

Two Types of Relativism

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Normative and metaethical moral theories

The idea of relativism and absolutism can be used in two different ways, depending on whether we are talking about *normative moral theories* or *metaethical* theories. Normative moral theories are theories about what is right and what is good which we can use in practical cases, e.g. utilitarianism, situation ethics, Kant's theory. Metaethical moral theories are theories about the *very ideas*, the concepts, of right and wrong, good and bad, e.g. whether moral judgements are objectively true or false.

Two senses of 'relativism'

Some types of normative moral theory, e.g. act utilitarianism and situation ethics, claim that types of action, e.g. abortion and euthanasia, are not always right or wrong. It depends on the particular, individual situation. Whether an action is right or wrong for these theories is *relative to the situation*. But notice that both act utilitarianism and situation ethics hold on to one *absolute standard*, that an act is right if it causes the greatest happiness or is a loving act.

In metaethics, relativism is a different claim. It claims that moral judgements, e.g. 'euthanasia is wrong', are true or false relative to a particular culture. There is no absolute truth about morality, and no absolute moral standards that are correct or incorrect, only what different cultures think.

There is a big difference between these types of relativism. We can distinguish metaethical relativism from relativism in normative ethics by doing the following exercise:

	Metaethical relativism	Normative relativism
1. Can the culture/individual get the answer wrong?		
2. Does the culture/individual always know best?		
3. Can cultures/individuals meaningfully disagree?		
4. What happens when cultures/individuals change their minds?		

Consider *why* you have given the answers you have in each case.

According to metaethical relativism, a culture cannot be wrong about whether euthanasia is right or wrong, because there is no truth of the matter. According to utilitarianism, say, it can be wrong, because it might think that euthanasia maximises happiness when it does not, or it might not value consequences highly enough. That means that the culture can be corrected, because there is still an absolute standard which determines what is right or wrong.

Or again, according to utilitarianism, when there is a disagreement about whether an act is right or not, the disagreement is meaningful, one person has got the answer wrong and can be corrected. According to relativism, if two cultures disagree, neither can be corrected by the other, for what is wrong is wrong according to the culture.

Finally, if a culture changes its moral principles, utilitarianism can say that it is a change for the better or worse, depending on whether acting on the new principle brings about greater happiness than before. The relativist, however, cannot understand the change as a 'correction' – in terms of getting the answer 'correct' – although if the change makes their principles more consistent, we can still say this is an improvement.

It is worth noting that the OCR Philosophy of Religion and Ethics syllabus is more interested in relativism in the normative sense. However, the AQA philosophy syllabus is more interested in relativism in the metaethical sense.

Absolutism

Because there are two senses of relativism, there are two senses of absolutism.

Absolutism in *metaethics* is the view that moral judgements can be objectively correct or incorrect, not dependent on what anything believes. Situation ethics and act utilitarianism are (usually) absolutist in this sense, because they understand their standard (greatest happiness or love) as telling us what is objectively the right way to act.

Absolutism in *normative ethics* is the claim that certain *types* of action are absolutely, always wrong, i.e. it does not depend on the situation. This may be because that wrong type of action does not respect the nature of human beings or their dignity or their freedom. On some interpretations, Kant, natural law theory, and some aspects of Christian ethics, e.g. the Ten Commandments, are absolutist. Each one prohibits certain types of action.