The term “moral absolute” refers to many different ideas. In contemporary moral philosophy, it most commonly refers to the idea of a moral prohibition or rule that holds without exception. Less commonly, it refers to the idea of a moral rule or standard that applies to all moral agents, rather than only to members of a particular society or culture or only to particular individuals (e.g., those who accept it). The present topic is moral absolutes in the first of these two senses (hereinafter, “moral absolutes”). Notable philosophers who have maintained that there are such absolutes include Immanuel Kant and Elizabeth Anscombe (see KANT, IMMANUEL; ANSCOMBE, G. E. M.). And the debate over the existence of moral absolutes has implications not only for general moral theory, but also for many topics in applied ethics and just war theory. For example, the question of whether the prohibition on deliberately killing the innocent is absolute has important implications for abortion, euthanasia, and noncombatant immunity (see ABORTION; EUTHANASIA; CIVILIAN IMMUNITY).

The view that there are moral absolutes (hereinafter, “absolutism”) most often takes the form of the view that certain actions are morally impermissible simply in virtue of being members of certain identifiable kinds of action, such as lies, acts of adultery, and deliberate killings of the innocent (Kant 1797; Anscombe 1958: 10; Geach 1969: 124–5; Nagel 1979). Absolutists have held that such acts are categorically prohibited by divine law (Anscombe 1958: 10; Geach 1969: 124–5), that they “are such bad things to do that they must never be done to secure any good or avoid any evil” (Geach 1969: 120), and that they are ruled out by an abstract moral principle that requires respect for persons (Kant 1797; Nagel 1979).

Absolutism may also take the form of the view that there are absolute moral rights. For example, Alan Gewirth has argued that “all innocent persons have an absolute right not to be made the intended victims of a homicidal project” (1981: 16). A moral right is absolute (in the relevant sense) “when it cannot be overridden in any circumstances, so that it can never be justifiably infringed and it must be fulfilled without any exception” (Gewirth 1981: 2). Here, too, such alleged moral absolutes have been associated with “unspeakable evils” and an abstract moral principle that requires respect for persons (Gewirth 1981: 7, 9, 16). They might also be seen as of divine origin.
Absolutism in this sense is opposed, not to moral relativism or subjectivism (see RELATIVISM, MORAL; SUBJECTIVISM, ETHICAL), but rather to the view that “every [moral] rule has its exceptions” (Rachels 1970: 338). In its most extreme form, absolutism would be the view that every moral rule holds without exception or that every moral right is absolute. However, absolutists tend to be absolutists only about prohibitions or rights to forbearances (negative rights). And more moderate forms of absolutism hold only that there are some moral absolutes. Gewirth’s view is an example of moderate absolutism: he maintains, not that all moral rights are absolute, but only that some are (1981: 3). In contrast, Peter Geach appears to accept an extreme form of absolutism according to which all moral prohibitions are absolute (1969: 124). (It should be noted that this way of characterizing absolutism requires distinguishing moral rules from moral principles. Otherwise, some paradigmatically non-absolutist moral theories, such as act utilitarianism, would have to be classified as absolutist ones (see UTILITARIANISM).)

Absolutists need not—and typically do not—deny that circumstances and consequences can be and sometimes are morally relevant (see, e.g., Anscombe 1958: 40–2; Nagel 1979: 58; Gewirth 1981: 10, 14–5). Moreover, they may allow that some actions are impermissible because their actual or expected consequences are unacceptable. And moderate absolutists may allow that the justification for some moral rules is broadly consequentialist. Thus, absolutism is not the view that circumstances or consequences do not matter.

Absolutism should be distinguished from the view that there are certain identifiable kinds of action that would only be permissible in circumstances that are so unlikely to occur that we should treat the prohibitions against them as if they were moral absolutes (Bennett 1966: 88–91). Take, for example, the view that, although torture would be morally permissible in the circumstances of an appropriately described “ticking time bomb scenario,” we should treat the prohibition against torture as if it were a moral absolute because those circumstances either could never obtain or are so unlikely to ever obtain that one could never be justified in believing that they did. One could call this view absolutism if one likes. But it is a far cry both from the view that there are certain identifiable kinds of action that would be impermissible in any circumstances whatsoever and from the view that there are some rights that cannot be overridden in any circumstances whatsoever. For it allows that torture would be morally permissible, and that the right not to be tortured would be overridden, in certain circumstances.

Absolutism should also be distinguished from deontology. For although it is often contrasted with utilitarianism and other forms of consequentialism, many deontologists also reject absolutism (see CONSEQUENTIALISM;
DEONTOLOGY). One notable deontologist who rejects moral absolutes is W. D. Ross (see ROSS, W. D.). Ross argues not only that there is a plurality of fundamental moral principles, but also that “no act is ever, in virtue of falling under some general description, necessarily actually right” (1930: 33). Moreover, what non-absolutists typically maintain is not that no actions are wrong or evil in themselves, but rather that any action, no matter how objectionable in itself, would be morally permissible if it were necessary to prevent a sufficiently great evil (Rachels 1970). Opinions will differ as to how great or certain an evil would need to be in order to justify, say, torture or genocide. But any non-absolutist would agree that any action would be morally permissible if it were necessary to prevent what Robert Nozick once dubbed “catastrophic moral horror” (1974: 30 n.).

In considering the non-absolutist’s position, we must be careful with our terms and concepts. Consider the term “murder.” It is sometimes used to mean something like “morally impermissible killing.” And when it is used in that sense, the proposition that murder is never morally permissible becomes true by definition. But by “murder,” absolutists typically mean something like “the deliberate killing of the innocent” (Anscombe 1961). And when used in that sense, the proposition that murder is never morally permissible is a substantive and controversial claim, especially when it is taken to encompass (e.g.) abortion or voluntary euthanasia.

We must also be careful not to limit our focus to typical cases or to cases in which it would be generally conceded that the conduct in question is gravely wrong. Consider genocide. One might wonder how genocide could ever be morally permissible. But suppose that what is meant by “genocide” is simply “the deliberate killing of a large group of people, esp. those of a particular ethnic group or nation” (Oxford American Dictionary). And suppose that the motives and ends of those considering genocide so-defined are noble, rather than base. In that case, one answer to the question of how genocide could ever be morally permissible is that we can imagine a “nightmare scenario” in which “catastrophic moral horror” can be prevented only by committing genocide defined in just this way. Moreover, it might be argued that the British faced just such a scenario in the early years of World War II—that a Nazi victory would have constituted catastrophic moral horror and that the only available means of preventing such a victory—city bombing—involved deliberately killing large groups of German civilians (see below).

Some arguments for absolutism appeal to the consequences of doing bad actions for the agents who do them. For example, Gewirth appears to argue that a mother’s right not to be tortured to death by her son is absolute because “in performing or even contemplating the performance of such an action the son
would lose all self-respect and would regard his life as no longer worth living” (1981: 8). One objection to such arguments is that no reason has been given for thinking that an agent’s own self-respect, virtue, or integrity carries so much weight that one could never be morally required to sacrifice it (Geach 1969: 123; Nagel 1979: 63). A second objection is that such arguments are confused, because one can sacrifice one’s own self-respect, virtue, or integrity only by doing something that is antecedently wrong (Nagel 1979: 63).

Arguably more promising attempts to justify moral absolutes appeal to an abstract moral principle that requires respect for persons. However, even if this abstract moral principle is accepted, it is not clear whether the most plausible interpretations of it—and of what it requires—would support even moderate absolutism. Certainly, some interpretations of this principle would, if accepted, support absolutism. Consider, for example, Kant’s second formulation of the Categorical Imperative: “So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means” (1785, 4:429). This is frequently interpreted as requiring respect for persons and, in particular, that we always treat persons as ends in themselves, and never as means only. And it has been interpreted as categorically prohibiting coercion and deception, because these involve treating persons in ways that they cannot possibly consent to being treated. But on this interpretation, the Categorical Imperative is deeply implausible. It would, for instance, prohibit lying to Nazis in order to save Jews. But now suppose that we interpret respect for persons (or treating persons as ends in themselves) as requiring only that we act on rules or in accordance with principles that rational persons would choose behind a veil of ignorance (see RAWLS, JOHN). In that case, it is not clear that the principle of respect for persons would support even moderate absolutism. For it is not clear that rational persons behind a veil of ignorance would choose to be bound by any moral absolutes. There are, to be sure, other interpretations of this principle. But it remains to be seen whether the most plausible of them would support moderate absolutism, much less extreme absolutism.

One objection that absolutists must answer is that absolutism is logically incoherent, because circumstances might arise in which obeying one moral absolute entails breaching another (Rachels 1970: 348). Suppose, for example, that Able could prevent the murder of Baker only by lying to his would-be murderer, Charlie. To make the case somewhat less schematic, imagine that Able is a Dutch fisherman who is trying to smuggle Baker, a Jewish refugee, out of Nazi-occupied Europe and to England, and that Charlie is the captain of Nazi patrol boat (Rachels 1970: 349). Such cases appear to present a forced choice between telling a lie and being complicit in a murder, thereby showing at least this much, that not all moral prohibitions can be absolute. While a moderate absolutist
might accept that one of the conflicting prohibitions is not absolute, this move is not available to the extreme absolutist. Some extreme absolutists (e.g., Geach 1969: 128) have suggested that God prevents such cases from arising, but that is wishful thinking: such cases do arise. Standard—and more promising—responses to this objection involve appealing to one or more distinctions that seem to be morally significant, such as the distinction between the intended and the merely foreseen consequences of voluntary action and the distinction between what we do and what we allow to happen (or do not prevent from happening). For example, it might be argued that, if Able does not lie to Charlie he would not thereby be complicit in Baker’s murder, either because Baker’s murder would be a foreseen but unintended consequence of his action or because he would only be allowing harm to be done to Baker by Charlie, rather than doing harm to Baker himself (see DOCTRINE OF DOUBLE EFFECT; DOING AND ALLOWING).

As the foregoing illustrates, absolutist positions presuppose the moral significance of certain distinctions, such as the action/consequence distinction, the intend/foresee distinction (Anscombe 1958), and the doing/allowing distinction (Geach 1969; Nagel 1979: 54, 59–61). As a result, one way to argue against absolutism is to argue that these distinctions lack the moral significance that absolutist positions require them to have (see, e.g., Bennett 1966; Rachels 1970). One might argue that a given distinction cannot be drawn in the way that a given absolutist position requires. Or one might argue that a given distinction is of no moral significance or—more narrowly—that it is not relevant to the permissibility of actions. But it would suffice to show that a given distinction does not have as much moral significance as an absolutist position requires. For non-absolutists need not—and many do not—deny that these distinctions are without moral significance. Conversely, absolutists must do more than defend the moral significance of these distinctions. For merely establishing that, say, the doing/allowing distinction or the intend/foresee distinction is of intrinsic moral significance would not suffice to show that there are any moral absolutes.

A more ecumenical strategy is to argue by counterexample, by describing cases in which it is clearly permissible to breach prohibitions or rules or to infringe rights that are alleged to be absolute. Indeed, the example given above is just such a case. For even if an absolutist can consistently maintain, as Kant (1797) does, that it would be wrong to lie to a would-be murderer even if that is the only thing that one could do to save his intended victim, this view is wildly implausible. It is this general strategy that non-absolutists use to argue that anything—even murder, torture, or genocide—would be morally permissible if it were necessary to prevent catastrophic moral horror.

Perhaps the most widely maintained absolutist position is that the rule against deliberately killing noncombatants in warfare is absolute. This prohibition may be
seen as an independent moral absolute. But it may also be seen as a special case of a more general moral absolute prohibiting the deliberate killing of the innocent (Anscombe 1961; Nagel 1979: 56–58, 70). Or it might be seen as following from an absolute right of all innocent persons not to be made the intended victim of a homicidal project (cf. Gewirth 1981: 15–6). Thus, the tenability of the claim that this prohibition is a moral absolute is of broader interest, as is the fact that this claim remains a controversial one, even among those who accept that this prohibition is exceedingly stringent.

One focal point of disagreement is the use of terror bombing by Britain and the United States during World War II. Both the British and (later) the Americans deliberately bombed German and Japanese cities in order to destroy enemy morale and, in the case of the atomic bombs dropped by the United States on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in order to persuade Japan to capitulate. The absolutist position is that there could have been no moral justification for these bombings, as the deliberate killing of noncombatants is strictly prohibited. Against this, it has been argued that some of these bombings were morally justified—namely those carried out by the British against German populations during “the terrible two years that followed the defeat of France,…when Hitler’s armies were everywhere triumphant” (Walzer 1977: 255). For example, Michael Walzer argues that the nature and imminence of the Nazi threat combined to constitute a “supreme emergency,” justifying the deliberate killing of noncombatants and the targeting of German cities—but only so long as the conditions constituting the supreme emergency lasted (1977: chap. 16).

This dispute is also instructive because the magnitude of what was at stake—particularly in Europe—brings the absolutist position into sharp relief. Anscombe contends that these bombings were not only unnecessary to the war effort but also motivated by “a villainous hatred” and in furtherance of the “visibly wicked” policy of seeking “unconditional surrender” (1961). But while an absolutist might consistently make such claims in rebuttal, Anscombe’s own position—the absolutist position—must regard such claims as of no relevance to the question at hand. (Nagel is admirably clear on this point (Nagel 1979: 58).) For if the rule against the deliberate killing of noncombatants is absolute, then it simply does not matter for what ends or with what motives Churchill or Truman ordered the bombings, or what would have happened had they not done so, or what other means were at their disposal. Nor does the nature of the threat faced by the Allies matter. All that matters is that noncombatants were the targets of these bombings.

Absolutists might contend that this is how it should be, that “something has gone seriously wrong when certain measures [such as city bombing] are admitted into consideration in the first place” (Nagel 1979: 58) or that “the strictness of the prohibition has as its point that you are not to be tempted by fear or hope of consequences”
Against this, non-absolutists might argue that this feature of the absolutist’s position is itself objectionable. For it is one thing to argue—as many non-absolutists do—that utilitarian and other consequentialist arguments are out of order when certain other factors, such as the rights of individuals, are in play. It is quite another to insist that “no argument about what will happen” is in order when certain prohibitions, rules, or rights are in play (Nagel 1979: 58), or to insist that it does not matter one way or the other whether “Nazism was an ultimate threat to everything decent in our lives, an ideology and a practice of domination so murderous, so degrading even to those who might survive, that the consequences of its final victory were literally beyond calculation, immeasurably awful” (Walzer 1977: 253). According to this objection, absolutism dismisses as irrelevant factors that are, in fact, morally relevant.

As the foregoing demonstrates, the defense of even a moderate absolutism faces considerable challenges. Nevertheless, the question of whether there are moral absolutes remains very much an open one.

SEE ALSO: ABORTION; ANSCOMBE, G. E. M.; CIVILIAN IMMUNITY; CONSEQUENTIALISM; DEONTOLOGY; DOCTRINE OF DOUBLE EFFECT; DOING AND ALLOWING; EUTHANASIA; KANT, IMMANUEL; RAWLS, JOHN; RELATIVISM, MORAL; ROSS, W. D.; SUBJECTIVISM, ETHICAL; UTILITARIANISM

References


**Suggested Readings**