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It DOES Matter What You Believe: A Critique of Moral Relativism

By Lisa Simpson

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11, Americans struggle to understand why it happened, what we should do, and why they responded the way they did. Nearly every American reacted with shock and outrage. Shock, because it is hard to absorb the sheer magnitude of the offense. Outrage, because nearly every person views the act as evil. This attitude is perhaps surprising, since cultural relativism is the predominant moral theory of our day. In this theory, judgments are based on one's experiences, interpreted according to one's culture. In truth, relativism is an absolutist theory in which the only absolute is culture.

The idea here is that since one's judgments are based on enculturation, one cannot pass judgment on any other ethical system. Problems arise from this theory when we try to address Hitler's Nazi morality or the ethnic cleansing in Eastern Europe. How can we resolve the inevitable conflict that arises between clashing ethical systems?

The terrorist attacks on September 11 illustrate this conflict. The terrorists thought they were doing what was right by their own belief system, but the victims of their action thought it morally reprehensible. The mere existence of differences among cultures does not mean that such differences should exist. Surely, all ethical systems cannot be right, or such extreme conflict would not result.

This, therefore, leads to the theme of my essay: To know the worldview that actually corresponds to reality is the moral imperative of our day.

Relativism and Truth

The root of all ethical theories is the question "What is truth?" Truth can be defined as that which conforms to fact or actuality, or that which is supreme reality and holds the ultimate meaning of value and existence. It may be helpful to differentiate two different kinds of truth. Subjective truth deals with the personal, with tastes and preferences and feelings. Since our likes and dislikes change, so does subjective truth. "I like broccoli," is an example of a subjective truth, but it may not have been true when I was a child. Objective truths deal with the external and cannot change. "Plants need water," is an objective truth regardless of my agreement or my feelings about the statement (Beckwith and Koukl, 1998).

In recent decades, there has been a modernist tendency in the "hard" sciences that confines reality to the realm of only that which is observable through the five senses. This viewpoint undermines the legitimacy of the "soft" disciplines (philosophy, ethics, theology, etc.) by denying the very existence of ideas, morality, and God. Furthermore, culture has reacted against modernism, which has resulted in the postmodern belief that ultimate truth either does not exist, or is simply not worth seeking. Relativism, therefore, arises from a modernist environment that denies any "hard" reality to metaphysical thought, or from a postmodern tendency to say that none of this really matters.

Relativism is a general term and may be applied in many ways, but I will focus on cultural relativism and subjective relativism. Cultural relativism stems from the observation that morality varies among cultures. Some claim that this is proof that morality is relative to the group to which one belongs, while others argue that most cultures hold common views regarding such actions as rape and murder.

Because individuals often have differing moral convictions than those established by their group, subjective (individual) relativism rejects not only moral absolutes, but also any individual obligation. Since each person's circumstance is unique, he alone can determine what he should or should not do.

At first glance, cultural and (to a greater degree) subjective relativism appear to be morally neutral. Closer examination will reveal that moral relativists enshrine tolerance as the highest virtue (which I will discuss shortly), which can only lead to anarchy when carried to its logical end (Beckwith and Koukl, 1998).

Relativism and Tolerance

The effects of moral relativism on modern American society are easily identified. This ethical theory touches every aspect of our culture, from politics to education, from law to family structure. Perhaps the most readily obvious outworking of relativism is the multiculturalism movement. With increasing diversity, there is a greater effort to understand various cultures and to foster good communication, particularly in business and education. Businesses and academic institutions are driven to pursue multiculturalism by the need to succeed in a global marketplace. Multiculturalism first emerged as a means to correct injustices suffered by minority groups, but now is promoted on the basis of inclusiveness. The philosophical basis for this approach assumes that all perspectives are equally valid and that tolerance of these different ideas is good (Gaede, 1993).

Political correctness is the attitude that one should do nothing that may offend any group defined by race, class, gender, age, or sexual orientation. While it is good to be sensitive to others, PC also encourages a person to keep silent about her own convictions because it assumes that people have the right not to be offended. PC tolerates anything but intolerance, due partly to the increasing uncertainty of truth (Gaede, 1993).

As I have already mentioned, tolerance is the ultimate virtue among those in the relativist camp. Tolerance is necessary in politics and economics but morality is a much more complicated area. We have the freedom to choose what to believe, but since all moral options are equally viable, we have no guidance on which one to choose (Gaede, 1993). If none are true (or if "all" are true), then a decision must be made subjectively, based on arbitrary feelings or self-serving motives (Beckwith and Koukl, 1998). There is therefore no reason to defend any particular belief, which is why intolerance is so terrible.

Relativists do not want anyone's morality imposed on them, yet they push for legislation to enforce personal autonomy and tolerance. The assumption here is that the law should be completely neutral and should always uphold the absolute autonomy of the individual. This view

allows for no form of redress if a member of the community feels that some legislation is harmful to the public or to institutions such as the family. Judges and lawmakers operate according to their own philosophical and metaphysical assumptions and therefore are not truly neutral. Any attempt to challenge the naturalistic philosophical underpinnings of relativism is labeled as “religious” because this would allow for transcendence, leaving little room for debate (Beckwith and Koukl, 1998).

Relativism and Education

Relativism has had profound effects on education. The values clarification taught in schools today is not a means of critically analyzing differing ethical theories, but rather the indoctrination that morality is solely determined by the students’ own feelings, beliefs, and ideas (Beckwith and Koukl, 1998). These exercises go beyond simply revealing that in some situations, ethical issues may be complicated and the right course of action may not be clear. In fact, they go much farther, to show that there are no ethical absolutes, and decisions should be based merely on self-gratification. With such an emphasis on relativism in schools, children are left with nothing but confusion in making moral decisions.

Relativism and Marriage

Perspectives on marriage have also changed quite dramatically under the influence of relativistic ideology. The most extreme example is in the debate over same-sex marriages. This issue calls into question the very nature of marriage itself. Beckwith and Koukl (1998) describe it as a clash of two diametrically opposed worldviews.

The side that supports same-sex marriages asserts that the state ought to prefer a view of human nature in which human institutions are artificial social constructions ruled by personal subjective preference. The side that supports traditional marriage asserts that the state ought to prefer the view of human nature in which certain human institutions are natural and good and ought to be proffered and encouraged by the state over personal subjective preference (p. 128, emphasis mine).

Clearly, if personal subjective preference were the standard by which to determine if a union is legitimate, there would be no reason to deny polygamous marriages, group marriages, and incestuous marriages.

Relativism and Ethics

Relativism has also had a tremendous impact on the meaning of life. For example, an appeal to absolute autonomy is often used to support such issues as abortion, physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia. It is legitimate to respect a person’s autonomy, however autonomy should be balanced with the principles of justice, nonmaleficence, and beneficence. If a patient asked his doctor to remove his pancreas simply because he no longer wanted it anymore, no doctor would. That procedure would certainly do the patient no good, and would also cause the patient much harm. Therefore, autonomy is not considered absolute in medical practice, but is tempered by paternalism and a respect for the field of medicine (Beckwith and Koukl, 1998).

The Fallacies of Relativism

The theory of moral relativism is riddled with flaws and internal inconsistencies. Understanding these shortcomings may help to illustrate why relativism is inadequate at best, and why an alternative moral objectivism may be preferable.

First of all, relativists claim to hold a scientific view of morals. Through extensive observation, they have discovered that different groups and different individuals hold to different ethical perspectives. Therefore there is no correct viewpoint and no absolutes that transcend culture.

However, the values of cultures really do not vary that much. Most cultures would endorse a respect for life, would uphold the right of individual happiness, and would applaud personal courage. The differences lie in the ways each culture demonstrates such values (Huemer, 1997). Relativists make a serious logical mistake here: they try to derive what ought to be from what actually is (Lutzer, 1981). It does not follow logically that a description can lead to a prescription: some fundamental presuppositions must take place. For example, one cannot simply say that because murder causes the death of a person and emotional pain to his family and friends that murder is wrong. This leap from the world of Is to the world of Ought presupposes that human life is valuable, that taking the life of an innocent individual is bad, and also that emotional suffering is undesirable.

The nature of value systems is not scientific, and should not be studied as such. As Aristotle pointed out: "(I)t is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each discipline just so far as the nature of the subject admits; it is evidently equally foolish to accept probable reasoning from a mathematician and to demand from a rhetorician scientific proofs" (in Huemer, 1997).

Secondly, relativists have no grounds for accusing others of wrongdoing. They cannot impose their own standards of morality on another in order to judge the morality of an individual's actions (Beckwith and Koukl, 1998). In order to be consistent with their own morality, they must tolerate views that they do not agree with or do not approve of. The ultimate standard of right and wrong is personal subjective preference. If your preference changes, so does the standard, which eliminates the possibility of doing wrong personally as well. This goes against our instinct that some things are inherently wrong and that judgment against such conduct is justified.

Relativists cannot complain about the problem of evil, for within relativism there is no room for the existence of evil (Beckwith and Koukl, 1998). There is no standard by which to judge something as evil, yet they use the problem of evil to deny the existence of God. Without an absolute standard of morality, there can be no such thing as good or evil, so their argument is turned on itself. They must either accept the existence of objective morality or they can wonder why a supreme being would allow things contrary to their opinion, which seems egocentric and silly.

Placing blame and accepting praise have no basis in relativism. Such would assume an external standard by which to judge something as good and praiseworthy or bad and worthy of blame. In reality, relativists readily accept praise but will hide behind subjectivism to avoid taking blame. Their actions betray the guilt that they harbor. I suspect this is because they know intuitively that

they have done something that is wrong, regardless of how they feel about it. I would argue that deep down, they want to have the assurance that they can discover truth and that they don't have to depend on self to determine it. It is empowering to feel like a god when I get to make the rules, but I don't want the responsibility God has when it comes to truth and objective morality.

Along the same lines, relativists cannot make claims of unfairness or injustice. The ideas of fairness and justice are merely social constructs created for the purpose of maintaining order in society. Beckwith gives two reasons these concepts are incorrect under relativism. First, fairness and justice are meaningless because they depend on an external standard. Second, moral guilt cannot be possible because guilt is dependent upon blame, which we have already established does not exist. Subsequently, no action is worthy of punishment.

With relativism, there is no room for improvement. One can change his personal ethic, but there can be no notion of "better" without a standard. Actually, since morality is determined by self-interest, a small baby would have the purest form of relativism, so to speak, because she does not yet have a complete understanding of others. As the child grows, she discovers the societal and familial responsibilities forced upon her, and these taint her version of self-serving morality. As she caves in to these social constructs, her morality grows weaker, if anything.

Relativists cannot participate in meaningful moral discussion. Frankly, there is nothing to discuss. The most they can do is describe their differences, but they would have no viewpoint to assert. There can be no debate, because no viewpoint has more merit than another. To be truly consistent, relativists must logically remain silent on issues of morality, but as we have seen they are quite proactive in endorsing their view (i.e., "Do not enforce your morality on others").

The obligation of tolerance cannot be enforced because to enforce any morality is in direct contradiction to tolerance. Tolerance may also violate self-interest. It may be to my advantage to be intolerant of ideas that are incompatible with my own, so I am completely free to pass judgment on the behaviors and attitudes of others. In fact, I may benefit from forcing my values on others.

Erwin Lutzer has shown that there is no room for a reformer in relativism. According to cultural relativism, an individual who is against popular opinion is wrong and by subjective relativism, there is no purpose for reform. Cultural norms are continually transformed by the changing of majority opinion. As soon as the 51st percent changes, those who are right and wrong are switched. Yet just because a majority of people thinks something is right, it doesn't follow that the majority is in fact correct. At times in history, a majority of people in the world thought that the earth was flat, that the universe revolved around the earth, that spontaneous generation of life occurred, and that the brain was a useless organ. Popular opinion is not used to discover scientific truth, and there is no reason to think that we can arrive at moral truth by the same means.

Finally, it should be clear by this point that relativism is ultimately self-refuting (Lutzer, 1981). I used the example that to be tolerant, one cannot promote tolerance. If everything is true, then nothing is. The law of non-contradiction is a maxim from Aristotelian logic that simply states: it is not possible that something can be both true and not true at the same time. Since moral

relativism violates this law, it cannot offer any guidance for resolving ethical dilemmas or for settling ethical disputes between individuals or cultures.

In summary, if the observation that morality differs among cultures and individuals leads to the rightness of that difference, then moral relativism is true. However, since that conclusion does not follow logically, then relativism must be false. If there is no basis for accusing others of wrongdoing, then relativism is true and there is no basis for our legal system. However, if some actions are inherently wrong, regardless of self-interest or cultural norms, then relativism is false.

If evil is merely an interpretation based on personal subjectivism, then relativism is true. On the other hand, if the problem of evil exists, then relativism is false. If we can remove the concepts of praise and blame from our vocabularies, then relativism is true. Conversely, if some actions are good and others are bad, then relativism is false. Likewise, if the notions of fairness and justice can be eradicated, relativism is true. If we cannot eliminate the legal system and politics, then relativism is false. If the idea of moral improvement is irrelevant, then relativism is true. If, however, we can uphold that one can “grow” morally, similar to intellectual or interpersonal growth, then relativism is false.

If there can be no meaningful discourse on the topic of morality, then relativism is true. If some viewpoints are worthy of defense and promotion, then relativism is false. If tolerance means keeping quiet about moral disagreement, then relativism is true. If tolerance is flaunted as the ultimate virtue and intolerance is seen as the ultimate offense, then relativism must be false. If morality can change simply at the whim of majority opinion, then relativism is true. If some actions are right or wrong regardless of public opinion and if right and wrong cannot change from one day to the next, then relativism is false.

Finally, if relativism is consistent, does not contradict itself, and is useful for resolving ethical conflict, then it may be true. If relativism is inconsistent and contradictory, then it is illogical and useless at best, and dangerous at worst.

Conclusion

When relativism is taken to its logical end, it is clear that it would undermine all morality and lead only to anarchy. If I act in my own self-interest to brutally murder my parents, and no one else can pass judgment on my actions, then everyone else can do exactly as he or she pleases with no recourse. I feel safe in asserting that very few people could accept that outcome. Most of us would be repulsed by the possibility that someone could infringe upon our rights or harm us without any consequence.

I contend that the outrage people feel to the full implications of relativism come from natural law. We all intuitively know that some moral principles are both universal and knowable through the exercise of human reason. Furthermore, humankind can readily agree on such moral principles as “do not murder,” or “be kind to one another,” or “do not steal.” These ideas are transcendent and external to us. I will not examine the various theories of moral objectivism, but they are clearly the only alternatives to moral relativism.

As many Western democratic citizens are finally discovering in the days, weeks, and months following September 11, 2001, moral relativism is profoundly inadequate to address the sharp differences between the worldview of the terrorists and ours. If such a moral framework cannot practically be applied, it should be abandoned. People are comforted knowing that there is an absolute standard of good and bad and right and wrong that they can appeal to when they have been wronged. And who is wronged more than the innocent civilian brutally attacked unawares while trying to provide an honest living for his family?

To know the worldview that actually corresponds to reality is the moral imperative of our day. Moral relativism is bankrupt, and cannot provide such a worldview. In a day of terror, many are searching for an alternative.

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