Human nature might either be wholly **plastic**, and subsequently given "ethical shape" by social forces, or a **programmed** bundle of moral software. What puzzles philosophers is the variation in ethical beliefs held by different societies at different times.

Some societies allow polygamy...

...some make it illegal and call it bigamy.

Some societies think it acceptable to kill and eat their grandparents...

...others put them in retirement bungalows by the sea.

It looks as if beliefs and values are pretty relative!
Moral Relativism

The recognition of this wide variety of ethical beliefs and practices is usually called moral relativism. Differences in moral belief exist between different countries and tribes, but can also exist between different subcultures within a society, or between different classes. History also demonstrates how time alters moral beliefs.

Nowadays there are very different sets of moral beliefs held by feminists and religious fundamentalists about abortion.
Ethical Absolutism

If there are all of these moral beliefs floating around, which one is right? How could we prove that one belief was right and others wrong? Most ethical relativists would say that there are no possible ways of deciding, and no such thing as moral "knowledge" at all. This kind of scepticism has worried other philosophers who think that there must surely be a set of universal moral rules that are always true. These philosophers are often called "Universalists", "Realists" or "Absolutists".

Universalists say that there are universal moral rules.

Absolutists claim that they are always compulsory.

Realists say that the rules are a true kind of knowledge.

All three would say that it was always wrong to sacrifice babies, regardless of the beliefs of the culture that encouraged or allowed this practice.