

Ethical relativism & intellectual humility?

- Very often the non judgemental ethical relativist is seen to be intellectually humble, that is, she considers her views & claims to be fallible – amenable to revision.□□
- But considering one's claims fallible is not denying the possibility of universal value(s)
- Thus we see that 'tolerance' and 'intellectual humility' touted as the pros of ethical relativism are not really so.

ER = Fallibilist

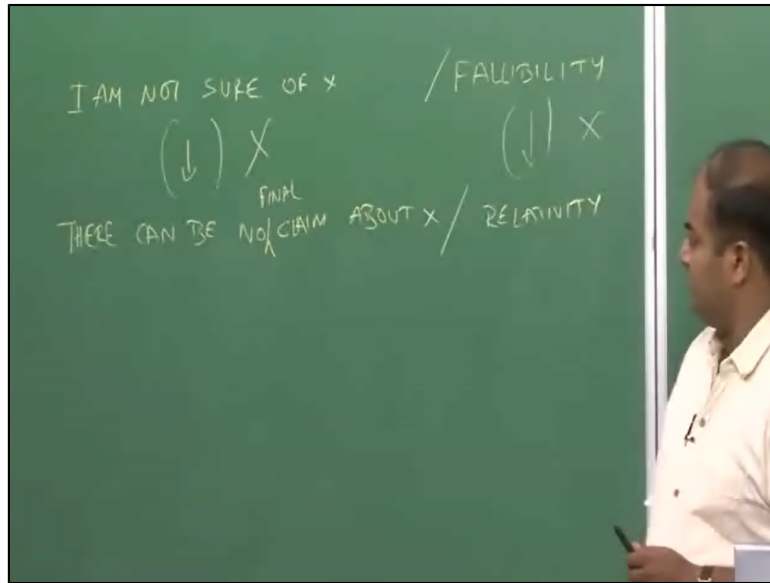
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Now, Ethical Relativism and intellectual humility. Well. Very often, the Non-Judgemental Ethical Relativist is seen to be intellectually humble, that is, she or he considers his or her views and claims to be fallible, amenable to revision. But, considering one's claims to be fallible, is not denying the possibility of universal values. Thus, we see the tolerance and intellectual humility, touted as the pros of Ethical Relativism, are not really so. Okay. What is the point, we are trying to make over here?

Now, when we talk about the Non-Judgemental Ethical Relativist, well, we find the Ethical Relativist to be, intellectually humble. Now, what exactly, we mean by that. Well, not the non-judgemental ethical agent is, or perhaps appears to be, more intellectually humble, less arrogant, does not consider his or her views as the final views, especially in the ethical domain. Now, is that really so? Is the Ethical Relativist, sets an example of intellectually humble behaviour? That is, making a claim, very well being aware that, it could be revised later.

Well, let us see. If the Ethical Relativist is actually, displays the qualities, that she or he is touted to display. Now, let us take a look. Now, if you consider yourself, your views as fallible. Right. We make a claim. And, fallible meaning, that amenable to revision, or that your views could be wrong, and could be corrected later. Now, if your views are amenable to revision, is it the same thing, that there is no final view possible. Let us write it on the board, to look at, to know the distinction.

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Okay. What we need to consider right now, that is Fallibility, the same thing as Relativity. Now, when I make a claim, that I am not sure of X. When I talk about X, and I am wondering that well, whether I am not very sure of my opinion, or my knowledge of X, that it could be revised, in time to come. Am I saying that well, there can be no final claim about X. Now, this is where, the crucial distinction we need to draw, between the apparent image of a Non-Judgemental Ethical Relativist, and that of a Fallibilist. Right.

Now, the crucial question, that we need to know is, if you take a look at the slide, is the Ethical Relativist, same thing as the Fallibilist. That is, considering oneself, fallible. Now, the claim that Ethical Relativist tend to make, is that well, Ethical Relativism justifies, or is a mix of fallible claim, and therefore is intellectually humble, less arrogant, and therefore perhaps, more preferable. But, as we can see here, that well, I am not sure of X, is a claim of Fallibility.

But, that there can be no final claim about X, that does not follow from Fallibility. This is an incorrect inference. Here, we make an incorrect inference. I am not sure of X, does nowhere mean or infer, that there can be no X. It only means that, my knowledge of X is not fool proof. It does not make any final claim, that there can be no knowledge of X. Right. Now, this is where, we would like to see, that well, intellectual humility. As seen in the slide, that this thing called intellectual humility, which is touted as the pros of Ethical Relativism, is not really so.

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Ethical Relativism as a description and as a meta ethical theory

- Ethical relativism as a description claims that there **are** varied and differing moral practices and claims amongst the various collectives/societies.
- Meta ethical relativism on the other hand claims that it is **impossible** to have universal values.
- Descriptive ethical relativism is a description of the state of affairs and is very often confused as a justification of Meta ethical relativism, but it cannot be so – for a description of the state of affairs cannot be a justification of the impossibility of a state of affairs.

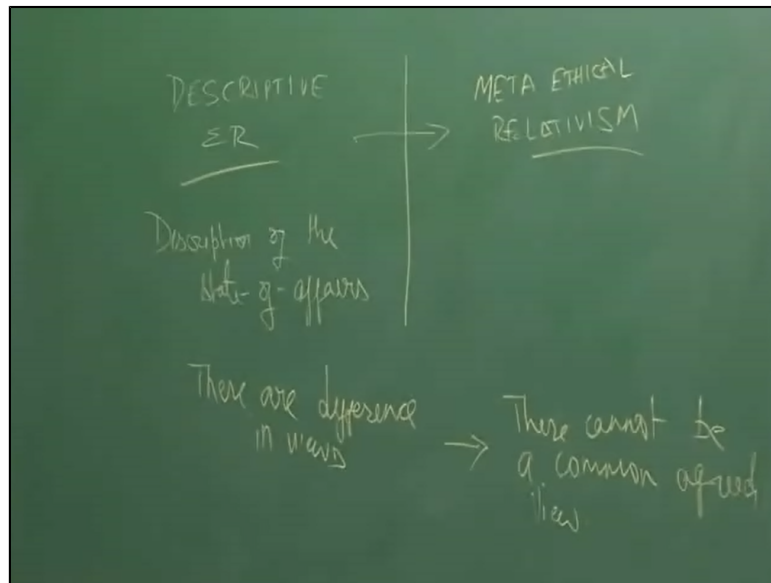
A prejudice is an invalid inference from a description of state - of - affairs.

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Now, we need to know about Ethical Relativism, as a description, and as a Metaethical Theory. Ethical Relativism as a description claims, that there are varied and differing moral practices, and claims amongst the various collectives or societies. Metaethical Relativism, on the other hand claims, that it is impossible to have a universal value.

Descriptive Ethical Relativism is, a description of the state of affairs, and is very often confused, as a justification of Metaethical Relativism. But, it cannot be so. For a description of the state of affairs, cannot be a justification of the impossibility, of a state of affairs. Now, what is it, we need to make a fundamental distinction between, what is it to describe something, and what is it to make a claim about it.

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So, we now have to talk about, Descriptive Ethical Relativism, and Metaethical Relativism. Now, Descriptive Relativism, like any description, is a statement of, or a description of, what is the state of affairs. Right. Now, on the other hand, Metaethical Relativist is making a claim, that there cannot be a universal ethical value. As, we read in the first bullet, of the presentation of the slide, Ethical Relativism as a description claims that, there are various moral practices and claims, amongst the various collectives and societies.

Metaethical Relativism, on the other hand claims that, it is in possible, to have a universal value. Now, well, let us see, what is the problem. Let us try briefly understand, what is the problem? Let us say, a historian, takes a slice of history of human civilisation. Right. Say, for 10 years, in a particular region. Now, this historian finds that, there have been perpetual wars and violence, in these 10 years, of this particular region, of these particular people.

Now. This is a description of state of affairs. Now, from that, if the historian concludes that, this particular kind of people, cannot or do not know, how to live in peace. Would we hold, such an inference, accurate. That is where, what is the question, we would like to focus on. This is a very interesting distinction, that we would like to make and apply, perhaps in your day-to-day lives. Whenever, you see a description, is it a final claim. Can we infer, a final claim, from a descriptive state of affairs?

Let us say, we find that well, in this particular person's life, suppose someone who is 15 years old, and he has been, or she has been, stealing for the past 7 to 8 years, since the time, she or he has been, sensible or conscious. This is a description of his life. Now, would this mean,

that this person is going to steal for ever, or that this person is inherently a thief. Well. Most of us would make our judgement. That is how, we generalise and make a judgement. A machine, that has broken down several times, is judged to be an untrustworthy machine.

A machine, that has not broken down for several years of usage, is a trustworthy machine. But, however, logically can we infer a claim, from a description of the state of affairs. Now, look at this now. This, particularly comes, when we talk about prejudices. Prejudices are invalid inferences, from state of affairs. Now, if a particular race is seen to be, say, very violent. Now, concluding that, this race will always be violent, or this race is a violent race, is an invalid justification, is an invalid inference.

Now, strictly speaking, this is an example of a prejudice. A prejudice is an invalid inference, from description. Perhaps, let me put that down, as an interesting note. If you look at the slide. Now, a prejudice is an invalid inference, from a description of a particular state of affairs. Now, we would like to bring this analogy back, into Ethical Relativism. That well, that we have been observing that, throughout the world, there are different moral practices, different times have different moral values, different moral judgements.

Is that a solid or rigorous justification, for the Metaethical claim of Relativism. So, can we infer this? Can we infer Metaethical Relativism, from Descriptive Ethical Relativism? Now, this happens, most of the times, when we talk about prejudice. Prejudice is, when we see a description of state of affairs. That well, most Terrorists, belong to this particular religion. Therefore, this religion promotes, terrorism. Now, that is a prejudice. Because, that is a prejudice, from a description of a state of affairs.

We need to find reasons, for justifying. Why? Justifying the claim, that we make. So, when I make a Metaethical claim, that well, universal values are impossible. It is not enough, if I say, that there have been no universal values, throughout the course of history. So, no universal values does not infer that, there can be no universal values. Now, this is the anomaly or the difficulty, that we would like to point out.

That, Descriptive Ethical Relativism, as we see in the slide, is a description of the state of affairs, and is very often confused, as a justification of Metaethical Relativism. But, it cannot be so. For, a description of the state of affairs, cannot be a justification of the impossibility of

the state of affairs. So, we now should be clear, that Ethical Relativism as a description, and as a Metaethical Theory. We are particularly talking about, Ethical Relativism, as a Metaethical Theory. Now, who would find out, Ethical Relativism as a description.

Well, a Sociological Anthropological survey, Empirical Evidence out there, would find out, that there are varied cultural practices. That would be a, descriptive moral claim, or descriptive claim of Ethical Relativism, that there are different moral practices. Now, what claim, we are making is that, there are differences in views. There cannot be a common agreed view. Now, this is the kind of inference, that we are pointing out, without difficulty with. That, there are difference in views, but there cannot be a common agreed view. Now, coming back to the slide. Let us look at the next slide.

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The slide is titled "Ethical relativism to Ethical universalism". It contains three bullet points:

- So, meta ethical relativism is neither proved nor disproved by the existing variety or difference moral values and practices. *DER*
- Meta ethical relativism is contrary to ethical objectivism or ethical universalism or ethical absolutism – the position that claims that there are/ can be universal moral values.
- Ethical universalism claims that there is at least one universal/universalizable ethical value.

Handwritten notes on the slide include "MER" and "DER" in a circle at the top right, and "Can there be a/any universal ethical value? Yes - MER No - EO/EA/EA" at the bottom right. The slide also has a small "VS" in the bottom left and "© Ethical Relativism" in the bottom center.

Now, Ethical Relativism to Ethical Universalism. Metaethical Relativism, is neither proved, nor disproved, by the existing variety, or difference in moral values and practices. So, what was this existing variety of difference moral views and practices. This is nothing but, Descriptive Ethical Relativism. So, Metaethical Relativism cannot be justified by, Descriptive Ethical Relativism. Whenever, we talk about Ethical Relativism, this is Descriptive Ethical Relativism. We mean, Metaethical Relativism.

So, whenever we refer to Ethical Relativism, we are meaning Metaethical Relativism. Now, Metaethical Relativism, is contrary to Ethical Objectivism, or Ethical Universalism, or Ethical Absolutism. The position, that claims that, there are, or can be, universal moral

values. Can there be universal moral values? If your answer to that is, yes, then you are an Ethical Universalist, or an Ethical Absolutist or Objectivist.

If your answer is no, then you are a Metaethical Relativist. So, the question to be answered is, can there be a single or any universal ethical value. This is the question. If your answer is yes, then you are a Metaethical Relativist. If your answer is no, then you are an Ethical Objectivist, or an Ethical Absolutist, or an Ethical Universalist. Now, Ethical Universalism claims that, there is at least one universal or universalizable ethical value.

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Ethical absolutism or universalism:

- The contrary of ethical relativism is ethical absolutism or ethical universalism.
- The absolutist or univesalist frequently connote the fanatic or the extremist, but this is only the connotation and not the full meaning of it.
- When one takes a stand in a ethical issue, one is becoming an ethical absolutist.
- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is one such absolutist or relativist claim. Let us take a look at a few of its articles.

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Now, let us say more about Ethical Absolutism. Now, the contrary of Ethical Relativism is, use of the word, contrary. The contrary of Ethical Relativism, is Ethical Absolutism, or Ethical Universalism. Now, when I say, choose the word contrary, what I mean that well, Ethical Relativism, and Ethical Absolutism, cannot both be true, at the same time. However, both can be false, at the same time. That, such a situation would be that of an Ethical Nihilism, that completely denies the ethical domain, that there can be no value judgements.

So, Ethical Relativism and Ethical Absolutism, are false. So, if I would have used the word contradictory, that would mean that, any one of the two, Ethical Relativism, or Ethical Absolutism, is true at a time. But, by the use of contrary, the possibility that both, Ethical Relativism and Ethical Absolutism are false, remains. The Absolutist or Universalist, frequently connote the Fanatic or the Extremist. But, this is only the connotation, and not the full meaning of it.

When, one takes a stand in an ethical issue, one is becoming an Ethical Absolutist. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is one such Absolutist or Relativist claim. Let us take a look, at a few of its articles. Now, before that, contrary of Ethical Relativism. What do we mean by, Ethical Absolutism? Now, whenever I use the word, Absolutist, or Ethical Objectivist, perhaps the connotation, or the impression, that comes to us is that of a Fanatic, of that of an Extremist, or even that of a Terrorist.

And yes, a Terrorist who believes, that he is forwarding one ethical, or she is forwarding one ethical value, which ought to be the final universal value, is an Ethical Absolutist. The Terrorist would claim that, the value for which, she or he is fighting violently, is the value, that should be the final universal value. So, this is perhaps, the most common impression of Ethical Absolutist, that we have, the Fanatic, the Extremist, even bordering on the Terrorist.

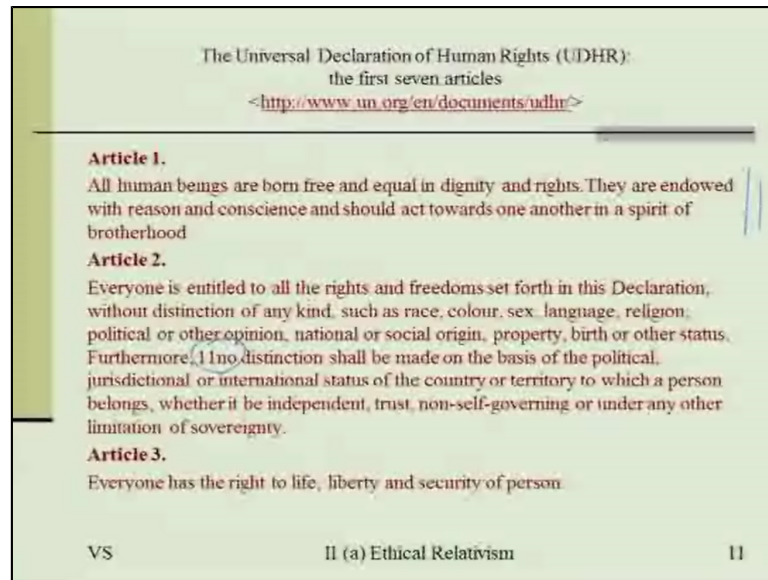
Now, that would be an uncharitable, or even an inaccurate reading of, what Ethical Absolutism would be. Well. When we claim, we make any moral claim for the other, when you make any moral judgement, we are making an Absolutist claim. When, we are sentencing somebody, or when the society or law, the government is sentencing somebody, for a violent crime, it is making an absolute moral claim. Violence, no matter what, by the aggrieved, does not have the right to be violent on the aggressor.

Justice is only, when it is done through the, third-party mediation. When we make any such claim, we are making a Moral Absolutist claim. Remember, the talk about the puppy. The bystander watching the puppy, being trampled upon by another person. So, when you make a claim, that well, the puppy has not provoked you, has not cause any harm to you, why are you. We would call such a person, perhaps sadistic, that well, who gets pleasure, out of giving thing.

And, that would be morally wrong. Because, we are holding it, as a final universal moral value, that unprovoked violence, or giving pain for the sake of giving pain, is wrong, no matter what. So, such a claim is an, absolute moral claim. Now, let us take a concrete example of, what is an Ethical Absolutist claim. Because, we can be wrong about our Ethical Absolutism. But, we proceed in the moral path, only with an assumption of Ethical Absolutism, or Ethical Universalism.

Because, without such an assumption, there is no progress in a moral dialogue, there is no point of a genuine rational discussion. Now, let us take a first look at the, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and a few of its articles. And, see that, how does it embed values in it, and claims Ethical Absolutism.

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Well. Let us take the, Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The First Article says, all human beings are born free, and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience, and should act towards one another in the spirit of brotherhood. Now, why you could ask that, everybody born free, why can I not raise an infant or child, as my slave. So, all human beings are born free, and equal in dignity and rights, is a very substantial Absolutist moral claim.

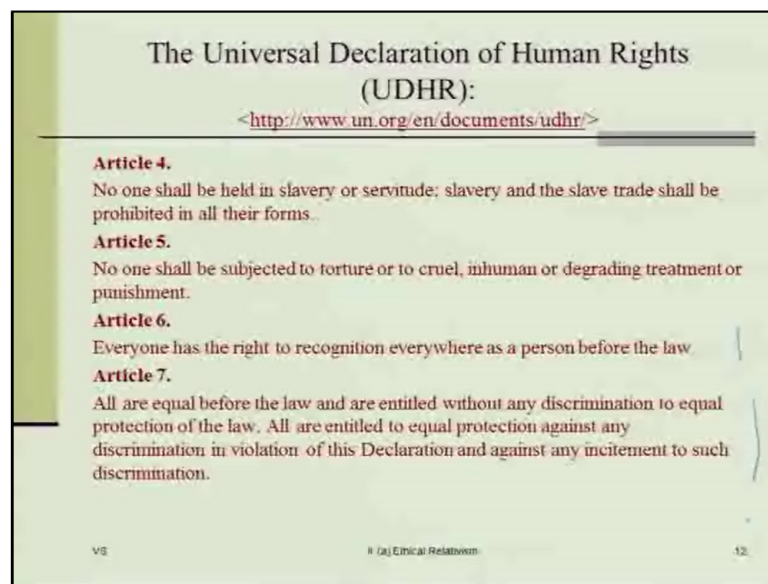
That, everyone is endowed with reason and conscience, and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood. So, this is an indirect attack, on the possibility of slavery, that one can enslave the other, that once dignity exceeds, over the rights of the other. Let us look at the Article-2. Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms, set forth in this declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, or other status.

Furthermore, there can be no distinction. No distinction shall be made, on the basis of the political, jurisdictional, or international status of the country or territory, to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trusts, non-self-governing, or under any other limitation of sovereignty. Now, this is the second part of the article. So, why does, race, colour, sex,

language, religion, political or other opinion, national and social origin, property, birth and other status, become irrelevant. So, there is some kind of a fundamental human equality, that this article is hinting at.

Let us look at Article-3. Everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security of person. Who could question why? Well, this is an Absolutist claim, by people coming together. Now, are all Absolutist claims, only empirical claims. Well, there are many claims, which are non-empirical. Which are, say, the example of geometric, or arithmetic, or mathematical claims. They are non-empirical claims. They are demonstrable, deduction, is a means of showing a claim, that is intrinsically valid. Now, everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security of person.

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The fourth article reads; no one shall be held in slavery or servitude. Slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited, in all their forms. Five. No one shall be subjected to torture, or to cruel inhuman, or degrading treatment, or punishment. Six. Everyone has the right to recognition, and everywhere as a person before the law. Seven. All are equal before the law, and are entitled without any discrimination, to equal protection of the law.

All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination, in violation of this declaration, and against any incitement to such discrimination. Now, we see the 7 Articles of Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Now, what does this, Universal Declaration of Human Rights claim. It is not hinting, it is aggressively or assertively claiming, that there is something

fundamentally equal about human beings, and that one cannot enter into a contract of slavery, even out of his or her own will.

So, this is making a very assertive positivist moral claim, and assertively universalist, that well, slavery and slave trade shall be banned. Everybody has a right to defence in a court of law, before being punished. So, why should these rights be there? Why should we have these dignities? Why can someone not sell himself or herself, even if one himself or herself wants to? Well, these are claims that, most of the countries of the world have signed in, most of the governments have signed in.

Most of these were formed at a time, when the world was war-ravaged. And, they wanted to have some, Universal Declaration of Human Rights. That, Ethical Relativism, or Cultural Relativism, could not be the excuse for tolerating, what was considered as violation of fundamental human values, no matter what, our differences are, in a race, colour, language, religion, beliefs, and opinions.

There is at some level, we have fundamental human equality. So, the entire Declaration of Human Rights, is making that assertive claim, that no matter what, our superficial differences are. At some level, we are all human beings. And, their-off, we have the same certain level of dignity, which cannot be violated, no matter what.

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Finally,

- Meta ethical relativism denies any hierarchy possible in the various ethical frames of reference.
- Ethical practices are not the same thing as an ethical value – an ethical value is embedded in ethical practices; a value conditioned by the then current knowledge claims result in an ethical practice. *Higher Practice*
- Varied ethical practices do not necessarily indicate a difference in ethical values, that is, superficially different ethical practices may have the same value underlying. eg.- 'justice' as a value in ancient Indian system versus that in a modern meritocracy.

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So, let us conclude our discussion that, what are we trying to arrive at. Metaethical Relativism, denies any hierarchy possible, in the various ethical frames of reference. So, what

is Metaethical Relativism. It denies that, possibility of any hierarchy between the various moral frames of reference. So, Metaethical Relativism is not claiming that well, we have universal values, right now.

Metaethical Relativism is claiming that, universal values are not possible. Metaethical Relativism is not claiming that well, universal values are not possible, now. In fact, Descriptive Ethical Relativism is actually describing, that we do not have any universal value, now. Perhaps, but that it is not possible. That is the Metaethical Relativistic claim. Second, ethical practices are not the same thing as ethical value. We saw the difference between, value and practice.

Now, unethical practices are not the same thing, as an ethical value. An ethical value is embedded in ethical practices. A value conditioned by the, then current knowledge claims result, in an ethical practice. Let us take an interesting example, that I think of, regarding the distinction between, value and practice. Let us say, the value, we talk about is justice. Now, if justice is a value. Let us talk about, ancient system that, say 1000 years back in India, it would be just a fair, for a person born in a particular caste, to have access to education.

And, a person born in a particular caste, not to have access to an education. Now, they considered that system, fair. Today, we again have discrimination between, who gets access to, say, higher education. It is perhaps now, mostly in a procedure of examination. That, all of us are allowed to take an examination. And, only the ones who qualify, are the top 5% to 10%, depending on the available vacancy, in the choice of educational institution, get into the chosen educational institution.

Now, both of these, are examples of justice. We would consider the ancient system, unjust. Because, it made a distinction between, the position, social standing of birth. Now, let us take a deeper look into this issue. What was justice according to them, and what is justice according to us. Well. The value justice, according to them was, well, one ought to get, what one deserves. Now, wait a minute. Is not this the same thing, as we would mean right now, that getting what one deserves, that what one has worked for.

So, I have worked for my entrance examination or procedure, and I have earned my college seat. But, if the values are the same, how is the practice different. The practices seemingly

contradict each other. Now here, when I quote, if you look at the slide that, a value conditioned by the, then current knowledge claims result, in an ethical practice. Now, a value, which is conditioned by the, then current knowledge.

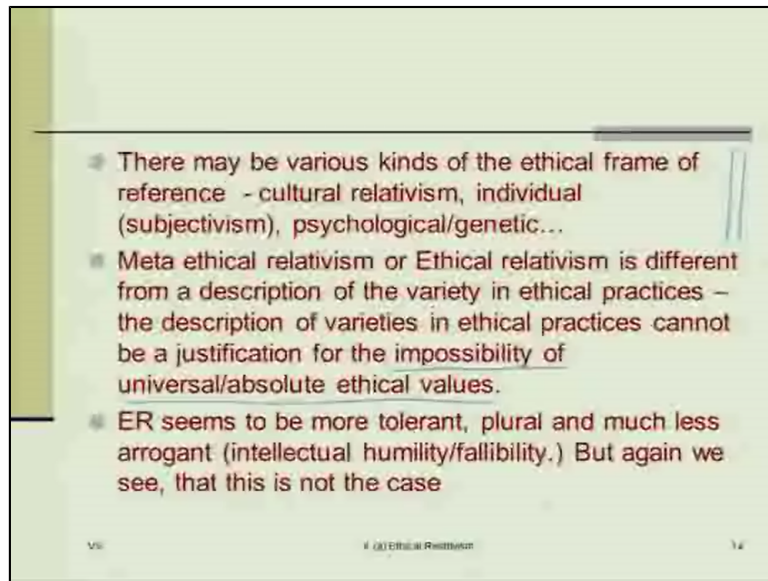
So, at the ancient time, their knowledge claims were, that well, where one is born, is not an accident, but an accumulative result of, what one has done, in prior lives. Now, this is the metaphysical assumption there. That, birth is no accident. Birth is a result of, what one has done, in past lives. Now, we may not agree, with these Metaphysical assumptions. We may not agree, with these knowledge claims, today.

But, if these knowledge claims are held, then we see that well, we can perhaps better understand that, why the value justice remains the same, but its practice differed. Today, we believe that the birth, or the position of birth, is an accident. That, in what social position one lines up, is merely an accident. So, rather one earns his admission, by a meritocracy, or by working hard, towards the entrance procedure.

So, both justice as a value, remains the same, but practices differ. The earlier practice was, because of that time of knowledge, that well, a birth is determined by your prior actions. And therefore, that your birth itself is essential, as a qualification for you to, have an access to education, or to be denied access to education. Whereas now, again, we have a discrimination. If you have cleared your entrance examinations, then you have access to education.

If you have not, then you do not have access to that education. So, this discrimination seems fair, that discrimination seems unfair, only because, our knowledge claims today, differ from our knowledge claims in ancient times. So, where we see in the third bullet, that varied ethical practices, do not necessarily indicate a difference in ethical values. That is, superficially different ethical practices, may have the same value underlying. For example, justice as a value in ancient Indian system, versus that in modern meritocracy.

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Something, that we just talked about. Next, there may be various kinds of ethical frame of reference. Cultural Relativism, Individual Relativism, or Subjectivism, Psychological, Genetic. Well, initial that we need to take a note of, is that Relativism. When we say, different frames of reference, and that there can be no hierarchy. The first instance, that perhaps comes to our mind is Cultural Relativism, or moral values are shaped by our culture.

And, people raised in different cultures, are bound to have, different moral values or practices. I would put more accurately. But, in case of Metaethical Relativists claim, that even values differ, depending on the culture. Now, the culture is here, one frame of reference. There can be, many frames of reference. There can be the individual, as the frame of reference. That, I alone determine, what is right and wrong for me.

So, this would almost shrink to Subjectivism, where the frame of reference of morality, again under the umbrella of Moral Relativism, or Ethical Relativism, would be Subjectivism. There could be other factors, such as psychological or genetic factors. That well, one is genetically programmed to have, such kind of value system. So, we can have various factors. But, the most dominant, and easy or immediate intuition is, of that of Cultural Relativism.

Now, the second bullet reads, Metaethical Relativism, or Ethical Relativism, is different from a description of the variety, in ethical practices. The description of varieties in ethical practices, cannot be a justification, for the impossibility of universal or absolute ethical values. So, if you remember, we just talked about the description. The description was, state

of affairs is not a justification, for the impossibility of the universal claims. Ethical Relativism, seems to be more tolerant, plural, and much less arrogant.

We talked about, intellectual humility, and Fallibility. But again, we saw that, this is not the claim. Fallibility and intellectual humility, are only instances of Fallibilism, not instances of Relativism. An Absolutist, can always be a Fallibilist. So, I can believe that, there are universal values, but I may not have reached them that, what I have known, are perhaps fallible, and amenable to revision.

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- When we discuss to arrive at a single ethical position, we implicitly assume the possibility of a universal value.
- The ethical relativist, cannot opine or engage with other's moral values. The ethical relativist has difficulty in explaining a change in ethical values of an individual or collective, especially when it is claimed to emerge out of a rational discussion.
- A rational discussion on morality assumes a meta ethical position of universalism or absolutism – a denial of ethical relativism.

So, with this, we come to the final slide. That, when we discussed to arrive at a single ethical position, we implicitly assumed the possibility of a universal value. Now, this is a crucial point, that covered over, this entire topic. Whenever, we argue to arrive at a universal position, or to arrive to argue to reach a resolution, not using force. But, arguments are rational discussion. We are implicitly assuming, universal values, or Moral Absolutism, or Universalism. The Ethical Relativist cannot opine, or engage, with others moral values.

And, this is a question, which can, when perhaps most of the people, would answer that, moral value, that are you an Ethical Relativist. Most of us would perhaps say yes, that well, different cultures, different values. But now, if this is a question, you ask yourself, that one cannot opine or engage, with others moral values. The Ethical Relativist has difficulty, in explaining a change in ethical values of an individual, or collective, especially when it is claimed to emerge out of, rational discussion.

Something like, whether sexuality is in the domain of value judgement. Now, if we plan to discuss, if we plan to sit in a parliament, or in a talk show, or in a group session, to find out whether, what is the collective opinion, or what is the right thing to do. And, we involved in the process of rational discussion, about values. Then, we cannot be an Ethical Relativist. An Ethical Relativist, cannot make any judgement, about the other's values.

A rational discussion on morality assumes, a Metaethical position of Universalism, or Absolutism, which is a denial, or which is contrary to Ethical Relativism. So, it denies Ethical Relativism. With this, we would like to come to an end of Ethical Relativism. So, keeping in mind, that well, if the Relativist is one, who finds it impossible, to engage in a moral discussion. So, how do moral changes occur? How do value changes occur?

So, these changes that occur, are occurring only when, people discuss, people think about it, or people are active participants in the process of moral theorising, not passive recipients of culture, or emotions, or socio psychological makeup. So, whenever we engage in a rational moral discussion, we are resuming Ethical Absolutism. So, Ethical Relativism is almost a denial of moral, is not almost, is totally a denial of moral discussion. So, with this, we come to an end of Ethical Relativism.