

ABSOLUTE

Authored by
mohammad looti

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Philosophy, Mathematics, Physics, Ethics

1. Core Definition

The term **Absolute** denotes that which is complete, self-existent, unconditioned, and independent of any other factors, relationships, or limitations. Across various disciplines, it serves to describe a reality or quantity that holds true regardless of external context or measurement bias. In its most general usage, as derived from the Latin *absolutus* (meaning "set free" or "unbound"), it signifies freedom from restriction or qualification, embodying the characteristics of **unlimited reign** or authority, particularly in political theory where it describes monarchical power.

Philosophically, the Absolute is often capitalized, referring to the ultimate, unconditioned reality--the ground of all being that is entirely self-reliant and not dependent upon phenomenal experience or contingent existence. This metaphysical usage posits a unitary, perfect, and all-encompassing reality that precedes and underlies the diversity of the universe. This concept forms the foundation of various idealistic schools of thought, emphasizing the entirety or completeness of reality existing outside of human perception or interpretation.

Quantitatively, particularly in scientific and mathematical contexts, **absolute** refers to a measure taken without reference to a relative scale, sign, or external standard, denoting the inherent magnitude or raw count of a phenomenon. For instance, determining the **absolute number** of cells in a biological sample, such as the example provided--"The graph shows an incline depicting heightened growth in the absolute number of white blood cells"--focuses specifically on the total count, irrespective of its percentage share within the total blood volume or relative to prior measurements. This definition emphasizes objective, unvarnished quantification.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The history of the term **Absolute** traces back to classical philosophy, but its most robust modern articulation emerged during the Enlightenment and the subsequent rise of Idealism. The Latin root *absolvere* means "to loosen, release, or detach," suggesting something that has been fully completed and stands alone. Historically, this term first gained prominence in jurisprudence and political thought, where *absolutus* described a ruler or power whose authority was complete and unrestrained by law or custom, culminating in the doctrine of **absolute monarchy**.

It was in German Idealism, particularly in the works of Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, that the concept achieved its profound metaphysical significance. Kant's concept of the noumenon, while unknowable, touches upon the idea of an underlying reality that is absolute, distinct from the phenomenal world accessible through the senses. Hegel, however, developed the

concept most fully, identifying the Absolute with **Absolute Spirit** or **Absolute Mind**--the comprehensive, evolving reality that encompasses nature, history, and consciousness itself, reaching self-awareness through philosophical understanding.

Following Hegel, the concept permeated 19th and early 20th-century philosophy, influencing thinkers across various schools, including British Idealism (e.g., F.H. Bradley) and American Transcendentalism. Though the Hegelian notion of the Absolute has faced significant decline following the critiques launched by existentialism and analytic philosophy, its influence remains foundational to understanding metaphysics, epistemology, and the nature of consciousness in modern thought. The shift from metaphysical speculation to empirical measurement also solidified its scientific usage, where its meaning became strictly confined to quantifiable, non-relative standards.

3. Philosophical Applications: Absolutism and Absolute Values

In philosophy, the application of the term **Absolute** bifurcates into the metaphysical (the nature of ultimate reality) and the ethical (the nature of moral truths). Metaphysical absolutism, as noted, asserts that there is a single, ultimate reality that is fundamentally intelligible and unchanging. This reality is the source and ultimate explanation for all contingent existence, serving as the ultimate ground against which all relative truths are measured. This view contrasts sharply with philosophical pluralism or relativism, which denies the existence of a single, unified, or unconditional reality.

Ethically, the topic of **absolute values** is referred to as absolutism. Moral absolutism is the view that certain actions are inherently right or wrong, independent of the consequences, cultural context, or individual beliefs. This means that universal moral principles, such as the prohibition against murder or the imperative to tell the truth, are held to be eternally and universally binding. These absolute moral values are considered self-justifying and require no external validation, thus possessing the characteristic of being self-reliant.

Key examples of moral frameworks rooted in absolutism include Kant's deontological ethics, which grounds morality in the unconditional **Categorical Imperative**, and traditional religious ethics that derive moral law directly from a divine source. The persistence of the debate between moral absolutism and moral relativism remains one of the central conflicts in contemporary ethics, highlighting the difficulty in reconciling universal standards with the diversity of human experience and cultural norms.

4. Mathematical and Scientific Applications

The application of **Absolute** in mathematics and the physical sciences involves removing dependency on arbitrary reference points or signs, yielding an intrinsic quality or magnitude.

Mathematical Usage: Absolute Value

In mathematics, the absolute value (or modulus) of a real number is its numerical value without regard to its sign. Represented as $|x|$, the absolute value of x is the distance of x from zero on the number line. For example, the absolute value of -5 is 5 , and the absolute value of 5 is also 5 . This concept abstracts the property of magnitude from the property of direction or orientation, allowing mathematicians to focus purely on size, which is critical in calculating distance, tolerance, and error margins in algebra and calculus.

Physical Sciences: Absolute Standards

In physics, the term is crucial for establishing fundamental, non-relative standards. **Absolute zero** (0 K or -273.15°C) is the lowest possible temperature where a substance has minimal or zero thermal energy. It is absolute because it is defined by a fundamental law of thermodynamics (the Third Law) and is independent of the arbitrary scales used by humans (like Celsius or Fahrenheit). Similarly, in classical mechanics, Sir Isaac Newton theorized **Absolute Space** and **Absolute Time**, positing them as frameworks that exist independently of the observer and the objects within them, serving as the ultimate, unmoving reference for motion.

While Einstein's theory of Special Relativity significantly challenged Newtonian absolute space and time, demonstrating that measurements of distance and duration are relative to the observer's frame of reference, the spirit of seeking absolute physical constants persists. Concepts like the speed of light in a vacuum (c) remain crucial **absolute constants** of the universe, serving as the ultimate limit and a cornerstone of modern physics, defining a reality independent of motion or observation.

5. Linguistic and Rhetorical Usage

As an adjective, **Absolute** carries significant rhetorical weight, emphasizing totality, completeness, or certainty. When applied to descriptive language, it serves to designate **entirety**, meaning "nothing less than" or "complete and perfect." This usage is common in phrases such as "absolute truth," "absolute certainty," or "absolute silence," where the modifier strips the noun of any ambiguity or qualification.

In grammar, an **absolute phrase** is a construction that modifies an entire sentence but is not grammatically dependent on any single word within that sentence. It typically consists of a noun or pronoun followed by a participle, and it provides context, cause, or descriptive detail independent of the main clause's structure. For example, in the sentence, "The work finished, the laborers packed up," the phrase "The work finished" is an absolute phrase that stands grammatically apart yet provides necessary contextual information. This grammatical independence mirrors the philosophical meaning of self-reliance and unconditionality.

Rhetorically, the claim of absoluteness often implies infallibility or definitive closure, which can be used persuasively to shut down debate or establish supreme authority. Conversely, the overuse of "absolute" can be viewed as hyperbolic, leading critics to question whether any human claim can truly satisfy the demanding criteria of being utterly complete and independent. The effectiveness of the word depends entirely on the context and the speaker's ability to justify such an unqualified assertion.

6. Key Characteristics

The definition of the Absolute is characterized by several fundamental attributes that consistently appear across its philosophical and scientific definitions:

Independence (Self-Reliance): The Absolute requires nothing external for its existence or definition. It is a se (from itself), standing wholly alone and possessing inherent self-sufficiency. This is the core meaning captured by the source content's description: "not relying on any other factors."

Unconditionality: It is free from all relations, limitations, or qualifications. Unlike contingent realities, which depend on a set of conditions to exist, the Absolute is unconditioned and necessary.

Completeness (Entirety): The Absolute is whole and entire, containing everything necessary within itself and leaving nothing outside its scope. This aligns with the source's meaning of "designating entirety."

Immutability: In metaphysical contexts, the Absolute is often understood as unchanging, eternal, and perfect. If it were subject to change, it would necessarily depend on temporal factors, thereby losing its unconditioned status.

7. Significance and Impact Across Disciplines

The concept of the Absolute holds immense significance because it provides a foundational limit or ultimate reference point necessary for structure and meaning. In metaphysics, the attempt to define the Absolute drives inquiries into ontology--the study of being--by seeking the ultimate source of reality. Without a concept of the unconditioned, all reality risks descending into infinite regress or complete relativity, making knowledge impossible.

In ethics, the debate over absolute moral principles dictates the framework for justice and law. Systems that embrace moral absolutism provide strong, unambiguous foundations for universal human rights and duties, arguing that certain acts are universally wrong regardless of cultural consensus. This pursuit of objective ethical truth profoundly impacts international law and humanistic endeavors, providing a seemingly stable anchor in an ever-changing world.

Scientifically, the establishment of absolute standards (like absolute zero, absolute magnitude, or

fundamental physical constants) is essential for objective measurement and verification. By providing fixed, non-relative points, these concepts allow researchers across the globe to communicate results unambiguously and test hypotheses against a universal, shared reality. The use of the **absolute number** rather than a percentage, for instance, ensures that biological or statistical data reflects raw reality rather than a contextualized proportion, giving it immediate practical significance in fields ranging from hematology to census studies.

8. Debates and Criticisms

Despite its foundational status, the notion of the Absolute, particularly in its philosophical and ethical forms, is subject to robust criticism. The most significant challenge comes from relativism, which argues that all knowledge, moral values, and truths are inherently contingent upon human perspective, culture, or historical epoch. Relativists argue that the claim of absolute truth is often a disguised attempt to enforce specific cultural norms universally.

From an epistemological standpoint, critics question how human beings, constrained by limited perspectives and sensory data, could ever truly grasp or describe an unconditioned, **Absolute Reality**. The Hegelian and Idealist concept of the Absolute Spirit is often dismissed by empirical philosophers as an unnecessary and unverifiable metaphysical speculation that lacks empirical grounding. Furthermore, modern physics, particularly quantum mechanics, introduces fundamental uncertainties and observer dependencies that seem to fundamentally undermine the Newtonian search for an absolute, objective reality underlying all phenomena.

Ethically, critics of moral absolutism point out the practical difficulties and potential inhumanity of applying rigid, unconditional rules across vastly different complex situations. They argue that an inflexible adherence to absolute rules can lead to outcomes that are demonstrably worse than those produced by a flexible, consequentialist approach, demonstrating the limitations of a morality that ignores context and outcome. Thus, while the idea of the Absolute provides intellectual comfort and structure, its practical and theoretical validity remains a perennial subject of intense interdisciplinary debate.

Further Reading

[Absolute value \(Mathematics\)](#)

[Absolutism \(Ethics and Philosophy\)](#)

[Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and the Absolute Spirit](#)

[Relativism vs. Absolutism](#)