



## Essential Philosophy with Dr. David Schenk

### Lesson 2: Popular Errors in Academia

#### Outline:

##### Popular Errors in Academia (0:00)

- Cultural Relativism in ethics
- Psychological Egoism in ethics
- Skepticism (relativism about truth)

**Dr. Schenk's Response:** While these arguments are often supported by students and professors in academia, they are false! If one considers categories and reflects on these arguments seriously, he or she will see how these arguments undermine themselves.

##### Sources Used in this Lecture (3:28)

- James Rachels, "The Challenge of Cultural Relativism"
- Joel Feinberg, "Psychological Egoism"

#### Cultural Relativism (5:07)

- **Relativist:** Someone who holds that some truth or falsehood in a subject matter is relative to who holds it or when it is being held
  - Example: Someone might think that *beauty or ugliness* is relative to some circumstance or context.
- **Field of ethics:** An explicit branch of philosophy that studies right and wrong/good and evil
- **Relativism in ethics:** A doctrine that right and wrong/good and evil will vary by circumstances or context
- **Cultural relativism:** A doctrine that what is right and wrong/good and evil is determined by one's cultural context

##### Argument for Cultural Relativism (see blackboard for Dr. Schenk's notes at 7:38)

- Cultural anthropologists (and some philosophers) support this argument, despite its flaws.
- **The argument:**
  - Premise: Right and wrong are a function of one's culture.
  - Different cultures have different moral beliefs and attitudes; there is no one single, universally-held system of moral beliefs. (**Dr. Schenk's response:** *This proposition is not about right and wrong; it is about people's*



*own beliefs regarding right and wrong. This is not an observation about moral facts.)*

- Therefore, right and wrong are really just functions of one's cultural environment; there are no objective universal facts of the matter about right and wrong. (**Dr. Schenk's response:** Notice that the argument slips from **beliefs about right and wrong** to right and wrong themselves.)

### Dr. Schenk's 3 Categories of Criticism for the Cultural Relativism Argument (13:18)

- Observational vs. Conceptual Claims
  - Questions of right and wrong/good and evil are **conceptual questions**, not observational questions.
  - The premise of the argument, "Right and wrong are a function of one's culture," is **observational**, but the conclusion of the argument is a **conceptual claim**. This is disastrous logic!
- Consequences
  - Those who support cultural relativism are making an **unnoticed moral commitment** that people ought to be more tolerant of other cultures.
  - However, if cultural relativism is taken seriously, a commitment to tolerance is not a universal commitment and therefore cannot be imposed on other cultures.
  - **James Rachels' example:** In early 21st century American culture it is acceptable to be tolerant of others. For Nazi culture in 1930s Germany, however, it was okay to kill those who were not Aryans. The logic of cultural relativism means accepting both of these cultural attitudes.
- Implicit commitment of the Cultural Relativist
  - Cultural anthropologists who endorse Cultural Relativism tend to be socially and politically left, often critiquing American-Western culture. These critics who advocate to change cultural norms are, by their own definition, morally evil, since they are attempting to change a culture that should be able to do as it finds morally acceptable.

### Psychological Egoism (27:42)

- **Egoism:** The position that the pursuit of self-interest (or the self-interested action) is the right action to engage in
- **Rational egoism:** As long as someone is behaving rationally, or sanely, his or her behaviors are directed towards self-interest (Thomas Hobbes' The Leviathan)
- **Ethical egoism:** When someone is behaving morally, he or she is behaving selfishly (Ayn Rand's The Virtue of Selfishness; an extreme form of egoism that is popular outside professional philosophy)
- **Psychological egoism:** Any time people are motivated their actions will be self-interested (especially popular among business and economics communities, as well as the highly cynical; also called Enlightened Self-Interest)



- 2 Arguments for Psychological Egoism (See Blackboard for Dr. Schenk's notes)
  - Argument 1
    - Premise: When people are motivated to act, they are motivated by their own desires and not someone else's. (*Dr. Schenk's response*: This confuses the subject of the desire—who feels the desire—with the object of desire—toward what/whom the desire is directed.)
    - *Dr. Schenk's Example of why this fails*: Parents who are motivated to protect their children are not concerned for their own happiness or desire; they are concerned for the happiness of their children. Parents are intrinsically motivated towards their child's own happiness; a mother or father thinking only of themselves in keeping their child safe would be cognitively perverse.
  - Argument 2 (41:58)
    - Premise: All human actions, when examined closely, can be shown to serve at least some self-interested end; human behavior is always understood some way by a self-interested motive. (*Dr. Schenk's response*: No evidence regarding actual empirical or observational motives going on in the human brain is given; construing something as selfish says nothing about the actual motives.)
    - *Dr. Schenk's Example of why this fails*: Dr. Schenk considers the mosquitos at the creek of his family's land in Vermont. They are not self-interested or altruistic—they are stimulus and response machines. Similarly, human beings often act unreflectively, without thinking of selfishness or altruism. Humans act impulsively, such as when they chew their fingernails or procrastinate.