

Discuss the Difference between Absolutism and Relativism in Ethics

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Introduction

Ethics, or moral philosophy, examines how people ought to act, what makes conduct right or wrong, and what kinds of principles should guide individual and collective life. Ethical judgment asks people to look beyond immediate self-interest and consider duties, consequences, rights, justice, and the interests of others (Banks 3). A central disagreement within ethics concerns the status of moral standards themselves. Are there rules that are valid for everyone, or are moral judgments valid only within particular cultures, historical periods, communities, or personal outlooks?

Absolutism and relativism offer sharply different answers. Moral relativism holds, in one of its strongest forms, that the truth or justification of a moral judgment depends on the standards of a person or group. Moral absolutism holds that at least some moral rules are universally binding and do not become true or false merely because a society approves or rejects them. The contrast is important, but it must be stated carefully. Relativism is not simply politeness toward other cultures, and absolutism is not identical to every form of moral objectivity. The most defensible comparison therefore examines what each position claims, why it appeals to people, and what difficulties arise when it is applied to contested issues such as punishment, discrimination, or human rights.

What Ethical Relativism Claims

Ethical relativists claim that moral judgments cannot always be evaluated from a single, culture-independent standpoint. What counts as an obligation, virtue, permissible act, or serious wrong may depend on the moral framework within which a judgment is made. On this view, a statement such as “this practice is wrong” is incomplete unless one identifies the standards against which the practice is being judged.

Relativism includes several distinct ideas that should not be confused. Descriptive moral relativism is the empirical observation that societies disagree about moral rules and priorities. Communities may differ over family duties, punishment, sexuality, property, religious practice, or the authority of elders. Metaethical moral relativism goes further: it argues that the truth or justification of moral judgments is relative to a group’s traditions, convictions, or practices rather than universally valid (Gowans).

Individual subjectivism makes the relevant standard a person's attitudes, while cultural relativism makes the relevant standard a community or social framework.

The distinction matters because the existence of disagreement does not by itself prove that there is no objective answer. People also disagree about scientific, historical, and legal questions, yet disagreement alone does not show that every answer is equally correct. Relativism becomes a philosophical position only when it explains why moral disputes lack a neutral or universally authoritative method of resolution.

Context, Interpretation, and Moral Understanding

The strongest contribution of relativist thinking is its insistence on context. Conduct that appears irrational or immoral from outside a community may have a meaning that can be understood only through that community's institutions, history, and beliefs. Relativism therefore warns against ethnocentrism: the assumption that one's own customs automatically represent the universal standard of civilization. It encourages patience, careful interpretation, and awareness that moral language can hide local assumptions (Banks 8).

This interpretive caution is valuable in anthropology, history, criminal justice, and international relations. A fair evaluation should distinguish between understanding a practice and approving it. Researchers must first determine what a practice means to those involved, what purposes it serves, who benefits, who is harmed, and whether members of the community are free to challenge it. Without that inquiry, an outsider may impose a misleading description or ignore relevant social conditions.

Relativism Does Not Automatically Require Tolerance

Relativism is often associated with tolerance, but the connection is not logically automatic. A person may believe that moral standards are culturally relative and still live in a culture that values intolerance. Conversely, a moral objectivist may defend tolerance as a universal duty grounded in respect for persons or freedom of conscience. The claim that people ought to tolerate different moral practices is itself a moral principle. If it is presented as binding on every society, it resembles a universal principle rather than a purely relativist conclusion.

Relativism can nevertheless support intellectual humility. It reminds people that confidence is not the same as truth and that inherited beliefs should be examined rather than treated as self-evident. Its most persuasive practical lesson is therefore not that every custom is beyond criticism, but that criticism should be informed, consistent, and attentive to context.

What Moral Absolutism Claims

Moral absolutism maintains that some moral requirements apply to all persons regardless of culture, opinion, place, or historical period. An absolutist may hold, for example, that intentionally torturing an innocent person for amusement is always wrong, even if a particular group accepts it. Social approval cannot transform the act into a morally permissible one because the relevant moral rule is not created by convention.

Absolutism is commonly grounded in divine command, natural law, rational duty, human dignity, or claims about basic human welfare. Different absolutists may therefore disagree about which rules are absolute and why. What unites them is the belief that at least some moral boundaries are not negotiable. In this sense, absolutism supports the idea that an individual, institution, or government can be morally wrong even when its conduct is lawful, traditional, or popular.

However, absolutism should not be treated as identical to moral objectivism. A moral objectivist believes that at least some moral judgments are true independently of what a person or culture happens to believe. An objectivist may still accept that context affects how a principle should be applied and that duties can conflict. An absolutist usually makes the stronger claim that certain rules admit no exceptions. For example, an objectivist might believe that truthfulness is objectively valuable while also allowing deception to protect an innocent person from a murderer. A strict absolutist about lying would deny that exception.

Universal Principles and Consistent Judgment

The attraction of absolutism lies partly in consistency. If moral rules apply universally, similar cases should be treated similarly. This discourages double standards in which a powerful group excuses its own conduct while condemning the same conduct in others. Universal principles can also protect individuals against oppressive customs. The fact that a harmful practice has existed for generations does not establish that it is just.

This feature is especially important in discussions of slavery, genocide, torture, racial discrimination, and systematic violence. A purely conventional standard can make moral reform difficult to explain because reformers often challenge the accepted values of their own society. Absolutism can recognize that a minority was morally justified before the majority agreed with it. It also gives moral language a critical function: ethical judgment can assess social norms rather than merely report them.

The Central Differences between Absolutism and

Relativism

The first difference concerns the source of moral authority. Relativism locates authority within a framework such as a culture, community, or shared agreement. Absolutism locates at least some authority beyond local acceptance, whether in reason, divine law, natural rights, or universal features of human beings.

The second difference concerns moral disagreement. Relativists often see persistent and rationally unresolved disagreement as evidence that moral judgments depend on different frameworks. Absolutists may acknowledge disagreement but interpret it as evidence of limited knowledge, bias, self-interest, or mistaken reasoning rather than proof that there is no universal truth.

The third difference concerns criticism across cultures. A strong cultural relativist may hesitate to declare another society's practice objectively wrong because the judgment arises from an external standard. An absolutist can condemn the practice if it violates a universal rule. Yet responsible absolutism still requires accurate evidence and fair interpretation; otherwise, claims of universality can become a cover for prejudice or domination.

The fourth difference concerns exceptions. Relativism expects moral evaluation to vary with social context. Absolutism holds that at least some rules remain binding despite context. This does not mean every absolutist applies every rule mechanically, but it does mean that moral validity cannot be created simply by changing local opinion.

Capital Punishment as a Test Case

The original discussion uses capital punishment to show how opposing absolutist positions can develop. Jonathan Glover examines life-and-death questions, including judicial killing, in *Causing Death and Saving Lives*. One absolutist may argue that a person who intentionally murders deserves death and that justice requires execution. Another absolutist may hold that deliberate killing by the state is always wrong and that no punishment can justify it. Both positions are absolutist because each treats its central rule as exceptionless, even though the rules point toward opposite conclusions (Banks 10).

This example reveals that absolutism alone does not settle a moral dispute. The decisive question is which principle should be treated as absolute: retributive justice, the sanctity of life, protection of the innocent, or a prohibition on state killing. Complications arise when principles conflict. If an innocent person could be executed, a strict commitment to deserved punishment must confront an equally serious duty not to punish the innocent. Absolutist systems therefore need an account of priority among rules, not merely a list of rules.

A relativist approach would examine how different societies understand punishment, responsibility,

deterrence, mercy, state authority, and human dignity. It could explain why one legal culture accepts capital punishment while another rejects it. This approach is useful for understanding variation, but explanation does not eliminate the need for evaluation. A society's approval does not answer questions about wrongful convictions, unequal enforcement, cruelty, or whether government should possess the power to take life.

The case demonstrates the practical value and limitation of both approaches. Absolutism provides firm moral limits but may become rigid when duties collide. Relativism provides contextual understanding but may offer insufficient grounds for condemning serious injustice when that injustice is socially accepted.

Strengths and Limitations of Ethical Relativism

Relativism has several strengths. It recognizes genuine moral diversity, challenges cultural arrogance, and draws attention to the social conditions that shape judgment. It can improve ethical inquiry by requiring people to understand practices before condemning them. It also exposes the danger of presenting local customs as universal truths merely because they are familiar or politically dominant.

Its central difficulty is that strong relativism can weaken moral criticism. If a society's accepted standards determine moral truth, then reformers who reject those standards may appear wrong by definition. The position also faces the problem of identifying the relevant culture. Modern societies contain religious, ethnic, political, professional, and generational groups with competing values. A person may belong to several communities at once. It is therefore difficult to speak of a single cultural code without ignoring internal disagreement.

Relativism can also produce inconsistency when it praises tolerance as universally good while denying universal moral standards. Furthermore, cultural acceptance does not guarantee free agreement. A rule may reflect the interests of rulers, dominant classes, or patriarchal institutions rather than the considered judgment of every member. Ethical analysis must therefore examine power, dissent, and harm, not merely the existence of a tradition.

Strengths and Limitations of Moral Absolutism

Absolutism offers moral stability and protects certain values from convenience or majority pressure. It explains how laws and customs can be unjust and why individuals may have duties even when wrongdoing would benefit them. Universal principles also support consistent criticism of abuses across borders and historical periods.

Its weakness is the risk of rigidity. Real situations often involve competing duties, uncertain facts, and unintended consequences. A rule that appears clear in isolation may become difficult to apply when obeying it causes severe harm or violates another rule. Absolutists must explain how conflicts are

resolved and how people can know that a proposed principle is genuinely universal rather than a local belief presented with excessive confidence.

Absolutism can also be misused. Political and religious authorities have sometimes described contested norms as timeless truths in order to silence criticism. The answer is not necessarily to reject universality, but to demand reasons, evidence, consistency, and openness to correction. A credible universal principle should not depend solely on the power of the group asserting it.

A Qualified Ethical Approach

The most reasonable conclusion may combine the insights of both positions without collapsing their differences. Moral inquiry should begin with relativism's interpretive discipline: understand historical and cultural context, listen to affected people, identify internal disagreement, and avoid assuming that unfamiliarity proves immorality. It should then apply critical standards that are not reducible to social approval, such as consistency, evidence of harm, respect for agency, fairness, and protection from coercion.

This approach is not strict relativism because it permits cross-cultural criticism. It is also not necessarily strict absolutism because it accepts that context affects the meaning and application of principles. It is closer to a limited moral objectivism: some ethical claims may have wider authority, while many social rules remain conventional and open to variation. Such a position recognizes that humility and moral criticism are compatible. People can admit the possibility of error while still opposing cruelty, exploitation, and arbitrary discrimination.

Conclusion

Absolutism and relativism differ primarily over whether moral standards possess universal authority. Relativism emphasizes that moral judgments are shaped by cultural or personal frameworks and warns against judging others through unexamined local assumptions. Absolutism maintains that at least some moral rules remain valid regardless of social approval and therefore provides a basis for criticizing unjust customs and institutions.

Neither position is free from difficulty. Strong relativism may make reform and cross-cultural criticism hard to justify, while strict absolutism may become inflexible and may conceal local prejudice beneath claims of universality. The comparison therefore shows why ethical reasoning requires both contextual understanding and principled evaluation. Relativism contributes humility, interpretation, and awareness of diversity; absolutism contributes consistency, moral limits, and the conviction that accepted practices can still be wrong. A mature ethical judgment must determine when context legitimately changes an evaluation and when it merely excuses harm.

Works Cited

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