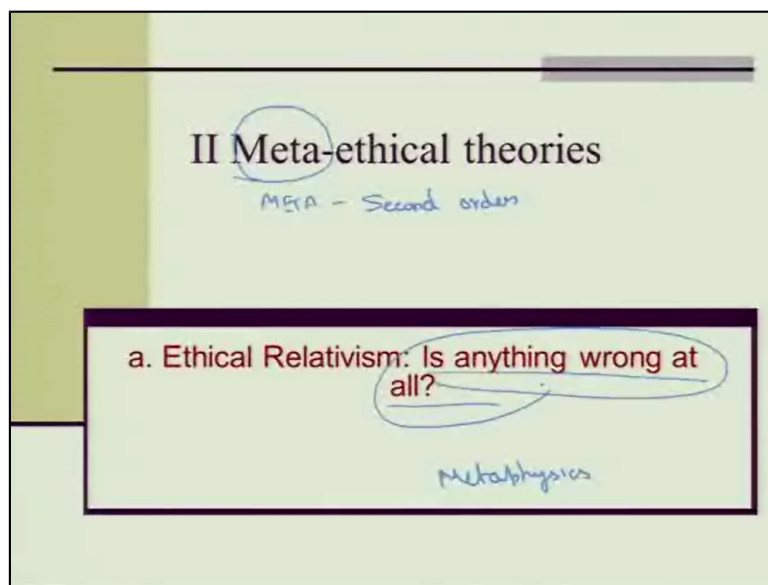


Ethics
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Module No. #01
Lecture No. #12
Metaethical Theories
Ethical Relativism: Is Anything Wrong at all?

Hello, viewers. Today, in the second section of the topic, Ethics, we are going to talk about, Metaethical Theories.

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If you take a look at the slide, it questions. Well. In Metaethical Theories, the first issue, that we would be tackling is, Ethical Relativism. Is there anything, wrong at all. Now, that is the fundamental question. Now, if you would recollect, that when we talk about Metaethics, we have talked about, there being three variations in Ethics. The first one being, the deepest and the most foundational question, tackled by Metaethics.

The second tackled by, Normative Ethics, or Moral Theories. And, the third one is Applied Ethics, where Moral Theories meet, real world problems out there. Now, Metaethics is the most foundational, or deepest questions of moral philosophy. Any subject, any issue, or any topic, when it has meta prefixed, it becomes a second-order study. A study about, the study itself. If you take a look at the slide. Whenever, this word, meta is put in, meta means, second-order, or studying from a distance.

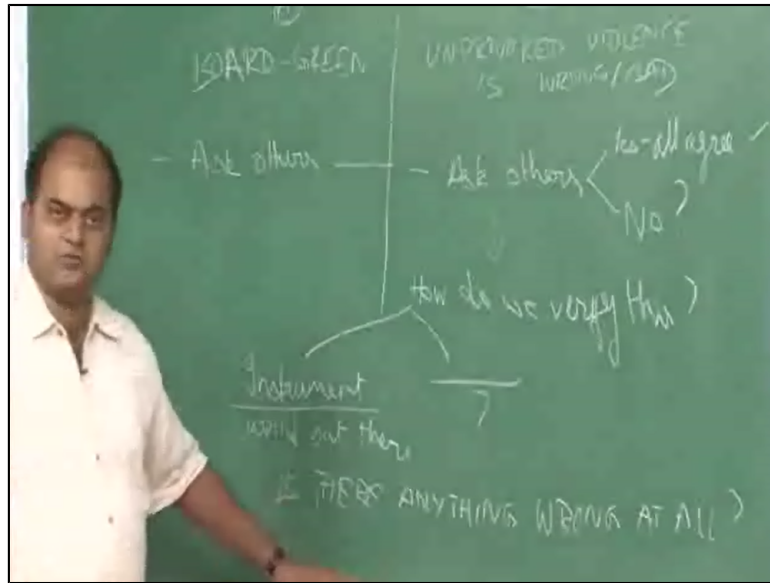
So, that way, when we talk about Meta-physics, it is a study about physics. Whereas, physics would be about the, roughly physical bodies, and measurable entities. Metaphysics would be about, studying the various methodologies of studying Physics. Now, coming back to Metaethics. So, Metaethics is actually taking a second person, or a second-order view, a distant view, on the discipline of Ethics. That, before we start theorising on Ethics, what are the most foundational questions, can we theorise on Ethics.

Now, if you look at the first question, that we talk about, which is Ethical Relativism, is anything wrong at all. Right. Now, this is a question, that I think, many of you must have faced earlier. Right. That well, let me put forth a view. That well, what do we mean, when we say, is anything wrong at all. Now, many of us have, perhaps thought that well, suppose, I need to know, what is the colour of this board. I would think, it is green.

I would ask a few others, that what do you think, is the colour of the board. Some of them may say, green. May be, all of them would say, green. May be, somebody would say, it is some other colour. How would we verify? We would verify, then well, by a scientific instrument, that would measure, the frequency and wavelength of the light waves, bouncing back from this board. And, that would be an undeniable proof, that well, the board is of so-and-so colour.

Now, what does this question signify? Or, what does this example signify? The example signifies that well, there can be an objective answer to the question, what is the colour of this board. But, in the same stream, do we wonder, can there be an objective answer to, what is the right thing to do. That, there is something called, right and wrong. Now, say, most of us would feel perhaps, or would opine that, unprovoked violence is wrong. Now, let us compare it, with the same old example. Now, in the board, if we say well, two types of proposition, we take.

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Board is green. Unprovoked violence is wrong or bad. Now, let us say, these are two kinds of propositions, that we have taken. Right. Well, the board is green, and unprovoked violence is bad or wrong. We saw in this example, well, first is, ask others. Right. Here also, we can have the same classification, we ask others, whether this holds or not. Maybe, most of us would agree, that well, unprovoked violence is bad, or wrong, or evil. And, just as most of us would agree, that well, the colour of the board is green.

If there is a difference of opinion. If the answer to this, is yes, all agree. Then, it is over. But, if it is no, then what? Now, in the same stream, that when we ask others, and if it is yes, all agree, then we have a consensus, and agreement, by the number of questioners. Again, of course, there is a little disclaimer, there that maybe, even if all of them agree, that could be different. Well. In either case, even if all agree, or if there is a disagreement, the next question that is coming up is, we want to verify this. How do we verify this?

Well. For this question, we verified by an instrument. What does the instrument do? It measures the world out there. Now, what about this question. Now coming back, now spinning this story around the question, that we ask, that well, if unprovoked violence is wrong, how do we know? Well, we ask others. And, others agree or disagree, but we now need an extrinsic external verification. And, where do we get this. Is that a fact of the world?

Can we look out into the world, to find, that there is something wrong, with unprovoked violence. Many of us would think, well, there is nothing out there in the world. There is no instrument, that can tell us that, well, there is something wrong, with unprovoked violence.

And, therefore may be, this cannot be verified. Then, the question comes, that if this be the reasoning, then the ultimate question that comes is, is there anything wrong at all.

This comes out to be the fundamental question, that we are going to tackle now, in this session. Because, this is a Metaethical question. When it asks that, is there anything wrong at all. Now, coming back to the presentation. Now, when we ask the question, that is anything wrong at all, we are asking a second-order question.

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Meta-ethics:

- The foundation of the ethical quest *Theorizing*
- Can moral claims be true or false? *Foundation of Moral Theorizing*
- What is the source or justification of moral claims?
- Does moral philosophy rest on a mistake, that is, are there reasons to progress with moral philosophy?
- How is our socio-psychological build determining our ethical world view?

VS

|| (a) Ethical Relativism

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Now, what is Metaethics. Well. It involves a lot of question marks, and a lot of thinking. Because, it goes into the foundations, of the Moral Theorising, or Ethical Theorising. Now, can moral claims be true or false. What is the source of justification of moral claims? Right. If we find the justification of moral claims, what is the source? How do you justify moral claims? Does moral philosophy rest on a mistake?

Interestingly, a very seminal paper in Ethics, was also written by the same name that, Does Moral Philosophy rest on a Mistake. That is, are there reasons to progress, with Moral Philosophy. How is our Socio-Psychological build, determining our Ethical Worldview. Well. Now, if you do a lot of thinking, there where, what is the foundation of the Ethical Quest, or Ethical Theorising. Now, can moral claims be true or false. These are the questions, that are raised by Metaethics.

If the dreams are true or false, how do we justify the claims. Is there any justification, for progressing with moral philosophy? Well. How is our Socio-Psychological build, determining

our Ethical Worldview. That is, is it that how the way we are brought up, the way we have the experiences that we are exposed to, determine our Ethical Worldview. So, these are the questions, that Metaethics tackles.

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The slide is titled "Ethical Relativism = NON JUDGEMENTAL". It contains four bullet points:

- This is a foundational meta ethical question that we face before philosophizing on morality.
- The claim of ethical relativism may be put forth as: that there are various moral systems or frames of reference and that there can be no hierarchy made between the various frames of reference.
- That there can be no trans-perspectival ethical system.
- Every ethical system develops in its own environment and is applicable to its own environment only.

Handwritten notes on the slide include: "There are no moral values - EP NO MORAL/ETHICAL MINIMALIST" and a circled "EP" next to the second bullet point.

Well. The first question, we talk about, that well, is the Ethical Relativism. Right. Now, this is a foundational Metaethical question, that we face before, philosophising on morality. Now, pay attention. This is the claim of Ethical Relativism. The claim of Ethical Relativism may be put forth as, that there are, various moral systems or frames of reference, and that, there can be no hierarchy made, between the various frames of reference. That, there can be no trans-perspectival Ethical system.

Every Ethical system develops, in its own environment, and is applicable, to its own environment only. Okay. Now, let us look at this question, that we are tackling, that well. Like many of us would perhaps think, that well, it is a common term today, to say that well, that I am non-judgemental. Right. That, I do not make any judgements. That, Ethical Relativism is being non-judgemental. That is a crucial term, that we might need to be aware of.

That, what do I mean, when I say, that I am non-judgemental, as an Ethicist, or in my Ethical perspective. Now, when somebody says that, he or she is non-judgemental, what she or he probably and more accurately means is that, that person does not see that, one person can judge the moral claims of another person. That means, my moral claims are my moral claims, and your moral claims are your moral claims.

And, there is no way, I can judge yours, or you can judge mine. Because, we belong to different domains. It is the same, it is a powerful argument, which relativist in various domain gave, relativist in general, and Ethical Relativism in particular. Well, the phrase like, you cannot compare apple with oranges. Because, they are simply two different kinds of fruits. To compare, any two claims or entities, there has to be a common factor.

You cannot compare, the relativist claim, as well. You cannot compare an apple, with an orange. Because, they are different fruits. But, well, you can compare an apple with an orange, if you are exploring from the dimension of sweetness, you are exploring from the dimension of weight, you are exploring from the dimension of aesthetic appeal. That could of course, be a little questionable, initially. But, we leave that question now, for it is out of the purview, of our enquiry, in this course

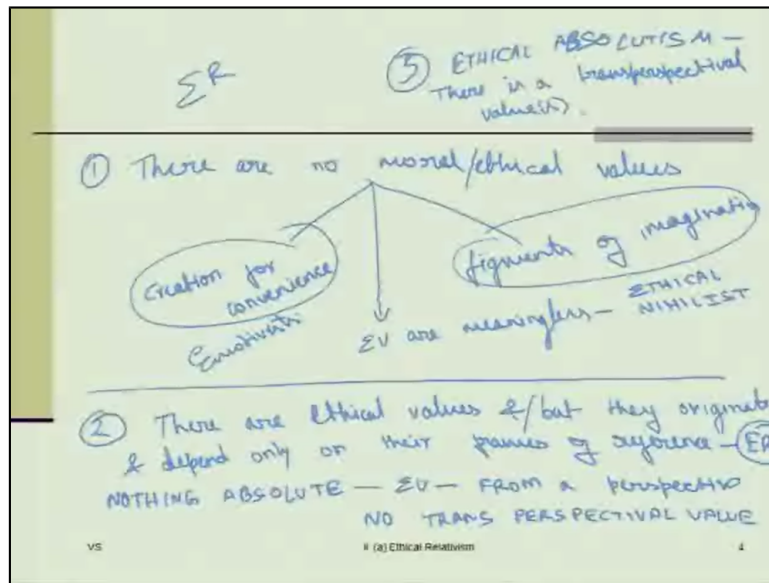
But, if apples and oranges can be compared, with respect to their sweetness, can moral claims be compared. Now, the Ethical Relativist says that, well, there are various moral frames of reference. Right. And, there is no way, we can compare, one frame of reference, with the other. Now, that would mean, that well, if I have arrived at a moral frame of reference, from whatever be the causes, be it my socialisation, my religion, my culture, A. And, somebody else has come up with, another moral frame of reference, B. The two cannot, judge upon each other.

Each is right, from its own perspective. Now, such a claim seems, very plural, very fashionable, very tolerant, very acceptable, very polished, very sophisticated, very open, and very cosmopolitan. But, let us explore this claim, to find out that, well, if this is really the case. So, let us clearly look at the slide now. That, what exactly is the claim. Now, as Philosophers, we would like to first define, what is the problem.

So, what we need to remember is, this crucial way. That, there are various moral systems, or frames of reference, and that there can be no hierarchy made between, the various frames of reference. Now notice, what this is not denying. Now, it is saying, that well, if I say, that there are no moral values, am I an Ethical Relativist. No. What am i. I am actually a Moral or Ethical Nihilist. Now, we will refer to it shortly as, in abbreviation as ER. What the Ethical Relativists claim is that, there are right, there is right and wrong. Right.

And, these right and wrong, are not depend on their frames of references. And, there can be no trans-perspectival Ethical system, for the same. Well, let us look at a presentation, to know the detail. As we find mentioned on the slide, that there can be no trans-perspectival system. Now, every Ethical system develops, is not in its own environment is, and is applicable to its own environment only. Now, let us look at this, on a new slide. And, what is the difference.

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Because, our understanding of Ethical Relativism is very essential, to proceed further. Now, what various positions can be, first, that there are no Moral or Ethical values at all. Right. Now, this could be, that well, their figments of imagination, or they are creation for convenience. Now, in either case, if their figments of imagination, and we downright hold that, there are no Moral or Ethical values that, Ethical or Moral values are meaningless.

Then, we are an Ethical Nihilist, or moral Nihilist. That is, denying the very existence of morality. Whereas, these two domains are claiming that, moral values are fictitious, but meaningful fictitious. We could see that, there are certain streams of Ethical theories, such as Emotivists, which subscribe to this kind of a jury. But, if one claims that, Ethical values are meaningless, and we are strictly in Ethical Nihilist.

Now, if second, I hold that there are Ethical values, and or but, they originate and depend, only on their frames of reference, then I am an Ethical Relativist. That, the Ethical Relativist is claiming that, there are Ethical values. But, the Ethical values are relative to the frames of reference, in which, they have originated. There is nothing absolute about them. Now, if there

is nothing absolute, what it means. That well, every Ethical value is, from a perspective, no trans-perspectival value.

Now, if this is the claim, that there are no trans-perspectival values, then well, we are strictly an Ethical Relativist. Now, we need to be clear, or why we are focusing on this fact. Is that well, our understanding of Ethical Relativism, needs to be very sharp, distinguished from, various other streams possible. Now, the Ethical Relativist agrees, that there are moral values. Only says that, these values come from a frame of reference.

And, there is no way of, comparing a moral value, from different frames of reference. Now, if this be the case, what is the situation? Right. Now, let us first look at, evaluate oneself, whether you belong to, the first category, or the second category, or none. Please, take a look at the slide, now. The first category would claim, that there are no moral values, that everything is subject to frame of reference, then you are an Ethical Nihilist.

The second is an Ethical Relativist, which says that well, you are a believer in Ethical values, but these values, depend on their frames of reference. The third can be an absolute frame of reference. The third can be termed as, Moral or Ethical Absolutism, that there is a trans-perspectival value or values.

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The appeal of ethical relativism:

- To each his own! : It is common to come across the view that each one of us has a right to his or her own (ethical) point of view, and that others ought not to interfere. LIBERTY?
- It seems that ethical relativism gives space to the view point of the other – it is non absolutistic and therefore non autocratic. D
- It seems to advocate moral pluralism and a tolerance for the view of the other. Intellectual humility/fallibility

Nothing is binding on the other.
Nothing can be binding on the other.

VE © (A) Ethical Relativism

Now, if you go on to the next slide, to see that, what is the appeal of Ethical Relativism. For many of us, who would find ourselves belonging to, well, that yes, there are moral values, but it depends on frames of reference. Well. Let us assume that, get into the psyche of these non-

judgemental perspective, or, that one's Ethical Theories cannot be judged, from another perspective. Well. It is common fact, that we have heard, if you look at the slide, the appeal of Ethical Relativism is that, to each his own.

It is common to come across the view, that each one of us has a right, to his or her own Ethical point of view, and that others ought not to interfere. Right. Now, does this strike to you, as liberal. It seems that, Ethical Relativism gives space, to the viewpoint of the other. It is non-absolutistic, and therefore non-autocratic. It seems only to advocate, moral pluralism, and a Tolerance, for the view of other. It is also as associated with, intellectual humility, or fallibility. Okay. Now, let us take a look that, what is appeal of Ethical Relativism.

Now, the Ethical Relativist is of the opinion that, there are various frames of reference, in terms of moral claim. And that, one frame of reference, cannot be compared to the, other frame of reference. They are different. Now, this non-judgemental claim, that we cannot judge others, has an appeal of its own. And, let us try to analyse, what is the appeal of such a non-judgemental position, or the position of an Ethical Relativist. First, its claim is, it gives space, to the view point of the other.

Now, we see, that well, giving the other, space. Because, as long as we hold an absolute judgement, we find it imposing on all others. Now, the Ethical Relativism is not only tolerant, is leaves ontological, psychological space, to the other. So, it is non-absolutistic, and therefore non-autocratic. It is not absolutistic, because it does not commit to any absolute claims, which are binding on the other. Nothing is binding on the other. Now, it seems to advocate moral pluralism and Tolerance, for the view of the other.

Now, if nothing is binding on the other, can we infer from this that, nothing can be binding on the other. Now, this is a crucial jump, which perhaps, nothing is binding to, nothing can be binding. This is perhaps the crucial jump, that the Ethical Relativist takes. Well, if nothing is binding on the other, is it also the position, that nothing can be binding on the other. Right. Think over this distinction. And, we will talk about it, in the coming slides.

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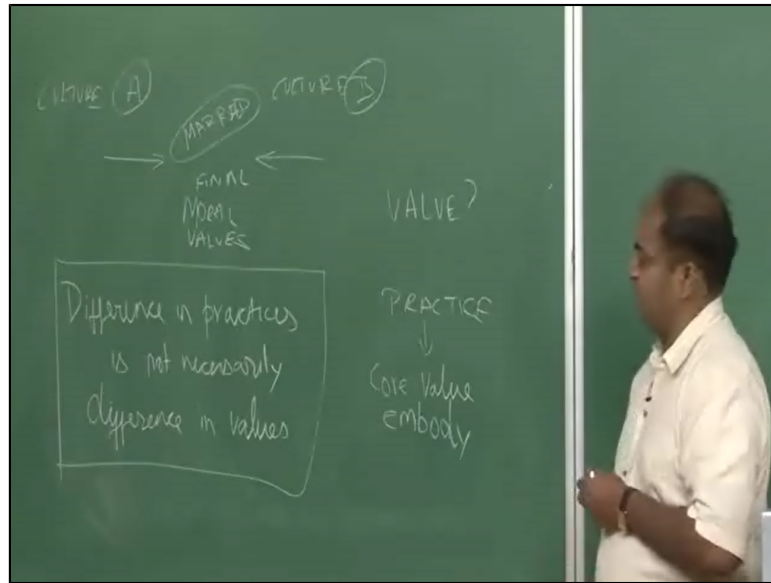


Now, our claim is that well, is the appeal of Ethical Relativism, misplaced. Tolerance is a virtue. Let us explore, what exactly do we mean, by Tolerance. When X, or any person, tolerates Y. A claim, or an act. Let Y, stand for a claim, or an act. So, when X tolerates Y, is not X already making a judgement upon Y, only. X is merely refraining from, expressing or enacting it. A trans-perspectival frame of reference, is the goal of an Ethical engagement.

This is crucial. Is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, an example of such a trans-perspectival claim? Okay. This is a question, that is raised for you, to think over. Now, Tolerance is a virtue. It has intellectual humility. Or, it has a level of Tolerance, associated with. Well. With the various arguments, the Ethical Relativist give. That, first to start with, that well, that there are different cultures, and different moral practices.

So, wherever cultures differ, moral practices differ. And therefore, we find that well, Ethical Relativism is a well-founded claim, that there can be no final morality. Now, let us look at this way. When cultures interact. Right. When, Culture-A and Culture-B interact, how do they arrive at a consensus. There are very crucial questions, that we would face over here. Well. Let us take again an example.

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Let us have, Culture-A, and Culture-B. Let us have them, interact. Right. Most of us are now, have been exposed to cosmopolitan, or a culture separate, from what we have been raised with. Now, there are moral practices, which differ a lot. So, let us say, now the Ethical Relativist, the Non-Judgemental Relativist, claims that well, somebody who comes from Culture-A, somebody comes from Culture-B, have different moral values.

Now, if these two moral values are different, we find, that when they interact, what are the moral values, that they would imbibe. Now, look at it, this way. Now, if A and B are interacting. Let us imagine, in an interesting and very relatable choices, say, A is an individual, gets married to B, as an individual. Right. They get married. Now, A and B have been raised in different cultures. They decide to get married. And, now they are married, and they live together.

Now, there is a limit to the plurality, they can observe. Suppose, every cultural value, that they have, they will somehow have to find a middle way, or a final moral value. Say, if one aggressively believes in, not wasting food. And, the other believes that well, food has to be offered to plants and animal. So, he or she puts cooked food on outside, which to the other individual, is a waste of food.

Now, this is strictly an example, where two practises are clashing. And, there can be only one resolution, because we share, one final space. So here, how do we arrive at a conclusion, at a final practice. Now, this is a dilemma, that the Ethical Relativist faces. That well, we are very happy that, A and B are married. But, after that, what is the final moral values, or cultural

values, that will come along. So, now there is a little bit of spelling mistake here. Okay.

Now, when A and B are married, the final moral values, where does that come from. A and B have to interact, negotiate. There can be trans-perspectival values, according to absolutist, where both have to evaluate their values, and bring forth a final moral value. Now, let us again, take a look at this. What are differences in values? Because, Ethical Relativism is founded on the observations, that we have. That well, there are various cultures, and therefore, various Ethical values.

Now, what exactly is a value. Clarity in these concepts, is necessary to progress further. Now, if somebody believes. Let me give an example. That well, why do we hold an entrance examination, or a test, for recruitment, or for admission, in to a coveted college, or course. We hold a test, because it gives us a hierarchy of a capable students. And, the students, the top lot, for which the college, or the course has vacancy, are invited to join. Now, we find this fair. Right.

Fairness as a value. Examination process as a practice. Now, this practice has its core value, as fairness or justice, that well, depending on the performance of the entrance examination procedure, you would be invited for an interview. Fair enough. Now, let us look at it, this way. Let us go flashback, thousand years back into, India's past. Now, there again, now there was this Gurukul system, in which admission was open, only to the Brahmins. Now, if that caste-based admission, does it seem to be fair.

It is again, that is an examination procedure, that is a practice, does it seem to be fair. Now, these are two different practices, both targeting fairness. Today, we find it unfair. But, let us try to reason how, perhaps people then recent. Let us say, that the people assumed, or believed unquestioningly, that there were lives, and after lives, and birth and death, and beyond that, there were lives.

So, where and how you are born, depends on the accumulate of your karmic desert, that you have accumulated over the past life. So, if you are born into a clan, or a caste, that is entitled to education, that is not an accident, but because, it is your desert from your past lives. Now, look at the fairness brigade. Now, we find this practice, unfair today. Because, we believe that, birth is a matter of accident.

But, if we believe that, birth is a result of your cumulative achievements, of your past lives, then this procedure, this custom of entrance, via clan or caste, again becomes fair. So, notice that, there is a practice. Right. But, the core of which, is a value. Let us even think of simpler examples. In the oriental tradition, one would bow down, to one's elders, to express respect. In occidental traditions, one would shake hands, to greet even an elder. Now, these are two different practices.

Both of them, may appear contradictory, at the superficial level. But, within them, they embody the same value. So, practices are the paraphernalia around values, or values are embodied in cultural practices. So, to read separation, or difference in practices, is not to infer immediately, that there is a difference in values. So, let us note down this crucial point, that difference in practices, is not necessarily, difference in values. Now, this is a crucial claim, that we need to comprehend, that well.

Very often, the Ethical Relativist makes this mistake of, finding difference in practices as, difference in cultural values. Say, in one culture, if it is considered that, a premarital sex is considered immoral. In another culture, premarital sex is considered moral. Is, still a matter of practices. Because, for one, the act of copulation, embodies a commitment. And, in another culture, perhaps it does not embody a commitment.

So, as long, both the cultures, respect commitment, and breaking commitment, or following one's commitment, or following the commitment made, is a core value. Now, in one culture, the act of copulation is, an act of commitment. And therefore, it should not be done in that culture. Because, it is a violation of the commitment, in fact, it is prior to the making of a commitment. So, violation of commitment, is a core value. But, how it is expressed.

Now, for somebody, say something, like politeness, like etiquette. When I say, good morning, or a good evening to you, do I really mean that, I am wishing you, well, for the morning, or the evening. Now, this in some culture, or in most of the cultures, that we are used to today is, fine etiquettes. But, if analysed, or looked at from a culture, which holds truth as a final value, is well, is a denial of the connect between, a claim, and its intention. Okay

Now, let us simplify this. So, difference in practices, is not necessarily, difference in values.

So, the core of practices are values, or practices embody values. Values are the crux of practices. Differences in practices, does not necessarily mean, difference in values. So now, when we talked about this couple, who got married, now they may have difference in, cultural practices.

But, that necessarily does not mean that, they have difference in values. Now, after having said all this, we can still hold that, there can be a difference in, moral or core values also. Do, all of us find justice, as desirable. How we interpret or analyse justice. There may be variance. Do all of us find fairness, as better than unfairness. Whatever are, definition of fairness be. Do all of us find, making and sticking to commitment, better than, making and breaking commitments.

Now, these are fundamental values. Now, if there is a difference in these values, what does it signify. Very often, now if you look at the slide, when I say that well, the Ethical Relativist is a tolerant person. Now, what are we meaning, when says that, the Ethical Relativist is tolerant. Because, when the Ethical Relativist is actually tolerating, so this credit, that the Ethical Relativist is given, that well, the Ethical Relativist is tolerant, is actually not unjustified.

Because, even the act of tolerance, implies that, a judgement is already being made. And, only that, the judgement is not expressed or enacted. So, the Ethical relativist were crucially disagreeing with Absolutist is that, a trans-perspectival frame of reference, is the goal of an Ethical engagement. Now, the Ethical Relativist believes that, this trans-perspectival enterprise is not possible. And, this is where, the Ethical Relativist differs from the, Ethical Absolutist.

Now, let us take an example. Is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, an example of such trans-perspectival claim? Now, we will talk about the, Universal Declaration of Human Rights. That well, how does it stand for, a trans-perspectival claim. Because, well, when the United Nations declared the, Universal's Declaration of Human Rights, it expects it to be binding on all people, at all times, across all countries and civilisations.

Now, this is a blatantly, anti-relativist claim. That well, there are certain practices, or certain rules, or certain laws or articles, as the UDHR mentions, which are applicable, all through the

country and civilisations. So, there are core values, which are embodied in these articles, that are fundamental, and non-negotiable, across cultures. So, if you are an Ethical Relativist, you would have to disagree, with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

A Non-Judgemental Relativist, cannot judge. Now, imagine yourself, when an agent says that, she or he is tolerant of the other. Well. Sure, he is not actually an Ethical Relativist. She is, or he is, making a judgement only, not expressing it. Let us say, you are walking by a park. And, you see another person, mercilessly kicking a puppy. Now, you would, as an Ethical Relativist, be indifferent to it. That, how does it that, it is his life, it is his culture, and for him, if it is right, I cannot judge it.

If you feel that, what that person is doing is wrong, and yet not express it, you could be said to be tolerant. That well, you disagree with, what the person is doing, but you reserve your judgement, or your expression of your judgement, to that individual. If you are an Absolutist, you would actually go, and ask him that, to stop doing that. Or, that well, he is doing the right thing, and let him continue doing that.

The very fact that, one can sit on the judgement seat on the other, or one does judge the other, or one can judge the other, indicates that, Ethical Relativism may not be, as appealing as it sounds initially, right. That well, imagine an Ethical Relativist, going through life. Well, any value, acts, taking place around, the Ethical Relativist cannot react, to such an act. Because, his Metaethical claim is that well, there is no judgement to be taken on, another moral frame of reference. Okay.

So, Tolerance is not as much as an indicator of, Ethical Relativism, as perhaps, it is made out to be. Now, we will go ahead to see, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Let us take a look at these rights, and find out trans-perspectival claim.