

ABSOLUTISM

(Ethical Absolutism)

“ONE TRUTH”

There is a universal truth that applies across people and situations. There is an absolute standard against which right and wrong can always be judged. There is one correct perspective (or “focus”) about what is right and it should be applied consistently.

QUESTIONS?

AN ABSOLUTIST MAY ASK:

What is the definitive truth?

How can I apply this universal truth?

How can we help others to see the right way of doing things?

SAYINGS

ASSOCIATED WITH THIS PERSPECTIVE:

“The truth is out there”

“The definitive truth”

“Only one right way”

“One path to the truth”

PROS +

CAN CRITIQUE OTHERS. Being open-minded is often important, but some things seem to be clearly right or wrong regardless of preference, culture or context. To resolve differences there are things that many feel we should not be open to or tolerate. Consistent measures of right or wrong allow us to have concrete ways to critique others and resolve differences.

Nazi Germany, Apartheid in S. Africa, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), etc.

CAN CRITIQUE OURSELVES. With a universal standard of right and wrong we are able to critique ourselves and our own culture. There are things we have gotten wrong, things many believe we should not be open to or tolerate and need to resolve.

Slavery, denying women's rights, food waste, etc.

MORAL PROGRESS. If there is at least one universal standard of what is right, then moral progress is possible. This gives us a concrete way to make consistent comparisons from the past to the present and the future.

Women now have the right to vote in many places, Indian Independence (e.g. Gandhi), US Civil Rights movement (e.g. MLK Jr.)

CONS -

RIGIDITY. It can be dangerous to believe in one universally accepted perspective, standard or approach that is better than all others in all situations, cultures and contexts. There seem to be times when a few valuable approaches each have a piece of the truth. If we only follow one standard of what is right, that standard may not always be correct.

"Never lie" sounds like a good universal standard, but imagine that you have a friend who is hiding from an aggressive drunk person who is trying to assault them. You know where your friend is hiding, but the drunk person does not know that. The drunk person is going in the direction of your friend's hiding place and asks you where your friend is hiding. It seems reasonable to lie to stop them from finding your friend.

CLOSED-MINDEDNESS. What we believe may not be the truth. Our reasoning can be missing something important. Considering other opinions and questioning our standards can be helpful. We can become open to different ways of viewing the world and get beyond imposing one narrow way of reasoning. Absolutism may stop us from considering multiple reasonable approaches and balancing out their pros and cons.

In some cultures loyalty to family and community are very highly valued. In other cultures individual freedom is very highly valued. Should you move away from your family and community to pursue your career? Reasonable people disagree about what is right.

CONCLUSION

Absolutism highlights a valuable lesson: there are some things that are clearly and consistently right or wrong (e.g. child abuse). However, it seems that more than just one perspective (or "focus") has at least part of the truth. Different perspectives can be held in an absolutist way (e.g. "X is the only worthwhile focus"), therefore it is important to remember the pros and cons of absolutism as they apply to different focus areas. WeTake5.com suggests considering a few well-respected focus areas when deciding what is right (see Pluralism and the 5Cs: **Character**, **Code**, **Consequences**, **Care** and **Consult**).

Helpful References: Hinman, Lawrence P. (2012) *Ethics: A Pluralistic Approach to Moral Theory (5th Edition)*; Kidder, Rushworth M. (2009) *How Good People Make Tough Choices: Resolving the Ethical Dilemmas of Living (Revised Edition)*. Harper Perennial; Rachels, James and Stuart. (2006) *The Elements of Moral Philosophy (5th & 7th editions)*. McGraw-Hill