



A Critical Overview of Moral Absolutism and Moral Relativism: A Meta-Ethical Approach

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Abstract

In today's world, a dominant question in meta-ethics is whether morality is absolute or relative.

The main intention of this work is to highlight the contradiction between the two moral frames (moral absolutism and moral relativism) in a critical context. Both moral absolutism and relativism play a vital role in the development of ethical theory. Moral relativism is a relatively new moral paradigm that challenges moral absolutism. The reason for the conflict between moral absolutism and relativism is based on whether there is a single criterion of morality or whether the moral criterion is relative. Moral absolutism holds that a single criterion of morality applies to everyone. While moral relativism rejects this view, it argues that no single moral criterion applies universally. Instead, moral standards differ from person to person and community to community. These two issues are not merely theoretical; they have practical implications for human rights, global justice, intercultural dialogue, and moral disagreements. This paper aims to explore how people determine what is right and wrong, good and bad, in light of these two doctrines. It also seeks to analyse the debate critically by examining its conceptual foundations, philosophical arguments, and the limitations of both doctrines.

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1. Introduction:

The concepts of Moral absolutism and relativism are two popular philosophical ideas related to ethical values or judgments. These are two famous philosophical debates in ethics and the study of morality. At the beginning of the paper, we need to understand what the term 'morality' means, as it is a shared conception between these two doctrines. Whenever people think about morality, specific questions arise. Like, what does the term morality mean? Why do we need to understand morality? What does it mean to be moral? Generally, we know that "morality" comes from the term "mores", which means customs and traditions. This is the principle that guides individual behaviour, influences how we treat others, and helps us to make decisions and lead our lives. It concerns about distinguishing right from wrong, good from bad, and making choices that influence ourselves and others. Lukes asserts that:

"There are two ways of thinking about morality and moral norms. One can view them as an external observer, either anthropologically or sociologically, as forming systems of morals, ethics, or codes of conduct that vary from society to society, culture to culture, or group to group. The second way of thinking about morality allows us, on the contrary, to view it as excluding and condemning practices such as these last as immoral. Here, one views morality not as an external observer but practically- from inside the practice of morality, as a moral agent or participant. One considers it from a first-person rather than a third-person standpoint. Here, we believe what is right and wrong, what is valuable and worthless, what is obligatory and prohibited, what is good and bad, and so on (Lukes, 1998, p. 13)."

Therefore, we understand that morality in ethics is the principle that helps human beings decide how to lead a good life, act rightly, and treat others fairly, based on reasoned principles and shared human values.

In discussions of morality, people identify four primary perspectives: absolutism, objectivism, relativism, and subjectivism. *Moral Absolutism* is simply the idea that some things are absolutely right and never wrong. For instance, "Be kind to someone" doesn't depend on the circumstances. If you are kind to someone, you are never behaving immorally. It's also claimed that some things are absolutely wrong and can never be right. Here, people might think about rape. It is never moral for one person to rape another person, no matter what the circumstances are. That's not appropriate. *Moral objectivism* asserts that ethical principles are universally

true regardless of personal beliefs or opinions. It claims that specific actions are inherently right or wrong, and human opinion doesn't change that. The other critical theory of morality is *Moral relativism*, the idea that moral judgments are true or false only relative to a specific standpoint. This is simply a claim that absolute right or wrong really does not exist. Here, right and wrong are determined by one's perspective or cultural context. This view holds that what is true for one person is not necessarily true for others. For instance, it could be true for Person – A that "slavery is wrong," but true for Person – B that "slavery is right". Moreover, *Moral subjectivism* asserts that ethical standards are subjective and derived from one's opinions, feelings, beliefs, and perceptions. It advises that an individual's preferences and values determine which actions are right or wrong.

However, this research is designed to explore the nature of moral absolutism and moral relativism, followed by a critical section in which I intend to highlight the popular conflicts between them.

2. Moral Absolutism:

Moral absolutism is the principle that a single moral code applies universally to all human beings. Some truths or values in the relevant domain apply universally across all areas, times, cultural, and social frameworks. Absolutism holds that truth, or goodness, does not vary from culture to culture. If a judgment or principle always remains identical and true, and there cannot be any incompatibility or exception to it at any cost, it is called a universal or absolute moral principle. "There are three characteristics of absolute principles: unchangeability, universality, and objectivity. Firstly, absolutes are not relative to time, so they do not change under any circumstances. Secondly, this is not relative to class, culture, nation, place, gender, or any other group, so it is universal. Thirdly, it is not relative to opinion, thought, belief, feeling, desire, or any subjective consciousness. Hence, they are objective (Kreeft, 1999, P. 30)." Furthermore, to elaborate the very nature of moral absolutism, Baghramian comments that:

"Moral absolutism is the belief that some moral principles have unconditional authority. They are binding on all moral agents – they apply to everyone and everywhere. There are, of course, variations in local practice, but such variations are ultimately explainable in terms of general and universal moral principles. Absolutists also admit that in most cases we have not yet established with any certainty what is ethically true, but hold that such epistemic failure is due to the complexity of the issues and to failing in human nature rather

than being any indication that moral truths are anything but absolute (Baghramian, 2004, p. 209).¹

Plato and Aristotle, the ancient Greek philosophers, accept the idea of moral absolutism or universalism. That means they believed in universal moral principles that apply to everyone. Plato's moral principles are rooted in his doctrine of Forms, particularly the Form of the Good, which is a perfect and unchanging concept. For Plato, *moral goodness* is objective, eternal, and discoverable through rational inquiry. Therefore, he might have thought that moral knowledge is not about convention but about insight into an objective moral reality. Plato's absolutism held that there is a single right way to act, and that is the same in all situations. It exists independent of human opinion or interpretation. Aristotle believed that there must be a distinct, eternal, or unchanging being that is the origin of all other things. He therefore maintains that virtues (honesty and fairness) themselves are rooted in human nature and thus possess an objective basis. The German Philosopher Immanuel Kant is the strongest proponent of moral absolutism. He established a monistic principle of deontological ethics in his moral philosophy. Kant maintains that the supreme moral law is an absolute, categorical imperative that obligates all people to obey it. Everyone is obligated to adhere to that categorical imperative rule, not to any desired outcome, but solely for that invaluable rule itself. He established deontological ethics by completely rejecting consequentialist ethical theories. Kant asserts that an action can be called a "right action" if it follows a universal and absolute moral rule that is intrinsically valuable. Kant expressed his principle of categorical imperative as follows: "*Act only according to that maxims whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.*" Whether a prevailing social custom is moral or not can be easily determined by applying the categorical imperative. A rule to which this universal principle can be used is considered moral, while a rule to which applying the universal principle leads to inconsistency is considered immoral. Kant grounds morality in reason itself, arguing that moral laws are derived from the rational will and are universally binding. Kant's morality, or moral philosophy, depends on the firm idea that morality exists universally and is independent of human experience. He believes that only those who can act morally are rational beings. For

¹ Baghramian, M, 2004, p. 209

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Kant, 'reason' is equal for all persons. That is why he asserts that all persons are the same, as potentially rational beings. Therefore, if 'reason' dictates that, if a person can perform a particular moral act in a specific situation, then any person will be able to perform that moral act in that same situation successfully. For Kant, moral obligations are not based on any ordinary things, such as empirical facts, emotions, feelings, or any other cultural norms. For instance, lying or theft is always morally wrong, regardless of the consequences. Therefore, Kant is a moral absolutist in the sense that all people are equal in terms of rationality and all people have the same moral duties. It can be said that absolutism has some advantages, such as it provides at least one criterion of morality upon which everyone can act. People understand the principle of moral universalism, which holds that what is good for one person is also good for everyone else in the same situation. At the same time, moral absolutism has some disadvantages; here, people have to negotiate their feelings, sentiments, culture, motives, and so on.

3. Moral Relativism:

Moral relativism is an essential theme in morality or ethics. It is a highly controversial issue in philosophy and beyond. Several prominent contemporary philosophers defend this idea, including J. David Velleman (2015), Gilbert Harman (1996), and David B. Wong (1984). The term moral relativism is understood in different ways. Sometimes it is referred to as a descriptive moral claim. It asserts that moral beliefs or standards vary across different individuals or societies. This means that different individuals or societies adhere to different moral codes, which leads to differing moral conclusions. Again, this is a meta-ethical position that holds that moral appraisals are neither objectively true nor false, and that different people and cultures can hold opposing moral views yet all be valid. Furthermore, moral relativism is discussed in a normative ethical thesis that claims judging or interfering with other cultures' moral views is morally wrong. In defining moral relativism, Cook pronounces that:

"Moral relativism, sometimes called 'cultural relativism,' is a philosophical doctrine about the nature of morality. Yet the principal proponents of this doctrine have been anthropologists rather than philosophers. They claim that their studies of various cultures have enabled them to show that morality is relative to each culture, which implies, among other things, that we cannot rightly pass moral judgment on members of different cultures except by their cultural standards, which may differ from ours (Cook, 1996, p.3)."

Moral relativism holds that morality is not fixed or universal; it is shaped by individual perspectives and societal norms. Nothing is absolutely correct. Everything relies on the circumstances. Therefore, our own moral code has no special status; it is merely one among many. In explaining and analyzing moral diversity, Gilbert Harman says:

“Members of different cultures often have very different beliefs about right and wrong, and often act quite differently on their beliefs. To take a seemingly trivial example, different cultures have different rules of politeness and etiquette: burping after eating is polite in one culture and impolite in another. Less trivially, some people are cannibals; others find cannibalism abhorrent. The institution of marriage takes different forms in different societies. In some, a man is permitted to have several wives; in others, bigamy is forbidden. More generally, the moral status of women varies significantly across societies in different ways. Some societies allow slavery, some have caste systems, which they take to be morally satisfactory, but others reject both slavery and caste systems as grossly unjust (Harman & Thomson, 1996, p.8).”

Therefore, this theory holds that universal moral rules do not exist. The notion of moral behavior (good and bad) varies from one nation to another, from one society to another, and from one individual to another. Those who believe that the notion of moral behavior (good and bad) is built differently across nations, societies, or individuals are called relativists, and their doctrine is called relativism. Moral relativism is presented in various ways. However, the proponents of this doctrine acknowledge that the truly permanent moral idea does not exist. A close observation of human social life reveals that actions that were formerly viewed as good are now deemed as bad. An action that is highly praised in one society may be condemned in another. One person thinks a specific behavior is appropriate, while another considers it inappropriate. The concept of moral good and bad is therefore relative to time, place, and circumstances. For instance, some societies accept the practice of bigamy; however, in different societies, taking another wife while the first wife is still alive is considered a highly unjust and immoral practice. The self-immolation of a Hindu woman on her husband’s funeral pyre was once praised, but today this practice is considered utterly abhorrent and reprehensible.

Observing the different customs, traditions, and behaviors of various societies naturally leads to the idea that moral rules have no objective basis, and moral judgments (good and bad) do nothing more than reflect the customs or traditions of a particular society, which are themselves creations of that society.

Morality is a fundamental principle; it is sometimes influenced by people's economic circumstances. For instance, the notions of moral good and bad are often associated only with the well-being of the rich, not with that of the poor. Therefore, what is considered morally good or bad varies depending on economic conditions; for example, what is good or beneficial for the rich may be bad for the poor.

4. The Conflict between Moral Absolutism and Moral Relativism:

Moral absolutism holds that there is a fixed, universal moral code, whereas moral relativism reverses this, saying that morals are not fixed; they depend on the situation or culture. This is why it can be stated that neither of them is similar; there are inevitable disagreements between them. Relativism suggests that absolute things do not exist. Absolutism holds that there are some absolutes, at least one. Relativism is always relative to something else. Absolutism is 'not relative,' but necessary. In absolutism, there are no conditions, so it is unconditioned. Absolutism asserts that people can discover values; relativism, on the other hand, mentions that people can create them. For instance, people are free to create or change baseball rules, but not free to change the fundamental principle that two plus two equals four. In that case, it can be said that relativism gives us freedom, and absolutism takes it away. Absolutism is the perception of everyone, and relativism is an individual's perception. Relativism holds that morality depends on the individual and their feelings. Gilbert Harman asserts that:

“According to moral absolutism, there is a single moral law that applies to everyone; in other words, there are moral demands that everyone has sufficient reasons to follow, and these demands are the source of all moral reasons. While Moral relativism denies that there are universal moral demands, it argues that different people are subject to different basic moral demands depending on the social customs, practices, conventions, values, and principles they accept. (Harman. G., 2000, P. 85)².”

Moral absolutists might say that lying is always wrong. Moral relativists would say lying can be right or wrong depending on why and where it's done (e.g., saving someone's life vs. hurting someone's feelings). Baghramian further adds:

“Absolutism also entails the universal validity of moral principles. Universalism is the claim that the scope of at least some moral claims or principles goes beyond the beliefs

² Harman. G., 2000, P. 85

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and practices of particular cultures and historical epochs. Universalism often contrasts with moral particularism, which holds that ethical judgments apply only to specific cases and situations. Relativism, however, should be distinguished from moral particularism in that particularists, unlike relativists, maintain that a given moral judgment can be objectively true or correct for a particular occasion. Absolutism and universalism in ethics imply monism or the view that there is no more than one right answer to every ethical question. The relativists, on the other hand, are pluralists. They believe that for any moral question, there could be more than one correct answer (Baghramian, M., 2004, p. 209)³.”

One of the strongest arguments in favour of moral absolutism is that it serves as a cornerstone of moral objectivity. It mentions that, without the universal values or standards, it becomes difficult to meaningfully criticize practices such as slavery, genocide, or discrimination. Absolutism allows moral judgments to transcend cultural boundaries. Absolutists argue that the idea of moral progress presupposes objective standards. It claims that if morality were entirely relative, then changes in moral perspectives or beliefs, could not be described as improvements; instead, they would be described only as differences. Like, the abolishment of slavery appears intelligible as moral progress only if slavery was objectively wrong. Contemporary human rights discourse relies heavily on moral universalism. Absolutists contend that human rights cannot be defended without appealing to objective moral norms that apply to everyone by virtue of their humanity.

The main argument for moral relativism is that communities vary in their moral codes, values, and standards. For instance, privacy might be valued in one society but not another. One essential characteristic of this idea is that no single view is inherently better than others. Philosophers in ancient India and Greece were known to write about the idea that people interpret morals differently. Every culture has different ideas about right and wrong, and for most of human history, people assumed their ways of life were right while others were wrong. People always care about what they value. For instance, a vegetarian really wants to get people to stop raising animals for food. The anti-abortionist seeks to get others to end the practice of abortion, etc. The relativists literally emphasize the vast diversity of moral beliefs across different cultures. The practices concerning marriage, punishment, sexuality, and death vary widely. They thought that morality is socially constructed rather than universally fixed. This

³ Baghramian, M., 2004, p.209.

theory is sometimes defended as a basis for tolerance. By rejecting the claims of moral universality, it discourages cultural imperialism and the imposition of one society's values upon another. Relativists argue that moral norms must be sensitive to context. They claim that Absolutist rules oversimplify complex moral situations and ignore relevant social and historical factors. Cook asserted that:

“What distinguishes relativists from absolutists is the following. Proponents of absolutism will say, for example, “Head-hunting is wrong,” meaning that people who engage in head-hunting are acting immorally, even if their culture condones or requires it. On the other hand, the relativists maintain that saying such a thing is perfectly absurd; it makes no sense to say, without reference to a particular culture, that the taking of heads is wrong. Head-hunting is not inherently wrong; it is wrong only if done in a culture that prohibits it. If I think to myself, “Head-hunting is wrong; it’s just wrong!

(Cook, J.W., 1996, p.14)⁴.

The doctrine of moral relativism cannot be dismissed as completely irrational; it cannot be entirely accepted either. If the relativistic theory is accepted, then moral judgment, that is, judging the behavior (good and bad) of any action, becomes impossible. When we make a moral statement, like “telling the truth is good,” the question may arise as to why it is good, and in answering that question, we are compelled to justify. If person A calls the same behavior good and person B calls it bad, then each of them must offer arguments in support of their respective opinion, because both the adjectives ‘good’ and ‘bad’ cannot be applied to the same behavior. However, if slavery is supported in one society and condemned in another, the relativistic theory of morality asserts that no conflict arises between individuals from these two societies. Here, the act is considered reasonable by a person from one society because it is acceptable there. Still, the same act is considered harmful by a person from another culture because it is condemned there. There is no conflict here between the judgments of good and bad made by the two individuals. This is why a relativistic theory of morality is unacceptable in some societies.

5. Concluding Remarks:

⁴ Cook, J.W., 1996, p.14

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From the above analysis, it can be said that the main difference between these two moral theories is that absolutism holds that moral values are fixed regardless of time, place, and the people concerned. On the other hand, relativism maintains that ethical standards depend on contexts since nothing is absolutely right or wrong. In absolutism, we know from our experience that some fundamental moral values bind us together. Simultaneously, relativism is the thesis that knowledge, truth, and morality exist within a culture, society, or historical context and are not absolute. Relativism suggests that truth is relative to one's perspective or frame of reference. Like, *you are committed to your own morality, and I am committed to mine.*

It can be said that one kind of serious objection raised against moral relativism, like, it undermines moral criticism. Here, people can assert that, if morality is relative, then it is difficult to denounce the horrific traditions (such as head-hunting, cannibalism, etc.) of other cultures, as well as one's own culture. Critics argue that relativism, in some sense or other, may be self-refuting. For instance, if every moral judgment is relative, then '*one ought to be tolerant*', this moral statement cannot be universally valid. It actually decreases its own moral standards. Whereas the moral absolutists are often criticized for their obduracy. Immanuel Kant's claim that 'Lying is always considered wrong even to save an innocent life' is repeatedly cited as an example of rigidity that conflicts with ethical intuitions. The Absolutists' assertion of universality may refuse cultural contexts and historical circumstances. Critics sometimes assert that what is presented as universal morality may also reflect particular cultural assumptions. Even if there are objective moral truths, certain questions arise here. For instance, absolutists face the challenge of explaining why such truths are called absolute and what accounts for the persistent disagreement among rational agents.

The debate between these two doctrines raises specific intrinsic questions on the essence of morality and human coexistence. Moral absolutism provides a strong basis for absolute or universal judgments, moral criticism, and human rights; however, it also risks rigidity and cultural insensitivity. However, moral relativism strengthens the context, situation, tolerance, and moral diversity. It faces severe difficulties in accounting for moral criticism and moral development. A critical reflection proposes that neither position is entirely satisfactory in its ultimate form.

Although, from a pragmatic point of view, it can be stated that there is no harm in admitting that, in reality, there is no such thing that can be counted as morally good or bad independent

of any individual mind. The opinions of moral relativists cannot be simply dismissed out of hand, even though they argue that objective morality and enduring moral ideals do not exist. However, denying objective morality does not mean that moral judgments are subjective and therefore beyond criticism. The absence of any eternal, objective moral values does not mean that one does not have to provide reasons in moral judgments, or that moral judgments are beyond criticism. In the case of moral judgments, practical ethical knowledge is required. Just as we determine whether a food is tasty and wholesome by consuming it and testing its usefulness, so, too, must we evaluate whether a behavior is good or not by assessing its effectiveness in social and personal life. In practical ethics, it might be claimed that the morality of an action is judged by determining its usefulness or harmfulness to society or the individual moral life; and, therefore, judging a moral action cannot be based on individual whim. The concept of moral good and bad is therefore neither entirely permanent nor solely dependent on the attitude of a particular individual. In human society, the goodness and badness of an action are determined by judging its utility. However, this may not be entirely accepted in today's world.

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