Tutorial U04: Absolutism vs Contextualism
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U04.1 What is moral absolutism?

Moral absolutism is the view that some actions are morally required or morally prohibited regardless of the situation and the potential consequences.

For example, the famous philosopher Kant is a moral absolutist with regard to telling the truth. He seems to think that lying is always wrong, no matter the consequences. In the essay "On a Supposed Right to Lie", Kant says that we should not lie, even if there is a murderer at the door asking you whether the innocent victim is in your house. The moral absolutist might say that perhaps one should also call the police or to warn the victim, but the bottom line is that one should never lie.

Understandably, many people find Kant's position bizarre, and there are probably very few people who are moral absolutists with regard to lying. But moral absolutism with regard to other actions are not difficult to find. For example, many people would think that incest is wrong, even if the parties involved genuinely love each other. Others might also hold some form of moral absolutism with regard to abortion and homosexuality, believing (perhaps for religious reasons) that they are never justified.

Consider also the 1987 United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. The second paragraph of Article 2 says,

"No exceptional circumstances whatsoever, whether a state of war or a threat of war, internal political instability or any other public emergency, may be invoked as a justification of torture."

Notice that this rule explicitly says that torture is never justified. A moral absolutist with regard to torture will agree with this rule. The absolutist would say that even in a situation when a terrorist has planted a bomb that is about to explode and kill many innocent people, it is still not permissible to torture the terrorist in order to extract information as to where the bomb is.

U04.2 What is moral contextualism?

The opposite of moral absolutism is moral contextualism. This is the view that the very same action can be right in one situation (context), but wrong in a different situation.

Obviously, moral contextualism with regard to an action X is inconsistent with moral absolutism with regard to X. Unlike Kant, most of us would probably think that when a murderer wants to find out where a person is in order to kill him, we should lie if it would save that person's life. But we might also think it is wrong for government officials to lie to its citizens, e.g. about corruption. This would be to reject moral absolutism with regard to lying.
Sometimes people say that morality is not black and white, and it is possible that moral contextualism is what some of them might have in mind. For certain actions described generally, it might be impossible to say whether they are right or wrong, and that it all depends on the details of the particular situation.

Notice that both moral absolutism and contextualism agree that morality is objective. They both agree that there are cases where certain actions are objectively right or objectively wrong. Moral relativism would deny this.

U04.3 Exercises

The author Shickle wrote in a paper "On a supposed right to lie [to the public] from benevolent motives: communicating health risks to the public." the following passage:

There are three main categories of rationale for withholding information or telling lies: if overwhelming harm can only be averted through deceit; complete triviality such that it is irrelevant whether the truth is told; a duty to protect the interests of others.

Come up with your own examples for illustrating these three types of situations.