Discuss the Difference between Absolutism and Relativism in Ethics

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Introduction

Ethical absolutism and ethical relativism offer different answers to a foundational question in moral philosophy: are some moral standards valid for everyone, or do moral judgments depend on the culture, community, or framework within which they are made? Moral absolutism maintains that at least some rules are universally binding and cannot become right merely because a society approves them. Moral relativism, in its stronger forms, argues that the truth or justification of a moral judgment depends on a particular social or cultural standpoint. The distinction should not be reduced to a contrast between intolerance and tolerance. A relativist can belong to a culture that is intolerant, while an objectivist can defend tolerance as a universal duty. Likewise, absolutism is not identical to every form of moral objectivity because an objectivist can believe that some principles are universally valid while still allowing context-sensitive exceptions. A useful comparison therefore examines moral authority, disagreement, cross-cultural criticism, and the problems that arise when universal rules conflict with complex circumstances.

What Relativism Contributes to Ethical Inquiry

Ethical relativists claim that moral judgment cannot always be separated from the historical and cultural framework in which it develops. This position encourages caution when outsiders evaluate unfamiliar practices because customs may have meanings that are invisible without knowledge of local institutions, beliefs, family structures, and social history. Cultural relativism therefore challenges ethnocentrism and reminds researchers that social difference is not automatically evidence of moral inferiority. Its weakness appears when cultural acceptance becomes the only criterion of morality. If whatever a society approves is right for that society, reformers who criticize slavery, discrimination, coercion, or abuse can appear morally mistaken until the majority changes its mind. The position also faces the problem of identifying the relevant culture because modern societies contain competing religious, political, professional, generational, and ethnic communities. Moral disagreement within a society shows that cultures are rarely unified enough to provide one uncontested moral code.

The Appeal and Risk of Absolutism

Moral absolutism provides a basis for saying that some conduct remains wrong even when it is legal, traditional, or popular. This gives moral criticism a role beyond simply reporting what a society accepts. Universal rules can protect individuals against majoritarian abuse and support consistent judgment across similar cases. The position is especially attractive in discussions of torture, genocide, slavery, deliberate cruelty, and systematic discrimination because it refuses to allow social approval to transform serious harm into moral legitimacy. However, absolutism also creates difficult questions. Different absolutists may identify different rules as exceptionless and may reach opposite conclusions about the same case. Capital punishment illustrates the problem. One absolutist may hold that intentional murder always deserves death, while another may hold that state killing is always impermissible. Both positions rely on universal principles, yet they conflict. A strict theory therefore needs an account of which rule has priority when duties collide, how universal principles are identified, and how certainty is distinguished from cultural prejudice presented as timeless truth.

Capital Punishment as a Test of Both Positions

Capital punishment reveals both the strength and limitation of absolutist and relativist reasoning. An absolutist can condemn or defend execution by appealing to a universal rule about justice, life, desert, or state authority, but the existence of incompatible absolute principles means that absolutism alone does not resolve the dispute. A relativist can explain why societies differ in their views of punishment, deterrence, mercy, human dignity, and governmental power, yet explanation does not settle whether a practice is just. Wrongful convictions, unequal enforcement, cruelty, and irreversible error still require evaluation even if a legal culture accepts execution. The strongest ethical reasoning therefore needs both contextual understanding and critical standards. It should identify what a practice means within its social framework while also asking whether it is consistent, evidence-based, fair, and respectful of human agency. Jonathan Glover’s discussion of life-and-death questions illustrates why moral philosophy must examine consequences and duties together rather than assume that one label—absolutist or relativist—automatically determines the answer.

Conclusion

Absolutism and relativism differ primarily over the source and scope of moral authority. Relativism emphasizes cultural context, interpretive humility, and the danger of judging unfamiliar practices through unexamined local assumptions. Absolutism maintains that some moral requirements remain valid regardless of approval and therefore gives ethics the power to criticize unjust laws and customs. Each position also faces a serious weakness. Strong relativism can make oppression difficult to condemn when it is socially accepted, while strict absolutism can become rigid and can hide local beliefs beneath claims of universality. A more defensible ethical approach recognizes that context

matters without assuming that social acceptance creates moral truth. It can preserve cross-cultural learning while still evaluating harm, coercion, fairness, and consistency. The philosophical debate remains important precisely because mature ethical judgment requires both humility about one's own standpoint and the courage to say that some accepted practices can still be wrong. Moral Relativism provides a useful overview of the ongoing debate.

References

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