


UNITED WISDOM

# Moral Disagreement Without Saying Everything Is Relative

Freedom and Action

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A-14-N03 · EN

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# Moral Disagreement Without Saying Everything Is Relative

## Epigraph

> *All silencing of discussion is an assumption of infallibility.*

John Stuart Mill, On Liberty, Chapter II. The context concerns refusing a hearing to objections against a belief. It does not require every conversation to continue without limits.

## What this article is about

Imagine friends raising money for a family they know. One suggests publishing a photograph of the child: it will clarify the appeal and speed up fundraising. Another sees this as an unacceptable intrusion into private life. He hears indifference to helping in her objection; she hears a willingness to use someone for a result in his proposal. Both believe they are protecting something important, but the discussion has become a dispute about who is worse.

They could end it by saying that everyone has their own morality. That temporarily removes the need to give reasons, but does not settle whether to publish. Someone could declare themselves the sole bearer of right values. Then listening becomes unnecessary, and the chance to notice an error in one's own description disappears. There is a harder path between these responses: acknowledge disagreement and keep examining its grounds.

This article distinguishes facts, principles, their application, and priorities. Respect for someone does not make all actions equally permissible. We do not establish a final theory of objective morality here. The practical task is narrower: discuss a particular action so that clarification does not become surrender and conviction does not become permission to decide for others.

## I. First clarify what people are actually disputing

Disagreement sometimes begins with different beliefs about facts. One participant thinks the family has already agreed to the photograph. Another believes permission was never given. They may not hold different moral principles: both can regard consent as important. Until the factual difference is named, each explains the other's decision through the worst possible motive. Clarification does not require accepting the proposed publication. It helps identify which circumstance actually changes the assessment and what remains unknown.



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Suppose the family allowed a written appeal but never discussed a photograph. Saying that they agree is then too broad. It helps to separate subjects: the appeal's text, names, the image, information about the child, the platform, and possible further circulation. These details are not a technical distraction from morality. They define the action being assessed. Consent to one subject does not automatically answer the other questions. Different conclusions can remain, but the discussion now concerns a particular proposal rather than imagined alternatives.

In Plato's Euthyphro, Socrates distinguishes general discussion of justice from a dispute about who did what and under which circumstances. The dialogue does not reduce every moral disagreement to a factual mistake. It shows why agreement on a general word does not determine the assessment of a case. The useful question here is limited: are we disputing a principle, or have we already described the act differently? Confidence does not supply the answer or replace checking available information.

Clarification should match the decision. The friends do not need the family's entire history, exposing more private material in order to conduct a moral discussion. It is enough to establish whether the chosen image may be used and where it will appear. If information is unavailable, publication cannot be called agreed on the basis of an assumption. The unknown remains unknown. This limit does not establish that any participant is good or bad. It provides grounds for changing the immediate action while a substantial question remains unresolved.

## II. A shared principle does not guarantee identical application

Suppose both participants agree that a person should not be used merely as a means. That does not guarantee the same assessment of the photograph. One sees the family's voluntary participation in a shared effort. The other suspects pressure: because the family depends on support, it will accept any condition. Their difference concerns applying a principle to circumstances, rather than necessarily the principle itself. Both descriptions need grounds. A simple yes does not settle voluntariness, but difficulty does not automatically deprive a family of the ability to agree.

Our editorial question is whether the people could understand the proposal, change it, and decline without a concealed penalty. This is no universal test of legally valid consent. It helps examine an everyday situation without treating a formal tick as a complete answer. The friends can offer an appeal without the image and check whether alternatives are available. If help is made conditional on disclosure, that condition should be named. Calling the fundraiser benevolent does not cancel the way it actually operates.

A principle and a case are connected through interpretation. When someone says publication violates dignity, it helps to ask what act they regard as the violation: absent permission, a degrading caption, unnecessary details, or a public image of a person in need itself. These



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answers can lead to different decisions. An improved caption does not resolve absent consent; consent does not make every caption respectful. Clarifying one ground should not be presented as eliminating every objection. The argument must retain its actual subject.

Detail can also become a way to postpone a principled boundary indefinitely. If the family expressly forbids the photograph, discussing its potential usefulness does not transform refusal into consent. New circumstances can nevertheless change other parts of the proposal: permissible wording, anonymity, or how funds are transferred. Open reasoning does not mean that every clear boundary must remain negotiable. We can clarify an available way to help while preserving a particular refusal's significance and without declaring every option equivalent.

## III. Different priorities call for naming a decision's cost

Disagreement can persist after facts and consent are clarified. One person places the speed of help first; another prioritises minimum disclosure. Both recognise both values but differ on which should limit action. A new piece of information may not settle this. It helps to name the acknowledged cost of each decision, the cost being ignored, and who will bear it. The dispute then moves beyond competing attractive words. Speed has particular benefits, disclosure has particular risks, and consequences fall on different people.

In our situation, the organisers' convenience should not silently become the family's voice. A photograph makes their explanation easier, while the family must live with its publicity. Equally, rejecting every intelligible appeal could make support harder to obtain. These consequences need consideration without promises of complete control. The friends do not know the exact amount raised with or without an image, cannot guarantee that copies will not be made, and should not present forecasts as established facts. Honest uncertainty changes the weight of claims about inevitable benefit.

They can look for an option preserving parts of both aims: explain the need clearly without an image, use an agreed general text, or let the family choose the appeal's form. This does not prove that compromise always exists. Requirements sometimes conflict. Yet until alternatives have been considered, a dispute can depend on a false choice between effective help and complete silence. A new method should be assessed against the existing grounds. It should not be labelled respectful simply because the organisers find it less inconvenient.

Naming the cost also means acknowledging what cannot be eliminated. If an appeal without a photograph might be less visible, the participant should not deny this possibility merely to protect her position. If using one creates a risk of unwanted publicity, the organiser should not dismiss that risk for the sake of speed. Recognising the other side's argument does not require

changing a decision. It shows that the decision includes an understood loss rather than removing it from the account. Grounds become assessable even while disagreement persists.

## IV. Fallibility does not make every answer equal

The existence of moral disagreement does not automatically make every answer equally well grounded. People disagree in matters where errors, omissions, or contradictions can be identified. The reverse conclusion also fails: my confidence does not prove that the mistake must be yours. The possibility of examination remains between these claims. One can acknowledge limited knowledge while rejecting a particular act on clear grounds. Fallibility calls for attention to an objection, rather than abandoning every distinction.

In Chapter II of On Liberty, Mill connects suppressing discussion with claiming infallibility. His argument protects the possibility of objection; it does not assert that disputed opinions are equally true. In our situation, participants can listen without treating the proposal as acceptable. They can also pause a conversation that no longer helps the decision. A text defending discussion does not require subjecting someone to endless pressure so that every organiser can finish speaking.

A useful distinction separates recognising someone's opportunity to speak from judging their argument sufficient. The friends can hear the case for speed and ask why the photograph is necessary. Without convincing grounds, they do not have to treat the proposal as equivalent to alternatives. If grounds emerge, they need assessing alongside agreed limits. In either case, the position is discussed through its content. An argument is not replaced by declaring its proponent good, experienced, sincere, or a member of the right group.

Examination itself can become biased. Requiring complete guarantees from someone else while accepting one's own predictions on trust is asymmetrical reasoning. The participant may overestimate risk; the organiser may overestimate benefit. This does not establish equal strength in their arguments. It means that comparison requires equally honest descriptions of what is known, supposed, and unknown. Fair treatment of grounds preserves the possibility of revision without presuming either that every act is permissible or that every position is equally mistaken.

## V. Respecting a person does not require approving an act

A conversation can preserve someone's dignity while containing a firm objection. The participant can say she will not support publication of an unapproved photograph without adding that its proposer has no conscience. The organiser can explain his idea and acknowledge that he previously failed to distinguish permission for text from permission for an image. Respect concerns a person as a participant; assessment concerns a definite action. When these levels merge, every clarification sounds like an attack on an entire character.

A respectful tone does not make content harmless. Someone can politely require disclosure and politely explain that help will end without it. The family needs a real choice, rather than merely gentle language. Moral assessment therefore extends beyond conversational manners. Conditions, authority, and consequences need examining. The reverse also holds: an awkwardly expressed objection can contain significant grounds. Those grounds deserve checking; a poor formulation does not prove that the boundary is mistaken. Both style and substance matter, without substituting one for the other.

In Romans 14:1–19, disagreements over food and days within a Christian community are considered alongside judging others and avoiding placing an obstacle before a brother. This is a particular religious context, rather than a claim that any moral norm is relative. Its limited connection to our task is preserving relationships and attention to others despite differing assessments. A teaching about disputed food cannot be transferred to every act as though it removed prohibitions on lying, violence, or appropriation.

A person can remain in a group without supporting one fundraising method. They can also leave if participation implies agreement with an act they reject. This article does not prescribe a single correct relationship. It matters to distinguish objection to a particular proposal, withdrawal from cooperation, and a demand to change someone's beliefs. Removing the photograph may be enough; sometimes a dispute exposes a deeper difference. Neither preserving friendship at any cost nor immediately ending it should be imposed as the predetermined conclusion.

## VI. A shared procedure can support action without a shared worldview

People do not always need to settle every moral question before acting together. The friends can agree on a procedure: the family approves text and image separately, expenses are recorded, and disputed changes are not published without renewed discussion. This does not mean they understand dignity, benefit, or virtue identically. It creates a particular way of cooperating while differences remain. It can be sufficient for the present task if the procedure conceals no substantial pressure and participants understand what they accepted.

A procedure is not moral magic. An organisers' vote does not replace the family's consent; a majority does not automatically acquire authority to disclose someone else's information. Rules too have subjects and limits. Friends can allocate their own time without accepting an obligation for a person absent from the decision. If an agreement is broken, the act cannot be justified by saying the procedure is generally good. Name the particular change and its consequences. A working arrangement earns trust through performance rather than an appealing label.

It also matters who can stop an action pending examination. In our situation, it is reasonable not to post an image while permission remains unclear. This is a temporary decision concerning a significant unknown, rather than a final verdict on every public appeal. Other steps can continue: agreeing wording or checking how to transfer funds. If every boundary question halts all help, the procedure may be excessive. If no question can delay publication, examination becomes decoration for a decision already made.

A sufficient agreement has an intelligible ending. Participants know which text is permitted, where it will appear, who handles changes, and what cannot be promised about further copies. Discussion can finish without philosophical unanimity. A new substantial fact can reopen the question; the absence of such a fact does not require endlessly repeating the same dispute. Joint action retains grounds that can be checked. An unresolved difference in worldview is named honestly instead of being concealed beneath a supposed moral consensus.

## VII. Revising a position does not have to mean defeat

Someone may discover that their original argument depended on a mistaken assumption. The organiser thought permission for the photograph existed; clarification shows it does not. He can change the proposal without admitting that wanting to help was bad. A particular ground has changed. Revision preserves responsibility and releases the conversation from defending every earlier phrase. When any change is called weakness, a group begins rewarding stubbornness over accuracy, even when everyone has access to new information.

Revision can be partial. The participant acknowledges that the family freely chose a public appeal but still objects to a degrading caption. The organiser abandons the image while maintaining the need for clear wording. These changes need not be described as one side's complete victory. Different parts of the proposal have different grounds. Record what was accepted, rejected, and left disputed. Such precision prevents a withdrawn condition from returning later on the pretext that one general agreement had already covered everything.

In Analects XV.23 in the chosen Legge translation's numbering, the answer about reciprocity directs attention to what the actor would not want. It offers a limited check on asymmetry here: would the organisers accept the same handling of their own story? Their answer does not automatically determine the family's preferences. People may want different things, so imagining exchanged roles is insufficient. The historical text helps frame a question, while the recipient's particular choice still needs to be heard and preserved.

Revision does not require erasing history either. If a photograph has already been posted, a later refusal does not make publication never have happened. Further circulation can be stopped through available channels, the family can be told what was done, and limits on control can be acknowledged. A contest over who won is poorly suited to repair. Preserve the facts, recognise participation, and choose an available correction. Moral disagreement can then lead to more accurate practice even without complete unity of views among the friends.

## VIII. Preserve disagreement and name the next action

A real difference can remain at the conversation's end. The organiser considers wider publicity permissible with the family's consent; the participant believes dependence on help makes that choice too vulnerable. This article does not remove the difficulty through a general statement about correct values. Remaining grounds and limits on participation can be named. For example, the group chooses an appeal without a photograph, while the family discusses further publicity separately. This resolves the current task, rather than proving that every disputed question about helping has been settled.

Preserved disagreement differs from concealed sabotage. Someone who promised not to post an image should not secretly do so for their own understanding of the good. An agreement about action remains significant despite differing beliefs. If they cannot accept it, they need to say so before acting. The ability to hold another view does not automatically authorise using shared resources against their conditions. Otherwise, freedom of opinion becomes a cover for a particular breach that can no longer be discussed merely as a theoretical dispute.

Conversely, a group should not demand a prescribed worldview as the condition of any cooperation. Action can be agreed without forcing someone to say they now think identically. Honest performance and explicit limits matter. Beliefs may change more slowly than a practical

agreement; this does not necessarily make participation insincere. A person can understand and voluntarily follow the grounds of a joint step while leaving some questions open. Clarifying differences is more useful than inventing complete unity.

We return to the opening situation with a different conversation. The friends discuss particular permission, alternative wording, the cost of publicity, and available resources. They can reject an unapproved photograph without declaring every opinion equally acceptable or passing a total verdict on a person. Disagreement prompted examination rather than proving morality meaningless. A next action can be named clearly alongside what remains unknown. Conviction retains the possibility of scrutiny, while respect does not require abandoning one's own moral boundary.

## What this means in practice

Take one ordinary disagreement over a joint action. Write down the proposal without judging a person: what is to be done, with whom, where, and when? Then distinguish four possible sources of difference: facts, a principle, its application, and priorities. This is an author-designed exercise, not a diagnostic scheme or a proven way to resolve every conflict. Serious danger or specialised professional responsibilities require an appropriate procedure; calm discussion does not replace it.

First clarify one significant unknown capable of changing the decision. Do not collect someone else's private history for the sake of formally complete knowledge. Identify unestablished facts as unestablished. Then formulate the other person's grounds so they can correct your account. A correction does not mean agreement with the argument. It helps ensure that an objection addresses the real position rather than a more convenient version you invented. Present your own argument with the same distinction between what is known and what is supposed.

Name the consequences of each proposal and the people who will bear its cost. Consider at least one available alternative without promising that compromise must exist. Preserve boundaries that cannot be resolved through a group vote or an attractive forecast. Where action requires someone's consent, organisers' discussion cannot replace that person's answer. If an agreed decision is changing, name the change directly. Strong conviction does not remove responsibility for earlier agreed action or authorise secretly carrying out another option.

Finish with a particular step and an honest remaining difference. You can refrain from posting a disputed image, continue agreeing wording, or decline this way of helping. You need neither declare someone wrong about everything nor say all answers are identical. A useful result is knowing which ground was checked, what decision was made, and where you still differ.

Moral disagreement retains its meaning: people remain able to assess acts, hear objections, and change behaviour without promising complete unity in their worldviews.

## Key quotation

> *Love worketh no ill to his neighbour*

Romans 13:10, first clause, King James Version. In context, love is connected with fulfilling the law. The quotation does not make every norm relative or establish that an organiser's good intention excludes harm.

## Connections between traditions

| Comparison | Similarity and boundary |
|---|---|
| Plato's Euthyphro, disputes over justice and particular circumstances / practical clarification of facts | Shared words do not ensure identical descriptions of a case. The dialogue does not prove that all moral disagreement concerns facts alone. |
| Mill's On Liberty II, the possibility of objection / retaining an assessment of conduct | Openness to examination is compatible with conviction. Freedom of discussion does not establish equal correctness in every decision. |
| Romans 14:1–19, differences over food and days / respect without complete agreement | Differences within the religious community are considered with care for others. This particular context does not abolish every moral norm. |
| Romans 13:10, love and doing no ill to a neighbour / consequences of a helping proposal | Intention can be considered alongside what happens to another person. The religious text is not an experimental model of harm assessment. |
| Analects XV.23, reciprocity / examining asymmetrical arguments | Considering what one would not want can expose a double standard. It does not determine another person's preferences or replace particular consent. |

## Primary sources

• John Stuart Mill. On Liberty, Chapter II, Project Gutenberg 34901. Selected continuous context on suppressing opinion, infallibility, and fallibility was read; the epigraph follows the checked text. Mill's own writing is used, rather than W. L. Courtney's introductory biography.

• Plato. Euthyphro, Benjamin Jowett translation, Project Gutenberg 1642. Selected dialogue on disagreement, justice, and the circumstances of an accusation, conventionally around 7b–9b,

was read. Socrates' and Euthyphro's statements are distinguished; a challenged definition is not presented as Plato's final position.

• The Epistle to the Romans, King James Version, Wikisource. Romans 13:8–10 and 14:1–19 were read. A particular Christian context, rather than universal moral relativism. The key quotation is the first clause of 13:10; worldwide rights in this edition are not declared established.

• Confucius. The Analects, James Legge translation, Project Gutenberg 3330. Selected XV.21–29 context was read; XV.23 follows Legge's numbering. Historical reciprocity is compared with our question about double standards without claiming identical doctrines or a modern consent procedure.

## Tags

morality, disagreement, dispute, conviction, fallibility, relativism, grounds, facts, principle, application, priority, dignity, consent, help, publicity, photograph, private life, consequences, objection, respect, procedure, revision, cooperation, reciprocity, Mill, Plato, Socrates, Euthyphro, Confucius, Epistle to the Romans

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