Many, if not most, college students say they believe that morality is all relative. In his article on student relativism, Clemson University philosophy professor Stephen Sarris suggests that the relativism of college students, what he calls SR, is not a genuine philosophical position but a way of avoiding analysis of one’s opinions. Because of this, SR can hinder moral development and the acquisition of critical thinking skills in students.

**Critical Thinking Questions**

1. What does Sarris mean by student relativism (SR)?
2. What distinguishes SR from ethical relativism or ethical subjectivism?
3. When are students most likely to engage in SR?
4. Why, according to Sarris, is SR so prevalent among college students today?

In this paper I offer an analysis of, and suggest some methods for dealing with, a quite particular and peculiar problem in teaching philosophy. It is, perhaps, not a problem essential to the discipline or to its teaching, but it is nevertheless one of the most serious, pervasive, and frustrating problems confronting most philosophy teachers today. I speak of the problem of student relativism—or, SR for short.

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What is SR? It is a phenomenon or perhaps a cluster of phenomena manifested in statements such as the following.

There is really nothing true or false—or nothing really good or bad—it’s all relative. One person has an opinion or feeling, and another person has a different one.

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*These expressions and their variants appear both singly and in clusters. The ungrammatical “their” is characteristic.*
A philosophically generous view which assumes (perhaps merely for pedagogical purposes) that an expression of SR is indeed a genuine philosophical thesis might—in spite of all that I have said—be effective. The SR, if it is a protective covering, might be just a very thin surface phenomenon that has been picked up and found useful. Generally, in this country, public education from kindergarten through high school explicitly promotes the use of protective devices such as SR. Students learn from teachers and peers how to fall back upon SR in nearly all non-scientific matters of controversy or evaluation, e.g., in matters of religion, morals, politics, and non-scientific argument in general. Many people come out of a public school background having learned that “value judgment” or “controversial issue” simply means a judgment or issue with respect to which there is no right response or answer and about which (since it’s all a matter of personal opinion and not of scientific fact) we may all conveniently believe as we wish while remaining error-free.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Do you agree with Satris that student relativism (SR) is not the same as ethical relativism or ethical subjectivism? Support your answer.
2. How does a person expressing SR act when his or her moral position is challenged?
   How does this differ from the way a true ethical subjectivist would respond to a challenge?
3. Have you ever engaged in SR? If so, give some specific examples. When are you most likely to engage in SR? What might you do to make yourself less likely to fall back on SR?
4. Discuss ways, if any, in which SR can interfere with students’ moral development and ability to think critically about moral issues.
5. To what extent have you your earlier education experiences, as well as your college experience, encouraged SR? How can ethics education counter SR?
6. Has the prevalence of SR contributed to the type of moral apathy that characterized the witnesses in the Kitty Genovese murder? Contrast Satris’s discussion of SR with Sommers’s explanation of moral apathy in the United States. Which person makes the most convincing argument?

**Cultural Relativism**

Cultural relativists, like ethical subjectivists, maintain that standards of right and wrong are created by people. However, rather than being relative to isolated individuals, they maintain that morality is created by cultures or societies. Public opinion, not private opinion, determines what is right and wrong. There are no objective universal moral standards that hold for all people in all cultures. Morality instead is nothing more than socially approved customs.