

CREATING DIALOGUE ON MORAL RELATIVISM

Stephen Wagner

Director of Training, Justice For All

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Relativism: Different Things to Different People

I had a conversation with a young man named “Matt” at the University of Missouri once. In the course of dialogue, I had made a case that abortion is seriously wrong because it kills an innocent human being. Instead of showing that my facts were mistaken (“The unborn isn’t a human being.” or “Abortion doesn’t kill.”) or that the moral principle was flawed (“It’s not wrong to kill human beings.”), Matt went directly after the idea of objective moral truth itself: “Morals are relative.”

Different levels of skepticism affect people’s views of moral truth. Here are the types you’ll likely encounter:

- ***Skeptical about Everything:*** Believes you can’t know what’s true about much of anything, including science.
- ***Skeptical about Objective Moral Truth:*** Believes you may be able to know things about science or history, but not morality. Moral truth is either unknowable, or the moral principles we do recognize are knowable only by cultures or individuals (which means they’re not objectively true).
- ***Skeptical about Certain Moral Truths:*** Believes in a few objective moral truths (e.g. “It’s wrong to harm someone else” or “Women have equal rights to men”) but believes we can’t know what’s true about abortion.
- ***Confused:*** Most people simply haven’t thought very deeply about issues of truth and morality. They haven’t developed a coherent set of beliefs about these things. You have an opportunity to help them enter into dialogue about issues they may never have confronted. Still, most in the *Confused* category do have a deep feeling that they shouldn’t criticize other people or cultures because that’s intolerant and narrow-minded.

Look at this interaction I had with a student I’ll call Matt at the University of Missouri:

Steve: Is there anything that is wrong regardless of culture, time, or place?

Matt: Morals are relative; everything’s relative.

Steve: It sounds like you’re saying what’s right is up to each person’s preference, is that correct?

Matt: Yes.

Steve: If morals are up to preference, then the father who prefers to molest his daughter and the father who prefers to feed his daughter would be morally equivalent. We couldn't say one is better or worse, or right or wrong, could we?

Matt: [Silence] That's a good one...I like that one. I guess there is one moral rule that transcends time, culture, or place: It's wrong to harm someone else.ⁱ

When Matt first made his "Morals are relative" claim, he appeared to be skeptical about objective moral truth in general. It appeared he thought people's preferences were right by definition. When I asked him a few questions, it turned out he *did* believe in objective moral truth, but was still skeptical about abortion. That's progress. His original overarching skepticism had less power to disarm my case against abortion, though, since we were now agreeing on one moral truth: *it's wrong to harm someone else*. Soon, we were back to discussing whether the unborn is a real *someone else*.

What is Relativism?

According to the person who's skeptical about objective moral truth, moral principles don't apply to every *person* or *culture* in the same way. In essence, because groups and individuals differ in their assessment of morality, no one can claim that their understanding of morality is correct. Some argue that because no principle is *universally believed*, no moral principle is *universal*.

Key Question #1: "Do you believe morals are relative to individuals or cultures?"

To create productive dialogue with a relativist, I need more information: "Do you believe morals are relative to individuals or cultures?" Some people believe morals are relative to cultures. Greg Koukl calls this "Society Says" Relativism.ⁱⁱ Since cultures differ in their moral standards, no culture (or member of a culture) can criticize another. What's right for one may be wrong for another.

Many people also say morality is up to individuals. Koukl calls this, "*I Say*" Relativism, because morality is reduced to what an individual says about it. Although two individuals may be in the exact same circumstance, they may have two totally different moral principles. And on this view, both would be perfectly correct, even if their principles directly conflict. Essentially, right and wrong is determined by personal preferences.

"Taking the Roof Off"

Once you know what kind of relativism a student is promoting, use a tactic called "taking the roof off" to help her see that the implications of relativism are very counterintuitive

(and unpleasant). If the view has implications that are obviously false, then the view must be false as well.

To “take the roof off,” assume the view is true, then show what the view logically entails. Use the phrase, “if morals are relative, then...” You can think of her argument as a house, with the conclusion “morals are relative” as the roof. When you “take the roof off,” you get under that roof and walk around to different rooms in the house, seeing all that the conclusion entails. Since each type of relativism justifies things that are obviously immoral, we can be confident morals are not relative. Here are sound bite questions I use to “take the roof off” of each type of relativism:

Student: Morals are relative to cultures. (“Society Says” Relativism)

Me: “If morals are relative to culture, then the Nazi decision to oppress the Jews was the right decision, wasn’t it?”

Student: Morals are relative to individuals. (“I Say” Relativism)

Me: “If morals are relative to individuals, then we can’t distinguish between a father who likes to molest his daughter and one who likes to feed and care for his daughter. We couldn’t say one is better or worse or right or wrong, could we? Both are acting according to his preference and what he thinks is right. How can we criticize him if morals are relative to individuals?”

A Word of Caution

Sometimes helping person see relativism’s flaws takes a long time. Because of multiculturalism, it may be difficult for her to see that it is actually very sensible to criticize other cultures sometimes. She will likely believe that because cultures disagree, she can’t be confident her culture is correct about anything. You will need to listen first and discern what kinds of examples of injustice in other cultures will be persuasive. And you may need to think of multiple examples to help clarify the point. But remember, you’re asking someone to radically change her conception of the way the world actually is and that’s a big step for anyone to take. If you can ask a question that “puts a stone in her shoe,” you’ve done a lot.ⁱⁱⁱ

Sample Dialogue

Test Yourself: Which kind of relativism is being discussed below?

Relativist: Morals are relative.

Objectivist: How did you come to that conclusion?

R: Well, in our culture we have certain moral standards, but there are other cultures who disagree. Who’s to say we’re right?

O: Let me see if I understand your view correctly. You believe that morals are relative to culture, that what is right or wrong depends on what culture thinks about it, is that right?

R: Not exactly. I think that different cultures just do differently in different areas. So it’s not what they think about it that makes it true, but it’s what they do that makes them think about it a certain way, that makes their moral code.

O: So aren’t you saying that morality does depend on what the culture determines is moral? But you think they determine what is moral by doing things?

R: Sure. Maybe it’s not much of a distinction.

O: I understand your point though. You believe we can't criticize a culture that has a different moral code from us. In essence, morality depends on culture, time, and place.

R: That's right. Don't you agree that different cultures have different moral codes?

O: Sure, but how does the fact that two cultures do differently, or the fact that they have different moral codes, mean that we can't criticize them?

R: That's intolerant!

O: Why is it intolerant?

R: Because you're criticizing!

O: Let's back up for a moment. Didn't you say that you thought morality depends on culture?

R: Yes, and that therefore we shouldn't criticize.

O: If morality depends on culture and we shouldn't criticize, we shouldn't criticize a culture that throws children off of cliffs for stepping on a certain plot of ground, should we?^{iv}

R: No.

O: Don't you think it's wrong to abuse children this way?

R: I think it's wrong, but they don't.

O: You're right, actually the Yali tribe thought this was virtuous behavior.

R: So, it was virtuous to them.

O: You think throwing a child off a cliff is virtuous?

R: To them.

O: Let me ask you a different question. Do you think it was right for us to criticize the Nazi's and ultimately to go to war against them? Were they wrong to destroy Jewish people in concentration camps?

R: Well, that's a good point. I guess I can't say *that* is right.

O: So do we at least agree that the Nazi's were doing wrong even though their culture approved it?

R: Well, not the whole culture.

O: But wouldn't you agree that the Caucasian and Jewish cultures were distinct in that situation? Or do you think cultures are defined by borders?

R: Of course not. I live in America! Okay, I agree. There is at least one thing we can know is wrong: committing genocide against a culture...

O: So if we know one thing is true about universal morality, might there also be other things true? If I could give you an accounting of how one might determine what is right or wrong, would it be helpful to you?

R: Well, I think most things are really grey areas, but sure...

ⁱ This dialogue also appears in Stephen Wagner's book, *Common Ground Without Compromise*, in the section on objective moral truth, pages 25-27. Which kind of relativism is Matt expressing in this dialogue?

ⁱⁱ Greg Koukl & Frank Beckwith, *Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air* (Baker Books: Michigan 1999), 36-39

ⁱⁱⁱ I owe the "put a stone in his shoe" illustration, along with much of the ideas in this article, to Gregory Koukl at Stand to Reason (www.str.org)

^{iv} Don Richardson, *Lords of the Earth* (Regal Books: Glendale 1977), 42-43