

Morality, Absolute Nature of. Orthodox Christianity has always defended moral absolutes. However, most modern ethicists hold some form of [relativism](#). Thus, it is necessary to defend the belief in moral absolutes. 🖋️

Moral Absolutes. Before the absolute nature of morality can be understood, morality must be defined. Several things are meant by a moral obligation. First, a moral duty is good in itself (an *end*), not merely good as a means. Further, it is something we *ought* to pursue, a duty. Morality is *prescriptive* (an “ought”), not merely *descriptive* (an “is”). Morality deals with what is right, as opposed to wrong. It is an obligation, that for which a person is accountable.

An absolute moral obligation is:

an *objective* (not subjective) moral duty—a duty for all persons.

an *eternal* (not temporal) obligation—a duty at all times.

a *universal* (not local) obligation—a duty for all places.

An absolute duty is one that is bind-

ing on all persons at all times in all places.

Defense of Absolutes. Moral absolutes can be defended by showing the deficiency of moral [relativism](#). For either there is a moral absolute or else everything is morally relative. Hence, if [relativism](#) is wrong, then there must be an absolute basis for morality.

Everything is relative to an absolute. Simply by asking, “Relative to what?” it is easy to see that total [relativism](#) is inadequate. It can’t be relative to the relative. In that case it could not be relative at all, ad infinitum, since there would be nothing to which it was relative, etc. [Albert Einstein](#) did not believe everything was relative in the physical universe. He believed the speed of light is absolute.

Measurement is impossible without absolutes. Even moral relativists make such statements as, “The world is getting better (or worse).” But it is not possible to know it is getting “better” unless we know what is “Best.” Less than perfect is only measurable against a Perfect. Hence, all objec-

tive moral judgments imply an absolute moral standard by which they can be measured.

Moral disagreements demand objective standards. Real moral disagreements are not possible without an absolute moral standard by which both sides can be measured. Otherwise both sides of every moral dispute are right. But opposites cannot both be right. For example, "Hitler was an evil man" vs. "Hitler was not an evil man" cannot both be true in the same sense (see [FIRST PRINCIPLES](#)). Unless there is an objective moral standard by which Hitler's actions can be weighed, we cannot know that he was evil.

Moral absolutes are unavoidable. Total moral [relativism](#) reduces to statements such as "You should never say never," "You should always avoid using always," or "You absolutely ought not believe in moral absolutes." "Ought" statements are moral statements, and "ought never" statements are absolute moral statements. So, there is no way to avoid moral absolutes without affirming a moral absolute. Total

moral [relativism](#) is self-defeating. 🖋️

Distinctions in Moral Absolutes. If there is an absolute basis for morality, then why do so many believe that all morality is relative? The reasons for this are mostly based on the failure to make proper distinctions.

Difference between Fact (Is) and Value (Ought). Relativists confuse fact and value, what is and what ought to be. What people do is subject to change, but what they ought to do is not. There is a difference between sociology and morality. Sociology is *descriptive*; morality is *prescriptive*. Relativists confuse the changing factual situation with unchanging moral duty.

Difference between Value and Instance of Value. There is confusion as well between an absolute moral value and changing attitudes regarding whether a given action violates that value. Once witches were sentenced as murderers, but now they are not. What changed was not the moral principle that murder is wrong. Rather, our understanding changed about whether witches really murder people by their curses. One's factual

understanding of a moral situation is relative, but the moral values involved in the situation are not.

Difference between Values and Understandings. A similar misunderstanding is over the difference between an unchanging value and a changing understanding of that value. A couple deeply in love better understand their love after twenty years. The love itself has not changed. Their understanding of it has changed.

Difference between End (Value) and Means. Often moral relativists confuse the end (the value itself) with the means to attaining that value. Most political disputes are of this sort. Both liberal and conservative politicians agree that justice should be done (the end); they merely disagree as to whose program is the best means to attain justice. Both militarists and pacifists desire peace (the end); they simply disagree as to whether a strong military best attains this peace.

Difference between Command and Culture. Another important difference, often overlooked by moral

relativists, is that between the absolute moral command and the relative way a culture can manifest it. All cultures have some concept of modesty and propriety in greeting. In some a kiss is appropriate, while in others such intimacy would horrify. What should be done is common, but how it should be done differs. Failure to make this distinction misleads many to believe that because a value differs among cultures, the value itself (*what*) differs.

Difference between Applications. A legitimate discussion to decide which value applies to a given situation is not the same as a discussion over whether there is an absolute value. For example, we err if we think that anyone who believes a pregnant woman has the right to an abortion places no value on human life. They simply do not believe that the unborn are truly human beings. This debate is vastly important, but it should not miscommunicate the notion that the absolute good of protecting life is the issue on the floor. The issue is whether the unborn are human persons (see Geisler,

chapter 8).

Conclusion. Moral absolutes are unavoidable. Even those who deny them use them. The reasons for rejecting them are often based on a misunderstanding or misapplication of the moral absolute, not on a real rejection of it. That is, moral values are absolute, even if our understanding of them or the circumstances in which they should be applied are not.

Sources

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