

2 Moral Absolutism and Moral Relativism

Essential terminology

Absolute
Consequentialism
Cultural relativism
Descriptive relativism
Moral absolutism
Moral objectivism
Moral relativism
Subjectivism

This chapter introduces some of the main ethical theories that are looked at in more detail in later chapters. You should read this chapter again once you have studied them. You will need moral relativism and cultural relativism for the Foundation paper, and both absolute and relative morality for the AS Ethics paper.

Examination questions on absolute and relative morality may be approached in more than one way:

- looking at normative ethical theories, both absolute and relative
- looking at cultural relativism
- looking at relative meta-ethical theories.

WHAT YOU WILL LEARN ABOUT IN THIS CHAPTER

- What is meant in ethics to call a system relativist.
- Moral relativism as distinct from cultural relativism.
- Situation ethics as an example of relative ethical systems.
- What is meant by moral absolutism.
- Absolute and relative ways of understanding 'right' and 'wrong'.
- The skills to decide whether there are any moral absolutes, or whether morality is completely relative, or whether there is an in-between position.
- The strengths and weaknesses of moral absolutism.
- The strengths and weaknesses of moral relativism.

KEY SCHOLARS

- Socrates (c.470–c.399)
- Aristotle (384–322 BCE)
- Plato (428–347 BCE)
- Joseph Fletcher (1905–1991)

THE OCR CHECKLIST



An introduction to the following concepts within ethical theory:

- absolutist morality;
- relativist morality;
- a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of absolutist and relativist morality.

- what it means when an ethical theory is called absolutist and objective;
- what it means when an ethical theory is called relativist and subjective;
- a discussion of the strengths and the weaknesses of these concepts.

- the term deontological;
- the term teleological;
- a discussion of the strengths and the weaknesses of these concepts.

From OCR A Level Religious Studies Specification H172.

Moral relativism

There are no universally valid moral principles and so there is no one true morality.

WHAT IS ETHICAL RELATIVISM?

The theory of ethical **relativism** holds that there are no universally valid moral principles. All principles and values are relative to a particular culture or age. Ethical relativism means that there is no such thing as good 'in itself', but if an action seems good to you and bad to me, that is it, and there is no objective basis for us to discover the truth. The problem today is that relativism tends to lead people into thinking that truth depends on who holds it, or that there is only one truth – their own. We often hear people say, 'Well that's your point of view, but it's not mine', and this can actually be a way of stopping thinking. Truth then no longer matters, as everything depends on the community to which one belongs, or one's own perspective. Where there is no agreed set of values, relativism can seem very attractive.

THE ORIGINS OF RELATIVISM

We can trace the origins of Western ethical thinking to the city states of ancient Greece. At the time of Homer (c. eighth century BCE), being good meant being a heroic warrior and the type of person you were – noble, courageous, strong – was the most important thing. This became further developed in the ethical theories of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle who looked at the ideas of character and virtue.

However, everything began to change, and by the sixth century BCE there was no longer any moral certainty. Alasdair MacIntyre in his book *A Short History of Ethics* (1985) says this was due to the discovery of other civilisations with different ideas of what it meant to be good and changes within Greek society itself. The discovery of these different cultures led the Greeks to question the absoluteness of their own moral ideas; also, as the city states expanded, it became less clear what a person's role in society was and so more difficult to know how to live a virtuous life.

Eventually a series of wise men, known as Sophists, appeared and argued that all morality was relative – right and wrong varied from place to place, from time to time and from person to person. Protagoras famously said: 'Man is the measure of all things.' All they saw as important was getting on in life, taking part in political life and fitting in – 'truth' was a variable concept. Socrates and later Plato and Aristotle worked on proving this view to be wrong.

Subjectivism

Each person's values are relative to that person and so cannot be judged objectively.

Sophists

This was a name originally applied by the ancient Greeks to learned men. In the fifth century CE, the Sophists were travelling teachers. They concluded that truth and morality were matters of opinion and emphasised skills such as rhetoric.

Protagoras (c.480–c.411 BCE)

Protagoras was a Greek philosopher, born in Thrace. He taught in Athens for money. He said that nothing is absolutely good or bad and that each individual is their own final authority when making decisions.

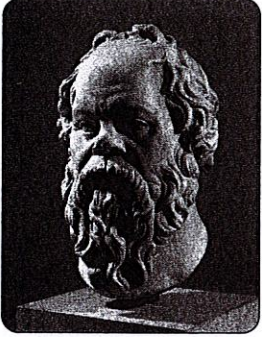
Like Socrates, he was charged with impiety and fled to Sicily, but drowned on the journey.



Detail of a red figure krater depicting warriors; Rhodes, 13th–12th century BCE (pottery) by Greek

© National Archaeological Museum, Athens, Greece/Lauros/Giraudon/The Bridgeman Art Library

Socrates (c.470– 399 BCE)



Socrates, marble head, copy from a bronze from the Pompeion in Athens, made by Lysippus, Classical Greek, c.330 BCE

© Louvre, Paris, France/The Bridgeman Art Library

Socrates did not leave any writings of his own but, as a Greek philosopher, he shaped Western philosophy. His pupil Plato wrote dialogues which claim to describe Socrates' views.

He is also mentioned in the works of Xenophon and others.

At the age of 70 he was tried for impiety and sentenced to death by poisoning (probably hemlock).

Socrates

It is difficult to distinguish between the views of Socrates and Plato, as Socrates left no writings and everything we know about him we know through his pupil Plato. However, Plato's dialogues have Socrates as the main protagonist and he argues that all humans share a common, innate understanding of what is morally good.

Plato

Plato explained how this moral knowledge was acquired with his theory of the Forms – moral knowledge came from the highest of the forms: the Form of the Good. According to Plato, there are objective and universal moral truths – the complete opposite of the view of the Sophists.

Aristotle

Aristotle approached ethics from a completely different angle, and although he thought universal truths could be discovered, he rejected Plato's idea of the world of the Forms, as he thought that understanding of goodness and wisdom could be found in this world. According to Aristotle, we can find out how to be virtuous by looking at virtuous people and by discovering how we can better develop our character.

Socrates, Plato and Aristotle all oppose complete relativism from different angles and ask people not to just blindly follow what everyone else is thinking and doing, to consider what they believe and why they believe it, to dialogue with others and to look for truths that are not limited by their own time and culture.

It cannot be assumed that relativism means the same thing to everyone and this chapter will explore some of the different approaches.

CULTURAL RELATIVISM

You do not need to be an anthropologist to know that throughout the world there are many different ideas about how to behave and there always seem to be clashes of moral codes between one culture and another. To us it seems obscene to chop off a man's hand as punishment for theft or to stone somebody for adultery, yet to many Muslims this is simply the required punishment, and they on their part will condemn what they see as the excessive liberalism and immorality of Western societies.

Cultural relativism

What is right or wrong depends on the culture.

Descriptive relativism

Different cultures and societies have differing ethical systems and so morality is relative.

This is what is known as the *diversity thesis* – because of the diversity across and within cultures there can be no one true morality.

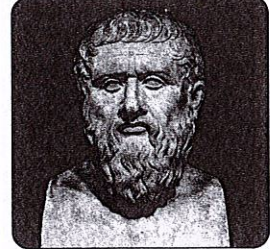
Many other examples of this clash of cultures may be found. Some societies practise polygamy, others monogamy; some have arranged marriages and others are free to make their own choice of spouse; we put our elderly in homes, whereas in other cultures they are valued for their wisdom and have an important place in the family home. For the relativist such differences present no problems – different tribes, different customs. Rules of conduct differ from place to place, as was noted by the ancient Greek historian Herodotus, who recounts an episode in which the King of Persia induced horror on the part of both the Greeks and the Callatians by asking them to adopt each other's funeral practices. What the Greeks took to be right and proper (e.g. burning their dead), the Callatians saw as absolutely abhorrent – Herodotus, implied that since fire burned just as well in Greece as in Persia, moral practices are relative to cultural contexts. By implication there is nothing right or wrong universally. This is what is known as the *dependency thesis* – what is right or wrong depends upon the nature of the society. No one can judge the morality of other cultures, as different cultures create different values, and we cannot be objective about another culture since we are all the product of our own culture.

However, for the absolutist these different forms of behaviour cause a major dilemma. Absolutism implies that forms of behaviour are universally right or wrong – an example of this is that when the nineteenth century British missionaries went to Africa and Asia they imposed their Western **absolutes** as being more right than local customs. Thus, for example, female converts to Christianity were made to cover their breasts – surely more a sign of Victorian prudery (and the cold British climate) than any universal moral code.

Historically we can also find support for the relativist position – forms of behaviour that were condemned in the past are now considered acceptable and vice versa. We no longer allow acts of cruelty for public entertainment as in the Roman games; homosexuals can enter into civil partnerships; unmarried mothers are no longer put in mental institutions; slavery is no longer legal and so on. The attitudes of society have changed on many issues.

Morality then does not exist in a vacuum, and what is considered right or wrong must be considered in context, and morality is seen as just a set of common rules and customs that over time have become socially approved and differ from culture to culture. If all morality is rooted in culture, there can be no universal moral principles valid for everyone at all times.

Plato (428–347 BCE)



Bust of Plato (c.428–347 BCE)
(stone) (b/w photo) by Greek

Vatican Museums and Galleries,
Vatican City, Italy/Alinari/The
Bridgeman Art Library

Plato is one of the most famous philosophers in history. His writings influenced the development of philosophy throughout the Western world and a large number of his books survive. Plato was taught by the first great Western philosopher Socrates. Most of the books he wrote have Socrates as the leading character in them. His early books are about Socrates' philosophy but the later ones present arguments from Plato's own thinking.

Plato wrote about many issues ranging from the existence of the soul and the nature of beauty, to who should run a government. Plato founded his own school of philosophy, like a university, called the *Academia*, from which we get the word 'Academy' in English. He died in 347 BCE aged 81.

Aristotle
(384–322 BCE)



Aristotle (engraving) (b/w photo) by French School

Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, France/Giraudon/The Bridgeman Art Library Nationality/copyright status: French/out of copyright

Aristotle was born in Macedonia. At the age of 17 he moved to Athens where he joined Plato's academy. In 347 BCE he moved to Turkey due to the growing political tensions between Macedonia and Athens. He spent his time there investigating science and particularly biology. In 341 BCE he moved with his family back to Macedonia to become the tutor of King Philip II of Macedonia's son Alexander (who would later become Alexander the Great). After Alexander became king, Aristotle returned to Athens and founded a school called the Lyceum. He remained in

Cultural relativism

Different societies have different moral codes

No objective standard can judge one culture better than another

Our own moral code is just one among many

There are no universal truths

Moral codes are just right for the society to which they apply

We cannot judge the conduct of other societies – we need to be tolerant

Thought Point

- 1 Jesus is quoted as saying: 'The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath' (Mark 2: 27b–28).

Does this mean that all rules are relative in human relationships? Or are there some rules that cannot be broken?

- 2 Winston Churchill's physician, Lord Moran, once remarked of the French President General de Gaulle: 'He's so stuffed with principles that he has no room for Christian Charity.' How relevant is this comment to the discussion on moral relativism?
- 3 There are many areas of human behaviour about which attitudes have changed.
 - Add to this list: hire purchase; cockfighting; the role of women in society.

- Are the changes all for the better?
- What accepted practices today do you think people will look back at in horror in the future? (e.g. pollution and gas-guzzling cars; the breeding and slaughter of animals for food; the use of nuclear power for energy)

THE REASONS FOR RELATIVISM

- The decline of religious authority.
- A greater understanding of other cultures.
- The unacceptable effects of interfering with other cultures.
- The influence of meta-ethical analysis – asking what the terms ‘ought’, ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ mean. If there is no agreement about what the words mean then this implies conceptual relativism – what an intuitionist thinks is good is different from what an emotivist thinks.
- The development of competing theories – utilitarian, intuitionist, egoist, emotivist.

THE WEAKNESSES OF RELATIVISM

- It implies that there can be no real evaluation or criticism of practices such as the burning of witches, human sacrifice, slavery, the Holocaust or the torture of the innocent.
- Relativism does not allow societies to progress (e.g. the realisation that slavery was unacceptable was slow to develop – but no one would doubt that we have made progress).
- Relativism seems to give little reason for behaving morally except to be socially acceptable.
- Although relativism is not subjectivism, it is only a step away and may come to this problematic position.
- Some statements are true absolutely (e.g. ‘It is wrong to torture innocent people’, ‘It is right for parents to be responsible for their children’). Just because cultures vary, it does not mean that there is no objective ‘good’.
- Ethical beliefs can change when challenged – primitive practices do stop.

Athens teaching until 323, when Alexander the Great died. After Alexander's death it became difficult for Aristotle to stay in Athens, as he was a Macedonian. Worried that he would die like Socrates, Aristotle and his family moved to Chalcis, where he died a year later.

Aristotle was a remarkable person. He tutored students on most traditional subjects that are taught at universities today. He was fascinated with understanding the physical world around him and the universe. His biology books were not superseded by anything better until 2,000 years later. Aristotle also wrote about other areas of study, including drama, rhetoric (public speaking), meteorology, sport and physics.

Absolute

A principle that is universally binding.

Moral objectivism

Truth is objectively real regardless of culture.

Consequentialism

The rightness or wrongness of an act is determined by its consequences.

NORMATIVE RELATIVISM

Normative ethics is where actions are assessed according to ethical theories – it is about what is actually right or good and not simply about cultural diversity and cultural dependency. A relativist will normally hold at least one absolute principle: that it is wrong to impose absolute moral rules.

Both Utilitarianism and Situation ethics are examples of normative theories, but they are different in the way they understand this. Utilitarians recognise ‘happiness’, ‘pleasure’ or ‘well-being’ as the result of good actions, but accept that this may differ from culture to culture. Situationists, like Fletcher, reject the use of words like ‘never’, ‘always’ and ‘absolute’ and adopt a pragmatic approach to decision-making. The only exception is that love should be seen as the absolute. ‘Love relativises the absolute.’

Normative relativists reject the principle of objectivity or absolutism and see morality as something which evolves and changes.

Utilitarianism is looked at in more detail in another chapter, so this chapter will focus on Situation ethics.

SITUATION ETHICS

Joseph Fletcher (1905–1991)

Fletcher was an American professor who founded the theory of Situation ethics in the 1960s. He was a pioneer in bioethics and was involved in the areas of abortion, infanticide, euthanasia, eugenics, and cloning.

Fletcher was an Episcopalian priest, but later renounced his belief in God and became an atheist.

Joseph Fletcher developed Situation ethics in the 1960s in reaction to Christian legalism and antinomianism (which is the belief that there are no fixed moral principles, but that morality is the result of individual spontaneous acts).

Fletcher argues that each individual situation is different and absolute rules are too demanding and restrictive. The Bible shows what good moral decisions look like in particular situations, but it is not possible to know what God’s will is in every situation. Fletcher says: ‘I simply do not know and cannot know what God is doing.’ As it is not possible to know God’s will in every situation, *love* or *agape* is Situation ethics’ only moral ‘rule’.

So it is not just the situation that guides what you should do, but the principle of *agape* and the guiding maxims of the Christian community: ‘Do not commit murder’, ‘Do not commit adultery’, ‘Do not steal’, ‘Do not lie’. Situation ethics is midway between legalism and antinomianism, and Fletcher’s book, which was published in 1966, reflected the mood of the times – Christians should make the right choices without just following rules and by thinking for themselves.

Christians should base their decisions on one single rule – the rule of *agape*. This love is not merely an emotion but involves doing what is best for the other person, unconditionally. This means that other guiding maxims could be ignored in certain situations if they do not serve *agape*; for example, Fletcher says it would be right for a mother with a 13-year-old daughter who

is having sex to break the rules about under-age sex and insist her daughter uses contraception – the right choice is the most loving thing and it will depend on the situation. However, the situation can never change the rule of agape which is always good and right regardless of the circumstances.

According to Fletcher's **Situation Ethics**, this ethical theory depends on four working principles and six fundamental principles.

The four working principles

- 1 *Pragmatism* – what you propose must work in practice.
- 2 *Relativism* – words like 'always', 'never', 'absolute' are rejected. There are no fixed rules, but all decisions must be relative to agape.
- 3 *Positivism* – a value judgement needs to be made, giving the first place to love.
- 4 *Personalism* – people are put in first place, morality is personal and not centred on laws.

The six fundamental principles

- 1 Love (agape) is the only absolute. It is the only thing which is intrinsically 'good' and 'right', regardless of the situation.
- 2 This love is self-giving love, which seeks the best interests of others but allows people the freedom and responsibility to choose the right thing for themselves.
- 3 Justice will follow from love, because 'justice is love distributed'. If love is put into practice, it can only result in justice. Justice is concerned with giving everyone their due – its concern is with neighbours, not just our neighbour.
- 4 Love has no favourites and does not give those whom we like preferential treatment – it is good will which reaches out to strangers, acquaintances, friends and even enemies.
- 5 Love must be the final end, not a means to an end – people must choose what to do because the action will result in love, not be loving in order to achieve some other result.
- 6 The loving thing to do will depend on the situation – and as situations differ, an action that might be right in one situation could be wrong in another. This is quite different from traditional Christian ethics and is far more relativistic, having just one moral rule – agape.

Strengths of Situation ethics

- Situation ethics is easy to understand and can be constantly updated for new problems and issues as they arise, such as genetic engineering and foetal research.
- It is flexible and can take different situations into account, but it is based on the Christian concept of love.
- It focuses on humans and concern for others – agape.
- Situation ethics allows people to take responsibility for their own decisions and make up their own minds about what is right or wrong. Bishop John Robinson called it ‘an ethic for humanity come of age’.

Weaknesses of Situation ethics

- This method of decision-making was condemned in 1952 by Pope Pius XII, who said it was wrong to make decisions based on individual circumstances if these went against the teaching of the Church and the Bible.
- It is not possible to determine the consequences of actions – how do we know that the result will be the most loving for all concerned?

Situation ethics has just one moral rule – agape or unconditional love – and it is relative in that it accepts that different decisions will be right or wrong according to the circumstance.

Thought Point

These examples are taken from William Barclay's *Ethics in a Permissive Society* (1971). Barclay wants you to agree with the actions; can you see other ways of acting?

- 1 Suppose in a burning house there is your aged father, an old man, with the days of his usefulness at an end, and a doctor who has discovered a cure for one of the world's great killer diseases and who still carries the formulae in his head, and you can save only one – whom do you save? Your father who is dear to you, or the doctor in whose hands there are thousands of lives? Which is love?
- 2 On the Wilderness trail, Daniel Boone's trail, westward through Cumberland Gap to Kentucky, many families in the trail caravans lost their

lives to the Indians. A Scottish woman had a baby at the breast. The baby was ill and crying, and the baby's crying was betraying her other three children and the rest of the party; the party clearly could not remain hidden if the baby continued crying; their position would be given away. Well, the mother clung to the baby; the baby's cries led the Indians to the position, the party was discovered, and all were massacred. There was another such occasion. On this occasion there was a Negro woman in the party. Her baby too was crying and threatening to betray the party. She strangled the baby with her own two hands to stop its crying – and the whole party escaped. Which action is love?

- 3 What about the commandment that you must not kill? When T.H. Lawrence was leading his Arabs, two of his men had a quarrel and in the quarrel Hamed killed Salem. Lawrence knew that a blood feud would arise in which both families would be involved, and that one whole family would be out to murder the other whole family. What did Lawrence do? He thought it out and then with his own hands he killed Hamed and thus stopped the blood feud. Was this right? Was this action that stopped a blood feud and prevented scores of people from being murdered an act of murder or of love?
- 4 Ethically, has humanity come of age, as Bishop John Robinson suggested in 1966?
- 5 To what extent is love compatible with human nature?
- 6 Why might critics of Situation ethics argue that it is really Utilitarianism under a different name?
- 7 Explain why some critics have questioned whether Situation ethics is really Christian.

WHAT IS ETHICAL ABSOLUTISM?

An ethical absolute is a command that is true for all time, in all places and in all situations. Certain things are right or wrong from an *objective* point of view and cannot change according to culture. Certain actions are *intrinsically* right or wrong, which means they are right or wrong in themselves.

According to moral absolutism, there are eternal moral values applicable everywhere. This is a popular position for those who believe in a God who establishes moral order in the universe. This approach is deontological. The consequences of an action are not taken into consideration.

This ethical system is easy and simple to apply – a crime is a crime, regardless of circumstances. If we take murder as an example – is it all right to kill someone for no reason? Both the ethical relativist and the ethical

absolutist would say no. Now if we assume the murderer is a doctor who could kill one patient to save another – again both the ethical relativist and the ethical absolutist would still say no. However, if we consider killing one person to save many lives, the ethical relativist will feel it is all right to kill, but for the ethical absolutist it is still wrong.

Absolute ethics allows judgements to be made about the actions of others – we can say the Holocaust was absolutely wrong. Absolute ethics allows courts of law to exist and order to be maintained.

Where do these absolute laws come from? For a theist the answer is simple – they come from God. For the agnostic or atheist the answer is more complicated – they just seem a priori in nature. They fit into Plato's world of the Forms, as there are some things we just seem to know are wrong without being taught: do you remember your parents ever telling you not to sleep with your sister? So to some extent moral absolutes can be seen as inherent in the nature of man.

Moral absolutism

There is only one correct answer to every moral problem.

MORAL ABSOLUTISM AND RELIGION

Many religions have moral absolutist positions as they see laws as having been set by the deity or deities. Such a position is seen as unchanging and perfect; for example, the Ten Commandments.

For one person, therefore, non-violence may be considered wrong, even in self-defence; for another homosexuality is considered fundamentally wrong, even when the couple are in a monogamous relationship. Many who make such claims even ignore evolving norms within their own communities, such as the rows about homosexual priests within the Anglican Church. In the past slavery was supported by religious believers, whereas today no religious group would endorse it.

Today many Christians believe there is a hierarchy of absolutes – a view called 'graded absolutism'. If there is a conflict between two absolutes, it is our duty to obey the higher one: duty to God comes first, then duty to others, followed by duty to property. Under this view, Corrie ten Boom (1892–1983) was morally right to lie to the Nazis about the Jews her family was hiding, because protecting lives is a higher moral value than telling the truth to murderers.

NORMATIVE ABSOLUTISM

The two absolutist theories that are dealt with elsewhere in this book are Natural Law, which is a religious theory, and Kantian ethics, which is based on reason.