

## Chapter 4 – Absolutism versus Relativism

### General Overview

The objective of this chapter is to acquaint students with the concepts and questions that pertain to one of the most perplexing metaethical issues: is morality absolute or relative? This is potentially a confusing topic for students and the either/or form of the question could be one of the problems here. Thiroux's text does help in breaking out of this. This chapter also presents an opportunity for instructors to get students to think about the important relationship between facts and values. Are any facts devoid of value? Students will often appeal to the way things are to justify how they should be, especially in the later chapters on sexuality, nature, animals, environment, etc., so a preparatory discussion of it now might be useful.

Those instructors new to the text will note that the author begins to develop his own moral framework (developed more fully in Chapter 7) and instructors face a choice about whether they will run along with it or sit back and question the text. With so much that is unsettled here the choice is between giving students something they can hold onto - recognizing that these principles are in principle always open to question – or letting students swim (or sink) for themselves.

### Class Suggestions

This topic may present quite a challenge to instructors since many students will already believe a version of relativism –sometimes picked up from other classes in sociology and anthropology. Students from religious backgrounds will sometimes espouse an equally inflexible commitment to absolutes. The challenge then is to get those on the extreme ends thinking hard about and questioning their own and each others' positions just as much as getting those somewhere in the 'soft middle' to not think that they have all the right answers, especially when the answer here is all too often a preformed liberalism which says that 'so long as it doesn't harm anybody, then it's okay' which conceals a multitude of problems. With this topic very contemporary examples can be used that students perhaps wouldn't ordinarily think about in any concerted way. For example, you might ask is there such a thing as 'American values'? Are they true only in American culture? How do these values differ from values and practices found in other parts of the world? You could develop these questions into a discussion of September 11<sup>th</sup>, the recent war in Iraq, treatment of women in various parts of the world (e.g., female circumcision in parts of Africa, 'widow burning' in India, etc.) and so on.

## **Chapter 4 – Absolutism versus Relativism**

**Key Concepts:** Absolutism, Relativism, Culture, History, Anthropology, Truth, Propositions, States of Affairs, Analytic, Internal, External, Emotivism, Reason, Moral Propositions, Is, Ought, Naturalistic Fallacy, Normative, Prescriptive, Justification, Near Absolutes

**Key Questions:** 1. What are the problems associated with absolute conceptions of morality? Do the ‘facts’ suggest that these problems could be overcome? 2. Are you a relativist? Explain why or why not, making sure that you look at arguments for and against. 3. What is the Emotive theory? Explain the advantages and disadvantages of holding such a view. 4. Analyze Moore’s naturalistic fallacy. Is Moore right? 5. Is morality absolute or relative? Give examples and justify your view.

### **Chapter Summary**

#### **Is morality absolute or relative?**

##### **The meanings of absolute**

Absolute means variously perfect, complete, certain. However difficult to prove an absolute supernatural being exists or the presence of absolutes (laws) in nature, let alone ‘natural moral laws.’

##### **The meaning of relation**

Relativism: Values are relative to time, place, person, situation, etc.; no values are absolute or independent of cultures and peoples.

##### **Cultural relativism and cultural absolutism**

###### *Cultural relativism*

1. Studies by anthropologists reveal wide variation in customs, more, practices, etc.
2. Moral beliefs derive from culture.
3. Different cultures believe that their morality is the one true morality.

###### *Cultural absolutism*

1. Similar moral principles exist in all societies, e.g., prohibition on murder, truth telling, etc.
2. All peoples have similar needs.
3. Similarities in situations and relationships across cultures, e.g., families, brothers and sisters
4. Similarities in sentiment, jealousy, emotion, love, need for respect, etc.

##### *Evaluation of these theories*

###### *Moral relativism*

Because cultures disagree does not mean that a particular belief cannot be right or wrong.

###### *Moral absolutism*

Similarities in societies does not suggest the existence of absolutes. Because people and situations exist or behave in certain ways tells us little about what should or ought to be the case.

It appears that if absolutism is true then relativism is false and vice versa. If absolutism is true how do we resolve the issue of conflict between them?

##### **Propositions and truth**

###### *Propositions and states of affairs*

Propositions are true or false statements regarding states of affairs. States of affairs are occurrences, events or happenings that either occurs or not. They cannot be true or false.

*Are there any absolute truths?*

Truth is not dependent or contingent upon our ability to know at a given time. Truth is based on whether state of affairs occur.

### *Types of propositions*

#### *Analytic propositions*

Logical truths – law of non-contradiction, excluded middle, identity, etc. True by definition of terms.

#### *Internal sense propositions*

Propositions that assert something of our internal state. True by experience.

#### *Empirical propositions*

State of affairs that occur in the external world. True by evidence of the senses.

#### *Moral propositions*

Propositions that have moral import, e.g., abortion is evil. Generally, but not always, these propositions contain words like should, ought, right, good, etc.

### **Emotive Theory**

If some propositions are absolutely true by virtue of logic or experience, are moral propositions ever absolute?

Some claim that morals are non-cognitive or ‘emotional’ having no basis in fact.

#### *Problems with the emotive theory*

John Hospers has pointed out discrepancies. Moral propositions can have:

1. purpose or intention
2. effects on hearers
3. actual meaning

If a moral proposition can have these attributes then not all moral propositions are solely emotive. Emotivist theory exaggerates its claims.

#### *Moore’s naturalistic fallacy*

If we say moral propositions are not any different from empirical propositions we are committing the ‘naturalistic fallacy. trying to set an ‘ought’ from an ‘is’. However, some moral propositions can be clearly and logically inferred from empirical propositions (example of AIDS).

#### *Moral proposition as types of empirical proposition*

Perhaps moral propositions are empirical propositions with value judgments

#### *Normative moral statements*

Some possibility that ‘he is a good man’ could be thought similar to ‘that is a green table’?

#### *Prescriptive moral statements*

Can prescriptive moral claims be thought true or false? Some prescriptive non-moral statements (chess example) appear to assert something about reality, i.e., are true or false.

#### *Propositions against killing human beings*

Could we make some case for moral propositions? Perhaps proposition against killing human beings is ‘best case scenario.’

#### *Problems with moral propositions*

Tension between true propositions and human action and between propositions that conflict. But perhaps all moral theories require some absolute.

*Near absolutes*

Perhaps the best to aim for are near absolutes making sure we justify all the exceptions.

**Conclusion**

*Relativism*

Are people relativists in real situations? Most will qualify this statement. What does the need to supply or add rules to relativism tell us? Our practical lives seem to conflict with our relativist theories.

*Absolutism*

There are absolutes in the sense of absolutely true propositions. From some of these we may derive 'near absolutes' that are moral principles 'don't kill another human being' that provide basic foundations. Each exception must be carefully justified.