In my essay, I aim to explain how Cultural Relativists and evolutionary debunkers of Moral Realism make their cases against Moral Realism, and to describe the differences between these arguments. Then, I will explain which theory is the greater threat to Moral Realism, which I will follow up with ways in which Moral Realists could defend themselves against these claims. First, I will define Moral Realism, and then discuss how Cultural Relativism differs from and refutes, Moral Realism. Moral Realism is the theory that there are universal moral and ethical truths in the world, yet we do not know what they are. Conversely, Cultural Relativists theorize that culture is what determines morality and that each individual culture determines its own moral truths. The Cultural Relativist argues that there is a known right and wrong within each culture, however, what is right in one society might be considered wrong in another. Additionally, the theory states that we should be tolerant of other cultures, even if their idea of right and wrong are vastly different from our own. Another feature of Cultural Relativism is that “the idea of universal moral truth in ethics … is a myth.” (Rachels, 14) This assertion is an attack on the heart of the Moral Realists theory which states that there are, in fact, universal moral truths.

Next, I will discuss how evolutionary debunkers of Moral Realism make their case against Moral Realists. Evolutionary debunkers of Moral Realism believe that evolutionary forces shaped our moral beliefs in ways that would help us survive and reproduce most effectively. Therefore, it is entirely possible that what we believe is morally ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ is completely different from the actual moral truth. The evolutionary debunker believes that, “we should have been evolving towards affirming the independent evaluative truths posited by the realist, but instead it turns out that we have been evolving towards affirming whatever
evaluative content tends to promote reproductive success.” (Vavova, 6) The debunkers’ main issue with Moral Realism is that it is not testable, and not based on scientific fact. Most people probably agree that it is wrong to kick a sleeping cat, but how do we know for sure?

The Moral Realist should be more worried about the debunkers’ argument than the Cultural Relativists’. This is because there are some glaring issues with Cultural Relativism, such as the fact that in a situation like the Holocaust, other countries would not be in a position to intervene, it would simply be seen as another culture practicing its different, yet perfectly acceptable moral beliefs. Additionally, there would be no way to measure cultural progress. The United States is a more progressive country than it was 100 years ago -- we no longer have slaves, and women have the right to vote-- yet the Cultural Relativist sees this as change, not improvement. Responding to the debunker is a more difficult task because his argument is empirical, meaning that it is based on evidence rather than theory and logic. In order to adequately respond to the evolutionary debunker, the Moral Realist must point out that we do not know the true basis of morality through any of these theories, “if morality could be about anything, then we have no idea what morality is about. So we have no idea if evolutionary forces would have pushed us toward or away from the truth.” (Vavova, 9) This would be a very helpful point to make and to elaborate on, by the Moral Realist. Challenging the debunkers’ assumption that our morals could be shaped by anything and not by a need to reproduce would be an effective defense against the debunkers’ arguments.