

# The Fatal Flaws of Moral Relativism

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## Introduction: The Reality of Moral Relativism – (The Problem of)

Have you ever heard someone say, “What’s morally right for you may not be morally right for me or... what’s morally wrong for you may not be morally wrong for me”? “If you think its right that’s okay, but I personally believe it’s wrong... or... what is wrong today may not be wrong tomorrow.”

Why do people express moral judgments as mere personal opinions? What is behind these statements? Two words: moral relativism. In a national survey by Barna Research by a 3-1 margin (64% vs. 22%) adults said truth is always relative to the person and their situation. The situation is even worse among teenagers: 83% said that moral truth depends on the circumstances and only 6% said moral truth is absolute. The “*moral majority*” is an oxymoron because the majority don’t subscribe to moral absolutes.

In *The Closing of the American Mind*, Professor Allan Bloom makes the observation that “There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes or says he believes, that truth is relative... The students, of course, cannot defend their opinion. It is something with which they have been indoctrinated” (p. 25). Now, that is a problem, a very serious problem!

The book goes on to say that by dogmatically asserting that there is no truth, people have become close-minded to the possibility of knowing the truth, if in fact it does exist. Behind much of the moral rhetoric in America today lies the fatal and foolish flaw of moral relativism. Nonetheless, it is still popular to espouse this view in many of our secularized cultural institutions. It is thought to be more tolerant, more open, and more intellectually respectable than the archaic absolutism of ages past.

## 1. The Concept of Moral Relativism – (The Definition of)

Because moral relativism has considerable implications for social ethics it is a matter of great importance. What we think about moral relativism matters, so it is important that we understand this concept. Moral relativism is the philosophical theory or belief that there are no absolute or objective standards for moral values which are used to determine right and wrong. A moral relativist believes that there is no un-changing basis for moral values, therefore all moral values are only opinions

and must have equal weight.

It typically comes in two forms: ethical subjectivism and cultural relativism. Ethical subjectivism holds that morality is relative to individuals. Cultural relativism holds that morality is relative to cultures. Both deny the existence of moral absolutes or objective moral truths that apply to all people in all times. According to these two views, moral truths are determined either by personal opinion or group consensus. A logical outgrowth of the philosophy of moral relativism is the belief and practice of situational ethics.

## **2. The Claims of Moral Relativism – (The Arguments for)**

According to the proponents of this view, moral relativism is essential to a democracy because it honors free speech and religious freedom. A belief in absolute truth stifles the free exchange of ideas. Dogmatists and moralists are not welcomed in a pluralistic public square of the “*politically correct*” secular culture.

Moral and religious diversity within and between societies is said to be evidence for moral relativism. With so many opinions, how could we ever say who is right and wrong? Everything must be relative. Must every answer on a multiple choice test be correct just because there is a diversity of answers? A diversity of opinions may simply indicate that some individuals and/or groups may be morally wrong.

If we focus only on the differences and disagreements, our perception becomes distorted or skewed. In the appendix of *The Abolition of Man*, C.S. Lewis listed common moral principles spanning thousands of years from diverse religions and civilizations. The Apostle Paul tells us in Romans 1-2, God has endowed with a conscience all those created in His own image, however much we efface or neglect it.

An additional argument for moral relativism is that it promotes tolerance, and tolerance is a good thing. The very concept of tolerance presupposes an objective standard of right and wrong. Tolerance is only a virtue if we think that the other person we are supposed to tolerate is mistaken. Real tolerance presupposes that something is right and something is wrong, which implicitly denies moral relativism. If two actions are morally equivalent there is no real need for tolerance. Today, tolerance has been redefined to mean that all moral viewpoints and lifestyles are equally valid.

## **3. The Causes of Moral Relativism – (The Assumptions of)**

The most obvious cause of moral relativism is the denial of a holy God who is the moral lawgiver. In a survey by George Barna, ten moral behaviors were evaluated by different groups. Compare the percent of Evangelical Christians with the percent of Agnostic/Atheists who consider these behaviors morally acceptable (See below).

George Barna predicted that the moral perspectives of Americans are likely to continue to deteriorate. “Compared to surveys we conducted just two years ago, significantly more adults are depicting such behaviors as morally acceptable.” We are becoming an increasingly irrational society because we are becoming an increasingly immoral society. Immorality is caused by and results in confused thinking.

Moral Behaviors Okay	% Evangelical Christians	% Agnostic/Atheist
1. Gambling	27%	75%
2. Co-habitation	12%	87%
3. Enjoy sexual fantasies	15%	78%
4. Having an abortion	4%	71%
5. Fornication	12%	87%
6. Hardcore pornography	5%	70%
7. Using profanity	7%	68%
8. Getting drunk	8%	61%
9. Homosexual sex	5%	55%
10. Using illegal drugs	6%	38%

While it appears that a person's belief in God or the denial of the existence of God makes a considerable difference in what one considers to be morally wrong, the question needs to be asked, "*What is the primary reason why people choose not to believe in the existence of a holy God who is the moral lawgiver?*"

The primary reason is that for most people, their morality determines their theology. They first decide the kind of life they want to lead and then they conceive of a God that is compatible with that lifestyle. If they can't conceive of a God compatible with their personal morality then they eliminate God altogether.

#### 4. The Confusion of Moral Relativism - (No Objective Moral Standard)

In the Western world, moral relativism poses a serious challenge to a biblical basis for ethics. The sad truth is that we are living in a culture that is crumbling at its Judeo-Christian foundation. It is becoming increasingly difficult for children to learn right from wrong because their parents don't know right from wrong. Why? Because, like the proverbial frog in the kettle, they are allowing the world to squeeze them into its politically correct (morally relative) mold and as a result they have become morally confused.

Moral relativism is at best *morally confusing* due to the absence of any clear objective moral standards. The Apostle Paul expresses it this way in Romans 1:18-25:

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but **their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened**. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator – who is forever praised. Amen.

One important observation made by C. S. Lewis was that no one who asserts they believe in moral relativity is capable of consistently living according to this immoral philosophy. It's a losing battle. Additionally, such a belief does not remove the guilt that invariably results from breaking God's laws. Underlying this destructive belief is a serious deception as to what, in fact, is in a person's best interests.

## **5. The Implications of Moral Relativism – (The Negative Consequences of)**

Relativism leads to absurd conclusions which undermine its credibility. For example, moral relativism impedes our ability to think critically and rationally about moral and ethical issues.

If there is no absolute moral law then there is no basis for making moral judgments or decisions. Would we say that Mother Teresa is no more or less virtuous than Adolf Hitler? If there is no absolute moral standard, how can we call Hitler and the Nazi atrocities absolutely wrong? Is genocide relatively wrong or absolutely wrong?

Moral relativists deny the very concept of sin. If there is no sin, we are not guilty and therefore do not need God to forgive us; therefore, there is most certainly no need for a Savior, which means that Jesus died for nothing (in vain). If morality is relative then absolute evil is impossible. Therefore, there is only relative good and evil. It eliminates the concept of justice or righteousness which assumes an objective standard of morality. Righteousness involves right thinking and living. In short, moral relativity undercuts the biblical values which are essential for a healthy society. It abandons the very concept of objective and absolute moral truth.

When everything is relative then morality becomes just a matter of personal opinion. If everything is morally relative then it doesn't really matter what you believe about ethics. Moral relativity moves us in the direction of anarchism or nihilism (rejection of all values). Ethical relativism eliminates the possibility of a moral mistake and denies personal responsibility.

Moral relativism supposedly elevates tolerance (redefined) as the supreme virtue of the society. Relativism is inconsistent with true tolerance and is closed to even the possibility of objective moral truth. It denies that harming others is wrong in any absolute sense. If this view is correct, how could any society rationally be justified in expecting individuals or groups to comply with its relative laws or standards?

## **6. The Confrontation with Moral Relativism – (The Arguments Against)**

Pure moral relativism has always been an easily refuted and fallible philosophy. Moral relativity in its purest form would virtually condone all behavior no matter how many rights are violated or the resulting consequences. It continues to thrive because it's the easy way out. If man is the measure of all things, including morality, then he has no one to whom he is accountable and he can do whatever he likes. The philosophy of moral relativism is simply modern man's meager attempt to justify his immoral behavior.

Moral relativism persists in politics today; it underlies socialism which teaches

that it is okay to take money from one person and give it to another as long as it passes through the government. Since when is stealing considered a moral activity? Moral relativism also underlies the notion that “*the ends justify the means.*” Such a philosophy can be used to justify any immoral behavior.

One strong argument against this point of view is the argument from moral progress or development. For example, the progress in eliminating slavery and the growth in the civil rights movement is generally regarded as a change for the better. If everything is morally relative then the preceding statement would not necessarily be true. A closely related problem to moral relativism is the moral reformers such as Mother Teresa, Wilberforce and Martin Luther King, Jr., who are honored, admired and respected.

Relativism undermines the credibility and validity of any form of orthodox religious belief. Relativism says, “You have your beliefs and I have mine and that’s just splendid.” Orthodoxy says, “(Moral) truth exists, whether we believe it or not and believing falsely is anything but splendid.” Denying reality doesn’t change reality. The Bible is “*the blue print of reality*” and when we go against it, it’s like spitting into the wind. When we try and break God’s laws we discover that God’s laws actually break us. God has made it crystal clear and we should not be deceived: Whatever we sow we shall also reap (Gal. 6:7).

The claim of the moral relativist is self-refuting since its main assertion “there are no moral absolutes” is an absolute moral assertion. Some moral relativists fear that those who subscribe to moral absolutes will try and force their moral views and practices on others. If you think about it, virtually all legislation embodies some concept of morality. However on a personal level, moral convictions do not necessarily lead to or result in forceful coercion but instead may be best be accomplished by ethical persuasion. Unthinking people continue to unthinkingly accept assumptions even though they have never worked.

The bottom-line: the philosophy and practice of moral relativism is morally and intellectually bankrupt. This moral philosophy has always existed, but today it is the dominant view in our politically-correct (PC) culture.

## **7. The Cure for Moral Relativism – (The Positive Alternative to)**

A God-centered model of truth affirms that Truth is defined by God for everyone; it is objective and absolute. God is the standard and ultimate judge of all truth and morality. One indispensable pillar of Christian truth is the proposition that God is the law giver and moral governor of the universe. God is a personal and a holy being and He has created us in His image as free moral agents.

Are there any universal values? That question can be answered by two other questions:

1) Are there any moral behaviors that God universally expects or prohibits of all people? The biblical answer to that question would be absolutely yes, because sin violates His holy standards.

2) Are there moral values that are universally recognized by all people and all

cultures? If the answer is no, that may simply mean that some people or cultures are ignorant of what God expects. If the answer is yes, what might some of these universal moral values be? How about: Love, truthfulness, fairness, freedom of expression, unity, tolerance, respect, nonviolence, responsibility and respect for life?

Jesus said in Matthew 5:38 “*Be holy as the Father in heaven is holy.*” Because God is the source and standard of ethics, the moral law is universal, absolute and objective; it is based of God’s holy and unchanging character – the eternal anchor for ethics and morality. Sin is the transgression of God’s moral law. John says that “*Sin is lawlessness*” (1 John 3:4). R. C. Sproul calls sin “*Cosmic Treason.*” When we rebel against our Creator, do our own thing and go our own way, we’re sinning against God.

The moral law is best understood as flowing from the moral lawgiver of the universe. God, as our Creator, knows what is best for us and calls us to trust and obey Him for our good and His glory. Paul says in Romans 1-3 that our guilt testifies that all have sinned in whatever cultural setting they might be. The good news is that the Lawgiver is also the Redeemer of those who repent of their sin and trust in Jesus to forgive them. But the unrepentant relativist must face the absolute justice of a holy God.

What about the difference between values and virtues? Values shift with popular opinion and/or individual preference. Virtues are those time honored traits that give strength to a person’s character, enabling the individual to recognize and do the right thing. Both Aristotle and Augustine recognized and acknowledged the reality of virtues. Virtues are knowable and definable and stand in stark contrast to moral relativism, situational ethics and the radical individualism which characterizes our culture.

Since ancient times great thinkers have been absorbed with ethics – defining right and wrong. Some define might as right, overlooking that one can be powerful without being good. Some say that each culture should define what is right for its members. Others say that each man should define what is right for himself. Others say that right is whatever is moderate, pleasurable, desirable or best in the long run. Each of these ethical systems have weaknesses in logic and are relative to one degree or another.

In stark contrast is the definition of right in terms of God’s moral law which is an extension of His holy nature. There is nothing illogical in acknowledging that the ultimate authority has ultimate authority. God’s will is consistent with His nature and His nature is good, therefore God’s will is also good. It is because God’s character never changes that His moral law is absolute. God’s standards are revealed in His Holy Word – the Scripture – and in the hearts of all mankind. His moral standards are most perfectly embodied in the person of Jesus Christ who always did those things which pleased His Heavenly Father. Further, God has given us His Spirit in order to empower us to obey His moral standards. Christianity isn’t true because it works, it works because it’s true.

## **Conclusion: What Is the End of the Matter? – (What Is the Bottom line?)**

For many, religion is simply a matter of personal choice and the idea of one way to God or moral absolutes is a foreign concept. There's not only an attitude of "My opinion is as good as yours," but a definite hostility toward those claiming to know any ultimate moral truth. Postmodernists are characterized by an "*all that counts is what I feel*" attitude. For many, how they feel becomes the standard of what is true. Biblical morality is so essential because, every time biblical moral values are broken down in society, confusion and chaos follows.

The conscience in America is dying and that's why we have crimes without motives, crime as sport, running rampant through the streets of America. History shows that no country can survive long without strong moral codes and no strong moral codes exist apart from religion. When moral values break down society disintegrates. Historically, when millions of people stop believing in God, enormous negative consequences follow. For example, the sexual revolution of the 1960's was based on relative morality.

Is the truth really important, or it is enough to be sincere? It is possible to be sincere and be sincerely wrong. Christians have long held that the truth is vitally important. Jesus said that the truth would make us free. Free from what? Free from being enslaved by sin. Moral freedom is not the right to do what we want but the power to do what we ought. The truth is that on our own we lack the knowledge, desire and power to do what we ought. But with the help of God's truthful Word and His empowering Spirit we have the knowledge, desire and power to act in the way that is pleasing to God and best for us. In fact, there is never a contradiction between the two. God knows what is best and wants what is best. The question is: Are we willing to receive His best?

God loved us enough to send the very best when He sent Jesus to earth to live a sinless life and die on the cross for our sins. God demonstrated His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. God has given us this tremendous promise: "*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life*" (John 3:16).

We must learn to give God His rightful place in our lives, families, church, and nation. We must refuse to accept the end of moral man; we must carry on the fight for the right. We must push back the forces of evil that push hard against us so our children will have a good future.

King Solomon, the wisest person who ever lived, summed up his writings in the following statement: "Now all has been heard; here is the **conclusion of the matter**: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole [duty] of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil" (Eccl. 12:13-14).