

MORAL RELATIVISM

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Introduction

- ✚ In this age, we have lost the confidence that statements of fact can ever be anything more than just opinions. The word “truth” now means true for *me*.
- ✚ Whether we realize it or not, this concept - Moral relativism - is the air we breathe, the background noise in our culture today. In this sort of cultural climate the only heresy is telling someone else that they are wrong. Tolerance has become the ultimate virtue, not truth”
- ✚ According to the Barna Research Group, **81%** of young Americans have adopted a view that “all truth is relative to the individual and his/her circumstances.” ¹

Defining Moral Relativism

- ✚ Moral relativism suggests that when it comes to moral issues, there are no universally objective right or wrong answers. ²
- ✚ Only subjective opinions exist, which are no different from one’s feelings about a favorite football team or ice cream flavor.
- ✚ It is up to the subject, the individual, to decide. Morality is not objective. It’s an individual matter. Moral truth depends on the individual.

Pleasure as Ethics

- ✚ When morality is reduced to personal taste, people exchange the moral question, what is good? For the pleasure question, what feels good?
- ✚ Instead of morality constraining pleasure (I want to do that but I really should not), the pleasure defines morality (I want to do that and I am going to find a way to rationalize it)

Two Kinds of Relativism

1. Cultural (Normative) Relativism
 - a. Each culture has a different morality; none is justified in claiming that its own brand of morality is correct.
 - b. All people ought to act within the boundaries of their cultural code
2. Individual Relativism

- a. Individual preference offers the only guidelines to behavior
- b. Morality is private. Each person acts as his conscience dictates.
- c. (Judges 17:6)

Roots of Relativism

1. The information explosion renders absolute, universal knowledge impossible.
2. The claim to objective, absolute, universal knowledge leads to intolerance.
3. The sincerity of religious believers means they cannot be wrong.
4. Having individual rights means I can determine my own truth.
5. Humility requires relativism; otherwise dogmatism and bigotry.
6. Relativism leads to tolerance.

Morality & Culture (Does Culture Define Morality?)

- ✚ The wide variations in moral practices of various cultures indicate a broad diversity of values.
- ✚ However, a closer look reveals that moral differences often represent differences only in perception of the facts of a situation and not a conflict in the values themselves.
 - **Facts are descriptive (What is the case?)**
 - **Values are prescriptive (What ought to be the case?)**
 1. Example 1: The dispute over Abortion. Much of the debate turns out to be a conflict about *facts*, not fundamental *values*.
In most cases, those favoring abortion, like those who are not, agree that human persons are valuable. They disagree on whether the unborn child is in fact a human
 2. Example 2: Murder of innocent people has been wrong in every culture at every time in history. Hitler agrees with this value, what has changed is his perception is the fact that there are not human. He justified his killing because he considered them subhuman. ³

Morality Driven by Culture Fails Because:

1. If cultures differ radically in their basic moral beliefs, it only shows that there are differing opinions. Not that no opinion is correct.
2. It denied the notion of Immoral Laws. If society is the final measure of morality, then all its judgments are moral by definition
3. It make impossible to criticize another society's practice – no external standard by which this society is judged.
4. It makes impossible to practice moral reformation. If a society's laws and cultural values are the ultimate standards of behavior then the notion of moral improvement is nonsense. A social code cannot be improved. If cultural values are the highest possible law, then there is no way for those

standards to be better than what they are at any given moment. They can only be different.

Major Flaws of Moral Relativism

Flaw #1: Relativists Can't Accuse Others of Wrong-doing

- Relativism makes it impossible to criticize the behavior of others, because relativism ultimately denies such a thing as wrong-doing.
- When right or wrong are a matter of personal choice, we surrender the privilege of making moral judgments on other's actions ever again. But if we're sure that some things must be wrong and that some judgments against another's conduct are justified--then relativism must be false.

Flaw #2: Relativists Can't Complain about the Problem of Evil

- Relativism is inconsistent with the concept that true moral evil exists. For moral evil to exist there must be some things that are objectively wrong.
- Evil as a value judgment marks a departure from some standard of moral perfection. But if there is no standard, there is no departure.

Flaw #3: Relativists Can't Place Blame or Accept Praise

- Relativism renders the concepts of praise and blame meaningless, because no external standard of measurement defines what should be applauded or condemned.
- Without absolutes, nothing is ultimately bad, deplorable, tragic, or worthy of blame. Neither is anything ultimately good, honorable, noble, or worthy of praise.

Flaw #4: Relativists Can't Claim anything is Unfair or Unjust

- The words themselves have no meaning. Both concepts dictate that people receive equal treatment based on an external standard of what is right. This outside standard, though, is the very thing repudiated by relativists.
- But if the notion of justice and fairness makes sense then relativism fails.

Conclusion of Flaws

- As we have seen, evil, praise, blame, justice, fairness, moral improvement, and tolerance--depend on some objective, external moral standard for its reality and application.
- What kind of world would it be if relativism were true? It would be a world in which nothing is wrong--nothing is considered evil or good, nothing is worthy of praise or blame. It would be a world in which justice and fairness are meaningless concepts, in which there would be no accountability, no possibility of moral improvement, and no moral discourse. And it would be a world in which there is no tolerance.

- Moral relativism produces this kind of world.

Tolerance

- One of the alleged virtues of relativism is its emphasis on *tolerance*
- Whereas the traditional understanding of tolerance urges us to respect the right of people that hold views with which we disagree, the new tolerance which hides under moral relativism demands we accept that there are many different truths
- We need to understand that tolerance is to be applied to people not their ideas or behaviors. ***Tolerating people should be distinguished from tolerating ideas and behavior.***
- Civic tolerance demands that all views should get an equal hearing and consideration not that all views have equal worth, merit, or truth.
- People can believe whatever they like and they usually have the liberty to express these beliefs. But they may not behave as they like. Some behavior is considered immoral and is construed as a threat to the common good therefore is not tolerated but rather restricted by law.
- Historically, our culture has promoted tolerance of all persons but not of all behavior.

The Consequences of Relativism

- Relativism destroys the conscience
- It provides no moral impulse to improve
- Ultimately relativism is self-centered. Doing our own thing is fine for us, but we do not want others to be relativists.

Finding God in Morality

- Moral rules are not physical in nature; we cannot discover them through our five senses but by the process of thought, introspection and reflection.
- They are a kind of communication. They are propositions, intelligent statements of meaning conveyed from one mind to another. The propositions take the form of commands. A command makes sense only when there are two minds involved, one giving the command and one receiving it. ⁴
- With this observation a personal God who provides an absolute standard of goodness offers the best explanation for the existence of morality. An impersonal force won't do because a moral rule is both a proposition and a command, and these are features of minds

- Moral laws suggest a moral law giver. His laws are a communication of his desires, imperatives expected to be obeyed.
- Ethical pain--true moral guilt--also makes sense. Since morals are not material principles, but personal commands, a violation is not just a broken rule, but an offense against the person who made the rule.
- Some attempt to argue that they don't need God to have morality. They can live a moral life even though they don't believe in a divine being. No one argues, though, that an atheist can behave in a way one might call moral.
- The real question is, "Why ought he?" In the name of whom or what do you ask me to behave? Why should I go to the inconvenience of denying myself the satisfactions I desire in the name of some standard that exists only in your imagination? Why should I worship the fictions that you have imposed on me in the name of nothing?
- A moral atheist is like a man sitting down to dinner who doesn't believe in farmers, ranchers, fishermen, or cooks. He believes the food just appears, with no explanation and no sufficient cause. This is silly. Either his meal is an illusion, or someone provided it. In the same way, if morals really exist, as I have argued, then some cause adequate to explain the effect must account for them. God is the most reasonable solution.

Conclusion

- Morality grounded in God explains our hunger for justice--our desire for a day of final judgment when all wrongs are made right, when innocent suffering is finally redeemed, when all the guilty are punished and the righteous are rewarded.
- This also explains our own personal sense of guilt caused by sin. We feel guilty because we are guilty. We know deep down inside that we have offended a morally perfect Being.
- This morally perfect Being, out of His love for his creation, has given us the ability for restoration and regeneration; only if we desire to partake of it. This morally perfect Being is none but Our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ.

Notes:

¹. Barna Research Group, *"Third Millennium Teens"* (Ventura, CA: The Barna Research Group, Ltd., 1999), 47

². Francis J Beckwith, *"Relativism: feet firmly planted in mid air"* (Grand Rapids, MI Baker books, 1989)

³. Rhawn Joseph Ph.D., *"The Mind & God of Adolf Hitler"*., (University Press, California)

⁴. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1960)