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## Cultural and Moral Relativism

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### Synonyms

[Descriptive relativism](#); [Metaethical relativism](#);  
[Normative relativism](#)

### Definition

*Moral relativism* refers to three distinct but related philosophical positions (Brandt 2001, pp. 25–28). *Descriptive relativism* is the hypothesis that there are pervasive and irresolvable moral disagreements between individuals or cultures. *Metaethical relativism* holds that moral claims can only be evaluated as true or false relative to a particular individual or culture's moral standards. Metaethical relativism thus denies that there are objective standards of moral truth that are universally applicable to all people and societies. *Normative relativism* is the prescriptive position that we should tolerate individuals or cultures with different moral standards. Such tolerance prohibits people from judging or imposing their moral standards on people or cultures with different moral standards. Each form of relativism can be cast at the individual level, i.e., that there are fundamental disagreements in individual moral standards, that moral

truth must be evaluated relative to the standards of different individuals, and that we must tolerate individuals with different moral standards. *Cultural relativism* may refer to any of these forms of relativism cast as differences between cultures rather than individuals. (*Cultural relativism* may refer to other forms of relativism unrelated to morality, such as methodological and epistemic/cognitive relativism. Methodological relativism is the practice of suppressing enculturated biases when studying other cultures (Obeyesekere 1966). Epistemic relativism holds that different cultures or individuals employ radically different conceptions of knowledge, justification, or reasoning (Boghossian 2006; Rorty 1991). Only moral forms of cultural relativism are discussed here (but see Brown 2008; Meiland and Krausz 1982).)

### Introduction

This entry will not focus on the history of moral relativism or offer extensive discussion of arguments for and against relativism. Instead, it will provide an overview of each form of relativism and discuss their relationship with evolutionary psychology. (For more historical treatments of moral and cultural relativism, see Brown (2008) and Hollinger (2003, pp. 708–721).) Evolutionary psychology has important implications for all three forms of relativism. The extent to which moral judgment is constrained by evolved

psychology plays a critical role in the possibility of deep and pervasive moral differences and could serve to circumscribe, falsify, or support some version of descriptive relativism. Evolutionary psychology is also relevant to metaethical and normative relativism. In part, this is because the practical significance of normative and metaethical relativism depends on the moral diversity postulated by descriptive relativism. However, philosophers also appeal to evolutionary influences on human psychology to support (Collier and Stingl 1993, 2013; Harman 2000; James 2009; Sterelny and Fraser 2016; Zamulinski 2007) or cast doubt on moral realism. Arguments in favor of moral realism are relevant to normative relativism insofar as the moral facts they purport to establish conflict with interpersonal and intercultural tolerance and may conflict with metaethical relativism if they purport to establish objective moral facts. Arguments against moral realism, on the other hand, are relevant to metaethical relativism insofar as they cast doubt on objectivist moral theories. The most prominent evolutionary arguments against moral realism are *evolutionary debunking arguments* (EDAs). These arguments appeal to the evolutionary origins of moral judgment to undermine justification for moral beliefs (Kahane 2011). EDAs have become increasingly popular in the philosophical literature and have spawned a growing debate over the relevance of evolutionary theory to metaethics. Evolutionary debunking arguments have received considerable support (Cline 2015; Fraser 2014; Griffiths and Wilkins 2010; Joyce 2006, 2013, 2016b; Lillehammer 2003; Mason 2010; Millhouse et al. 2016; Mogensen 2014b; Street 2006, 2008; Wright et al. 2014) but have also attracted many critics (Behrends 2013; Berker 2014; Bogardus 2016; Brosnan 2011; Carruthers and James 2008; Deem 2016; Enoch 2010; FitzPatrick 2014a, b, 2015; Kahane 2011; Mogensen 2014a; Peters 2012; Schafer 2010; Shafer-Landau 2012; Skarsaune 2011; Talbott 2015; Toner 2011; Vavova 2014; Wielenberg 2010). Even if these arguments fail on philosophical grounds, they all depend on specific claims about the evolution of moral cognition. Finally, while it is unlikely that evolutionary psychology

could play any direct role in determining whether or not we ought to tolerate people or cultures with different moral values, it may inform normative relativism by providing practical insight into how to devise institutions, policies, and norms that facilitate tolerance.

## Moral Relativism

### Descriptive Relativism

Descriptive relativism is the empirical hypothesis that there are pervasive and fundamental moral disagreements between individuals (*descriptive individual relativism*) or cultures (*descriptive cultural relativism*). The most common source of evidence in support of descriptive cultural relativism is the prevalence of practices that are permissible or even obligatory in one culture, but prohibited in another, such as female genital mutilation, polygamy, cannibalism, and human and animal sacrifice. Analogous support for descriptive individual relativism draws on the existence of moral variation within a population. In either case, variation in moral belief is uncontroversial, so it may seem that descriptive relativism consists in the trivial claim that people often hold conflicting moral views. This is not the case. Descriptive relativism is committed to the existence of *fundamental moral disagreements* or moral disagreements that cannot be resolved in principle because they express differences in basic moral beliefs and commitments (Moody-Adams 2009).

Many moral disagreements are not fundamental but are instead disputes over nonmoral facts or the result of misunderstandings or errors in reasoning. Two people with the same moral standards may hold conflicting views about gun control because they disagree about whether it reduces crime. Once both individuals were in full possession of the facts and knew whether gun control reduced crime, the disagreement would in principle dissolve. Errors in reasoning could also lead two people to disagree (or at least think they disagree) about a moral issue. Rational discussion could lead either side of a dispute to identify errors or inconsistencies in their position,

modify their beliefs, and come to an agreement. If so, this dispute would involve misunderstandings that could in principle be corrected, not a fundamental moral disagreement.

Since it is possible that most or even all moral disagreements would dissolve once both sides of a dispute were in possession of the facts and were reasoning correctly, descriptive relativism must demonstrate that there would still be many moral disagreements even under such optimal conditions. In spite of this difficulty, empirical findings could vindicate descriptive relativism by providing compelling evidence that cultures or individuals really do have fundamentally different moral values.

### Metaethical Relativism

Metaethical relativism is the philosophical position that moral claims are only true or false relative to an individual or group's moral standards. (There are other possibilities. Harman (1975) and Harman and Thomson (1996) argue that moral claims could be relativized to the shared context of the agent making a moral claim along with their intended audience (Joyce 2015). Moral claims could also be relativized to groups other than cultures, such as superordinate cultural groups (e.g. "the West") or different species.) Metaethical relativism does not deny that there are moral facts; it only denies *metaethical objectivism*, the view that there are objective moral facts that are universally applicable to all individuals and cultures. Unlike metaethical objectivism, metaethical relativism allows the same moral claim, e.g., "slavery is wrong," to be true relative to one moral standard but false relative to another.

It may seem absurd to suggest that the same claim can be both true and false, but ordinary language already incorporates linguistic features that permit expressions to have variable truth values. This is achieved by employing *indexicals*, linguistic expressions or behaviors (e.g., pointing) that allow statements to vary in meaning from one context to another or from one speaker to another. Common indexicals include "I," "you," "he," "she," "here," "there," "yesterday," and "today" (Kaplan 1989). For example, if Alex says "I am at home," she is referring to herself and her home,

but if Sam says "I am at home," she is referring to herself and her home, not Alex or Alex's home. Indexicals also permit the truth of a claim to vary. If Alex is facing north and Sam is facing south, the statement "I am facing north" is true if Alex says it but false if Sam says it.

Metaethical relativism incorporates a similar indexical component into moral claims, such that each moral claim includes an implicit reference to a particular moral framework (Joyce 2015; but some object to this characterization, see Harman 2015). Since different people and cultures have different moral standards, the truth of a moral claim will depend on which moral framework is referenced. For example, Alex may live in a culture that prohibits slavery, while Sam lives in a culture that permits it. According to cultural metaethical relativism, when Alex says, "Slavery is wrong," she implicitly refers to her culture's standards. Since slavery is wrong in Alex's culture, this statement is true. When Sam says "Slavery is wrong," she references her culture's standards. Since slavery is permissible in Sam's culture, this statement is false. Thus, the same moral claim, "Slavery is wrong," can be true when one person says it but false when another says it, because each claim implicitly refers to a different moral framework.

Although metaethical relativism treats moral claims as being true or false, critics often conflate it with moral skepticism (the belief that moral claims are unjustified or their truth is unknowable) or outright rejection of moral truth or warn that it inevitably leads to an egoistic or nihilistic view of morality (Wong 1998). For example, Pope Benedict XVI warned that "[W]hen policies do not presume or promote objective values, the resulting moral relativism . . . tends instead to produce frustration, despair, selfishness and a disregard for the life and liberty of others" (Ratzinger 2005). Pope Benedict may or may not be correct to worry that denying objective right or wrong has negative behavioral consequences, but a relativistic view of moral truth does not itself consist in a rejection of moral truth (unless moral truth is question-beggingly defined in such a way as to exclude relative truth) nor does it logically entail any normative implications, including the

advisability of wanton indulgence. Furthermore, although metaethical relativism does deny that there are objective moral truths (at least in its most radical form), the denial of objective moral truth does not entail that the world is “without value,” unless the only legitimate values are objective, which would beg the question if it were offered as a criticism of metaethical relativism.

Admittedly, Pope Benedict does not necessarily intend to critique sophisticated philosophical positions that are careful to disentangle different forms of relativism, and he might concede that metaethical relativism, construed strictly as a metaethical and not a normative stance, is not subject to their concerns. Nonetheless, his remarks echo the common sentiment that there *is* a relationship between a denial of objective moral truth and the adoption of pernicious attitudes and behavioral dispositions (Kanarek 2013; Tasioulas 1998). Since metaethical relativism does not logically entail normative consequences, it could at best have only a contingent relationship with egoism, nihilism, or any other normative or behavioral consequences. Such a relationship *may* exist, but it would require empirical evidence to establish it. Researchers are beginning to explore this relationship, and preliminary findings suggest that concerns about the deleterious consequences of relativism may be at least somewhat justified. Rai and Holyoak (2013) found that priming participants with relativism increased dishonesty and cheating, while Young and Durwin (2013) found that priming objectivism led to substantial increases in donations to charity but priming relativism did not.

Critics of metaethical relativism also argue that, because it does not privilege any moral systems over others, it is incapable of providing rational justification for condemning the moral practices of other people and cultures, even when those practices include genocide, torture, or other atrocities (Bennett 2002, p. 46; Pojman 2004; Rachels 2001). Defenders of metaethical relativism could respond by insisting that it does not have any normative implications, but others have responded by abandoning an entirely relativist metaethics and instead propose objectivist

constraints that limit which moral systems can be legitimate. This *moderate metaethical relativism* can be distinguished from *radical metaethical relativism*, which asserts that all moral truth is relative and that no moral claims are objectively true or false (Carson and Moser 2001). This radical form of metaethical relativism does entail, as critics maintain, that all moral frameworks are equally true and that none hold any privileged status over others. It is this radical stance that has attracted harsh criticism. But metaethical relativism need not entail that *all* moral claims are relative. It is possible to regard some moral practices as relative but others as objective. Copp (1995), Brandt (1984), Velleman (2013), Foot (2001, 2002), and Wong (1995, 2009) have all defended moderate views of this sort.

Wong (1995, 2009) for instance, defends what he calls “pluralistic relativism” (cf. Xiao and Huang 2014). According to this view, conflicting moral frameworks could each be true, but human nature and local circumstances place constraints on which moral frameworks are legitimate (Gowans 2015). These constraints are based on the finite set of moral frameworks that, for instance, promote human flourishing and facilitate cooperation within a society. Since there are multiple ways to meet these conditions, mutually incompatible moral systems could be equally consistent with moral truth. Any moral system that fails to achieve these standards, on the other hand, is objectively false. Wong’s pluralistic relativism, and views like it, is neither fully relativist nor fully objectivist. To proponents of more “pure” conceptions of relativism, this may be too great a concession. Nonetheless, moderate metaethical relativism offers a compromise that circumvents some of the difficulties faced by more radical forms of relativism.

### Normative Relativism

*Normative relativism* is the prescriptive position that we must tolerate the moral practices of different people and cultures. Normative relativism does not require people to support moral frameworks that differ from theirs, but it does prohibit them from imposing their values on other cultures or judging them according to their own moral

standards. The obligation to tolerate other cultures may be framed not as a principle of acceptance but as a principle of noninterference (Bennigson 1999; Gowans 2015). Few philosophers defend the notion that descriptive or metaethical relativism necessarily entail normative relativism (see Harrison 1976; Wong 2009; Williams 1972). Instead, contemporary debate concerns whether there is an indirect relationship between descriptive/metaethical relativism and normative relativism, such that descriptive and metaethical relativism in some way provide a rationale or a context in which a norm of intercultural or interpersonal tolerance is more likely, more desirable, or more philosophically defensible (see Bennigson 1999; Graham 1996; Ivanhoe 2009; Kim and Wreen 2003; McKinnon 2007; Rachels 2001; Prinz 2007; Tilly 1998; and Wong 1984).

Nonetheless, it is illustrative to examine a formal argument that tolerance follows directly from moral relativism. Pojman (2004) attributes one such argument to Herskovits:

1. If moral claims are only true or false relative to a particular culture's standards, then there are no nonrelative justifications for members of one's culture to morally judge the standards of another culture.
2. If there are no nonrelative justifications for members of one culture to morally judge the standards of another culture, then we ought to tolerate cultures with different moral standards.
3. Moral claims are only true or false relative to a particular culture's standards.
4. We ought to tolerate cultures with different moral standards. (Adapted from Pojman 2004, pp. 244–245).

This argument would have no practical significance if descriptive relativism was false, but the falsehood of descriptive relativism would not demonstrate that any of the argument's premises were false. The argument relies only on the hypothetical possibility of cultures with different moral standards. Nonetheless, descriptive relativism asserts only that there are fundamental moral

disagreements. If true, this fact by itself would have no normative implications.

In addition, this argument fails to show that tolerance follows from metaethical relativism. As Pojman (2004) points out, "If morality simply is relative to each culture, then if the culture does not have a principle of tolerance, its members have no obligation to be tolerant" (p. 245). More importantly, we could not infer from the fact that moral truths are true relative to a particular framework that there is a universal, nonrelative moral duty to tolerate people who subscribe to different frameworks, since the very existence of such nonrelative moral facts is precluded by metaethical relativism. Even if the normative relativist endorsed a hybrid metaethical theory in which the obligation to tolerate others was objectively true, such a position would not follow from metaethical relativism itself. This suggests that the difficulty with this argument is the second premise. Even if there were no nonrelative way to condemn the practices of other cultures, this would not in any way entail that it were *morally wrong* to condemn the practices of other cultures. A culture could even include among its standards an obligation to be intolerant toward other cultures. Nothing about metaethical relativism precludes this possibility or suggests that it is less preferable than tolerance. Pojman makes this point himself, concluding that, "[F]rom a relativistic point of view there is no more reason to be tolerant than to be intolerant, and neither stance is objectively morally better than the other" (p. 245).

Although normative relativism does not follow deductively from descriptive or metaethical relativism, they may provide indirect support for tolerating people or cultures with different moral practices. This could be achieved via inductive arguments, though Kim and Wreen (2003) consider and reject several attempts, and ultimately conclude that there is no inductive link either. Even if we accept their conclusions, there may still be a psychological link between descriptive or metaethical relativism and normative relativism. The belief that metaethical relativism is true, and that because of this there are no objective standards of moral truth, could induce a state of reflection and critical self-examination that would

lead us to be more cautious in morally condemning others. Westermarck (1932) suggests this possibility, stating that “Could it be brought home to people that there is no absolute standard in morality, they would perhaps be on the one hand more tolerant and on the other more critical in their judgments” (p. 59). Baghrmian (2015) argues that such transformative experiences may not even require the belief that moral standards are relative but could instead result from exposure to and reflection on the sheer diversity of moral views that exist. Citing Knobe and Nichols (2007), she adds that such experiences may result in a crisis of faith similar to those experienced by children who, growing up in insular religious communities, discover that others do not share their religious beliefs, since circumstances like these may reflect instance of “contingency anxiety,” as discussed in Mogensen (2015):

... [T]he discovery of religious diversity can prompt the thought that it's in some sense accidental that one happens to be raised in a Christian household rather than a Hindu household. This kind of arbitrariness can make the child wonder whether there's any reason to think that his religious beliefs are more likely to be right than those of the Hindu child. (p. 11)

(Westermarck's and Baghrmian's proposals could be correct, but if so, they would entail only an indirect and contingent capacity for metaethical and descriptive relativism to encourage tolerance. They would be indirect and contingent in that any tendency for people to move from metaethical or descriptive relativism to normative relativism would not result from a rational chain of inferences or the logical deduction that the latter is a corollary of the former but of some further set of facts about the interaction of accepting the metaethical or descriptive relativism with other characteristics of specifically human psychology).

Even so, the discovery of a contingent empirical connection between metaethical or descriptive relativism and an increased tolerance for different moral practices would be fascinating and important. Some researchers have already found evidence consistent with this possibility. Goodwin and Darley (2012) found that, compared

with relative moral beliefs, objective moral beliefs were associated with reduced comfort with people who disagreed, the judgment that people who disagreed were more immoral, and reduced willingness to reconsider that belief. Wright et al. (2014) found that objective moral beliefs were associated with greater unwillingness to date, interact with, or help people who did not share the same belief than nonobjective moral beliefs. These studies suggest that relativism is associated with greater tolerance of moral diversity than objectivism, but the correlational nature of these findings does not provide causal evidence that a change from objectivism to relativism would lead to greater tolerance. If such a relationship results from protracted reflection and critical self-assessment, as Westermarck and Baghrmian suggest, such evidence may be difficult to acquire, since it is doubtful that priming participants with evidence of moral diversity or presenting an argument for metaethical relativism would induce anything approximating serious reevaluation of one's moral beliefs, especially if participants are evaluated immediately or shortly after the manipulations. Future research should investigate the causal impact of changes in metaethical beliefs and evaluate a broader range of behavioral consequences. Such research could also attempt to more closely replicate the impact of more serious reevaluation of moral beliefs over an extended period of time to more specifically test Westermarck's and Baghrmian's suggestions. Since it is possible that increases in tolerance are a specific instance of a global reduction in moral concern, one possibility is that reflection on moral diversity or relative moral truth increases tolerance via a global reduction in moral concern.

## **Evolutionary Psychology and Moral Relativism**

### **Evolutionary Psychology and Descriptive Relativism**

Even on the most uncharitable assumption of widespread exaggeration and misinterpretation, there is little doubt anthropologists have accurately documented an extraordinary degree of



moral diversity. And there is no question that political, religious, and personal divisions lead people with similar cultural backgrounds to differ, often fiercely, over moral issues. All this would suggest that the case for descriptive relativism is settled. Yet descriptive relativism cannot be demonstrated by merely pointing to differences in moral beliefs, because it is unclear from the existence of such disagreements whether they result from differences in nonmoral beliefs, failures in reasoning or reflection, or genuine differences in fundamental moral values.

Descriptive relativism may be an empirical hypothesis, but it is not a hypothesis that could be confirmed or disconfirmed exclusively by observational research. Descriptive relativism holds that *even if* people were fully informed and reasoning properly, they would still disagree about a wide range of moral issues. But people are far from fully informed, and the human mind is riddled with cognitive biases that hinder people's ability to rationally evaluate information even when it is available (Tversky and Kahneman 1974). Descriptive relativism, as an explanation of moral diversity, rests on a conjecture about what would happen in a highly idealized hypothetical state of affairs that has not, and likely never will, come to pass. This does not invalidate it as a legitimate empirical hypothesis. Sufficient evidence could show that the best explanation of available data is that extensive moral disagreement would likely persist under ideal circumstances, but establishing this claim is far more difficult than is commonly appreciated.

Descriptive relativism must overcome several theoretical and empirical difficulties to establish itself as the best explanation of moral diversity. It is subject to conceptual, normative, and methodological difficulties that make it difficult to precisely state, operationalize, and empirically evaluate. These difficulties make observational research alone inadequate to demonstrate widespread fundamental moral disagreement. As a result, a compelling case for descriptive relativism will require a sufficiently deep understanding of human psychology to reasonably conclude that many moral disagreements are irresolvable in principle. However, demonstrating descriptive

relativism's dependence on psychological research and the importance of evolutionary psychology will first require an understanding of the particular theoretical and empirical obstacles the hypothesis faces.

Descriptive relativism, like every other empirical hypothesis, is vulnerable to the charge that it is underdetermined by available data (Newton-Smith and Lukes 1978; for discussion, see Acuña and Dieks 2014; Kukla 1996; Ladyman 2002, Chap. 6; Laudan 1990; Laudan and Leplin 1991). There is always a way to fit empirical evidence to a hypothesis provided an individual is willing to shift the rest of their beliefs accordingly. This means that for any scientific explanation of a given set of data, there will always be alternative explanations that are consistent with the data. As a result, we cannot interpret the implications of empirical data without implementing explanatory virtues that help us decide among competing accounts of the same data, such as simplicity, precision, scope, and conservatism (the minimization of changes to existing beliefs) (Lipton 2013; Sklar 1975). This by itself is not a significant cause for concern for any particular hypothesis, since the same general worry is applicable to science as a whole, but Michele Moody-Adams (2001) argues that descriptive cultural relativism is especially subject to concerns about underdetermination, and some of these arguments may apply to descriptive individual relativism as well.

Moody-Adams (2001) notes that anthropological fieldwork often relies on limited access to a small number of interviewees, which raises questions about the representativeness of their responses. Sometimes this is justified on the grounds that members of a community are legitimate authorities on its beliefs and customs. Moody-Adams objects, noting that, "Any such confidence embodies a complex evaluative stance that will sometimes prove neither methodologically nor morally benign. Very often such confidence overlooks the possibility of internal conflict, as when a community practice has been subjected to criticism from within" (p. 95). Authority figures would not represent internal dissent and may not report on it. Yet dissent may

represent an ongoing debate within the community that could reveal that some belief or practice is inconsistent with values that are more central to the culture's identity than the practice itself (p. 95). Communities may include subgroups that differ in important ways from designated spokespeople or typical members of the community. For example, interviewing the exclusively male leadership of a highly patriarchal society could overlook the critical and ongoing dissent among women and consulting the typical, reasonably well-off member of a highly economically stratified society may fail to capture the moral perspective of its most disadvantaged members. Attempts to provide a complete picture of the moral values of a given culture would require a more comprehensive analysis of its members and may require contestable appeals to evaluative judgments.

A complete and reliable picture of a culture's moral views is further impeded by linguistic and conceptual barriers that make intercultural interpretation exceptionally difficult. Any attempt to make cross-cultural comparisons will have to account for differences in local conceptions of what constitutes sex, slavery, consent, work, and other concepts relevant to morality, as well as differences in how people conceive of morality itself, including notions about justice, equality, and purity, as well as differences in epistemic norms, religious beliefs, and a host of ancillary beliefs and practices relevant to their moral perspective. In many cases, this may make it difficult to determine what observations provide relevant information about a culture's moral beliefs and practices or if they even conceive of a given practice as moral at all. As Moody-Adams points out, "... [M]oral relativists seldom hesitate to assume that the natural languages of the groups they encounter contain a concept of morality ... [B]ut this assumption (however plausible) presupposes sophisticated judgment about a concept – the concept of morality – so complex that its content is [essentially contested] ... even by speakers of the same language" (p. 94).

A more pressing difficulty for descriptive relativism is disagreement itself. As previously noted, it is unclear how much moral diversity results

from disagreements over nonmoral facts. Given extensive variation in education, cultural background, social class, religious belief, and political ideology, such differences are likely to be extensive both within and between cultures. More importantly, every person and every society are in a considerable state of ignorance about the consequences of their moral practices and of innumerable nonmoral facts that are potentially relevant to their moral systems. Even the most advanced nations have not reached consensus on the long-term consequences of their economic policies or criminal justice systems. Because of this, many moral disputes rest on disagreements about the impact of actions and institutions that everyone lacks adequate information about. People can disagree with impunity under these circumstances since nobody can appeal to evidence that decisively confirms their position. Even when evidence is available, disputes may remain unresolved, since any interpretation of that evidence will likely be tainted by motivated reasoning (Kunda 1990; Sunstein et al. 2016) and ideological commitments that impede rational evaluation (Cohen 2003; Kahan 2013; McCright and Dunlap 2011).

Even if factual disputes are set aside, moral diversity would still fail to unambiguously demonstrate fundamental moral disagreement, since the same moral principles may be consistent with different local practices. One reason for this is that moral diversity is consistent with *local objectivism*. Local objectivism is the view that there is one universal set of objective moral principles, but differences in environmental conditions, psychological characteristics, or other factors may allow or even require that the same moral principle be satisfied in different ways by different individuals or cultures.

One way this can happen is if two cultures with the same moral values develop practices that differ due to local conditions but which conform equally well to their shared moral standards. An isolated island community with a limited food supply and small population may develop strict norms for regulating reproduction out of a necessity to conserve resources and minimize the deleterious effects of inbreeding. In the long run,



failure to adopt these practices could otherwise lead to food shortages and poverty. Yet these practices may be inconsistent with the same moral values in communities with more resources and larger populations. Both the isolated island community and larger communities with more resources could place equal weight on the importance of reproductive autonomy and the collective welfare of the community, and agree sacrifices to the former must be made when necessary to promote the latter, yet only the isolated community would need to make this sacrifice in practice.

The same moral values may also be sufficiently general that a wide range of practices are consistent with them regardless of local conditions. If two people wanted to cross a river, one might achieve this goal by building a boat and the other by building a bridge. Provided these methods were equally effective, the same abstract goal (crossing the river) could be achieved by different concrete methods (e.g., a boat or a bridge). In much the same way, different cultures may conform to the same moral goals by developing different sets of beliefs and practices, even if those practices are not specific adaptations to local circumstance. Whether a specific moral practice conforms to the same set of abstract moral principles may also depend on its function in the context of the wider set of norms, beliefs, and practices of the moral framework it is embedded in. This suggests that determining whether a particular practice is consistent with a given set of general moral values may require holistic evaluation of its interaction with other norms, beliefs, and practices.

It is also unclear what exactly it would mean to say that moral disagreements are sufficiently extensive that they entail descriptive relativism, since there are many ways of quantifying the total amount of agreement and disagreement or weighing the importance of particular norms or principles. We could emphasize judgments about first-order moral practices, like polygamy or abortion, but there may also be disagreements about the moral importance of character traits (e.g., courage, honesty) or differences in more abstract approaches to morality. For instance, Wong (1984) claims that some cultures adopt a moral

system grounded in virtue and promoting the communal good, while other cultures ground morality in rights and emphasize individualism and liberty (Gowans 2015).

Morality can also be cast at different levels of generality. People can disagree about concrete moral practices but share the same commitment to abstract universal principles. Even apparent disagreement over relatively abstract moral values such as personal autonomy or promoting the good of the community could dissolve if morality were cast at an even higher level of abstraction. For example, people may value their culture's moral code because they believe it fulfills the more basic moral goal of promoting human flourishing. Disputes between societies that are more collectivist or more individualist may seem to represent quite abstract differences in a moral perspective and could present more viable candidates for fundamental disagreement, but even these may be due to disputes over which overarching perspective was best for the society on a largely shared understanding of what "best" entails. The purpose of even radically different moral systems, even ones that differ on relatively abstract moral values, could still be to promote even more abstract moral goals, e.g., to promote the well-being of its members (Kluckhohn 1955). Individuals or cultures may agree along some axes of morality but disagree along others, and it is unclear which, if any, take priority, without drawing on contestable application of explanatory virtues and appeals to philosophical arguments or intuitions. This suggests that a given set of moral disagreements could be consistent with some conceptions of descriptive relativism, but inconsistent with others, and there may be no way to decisively argue that one account should be favored over another. If so, this could make the truth of "descriptive relativism" as a general thesis indeterminate.

In light of these difficulties, the prospects for descriptive relativism seem bleak. But the purpose of presenting them is not to show that they cannot be overcome, it is to justify the need for more comprehensive psychological evidence. At the core of descriptive relativism's claim is an empirical assumption that we are psychologically

constituted in such a way that we can form mutually incompatible moral frameworks that could not be reconciled even in principle. If this is the case, it must be due at least in part to specific facts about how human minds function, and knowledge of these facts is critical to evaluating the possibility and extent of irresolvable moral differences. In other words, descriptive relativism is a hypothesis about human psychology. Psychological evidence of the conditions in which moral disagreements could be resolved would provide the most compelling evidence for or against descriptive relativism, since only these findings would allow us to determine whether two people or cultures with different moral beliefs would be likely to come to an agreement if they agreed on all relevant nonmoral facts. For instance, knowledge of how moral judgments differ from nonmoral judgments (or if they do), how moral beliefs are acquired, and what conditions are necessary for moral beliefs to change all inform the possibility that people could converge or fail to converge on the same set of moral beliefs if they agreed about the relevant nonmoral facts.

It is beyond the scope of this entry to survey all research relevant to this dispute, but one issue central to determining the extent and scope of moral disagreement is *moral nativism*. Moral nativism, as a general hypothesis, claims morality is in some respect innate, but precisely what this means will depend on the particular nativist hypothesis (see Joyce 2016c). The most relevant way nativist accounts differ from one another concerns the traits purported to be innate. *Rule nativism* holds that we have an innate capacity for forming specific moral norms, rules, or judgments. This innate capacity consists of domain-specific psychological mechanisms that lead people to reliably develop particular moral judgments and beliefs, such as the belief that committing incest or harming innocent people is morally wrong.

A second, related view claims that certain moral *domains* are innate. These accounts claim that morality is innately constrained to a subset of domains that limit which behaviors and traits can be subject to moral evaluation. Haidt and colleagues have articulated the most widely

developed and widely discussed form of domain nativism, *moral foundations theory* (MFT) (Graham et al. 2011, 2012; Haidt 2012; Haidt and Joseph 2004). MFT is typically characterized as having at least five domains: harm, fairness, loyalty, authority, and purity (as well as a proposed sixth domain concerning liberty and oppression, see Iyer et al. 2012; Graham et al. 2011, 2013). Norms in each of these domains may be triggered by distinct, domain-specific cognitive modules that evolved to meet a particular adaptive challenge relevant to that domain, though Graham and colleagues maintain that MFT can be sustained without any deep commitments about modularity or cognitive architecture (see Graham et al. 2013, p. 63). For instance, the *loyalty* domain evolved to facilitate cooperation with members of one's group, while the *purity* domain evolved as a "behavioral immune system" that encourages avoiding substances and activities that increase risk of infection (Schaller and Park 2011; Graham et al. 2013).

Moral foundations theory does not propose that all domains are equally active in every culture but that culture can amplify or attenuate the relative importance of a given domain. For example, Haidt and colleagues argue that American liberals tend to emphasize harm and fairness but assign relatively little importance to the domains of purity, loyalty, and authority, whereas conservatives treat all five as important (Graham et al. 2009; Haidt 2012; Haidt and Graham 2007). Furthermore, the specific content of the domain is not specified in advance. Cultures may have standards of fairness but differ in their application, e.g., one culture's purity norms may include specific dietary or sexual taboos that differ from another culture. Finally, MFT incorporates Haidt's social intuitionist model (SIM) of moral judgment. According to the SIM, moral judgments are the result of rapid, automatic, relatively effortless intuitive processes (*system 1 processes*) rather than deliberative, effortful conscious reasoning (*system 2 processes*) (Kahneman 2011; Stanovich and West 2000). Moral reasoning that involves deliberative processes does occur, but it serves primarily to justify and explain our moral

beliefs, not to enable us to seek moral truth (Graham et al. 2013; Haidt 2001).

*Toolkit nativism* holds that we have an innate capacity for thinking in moral terms and to employ *moral concepts*, but these concepts are not limited to any particular domains and do not specify particular moral norms or judgments. (Prinz refers to this form of nativism as *minimal* (Prinz 2009) or *weak* (Prinz 2014). Joyce (2013) objects to this characterization, arguing that it produces the rhetorical effect of making its proponents appear to have retreated from bolder nativist hypotheses and are desperately attempting to salvage a losing position.) Instead, “the individual’s socialization process,” as Joyce puts it, serves “as the sole determinant of to which subjects these concepts get attached” (p. 131). Concepts like “moral wrongness,” “moral duty,” and “moral praiseworthiness,” may be innate, but whether we regard it as morally wrong to own slaves and morally praiseworthy to help strangers, or vice versa, will depend on our social environment (Joyce 2016c).

All three forms of nativism conflict with anti-nativist accounts. Anti-nativists accounts deny that there are any adaptations for distinctively moral thought or that moral norms, domains, or concepts reliably emerge as a result of innate psychological processes. Prinz articulates one such view. According to Prinz (2009), morality is “a by-product of capacities that were evolved for other purposes. Morality is a spandrel. There is no mechanism dedicated to the acquisition of moral norms.” (p. 168). Such accounts may hold, like Prinz, that morality is a by-product of domain-general processes, though anti-nativist hypotheses do not necessarily endorse the view that the human mind is a *tabula rasa* or “blank slate” that consists *only* of domain-general processes (Barkow et al. 1992). For example, Machery and Mallon (2010) suggest that the human mind may lack an innate capacity for distinctively moral cognition, but there could still be an innate capacity for normative cognition in general. Machery and Mallon point out that normative thought is not restricted to morality. We also routinely employ normative judgments about rationality (“You should not believe everything

you read”), aesthetics (“You should not wear that ugly sweater”), and social conventions (“You should not eat with your hands at the dinner table”) (p. 21). Even if moral norms or concepts in particular were not innate, the human mind could still possess an innate capacity for employing normative concepts, e.g., “oughtness,” with the social environment determining the specific normative domains a particular individual or culture employed. If so, morality would be a by-product of more general psychological processes, but these processes would still be canalized, species-typical traits that reliably emerged across cultures.

Each of these hypotheses has distinct implications for descriptive relativism. For obvious reasons, rule nativism presents the greatest potential threat. If the human mind is equipped with psychological mechanisms that reliably lead most people to adopt a shared set of moral principles, then, depending on how great of a proportion and how central these innate moral norms were to our moral systems as a whole, this could directly entail that descriptive relativism is false. However, rule nativism is not necessarily inconsistent with descriptive relativism. If only a few relatively specific moral norms were innate, other norms could be free to vary between individuals or cultures. If so, moral variation could still be sufficiently widespread to justify descriptive relativism. A rule nativist account would also need to demonstrate that these innate moral rules are species-typical traits that are universal or nearly universal and that they reliably emerge in a wide range of contemporary social environments, since novel environments may lead some populations to develop different moral norms (Haraway and Maples 1998). As Joyce (2016c) points out, “[...] innate traits may well require substantial environmental input – input that may have been reliably present in the EEA [Environment of Evolutionary Adaptedness] but is absent, patchy, or distorted in the modern environment” (p. 132).

The generality or specificity of an innate moral rule also matters. If a handful of moral rules are innate but relatively specific, such as a norm against incest, these innate rules may fail to

capture broad swaths of potentially variable judgment that doesn't fall within their limited purview. However, a small number or even a single general moral principle could underlie all or nearly all moral judgment. Moral dyad theory (MDT) provides one such unifying account of morality (Gray et al. 2007, 2012a, b, Gray et al. 2014; cf. Crone and Laham 2015). According to Gray and colleagues, all moral judgments are the product of a dyadic template in which an agent intentionally causes suffering to a patient (Gray et al. 2012a). This cognitive template operates even when no obvious moral agent or patient is available by inserting an imagined perpetrator or victim into the act, a process Gray and colleagues refer to as "dyadic completion" (Gray et al. 2014). This allows MDT to explain seemingly "victimless" moral violations, such as homosexuality and masturbation. MDT seems to provide a direct challenge to descriptive relativism. Gray et al. (2012a) allude to this possibility when they state that viewing harm as the currency of morality implies that:

[T]here is not an unbridgeable gap between moral judgments across relationships [...] or cultures [...]. Just as Pesos can be converted to Euros, so too can moral violations across cultures be compared on perceptions of harm. Thus, liberals and conservatives may not fundamentally misunderstand each other's moral judgments but instead simply disagree on what is harmful. (p. 209)

If so, then all moral disputes would be reducible to factual disputes about what causes harm, which suggests that all moral disagreements could be resolved in principle. Even so, it would remain an open question whether people possessed the psychological resources to resolve moral disputes in practice. Even if the cognitive processes involved to moral judgment were uniformly based in judgments about harm, concrete moral judgments about specific moral issues may be insensitive to this discovery or to information about how harmful an act is. If, for instance, the social intuitionist model or Prinz's anti-nativist view is correct, moral norms are acquired through mechanisms that would make rational resolution to moral disagreements difficult or impossible. Prinz (2009) argues for this explicitly when he

states that variation between cultures "[...] may be impossible to rationally resolve. Moral norms are products of nonrational enculturation, not deliberation and deduction from shared first principles," which, he concludes, "amounts to a strong form of descriptive moral relativism" (p. 187). If moral norms are acquired this way, different populations will attach intrinsic importance to different concrete moral norms or otherwise develop rigid commitments to first-order moral beliefs. For instance, an individual raised in one culture may adopt that culture's condemnation of homosexuality, while someone raised in a different culture could adopt their culture's acceptance of it. Even if both of these beliefs were grounded in a harm-based template, information about the harmfulness of homosexuality may be insufficient to sway either individual to adopt the other's beliefs, since the mechanisms involved in norm acquisition would be insensitive to the domain-general processes involved in reasoning and philosophical reflection.

Domain relativism could also support descriptive relativism. If different cultures assign differential weight to or assign variable relevance to one or more domains, this could produce irresolvable intercultural differences in moral value. This possibility would be especially likely if the social intuitionist model is correct, since the SIM suggests that moral beliefs generated by intuitive processes are resistant to conscious revision. While Haidt does not deny that we can reflect on and revise our moral beliefs, it is unclear whether such processes permit complete malleability in our moral commitments.

Toolkit nativism and anti-nativist hypotheses are consistent with descriptive relativism, though neither, if correct, would guarantee relativism. On either view, the moral content of different moral frameworks may vary between individuals or cultures, since the local social environment determines the content of an individual's moral beliefs. Yet this is consistent with the possibility that members of different social environments could converge on the same moral standards. Absent additional psychological facts about how moral norms are acquired and internalized, and how subject they are to change, views about the

flexibility of moral beliefs could cut both ways. The very cognitive malleability that allows a person in one culture to develop a different set of moral beliefs than someone in another culture may also allow those individuals, under the right circumstances, and given further facts about the psychological mechanisms involved in moral judgment and moral disagreement, to reach agreement. FitzPatrick (2014b) points out that even if evolution played a substantial role in shaping the mechanisms involved in moral judgment “[...] This is entirely compatible with thinking that thousands of years of cultural evolution, including the development of sophisticated traditions of moral inquiry and reflection, have also allowed us to engage in largely *autonomous* moral thinking” (FitzPatrick 2014b, p. 242). FitzPatrick adds that we do seem to engage in this type of autonomous thinking when we pursue philosophy, mathematics, and science, and each of these areas of inquiry consists in the discovery of and convergence on a unified set of facts (FitzPatrick 2014a, b, 2015). If moral thinking falls within the ambit of domain-general processes, it is at least possible that the same capacities that permit convergence in math and science could also lead disparate individuals and cultures to converge on the same moral standards.

Descriptive relativism begins with the observation that there are significant moral differences across cultures or between individuals within the same culture. The critical empirical question is not whether this is true or whether people are willing to fight and die on behalf of conflicting moral values. These issues have been settled with a decisive “yes.” Rather, it is whether the psychological mechanisms involved in the acquisition of moral belief and the resolution of moral disagreement involve a shared set of universal moral commitments, or a shared capacity to track the same set of objective moral truths, that would permit, at least in principle, all societies and all psychologically normal people to come to an agreement.

### Evolutionary Psychology and Metaethical Relativism

Evolutionary psychology has both direct and indirect implications for metaethical relativism. Since

most arguments for metaethical relativism rely on the claim that descriptive relativism is true, one way evolutionary psychology can play an indirect role is by supporting or casting doubt on the existence of fundamental moral disagreements (see Harman 1996; Prinz 2007; Wong 1984, 2009). One way of establishing metaethical relativism is to identify cases where people reach moral conclusions without any errors in their reasoning or mistaken judgments about the world. If conflicting moral perspectives can be rationally maintained, this suggests that neither position is objectively correct. Arguments along these lines rely on identifying plausible real-world instances of such “faultless” moral disagreements in which neither side of a moral dispute is demonstrably mistaken (Gowans 2015; Kölbel 2004). This reliance on descriptive relativism leads Gowans (2015) to suggest that metaethical relativism would lose most of its supporters if descriptive relativism were refuted. Metaethical relativism would not be decisively refuted even if descriptive relativism were rejected. Some arguments for metaethical relativism do not depend on the prevalence of moral disagreement (see Harman 2000; Rovane 2011, 2013; Velleman 2013). Others appeal to the hypothetical possibility of rationally defensible disagreement (Pojman 2004). If a single civilization came to dominate the world and impose the same cultural standards on everyone, there may be no moral disagreements, but moral principles would not become objective merely because rival positions had been eliminated. If this were to happen, Pojman insists, “We could still *imagine* a culture that was an exception to the rule and be unable to criticize it” (p. 248). Metaethical relativists could also argue that intelligent extraterrestrial species would have faced different evolutionary pressures that would plausibly lead them to develop different moral values. This suggests that fundamental moral disagreements may be possible even if we cannot identify any among human populations.)

Evolutionary psychology also has important implications for moderate metaethical relativism. These hybrid accounts allow conflicting moral systems to be true but within objective limits imposed by human nature (among other



constraints). Foot (2001, 2002), Nussbaum (1993), Wong (1995, 2009), and Velleman (2013) all ground objective moral constraints in empirical facts about what promotes a good human life. For example, Wong's pluralistic relativism requires moral systems to promote cooperation and individual flourishing. Wong emphasizes that knowing which moral systems can achieve these ends in practice requires a detailed empirical understanding of the particular goals, needs, and desires imposed on the human species by its distinct biological and psychological characteristics, which leads him to explicitly conclude that moral theory must be integrated with empirical findings in evolution and psychology. Although Wong is hesitant to endorse specific evolutionary psychological accounts, empirical facts about human psychology float free of his particular stance and ultimately determine the conditions that optimize human flourishing. Wong is cautious not to explicitly endorse particular evolutionary psychological theories, however. He states that his "use of evolutionary theory [...] should not be confused with an endorsement of some of the most prominent theories of evolutionary psychology that do hold in central, universal psychological adaptations that evolved in the Pleistocene era and remain unchanged to this day" (p. 102). Wong cites Tooby and Cosmides's (1992) "cheater detection module," and Buss's (2003) argument that men and women evolved distinct preferences for different characteristics in mates as two examples, clarifying that "No argument in this book presupposes the truth of such assertions." Nonetheless, Wong is confident that the liberal, Western conceptions of morality that dominate philosophy, such as Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (Rawls 1971), fail to account for the importance of community and family impressed upon us by natural selection. Aside from Wong's account in particular, a persuasive case can be made that any attempt to limit moral systems on the basis of empirical facts about what promotes human well-being will depend heavily on evolutionary psychological insights into human motivation and behavior. Utopian dreams of abolishing familial bonds and parochial favoritism in favor of a more global,

egalitarian social system may fail if familial affection and in-group favoritism are less susceptible to social conditioning than proponents of social constructivist approaches believe. Likewise, an evolutionary perspective can provide critical insight into the likely function, scope, and malleability of retributive impulses, feelings of jealousy, guilt, and shame, and virtually every other aspect of human psychology relevant to human well-being, insights that may be critical in prescribing norms and policies that do not backfire by failing to take proper stock of human limitations.

One critical response may be that these phenomena can be understood without adopting an explicitly evolutionary approach. However, the value of an explicitly evolutionary approach to psychology lies less in its formal necessity in understanding proximal psychological mechanisms than in understanding how these mechanisms are likely to operate under novel environmental conditions, in providing a deep well of theoretical resources for generating novel hypotheses and for its capacity to narrow the range of plausible hypotheses by providing a background of theoretical and empirical considerations that serve as a check on the plausibility of existing psychological theories, explanations, and phenomena.

To consider just one example of how evolutionary psychology can provide a novel insight into the conditions most likely to be conducive to human well-being, Wright (1994) argues that conservative preference for traditional monogamous marriage and the nuclear family may reflect a deeper wisdom about human nature, even if progressive and liberal policies are usually more consistent with promoting collective human welfare. Men and women in ancestral environments faced distinct adaptive challenges with respect to mate selection, which culminated in an evolved preference in men for women who are young, healthy, and attractive and a preference among women for men who have high status and the ability to provide resources (Buss 1995). According to Wright, these differences influence the dynamics of the marriage market in polygamous and monogamous cultures. Wives will be less evenly distributed in polygamous societies, since many women benefit



more from being a second or third wife to a wealthy, high-status man than the exclusive wife of a lower-status man with fewer resources. As a result, many men on the lower social rungs will remain unwed. Wright argues that this would have significant negative consequences for society, since marriage can exert a pacifying effect on men who would otherwise be more likely to engage in risky behavior and commit more violent and nonviolent crimes (Daly and Wilson 1990, 2001). Wright's thesis is supported in part by evidence that a high male to female sex ratio is associated with increases in violent crime (Hudson and Den Boer 2004) and that marriage is associated with decreased crime (Burt et al. 2010). These effects may be quite dramatic. Sampson et al. (2006) found that "being married is associated with an average reduction of approximately 35% in the odds of crime compared to nonmarried states for the same man" (p. 465; but see Schacht and Kramer 2016 and Schacht et al. 2014 for more recent criticisms of the impact of sex ratios on crime).

Wright argues that contemporary liberal societies have become increasingly permissive of divorce, premarital sex, and a generally lax attitude about sexual behavior. The net effect has been an abandonment of traditional marriage and slide into serial monogamy, which has similar social consequences as polygamy, since serial monogamy allows high-status men to monopolize the peak fertility of young women before moving on to younger mates (p. 101). In short, Wright argues that a strong norm of institutionalized monogamy would provide a bulwark against the socially destructive behavior of unwed men (pp. 101–102). Even if Wright is incorrect, his analysis reveals the potential for an evolutionary psychological perspective to uncover reasons to reevaluate the social impact of institutions we might have otherwise overlooked.

Findings in evolutionary psychology could also cast doubt on metaethical relativism by supporting forms of moral realism that are incompatible with it. At a minimum, moral realism holds that moral claims can be true or false, and at least some of these claims are true (Sayre-McCord 2015). (More specifically, moral realists hold that at least

some first-order moral claims are true, e.g. "murder is wrong" (see Bennett 1998, p. 46). An anti-realist could acknowledge that some claims about morality can be true, e.g. "There are no moral truths," but this does not constitute moral realism.) Not all conceptions of realism are necessarily incompatible with metaethical relativism (Harman 2015), and this minimal definition is consistent with metaethical relativism (see also Joyce 2015). (Joyce (2015) makes this point plainly, stating that "Moral relativism is sometimes thought of as a version of anti-realism but (short of stipulating usage) there is no basis for this classification; it is better to say that some versions of relativism may be anti-realist and others may be realist.") However, moral realism is typically construed (and will be understood here) more narrowly as the claim that moral facts are "objective features of the world," which we are capable of discovering and which are not dependent on or constituted by beliefs, preferences, or evaluative attitudes (Joyce 2016a, p. 5; Sterelny and Fraser 2016; Street 2006). Since moral realism in this narrower sense purports to establish the existence of a universal body of objective moral facts that are true for all people and cultures independent of their individual or cultural moral standards, any such account would entail an explicit rejection of metaethical relativism. Several attempts have been made to establish this more narrow conception of moral realism by appealing to human evolution (Collier and Stingl 1993, 2013; Harman 2000; James 2009; Sterelny and Fraser 2016; Zamulinski 2007). Collier & Stingl refer to this approach as *evolutionary moral realism*, which they define as "the view that there are moral values with roots in evolution that are both specifically moral and exist independently of human belief systems" (p. 218). Sterelny and Fraser (2016) present one of the most developed accounts of evolutionary moral realism (Joyce 2016a). They argue that the moral cognition evolved primarily to identify "facts about profitable forms of cooperation, about social arrangements and cognitive dispositions positively and negatively relevant to the stable exploitation of those opportunities" (p. 10). The success of accounts like these depends critically on whether the facts of human evolution are consistent with them. If we did not evolve an innate capacity

for distinctively moral cognition, or if we did, but this capacity does not function in part to detect facts about which policies, actions, and attitudes facilitate cooperation, Sterelny and Fraser's account would fail for the simple reason that it rests on mistaken empirical presuppositions about the evolution of human moral cognition. But if they do correctly identify the facts of human evolution, one of these accounts could succeed at establishing an objective set of moral truths that would disqualify metaethical relativism as a viable philosophical position.

Even so, some of these accounts may provide an incomplete picture of morality that allows some room for fundamental moral disagreement. Sterelny and Fraser (2016) claim only that *one* of the primary functions of moral cognition is to track facts about cooperation. If, as they concede, our moral faculty only partially and imperfectly tracks facts about cooperation, this leaves open the possibility that there are other aspects of morality that cannot be fully incorporated into a realist account of morality. Sterelny and Fraser seem open to this possibility, rejecting the strict dichotomy between evolutionary influences on human moral thought either fully vindicating or fully debunking moral realism (p. 4). A moderate form of metaethical relativism could potentially escape partial realist accounts of this kind, if they can identify plausible instances of fundamental moral disagreement that fall outside the scope of the truth-tracking aspects of moral cognition. (It also seems that evolutionary moral realist accounts may not escape being relativized to the *species* (see Harman 2000). If so, it is unclear how these accounts would manage interspecies moral disagreements. If moral facts *just are* the sorts of facts captured by human linguistic conventions, however, then one move may be to argue that another species with radically different values isn't really engaged in *moral* cognition but a conceptually analogous form of normative cognition that could similarly track its own independent set of normative facts.)

In contrast to arguments for evolutionary moral realism, *evolutionary debunking arguments* (EDAs) attempt to undermine moral realism by demonstrating that moral beliefs are false

(Ruse 1986, 2006) or unjustified (Joyce 2006; Street 2006). Street (2006) presents one of the most widely discussed EDAs in the form of a dilemma for moral realists. Street begins with the premise that some form of moral nativism is true or at least that evolution has so extensive an influence on moral judgment that that "our system of evaluative judgments is thoroughly saturated with evolutionary influence" (p. 114). She then poses the following dilemma to moral realists: either there is no relationship between evolutionary influences on moral judgment and the independent set of objective moral facts posited by the realist or there is a relationship. If there is no relationship, then it would be an extremely unlikely coincidence if our moral judgments happened to track objective moral facts (Joyce 2016a). If there is a relationship, then moral judgments could track moral facts. Street refers to this second horn of the dilemma as the *tracking account*. Street believes that this is the more plausible of the two horns of the dilemma but that, unfortunately for the realist, available empirical data does not support it. Evaluating Street's argument is not critical here. The only relevant point is that both EDAs and evolutionary moral realism fail if they rest on mistaken assumptions about the evolution of human moral cognition. In short, these accounts rely on empirically falsifiable evolutionary psychological presuppositions, and to that extent they are all fundamentally dependent on evolutionary psychological findings.

Fraser (2014) has criticized proponents of EDAs for failing to grapple with the relevant evolutionary details and proposes a minimal set of conditions necessary for the evolved cognitive mechanisms involved in moral judgment to reliably track moral truths. This represents genuine progress in identifying the empirical questions both moral realists and antirealists would need to answer. But the conditions Fraser identifies presuppose that we are adapted to engage in distinctively moral judgment. Machery and Mallon (2010) distinguish this strong nativist position from two alternative conceptions of what it would mean to say that "morality evolved." To say that morality evolved could mean that some of the underlying mechanisms involved in moral

judgment (but not necessarily *only* moral judgment) evolved (p. 4). Likewise, normative cognition, understood as the “the capacity to grasp norms and to make normative judgments,” may have evolved (p. 4). If so, there may be no specific evolved faculty for distinctively *moral* normative judgments. (Sinnott-Armstrong and Wheatley (2014) defend the even stronger claim that there is no conceptually unified domain of “moral norms” at all.)

Millhouse et al. (2016) argue that if a capacity for distinctively moral cognition did *not* evolve, this presents a significant obstacle for EDAs. If moral cognition results from a domain-general capacity for normative cognition, arguments that undermine moral truth may also undermine other evaluative truths, including the very epistemic norms that would permit people to make rational judgments in the first place. Any EDA that seeks to establish that *only* moral norms are threatened in this way must therefore either show that moral cognition is a distinct capacity or provide a principled means of debunking only moral judgments but not other normative judgments. Millhouse et al. refer to this as the *containment problem*. On the other hand, if some of the underlying components involved in moral cognition evolved, each may have a different evolutionary history and adaptive function. If so, debunking arguments that cast doubt on the reliability of specific mechanisms will have to target each of these mechanisms separately to show that that mechanism in particular cannot reliably track moral facts. This opens up the possibility of more targeted evolutionary debunking of specific features of moral judgment. For instance, if Greene’s dual process model of moral cognition is correct, then moral judgments may result from two relatively distinct psychological processes, each of which may have a unique evolutionary history and may have evolved to meet a specific adaptive challenge. An evolutionary debunking argument may succeed at undermining one of these domains without undermining the other. In short, if moral cognition is the result of a disunified set of cognitive processes, it may be possible to debunk some moral judgments without debunking others.

## Evolutionary Psychology and Normative Relativism

The truism that one cannot derive normative conclusions from descriptive facts is no less applicable to the relationship between evolutionary psychology and normative relativism (Hume 1739; Schurz 1997). Although the moral duty to tolerate people and cultures with different moral practices cannot be derived directly from facts about the evolution of moral cognition, evolutionary psychology still has indirect implications for normative relativism. Arguments in favor of normative relativism are often predicated on the truth of descriptive relativism, metaethical relativism, or both. Insofar as evolutionary psychology supports or undermines either, it will have an indirect influence on arguments for normative relativism.

Evolutionary psychology also has the potential to provide practical insight into how to devise and implement policies and interventions that effectively promote intercultural and interpersonal tolerance of moral differences. Even if we arrive at the normative conclusion that tolerance of moral differences is desirable, the practical question of how best to conform to this norm will depend on relevant psychological considerations. Research on the developmental psychology (e.g., Aboud 2003; Bigler and Liben 2007; Cameron et al. 2001; Rutland et al. 2010), social psychology (e.g., Brown 2011; Devine 1989; Greenwald and Banaji 1995), and neuroscience (e.g., Amodio 2014; Baumgartner et al. 2015; Ratner et al. 2014; Sellaro et al. 2015) of prejudice, stereotyping, and intergroup biases can and already has been successfully integrated with moral psychology (Van Nunspeet et al. 2014) and supplemented by an evolutionary perspective (Fiske 2000; Kaya 2015; Kurzban and Neuberg 2005; Kurzban et al. 2001; Mahajan et al. 2011).

Park (2012) has already made an explicit effort to extract practical guidance from an evolutionary psychological perspective on tolerance. An evolutionary perspective on prejudice suggests that there may be systematic differences between forms of prejudice related to intergroup interaction (e.g., racism) and forms of prejudice that are not (e.g., sexism) since the former may draw on evolved mechanisms uniquely adapted to

coalitional psychology. If different forms of prejudice rely on different psychological mechanisms, understanding the evolutionary origins and likely function of these mechanisms may be relevant to devising effective interventions. As Park notes, “A broader implication of evolutionary perspectives is that there is unlikely to be a panacea for reducing every kind of prejudice. The best methods will differ for prejudices against ethnic out-groups, women, elderly people, gay people, obese people, disabled people, and non-human animals, because the roots of these prejudices differ” (p. 195).

## Conclusion

The philosophical relevance of empirical data has become an increasingly contested topic in contemporary philosophy. The rise of experimental philosophy (Knobe and Nichols 2013), which utilizes social scientific methods to explore traditionally philosophical questions, has prompted widespread reflection and reevaluation of the methods and characteristics that make philosophy a distinct academic discipline. Recent attempts to draw philosophical conclusions from moral psychology (e.g., Greene 2003) have likewise challenged traditional assumptions about the relationship between moral psychology and moral philosophy. An evolutionary psychological perspective will likely play a growing role in understanding the relationship between psychology and philosophy in general. In reviewing the relevance of evolutionary psychology to the different forms of moral and cultural relativism, this entry has outlined one small facet of this broader picture.

## Cross-References

- [Ethnography](#)
- [Ethnology](#)
- [Franz Boas](#)
- [Misinterpreted as Cultural Relativism](#)
- [Modern Moral Relativism](#)
- [Relationship Between Culture and Race](#)
- [The Methodology of Cultural Relativism](#)

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