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Chapter 2

Absolutism and relativism

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Introduction

Key philosophers and texts

Aristotle (384–322 BCE): *Nicomachean Ethics*
Plato (428–347 BCE): *The Republic*
Protagoras (490–420 BCE): only fragments surviving
J. L. Mackie (1917–1981): *Ethics, Inventing Right and Wrong*, 1977
William Graham Sumner (1840–1910): *Folkways*, 1906

Key terms

Absolutism, cultural relativism, forms, moral absolutes, objective truth/
knowledge/value, relativism, subjective

What you will learn by the end of this chapter

- The theory of ethical absolutism and the contribution of Plato.
- The theory of relativism, and the contributions of Protagoras, Sumner and Mackie.
- The respective strengths and weaknesses of those theories.
- Examples that illustrate the ethical dilemma.

Key questions

- 1 Do moral rules really exist?
- 2 Should moral rules ever be broken?

- 3 Are there times when an action might be right and other times when the same action is wrong? What are they?
- 4 Are there any actions which are always wrong? What are they?
- 5 Is one culture's view of morality as good as another?
- 6 Are things that are true for you necessarily true for me?
- 7 Are all moral opinions equally valid, or are some moral opinions better than others?

Absolutism

Consider the following:

- A man has an affair with his secretary.
- A gang leader murders a member of a rival gang.
- A youth mugs an old lady and takes her purse.

Many people would say that each of these examples shows someone doing wrong. It is wrong to have affairs, wrong to murder and wrong to mug old ladies. To help an old lady across the road is right, just as it is to remain faithful to your partner. People make moral judgements about right and wrong all the time. Some organisations are quite vocal about what is right and wrong. Christian Churches preach the Commandments as a guide to knowing what one should not do: 'Do not murder', 'Do not steal', 'Do not bear false witness' and so on. Islamic law gives clear guidelines on morally good and bad behaviour. Politicians often make statements about right and wrong. In ethical terms, to maintain that some things are right and other things are wrong, and that these things are fixed for all time and all people, is called **absolutism**.

An ethical absolute is a moral command or prohibition that's true for all time, in all places and in all situations. Absolutists hold that some things are wrong from an objective point of view, not just wrong from your or my perspective. In the Middle Ages, the principle 'Follow the good and avoid the evil' expressed an absolutist perspective. It implies that the moral way of living is to do things that are objectively good and avoid things that are objectively bad. In ethical absolutism, things that are right or wrong can't change. They aren't affected by mitigating circumstances. They don't depend on the situation. For example, absolutists might say that torturing children, rape and murder are always wrong. They don't change according to the culture in which you live. What is right and wrong for you is the same for me and for every other person in the world. Immoral acts are **intrinsically wrong**, which means wrong in themselves. The thing isn't made wrong by the situation or the result it causes. It is wrong because the act in itself breaks a moral rule.

Plato and the forms

Plato was an ethical absolutist. He thought that moral absolutes such as goodness and justice really existed in some way, beyond our normal perceptions of the world. This other-world was inhabited by the forms or ideas, which were the true reality. What we perceived around us was a shadow of this truth.



Plato

We might find a piece of music beautiful. We might use the word 'beautiful' to describe a statue or painting, or the way a mother holds her baby, or the sound of a bird. Plato believed that a beautiful painting had 'form beauty' participating in it. Without the form beauty there would be no beautiful things. He held that there were many forms. The form 'green' participated in the grass, the form 'red' participated in wine, and so on. The highest of all the forms was goodness itself. While Protagoras thought that you could only ask the question 'What's good for you?', Plato thought that you could ask the question 'What is goodness itself?' Goodness itself was the highest form of reality – an objective or absolute thing that existed eternally, beyond our limited world. Plato was an absolutist.

Plato described his view of reality using similes. In the simile of the Sun (see Table 2.1), he illustrated the importance of the form 'good' for truth, by drawing an analogy with the importance of the Sun.

He felt that we must escape from the mistake of believing that our perceptions of reality were the truth. Our mind was distorted by pleasure and pain, and so the search for truth was a struggle to get beyond our physical perceptions and sensations. He described this journey in *The Republic*, in the simile of the cave. An extract from that book is given at the end of this chapter.

Table 2.1 Plato's simile of the Sun

Visible world	Intelligible world of the forms
The Sun Source of growth and light, which gives visibility to the objects of sense and the power of seeing to the eye. The faculty of sight.	The Good Source of reality and truth, which gives intelligibility to objects of thought and the power of knowing to the mind. The faculty of knowledge.

Tasks

- 1 Individually, list five things that you would say might be wrong in certain situations.
- 2 In groups, compare your lists and come up with a common list with which you all agree. Order the items, from 'most likely to be always wrong' to 'least likely to be always wrong'.
- 3 For each of the five things, give a plausible exception where you might be justified in breaking the rule.

Relativism

People don't always agree about what's right and what's wrong. Some people feel that it is acceptable for a man to marry more than one wife, while others feel that such a practice is a crime. Different cultures express different moral codes of conduct. An ancient observer of this cultural diversity was King Darius. In a story recorded by Herodotus in the *Histories* (Book 3, p. 38), Darius observed that while certain Greeks burnt the bodies of their fathers, a different people called Callatians ate the bodies of their fathers. He brought the two groups together and asked each how much he would have to pay them to adopt the practice of the other. In both cases, the groups were outraged at the suggestion and refused to follow the practice of the other for any amount of money. What was right for one tribe was wrong for the other.

An ancient Greek philosopher called Protagoras held that there's no truth in anything beyond the way it seems. There's no objective knowledge, because all knowledge depends on the perceptions of the person. There's no objective truth. Truth is only true for you, or true for me. Man is the measure of all things. Things are good or bad relative to our perspective. A sick person

eating food may find that it tastes horrible, while a healthy person eating the same food will find it delicious. Each view is true relative to each person's perspective. If I say I don't like spaghetti and you say you do like spaghetti, both of us are right. Protagoras thought that moral statements were like this: so when I say 'Abortion is wrong' and you say 'Abortion is right', we're both saying things that are true, because what we're saying is true for you, and true for me.

A debate between an absolutist and a relativist might go something like this:

Sam: Abortion is wrong. It's killing and killing is wrong. It's something that should not be done. People should not ask for abortions and they should not carry out abortions. Killing is wrong. It's one of those rules that can't be broken.

Ben: Who says it's wrong? May be it's wrong for you, perhaps because of your religion, but just because you feel it's wrong doesn't actually mean it is wrong, except in your eyes. It's just your view. I have a view that's different – and who is to say that your view is better or more accurate than my view? How do you know for sure that abortion is wrong? You can't tell me what to think. There isn't just one set of morals that everyone agrees with or follows.

Another ancient Greek philosopher to be more relativistic was Plato's pupil, Aristotle, whose ethics were collected into a book called *Nicomachean Ethics* in the fourth century BCE. Aristotle did not believe in universal forms which are absolute and beyond our world. He felt that the forms were in the world, and therefore not absolute. He believed in a rule-of-thumb approach to moral characteristics whereby we should seek a midway approach of behaviour between two extremes. Virtue is the mean between two extremes. For example, we should not be rash in our behaviour or cowardly but should choose a 'midway' courageous approach. Human circumstances are infinite and it is not possible to have a general rule which will cover every situation. Moral rules hold for the most part, but there are times when they won't. This makes Aristotle more relativistic than Plato. We shall learn more about Aristotle's ethics in Chapter 10.

Cultural relativism

Modern anthropologists have observed cultural differences and some have concluded that the existence of diverse moral codes implies that morality is not absolute. Morality simply means 'socially approved habits'. The anthropologist William Graham Sumner expressed this view in 1906:

The 'right' way is the way which the ancestors used and which has been handed down. The tradition is its own warrant ... The notion of right is in the folkways. It is not outside of them, of inde-

pendent origin, and brought to test them. In the folkways, what-ever is, is right. This is because they are traditional, and therefore contain in themselves the authority of the ancestral ghosts. When we come to the folkways we are at the end of our analysis.

Sumner (1906)

This approach to ethics is cultural relativism. Moral rules are expressions of the culture and nothing more. There's no set of moral rules that applies to all. There's nothing absolute or universal about morality; When in Rome, do as the Romans do. This theory directly challenges ethical absolutism. Cultural relativism celebrates the variety of beliefs and values held by different peoples. There's no way of deciding between one set of morals and another, because there's no objective measure. What is right and wrong depends upon the perspective of the group.

If you're in a strict Islamic country, the women are right to cover themselves. In a Western country, the women are right to expose more skin. This ethical theory suits the multicultural nature of the world, as it gives equal measure to the different ethnic and religious groupings. It doesn't raise one particular cultural expression to supremacy over others, as happened during the period of European colonial expansion, and more recently in Nazi Germany. Cultural relativism seems a more modern and open ethical system than this early view.

Relativism also explains other differences. What is right and wrong not only differs from culture to culture, but also from one time to another. In the past, it was considered acceptable to leave highwaymen in hanging cages to starve and rot. Today, that form of punishment is considered morally unacceptable. In the past, women didn't have the vote or the same property rights as men. Today, many countries grant men and women equal status. Moral points of view vary from time to time, from culture to culture, from religion to religion and from place to place.

Relativism and J. L. Mackie

A modern relativist, J. L. Mackie, writes that 'There are no objective values' (Mackie, 1977, p. 15). He maintains that values, the good, rightness and wrongness, aren't part of the fabric of the world. They don't exist. He sees the existence of diverse ethical values expressed in different times and cultures as evidence that no moral absolutes exist. An absolutist might argue that there are common values beneath many of these cultural expressions, but Mackie thinks that a more convincing argument is to assume that people participate in different ways of living because they actually follow different codes. Mackie agrees with Plato that if moral rules existed they would have to be entities of a strange sort, uniquely different from all other things, but he finds this idea unconvincing.

Tasks

- 1 What, in your view, does Darius' experiment prove?
- 2 In Christian cultures it is believed that monogamy is the only acceptable way of arranging marriage. In Islamic law, husbands have the right of **polygamy** and may be validly married at the same time to a maximum of four wives. The nomadic Masai of East Africa practise **polygamy** and wife-lending between men of the same age group. Some Westerners practise open marriages whereby husbands and wives engage other husbands or wives in sexual relations openly. What are the arguments that:
 - a these are different but equally valid ways of arranging marriage
 - b one way is right (or morally better) and the others are wrong (or morally worse)?
- 3 Think of any other differences, and in each case consider the arguments for **a** and **b** in each case.
- 4 Construct an argument against the claim that views about moral issues are similar to views about chocolate – some prefer dark chocolate, others prefer milk, but both are equally valid.

Evaluating relativism and absolutism

Moral relativism has several attractions. It explains the different values that people hold and it encourages diverse cultural expressions. It prohibits a dominant culture from enforcing itself over others simply because 'we're right and they are wrong'. Relativism is a flexible ethical system that can accommodate the wide diversity of lifestyles found in the modern world. However, it does have some weaknesses. Cultural relativism observes that as different value systems exist, there can't be one moral truth. However, the existence of different views doesn't mean that they are all equal, and the existence of many views doesn't mean that all views are equally true. In a dialogue between Socrates and Crito, Socrates argues that 'one should not regard all the opinions that people hold, but only some and not others ... one should regard the good ones and not the bad ...'. He goes on to illustrate his point by observing a male athlete who doesn't take all the praise or criticism that he receives to be equally important. He only listens to the comments of a qualified person such as his trainer, and he disregards anything said by people who don't have any expertise in athletics (Crito 46B–47C, in Plato, 1969).

For Plato, not all views are of equal worth. This is quite apparent when we consider the Nazi Reich. To argue that the Nazi ethic was 'right for them' seems very dangerous. Most people today consider an ideology that justified the extermination of millions of innocent people to be morally corrupt and utterly wrong. Many people see the Second World War as a battle against evil, but this is an absolutist perspective. Cultural relativists are unable to criticise a different culture. Relativists can't prefer one moral opinion rather than another.

Another problem is that a cultural relativist can't condemn any practices that are accepted by society, because there's no objective measure by which those practices can be judged. Ultimately, cultural relativism reduces the meaning of 'good' to 'that which is socially approved'. If a culture endorses wife-beating, then wife-beating is morally acceptable.

There's also a paradoxical consequence of adopting relativism. If the relative belief that differing moral codes should all be supported was adopted universally, relativism itself would become an absolute moral code. Put another way, to say that the statement 'what is right is what is approved by the culture' is always true is to make an absolute claim about relativism.

Ethical absolutes overcome some of these problems. Absolutism provides a fixed ethical code with which to measure actions. An ethical absolutist can condemn Nazi Germany or the wife-beater. Absolutism gives people clear guidelines of behaviour that reinforce a global view of the human community. One country may judge the actions of another country as wrong and act on that judgement. The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights suggests a set of absolutes that apply to all people, no matter where they live. Absolutism can support the Declaration, while relativism might have difficulty when the Declaration differs from a particular culture's way of doing things.

Absolutism also has its weaknesses. It can't take into account the circumstances of the situation. An absolutist might consider stealing to be wrong. If the thief is a starving child who needs money for food, and the victim is a rich tourist, the absolutist must still condemn the thief, while the relativist could tolerate the action. An absolutist with strong beliefs about the treatment of animals might find the Islamic practice of ritually killing a lamb immoral, while a relativist can recognise the religious significance and the importance of the activity to that community. Absolutism can seem intolerant of cultural diversity in the way in which European nations were in the past.

Despite various limitations, relativism remains a popular ethic, although it is rejected by most religions, which remain staunchly absolutist (see Chapters 3, 5, 6 and 11). However, it has been accommodated by one Christian ethic in situation ethics. Other ethical theories – such as utilitarianism, which defines goodness relative to the amount of happiness created, and emotivism, which takes relativism to an extreme individualistic position – have relativistic aspects.

Questions

- 1 If you believe that a certain thing is wrong, should you try to persuade others not to do it?
- 2 Explain the view that there are objective moral truths.
- 3 Explain that view that all moral statements are relative.
- 4 What are the strengths and weaknesses of relativism and absolutism?
- 5 What is the most plausible argument for and the most plausible argument against moral absolutism?

Extracts from key texts

Plato, *The Republic*

The simile of the cave, Part seven, Book six

Imagine an underground chamber like a cave ... in this chamber are men who have been prisoners there since they were children, their legs and necks being so fastened that they can only look straight ahead of them and cannot turn their heads. Some way off, behind and higher up, a fire is burning, and between the fire and the prisoners and above them runs a road, in front of which a curtain-like wall has been built, like a screen at puppet shows between the operators and their audience ... Imagine further that men are carrying all sorts of gear along behind the curtain-wall, projecting above it and including figures of men and animals made of wood and stone and all sorts of other materials, and that some of these men, as you would expect, are talking and some are not ... Then if they [the prisoners] were able to talk to each other, would they not assume that the shadows they saw were the real things? ... that whenever one of the passers by on the road spoke, that the voice belonged to the shadow passing before them? ... And so in every way they would believe that the shadows of the objects we mentioned were the whole truth ...

... Suppose one of them were let loose, and suddenly compelled to stand up and turn his head and look and walk towards the fire ... and if he was forcibly dragged up the steep and rugged

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Absolutists:

- Believe in moral truths that are fixed for all time and all people.
- Believe that moral actions are right or wrong in themselves, irrespective of circumstance, culture or opinion.
- Deontological thinkers are concerned with acts, not ends.
- 'Follow the good and avoid the evil' (a saying from the Middle Ages).

Examples of ethical absolutists:

- Plato, believing that goodness itself really exists beyond this world.
- St Thomas Aquinas (see Chapter 3), believing in a fixed divine law.
- F. H. Bradley (see Chapter 6), believing that morals are fixed, part of a concrete universe.

Relativists:

- Believe that moral truth varies depending on culture, time, place and religion.
- Believe that there's no fixed objective moral reality – or if there is, that it can't be discovered.
- Believe that morals are **subjective** – subject to the culture, religion, time and place.

Examples of ethical relativists:

- Aristotle believed that forms were in the world and therefore not absolute. Differing human circumstances mean we cannot have a general rule for all situations.
- Protagoras: 'Man is the measure of all things' (attributed).
- William Graham Sumner: 'The "right" way is the way which the ancestors used and which has been handed down.' Sumner was an anthropologist who investigated and appreciated cultural diversity.
- J. L. Mackie: 'there are no objective values' – different culture's ethics are evidence against the existence of moral absolutes, and people participate in different ways of living, or codes.

Evaluate:

- Relativism explains the existence of the different values that people hold.

Absolutism	Relativism
Moral truth is objective	There is no objective moral truth, or if there is we cannot know it
Moral actions are right or wrong intrinsically (in themselves)	What is morally true for you is not necessarily true for me
Moral truth is universal and unchanging in all circumstances, cultures, times and places	Morals are subject to culture, religion, time and place
Absolutists: Plato, Aquinas, Bradley	Relativists: Protagoras, Aristotle, Sumner, Mackie

Absolutism and Relativism – Essentials

ascend and not let go till he had been dragged out into sunlight ... he would need to grow accustomed to the light before he could see things in the upper world outside the cave. First he would find it easier to look at the shadows, next at the reflections of men and other objects in water, and later on at the objects themselves. After that he would find it easier to observe the heavenly bodies and the sky itself at night, and to look at the light of the moon and stars ... The thing he would be able to do last would be to look at the sun itself ... Later on he would come to the conclusion that it is the sun that produces the changing seasons and years and controls everything in the visible world, and is in a sense responsible for everything that he and his fellow prisoners used to see.

... Now my dear Glaucon, this simile must be connected throughout with what preceded it. The realm revealed by sight corresponds to the prison, and the light of the fire in the prison to the power of the sun. And you won't go wrong if you connect the ascent into the upper world and the sight of the objects there with the upward progress of the mind into the intelligible region. That at any rate is my interpretation, which is what you are anxious to hear; the truth of the matter is, after all, known only to God. But in my opinion, for what it is worth, the final thing to be perceived in the intelligible region, and perceived only with difficulty, is the form of the good; once seen, it is inferred to be responsible for whatever is right and valuable in anything ...

- Relativism supports diverse cultural expressions.
- Relativism prohibits the dominance of a single culture.
- Relativism is a flexible ethical system that can accommodate the wide diversity of lifestyles found in the modern world.

However –

- The existence of different views doesn't mean that they are all equal.
- The Nazi culture was morally wrong, not 'right for them'.
- Cultural relativists are unable to criticize a different culture.
- Cultural relativists can't condemn any cultural practices – if a culture endorses wife-beating, then wife-beating is morally acceptable.
- If the relative belief that differing moral codes should all be supported was adopted universally, relativism itself would become an absolute moral code.

On the other hand:

- Absolutism provides a fixed ethical code to measure actions.
- Absolutism gives clear guidelines of behaviour.
- The UN Declaration of Human Rights suggests a set of absolutes that apply to all people, no matter where they live.

However –

- Absolutism can't take into account the circumstances of the situation.
- Absolutism can seem intolerant of cultural diversity in the way European nations were in the past.