

Moral Absolutism, Ethical Relativism & Situationism

By David Lee Burris

Ethics Explainer: Moral Absolutism

ARTICLEBIG THINKERS + EXPLAINERS BY THE ETHICS CENTRE

Moral absolutism is the belief there are universal ethical standards that apply to every situation. Where someone would hem and haw over when, why, and to whom they'd lie, a moral absolutist wouldn't care. Context wouldn't be a consideration. It would *never* be okay to lie, no matter what the context of that lie was.

You've probably heard of moral relativism, the view that moral judgments can be seen as true or false according to a historical, cultural, or social context. According to moral relativism, two people from different situations could disagree on whether an action is right or wrong, and they would both be right. What they consider right or wrong differ according to their contexts, and both should be accepted as valid.

Moral absolutism is the opposite. It argues that there are universal moral truths relevant across all contexts and all people. These truths can be grounded in sources like law, rationality, human nature, or religion.

“Moral absolutism is the belief there are universal ethical standards that apply to every question.”

Rational absolutism

The text (or texts) that a religion is based on is often taken as the absolute standard of morality. If someone takes scripture as a source of divine truth, it's easy to take morally absolutist ethics from it. Is it ok to lie? No, because the Bible or God says so.

It's not just in religion. Ancient Greek philosophy held strains of morally absolutist thought, as did Immanuel Kant, who sought to clearly articulate a rational theory of moral absolutism.

As an Enlightenment philosopher, Kant sought to find moral truth in rationality instead of divine authority. He believed that unlike religion, culture, or community, we couldn't 'opt out' of rationality. It was what made us human. This was why he believed we owed it to ourselves to act as rationally as we could.

In order to do this, he came up with duties he called "categorical imperatives". These were duties we, as rational beings, were morally bound to follow, were applicable to all people at all times, and weren't contradictory. **Think of it as an extension of the Golden Rule.**

One of these is the *universalisability* principle. This mouthful of a term says an act only becomes a duty if you'd be willing to make it a universal law that everyone is bound to. In his words, Kant says, "act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become universal law".

What Kant meant was before choosing a course of action, you have to determine the general rule that stands behind that action. If this general rule could be applied to all people in all circumstances without contradiction, you are choosing the moral path.

An example Kant proposed was not to tell a lie. He argued that if lying was a universal law then no one could ever trust anything anyone said. The possibility of truth telling would no longer exist, rendering the very act of lying meaningless. In other words, you cannot universalise lying as a general rule of action without falling into contradiction.

Therefore, lying is a self-contradictory act that contravenes the absolute standards of rational morality.

By determining his logical justifications, Kant came up with principles he believed would form a moral life, without relying on scripture or culture.

Counterintuitive consequences

In essence, Kant is saying it's never reasonable to make exceptions for yourself when faced with a moral question. This sounds fair, but it can lead to situations where a rational moral decision contradicts moral common sense.

For example, in his essay 'On a Supposed Right to Lie from Altruistic Motives', Kant argues it is wrong to lie even to save an innocent person from a murderer. He writes, "To be truthful in all deliberations ... is a sacred and absolutely commanding decree of reason, limited by no expediency".

While Kant felt that such absolutism was necessary for a rationally grounded morality, most of us allow a degree of relativism to enter into our everyday ethical considerations.

In psychology, uncertainty was made famous by the work of Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky. In their 1982 collection of research, "Judgments under Uncertainty," the psychologists explained that when you don't have enough information to make a clear judgment, or when you are making a decision concerning something too complex to fully grasp, instead of backing off and admitting your ignorance, you tend to instead push forward with confidence. The stasis of uncertainty never slows you down because human brains come equipped with anti-uncertainty mechanisms called [heuristics](#).

Worldview: Scope & Focus Filtering

Worldview

The term worldview comes from the German word "weltanschauung"; "welt" meaning world, and "anschauung" meaning view or outlook. Many scholars use this term to describe the network of thoughts and values that a person uses to make sense of the world. (Naugle, 2002) In other words a person's worldview is akin to a pair of glasses a person might wear: the lenses are the cognitive perspectives and beliefs a person uses to understand and view the world they live in.

Thus the answers a person holds for the BIG questions (along with others) create the lense a person uses to understand the world and thus deeply influences the ways they act or react in it.

A new BIG question

So how do we deal with this fundamental questioning of our worldview?

If our worldview is one of many possible metanarratives-which are all socially constructed stories that do not carry inherent value over each other-then how do we make an argument for one perspective over the other? Or do certain worldviews carry value over others?

Is there merit in striving to come to some agreement over answers answer to the BIG questions?

While these are hard questions they are important ones, and in seeking to really answer them we seek to answer fundamental questions about who we are as humans, and what we value. I for one would argue that it is important for us to consider carefully our judgments about what is "good", "right", "just", and "beautiful".

The Roots of Modernity and Postmodernity

1520 1650 1750 1900

Renaissance Reformation Enlightenment Modernity Postmodernity

Locus of Reality	Rationality	Non-Rationality (the Intuitive)
Authority	Reason	Self
Worldview	Progressive Positivistic	Privitism / Individualism
Features	Order / Balance / Symmetry	Randomness / Disorder (despair / anxiety / relativity)

Decision Making and the Christian Worldview

MARCH 21, 2015 | FREDDY DAVIS

There are numerous ways one can look at the process of decision making. You can look at it based on style, you can focus on the process, or even on the information needed to make a good decision. None of these approaches are innately good or bad. But there are other factors which can cause a decision to be good or bad. Let's look at an example of how this might play out.

There is a fast food company that advertises its food in a way that is sexually provocative. As a Christian business person, would you do your advertising that way? There is certainly nothing wrong with the product, so advertising the food itself should be fine. And there is nothing wrong with using beautiful people to show off their products. But their approach to expressing the message has these beautiful people eating and playing with the food in ways which are designed to stimulate gratuitous sexual thoughts. This approach to expressing their message isn't based on a Christian worldview. It treats the actors as sex objects and invites the viewers to do the same – a mindset that is more compatible with a naturalistic worldview than a Christian one.

Obviously, someone in the corporate office made the decision to go with the naturalistic worldview thinking as a means of promoting their product. This is not a way Christians ought to be moving. So, what can we do to make sure we don't go down that road?

Feelings, Knowledge and Values

As we explore the topic of decision making based on a Christian worldview, I want us to look at three foundational platforms for making decisions – feelings, knowledge and values. Every approach to decision making will interact with all three in some way. As such, it is not the mere use of these three which is at issue. Rather, it is the way they are dealt with in order to express them in the culture.

Many people make decisions based strictly on how they feel about something. The only problem with that is it removes the human element from the process. Non-human animals make their decisions that way. Since they are not self-conscious creatures, like human beings, they don't have the ability to consider the possibilities & consequences of their actions. They operate strictly off of instinct and are only concerned with how they feel. When human beings base their decision making purely on feelings, they operate only at the non-thinking, animal level.

As human beings, we have an ability that other animal creatures don't have. We are able to self-consciously consider the possibilities surrounding a situation and make considered decisions. That is a uniquely human quality. And we are most human when we live by decisions rather than by mere feelings.

But even living by intentional decisions is not the highest possibility. We are not only human animals with the special ability to make self-conscious, free-will decisions, we are also persons who have been created in the image of God. As such, we are not left with only our feelings and our personal intellectual prowess, we also have the ability to decide based on a set of values. When we do that, we act as persons, and not mere human animals.

Not every set of values is good, however. God created us to live in relationship with him, and it is living by his values that allows for that to happen. We are our highest person when our decisions are based on God's ways. It is using our abilities in this manner that reflects decision making which has a biblical worldview as its basis.

All of this has very practical applications as we live life out in the world. Not only does it affect the process of decision making itself, but it affects the way the decisions actually play out in life. The worldview foundation of our decisions will determine what happens.

Decisions Made Purely Based on Feelings

Certainly there is nothing innately wrong with considering our feelings as we make decisions. After all, God made us with physical bodies and the feelings we feel are an inseparable part of our personhood. But as human beings, we are more than mere animals. As such, more than feelings must factor into our decisions. When our decisions are based purely on feelings, important information is left out of the process which can cause us to go down the wrong road. When all we consider is feelings, it becomes very easy to make ourselves feel good about doing things that are contrary to God's will. It also becomes possible to make ourselves feel bad about doing things that are consistent with his will.

Decisions Made Purely Based on Intellect

When our decisions are purely based on intellect, we can be proud that we rose above mere feelings, but we must also be careful that the knowledge we are basing our decisions upon corresponds with the truth. There is a way reality is organized and it is not organized any other way. When we allow our decision making to be based on untruth, serious problems inevitably emerge. And people do that all the time – even as it relates to major decisions. People rationalize sexual immorality, greed, lying, gluttony, divorce, and even killing, based on incomplete knowledge from non-Christian sources. The act of intellectually thinking through decisions is truly important, but that should never be the last word for a Christian.

Decisions Made Based on God's Revelation

For believers in Christ, the foundation for every decision should be God's revelation. There is a way that is right, and that should always be the starting point.

As we consider making decisions based on a Christian worldview, there are a couple of things that are important to keep in mind. First, there will be times when making the right decision does not “feel good.” A biblical worldview does not begin with how we feel. Additionally, there will be times when we might put ourselves at a certain disadvantage when we make the right decision. A biblical worldview also does not begin with an intellectual supposition.

Decisions based on a Christian worldview begin with the will of God.
In the ultimate sense, the feelings and intellect must flow out of that. When our decisions are based squarely on what God has revealed to us, we put ourselves in a position to receive three things. First, it becomes possible to receive intimate fellowship with him. The second thing is spiritual maturity. Finally, making decisions based on God’s revelation gives us the ability to enjoy the greatest fulfillment in this life. When we make our decisions based on a biblical worldview, good feelings and intellectual satisfaction naturally follow. It cannot be any other way.

What are some Christian Worldview Essentials?

by [Matt Slick](#)
11/25/08

A worldview is a set of beliefs used to understand the world. Everyone has a worldview. Everyone has a set of principles by which to judge right and wrong, and which guides them in everyday living. You stop at a red light, go at a green. You leave a tip with a waiter or a waitress. You try and color coordinate your clothes. You voice your order for food to a speaker box while sitting in your car. You cast a vote for a political leader. Why do these things? Because you are accustomed to doing them in a manner that is consistent with what you believe. In other words, you behave according to your worldview.

Your worldview forms the basis of how you interpret reality. Your worldview is a lens through which you look at the world. Your worldview shapes your moral opinions. It affects what you believe about [God](#), marriage, politics, social structures, environmental concerns, educational requirements, economics, the raising of children, what kind of foods to eat, etc. It affects everything because all of that which is around you and all of that with which you interact must be interpreted and must be understood in light of your worldview.

According to Barna Research,¹ "About half of all adults (54%) claim that they make their moral choices on the basis of specific principles or standards in which they believe. Other common means of making moral choices include doing what feels right or comfortable (24%), doing whatever makes the most people happy or causes the least conflict (9%), and pursuing whatever produces the most positive outcomes for the person (7%)."

Why the difference in results? People have different worldviews, different opinions about God, man, purpose, life, right and wrong.

Philosophical and Social Questions

There are some basic philosophical questions that most everyone in the world wonders about. Generally speaking, it is the answers to the following set of questions that guide how the next set of questions are answered. First, let's look at the philosophical worldview questions.

Where did we come from?

What happens to us after we die?

Why are we here?

Did we evolve or were we created?

Is there a God?

Is morality absolute or subjective?

If there is a God, what does he want?

Answering these questions forms the most basic elements of our worldview. Once these are answered, you are better able to form answers to the next set of questions, those related to society.

A worldview affects behavior and beliefs

You behave according to what you believe, not what you don't believe. I can recall having conversations with atheists who said they "lack belief in God". They don't believe or disbelieve in God. Yet, when I defend the Bible as being true or the Christian God as the only God, they are quick to attack my arguments in order to disprove God's existence. So, I tell them that they are behaving according to what they believe, not what they don't believe. It is inconsistent to say that you lack belief in something and then behave as though you deny the existence of that something. Without admitting it, their worldview didn't "lack belief about God"; it denied God. There's no getting around it. Different worldviews affect behavior -- whether or not someone is aware of it.

Since I've already mentioned atheism, let's take a look at that perspective for a moment. How would an atheist answer the philosophical questions such as "How did we get here?" An atheist would probably say we evolved from lower primates. Of course, he would deny that God exists and he would probably say that after we die, we cease to exist. Since there is no absolute God, morals would not be absolute. Instead, they would be based upon personal preference and whatever works in society.

A Christian, on the other hand, would answer the questions differently. A Christian would say that God created us and put us in the world with a purpose. The purpose is to bring glory to God and to exercise proper and responsible dominion over creation. A Christian would say that when we die, we either end up in heaven or hell. Of course, a Christian would deny we arrived via evolution and would also deny that morals are subjective.

What are the elements of a Christian worldview?

Christianity teaches a set of beliefs that form the basics of our worldview. Following is a list of some of the elements that make up the Christian worldview.

An absolute God exists

If an absolute God exists, then it means that God is self-sufficient and lacks nothing. If God is self-sufficient, then he needs no external cause for his existence. This would mean he is eternal. If he is eternal then he does not change.

God created the universe

If God created the universe, then he is all powerful -- since it obviously takes a great deal of power to create the universe. This would also mean that God is separate from creation and not a part of the created order. From the previous point where we see that God is absolute and unchanging, we could see that God's nature would be reflected in the created order. As a painter leaves a part of himself on the canvas, so God reveals himself in creation. Creation is, therefore, ordered, predictable, and dependable. This would mean that when Christians look into creation, they would expect to find a predictable, regular, and testable world.

Man is created in God's image

This means that God, who is rational and intelligent, has impressed his image upon the hearts and soul of human beings. Therefore, people can be rational and turn their attention towards the world and since they believe that the universe reflects God's creative nature, they can have the confidence to look into creation and expect order. They can also expect that since they are made in the image of God, they have the ability to unlock the secrets of the universe.

Also, if man is created in God's image, then all people are worthy of respect and honor.

This would also mean that when a new life formed in the womb, it is human from the time of conception. Therefore, abortion would be wrong. Furthermore, if we are created in God's image, then we did not evolve from lower primates. This would mean that we have purpose and are not merely the result of random development through evolution that is, supposedly, guided by natural selection. Natural selection works on the theory of survival of the fittest and this could have a very harmful effect on society if "survival of the fittest" is transferred into a moral principle. It would justify oppressing the weak and helpless.

Man was given dominion over creation by God.

This means that all aspects of the created order on earth are to be governed by man according to how God has revealed himself and his will for us in the Bible. Therefore, politics, medicine, art, ecology, society, economics, exploration, philosophy, mathematics, education, etc. all fall under the domain of human responsibility and should be considered realms for man to control -- under the wisdom and direction of God's revelation, the Bible (more on that below).

Jesus is mankind's only hope for redemption

Because man is fallen, he is in need of rescue from God's righteous condemnation -- which is eternal damnation. Also, since he is fallen, there is no way he can redeem himself. Therefore, Jesus, who is God in flesh, died for us and rose from the dead. We receive his righteousness and forgiveness by faith. This basic theological truth means that Christians should then preach that good news of redemption in Christ to all the world. Therefore, one of the most basic Christian principles is promoting Jesus as the means by which we are made right with God.

The Bible is the Word of God

Of course, I have already mentioned the Bible, but the Bible is the inspired and inerrant word of God. From the Bible, we derive the truths by which we govern our lives. It is from the Bible that we learn about God himself, his created order, the Trinity, redemption, about sin, salvation, hope, and what is morally correct. The Bible reveals the direct will of God for mankind, for the family, for raising children, for proper behavior in society, etc.

God Provides for his creation

It is from the Bible that we learn of God's loving provision for us. We know that God lets the sun and rain fall down upon both the good and the bad. We know that God causes the crops to grow and cattle to multiply. We know that though we live in a fallen world, God has promised that he will never leave us or forsake us. Therefore, we can rely on God's provision for us and should have confidence that he will continue to provide for our needs.

Worldview, Ethics, and Engaging the Culture

Posted By [Zach Maloney](#)

Meta – Ethics

Different worldviews lead to different forms of moral reasoning in our world today. These can be grouped into two different categories:[3] (1) Some understand morality as a construction of human beings, while (2) others see morality as something that transcends human nature. For the Christian, we derive our moral reasoning and understanding primarily from divine revelation. David Jones explains,

The difference between ethical systems that rely solely upon a human construction for moral authority and those with a transcendent orientation is great, for with an anthropocentric source of moral authority, ethics are subjective, created, and changeable, while with a divine source of moral authority, ethical standards are objective, discovered, and unchanging.[4]

The Christian vision of morality requires us to consider *meta-ethics*—the approach that addresses the general and fundamental questions behind or beyond (“meta”) moral reasoning. Meta-ethics looks at the motives behind *why* humans do what they do, which is connected to the most general and fundamental questions regarding ethics and morality.

Ethicists refer to the *summum bonum*, or “highest good” to determine the motive behind human conduct. In other words, “What are we trying to achieve in our actions?” For example, consider situation ethics,[5] a form of utilitarianism. The basic thrust of this argument is that we should perform the actions that produce more pleasure and less pain, and the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Human happiness or pleasure is given the highest attention in this form of ethics. Of course, it’s worth asking who determines the definition of the “greatest good.” In [1 Corinthians 10:31](#)^L, Paul explains that we should seek God’s glory in everything. As Jones explains, “Since the Bible reveals God’s glory, the *summum bonum* of biblical ethics is the glorification of God.”[6]

The motive behind how we behave will reveal *who* it is for whom we are living. Once we recognize and identify the *summum bonum*, or the person's motive behind his/her actions, then we'll begin to see the shape of the person's worldview.

Worldview and Meta – Ethics

What is a worldview? Charles Colson defines a worldview as “the sum total of our beliefs about the world, the ‘big picture’ that directs our daily decisions and actions... (it) is a way of seeing and comprehending all reality.”[7] It is helpful to think of worldviews in relation to vision. Philip Ryken comments on this: “We don’t even think about seeing: we just see, and we are seeing all the time. Similarly, even if we never think about our worldview, we still view everything with it, and then apply our view of things to the way we live.”[8]

Ryken compellingly shows the sheer importance of our worldviews. As human beings, we constantly make decisions about how to spend our time, how to treat others, and how to live in general, based on the facts and experiences that we have compiled throughout life. Our worldviews are more than external conformity to a system of ideas. They also arise from internal issues like motivation and personal attitudes.

The assumptions of a worldview go hand-in-hand with one's reasons for behaving as they do. When worldview assumptions are identified, then understanding the motivations for moral behavior becomes clearer. Whether a person is aware of it or not, they have a worldview. That worldview reflects his/her inner meta-ethical beliefs. The problem is that not everyone is *aware* of it. It could be that the person's stated belief and actual practice actually contradict one another. [9]

Engaging the World

One of the ways that may help us in explaining these contradictions is to identify different sources of authority. When it comes to ethical decision-making, the four sources of authority that are most often used include: (1) Scripture, (2) Tradition, (3) Reason, and (4) Experience.[10] **The way these are ordered are important and will affect how one makes decisions.**

As mentioned above, our view of God is part of our worldview and in turn drives and reflects what our meta-ethic is. Therefore, Scripture should be the predominant authority in one's life for decision-making since God has disclosed Himself through His written word. Decision-making therefore relies upon this primary source of authority, which transcends humanity as a source or foundation.[11]

All of this becomes a doorway to evangelism when we begin to identify how a person orders these sources mentioned. The case can be made that our culture has these sources in reverse order, starting with experience and ending with Scripture. Therefore, the believer must be attentive to these positions with the conviction to challenge them as they contradict. Consider Paul's words to the Corinthians:

I, Paul, myself entreat you, by the meekness and gentleness of Christ – I who am humble when face to face with you, but bold toward you when I am away – I beg of you that when I am present I may not have to show boldness with such confidence as I count on showing against some who suspect us of walking according to the flesh. For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete.[12]

Cultural engagement begins with an ethic and a worldview that finds its final authority in divine revelation. We identify the world around us with meekness and gentleness, seeking to take every thought captive in obedience to Christ in our lives and those around us.

Conclusion

Indeed, ideas have consequences.[13] Sadly, most people drift through life without ever reflecting on the assumptions embedded in their worldview. This lifestyle for the believer is simply unacceptable. Paul urges us to think on “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable.”[14] Such virtues are more than just a mental exercise, but they are profoundly spiritual.

All humans are created in the image of God. Though this image is broken from sin, it is being renewed in Christ through the Spirit. This transformation is the goal of God's saving and renewing work, which includes our worldviews, motives, and behavior. As Christians called to be salt and light in a decaying and dark world, we must resist following the currents of culture by allowing God to shape our worldview, ethics, and approach to life.

[1] A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of The Holy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 9.

[2] [Proverbs 23:7 \(KJV\)](#)^L.

[3] Scott B. Rae, *Moral Choices: An Introduction to Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 66.

[4] David Jones, *An Introduction to Biblical Ethics* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Groups, 2013), 14.

[5] Joseph Fletcher is the notable proponent for this approach to morality. "Doing the most loving thing" should be the goal in any situation. Fletcher associated this form of ethic with Jesus' teaching on love. He argues that since "Jesus had no system of ethics" even the most "revered principles may be thrown aside." See Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966).

[6] Jones, 15.

[7] Charles Colson and Nancy Pearcey, *How Now Shall We Live?* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1999), 14-15, 297.

[8] Phillip Graham Ryken, *Christian Worldview: A Student's Guide* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 20.

[9] Francis Schaeffer is known for a similar practice known as "pre-evangelism." Conversion was the ultimate goal in showing unbelievers that their lofty worldviews were not adequate for everyday living. Schaeffer's thought can be seen elsewhere on this site as well. You may read an essay entitled, "Saving Schaeffer" [here](#).

[10] Thomas C. Oden, *The Living God, Systematic Theology: Vol. 1* (San Francisco: Prince Press, 1998), 330-339.

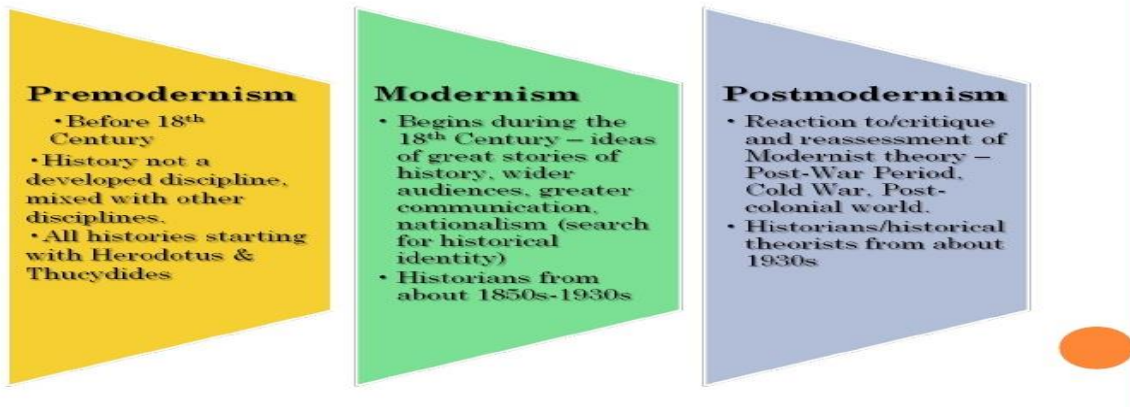
[11] Oden, 330-339.

[12] 2 Corinthians 1-6 (ESV).

[13] See Richard Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948).

[14] [Philippians 4:8 \(ESV\)](#)^L

THE "AGES OF HISTORIOGRAPHY" (FROM A POSTMODERN PERSPECTIVE)



MODERNISM VERSUS POSTMODERNISM

<p>Modernism was prevalent from late 19th century and early 20th-century style.</p> <hr style="border-top: 1px dashed white;"/> <p>Modernism was influenced by the first world war.</p> <hr style="border-top: 1px dashed white;"/> <p>Modernism was based on using rational and logical means to gain knowledge since it rejected realism.</p> <hr style="border-top: 1px dashed white;"/> <p>Modernism rejected the conventional styles of prose and poetry.</p> <p style="font-size: small; text-align: left;">IPedlica.com</p>	<p>Postmodernism was prevalent from the mid-twentieth century.</p> <hr style="border-top: 1px dashed white;"/> <p>Postmodernism was influenced by the second world war.</p> <hr style="border-top: 1px dashed white;"/> <p>Postmodernism was based on an unscientific, irrational thought process, and it rejected logical thinking.</p> <hr style="border-top: 1px dashed white;"/> <p>Postmodernism deliberately uses a mixture of conventional styles.</p>
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Defining Modernism and Postmodernism

Defining	Premodernism	Modernism	Postmodernism
<i>What is real?</i> (Metaphysics)	Realism: Supernaturalism	Realism: Naturalism	Antirealism
<i>How do I know?</i> (Epistemology)	Mysticism and/or faith	Objectivism: experience & reason	Social subjectivism
<i>What/who am I?</i> (Human Nature)	Original Sin Subject to God's will Dualism	<i>Tabula rasa</i> ; nature/nurture/choice combo Autonomy Integration	Social determinism Group conflict Reductionism
<i>How should I live?</i> (Ethics)	Collectivism: altruism	Individualism	Collectivism: egalitarianism
<i>How should we live?</i> (Politics and Economics)	Feudalism	Liberal capitalism	Socialism
When & Where	Medieval	Enlightenment; current sciences, business, technical fields	Current humanities and related professions

Source: Stephen R.C. Hicks, 2004/2011. *Explaining Postmodernism: Skepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to Foucault.*

Postmodernism: An Old Enemy in a New Suit

Posted by [Mark Mayberry](#) September 11, 2012

By David McClister

The good news is that secular humanism is on the way out. The bad news is that something worse is taking its place. That something worse is called postmodernism.

Modernism

Before we can define and understand postmodernism, a few words about modernism, its precursor, are in order. “Modernism” is a term that is loosely applied to several philosophical systems including rationalism, empiricism, existentialism, and logical positivism. Don’t let those terms scare you. They are all philosophical systems that have in common the idea that the supernatural either does not exist or if it does it is not a source of significant information for man. In other words, these systems were attempts to do away with God and the miraculous in man’s thinking. Rationalism made reason the determiner of truth. Empiricism said that the only things we may know for certain are the things we know through our senses. Existentialism said that truth is wholly subjective, and what is important is your own self-realization. Logical positivism was empiricism with a twist. It said that no statement has meaning unless it can be verified (usually by some kind of sense observation). It would not be too much of a generalization to say that the goal of these systems was to do away with the idea that man must be subject to revelation from God. Truth, according to these systems, does not come from God.

Modernism has borne its fruits in the last 50 years in several ways. The atheistic, humanistic, evolutionary view of human origins, political structures that emphasize material success from human effort alone (like Marxism), the idea that morality is relative to culture or situation, the near deification of science and technology as man's savior, the rise of radical liberal biblical criticism that strips the Bible of all that is supernatural, secular humanism that makes man the god of this world — all of these are just some of the fruits of modernism that we have seen in our lifetime.

Modernism produced a despair, however. Man denied that he could find anything useful in a supernatural realm (that is, from God). In his search for truth and meaning the only other place man could turn was to this world and to himself. So man looked to the secular world, but the problem was that he found no significance in what he found there. Modernism thus reached a dead end.

Postmodernism

The dead end of modernism has now given rise to a world view known as Postmodernism. Post-modern-ism asserts that there is no order or rationale to anything, there is nothing that is absolute. Man's dead end search for truth means that there is no truth in this world. It asserts that order (the idea that things are a certain way) is our creation, our doing, that order is what we impose on the world, but the world itself has no order to it. Furthermore, the order we create and impose on the world is provisional and relative. It can be changed or replaced, it is not permanent. Consistency is not a concern to the postmodernist, for consistency is order and postmodernists reject the idea of a knowable unchanging order in anything. Postmodernism is thus inherently pluralistic. We are beginning to see this in the people around us.

This is the effect of Postmodernism. Without any order or absolute truth, people are free to believe what they want whether it fits with other beliefs or not. One of the first results of this kind of thinking is that there is no room for any system of thought that claims to be true. Since there are no absolutes there is no absolute truth, and since there is no inherent order, any system of thought that presents itself in an orderly way is dismissed as only one arrangement no better than any other. In short, Christianity, with its systematic presentation of the truth, is the first thing to go out the window with Postmodernism.

Some Basic Tenets of Postmodernism

Postmodernism is the old relativism in a new suit of clothes. But it is not the stock relativism we have seen in the past. Existentialism and secular humanism said that truth is relative to the individual. Each person decides for himself what is true or right. Postmodernism also asserts relativism, but says that truth is relative to society. Society determines what is true and right. Things only have the significance that societies give to them.

Technically, a postmodernist would object to our use of the words “true” & “right,” because those words imply absolutes & postmodernists reject any notion of absolutes. They prefer to speak of “significance.” Accordingly, they do not speak of thought systems. They speak of narratives instead. And instead of truth claims, they speak of fictions. The idea is that what we know and believe is not absolutely true or right. It is just that our society has made these ways of thinking significant, our society says they are important (but they are not really true or right). They are, in the end, just our way of looking at things (thus they are narratives, fictions) and they are no better or worse than any other way of looking at things.

This way of thinking has thoroughly pervaded the way literature is read and taught in the major universities of this country. In literary circles the approach is called structuralistic hermeneutics. That's a fancy way of saying that no literary text (such as the Bible, but any text, such as Melville's *Moby Dick* is included) must have one meaning. Even what the author himself says he meant is irrelevant to this approach. I recall sitting in a course one time in which various interpretations of a book were being battered around. When one student argued that the author himself could not possibly have meant all of the various things that were proposed, the teacher responded, "What has that got to do with anything?"

Coupled with this belief that society is the source of what is significant is the idea that societies are fundamentally concerned with their own survival, and thus when a society says something is significant it is only manipulating things to retain its power. The expressions of a society (such as its institutions and its literature) only perpetuate that society's manipulation of power. There are sinister motives behind it.

This leads to the idea that these institutions need to be viewed not for what they say on their surface, but for what they are trying to protect and what they are trying to control. This approach to things is called Reconstruction. A deconstructionist approach to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States would say that our country's founding documents are not about guaranteeing absolute rights, freedoms, and values to all people in our society, but that they are simply tools to legitimize the power of the upper-class white men who wrote them. They are actually oppressive documents according to the postmodern deconstructionist reading. We have heard the same things about how history books need to be rewritten, traditional families are obsolete, etc. All of these things, according to postmodernism, are just ways societies manipulate others, and thus they have to go. Included in their sights is the faith, the truth we have from God.

Modern theological literature is filled with deconstructionist readings of biblical texts that claim the biblical documents were written only to legitimize the people who wrote them. Thus, the Bible, they claim, is just another oppressive document that cannot be taken too seriously.

With the emphasis on society, postmodernism also denies that man is the most important thing in the world. Secular humanism's exaltation of man has no place in postmodern thinking.

Before we applaud the death of secular humanism at the hands of postmodernism, we should realize that the post-modernists deny that man has any special significance at all. People are no better or no more important than anything else in the world. This is where the modern animal rights and ecological movements have gained their strength. Man is just another living thing on the planet, no more noble and with no more "rights" than spotted owls or pine trees. Man himself is insignificant. Perhaps you can see where this is going. If human life is no more valuable than any other life, then there can be nothing wrong with infanticide, abortion, geriatricide or any other means of population control - even so-called ethnic cleansing.

- TRUTH MAGAZINE

Post-modernism

by [Dr. Carl Broggi](#) *Answers In Genesis*

I was recently on an airplane where, as God sometimes allows to happen, the subject of conversation was turned to religion and Christianity. The individual sitting next to me was a pediatrician from Thailand. I asked her if she had ever considered the claims of Jesus Christ upon her life. She said, “There is no need to. All religions are the same.” Then she added, “No one can claim that one religion is right and another is wrong. One can believe whatever they wish, as long as they believe it sincerely. All religions can be equally true.”

This woman, who said she was a Buddhist, told me that this is what Buddhists have believed for centuries. Her statement reminded me of what God said through King Solomon, “There is nothing new under the sun” ([Ecclesiastes 1:9](#)). This perspective, that all religions are equally valid, and that no one can dogmatically say that one religion is more valid than another is known as postmodernism. This notion, held by this Buddhist physician, is a perspective that many Americans are now embracing.

Postmodernism Defined

Defining postmodernism is a difficult process because the term can be used differently between disciplines. To understand the word, it might be helpful to break it down. Historically, when the word “modern” was used in a philosophical context, it referred to a worldview based on the principles of the Enlightenment. During the 17th and 18th centuries, the Enlightenment emphasized the autonomy of the individual, trust in the power of reason, conviction that human reason is objective, and that truth can be discovered by the rational human mind.¹ The “modern” mindset valued scientific investigation, absolute truth, logical and pragmatic organizations, and orderly surroundings.²

For this reason, long-established institutions that were deeply rooted in society, such as religion and the government, began to be questioned. There was a new and greater emphasis being placed on man’s ability to reform the world by his own thought, by scientific investigation, and skepticism.³

Someone might think, “Well, what is wrong with that? What is wrong with using your mind and using science to determine what is true or false?” Please understand, the Bible is not necessarily against using our minds—it simply recognizes the limitations of human thought. God Himself says, “ ‘Come now, and let us reason together,’ says the LORD” ([Isaiah 1:18](#)). Even the casual reader of Scripture is familiar with the Apostle Paul, who when evangelizing the lost people would “reason from the Scriptures” the truths concerning Jesus Christ ([Acts 17:2, 18:4](#)). God made us with minds, and in the commandment that the Lord referred to as the greatest of all the commandments He said, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind” ([Matthew 22:37](#)).

THE FACT THAT THE BIBLE TELLS US THAT OUR MINDS NEED TO BE RENEWED INFORMS US THAT FROM GOD’S PERSPECTIVE THEY’VE BEEN DAMAGED.

But the Scriptures also recognize that man’s mind is fallen. For the same reason, the Apostle Paul can declare, “For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God” ([1 Corinthians 3:19](#)). This is why he warns us, “Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ” ([Colossians 2:8](#)). For this reason, once we are new persons inside ([2 Corinthians 5:17](#)), we are commanded to renew our minds through the truth of the Scripture ([Romans 12:2](#)). The fact that the Bible tells us our minds need to be renewed informs us that from God’s perspective they have been damaged.

Logically, most people can understand the principle that all human reasoning is not necessarily good. Hitler, with his reason, believed the Jewish people were an inferior race that needed to be exterminated. While the modernism of the Enlightenment period encouraged people to look to reason and science as a source of authority, if man’s mind is rebellious as the Bible reveals ([Rom. 3:10–12](#)), then the conclusions one may make from science and reason alone will at times be faulty.

Scientific thought has been proven wrong on many occasions. There was a time when a minority of the scientific world was convinced that the world was flat. In hindsight, it did not matter how confidently they believed and taught it to be true -- their position was still erroneous.⁴ So when we speak of *modernism*, we are referring to a term that goes back to the time of the Enlightenment where man’s autonomous reason was considered sovereign.⁶ The problem with modernism is that it did not recognize that man’s reason must be brought under the authority of the Bible (hence, “autonomous”). Therefore, it is not surprising that today in theological realms, *liberalism*, the rejection of the Bible as the absolute and final authority, was once called *modernism*.⁷

Bible-believing evangelicals recognize that “reason” is valuable in that God has called us to use our minds, but only to the degree that our reasoning process is tempered and corrected by Scripture. Those of us who believe the Bible to be the inspired, inerrant, and infallible Word of God tend to emphasize biblical thinking formed by logical analysis, propositional teaching, and a historical, grammatical interpretation of Bible passages. We embrace theological and moral absolutes as forming the foundation of our faith and typically are unafraid to challenge those who do not fully agree with this perspective.

But while we would say that we have “reasoned our way” to this position, we would also acknowledge that this “reasoning” was not done without submitting any of the conclusions we have made to the litmus test of Scripture. In other words, we would say that our use of logic and reasoning are still predicated on the ultimate authority of God and His Word. The Apostle Paul taught us that conclusions about life and God and the world around us that are contrary to what has been revealed in Scripture, are to be rejected.⁸ So while the “modern” of the Enlightenment used his mind, he rejected the Bible as the final authority to guide it. In his thinking, if reason and science dictated the Bible was wrong, then it must be wrong.

So, what do we mean by postmodernism and how can we best define the term? As previously stated, it can be difficult to define, and definitions tend to differ. Earl Creps posits that due to its absence of a central, unifying trait, trying to define postmodernism “is like nailing Jell-O to the wall.”⁹ Students of the social sciences generally agree that there was a shift that began to take place in the way some people began to think as early as the 1930s.¹⁰ While some date postmodernism to the 1930s, most agree that it did not begin to take root in the West and in the United States until the 1960s and '70s, progressing ever since.¹¹

Initially, the term “postmodernism” gained popularity as a term used to describe a period of architecture and art that began to emerge especially during the 1970s. Many found modern art and modern architecture to be confusing because it seemed to lack a sense of order, rhyme, and reason. By previous standards, this new expression of art and architecture seemed so bizarre, because it had abandoned traditional standards for new ideals. These new “postmodern” standards rejected a previous way of thinking about life based on objectivity and reason.

The Fruit of Modernism

Modernism began to deviate into a man-centered reality (as opposed to a God-centered reality)—postmodernism is like the fruit of this man-centered religion. It goes one more step toward relativism. Where modernism still retained certain aspects of Christianity (such as absolute conclusions) within its parameters, postmodernism tried doing away with any semblance of Christian influence (no absolutes). Postmodern art and architecture had abandoned all previously held conventional standards in these fields. As a young man, when I would see this new kind of art and architecture, my first reaction was typically, “This is rather odd and confusing to me.” The rejection of absolutes—the rejection of being able to rationally define something as acceptable or unacceptable—eventually made its way into the realm of theology.

POSTMODERNISM IS A PHILOSOPHY THAT SAYS ABSOLUTE TRUTH, SOLID CONCRETE VALUES, DOESN'T NECESSARILY EVEN EXIST.

Postmodernism is a philosophy that says absolute truth, solid concrete values, does not necessarily even exist. Since the postmodernist thinks there is no real valid way to measure truth from error, acceptable from unacceptable, or right from wrong, all beliefs and perspectives are determined to be equally valid. This way of thinking is determinatively different from the way Americans and Westerners have thought in the past. A survey of research and literature indicates that Americans under the age of thirty five have been raised in a postmodern culture, with many having distinctly different values and preferences from those in earlier generations.¹² At least with the person raised under the influence of the Enlightenment, through the process of reason, someone would come to a conclusion. Sometimes, a proper conclusion is made, consistent with the revelation of God in Scripture and sometimes an improper conclusion. But in either case, a decision could be formulated, such that they would view an opposing decision as wrong.

However, in postmodernism it is argued that each decision is equally valid and that two opposing decisions can be true at the same time.¹³ Postmodernism embraces relativism to the highest degree. Relativism is the idea that truth and moral values are not absolute but are relative to the persons or groups holding them.

This means that what is right for one person, may not necessarily be right for another person. Therefore, truth is not really knowable. Truth is whatever you want it to be. This makes truth a moving target. What one believes, what one considers to be right or wrong, is really left up to the individual. I'm OK; you're OK—the famous saying brought to us by the psychology of the past—is an effective mantra for this viewpoint. What is true for you might not be true for me. In the thinking of the postmodernist, no one is really wrong except for those who hold to absolute truth. But how can they know that those who hold to absolute truth are wrong?

Are they absolutely sure? In their religion, there were no absolutes! By their own admission, they can't know the most basic tenant of their own religion! So, they are inconsistent and self-refuting at their most basic level. More on this as we progress in the chapter.

The Postmodernist and Tolerance

Today, those who embrace postmodernism ridicule Christianity as intolerant, egotistical, and arrogant because of its exclusive claims about God and morality. To say that there is only one way to heaven through Christ¹⁴ is viewed as intolerant by those who say there are many paths to heaven. To embrace a strict moral code that condemns sexual perversion like homosexuality¹⁵ or sexual permissiveness like fornication or adultery¹⁶ is to be restrictive, judgmental, and lacking sophistication. The battle cry of the postmodernist is a redefined understanding of "tolerance." Because truth cannot absolutely be known in their religion, the highest virtue for the postmodern man is tolerance, but not as the word has traditionally been defined. In the past, when Americans used the term *tolerance*, it was understood to mean that everyone has a right to have their viewpoint respected. When brought over into the realm of religious belief, while you might reject someone else's religious system because you believed it was inferior or just wrong, you still allowed that person the right to embrace it. You might even try to convince someone that you believe his or her beliefs are wrong.

Nonetheless, because everyone is made in the image of God and is a free moral agent, you recognize they are free to choose and tolerate their choice. However, in the postmodern worldview, no one has a right to say that his or her viewpoint is better or more correct than someone else's point of view (except, of course, the postmodernist who is imposing this belief system on others). **"Tolerance" for the postmodernist is to be extended only to those who embrace a relativistic worldview. In practice, since postmodernism cannot possibly coexist with a worldview that embraces absolute truth, they are intolerant of those who do not agree, particularly Christians.**

Postmodernism and Biblical Christianity

Some postmodernists argue that evangelical Christians are intolerant, not allowing other positions to exist or express their viewpoints. However, to paint this picture of Bible-believing Christians is utterly incorrect. It is true that in the history of the Church there have been some people who, in the name of Christianity, have not allowed other people to embrace or present their viewpoints. In this sense, such people were truly intolerant. However, what they did was contrary to Scripture, for the Lord Jesus said, “If anyone wills to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority” ([John 7:17](#)). This statement that Christ made to those who questioned His authority implies the opportunity to decide for oneself.

Christianity is not intolerant in prohibiting people from considering certain options. But when postmodernists accuse Christians of intolerance, what they really mean is that because Bible-believers insist their point of view concerning moral absolutes and salvation in Jesus Christ is correct and other views are aberrant, they should be defined as intolerant.

THERE IS A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN TOLERATING A BELIEF AND REFUTING IT.

Such a premise is a misunderstanding of tolerance. There is a difference between tolerating a belief and refuting it (showing it to be false). It is impossible for two viewpoints that contradict each other to be true.¹⁷ They might both be false, but they cannot both be true at the same time. Therefore, just because Christ claimed to be the only way to God, and because Christianity maintains that there are moral absolutes, does not by definition make it intolerant. It would only be intolerant if it did not allow people the freedom to believe their viewpoints. The postmodern man will allow the conservative evangelical to have a place at the table for discussion, only if we quit being conservative evangelicals. We must leave Jesus’ unique claims, the truth of the gospel, fiat creationism,¹⁸ moral absolutes, and the offensive teaching about hell on the back shelf. In postmodern thought, exclusive claims about Jesus and His work violate the highest virtue of their understanding of tolerance, and so they want it silenced in the name of their religion.

The most obvious example is sexual morality. For instance, Christianity teaches that marriage is defined as a union between a man and a woman because God created a man and woman. Therefore, by definition homosexual behavior and homosexual “marriage” are wrong.¹⁹ Yet, more and more young Americans who have adopted a postmodern point of view would simply claim that such a position might pertain to some Christians but not to other Christians or to those who do not follow Christ at all. Following this line of thought to its logical conclusion, postmodernism argues that the Judeo-Christian ethic on which our legal system was built, is now antiquated. So, it is now maintained that while homosexual behavior was once considered against the law, such statutes should now be considered archaic. There was a time in the recent past when most Americans viewed homosexual behavior as objectionable. Prior to 1962, sodomy was a felony in every state, punished by a lengthy term of imprisonment and/or hard labor.²⁰

There was a time in our nation when the average American would have had little or no problem with the Apostle Paul’s instruction to Timothy, his young pastor protégé in the faith:

But we know that the law is good if one uses it lawfully, knowing this: that the law is not made for a righteous person, but for the lawless and insubordinate, for the ungodly and for sinners, for the unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, for fornicators, for sodomites, for kidnappers, for liars, for perjurers, and if there is any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine. (1 Tim 1:8–10)

In this passage, God plainly tells us that laws are to be written not to condone this kind of behavior, but to curb it. However, if you believe that truth is different for each person, which is at the core of postmodernism, then you will favor laws endorsing any lifestyle the individual chooses. Postmodernism is turning our legal system upside-down because those things that were once considered wrong are now being embraced as right.

What Is Truth?

Hours before the Crucifixion, Jesus Christ stood before Pontius Pilate, and, as the Apostle John records:

Pilate therefore said to Him, "Are You a king then?" Jesus answered, "You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice." Pilate said to Him, "What is truth?"
(John 18:37-38)

Pilate's question, "What is truth?" has reverberated down through history. It doesn't appear that Pilate was looking to find the answer, but rather was giving a cynical, indifferent, even irritated reply to Jesus' answer. However, if the postmodern man were to attempt to answer Pilate, he would say, "Truth can't be known definitively—truth is whatever you want it to be." A profound response to that would be, "How do you know that is true?"

Of course, in our day Americans have differing definitions of what truth is, due to the influence of postmodernism. Some would say that truth is whatever works. The pragmatic outlook embraces that the end justifies the means. It is easy to see the fallacy in this line of thinking. For instance, one could lie & accomplish the objective they were trying to achieve, all the while doing it in a non-truthful way. Still, some would argue that truth is whatever makes you feel good. Many people build their morality on this proposition. *However, if truth is what makes you feel good, what will the postmodernist do with bad news that one knows to be true but makes them feel miserable?*

IN OUR DAY AMERICANS HAVE DIFFERING DEFINITIONS OF WHAT TRUTH IS, DUE TO THE INFLUENCE OF POSTMODERNISM.

Others would say that truth is what the majority of people think is correct. Upon a recent visit to Yad Vashem, the World Center for Holocaust Research in Jerusalem, I was reminded again that during World War II, the Jewish people fled to nation after nation only to be turned away, with no place to go but back to Germany. While the majority of nations thought that the Jewish people should not be received into their countries, clearly the majority was wrong in light of the peril they faced in Germany.

Postmodernism has also influenced the popular position that truth is based on sincerity. It is reasoned that if you sincerely embrace something, then it is must be true. But if you pause and think about it, you will meet people who are sincere, but sincerely wrong. A person who is wrong but sincere is deceived, like so many in the various cults. Being sincere is not enough. The physician I sat next to in the airplane said, “It doesn’t matter what you believe, just as long as you are sincere.” Of course, people who say this typically only apply this fallacy to morality and religion, but never to other disciplines like mathematics or mechanics or medicine. They fragment their worldview and apply it selectively. I reminded her of some absolutes that she embraced as a practicing physician, for which she had no argument. I mean, who would want to have a heart surgeon who thought it did not matter what you believed concerning the function of the heart? It does not matter how much one sincerely believes a wrong key will fit a door, if it is not the right key, the lock can’t be opened. **Truth is unaffected by sincerity.**

Someone who picks up a bottle of poison and sincerely believes it is lemonade will still suffer the unfortunate effects of the poison. My pediatrician friend from the airplane was quick to concur that believing two plus two equals five is foolish no matter how sincere you may be. Yet, what is sometimes so mind-boggling is that when it comes to spiritual truth, the one area of life that determines your spiritual destiny, people will tell you to believe whatever you want. Encounters like this serve as constant reminders that we are in a spiritual battle.²² Indeed, the question Pilate asked, “What is truth?” is a very important question.

I find it interesting that in the Bible the Hebrew word for truth is *emeth*—which literally can be translated as “firmness,” “constancy,” or as “duration.”²³ In other words, truth is something that is rock-solid and unchanging. In the original language of the New Testament, the Greek word for “truth” is *aletheia*, which literally means to “un-hide” or “to reveal.”²⁴ It conveys the thought that truth is always there, always open and available for all to see, with nothing being hidden or obscured.

Unlike the postmodernist’s perception of truth, God reveals that truth is knowable and available for those who desire to find it.²⁵ Truth is simply telling it like it is because truth reflects a sure and certain reality that exists and is unchanging. Truth comes from an unchanging God who is the truth.

Evangelizing the Postmodernist

IN MANY WAYS, POSTMODERNISM APPEARS TO BE WINNING BECAUSE SO MANY OF GOD'S PEOPLE ARE SILENT WHEN IT COMES TO SHARING THE GOSPEL.

Some Questions to Ask the Postmodernist

First, “How do you know that is true?” Second, “Where do you get your information?” Third, “What if you are wrong?”

How Do You Know That Is True?

In asking this question, you want someone to examine the foundation of why they believe what they believe. For the postmodernist, you are asking them to explain why it is that they think their belief that “truth is not absolute” is correct. Of course, if they give the standard answer that truth cannot be definitively known, you can ask them, “Are you absolutely sure?” If they respond positively, they have revealed the absurdity of their position.

When the postmodernist states that there is no such thing as absolute truth, he is either stating that as an absolute or not. Obviously, if they are stating it as an absolute, then there is absolute truth. Whether his answer is in absolute terms or with a degree of uncertainty, we can still reason with him on the basis of the moral code written in his heart. If they are open to investigating the nature of truth, then you will have the opportunity to present the evidence for why you believe what you believe.[38](#)

The Christian's faith is an issue of fact—God really did enter into human history, and there is either evidence for this or there is not. This is what contrasts Christianity with all the other religions in the world. Virtually all the other religions of the world are based upon an inner faith experience. They are not based on any objective, factual foundation. Knowing, as the Bible teaches, that God has written a sense of eternity into our hearts,³⁹ I find it helpful to remind people that eternity is for a long, long time. I am trying to help them see that it is at least worth their consideration to examine the objective evidence Christians claim to have.

Where Do You Get Your Information?

A second question I often ask the postmodernist is, “Where do you get your information?” Remember, everything you believe, and everything I believe, is based on something. You either made it up in your mind, someone told you, or possibly you read it in a book somewhere. There is always some basis, some source for an individual embracing the belief system he or she embraces. This becomes a good lead-in to remind them that everything the Christian believes is based on the Bible. That opens the door for them to ask, “Why should I believe the Bible?” Of course, our argument is that the Bible is the only book on planet Earth that God ever inspired. Think about it, since God actually is the author behind the human authors of Scripture, and since the Bible is the only book God inspired, then it stands to reason that humanity has a reliable standard of absolute truth. Based on this premise, anyone can take any belief they have & look in mirror of Scripture to see if it's true.

What If You Are Wrong?

A third question I sometimes ask is, “What if you are wrong?” The Bible’s viewpoint, is narrow. Jesus did not claim to be a good way to God, or even the best way to God, but the only way to God.⁴¹ Unlike in postmodern thought, all roads do not lead to God. If one takes the position that all roads lead to God because all roads can be equally true, then that person is going against the clear teaching of the Bible.

A WISE PERSON WILL BE WILLING TO EXAMINE THE OBJECTIVE EVIDENCE THAT THE CHRISTIAN FAITH IS BUILT ON.

Again, since the Bible is absolutely true, then they are embracing human opinion when they take a position that opposes the Bible. They are basing their eternal outcome on assertions others (mere people) have made, who have no authority to make them, because unlike Jesus Christ, they have not risen from the dead. It is much wiser to put one’s faith in the objective evidence of the Resurrection, which demonstrated Christ’s deity,⁴² and proved His assertion that He is the only way to heaven. Facts are facts, and facts cannot be disputed. For some, their problem is that they are afraid to examine the evidence. However, a wise person will be willing to examine the objective evidence that the Christian faith is built on. Eternity is for a long time, and the Bible reminds us that, someday, “every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.”⁴³

The issue is not whether one will do this, but when one is going to do this. People will either do it now, when it will bring them salvation, or they will do it when it is too late and they are eternally separated from God.⁴⁴ This is why the Apostle Peter boldly proclaimed, “Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” ([Acts 4:12](#)).

Conclusion

As we think about evangelizing the postmodernist, as Christians we are to be involved in both apologetics and evangelism. Evangelism is the presentation of the gospel. The gospel is defined in 1 Corinthians 15 in the following words: “That Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures” ([1 Corinthians 15:3-4](#)). The death, burial, and resurrection took place just as the Old Testament Scriptures prophesied centuries before would happen. Evangelism presents the essence of Christianity—that God came to earth in Christ and by His death and Resurrection provided a means by which we could be forgiven. We must never forget that evangelism is our primary responsibility and apologetics is our secondary responsibility.

Apologetics comes into play just as soon as people have objections. If a person raises an objection like Christ never lived, or the Bible is not true, or all truth is relative, then we should attempt to address these issues. As Christians, we need to be prepared to show the unbeliever that they cannot rationally justify unbelief. This means as ambassadors for Christ we can't remain intellectually lazy but must study to be able to respond to their objections. If someone remains a non-Christian, if someone embraces postmodernism, they will do so in the face of the evidence, but not because there is a case for unbelief.

In this day, many of God's people are distracted by the entertainments of the world, and so they have lost their edge in being used of God to win people to the Savior. Just before his death, the Apostle Paul reminds Timothy in his *last will and testament* to, “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” ([2 Timothy 2:15](#)). This verse reminds us that not all Christians can be usable in God's hand, because not all are “approved.”

Certainly, the Bible is clear that all who have been saved are equally loved & accepted by the Father.⁴⁶ Paul reminds Timothy, while all may be equally loved, not all are equally approved. Clearly, some are more usable than others because of their willingness to *study* the Scriptures and as to their readiness to *share* the Scriptures. If the instrument that the Holy Spirit uses to bring about conversion is the Word of God,⁴⁷ then we would be wise to study it and be ready to defend it. May God help us to be faithful to this high and holy call.

Summary of Post-modern Beliefs

Doctrine	Postmodern Teaching
God	Deny the exclusivity of the God of the Bible. Various positions exist, but all would deny the exclusivity of Jesus as Savior.
Authority/Revelation	Holds a humanistic view of truth, looking to man as the source of truth.
Man	All men are able to determine truth on their own. Various positions exist on the nature of man, but most would view man as basically good.
Sin	Sin is a relative concept and generally denied. The Bible cannot be seen as the absolute authority on what is sinful.
Salvation	Most would hold the position that if there is an afterlife, there are many different paths to get there.
Creation	Most would hold to evolutionary views, though positions vary.



Absolutism vs Relativism

Comparison Chart

Characteristics	Absolutism	Relativism
Moral Guidelines	definite	dependent on the context
The Value of Tolerance	emphasized	not emphasized
Intrinsic Values	acts are intrinsically right or wrong	acts are influenced by other external factors
Religion	more associated	less associated
Advantages	Critically evaluates moral standards	Considers gray areas
Disadvantages	Does not consider the context	May lessen "morally correct" to "socially acceptable"
Major Categories	No categories	Moral relativism, truth relativism, descriptive relativism, normative relativism
Consequences	Not considered	The end may justify the means
Moral Theory Examples	Kantian Ethics	Situational Ethics

Moral Relativism or Scriptural Absolutes?

by Apologetics Press Staff

In our postmodern age, the philosophy of total indulgence in sensual pleasures has become the societal norm. Television, movies, video games, and books espouse moral relativism (which teaches that there is no absolute system of morals or ethics). Television shows such as *Friends* teach that lying, stealing, and sexual promiscuity are normal and ethically acceptable—as long as you get what you want. “Just do it!” is the catchphrase of a popular, and therefore fashionably desirable, shoe marketed primarily to teenagers and college students. With this kind of pressure from the entertainment and fashion industries, it is easy to see why moral relativism is such a prevalent way of thinking. The results, though, are evident in the decadence of humanity in our postmodern world. Legalized murders bear new and acceptable names such as “abortion” and “euthanasia”; sexual perversions enjoy favored status; lying, stealing, and cheating are fully acceptable under our new “enlightened” way of relativistic thinking—get whatever you can, however you can, whenever you can, because life is short and you only go around once.

However, this idea is not confined just to contemporary society. Moral and ethical relativism has spread even into the realm of Christianity, causing faithful men and women to question scriptural absolutes and abandon clear biblical teachings. The Christian exegesis has shifted from “the Bible says,” to “I just feel this in my heart and therefore know it to be true.” Elders no longer execute scripturally mandated discipline, preachers cease to teach the truth and preach only what is commonly acceptable, and those who teach moral and scriptural absolutism are branded as legalistic, judgmental, and narrow-minded.

If this is the case, then the inspired writers themselves were legalistic, judgmental, and narrow-minded, because absolutism is clearly taught throughout the Bible! Paul wrote:

[F]or when Gentiles that have not the law do by nature the things of the law, these, not having the law, are the law unto themselves; in that **they show the work of the law written in their hearts**, their conscience bearing witness therewith, and their thoughts one with another accusing or else excusing them... (Romans 2:14-15, emp. added).

The Gentiles did the things required by God’s law, not because they had received any specific written code, as the Jews had, but because **there exists an absolute system of morals and ethics**.

God established this system, which has continued from the Creation until now. God's absolutes cannot be superceded by man's will without drastic consequences, as the world around us bears witness. This same principle of moral absoluteness is seen in scripture, because the Bible contains definite teachings that are not open to man's personal feeling and interpretation:

And we have the word of prophecy made more sure; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day-star arise in your hearts: knowing this first, that **no prophecy of scripture is of private interpretation**. For no prophecy ever came by the will of man: but men spake from God, being moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:19-21, emp. added).

Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy by thy name, and by thy name cast out demons, and by thy name do many mighty works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity (Matthew 7:21-23).

When God speaks, it is not for man to interpret via his own feelings what God has said. There **is** an **absolute** system of teaching, just as there **is** an **absolute** set of morals—both are defined by God, and as such are not open to postmodernism's relativistic way of thinking. Perhaps the most sobering thought in this is that by these absolutes we are judged and by these absolutes we are either confirmed or condemned. It is not by our own feelings, but by what God has established from the beginning in the form of moral and biblical absolutes.

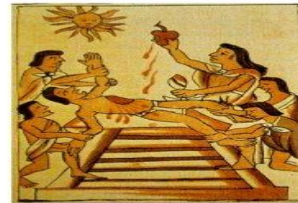
In a time when the world around us says, "Just do it," those of us who are Christians should not be swept away by moral or scriptural relativism. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, yea and forever" (Hebrews 13:8), and as imitators of Christ, we should continue to teach absolutes that are the same yesterday, today, and forever.

Relativism, Absolutism, Pluralism

- ❖ To defined normative ethical relativism on the grounds that moral judgment are culturally determined is rather facile. A simple example is the way most of people in India fined their partner of life through newspapers, websites or community of their own cost. this maybe is normal in India but its totally unacceptable by society in Iran.
- ❖ This is not a case of ethical relativism but that of differing instantiation. No two societies could disagree on the morality of an action, for each holds 'moral' to be different as applies to it.
- ❖ It is a fact of moral life that people & societies do disagree with one another on moral matters.

Cultural relativism: Meaning

- The belief that there is no moral truth that applies to all peoples at all times
- since there are no absolute moral standards for moral judgement.
- 'when in Rome, do as the Romans do'.
- Consequence: between cultures (and the same cultures at different times), there could be wide moral variance.
 - e.g. Greece BC 220 slavery is OK; Greece AD 2011 slavery is not OK
 - Papua New Guinea: Cannibalism is okay in some tribes; Great Britain, less so;
 - Aztec human sacrifice vs European 'civilisation'



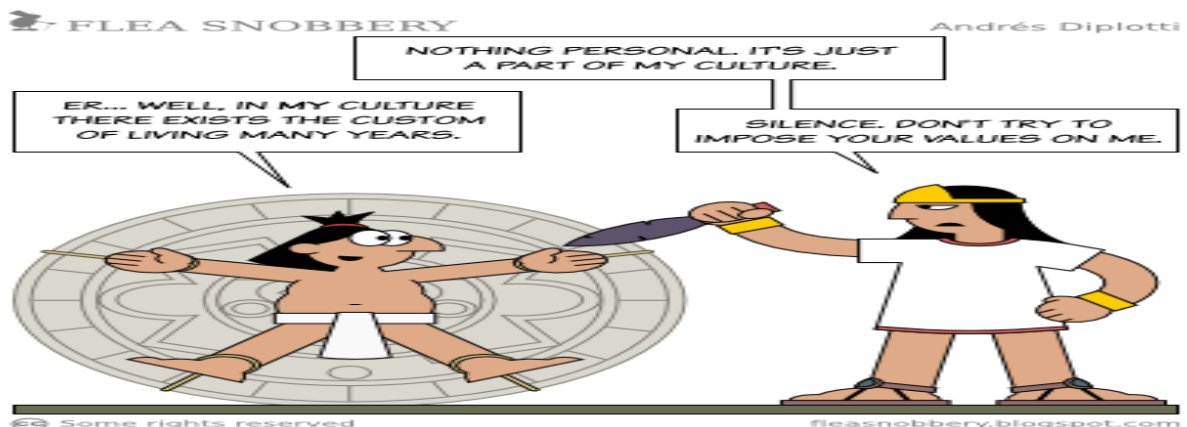
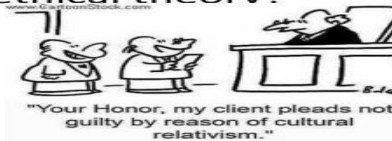
The Cultural Relativism Argument

People's judgment about right and wrong differ from culture to culture.

Therefore, right and wrong are relative to culture, and there are no objective moral principles.

If people's judgments about right and wrong differ from culture to culture, then right and wrong are relative to culture, and there are no objective moral principles.

Is cultural relativism and viable ethical theory?



Relativism

Ethical Relativism

Moral systems are products of an individual or group.

If people believe different things are good and bad, how can you define what is good?

Cultural Relativism

“Good” depends on the norms of each society. What is acceptable in one society might not be in another.

Who is to say which society is right?

However, FATAL FLAW in relativism is: why should anyone obey their cultural norms since they may be right in another place or another time?

Philosophy of Ethics – Ethical Relativism

- **Moral Subjectivism** – The view that moral values are relative to individual people rather than people groups. (Whatever a person prefers is what is morally right.)
- Like cultural relativism, moral subjectivism denies the existence of any universal truth.
- But if moral subjectivism is true, then no one can ever be mistaken in their moral judgments; we have no grounds ever to be critical of another person’s moral choices (rapists? serial killers? pornographers?); and no debate on ethical issues is possible, ever.

Ethical Relativism or Global Values?

- Three main responses to the question:
 - The ***ethical relativism*** believes that there are no universal or international rights and wrongs, it all depends on a particular culture’s values and beliefs - when in Rome, do as the Romans do.
 - The ***ethical absolutism*** believes that when in Rome, one should do what one would do at home, regardless of what the Romans do. This view of ethics gives primacy to one’s own cultural values.
 - In contrast, the ***ethical universalism*** believes that there are fundamental principles of right and wrong which transcend cultural boundaries and multinationals must adhere to these fundamental principles or global values.

Subjective Ethical Relativism / Subjectivism

- Subjectivism claims that moral truths are relative to individual personal beliefs. In other words, morality is subjective—what's right or good *for me*.
 - Ultimately reduces morality to aesthetic tastes or purely emotional responses (emotivism).
 - Makes morality a useless concept because there can be no interpersonal criticism, judgment, evaluation.
 - Based on atomistic view of self, which happens to be favored by our emphasis on individualism, but is belied by our obvious belonging to several communities.

Subjective Ethical Relativism / Subjectivism

Diversity Thesis	What is considered morally right and wrong varies from person to person, so that there are no moral principles accepted by all persons.
Dependency Thesis	All moral principles derive their validity from individual acceptance.
Conclusion	Therefore, there are no universally valid moral principles that apply to all persons or individuals everywhere and at all times.

Ethical Relativism: A Self-Interest Approach

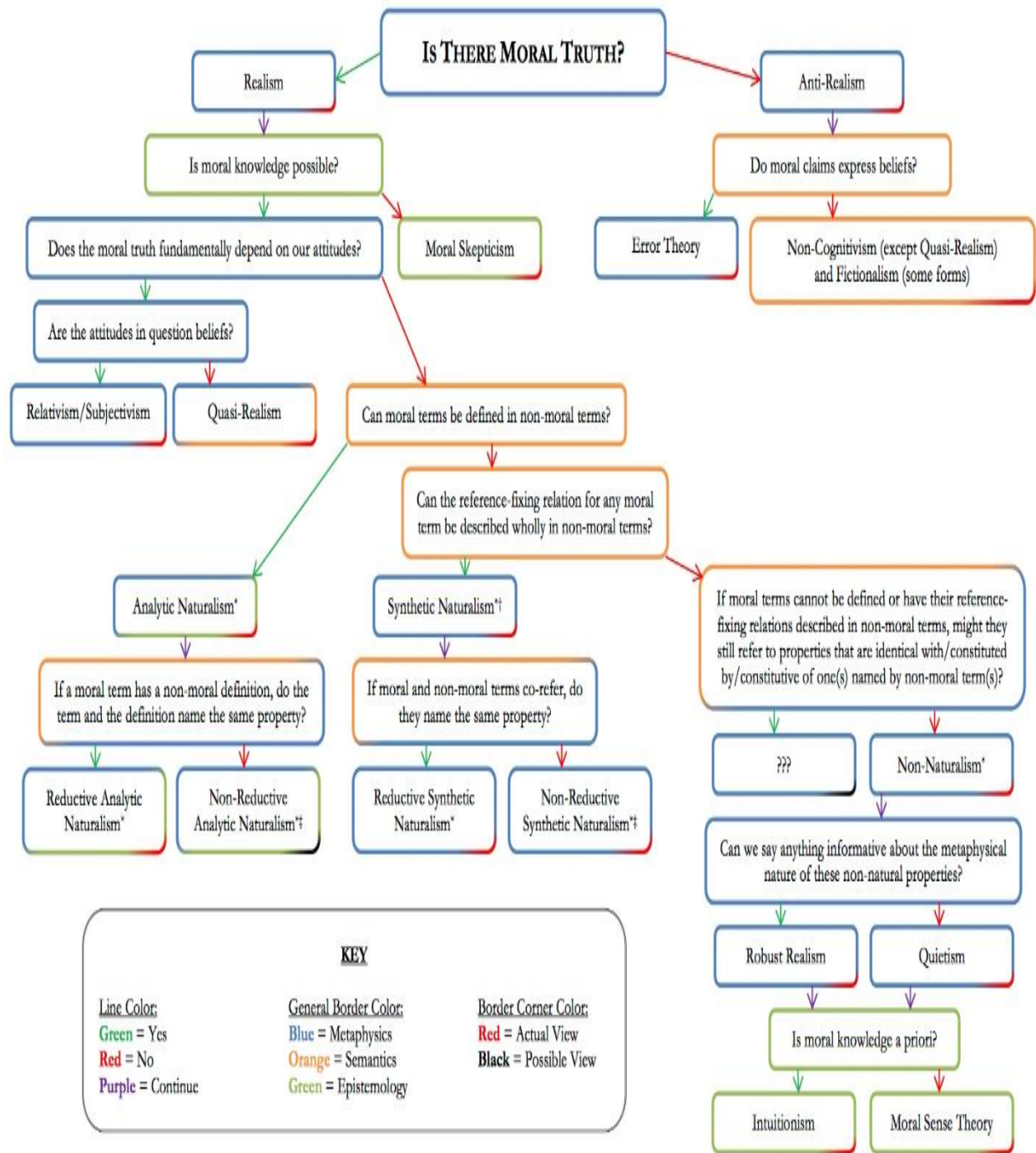
- **Benefits include:**
 - **Ability to recognize the distinction between individual and social values, customs, and moral standards**
- **Problems include:**
 - **Imply an underlying laziness**
 - **Contradicts everyday experience**
 - **Relativists can become absolutists**
- **Relativism and stakeholder analysis.**

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Ethical Relativism: A Self-Interest Approach

- **Ethical relativism** holds that no universal standards or rules can be used to guide or evaluate the morality of an act.
- This view argues that people set their own moral standards for judging their actions.
- This is also referred to as **naïve relativism**.
- The logic of ethical relativism extends to culture.

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* (Non-)Naturalism is the standard label for these views. Technically, we need another level of questions to determine whether the properties in question are natural or non-natural. We could then distinguish, e.g., Analytic Naturalism from Analytic Non-Naturalism, or (standard) Non-Naturalism from "Autonomous Naturalism." Since these distinctions are rarely, if ever, discussed, I set this issue aside here.

† You will see no more epistemic green on this branch of the chart. Typically, epistemic access on synthetic naturalism involves both (a priori) access to the correct reference-fixing relation and either a priori or a posteriori access to the relevant relata.

‡ Setting aside the possibility of reduction without property identity.

THEY ARE INTELLECTUALLY DISARMED! Per Premier Issue *Salvo Magazine*

Seven Things You Can't Do As Moral Relativist:

- ✓ Relativists Can't Accuse Others Of Wrongdoing!
- ✓ Relativists Can't Complain About Evil As A Problem!
- ✓ Relativists Can't Place Blame Or Accept Praise!
- ✓ Relativists Can't Claim Anything Is Unfair Or Unjust!
- ✓ Relativists Can't Improve Their Morality!
- ✓ Relativists Can't Hold Meaningful Moral Discussions!
- ✓ Relativists Can't Promote Toleration As Requirement!

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Morality, Ethics, Values

"What you do when no one is looking."

Values--beliefs of a person or social group in which they have an emotional investment (either for or against something). Examples: moral values, economic values, political values, and social values.

Morality—values that govern a society's attitude toward right and wrong.

Ethics—attempts to develop the means for determining what those values should be.

Ethics vs. Morals... It's blurry.

The meanings of **morals** and **ethics** do overlap.

Ways to differentiate:

- ▶ **Morals** are about personal behavior while **ethics** more grandly philosophical.
 - ▶ A **moral** is a lesson to be learned about a single principle of right and wrong
 - ▶ An **ethic** is a guiding principle that affects your criteria for determining what is right and wrong.
- ▶ We tend to think of morals as beliefs and values that are given to us- taught to us by our parents, culture, religion, etc. A **system of ethics (or moral philosophy)** is determined by examining morals and choosing based on reason.

Ethics assumes that the [moral] standards exist and seeks to describe them, evaluate them, or evaluate the premises upon which those standards exist.

Ethics and **morals** relate to “right” and “wrong” conduct. While they are sometimes used interchangeably, they are different: **ethics** refer to rules provided by an external source, e.g., codes of conduct in workplaces or principles in religions. **Morals** refer to an individual’s own principles regarding right and wrong.

Comparison chart

Ethics versus Morals comparison chart

	Ethics	Morals
What are they?	The rules of conduct recognized in respect to a particular class of human actions or a particular group or culture.	Principles or habits with respect to right or wrong conduct. While morals also prescribe dos and don'ts, morality is ultimately a personal compass of right and wrong.
Where do they come from?	Social system - External	Individual - Internal
Why we do it?	Because society says it is the right thing to do.	Because we believe in something being right or wrong.
Flexibility	Ethics are dependent on others for definition. They tend to be consistent within a certain context, but can vary between contexts.	Usually consistent, although can change if an individual’s beliefs change.
The "Gray"	A person strictly following Ethical Principles may not have any Morals at all. Likewise, one could violate Ethical Principles within a given system of rules in order to maintain Moral integrity.	A Moral Person although perhaps bound by a higher covenant, may choose to follow a code of ethics as it would apply to a system. "Make it fit"
Origin	Greek word "ethos" meaning "character"	Latin word "mos" meaning "custom"
Acceptability	Ethics are governed by professional and legal guidelines within a particular time and place	Morality transcends cultural norms

CARM: Ethical Relativism

by [Matt Slick](#)

Ethical relativism is the position that there are no moral absolutes, no moral right and wrong. Instead, right and wrong are based on social norms. Such could be the case with "situational ethics," which is a category of ethical relativism. At any rate, ethical relativism would mean that our morals have evolved, that they have changed over time, and that they are not absolute.

One advantage of ethical relativism is that it allows for a wide variety of cultures and practices. It also allows people to adapt ethically as the culture, knowledge, and technology change in society. This is a good and valid form of relativism.

The disadvantage of ethical relativism is that truth, right and wrong, and justice are all relative. Just because a group of people think that something is right does not make it so. Slavery is a good example of this. Two hundred years ago in America, slavery was the norm and morally acceptable. Now it is not.

Relativism also does not allow for the existence of an absolute set of ethics. Logically, if there are no absolute ethics, then there can be no Divine Absolute Ethics Giver. Requiring an absolute set of ethics implies an Absolute Ethics Giver, which can easily be extrapolated as being God. This would be opposed to ethical relativism. Therefore, ethical relativism would not support the idea of an absolute God, and it would exclude religious systems based upon absolute morals; that is, it would be absolute in its condemnation of absolute ethics. In this, relativism would be inconsistent, since it would deny beliefs of absolute values.

Furthermore, if ethics have changed over time, there is the problem of self-contradiction within the relativistic perspective. 200 years ago slavery was socially acceptable and correct. Now it is not. There has been a change in social ethics in America regarding this issue. The problem is that if slavery becomes acceptable again in the next 200 years, who is to say if it is right or wrong? We would have a contradictory set of right and wrong regarding the same issue. To this I ask the question, does truth contradict itself? (But this gets into the discussion of the nature of [truth](#).)

Within ethical relativism, right and wrong are not absolute and must be determined in society by a combination of observation, [logic](#), social preferences and patterns, experience, emotions, and "rules" that seem to bring the most benefit. Of course, it goes without saying that a society involved in constant moral conflict would not be able to survive for very long. Morality is the glue that holds a society together. There must be a consensus of right and wrong for a society to function well. Ethical relativism undermines that glue.

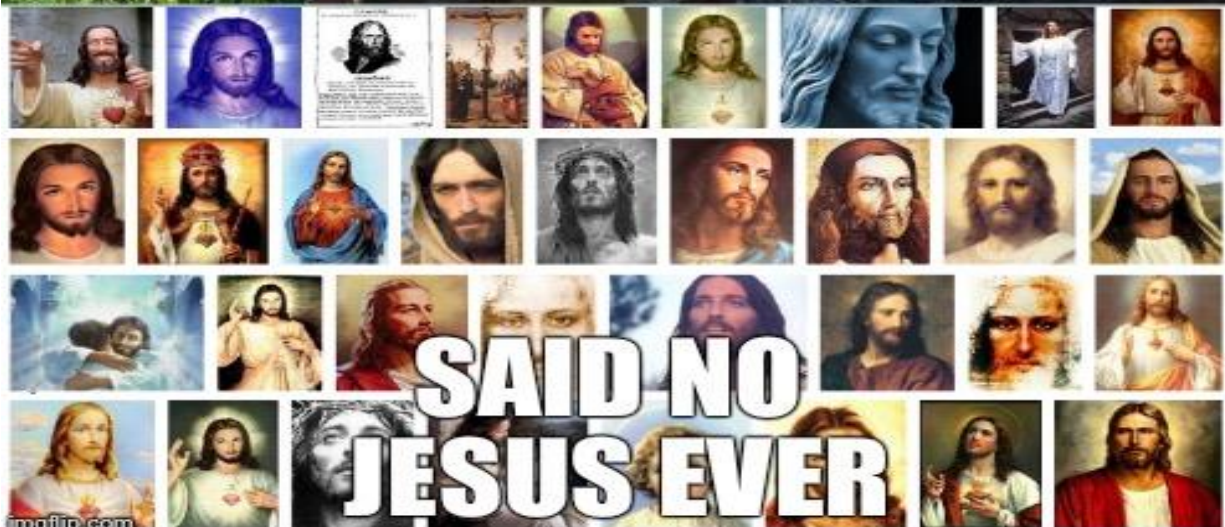
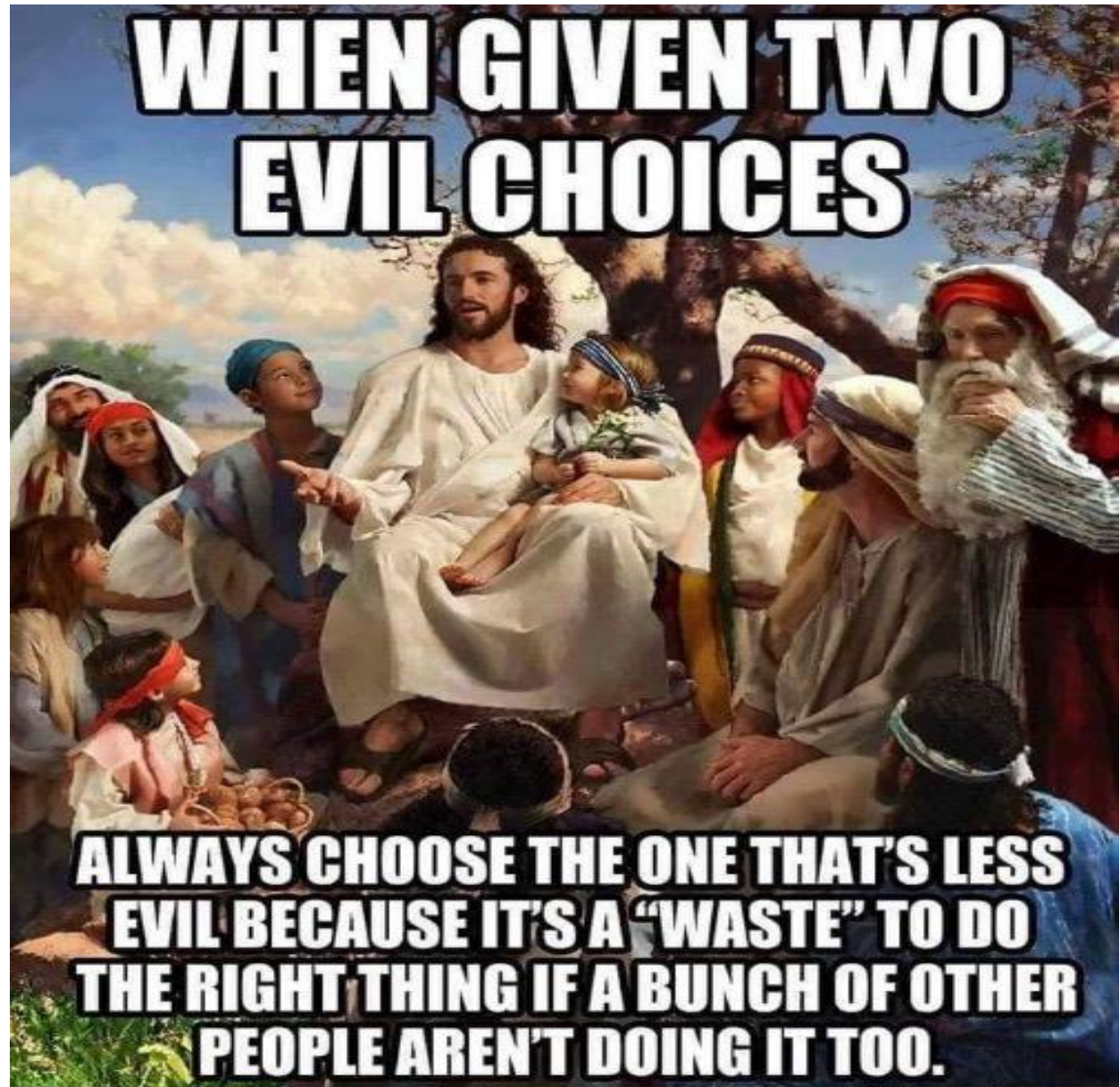
It seems to be universal among cultures that it is wrong to murder, to steal, and to lie. We see that when individuals practice these counterproductive ethics, they are soon in prison and/or punished. Since ethics are conceptual in nature, and there are some ethics that seem to transcend all cultures (be true for all societies), I conclude that there is a transcendent God who has authored these ethics -- but that is another discussion.

I do not believe that the best ethical patterns discovered by which societies operate (honesty, fidelity, truth, no theft, no murder, etc.) are the product of our biological makeup or trial and error. As a Christian, I see them as a reflection of God's very character. They are a discovery of the rules God has established by which people best interact with people because He knows how He has designed them. The 10 commandments are a perfect example of [moral](#) absolutes and have yet to be improved upon. They are [transcendent](#); that is, they are not dependent on social norms and are always true.

I was once challenged to prove that there were moral absolutes. I took up the challenge with the following argument. I asked the gentleman whether or not there were logical absolutes. For example, I asked if it was a logical absolute that something **could** exist and also **not** exist at the same time. He said no, that it was not possible. Another example is that something cannot bring itself into existence. To this, he agreed that there were indeed logical absolutes. I then asked him to explain how logical absolutes can exist if there is no God. I questioned him further by asking him to tell me how in a purely physical universe logical absolutes, which are by nature conceptual, can exist. I told him they cannot be measured, put in a test tube, weighed, nor captured; yet, they exist. So, I asked him to please tell me how these conceptual absolute truths can exist in a purely physical universe... without a God. He could not answer me. I then went on to say that these conceptual absolutes logically must exist in the mind of an absolute God, because they cannot merely reside in the properties of matter in a purely naturalistic universe. And since the logical absolutes are true everywhere all the time and they are conceptual, it would seem logical that they exist within a transcendent, omnipresent being. If there is an absolute God with an absolute mind, then he is the standard of all things – as well as morals. Therefore, there would be moral absolutes. To this argument, the gentleman chuckled, said he had never heard that argument before, and conceded that it may be possible for moral absolutes to exist.

Of course as a Christian, as one who believes in the authority and inspiration of the [Bible](#), I consider moral absolutes to be real because they come from God and not because they somehow reside in a naturalistic universe or are determined by the whims of mankind.

Ethics are important in society, in the home, and in all interactions. Would you believe me if I started lying to you in this paper? No. You expect me to be fair, honest, logical, and forthright. Can I be that if I believe all ethics are relative?



Of two evils, the lesser
must always be chosen
De duobus malis, minus
est semper eligendum

Thomas a Kempis

PICTUREQUOTES.COM

CHOOSING THE LESSER OF
TWO EVILS, YOU STILL GET



“*Sometimes,*
= the only choices you have =
ARE BAD ONES,
but you still
HAVE TO CHOOSE.”

- The 12th Doctor (*Mummy on the Orient Express*)

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Of two evils...

choose

neither

Quote by Charles Spurgeon



If it feels like you're choosing between the lesser of two evils, don't. There is always a higher choice.

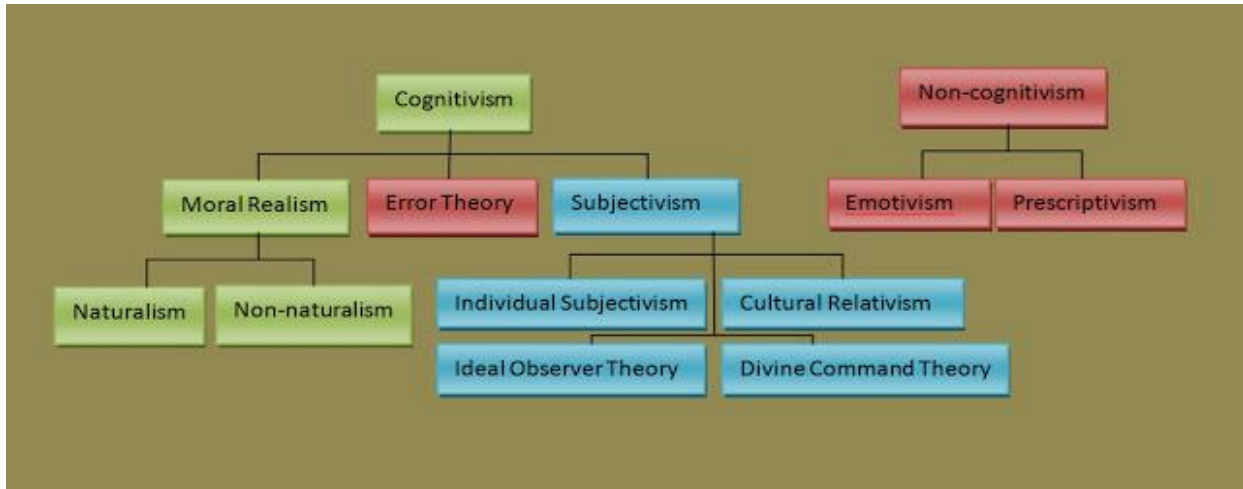
Michael Neill

“Of two evils, choose neither.”


A handwritten signature of Charles H. Spurgeon in cursive script.

C.H. Spurgeon
1834 - 1892

The Dangers of Situationalism



Ideas have Consequences



- Fruit = Consequences**
- Branches = Choices & Behavior**
- Trunk = Values**
- Roots = Belief System**

Source : Darrow Miller, Discipling Nations

TRUE FOR ME
BUT NOT FOR YOU?
Moral Relativism and Moral Truth



MORAL AUTONOMY

- Moral autonomy is defined as, decisions and actions exercised on the basis of moral concern for other people and recognition of good moral reasons.
- Alternatively, moral autonomy means 'self determinant or independent'. The autonomous people hold moral beliefs and attitudes based on their critical reflection rather than on passive adoption of the conventions of the society or profession.
- Moral autonomy may also be defined as a skill and habit of thinking rationally about the ethical issues, on the basis of moral concern.

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10/6/2016

What is Moral Relativism?

Definition:

Moral relativism can be 3 different types of positions, descriptive, meta-ethical, or normative, depending on the differences of moral judgments amongst a certain people or culture.

- **Descriptive:** describes the way things are, without suggesting a way they should be. This is to say that people frequently disagree over what is the most "moral" course of action.
- **Meta-ethical:** is the position that the truth or the falsity of moral judgments is not objective. Justification for moral judgments is relative to the traditions, convictions, or practices of an individual or group of people. Ex: "It's moral to me because I believe it is".
- **Normative:** is the position that because there is no universal moral standard by which we can judge others, we should tolerate the behavior of others, even when it is against our personal or cultural moral standards.

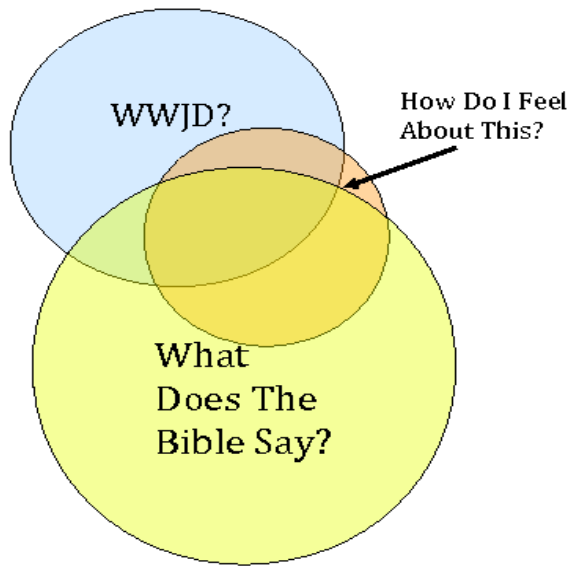
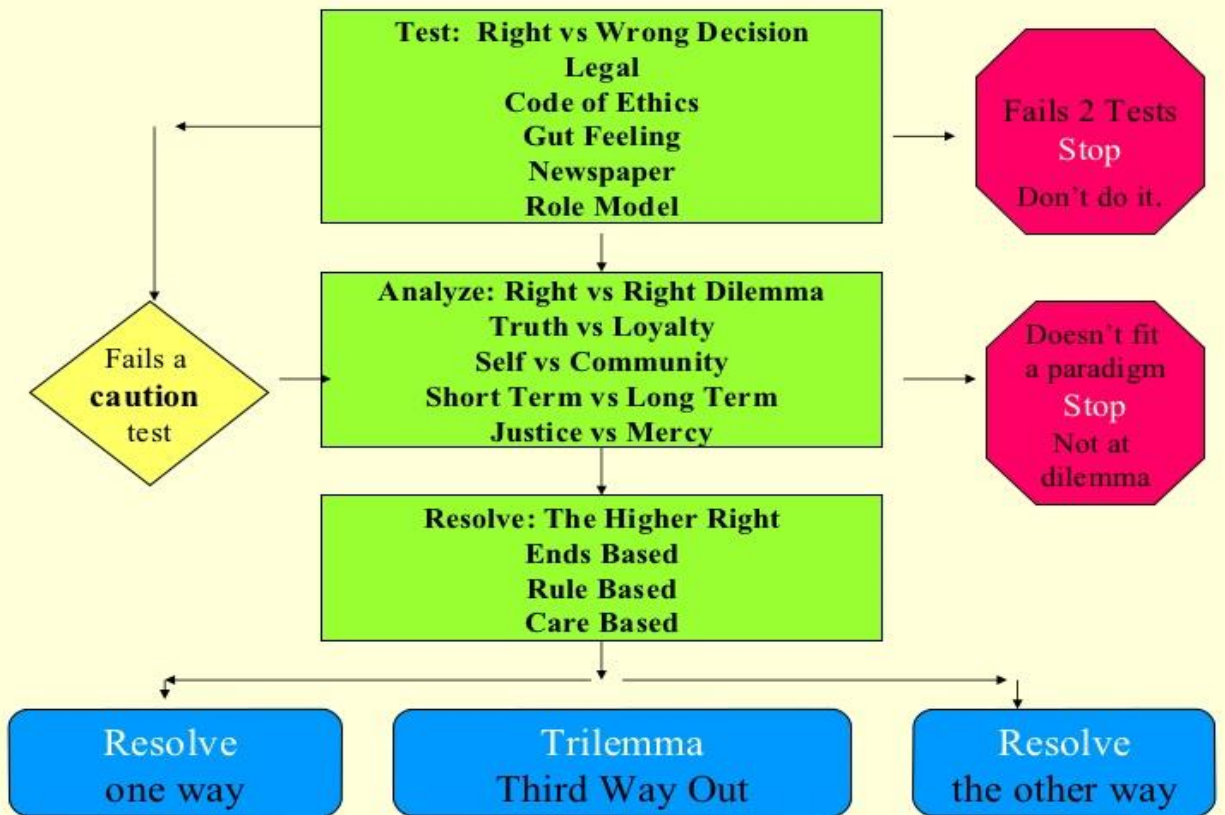


The Problem of Ethical Relativism and Situation Ethics

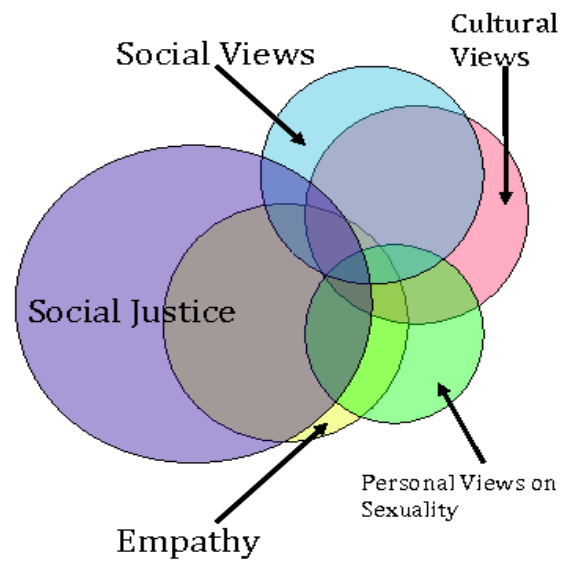
Approaches to Moral Differences

There is no Universal Truth

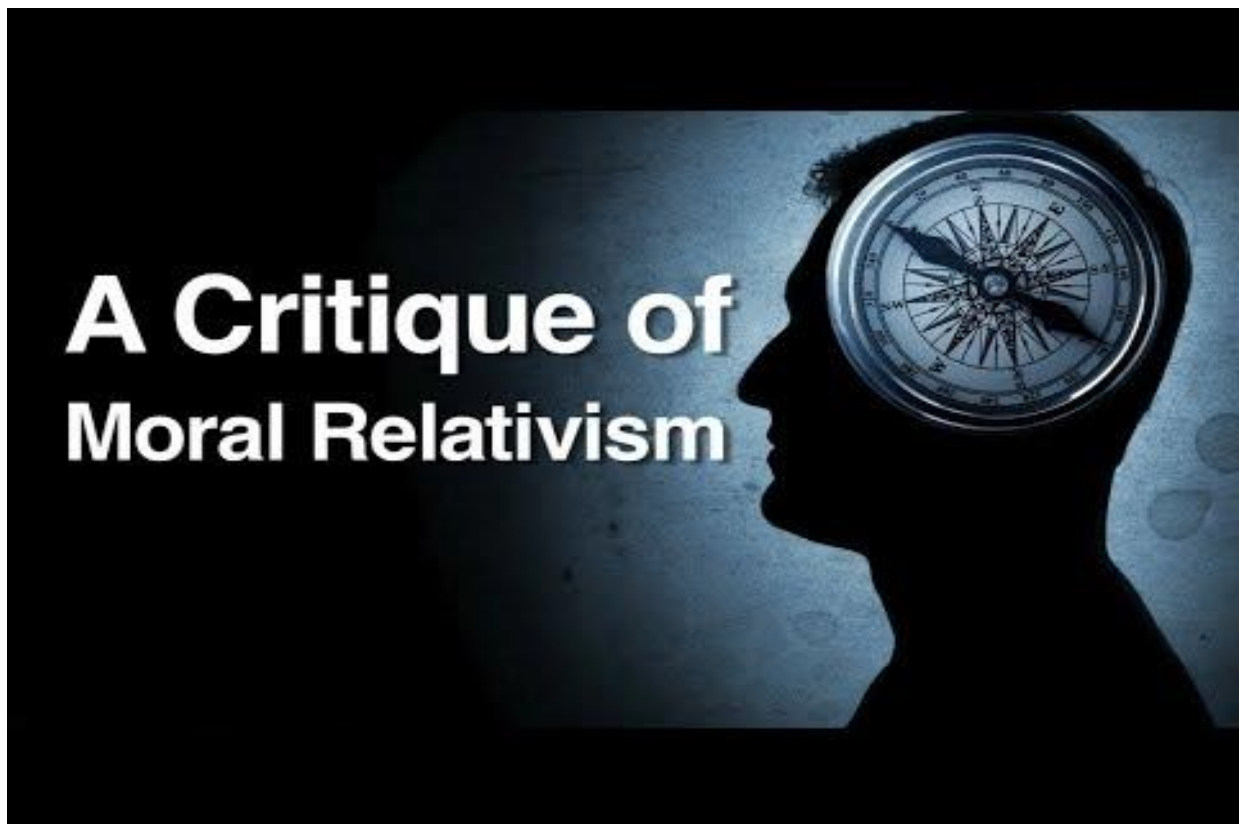
Each Culture has its own set of rules that are valid for that culture, and we have no right to interfere, just as they have no right to interfere with our rules. This ethical paradigm maintains that there are moral truths that exist but these truths are relative and dependent on cultures and beliefs of people.



Fundamentalist Christian Viewpoint



Secular Viewpoint



Moral Relativism (Philosophy Encyclopedia)

Moral relativism is the view that [moral judgments](#) are true or false only relative to some particular standpoint (for instance, that of a culture or a historical period) and that no standpoint is uniquely privileged over all others. It has often been associated with other claims about morality: notably, the thesis that different cultures often exhibit radically different moral values; the denial that there are universal moral values shared by every human society; and the insistence that we should refrain from passing moral judgments on beliefs and practices characteristic of cultures other than our own.

Relativistic views of morality first found expression in 5th century B.C.E. Greece, but they remained largely dormant until the 19th and 20th centuries. During this time, a number of factors converged to make moral relativism appear plausible. These included a new appreciation of cultural diversity prompted by anthropological discoveries; the declining importance of religion in modernized societies; an increasingly critical attitude toward colonialism and its assumption of moral superiority over the colonized societies; and growing skepticism toward any form of moral objectivism, given the difficulty of proving value judgments the way one proves factual claims.

For some, moral relativism, which relativizes the truth of moral claims, follows logically from a broader [cognitive relativism](#) that relativizes truth in general. Many moral relativists, however, take the fact-value distinction to be fundamental. A common, albeit negative, reason for embracing moral relativism is simply the perceived untenability of moral objectivism: every attempt to establish a single, objectively valid and universally binding set of moral principles runs up against formidable objections. A more positive argument sometimes advanced in defense of moral relativism is that it promotes tolerance since it encourages us to understand other cultures on their own terms.

Critics claim that relativists typically exaggerate the degree of diversity among cultures since superficial differences often mask underlying shared agreements. In fact, some say that there is a core set of universal values that any human culture must endorse if it is to flourish. Moral relativists are also accused of inconsistently claiming that there are no universal moral norms while appealing to a principle of tolerance as a universal norm. In the eyes of many critics, though, the most serious objection to moral relativism is that it implies the pernicious consequence that “anything goes”: slavery is just according to the norms of a slave society; sexist practices are right according to the values of a sexist culture. Without some sort of non-relative standard to appeal to, the critics argue, we have no basis for critical moral appraisals of our own culture’s conventions, or for judging one society to be better than another. Naturally, most moral relativists typically reject the assumption that such judgments require a non-relativistic foundation.

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1. Historical Background

a. Ancient Greece

In the view of most people throughout history, moral questions have objectively correct answers. There are obvious moral truths just as there are obvious facts about the world. Cowardice is a bad quality. A man should not have sex with his mother. Heroes deserve respect. Such statements would be viewed as obviously and objectively true, no more open to dispute than the claim that seawater is salty. This assumption was first challenged in fifth century B.C.E. Greece. The idea was that moral beliefs and practices are bound up with customs and conventions, and these vary greatly between societies. The historian Herodotus tells the story of how the Persian king Darius asked some Greeks at his court if there was any price for which they would be willing to eat their dead father's bodies the way the Callatiae did. The Greeks said nothing could induce them to do this. Darius then asked some Callatiae who were present if they would ever consider burning their fathers' bodies, as was the custom among Greeks. The Callatiae were horrified at the suggestion.

Herodotus sees this story as vindicating the poet Pindar's dictum that "custom is lord of all"; people's beliefs and practices are shaped by custom, and they typically assume that their own ways are the best. Herodotus' anecdote is not an isolated moment of reflection on cultural diversity and the conventional basis for morality. The sophists—notably Protagoras, Gorgias, and some of their followers—were also associated with relativistic thinking. As itinerant intellectuals and teachers, the sophists were cosmopolitan, impressed by and prompted to reflect upon the diversity in religions, political systems, laws, manners, and tastes they encountered in different societies. Protagoras, who famously asserted that "man is the measure of all things," seems to have embraced a wholesale [relativism](#) that extended to truth of any kind, but this view was uncommon. More popular and influential was the contrast that many drew between *nomos* (law, custom) and *physis* (nature, natural order). In Plato's *Gorgias*, for instance, Callicles, a student of Gorgias, argues that human laws and conventional notions about justice are at odds with what is right according to nature (which is that the strong should dominate the weak). This view is not truly relativism, since it asserts a certain conception of justice as objectively correct, but Callicles' stress on the merely conventional status of ordinary morality points the way towards relativism.

More radical is the position advanced by the sophist Thrasymachus in Book One of Plato's *Republic* when he claims that "justice is nothing but the advantage of the stronger." According to one interpretation, Thrasymachus is arguing that nothing is objectively right or wrong; moral language is simply a tool used by the powerful to justify the moral and legal systems that serve their interests. This view echoes the one expressed by the Athenians in Thucydides' "Melian Dialogue" when they dismiss the Melian's complaint that Athenian policy toward them is unjust. So, relativistic thinking seems to have been in the air at the time. Strictly speaking, it is a form of moral nihilism rather than moral relativism, but in rejecting the whole idea of objective moral truth it clears the ground for relativism.

Even though moral relativism makes its first appearance in ancient times, it hardly flourished. Plato vigorously defended the idea of an objective moral order linked to a transcendent reality while Aristotle sought to ground morality on objective facts about human nature and well-being. A few centuries later, Sextus Empiricus appears to have embraced a form of moral relativism, partly on the basis of the diversity of laws and conventions, and partly as a consequence of his Pyrrhonian skepticism that sought to eschew dogmatism. In his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Sextus catalogues the tremendous diversity to be found between cultures in the laws and customs relating to such things as dress, diet, treatment of the dead, and sexual relations, and concludes: "seeing so great a diversity of practices, the skeptic suspends judgment as to the natural existence of anything good or bad, or generally to be done" (Sextus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, 1, 14). But Hellenistic skepticism gave way to philosophy informed by Christianity, and moral relativism effectively became dormant and remained so throughout the period of Christian hegemony in Europe. According to the monotheistic religions, God's will represents an objective moral touchstone. Scriptural precepts such as "Thou shalt not kill" constitute absolute, universally binding, moral truths. Relativism thus ceased to be an option until the advent of modernity.

b. Modern Times

Many scholars see the first reappearance of a relativistic outlook in the writings of Montaigne, which, not coincidentally, came on the heels of the publication of Sextus' writings in the 1560s. In "On Custom," Montaigne compiles his own list of radically diverse mores to be found in different societies, and asserts that "the laws of conscience which we say are born of Nature are born of custom." (Montaigne, p. 83). In his famous essay "On Cannibals," written around 1578, Montaigne describes the lives of so-called barbarians in the new world, noting their bravery in battle, the natural simplicity of their morals, and their uncomplicated social structure. "All this is not too bad," he says, "but what's the use? They don't wear breeches." The thrust of the essay is thus to criticize the ethnocentrism of the "civilized" Europeans who naively think themselves morally superior to such people. Furthermore, Montaigne advances as a general thesis that "each man calls barbarism whatever is not his own practice; for indeed it seems we have no other test of truth and reason than the example and pattern of the opinions and customs of the country we live in" (Montaigne, p. 152).

In the centuries following, further trends in modern philosophy helped prepare the way for moral relativism by chipping away at people's faith in the objectivity of ethics. In the 17th century, Hobbes argued for a social contract view of morality that sees moral rules, like laws, as something human beings agree upon in order to make social living possible. An implication of this view is that moral tenets are not right or wrong according to whether they correspond to some transcendent blueprint; rather, they should be appraised pragmatically according to how well they serve their purpose.

Hume, like Montaigne, was heavily influenced by ancient skepticism, and this colors his view of morality. His argument, that prescriptions saying how we should act cannot be logically derived from factual claims about the way things are, raised doubts about the possibility of proving the correctness of any particular moral point of view. So, too, did his insistence that morality is based ultimately on feelings rather than on reason. Hume was not a relativist, but his arguments helped support elements of relativism. With the remarkable progress of science in the 19th and 20th centuries, the fact-value distinction became entrenched in mainstream philosophy and social science. Science came to be seen as offering value-neutral descriptions of an independently existing reality; moral claims, by contrast, came to be viewed by many as mere expressions of emotional attitudes. This view of morality suggests that all moral outlooks are on the same logical plane, with none capable of being proved correct or superior to all the rest.

There are relativistic tendencies in Marx's critique of bourgeois morality as an ideology expressing certain class interests. According to one interpretation, Marx holds that there is no objectively true moral system, only interest-serving ideologies that use moral language. But Marx wrote little about ethics, so it is hard to pin down his philosophical views about the nature of morality and the status of moral claims.

Nietzsche, on the other hand, wrote extensively and influentially about morality. Scholars disagree about whether he should be classified as a relativist, but his thought certainly has a pronounced relativistic thrust. His famous pronouncement that “God is dead” implies, among other things, that the idea of a transcendent or objective justification for moral claims—whether it be God, Platonic Forms, or Reason—is no longer credible. And he explicitly embraces a form of perspectivism according to which “there are no moral phenomena, only moral interpretations of phenomena” (*Beyond Good and Evil*, 108). It is true that Nietzsche likes to rank moralities according to whether they are expressions of strength or weakness, health or sickness; but he does not insist that the criteria of rank he favors constitute an objectively privileged vantage point from which different moralities can be appraised.

These philosophical ideas prepared the ground for moral relativism mainly by raising doubts about the possibility of demonstrating that any particular moral code is objectively correct. But anthropological research in the 19th and 20th centuries also encouraged relativism. Indeed, many of its leading contemporary champions from Franz Boas to Clifford Gertz have been anthropologists.

One of the first to argue at length for moral relativism was William Sumner. In his major work, *Folkways*, published in 1906, Sumner argues that notions about what is right and wrong are bound up with a society’s mores and are shaped by its customs, practices, and institutions. To those living within that society, the concept of moral rightness can only mean conformity to the local mores. Sumner acknowledges that if members of a culture generalize its mores into abstract principles, they will probably regard these as correct in an absolute sense. This may even be psychologically unavoidable. But it is not philosophically legitimate; the mores themselves cannot be an object of moral appraisal since there is no higher tribunal to which appeals can be made.

The work of Franz Boas was also tremendously influential. Boas viewed cultural relativism—a commitment to understanding a society in its own terms—as methodologically essential to scientific anthropology. From an objective, scientific standpoint one may not pass moral judgment on the beliefs and practices that inhere within a culture, although one may objectively assess the extent to which they help that society achieve its overarching goals. Many of Boas’ students helped disseminate this approach, and some, such as Melville Herskovits and Ruth Benedict, made more explicit its implications with respect to ethics, arguing that a relativistic outlook can help combat prejudice and promote tolerance.

The debate over moral relativism in modern times has thus not been an abstract discussion of interest only to professional philosophers. It is thought to have implications for the social sciences, for international relations, and for relations between communities within a society. In 1947, the American Anthropological Association submitted a statement to the UN Commission on Human Rights criticizing what some viewed as an attempt by the West to impose its particular values on other societies in the name of universal rights. The statement declared that:

Standards and values are relative to the culture from which they derive so that any attempt to formulate postulates that grow out of the beliefs or moral codes of one culture

must to that extent detract from the applicability of any Declaration of Human Rights to mankind as a whole (*American Anthropologist*, Vol. 49, No. 4, p. 542).

It went on to assert that “man is free only when he lives as his society defines freedom” (*ibid.* p. 543). Needless to say, the statement caused some controversy since many members of the AAA did not agree with the position it laid out.

More recently, discussions of relativism have been at the center of debates about how societies with large immigrant populations should deal with the problem of multiculturalism. To what extent should the practices of minorities be accepted, even if they seem to conflict with the values of the majority culture? In France, a law was passed in 2011 banning face veils that some Muslim women view as required by Islam. Those supporting the ban appeal to values they consider universal such as sexual equality and freedom of expression (which the face veil is said to violate since it inhibits expressive interaction). But critics of the policy see it as expressing a kind of cultural intolerance, just the sort of thing that relativism claims to counter.

2. Clarifying What Moral Relativism Is (and Is Not)

Defining moral relativism is difficult because different writers use the term in slightly different ways; in particular, friends and foes of relativism often diverge considerably in their characterization of it. Therefore, it is important to first distinguish between some of the positions that have been identified or closely associated with moral relativism before setting out a definition that captures the main idea its adherents seek to put forward.

a. Descriptive Relativism

Descriptive relativism is a thesis about cultural diversity. It holds that, as a matter of fact, moral beliefs and practices vary between cultures (and sometimes between groups within a single society). For instance, some societies condemn homosexuality, others accept it; in some cultures a student who corrects a teacher would be thought disrespectful; elsewhere such behavior might be encouraged.

Descriptive relativism is put forward as an empirical claim based on evidence provided by anthropological research; hence it is most strongly associated with the work of anthropologists such as William Sumner, Ruth Benedict and Meville Herskovits. There is a spectrum of possible versions of this thesis. In its strongest, most controversial form, it denies that there are any moral universals—norms or values that every human culture endorses. This extreme view is rarely, if ever, defended, since it seems reasonable to suppose that the affirmation of certain values—for instance, a concern for the wellbeing of the young-- is necessary for any society to survive. But Benedict seems to approach it when she writes of the three societies she describes in *Patterns of Culture* that “[t]hey are oriented as wholes in different directions....traveling along different roads in pursuit of different ends and these ends and these means in one society cannot be judged in terms of those of another society, because essentially they are incommensurable” (*Patterns of Culture*, p. 206). In its weakest, least controversial form, descriptive relativism merely denies that *all* cultures share the same moral outlook. A well-known version of this has been defended by David Wong, who describes his position as “pluralistic relativism.”

The somewhat simple form of descriptive relativism, which takes any differences between the moral beliefs or practices of two cultures as evidence of a difference in moral outlooks, has been heavily criticized both by social scientists such as Solomon Asch and by philosophers such as Michele Moody-Adams. One objection is that it is difficult to establish the relativist's claims about moral diversity in an evaluatively neutral way; for the empirical researcher who asserts that a particular moral belief is representative of a culture will have to grant the opinions of some members of that culture authoritative status while ignoring or glossing over internal conflicts and ongoing cultural changes. Another objection is that many apparent moral differences between cultures are not really fundamental disagreements about questions of value—that is, disagreements that would persist even if both parties were in full agreement about all the pertinent facts. For instance, the taboo against homosexuality in some cultures may rest on the belief that homosexuality is a sin against God that will result in the sinner suffering eternal damnation. The point of conflict between these cultures and those that tolerate homosexuality may thus be viewed as being, fundamentally, not about the intrinsic rightness or wrongness of homosexuality but the different *factual* beliefs they hold concerning the consequences of homosexuality.

In light of such difficulties, contemporary defenders of descriptive relativism usually prefer a fairly modest, tempered version of the doctrine. Wong, for instance, holds that human nature and the human condition set limits to how much moral systems could diverge while still counting as true moralities; but he argues that the experience of “moral ambivalence”—which occurs when one disagrees with another person's moral views yet recognizes that their position is reasonable—is nevertheless common and usually arises when the parties put shared values in a different order of priority.

b. Cultural Relativism

Cultural relativism asserts that the beliefs and practices of human beings are best understood by grasping them in relation to the cultural context in which they occur. It was originally put forward as, and remains today, a basic methodological principle of modern anthropology. It was championed by anthropologists like Sumner and Boas who saw it as an antidote of the unconscious ethnocentrism that may lead social scientists to misunderstand the phenomena they are observing. For instance, ritualistic infliction of pain may look, on the surface, like a punishment aimed at deterring others from wrongdoing; but it may in fact be viewed by those involved in the practice as serving a quite different function, such as purging the community of an impurity.

Ironically, an extension of this argument in favor of the view that what appears on the surface to be similar acts can have different “situational meanings” has been used as an objection to descriptive relativism. Thus, Gestalt psychologist Karl Duncker, argued that the action by an Eskimo of killing his aged parent, where this is socially sanctioned as a way to spare their suffering, is not the same act as the killing of a parent in a society where such an action would generally be condemned as murder. Since the meaning of each act differs, we should not infer that the values of the two societies are necessarily in conflict.

The term cultural relativism is sometimes also used to denote the corollary methodological principle that social scientists, if they wish their work to have scientific status, should describe and analyze what goes on in the cultures they are studying, carefully eschewing any normative appraisal of what they observe.

b. Ethical Non-Realism

Ethical non-realism is the view that there is no objective moral order that makes our moral beliefs true or false and our actions right or wrong. The term “objective” employed here is notoriously difficult to explicate; it means something like “independent of human desires, perceptions, beliefs and practices” (although the meaning of the term “independent” is equally hard to pin down). According to an ethical realist, a sentence like “slavery is wrong” is true or false regardless of the speaker’s state of mind or the norms prevailing in his or her community. This is the view held by most philosophers in the Western canon from Plato and Aristotle to Kant, Mill, and G. E. Moore. It continues to be widely held, and leading contemporary defenders of ethical realism include Thomas Nagel, John McDowell, and Richard Boyd.

Ethical non-realists obviously reject ethical realism, but not all for the same reasons; consequently there are several types of ethical non-realism. The most head-on rejection of ethical realism is perhaps the sort of moral error theory defended by J. L. Mackie. He argues that all moral claims are, strictly speaking, false since they posit properties (for example, goodness, wrongness, fairness) that are “ontologically queer” in being quite unlike any of the properties of things that we can perceive by normal empirical means. In the absence of any special faculty for detecting such properties, and therefore of any real evidence for their existence, we should conclude that they don’t exist; hence all statements that assert or presuppose that they exist are false.

A skeptical attitude toward [moral realism](#) can be more tentative than this. Hume is often interpreted as a moral skeptic who denies the possibility of proving by reason or by empirical evidence the truth of moral statements since our moral views rest entirely on our feelings. More recently, Michael Ruse, has defended an updated version of Hume, arguing that we are conditioned by evolution to hold fast to certain moral beliefs, regardless of the evidence for or against them; consequently, we should not view such beliefs as rationally justified. And Walter Sinnott-Armstrong has shown how difficult it is to refute moral skepticism, especially the sort of non-dogmatic Pyrrhonian skepticism which holds that one may be justified within a restricted context in affirming a certain moral belief—for instance, in court it is wrong to lie as opposed to telling the truth—yet not be able to justify the claim that lying, or even perjury, is wrong in some absolute, objective sense.

Ethical non-realism is typically presupposed by moral relativists, but it is not the whole of moral relativism. Clearly, no one who believes in the absolute authority of divine law or the intrinsic value of a rational will would be likely to embrace relativism. But merely denying that morality has an objective foundation of this sort does not make one a relativist; for moral relativism also asserts that moral claims may be true or false relative to some particular standpoint such as that of a specific culture or historical period.

d. Ethical Non-Cognitivism

Ethical non-cognitivism is the view that moral judgments are neither true nor false since they are not “truth-apt,” meaning they are not the kind of utterances that can have a truth-value. In this respect they are like questions or commands rather than like indicative sentences such as “Grass is green.” The most common kinds of ethical non-cognitivism in the twentieth century are forms of expressivism which view moral statements as expressions of evaluative attitudes. An especially influential version of this view, first put forward by Ogden and Richards, and later elaborated upon by A.J. Ayer and C.L. Stevenson, is emotivism. According to emotivism, moral judgments express the speaker’s feelings towards the thing being judged. So, saying “Nelson Mandela is a good man” expresses approval of Mandela; it is like saying “Hurrah for Mandela!” Other forms of ethical non-cognitivism have built on this idea. Prescriptivism, for instance, the view developed by R. M. Hare, acknowledges that moral statements can express emotional attitudes but sees their primary function as that of prescribing how people should behave. Thus, “stealing is wrong” is a way of saying “Don’t steal!” More recent versions of expressivism however, such as Simon Blackburn’s “quasi-realism,” hold that while moral claims are not, strictly speaking, true or false, we are justified in treating them as if they are, both in our ethical reasoning and in our practice.

Most forms of ethical non-cognitivism, like moral relativism, have been fueled by acceptance of a fact-value gap. But unlike ethical non-cognitivism, moral relativism does not deny that moral claims can be true; it only denies that they can be made true by some objective, trans-cultural moral order. It allows them to be true in the humbler, relativistic sense of being rationally acceptable from a particular cultural vantage point.

e. Meta-Ethical Relativism

Meta-ethical relativism holds that moral judgments are not true or false in any absolute sense, but only relative to particular standpoints. This idea is essential to just about any version of moral relativism. Relativizing truth to standpoints is a way of answering in advance the objection that relativism implies that the same sentence can be both true and false. The relativity clause means that the same sentence—say, “slavery is unjust”—can be both true and false, but not in exactly the same sense, since the term “unjust” contains an implicit reference to some particular normative framework. The situation is analogous to that in which one person says “It is raining” and another person says “It is not raining.” If they are standing together at the same place and at the same time, they cannot both be right. But if they are speaking at different times or from different locations (standpoints) this is possible.

Saying that the truth of a moral claim is relative to some standpoint should not be confused with the idea that it is relative to the *situation* in which it is made. Only the most extreme rigorists would deny that in assessing a moral judgment we should take the particular circumstances into account. Most people would agree that lying in court to avoid a fine is wrong, while lying to a madman to protect his intended victim is justified. The particular circumstances surrounding the action alter its character and hence our appraisal of it.

Some meta-ethical relativists focus more on the *justification* of moral judgments rather than on their truth. Gilbert Harman, for instance, argues that when we say someone ought to do something, we imply that she has a “motivating reason”—that is, certain desires and intentions—to perform the act in question. But whether or not the person has these desires and intentions, and hence feels obliged to perform the action, is largely determined by the prevailing norms of the community to which she belongs. Feelings of moral obligation provide a justification for particular beliefs and practices; but these only arise through agents being embedded in particular social groups whose moral outlook they share.

Most moral relativists endorse some version of meta-ethical relativism. But meta-ethical relativism is not quite fully-fledged moral relativism; for one could consistently affirm it and still insist that one particular standpoint was demonstrably superior to all others. It is the denial of this possibility that gives moral relativism a more radical edge and is responsible for much of the criticism it attracts.

f. Normative Relativism

Normative relativism is the view that it is wrong to judge or interfere with the moral beliefs and practices of cultures that operate with a different moral framework to one’s own, that what goes on in a society should only be judged by the norms of that society. It is a prescriptive position adopted initially by many anthropologists reacting against the ethnocentrism characteristic of the colonial era. Melville Herskovits, for instance, affirms that “... in practice, the philosophy of relativism is a philosophy of tolerance” (*Cultural Relativism*, p. 31). Similar claims can be found in the writings of Ruth Benedict and Edvard Westermarck.

Because it is prescriptive, many would say that what is being described here is not really a form of relativism but is, rather, a position entailed by moral relativism. The motive behind it is to avoid arrogance and promote tolerance. But normative relativists can also argue that judging other cultures is misguided since there are no trans-cultural criteria to which one can refer in order to justify one’s judgment. Whether or not meta-ethical relativism entails normative relativism is a major bone of contention. Bernard Williams disparages with the label “vulgar relativism” the sort of thinking that simplistically infers tolerance from relativity. Geoffrey Harrison argues that while moral relativism, properly understood, is essentially a meta-ethical position *about* morality, the claim that we should be tolerant is one made from *within* a particular moral point of view; the latter does not follow the former, therefore, since they belong to different levels of discourse. And David Wong, while defending both meta-ethical and normative relativism, agrees that the former does not, by itself, entail the latter, some sort of independent principle of liberal political theory being also needed to support a non-interventionist position.

g. Moral Relativism

Moral relativism has been identified with all the above positions; and no formula can capture all the ways the term is used by both its advocates and its critics. But it is possible to articulate a position that most who call themselves moral relativists would endorse.

1. Moral judgments are true or false and actions are right or wrong only relative to some particular standpoint (usually the moral framework of a specific community).
2. No standpoint can be proved objectively superior to any other.

According to this view, “slavery is unjust” is true relative to the moral framework of most 21st century Norwegians, but it is false relative to the moral perspective of most white Americans in South Carolina in the 18th century. Regarding the second clause in the definition, moral philosophers from the time of Plato have sought to demonstrate the objective correctness (and hence the superiority) of a given moral outlook by showing how it conforms to God’s will, or corresponds to a metaphysical moral order, or is entailed by dictates of Reason, or accords with basic intuitions, or best meets the needs of human nature. According to the moral relativist, all such attempts fail, for they all rest on premises that belong to the standpoint being defended and need not be accepted by people who do not share that point of view.

Thus, a critic of slavery could no doubt prove the truth of what she says to anyone who accepts her basic premises—for example, that all races are equally human, and that all human beings should enjoy the same basic rights. But the argument will not convince someone who denies these premises. To them, such a “proof” of slavery’s wrongness will appear question begging, and they can reject it without being inconsistent or irrational.

The fact that one moral outlook cannot be conclusively *proved* superior to another does not mean, however, that it cannot be *judged* superior; nor does it imply that one cannot give reasons for preferring it. Gilbert Harman, for instance, holds that he can consistently affirm basic tenets of liberal morality while recognizing that his reasons for doing so may not be “motivating reasons” to someone belonging to a different moral culture, and so will have no persuasive power. A moderate moral relativist like David Wong argues that some moralities are better than others on the grounds that they better serve the needs and purposes that people in all cultures share. But within the parameters imposed by the common human condition, significant variation in moral outlook is possible. For instance, between the individualistic ways of thinking that are characteristic of the modern West and the community-centered outlooks more typical of Asia—to take an example Wong considers in depth—one can express a preference, but one cannot justify it by appealing to neutral criteria of superiority. Thomas Scanlon, an even milder kind of relativist, also defends the idea that one can view another society’s moral norms as worthy of respect while still having cogent reasons for preferring one’s own.

Moral relativists typically relativize the truth of moral judgments to cultures, which may encompass an entire society or historical period (China, Victorian England) but can also designate a subculture within a society (the Pennsylvania Amish, urban street gangs). In principle, the standpoint in question could be narrowed to that of a single individual, in which case, the relativism becomes a form of moral subjectivism. But this is not a widely held position since it seems to reduce to the idea that whatever an individual believes to be right is right, and that would seem to undermine the whole idea of morality.

3. Arguments for Moral Relativism

The main arguments for moral relativism are not necessarily all compatible. For instance, some relativists presuppose that value judgments are fundamentally different from factual judgments (which can be objectively true), while others see the truth of both kinds of judgment as irreducibly relative to some conceptual or cultural framework. The arguments given here thus represent different routes by which one may arrive at a relativistic view of morality.

a. The Argument from Cultural Diversity

Textbooks often suggest that relativists argue from the plain fact that different cultures have different moral belief systems to a relativistic view of morality; but this is an oversimplification. The path seems to be more along the following lines. Awareness of the existence of diverse moralities (a) casts doubt on the idea that there is a single true morality, and (b) encourages the idea that the morality of one's own culture has no special status but is just one moral system among many.

The fact of diversity—if it is a fact, which some question (see section 4a below)—does not logically entail moral relativism. It does not even entail that objectivism is false. After all, there are diverse views on how human beings came to exist, but that does not imply that there is no single, objectively correct account. Nor can moral relativism really claim to *explain* the diversity of moral systems, although this claim is sometimes made on its behalf. For how can the mere absence of something—in this case, an objective and universally binding moral code—*explain* the phenomenon in question? The suggestion seems to rest on the premise that if there were an objective moral truth, there would not be such moral diversity. Presumably, the idea underlying this premise is that cultures would have by now converged on the objective moral truth. But the absence of an objective truth does not explain this lack of convergence. At most, it is merely a condition that makes diversity more likely. Cultures have different sporting preferences: Brazilians love soccer; Pakistanis prefer cricket; Mongolians are passionate about horse racing. But no one would suggest that these differences are *explained* by the absence of a single, objectively superior game that everyone should play.

To be sure, an objectivist has to explain why so many people seem to have failed to discover the one true moral code, while relativists are excused from this task. But explanations referencing the usual suspects—ignorance, habit, tradition, unreason, fear, self-interest, and so on—are possible.

Thus, diversity by itself proves very little. Relativists nevertheless see it as suggestive, often pointing to an analogy between moralities and religions. The existence of many different religions does not *prove* that none of them can claim to be the one true religion. But it obviously does raise the question of how the objective truth of any religion could possibly be demonstrated. And in the case of moralities, too, the question arises: how is it possible to prove that one is superior to all the others?

b. The Untenability of Moral Objectivism

The untenability of moral objectivism is probably the most popular and persuasive justification for moral relativism--that it follows from the collapse of moral objectivism, or is at least the best alternative to objectivism. The argument obviously rests on the idea that moral objectivism has been discredited. In its oldest and most widespread form, the idea that a moral code has objective validity rests on the belief that it has some sort of divine sanction. With the decline in religious faith that is a hallmark of modernity, this foundation for morality was shaken. Consequently, much moral philosophy from the 17th century onwards has been devoted to establishing an alternative, secular foundation, one that can claim universal validity without appealing to dubious metaphysical doctrines. This is what Alasdair MacIntyre has dubbed the “enlightenment project.”

But despite the efforts of Kant, [Mill](#), and their successors, many remain skeptical about the possibility of proving the objective truth or the universal validity of moral claims. The fact that the moral objectivists themselves cannot agree about which moral system is correct, or what its philosophical foundation should be, encourages this skepticism. But it also rests on forceful philosophical considerations. Moral judgments, say the critics of objectivism, have an irreducible evaluative component. They assert, assume, or imply that a state of affairs is good or bad, that an action is right or wrong, or that something is better than something else. But if one accepts—as many do—that value judgments are logically distinct from factual statements and cannot be derived from them, then any attempt to justify a moral claim must rest on at least some value-laden premises. And these basic moral presuppositions will not be susceptible to proof at all.

For example, an argument to prove that a husband should not beat his wife will probably rest on the assumption that men and women should enjoy equal rights. But how does one prove this to someone who categorically denies it? How does one prove that the intrinsic value of happiness should be the foundation of our moral judgments to someone who thinks that family honor is the most important value of all? Or how does one prove that individual rights are a primary good to someone whose theoretical bottom line is that individuals should be subservient to the state?

The increase in skepticism towards moral objectivism is one of the most significant shifts that has taken place in moral philosophy over the past two centuries. This trend has been reinforced by the apparent contrast between natural science and moral discourse. Science is generally thought to describe an independently existing, objective reality; and scientists from all over the world largely accept the same methodology, data, theories and conclusions, except in the case of disputes at the cutting edge of research. Ethics exhibits nothing like this degree of convergence.

Gilbert Harman is one of the best-known defenders of moral relativism along these lines. But other critics of objectivism, such as Alasdair MacIntyre and [Richard Rorty](#), have carved out relativistic positions that don't rest on acceptance of a sharp distinction between facts and values. Moral relativism is not the only response to the perceived problems with moral objectivism. As noted earlier, ethical non-realism, ethical non-cognitivism, emotivism, moral subjectivism, and moral skepticism are other possible responses, for the mere denial of objectivism, like the mere fact of cultural diversity, does not logically entail moral relativism. It does, however, undoubtedly make people more receptive to a relativistic outlook.

c. The Argument from Cognitive Relativism

The majority of moral relativists do not embrace cognitive relativism, which offers a relativistic account of truth in general, not just the truth of moral judgments. However, some do, and this is another path to moral relativism. One of the merits of this approach to moral relativism is that it can help to clarify fundamental questions about what is meant by talk about the relativity of moral claims. What does it mean, after all, to say that moral norms are “relative to” some culture? If we are merely saying that what people think about right and wrong is influenced by the cultural environment, then the claim seems banal. If we are saying that moral beliefs and practices are causally determined by the surrounding culture, then unless one is a strict determinist, the thesis seems to be obviously false; for members raised in the same cultural community can adopt very different moral outlooks. The philosophically interesting claim at the heart of most forms of moral relativism is that moral statements are true (or false) relative to some normative standpoint, usually one characteristic of some particular culture. But what does “true relative to” mean, precisely? From an objectivist or realist point of view, the phrase makes little sense since what determines the truth or falsity of a statement is whether or not it accords with objective reality. The cognitive relativist, however, argues that this notion of truth is philosophically vacuous since it employs the notion of an independent, objective reality that lies beyond any possible experience.

Cognitive relativism holds that (a) the truth value of any judgment is relative to some particular standpoint (for example, a conceptual scheme or theoretical framework); and (b) no standpoint is metaphysically privileged over all others—there is no “God’s eye point of view” that yields the objective truth about reality. Relativists of this sort are not so impressed by the fact-value distinction. They do not view truth as a property that sentences possess in virtue of their correspondence to an independent reality. Rather, they argue that we call a sentence “true” when it coheres with the rest of our beliefs, perceptions, values, and assumptions—in other words, when it is rationally acceptable or appears justified according to our general conceptual scheme. On this view, “the earth moves around the sun” is false relative to a medieval conceptual scheme and is true relative to ours. Similarly, “homosexuality is morally wrong” is true relative to the perspective of conservative Christians and false relative to that of twenty-first century liberals. There is no essential difference between the two cases. And in both cases, it is not possible to demonstrate logically the superiority of one standpoint over the other.

This is more or less the position defended by Richard Rorty, even though he rejects the relativist label. Rorty likes to describe himself as following in the footsteps of William James and John Dewey, although his interpretation of his pragmatist predecessors is controversial. According to him, the term “true” is an “empty compliment” we pay to statements that we consider sufficiently well supported by the network of other assumptions, beliefs, and experiences that surround them.

d. Moral Relativism Promotes Tolerance

The idea that moral relativism promotes tolerance is a normative argument. The key idea is that moral relativism encourages a certain humility. Becoming aware of the merely relative validity of one’s own moral norms makes one less likely to fall into arrogant ethnocentrism and less inclined to pass moral judgment on the beliefs and practices found in other cultures. In effect, the argument is that moral relativism entails normative relativism (see above). Ruth Benedict states the idea forcefully at the end of her influential work *Patterns of Culture*, when she expresses her hope that, on the basis of the sort of anthropological research she has described, “we shall arrive at a more realistic social faith, accepting as grounds of hope and as new bases for tolerance the coexisting and equally valid patterns of life which mankind has created for itself from the raw materials of existence” (*Patterns of Culture*, p. 257). Benedict, in fact, takes the argument a step further, arguing that the relativistic outlook she champions can be positively beneficial in helping to combat bigotry, racism, chauvinism and other forms of prejudice. One reason for thinking that a relativistic view of morality might foster tolerance is that it will also incline us to be more self-critical. Edvard Westermarck makes this connection in his 1932 work *Ethical Relativity* when he says, “Could it be brought home to people that there is no absolute standard in morality, they would perhaps be on the one hand more tolerant and on the other more critical in their judgments” (*Ethical Relativity*, p. 59). As mentioned earlier, however, even some thinkers sympathetic to relativism, such as Harrison and Wong, are suspicious of the claim that moral relativism by itself necessarily entails a tolerant attitude toward alternative moralities. And critics of relativism, such as W.T. Stace and Karl Popper, argue that if relativism does indeed imply universal tolerance, that this constitutes an objection to it, since some things—like oppressively intolerant moral systems—should not be tolerated (see section 4g below).

4. Objections to Moral Relativism

a. Relativists Exaggerate Cultural Diversity

The objection that relativists exaggerate cultural diversity is directed against descriptive relativism more than against moral relativism as defined above; but it has figured importantly in many debates about relativism. In its simplest form, the argument runs as follows. Every human culture has some sort of moral code, and these overlap to a considerable extent. There is a common core of shared values such as trustworthiness, friendship, and courage, along with certain prohibitions, such as those against murder or incest.

Some version of the golden rule—treat others as you would have them treat you—is also encountered in almost every society. The existence of these universal values is easy to explain: they enable societies to flourish, and their absence would jeopardize a society's chances of survival.

The claim that every society must share these basic commitments thus links up with findings in evolutionary ethics. It is also supported, according to some, by the results of the “moral sense test,” a research project conducted by Harvard's Primate and Cognitive Neuroscience Laboratory. The project is an internet-based study of the moral intuitions of people from all over the world. The responses are sufficiently uniform, according to the laboratory's director, Mark Hauser, to support the idea that there is a “universally shared moral faculty” common to all human beings and rooted in our evolutionary heritage. Such universalist claims are sometimes cited by those seeking to establish a generally agreed upon set of human rights or human capacities, a foundation for the work of organizations and bodies like the United Nations.

The argument that relativists exaggerate the diversity among moral systems is also advanced in a subtler form, an early version of which can be found in the Dialogue that Hume appended to his *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. What appear to be striking differences in moral outlook turn out, on closer examination, to be superficial disagreements masking underlying common values. For example, some nomadic cultures have considered infanticide to be morally acceptable, while in other societies it is viewed as murder. But those carrying out infanticide may be motivated by the knowledge that they lack the resources to support the child. Their action is thus prompted by a concern for the well being of the community, and perhaps, also, a desire that the child be spared avoidable suffering—values that would be recognized and approved by people in other societies where, since additional children would be less of a burden, infanticide is prohibited. In this case, the apparent difference in values is explained by the different circumstances of the societies in question.

Other seeming differences may be explained by reference to the different factual beliefs that people hold. Take the issue of slavery. Some societies have seen nothing wrong with slavery; others view it as a moral abomination. This would seem to mark a basic and serious disparity in moral perspectives. Yet both parties may subscribe to the principle that “all men are created equal.” Their disagreement may be over whether or not the people being enslaved are fully human. And defenders of slavery in the United States did indeed use to argue that blacks were sub-human and could therefore legitimately be treated like animals rather than as human beings.

The critics of relativism thus argue that before declaring a moral difference between cultures to be fundamental we should look carefully to see whether the difference does not, at bottom, arise out of disparate living conditions or rest on conflicting factual beliefs.

The question of whether or not there are universal values has been at the center of many of the debates about moral relativism. But the expression “universal values” is ambiguous, and how it is understood affects the kind of relativism that it calls into question.

(i) “Universal values” can mean moral values or norms to which every culture, as a matter of fact, is committed. If there are universal values in this sense, then it is an objection to a strong version of descriptive relativism which sees cultural diversity as sufficiently radical to preclude any common ground that all cultures share. It is worth noting that descriptive relativism would also become false in the event of humanity eventually converging on a single moral outlook or of a catastrophe that wiped out all cultures except one. But neither scenario would falsify moral relativism as defined above, since it is not an empirical theory about anyone’s actual beliefs or practices; it is, rather, a view about the status of moral judgments and the limitations on how they can be supported.

(ii) “Universal values” can mean moral values or norms that everyone *ought* to affirm. This is a normative universalism. It is likely that most who hold this view see these universal values as constitutive of an objectively correct moral point of view. Understood in this way, the position is incompatible with relativism. But the view that there are, as a matter of fact, universally shared values does not entail this normative universalism. After all, every society might agree that homosexuality is wicked or that men should have dominion over women. It would not follow that everyone *should* embrace these values.

c. Relativism Ignores Diversity Within a Culture

When relativists say that the truth of moral claims and the rightness of actions is relative to the norms and values of the culture in which they occur, they seem to assume that members of that culture will generally agree about the moral framework which they supposedly share. This may sometimes be the case; but such homogeneous and relatively static cultures are increasingly uncommon. Today, many cultures contain sub-communities that disagree sharply on matters such as abortion, capital punishment, euthanasia, polygamy, women’s rights, gay rights, drug use, or the treatment of animals. Given that this is so, which set of norms and values are we supposed to refer to when judging a belief or practice? If the relevant norms are those of the sub-culture to which the person making the claim belongs, then the relativist position seems in danger of spiraling down toward subjectivism, since there can be many sub-cultures, and some of them can be quite small.

From the other direction comes the objection that relativists tend to ignore the extent to which cultures overlap and influence one another. These criticisms are related, as both accuse relativists of presupposing an oversimplified and outdated view of what a culture is. This charge seems to have some purchase on the sort of relativism that treats the validity of moral claims as relative to specific identifiable cultures. It seems less damaging, though, to the kind of relativism that relates moral claims to general normative standpoints without requiring that these be identified with actual communities.

c. Relativism Implies that Obvious Moral Wrongs are Acceptable

The most serious objection to moral relativism is that relativism implies that obvious moral wrongs are acceptable. The objection is that if we say beliefs and actions are right or wrong only relative to a specific moral standpoint, it then becomes possible to justify almost anything. We are forced to abandon the idea that some actions are just plain wrong. Nor can we justify the idea that some forms of life are obviously and uncontroversially better than others, even though almost everyone believes this. According to the relativists, say the critics, the beliefs of slave-owners and Nazis should be deemed true and their practices right relative to their conceptual-moral frameworks; and it is not possible for anyone to prove that their views are false or morally misguided, or that there are better points of view. To many, this is a *reductio ad absurdum* of moral relativism. This line of attack appears compelling against normative relativism, the view that what goes on within a society should *only* be judged by the prevailing norms of that society. If that is one's position, then one must hold that in a culture where, say, adulterers are stoned to death, this practice is morally right, since it is justified according to the only norms that matter— those of the society in question. The argument is less persuasive, however, against the position identified as “moral relativism” in section 2 above, since this version of relativism allows the beliefs and practices within a culture to be judged according to norms external to that culture. With this view, stoning adulterers is right relative to some moral standpoints (for instance, that of ancient Israel) and wrong according to others (for instance, that of modern liberalism). So relativists who happen to be liberal-minded denizens of the modern world are still free to judge what goes on elsewhere by their own moral norms. What makes their position relativistic is their denial that there is any neutral, transcultural court of appeal to provide an objective justification for preferring one standpoint over another.

To many critics, however, this denial is precisely what renders relativism unacceptable. In their view, both versions of relativism put all moralities on the same plane and make one's choice between them arbitrary. In responding to this criticism, moral relativists would seem to have three options.

(i) Assert that all moralities are indeed on the same plane and we have no reasons for favoring some over others. However, virtually no one takes this position since it amounts to a form of moral nihilism.

(ii) Argue that the beliefs and practices of a culture should be appraised according to how well they enable that culture to realize the goals it sets for itself. This allows for an assessment that avoids judging according to an external standard. True, the general criterion of efficiency or success being used here could be called transcultural; but the relativist can plausibly argue that the criterion is one that every culture would accept; for to reject it would amount to saying that one did not care whether one's society flourished or failed.

However, for the relativists, this line of defense only sets the problem back a step. The critic will next pose the question: Regarding the goals societies set for themselves, do we have any reason for preferring some goals over others? Suppose a society's overarching goals include realizing racial purity or achieving world domination. If relativists allow for no way of appraising such goals, insisting that any preferences we express are arbitrary, then, the critics will say, their position is once more shown to be beyond the pale of common sense.

(iii) A third option for relativists is to embrace what might be called (following Richard Rorty) an “ethnocentric” position. Relativists of this stripe continue to insist that all moralities are in the same boat insofar as none can be conclusively proved in some absolute sense to be true or false, right or wrong, or better than any other available moral outlook. But, they argue, it does not follow from this that relativists cannot consistently prefer some moralities over others, nor that they cannot offer reasons for their preference. They simply admit that when they appraise moralities, they do so according to norms and values constitutive of their particular moral standpoint, one that they probably share with most other members of their cultural community. Thus, a relativist might condemn laws prohibiting homosexuality in the name of such values as happiness, freedom, and equality. But she does not claim that she can *prove* that this normative standpoint is objectively superior to that of the culture outlawing homosexuality. Possibly those she is criticizing might share her values, in which case they may be open to persuasion. But they might have different basic values; for instance, they may favor executing homosexuals in order to realize a certain vision of moral purity. In that case, the standoff seems to be at the level of fundamental values. And when that is the case, the relativist may accept that she cannot demonstrate the objective superiority of her views in a non question-begging way—that is, without making assumptions that those she is trying to persuade will reject.

To the critic, moral relativism implies that one moral view is just as good or as bad as any other, and to take this line is to countenance immorality. But the difference between Western academics who are moral relativists and their fellow academics who criticize them is clearly not a deep difference in moral values. They all are likely to praise democracy and condemn discrimination. The difference is, rather, at the meta-ethical level in their view of the status of moral judgments and the kind of justification they allow. The critics believe some sort of objective bulwark is needed to prevent the slide toward an “anything goes” form of moral nihilism. The relativists see this anxiety as mistaken since what it asks for is both impossible and unnecessary. In their view, an “ethnocentric” justification of one's views is the only kind available, and it is enough.

e. Relativism Undermines the Possibility of a Society Being Self-Critical

If the rightness or wrongness of actions, practices, or institutions can only be judged by reference to the norms of the culture in which they are found, then how can members of that society criticize those norms on moral grounds? And how can they argue that the

prevailing norms should be changed? If, for instance, a society has a caste system under which one caste enjoys great privileges while another caste is allowed to do only menial work, then this system will necessarily appear just according to its own norms. So there will be nothing to criticize.

One apparent way for the relativist to avoid this objection is to point out that most societies are imperfect even by their own lights; what actually happens usually falls short of the ideals espoused. For instance, an official commitment to equality is belied by discriminatory laws. Thus, a society can be self-critical by noticing gaps between its practices and its ideals. This is a weak response, however, since the sort of self-criticism it allows is quite limited. Often, the most important kind of self-criticism involves a demand that the ideals themselves be changed, as, for instance, when the American and French revolutions articulated new egalitarian values. Can moral relativism make sense of a society's own members rejecting the prevailing norms?

The answer is that it all depends on the precise sort of moral relativism being espoused. If the particular standpoint, by reference to which moral claims are appraised, has to be that constituted by the prevailing norms in a society, then it is hard to see how those norms themselves can be criticized. But if the relativist only insists that moral claims are true or false relative to *some* particular standpoint, then this does not follow. In that case, the prevailing moral norms can be judged wrong from an alternative point of view, which may be the one the relativist favors. For instance, the current treatment of animals on American factory farms could be criticized by an American relativist who adopts the standpoint of a utilitarian committed to the minimization of unnecessary suffering. Closely related to the argument concerning a society's capacity for self-criticism is the objection that moral relativism implies there is no such thing as moral progress. A society may change its norms by, say, ending systematic discrimination against certain groups, or becoming less indifferent to the suffering of animals. But if there is no neutral point of view from which such changes can be appraised, how can one argue that they constitute progress? Indeed, from the point of view of the old norms, any changes must appear suspect, since the old norms dictate what is right.

Like the previous objection, this argument has the form of a *reductio ad absurdum*. Almost everyone believes that moral progress can and does occur within a society. The abolition of slavery is a paradigm of such progress. So, any theory implying that such changes do not constitute progress must be false. By the same token, moral relativism can also be criticized for not allowing the possibility of moral decline, which also presumably occurs at times.

One response a relativist could offer to this objection is simply to embrace the conclusion and insist that moral progress is a chimera; but this undeniably goes against what most people view as ethical common sense. The more common and more plausible response, therefore, is, once again, for the relativist to take the "ethnocentric" line. On this view, moral progress is possible, but not relative to objective, trans-cultural criteria. It can only be gauged by reference to some particular moral standpoint that cannot be conclusively proved superior to other points of view.

Thus, relativists, like everyone else, will view the abolition of slavery as progress because they affirm values such as freedom, equality, and individual happiness. They simply deny that it represents progress in some more objective sense—from “the God’s eye point of view,” so to speak.

f. Relativism is Pragmatically Self-Refuting

A standard objection to cognitive relativism, which is sometimes advanced against moral relativism, is that it is pragmatically self-refuting. The basic idea behind it is that moral relativists, whatever their official meta-ethical position, cannot avoid being implicitly committed to certain fundamental norms and values, and they presuppose this commitment in the very act of arguing for moral relativism. So, the content of the theory is at odds with the practice of affirming or defending it. Jürgen Habermas develops this line of argument by claiming that anyone participating in rational discourse reveals, through that very act, a commitment to certain values that belong to a normative notion of rationality: for instance, values such as sincerity or open-mindedness. Relativists, however, are likely to be skeptical about the universality of these alleged implicit commitments. To them, the concept of rationality in question is characteristic of a particular time and place. To be sure, they may, as modern Western liberals, embrace values such as sincerity or open-mindedness. But they can still plausibly deny that they have an objective duty to do so, or that such values are necessarily embedded in all acts of communication and must therefore be viewed as universal.

g. Relativism Rests on an Incoherent Notion of Truth

What does it mean for a moral belief to be true relative to a particular culture? If it merely means that most members of that culture hold that belief, then it is a somewhat grandiose and misleading way of stating a simple fact. Presumably, therefore, relativists mean something more by it. In addition, they cannot be simply making the banal point that someone belonging to that culture who rejects the belief in question is in the minority, or is perceived to be mistaken by the majority. The relativist thesis seems to be that in some sense the truth (or falsity) of a person’s moral beliefs is either determined by or constituted by their coherence (or lack of coherence) with the prevailing moral outlook in that person’s community. This raises a number of awkward issues. It seems to imply, for instance, that the majority can never be wrong on moral matters. And a corollary of that is that within a given community, dissidents must always be wrong. These ideas go against our normal ways of thinking.

A further problem for the relativist thesis is that it seems not to take into account exactly *how* the prevailing moral norms in a society were established. If they gained ascendancy over time, shaped by collective experience, then one could perhaps view them as the outcome of an implicit social contract, and in that sense to have some claim to rationality. But what if they were initially imposed on a society forcibly by conquerors or dictatorial rulers? Does that make a difference? It certainly sounds odd to say that a moral statement that once was false can be made true by the establishment of a new religious or political order and the consolidation of its ideas.

Moral relativists are thus under some pressure to explain why they go beyond simple factual statements about what the majority in a society believes, insisting on advancing a philosophical claim about the *truth* of moral statements. This is one reason some would give for viewing moral relativism as an instance of a more general relativism that sees the truth of any statement as a function of its coherence with a broader theoretical framework. Relativists who base their position on a sharp distinction between facts and values must work with two distinct notions of truth: factual claims are made true by correspondence to reality; moral claims are made true by cohering with or being entailed by the surrounding conceptual scheme. Those who see truth of any kind as ultimately a matter of inter-subjective agreement may be better positioned to avoid this problem.

h. The Relativist Position on Tolerance is Problematic

A good deal of the debate surrounding moral relativism has focused on its claim to exemplify and foster tolerance. There are at least three lines of criticism against this claim.

(i) Tolerance is not the same as respect.

Showing genuine respect for a culture means taking its beliefs seriously, and that means viewing them as candidates for critical appraisal. The relativist eschews any evaluation of other cultures' norms in the name of tolerance; however, this attitude is actually patronizing. It suggests that the beliefs could not withstand critical scrutiny, or perhaps that they are just not worth appraising.

(ii) Moral relativists inconsistently posit a principle of tolerance as a universal obligation.

Relativists say we should be tolerant of beliefs and practices found in other cultures. This is a normative claim. If it applies to everyone, then it is a trans-cultural moral principle, in which case relativism is false. If, on the other hand, relativism is true, then this principle of tolerance does not express a trans-cultural obligation binding on everyone; it merely expresses the values associated with a particular moral standpoint.

Tolerance is, of course, a central value espoused by modern liberal societies. But according to the relativist's own position, members of other societies where tolerance is not viewed so positively have no reason to accept the idea that one ought to be tolerant. So for other societies, the fact that relativism promotes tolerance is not a point in its favor, and relativists have no business preaching tolerance to them. It would not be self-contradictory for moral relativists to hold that all moral principles have only a relative validity except for the principle of tolerance, which enjoys a unique status. But the resulting position would be peculiar. The relativistic viewpoint would be significantly modified and some account would be owed of why the principle of tolerance alone has universal validity.

For this reason, a more common relativistic response to the criticism is along the lines suggested by David Wong. Relativists can simply accept that the obligation to be tolerant has only relative validity or scope. It applies to those whose general moral standpoint affirms or entails tolerance as a value; and only these people are likely to be swayed by the argument that relativism promotes tolerance.

(iii) The relativist's advocacy of tolerance is morally misguided since not everything should be tolerated.

This is, in effect, another version of the charge that moral relativism entails an "anything goes" attitude that countenances obvious wrongs in other societies such as religious persecution or sexual discrimination. It even requires us to be tolerant of intolerance, at least if it occurs in another culture.

Clearly, this is a problem for anyone, relativist or not, who elevates the principle that we should be tolerant to an absolute, exceptionless rule. But for relativists who do not do this, the problem will seem less pressing. Tolerance, they will argue, is one of the values constitutive of their standpoint—a standpoint they share with most other people in modern liberal societies. From this standpoint, intolerance can and will be criticized, as will other policies and practices, wherever they occur, that seem to cause unhappiness or unnecessarily limit people's prospects. The relativistic stance is useful, however, in helping to make us less arrogant about the correctness of our own norms, more sensitive to cultural contexts when looking at how others live, and a little less eager in our willingness to criticize what goes on in other cultures. The more difficult, practical question concerns not whether we should ever criticize the beliefs and practices found in other cultures, but whether we are ever justified in trying to impose our values on them through diplomatic pressure, economic sanctions, boycotts, or military force. This question has arisen in relation to such practices as *satee* in India, persecution of religious or ethnic minorities, female circumcision, and legalized violence against women. But it is not a problem that only moral relativists have to confront.

5. Conclusion

Over the years moral relativism has attracted a great deal of criticism, and not just from professional philosophers. One reason for this, of course, is that it is widely perceived to be a way of thinking that is on the rise. Indeed, by the end of the twentieth century it had become a commonplace among teachers of moral philosophy in the US that the default view of morality held by the majority of college students was some form of moral relativism. Another reason for so much trenchant criticism is that a relativistic view of morality is thought by many to have pernicious consequences. However, the attitude labeled "moral relativism" by those who worry about the moral health of contemporary society is not a well-defined or rigorously defended philosophical position. It typically amounts to little more than a skepticism about objective moral truth, often expressed as the idea that beliefs and actions are not right or wrong *per se*, only right or wrong *for someone*.

Philosophers like Gilbert Harman, David Wong, and Richard Rorty who defend forms of moral relativism seek to articulate and defend philosophically sophisticated alternatives to objectivism. As they see it, they are not countenancing immorality, injustice, or moral nihilism; rather, they are trying to say something about the nature of moral claims and the justifications given for them. The main problem they face is to show how the denial of objective moral truth need not entail a subjectivism that drains the rationality out of moral discourse. Their critics, on the other hand, face the possibly even more challenging task of justifying the claim that there is such a thing as objective moral truth. – **Internet**

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Critique of Relativism (Blog)

Many people aren't persuaded at all by religious ethics, and so they don't grant that morality has an objective basis in God's nature (or laws). Most philosophical ethicists, to my knowledge, reject moral relativism whether or not they are theists or atheists, or other. Usually some brand of objectivism wins out among the studied professionals in the field ethics. That's not always the case, see for example, J.L. Mackie (moral scepticism) and David Hume (emotivism). But most of the time it's the case, see for example, David Brink (moral realism), and new-atheists Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens.

Why bother with objectivism when relativism seems to accommodate the vast cultural disagreements, the arbitrariness of evolutionary outcomes, the mindless valueless operations of natural forces, and so on? Well, in short, relativism seems too morally repugnant and too unsuited to what we know/believe about reality. In the following list, I'm going to intermingle conventionalism (group relativism) and subjectivism (individual relativism).

1. Naturalistic Relativism fails to account for moral revolutionaries.

Occasionally there arises a moral revolutionary who defies the majority or consensus ethic and asserts a different ethic. According to conventionalism, that minority view is inherently wrong. No matter what they are talking about, if the societal or cultural convention has established that slavery is morally permissible than abolitionists are advocating evil. Obviously, some minority views are right, and the majority view (in ethics) can be wrong. Hence conventionalism is wrong.

2. Might doesn't make right.

The reason moral revolutionaries pose a problem for relativism is that, ultimately, conventionalism (group relativism) mistakenly treats the collective self-interests of people as somehow "good," as if the might of the masses inherently sanctifies their efforts at ethics. People can be collectively bad or good. Likewise, for subjectivism (individual relativism), a person could try to assert his own ethical standards for himself on a group. Authority figures and bullies do this all the time. But there's nothing intrinsically correct about that exercise of strength. His or her ethics could be wildly off target. The might doesn't make it right.

3. People Can be Wrong

Related to the past two points, individuals can be wrong, and so can groups. Even whole nations can approve of and institute moral evils, as if they weren't evil at all. In logic, we would call this conventionalist problem: "ad populum" (fallacious appeal to popularity) or "consensus gentium" (fallacious appeal to the consensus of the people)

4. Legality isn't Morality

Similar to the last point, we know from experience across our tumultuous history that laws aren't always ethical. Whether it's slavery laws in the antebellum southern states, or apartheid in South Africa, or human rights abuses from Sharia law in Islamic states—legality is clearly not the same as morality even though conventionalism would demand that ethics

are the same as a group's legal standards, at least in so far as the law still represents the standing conventions of the masses.

5. Individual and group relativism fail in terms of moral mediators.

When one group (or individual) disagrees with another, there's no objective and higher ground for mediating between those feuding parties. Yet that seems counterintuitive and wrong, for example, when it comes to the moral feuds between WWII Germany and Poland, between the Hussein regime in Iraq and its Kurdish citizens, between the Tutsis and the Hutus in Rwanda, or between Japan and China in the early years of WWII.

6. Relativism amounts to an unduly bold Universal negative Claim

Objectivism needs only one objective moral value; then objectivism can be true. But relativism needs *all* moral values to be relative. This is a universal negative claim: "No moral values are objective." Such claims are bold, perhaps too bold, because one would need to either know all moral values, or have justified reason for generalizing over all moral values and concluding that no objective moral values exist.

7. Naturalistic relativism fail by trivializing morality.

It's been said that relativists become objectivists when you steal their radio. Relativism treats all the vast world of morality like truthless opinions and shifting conventions, and that just doesn't jive with us when we are wronged. Sure, we can feel bad about some crime, but that's not what makes it evil. We might not even know a particular evil has been done to us, its effects are still submerged or latent (like undisclosed HIV), so there may be no relevant emotional or experiential quality to a morally weighted event, yet evil has still been committed. It's easy to talk about moral laws and values, abstractly, as relative opinions, desires, and feelings when we are in the safety of sterile classrooms or in the luxury of our skeptics' meetup and coffeehouse convos. But it's profoundly insulting to describe our ethical indignation that way when someone just had you or I have our house burned down by arsonists, or our daughter was raped and killed. We don't correct those sorts of wrongs by changing our desires, or instilling a different instinct, or developing different feelings. Injustice like that is not an emotional chimera, it's a metaphysical reality. We "correct" those wrongs with justice by punishing the guilty party, or perhaps even forgiveness. And even then, there's no guarantee that we'll ever be the same existentially. Relativism comes off as trivial and simplistic when faced with profound harms, mass crimes, and otherwise "clear examples" of evil.

8. Some values are too agreeable to merit the skepticism of relativists (courage, love, etc.)

This point is a softer one, it bears mentioning. Even amidst the wildly divergent laws and norms across different cultures, there abide a number of apparently universal virtues such as courage, love, truthfulness, and benevolence. No society has ever been found which exalts cowardice as a virtue, or which has no moral value for love. These sorts of universal moral values are consistent with ethical universalism and absolutism, and as such, are promising candidates for objective moral values.

9. Can justify ANYTHING

Perhaps the scariest result of relativism is that it has no principled objections to any moral fixture. Rape, torture, sport-killings, warfare, all of these can be readily accommodated by moral relativism. A little imagination and an unprincipled ethical outlook can go a long way, . . . towards disaster.

10. We know better—some stuff is just wrong. Lastly, it bears mentioning that we tend to know better than this. I'm not saying that relativism is devoid of intellectual justifications,

as if it has no evidence or argument on its side. There are at least some evidences for relativism, but when it comes to our own moral knowledge, we seem to have an operating leverage of moral facts to push against, for example, an apparently evil God (the problem of evil), or apparent evils in the Bible (“total war,” slavery, etc.), or church abuses (pedophile priests). I doubt the naturalistic atheist is comfortable surrendering all that moral indignation to the status of mere “opinion” or “feelings.” Since opinions can be epistemically baseless and feelings can be devoid of truth-status, that option surrenders too much. Essentially, some of the toughest objections to conventional conservative forms of theism require objective moral facts. Moreover, setting that theological dispute aside, I think we all just know better on a personal level. We have a sense of justice which is very much unlike mechanical laws, but doesn’t seem as shifty social conventions like dress code and etiquette. While it might be difficult to give a full metaphysical account of “justice” it seems like a good, realistic, starting ground for ethics to grant that “justice” is an objective moral fact and we need a worldview that allows for “justice” that way.

Critiques of Naturalistic Objectivism

Now that we’ve critiqued relativism, we can turn to a critique of naturalistic objectivism. Naturalists might agree with enough of the previous critiques so that they seek an escape into objectivism. But for several reasons, that door might be closed too.

1. Naturalistic Objectivism fails to ground ethics in a mind.
Morality, as we have so far encountered it, is mental stuff. It’s hypothetical states theorizing about what “ought” to be and what “ought not” be, and involves moral desires, motivations, goals and so on. All of that is profoundly mental. Yet nature is fundamentally non-mental, and even human minds tend to be explained away as deterministic programming, leaving morality so radically revised it’s not even recognizable. Naturalism is having a beast of a time demonstrating that it’s even possible for human minds to emerge from brute material processes.
2. Naturalistic Objectivism fails to provide an objective transcultural law-giver that could issue objectively binding laws.
so far I’ve focused the truth-makers for moral facts. What makes a claimed moral value “true”? If that truth-maker is merely human minds, culture, and society then it’s relativistic and fails to live up the fuller, more robust aspects of morality we sometimes encounter. But there’s also a question about moral authority. We lack moral authority to create laws that are binding for all cultures and all times. We may have authority to make laws, but we can’t make those laws “good” because we aren’t trans-culture law-givers establishing the moral foundations of human existence. The best we can do is create laws in our time, which may or may not be “good”, and have those laws serve as binding features relative to our group.
3. Naturalistic Objectivism lacks transcultural grounding.
As I discuss, at length, in the article [“Nature is a Jerk.”](#) descriptive facts of nature are not prescriptive. They have no innate oughtness. So, the ethical laws and rules emerging from one’s naturalism aren’t binding apart from that groups who thought up those rules and laws.

4. Naturalistic Objectivism has no natural truth-maker to make any value claim “true.”
At the heart of the naturalist’s problems is the wholesale inability of naturalism to produce even one single “ought” which has arisen indisputably from natural causes. that ought is critically important because if any of our moral claims (our “moral oughts”) are going to be “true” they need to correctly correspond to a real-world reference point. Our moral claims are ought statements, so if nature is going to make any of them whatsoever “true” nature needs to show us some “oughts.” Nature hasn’t given us any moral oughts, therefore our moral claims are either truthless, false, and thereby non-objective or they have their grounding outside of nature, in supernatural (i.e., God).
5. Nature has no transcendence to enable meaningful language hence moral language/ideas are all meaningless.
An even deeper problem of naturalistic ethics is that the very use of language requires teleology, for example, the goal-directedness and referential operations of language (language ‘points’ to things besides itself). Moral language is an instance of language. Naturalism is openly hostile if not prohibitive towards teleology. Therefore, moral language is potentially banned from or foreign to naturalism.
6. Naturalism’s chief bodyguard, evolution is value neutral, yet natural reason can only discover (not create) moral values, and objective intuitions (Moore, Ross) are non-natural if they are “good” at all (see, G.E. Moore’s *Principia Ethica*).
Summarizing this case against naturalistic objectivism, it seems that naturalism is fraught with problems when the naturalist tries to erect an objective moral framework. Perhaps one can appeal to pan-psychism or pantheism, but these are only tenuously “naturalistic,” and they are liable to introduce more problems than they solve.

Closing Thoughts

Relativism, we have seen, is bogged down irredeemably with a strong of objections. It trivializes morality, it prohibits cross-cultural judgments, it prohibits moral mediators, it rules against all moral revolutionaries, it’s an overzealous universal negative claim, and in many ways it’s morally repugnant. Now, it could be that objectivism fails too, torn apart on the same rocky shores of critical inquiry. In that case nihilism, absurdism, or amoralism might prevail. But I’ll have to save that critique for another day.

In the meantime, *naturalistic* objectivism is fraught with problems too including it’s “mental handicap,” lacking a divine mind or even a strong account of human minds whereby the imminently mental stuff of morality can inhere. Naturalism fails to demonstrate even one single moral “ought” to serve as an objective truthmaker for moral claims. And it struggles with moral authority, teleology, and the various embarrassments of it’s horrifically violent brother, [Evolution](#). – Intelligent Christian Faith

Refuting relativism

by [Matt Slick](#), CARM

Relativism is the philosophical position that all points of view are equally valid and that all truth is relative to the individual. This means that all moral positions, all religious systems, all art forms, all political movements, etc., are truths that are relative to the individual. Under the umbrella of relativism, whole groups of perspectives are categorized. In obvious terms, some are:

- **cognitive relativism** (truth) - Cognitive relativism affirms that all truth is relative. This would mean that no system of truth is more valid than another one, and that there is no objective standard of truth. It would, naturally, deny that there is a God of absolute truth.
- **moral/ethical relativism** - All morals are relative to the social group within which they are constructed.
- **situational relativism** - Ethics (right and wrong) are dependent upon the situation.

Relativism is the philosophical position that all points of view are equally valid and that all truth is relative to the individual. But, if we look further, we see that this proposition is not logical. In fact, it is self-refuting.

1. All truth is relative.

1. If all truth is relative, then the statement "All truth is relative" would be absolutely true. If it is absolutely true, then not all things are relative and the statement that "All truth is relative" is false.

2. There are no absolute truths.

1. The statement "There are no absolute truths" is an absolute statement which is supposed to be true. Therefore, it is an absolute truth and "There are no absolute truths" is false.
2. If there are no absolute truths, then you cannot believe anything absolutely at all, including that there are no absolute truths. Therefore, nothing could be really true for you - including relativism.

3. What is true for you is not true for me.

1. If what is true for me is that relativism is false, then is it true that relativism is false?
 1. If you say no, then what is true for me is not true and relativism is false.
 2. If you say yes, then relativism is false.
2. If you say that it is true **only** for me that relativism is false, then
 1. I am believing something other than relativism; namely, that relativism is false. If that is true, then how can relativism be true?
 2. am I believing a premise that is true or false or neither?
 1. If it is true for me that relativism is false, then relativism (within me) holds the position that relativism is false. This is self-contradictory.
 2. If it is false for me that relativism is false, then relativism isn't true because what is true for me is not said to be true for me.
 3. If you say it is neither true or false, then relativism isn't true since it states that all views are equally valid; and by not being at least true, relativism is shown to be wrong.
3. If I believe that relativism is false, and if it is true **only** for me that it is false, then you must admit that it is absolutely true that I am believing that relativism false.
 1. If you admit that it is absolutely true that I am believing relativism is false, then relativism is defeated since you admit there is something absolutely true.
4. If I am believing in something other than relativism that is true, then there is something other than relativism that is true - even if it is only for me.
 1. If there is something other than relativism that is true, then relativism is false.

4. No one can know anything for sure.

1. If that is true, then we can know that we cannot know anything for sure, which is self-defeating.

5. That is your reality, not mine.

1. Is my reality really real?
2. If my reality is different than yours, how can my reality contradict your reality? If yours and mine are equally real, how can two opposite realities that exclude each other really exist at the same time?

6. We all perceive what we want.

1. How do you know that statement is true?
2. If we all perceive what we want, then what are you wanting to perceive?

1. If you say you want to perceive truth, how do you know if you are not deceived?
2. Simply desiring truth is no proof you have it.

7. You may not use logic to refute relativism.

1. Why not?
2. Can you give me a logical reason why logic cannot be used?
3. If you use relativism to refute logic, then on what basis is relativism (that nothing is absolutely true) able to refute logic which is based upon truth.
4. If you use relativism to refute logic, then relativism has lost its relative status since it is used to absolutely refute the truth of something else.

8. We are only perceiving different aspects of the same reality.

1. If our perceptions are contradictory, can either perception be trusted?
2. Is truth self-contradictory?
 1. If it were, then it wouldn't be true because it would be self-refuting. If something is self-refuting, then it isn't true.
3. If it is true that we are perceiving different aspects of the same reality, then am I believing something that is false since I believe that your reality is not true? How then could they be the same reality?
4. If you are saying that it is merely my perception that is not true, then relativism is refuted.
 1. If I am believing something that is false, then relativism is not true since it holds that all views are equally valid.
5. If my reality is that your reality is false, then both cannot be true. If both are not true, then one of us (or both) is in error.
 1. If one or both of us is in error, then relativism is not true.

9. Relativism itself is excluded from the critique that it is absolute and self-refuting.

1. On what basis do you simply exclude relativism from the critique of logic?
 1. Is this an arbitrary act? If so, does it justify your position?
 2. If it is not arbitrary, what criteria did you use to exclude it?
2. To exclude itself from the start is an admission of the logical problems inherent in its system of thought.

Western Practical Philosophy:
Category Theories Of The Right

Question: What Makes A Life A Moral Life?

- Derivative Logic Or Ends Justification No Longer Appropriate Rationale For Injustice.
- Positive Intent & Good Will & One's Duty Are Recognized As Great & Noble Motives.
- Instrumental Goods & Intrinsic Values – Prerequisite Values & Those Type Virtues Of A Higher Order – Properly Proportioned.
- Kant's Imperative Is The Rule Of Thumb; General Guide: Our Act Made Universal
- Weakness: Real Result & Consequence.

Classic & Western Practical Philosophy
Debate Between Theory Good & Right

Question: How Do We Know Right From Wrong?

- Divide The Debate Three Stage Staggered:
 - ✓ **Descriptive Relativism:** The claim that cultures differ according to their fundamental beliefs about value.
 - ✓ **Ethical Relativism:** Actions right & wrong alter along cultural context; universal truths and moral absolutes do not exist.
 - ✓ **Prescriptive Relativism:** It is wrong to condemn others or pass judgment on those with different cultural values.
- The Three Positions Are A Process...
- The Three Positions Are Progressive...
- The Three Transition From Harmless To Alarming.
- The Three Together Form Societal Slippery Slope.

Classic & Western Practical Philosophy
Debate Between Abstract & Concrete

Question: How Do We Know Right From Wrong?

- Pragmatic Problems: Implicit Applied Explicit
- Utilizer Viewpoint Weakness: Justice For All
- Kantian Viewpoint Weakness: Consequential
- Balancing Hypothesis Of Fragmented Value:
 - ✓ 1st – Role & Duty: Institutional & Relational
 - ✓ 2nd – Actions Constrained By Human Rights
 - ✓ 3rd – Utility Welfare Effects: Macro & Micro
 - ✓ 4th – Intrinsic Values To Perfectionist Ends

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clear answers for common questions

Also known as situation ethics, situational ethics is a religion-based [theory](#) regarding the application of ethical principles to various situations. Originally conceived by Joseph Fletcher during the 1960's, the approach sought to qualify ethical responses in a manner that allowed the injunction found in the Christian New Testament to love all people to supersede any other moral imperatives when an apparent contradiction was present. Fletcher, an Episcopal priest, defined love in terms of the Greek word "agape" and used the literal translations of unconditional, absolute, and universal as the basis for the type of love that must be applied to all facets of human interaction.

The Christian ethical theory formulated and promoted by Fletcher was aimed at moving away from the legalistic and antinomian approaches that were found in many different Christian traditions. Situational ethics moved beyond the pale of legalistic applications of commandments and laws found within the historical Christian canon, noting that while there was a great deal of good within the laws, they could not necessarily address every possible variation of a chain of events.

Situational ethics also differs from an antinomian approach to ethics. With antinomian ethics, there is little to no recognition of pre-existing laws to serve as a basis for making ethical decisions. Instead, each situation must be considered independently of any application of ethics that has occurred to similar situations in the past. Situational ethics, by contrast, acknowledges the existence of basic laws that provide a framework for making value judgments in the course of action to take, tempered by the [Golden Rule](#) of Christianity.

To a degree, it can be claimed that situational ethics represents a middle ground between the extremes of legalistic and antinomian expressions of ethics. Unlike the legalistic application of moral codes, situational ethics allows the possibility that a particular situation may require a response that is not well defined by existing laws or commandments. At the same time, it provides more cohesion and structure to the process of defining and developing an ethical code, since there are commandments and laws that help form a basis for determining the best response for a given situation.

The concept of situational ethics has made an impact in many denominations, in that the approach makes it necessary to not rely on tradition or the literal words in the canon of Scripture to provide a precise response to modern living. Rather, it motivates individuals to understand laws and commandments in the context and historical setting from where they emerged and determine to what degree they can be aligned with the commandment of Jesus to love all people.

Situation Ethics

Posted by [Mark Mayberry](#) May 23, 2012

By Weldon E. Warnock

Ethics means “a series of rules and laws and principles by which we act and which tell us what to do.” But “situation ethics” is not geared to rules and regulations. This system of ethics refuses to be circumscribed by rules and laws. It says there is nothing right or wrong. Moral behavior is relative, not absolute. Decisions depend on the situation at hand, rather than law. It is also called the “new morality,” “contextualism,” “ethical individualism,” “casuistry,” as well as some others. But regardless what one calls it, it does not make the system anymore respectable.

Joseph Fletcher's Views

Joseph Fletcher, a professor of Social Ethics, an Episcopalian and a well known proponent of “situation ethics,” stated: “As we shall see, Christian situation ethics has only one norm or principle or law (call it what you will) that is binding and unexceptionable, always good and right regardless of the circumstances. That is ‘love’ – the agape of the summary commandment to love God and the neighbor” (Situation Ethics, p. 30). Fletcher further wrote, “For the situationist there are no rules – none at all” (p. 55); “. . . ‘circumstances alter rules and principles’” (p. 29); “. . . all laws and rules and principles and ideals and norms, are only contingent, only valid if they happen to serve love in any situation the Christian chooses what he believes to be the demands of love in the present situation” (pp. 30, 55). “The new morality, situation ethics declares that anything and everything is right or wrong, according to the situation” (p. 124).

There are three approaches to follow in making moral decisions according to Fletcher (pp. 18-26):

(1) Legalistic. He says, “With this approach one enters into every decision-making situation encumbered with a whole apparatus of prefabricated rules and regulations.

(2) Antinomianism. “Over against legalism, as a sort of polar opposite, we can put antinomianism. This is the approach with which one enters into the decision-making situation armed with no principles or maxims whatsoever, to say nothing of rules.

(3) Situationism. “A third approach, in between legalism and antinomianism unprincipledness, is situation ethics The situationist enters into every decision-making situation fully armed with the ethical maxims of his community and its heritage, and he treats them with respect as illuminators of his problems. Just the same he is prepared in any situation to compromise them or set them aside in the situation if love seems better served by doing so The situationist follows a moral law or violates it according to love’s need.”

Fletcher allows stealing, lying, adultery, and anything else that the law of God prohibits. His thinking is shown in the following statement: “But situation ethics has good reason to hold it as a duty in some situations to break them, any or all of them. We would be better advised & better off to drop the legalist’s love of law & accept only the law of love” (p. 74).

On pages 164-165 of Fletcher’s book, Fletcher captures the attention of the readers about a German woman separated from her husband at the Battle of the Bulge, and was imprisoned in the Ukraine. While in prison she learned that her husband, also a prisoner of war, had been released from another camp and had located their two children in Berlin.

There were two reasons why the Russians would release a prisoner: (1) For severe medical treatment or (2) pregnancy. She persuaded a Russian soldier to impregnate her in order to be released. Following her pregnancy she was released and joyfully united with her family. All loved her and the child born out of adultery. Fletcher lauds this as a loving act, the law against adultery being superseded by the situation at hand.

From what Fletcher said, we can readily see where situationism is coming from. It is a philosophy of liberalism, pragmatism, relativism and individualism that arrays itself against the Word of God and makes a mockery out of the Bible.

Jesus and Situation Ethics

In his book, *The Christian New Morality*, O. Sydney Barr stated that “The new morality is biblical morality. Behind it lies the authority of Jesus Christ himself” (p. 6). Situationists use for proof (?) Jesus’ defense of his disciples of the charge brought against them by the Pharisees of eating grain on the Sabbath (Matt., 12:1-8). The Pharisees considered the plucking of the grain and the rubbing it in their hands to separate the grain from the chaff, work, thereby violating the Sabbath.

Jesus vindicated His disciples, according to situationists, by His approval of David breaking the law of God in eating the forbidden showbread (1 Sam. 21:6; Lev. 24:9). They tell us that human welfare has preference over the laws of God. By sanctioning David’s action, Jesus in turn justified His disciples, and established a precedent for all time to come, they reason.

But Jesus never approved or encouraged the violation of God's law under any circumstances. Eating on the Sabbath was not a violation of God's law. Sin is a transgression of law (1 Jn. 3:4). Jesus never sinned (Heb. 4:15). Hence, He never violated a law of God. Neither did He encourage His followers to sin or try to justify their sins.

Jesus said, "Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:19). From this passage we can see clearly what Jesus thinks of lawbreakers. Adherence to God's laws is emphasized over and over in the Bible.

J.W. McGarvey, commenting on Matt. 12:3-5, stated: "Jesus expressly admits that what David did was unlawful; and some have supposed that he here intends to justify it on the ground of necessity, and then to argue that his disciples, though guilty of violating the law of the Sabbath, are justifiable on the same ground. There is no doubt that on this ground David excused himself for eating the showbread, and that the Pharisees did the same for him. But it cannot be that he who refused to turn stones into bread when tortured by a forty days' fast . . . would approve such a violation of law as David was guilty of. Neither can it be that he allowed his own disciples while under the law to break the Sabbath. If Christians may violate law when its observance would involve hardship or suffering, then there is an end of suffering for the name of Christ, and an end even of self-denial.

"But it is clear that by the Pharisees David's act was thought excusable; otherwise they could have retorted on Jesus thus: Out of your own mouth we condemn you: you class your act with David's; but David sinned, and so do you.

Now the real argument of Jesus is this: David, when hungry, ate the show-bread, which it was confessedly unlawful for him to eat, yet you justify him: my disciples pluck grain and eat it on the Sabbath, an act which the law does not forbid, and yet you condemn them” (The New Testament Commentary, pp. 103-104).

In regard to the priests profaning the Sabbath by their religious services in the temple (v. 5), McGarvey says, “Having silenced his opponents by the argument ad hominem, he next proves by the law itself that some work may be done on the Sabbath day. The priests in the temple were required to offer sacrifice, trim the golden lamps, and burn incense on the Sabbath, and these acts required manual labor. In this case, the general law against labor on the Sabbath was modified by the specific law concerning the temple service. The term “profane” is used, not because it was a real profanation, but because, being labor, it had the appearance of profanation. The example proves that the prohibition of labor on the Sabbath was not universal, and as it was not, it might not include what the disciples had just done” (Ibid., p. 104).

Opposition to Fletcher’s Ethics

Peter Wagner, writing in Eternity Magazine, Feb. 1967, said:

(1) “He (Fletcher) says that love is the only norm of ethics. But what is love? How is its context determined? We need the rest of the Bible to guide us as to just what the law of love expects from us.

(2) “Love, for Fletcher, is neighbor love. But this is only the second table of the law. The first is love of God It is impossible for us to love our neighbor properly without first loving God, and we in turn show our love to God by obeying his commandments.

(3) “. . . be impossible for him to define with any preciseness a `situation’ To be able to predict all involved in a moral decision in every case, especially in a crisis of life, is too much to expect even of an ethics professor to say nothing of the man in the street.

(4) “. . . (Fletcher) bases his law of love on revelation. But he does not tell us what criterion he has used to select this particular fragment of revelation and reject the rest. There must be some norm which tells him he ought to believe revelation when it speaks about love, but he need not believe it when it speaks about lying, fornication, or stealing.”

Wagner, as you can see, gets right to the heart of the problem and forcefully destroys the very foundation on which Fletcher builds his theory.

James M. Gustafson, professor of Christian Ethics at Yale University, wrote in *Christian Century*, May 12, 1966, the following:

“. . .he (Fletcher) states that the situation is determinative. However, he is never very careful to designate what constitutes a `situation’ If one says that the situation plus love makes for the right action without being clear about what love is and is not, one-has a simple formula, a radical ethic in both substance and method.”

Henlee H. Barnette, professor of Christian Ethics at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, wrote, as quoted in *The Situation Ethics Debate*, p. 136, “Love alone, or situation ethics, is characterized by a one-sided methodology in arriving at moral decisions. It is a misplaced emphasis, a false polarization in Christian ethics.”

John Macquarrie wrote in his book, "Three Issues in Ethics, pp. 33-35, the following:

"One of the most telling objections against situationism is that is a fundamentally and incurably individualistic type of ethic. Paul Ramsey is correct in his warning that 'no social morality ever was founded or ever will be founded, upon a situational ethic.'

' . . . As well as suffering from individualism, radical situational ethics suffers from the allied vice of subjectivism. The situationist seems to be compelled by the theories to assume an extraordinary degree of moral sensitivity and perceptiveness in those who are expected to read the demands of the situation .

" . . . The situationist is less than realistic in the extent to which he is willing to recognize the weakness of human nature and the fact that even our conscience can be distorted."

William Barclay stated, "If we insist that in every situation every man must make his own decision, then first of all we must make man morally and lovingly fit to take that decision; otherwise we need the compulsion of law to make him do it" (Ethics in a Permissive Society, p. 81).

Ladies and gentlemen, there is no way that a Bible believer can embrace situation ethics and remain true to the Bible. The Bible and situation ethics are on different planes and operate on different channels. Situation ethics or the new morality sets aside the Bible whenever man wants to and injects his own judgement in its place.

Consequences of Situation Ethics

There are several adverse consequences of the situation ethics philosophy.

(1) Destroys respect for the Bible. The Bible claims for itself to be an all-sufficient guide (2 Tim. 3:16-17; 2 Pet. 1:3). It saves us (Jas. 1:18), and by it we will be judged (Jn. 12:48). The situationists tell us we need not be too concerned about what the Bible teaches, but just let love have its way.

(2) Makes love and law exclusive. For the situationist it is either love or law. For the Christian, it is both law and love. Jesus said, "If ye love me, ye will keep my commandments" (Jn. 14:15, ASV).

(3) Deifies man. It makes man his own god. Man decides what to do and when to do it. He becomes his own standard. Jeremiah tells us that it is not in man to direct his own steps (10:23). God knows what is good for man and, therefore, we shall follow him (Duet. 6:24).

(4) Obscures right and wrong. The system implies that each one is to do his own thing as he interprets the problem or issue in a particular situation. There is nothing inherently right or wrong, they say, but it must be judged in context on the spur of the moment.

(5) Presumes each act will turn out well. What if the woman in the concentration camp who got herself impregnated in order to be released had been resented by her husband and children? Things like this are always the possible consequences of the arbitrary and subjective acts in situation ethics.

(6) It encourages permissiveness. At least, Fletcher's approach encourages permissiveness. Listen to him: "Does any girl who has 'relations' . . . outside marriage automatically become a prostitute? Is it always, regardless of what she accomplishes for herself or others - is it always wrong? Is extramarital sex inherently evil, or can it be a good thing in some situations" (Ibid., pp. 17-18)? To Fletcher, extramarital sex may at times have intrinsic value. A man decides for himself when this is true.

Conclusion

Actually, situation ethics is not something new. Catholics have had for centuries their form of situation ethics, called "mental reservation," enabling them to lie whenever they deem it necessary. Protestants have always practiced situation ethics in setting aside God's command of baptism for the man on his death bed or the man in the desert.

But faithful Christians have always obeyed God in all things (Acts 5:29). Christians wait for the way of escape (1 Cor. 10:13), pray, often for strength and guidance (Jas. 5:16; Phil. 1:9-10), and study the Bible regularly to know God's way (Psa. 119:11). With rapturous acclaim, they say with the Psalmist, "O how love I thy law! it is my meditation all the day" (Psa. 119:97).

A Critical Look at Situation Ethics

By **Wayne Jackson**

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Basically, there are three schools of thought regarding human moral responsibility. First, there is nihilism. Nihilism argues that there is no God, hence anything one wishes to do is permitted. There are no rules—absolutely none—for human conduct; according to this ideology, every person is a law unto himself.

Second, there is relativism. Relativism contends that all conduct is relative to the circumstance. Thus, each individual must decide what is moral or immoral in a given situation. Ultimately, every man is his own judge of the matter.

Third, there is absolutism. This concept affirms that there is an absolute, objective standard of right and wrong (grounded in the holy nature of God himself), and this code of moral conduct is set forth in the Bible—reaching its zenith in the New Testament. Elsewhere we have discussed these ideas in greater detail (Jackson 1986, 153-160). For the present, we will address relativism, or, as it is more commonly known, situation ethics.

There are two fundamental categories of situation ethicists. There are **atheistic situationists**—those who totally reject the Scriptures as having any bearing on morality. Then, in addition, there are **religious situationists**—including those who allege that the Bible actually endorses this code of action.

Atheistic Situationism

The former category finds expression in the following statement found in *Humanist Manifestos I & II*:

[W]e affirm that moral values derive their source from human experience. Ethics is autonomous and situational, needing no theological or ideological sanction (1973, 17).

The foregoing declaration is wholly void of reason. If man is “autonomous,” i.e., he is a self-governing creature, there could **never** be a situation in which he could do wrong! It is an exercise in futility to attempt to construct any sort of ethical system apart from the concept that man has a soul that ultimately will be accountable to God in eternity, that Heaven has revealed that concept, and regulated human activity, through the Scriptures.

The French philosopher Pascal wrote:

It is certain that the mortality or immortality of the soul must make an entire difference to morality. And yet philosophers have constructed their ethics independently of this: they discuss to pass an hour (n.d., 79).

In his *Diary of a Writer*, the Russian novelist Dostoevsky observed:

Neither a man nor a nation can live without a “higher idea,” and there is only one such idea on earth, that of an immortal human soul; all the other “higher ideas” by which men live follow from that (Berdyayev 1934, 105).

No skeptic can consistently argue the case for situational morality.

Religious Situationism

Theological situationism has been popularly argued by Joseph Fletcher. Fletcher claims that situation ethics is a balance between “antinomianism” (no law) and “legalism” (bound by law). Antinomianism and legalism represent the same basic concepts referred to above as nihilism and absolutism. For Fletcher, “love” is the sole factor in making moral judgments (1966, 26).

But Fletcher’s theory is fraught with insuperable logical difficulties. First, it is self-contradictory. This view contends that there are no rules except the rule to love. But what if, in a certain situation, one decides that love is not the appropriate course of action? Again, according to the situationist, there are no absolutes—except that one absolutely must love in all situations! But what is the standard by which this mandate is defended?

Second, the situationist's "love" is purely subjective; he decides what love is in any given context. One writer notes that Fletcher has defined "love" in no less than a dozen ways in his book, *Situation Ethics*. Situation ethics removes God from the throne as the moral sovereign of the universe, and substitutes man in his place. Situationism completely ignores the biblical view that mere mortals are void of sufficient wisdom to guide their earthly activity (cf. Jeremiah 10:23).

Third, this ideology assumes that "love" is some sort of ambiguous, no-rule essence that is a cure-all for moral problems. That is like suggesting that two football teams play a game in which there will be no rules except "fairness." But, fairness according to **whose** judgment? The Cowboys? The Forty-niners? The referees? The spectators? The sports writers? (cf. Lutzer 1981, 33). This line of argumentation is utter nonsense. Actually, when boiled down, situationism is not substantially different from nihilism, for, as Joseph Fletcher confesses: "For the situationist there are no rules—none at all" (1966, 55).

Finally, situationism assumes a sort of infallible omniscience that is able to always precisely predict what the most "loving" course of action is. For instance, the theory contends that lying, adultery, murder, etc., could be "moral" if done within the context of love. Yet who is able to foretell the consequences of such acts, and so determine, in advance, what is the "loving" thing to do? Consider the following scenario.

A young woman, jilted by her lover, is in a state of great depression. A married man, with whom she works, decides to have an affair with her in order to comfort her. Some, like Fletcher, would argue that what he did might well have been a noble deed, for the man acted out of concern for his friend. What a perverted viewpoint! **Here is the rest of the story.** The man's wife learned of his adulterous adventure, could not cope with the trauma, and eventually committed suicide. One of his sons, disillusioned by the immorality of his father and the death of his mother, began a life of crime, and finally was imprisoned for murder. Another son became a drunkard and was killed in an automobile accident that also claimed the lives of a mother and her two children. Now, who will contend that that initial act of infidelity was the "loving" thing to do?

Here is another matter for reflection. During the first century, thousands of Christians were martyred for their faith. If the rule of situation ethics is valid, why could not those saints have lied, “denying the Lord who bought them,” and thus have rationalized that circumstance by arguing that the preservation of their lives would grant them more time in which to proclaim the gospel? If this dogma is true, the martyrs died in vain!

Is Situation Ethics Biblical?

There are those who actually claim that the Bible endorses the concept of situation ethics. Some, for instance, cite the case of the Canaanite harlot, Rahab. She lied in order to save the Israelite spies; and yet, she is commended in the New Testament record (Hebrews 11:31; James 2:25). This, they allow, is a clear argument in defense of situation ethics.

Moreover, it is claimed that even Christ sanctioned the principle of situationism when he appealed to the circumstance of David and his men eating the showbread, normally reserved for priests only, in an emergency situation (Matthew 12:1ff). Actually, neither of these cases provides the coveted justification for the practice of situation ethics.

The case of Rahab does not bestow divine sanction upon the practice of situation ethics. First, Rahab’s lie is never condoned in the Scriptures. The fact that the episode is recorded in the Bible does not mean that it is approved. All lying is condemned (Revelation 21:8). The narrative regarding Rahab merely provides an example of where God honored a woman due to her obedient faith—in spite of her character flaw. This woman was a harlot in a pagan environment, but she had developed a budding faith in Jehovah (see Joshua 2:9ff). Accordingly, she received the Israelite spies with peace (Hebrews 11:31). Her motive was right, even though her method was wrong. There is not a word in the Scriptures that endorses the false story she told in concealing the spies, and it is utter desperation that grasps at this narrative in an attempt to justify situation ethics.

The record in Matthew 12 is very interesting. On a certain Sabbath day the Lord and his disciples were traveling through a grain field. The disciples, being hungry, began to pluck grain and to eat. Certain Pharisees saw this,

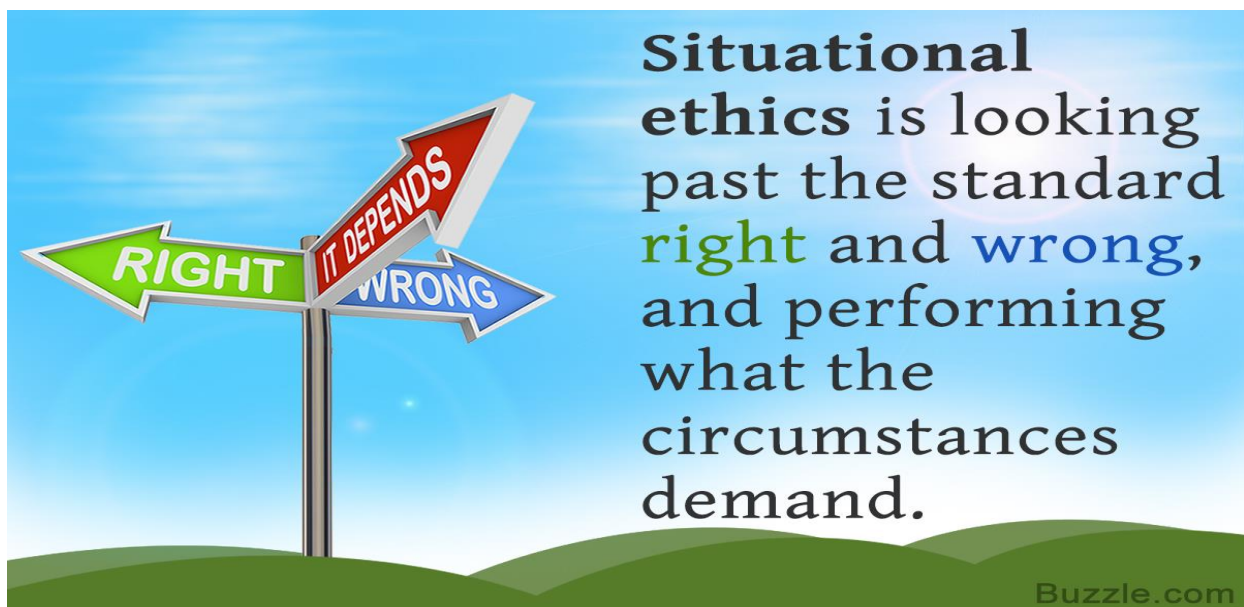
and charged these men with breaking the sabbath regulation within the Mosaic law. The fact is, the disciples had violated only the **uninspired traditions** of the Jewish elders; they had not transgressed the law of Moses (see Edersheim 1947, 56). In order to silence their baseless objection, Christ employed an ad hominem argument (a procedure whereby an opponent's inconsistency is exposed by an appeal to his own position).

Jesus cited the case of David (1 Samuel 21:6), who along with his men, once ate of the temple showbread, which "was not lawful for him to eat" (Matthew 12:4). The essence of the Lord's argument is this:

You gentlemen revere David as a great king and Hebrew hero. David once clearly broke the law by an illegal consumption of food. Yet, you never condemn him! On the other hand, my disciples have violated only your human traditions, and yet you charge them with sin. How very inconsistent you are!

This incident contains not a vestige of support for situation ethics. Jesus plainly said that what David did was "not lawful." Those who attempt to employ this narrative in defense of situationism simply have missed the force of the Master's argument (cf. McGarvey n.d., 104).

Situation ethics is a popular belief in a world bent on departure from God. But it does not have the sanction of the Holy Scriptures, and, if persistently pursued, will ultimately result in societal chaos.



The Meaning of Love

THE NEW MORALISTS choose love as their criterion for good and evil. They insist that love may frequently require that rules and commandments be set aside if the situation demands it. However, since there is widespread disagreement as to what actions are loving or unloving, a more fundamental problem must be solved; namely, what makes an action loving or unloving? Love must be defined accurately, so that a person can make an intelligent decision regarding what counts for love and what does not. As Aristotle observed, a term must not only mean something but it must mean not-something as well. There must be a limit to the meaning of a given word. Clearly, a term compatible with anything and everything is meaningless. The word *love* in particular suffers from much ambiguity because it is used in a variety of contexts. A lover may tell his girlfriend, "I love you," and a moment later use the same word to describe his fondness for his mother's apple pie. Since agape (love) is the basis for the new morality, it might be expected that the term would be clearly defined. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Although both Joseph Fletcher and Bishop Robinson acknowledge that the word needs defining, they present a confusing and contradictory account of what love is. Several commentators have found as many as a dozen uses of the word *love* in Fletcher's book. Such a list is unnecessary. Three incompatible definitions should be sufficient to demonstrate that the new moralists must make a decision as to what description of love should be used in calculating what actions are loving and which ones fail to pass the test.

NOMINALISM

In medieval times a controversy existed between the nominalists and the realists. Fletcher acknowledges that the debate which raged for several centuries is central to the problem of ethics. The realists believed that universals had independent, objective existence, but the nominalists held that universals existed only in name (hence the word *nominalism*). Universals were regarded as nothing but collective names; only the individual things are to be regarded as substances, as the truly real. The nominalists concluded that there are no eternal moral principles which are binding in all situations. Since only the individual thing is real, morality cannot be subsumed under universal prohibitions or commandments. In making ethical choices the situation must be considered rather than invoking an absolute moral rule.

Fletcher falls squarely under the nominalist label and asserts, "The whole mind-set of the modern man, *our* mind-set, is on the nominalists' side." Several scholars are then listed and subsequently judged as to whether they are consistent situationists. Brunner, Buber, Brightman, and even Barth qualify. Dietrich Bonhoeffer came close to joining the ranks, but missed it.² With such impressive company it seems that Fletcher can scarcely go wrong.

In keeping with the nominalists' view that there are no fixed moral principles, Fletcher defines love as the *intention* of the agent. He writes, "Nothing *can* justify an act except a loving purpose." Love is "an attitude, a disposition ... a purpose."⁴ Moral judgments are therefore to be based on whether one's intentions were good or bad. When this criterion is used, the consequences of an act are irrelevant. If one were faced with the decision of whether to lie or tell the truth, the lie

would be moral (assuming good intentions) even if it was later discovered and greater harm came as a result of it. It would be moral because it was told in love, that is, with a loving purpose.

In contrast, the realist believes that an action can have moral value independently of its consequences. Good and evil are regarded as intrinsic to the action. It follows, therefore, that an action can be immoral even if some good may happen to result from it. Also an action can be moral even if the consequences are undesirable. Traditional Christianity has adopted the realist position, because the moral law is regarded as the revealed will of God, hence obedience is required apart from a calculation of its results. This does not mean that consequences are totally unrelated to moral actions. In amoral matters the consequences are regarded as a factor in decisions; and even in moral issues, consequences are not regarded as irrelevant. Christianity holds that in eternity, appropriate rewards will be given for righteous deeds, and retribution for evil deeds. In that sense consequences are regarded as relevant to morality. Gordon Clark writes: "Not only will those who meet God's requirement be rewarded with joys unspeakable, but also a conscious desire for those rewards is legitimate motivation." However, traditional Christianity has repudiated the basic tenets of nominalism, namely, that moral decisions are to be determined by *human* calculation.

In the twelfth century a philosopher by the name of Peter Abelard denied the existence of universal ethical norms. Like the new moralists he stressed the *individual* rather than any binding moral code. He believed that morality was dependent solely on the *intention* of the agent. Consequences cannot become the basis for moral actions. An act done with good intentions is always good; if done with evil intentions, it is always evil. Both the act per se and the results were regarded as unimportant. But at this point a crucial question arises: What basis can be used to determine whether an intention is good or evil? Have people not performed grossly immoral acts while believing that they were doing right? No one can deny that they had good intentions. Christ predicted that the day would come when those who killed His followers would do so believing that they were serving God (Jn 16:2). Abelard attempted to answer this problem by an appeal to the Scriptures. Since the Bible spells out the content of morality rather clearly (eg., the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount), one might suspect that he would be explicit in deciding which actions had right intentions and which ones did not. Though Abelard insisted that only the intention determined the morality of an act, he decided that he could not take the biblical commandments at face value. Consistent with this view he writes, "Wherever actions are restricted by some precept or prohibition, these refer rather to will and consent than to the deeds themselves." The commandments may be broken without committing a sin. He held that if a person acts in ignorance, even adultery and murder may be committed without sinning. A sinner is not one who does what is prohibited, but rather he *consents* to it.

Abelard's theory that only the intention of the person determines morality led him to some rather interesting conclusions. Since no one should be judged by what he does, but by his intentions, it follows that those who disobeyed Christ (when He urged them not to make His miracles public) did the right thing. Their disobedience did not arise from contempt; therefore, it was good that they did not obey the command. Furthermore, those who persecuted Christ and ultimately killed Him should not be condemned for their deeds. In fact, Abelard says that their sin would have been greater if they would have allowed Christ and others whom they persecuted to go free.

Since Fletcher has defined a moral action as one that has a loving purpose, does he accept Abelard's conclusions? The answer is yes. Fletcher writes, "Like Abelard in the twelfth century, the situationist says sturdily that those who crucified Christ according to their own consciences were guilty of no sin." For Fletcher, the loving purpose alone is sufficient to make the crucifixion of Christ moral. Morality is determined by the intention of the agent.

There is, however, a second description of love which Fletcher presents. He states that "love is not something we *have* or *are*, it is something we *do*." Even more clearly he asserts, "In Christian situation ethics nothing is worth anything in and of itself. It gains or acquires its value only because it happens to help persons (thus being good) or to hurt persons (thus being bad)."¹⁰ Here Fletcher places the basis of morality squarely on the *consequences* of an act. Throughout his writings, this meaning is stressed most often. He believes that people should manipulate circumstances and break whatever rules necessary in order to achieve certain results. Responsible individuals should be calculating and use every reasonable means available to reach desirable ends. One of the foundation stones of situationism is the pragmatism of William James and John Dewey, which holds that the good is whatever works. In fact, Fletcher states that the very first question in all ethics is *What* do I want? With this as the central question, he proceeds to give a multitude of illustrations of how people in the past have gone about achieving their goals. There was a man in the English movie *The Mark* who was sexually attracted to little girls, until rescued by a woman who seduced him, thereby releasing him from his pathology. In this case the woman achieved her loving goal by shrewd calculation. A Negro woman killed her crying baby with her own hands so that the Indians might not find her and her other companions. In this way their lives were spared.¹³ In these and countless other illustrations, Fletcher emphasizes that moral actions are ones that are instrumental in producing certain consequences. In general, people are to be placed above principles; individuals are more important than things. But in answering the question of What do I want? the important thing is to achieve an end by using available means.

On the one hand Fletcher insists that the intention of the agent makes an act moral; while on the other hand, he maintains that an act is not moral until it helps someone. However, the two views cannot be reconciled. If an act is moral because of good intentions, then the consequences must be regarded as irrelevant. Frequently an act done with good intentions turns out to be harmful, and conversely an act done with evil intentions may by accident have good results. For example, if good intentions are the criterion for morality, then a man who has sex relations outside his marriage would not be doing evil, as long as he meant well—that is, had good intentions. If good intentions could absolve from any taint of sin those who crucified Christ, presumably this man did not sin either. At first, it might appear that his good intentions worked out perfectly. But what if, several weeks later, his wife discovers what happened, becomes enraged, sues for a divorce, and leaves with the children, who by this time have become frustrated and disillusioned with their father. In addition, the man discovers that the woman with whom he had his liaison became pregnant. Was the act moral? If morality is to be judged by his intentions, the answer is yes; if it is to be judged by consequences, the answer is no. And it is contradictory to say it is both!

Of course, such situations may also be reversed. In the Old Testament, Joseph was tempted to have an affair with Potiphar's wife. Although she coaxed him day after day, he refused. No one could doubt his good intentions; in fact, one of the reasons he resisted was his loving concern for

Potiphar himself. He would not only be sinning against God, but against the one who had committed so much responsibility into his hands. Not even a situationist could quarrel with Joseph's loving intentions! Yet, because of his resistance to this woman, he was put in jail for two years. Had he been acting morally? If intentions make an act moral, then once again the answer is yes. But what if morality is judged by consequences? What if Fletcher is correct when he says, "But Christians say that nothing is right unless it *helps* somebody"? To be in prison for two years when innocent is indeed an unloving consequence. Joseph, on situational grounds, would be judged immoral.

Some may argue that Joseph's imprisonment actually turned out for greater good (through circumstances he was later promoted to a high position in Egypt), and hence this act even from the standpoint of the consequences was moral. Two things must be considered: (1) it is entirely possible that Joseph would have eventually been elevated to his high position even if he had not gone to prison, and (2) the real question is What if Joseph had died in prison because of his resistance to Potiphar's wife's enticement? Doubtless, situationists would consider an innocent victim's imprisonment and death something that hurts rather than helps.

If morality is to be determined by consequences, Joseph would be regarded as immoral. What is true of Joseph would be true of all martyrs both past and present. Fletcher, when discussing a situationist's response to the second commandment, Thou shalt have no other gods before me, says "One could surely *pretend* to have no faith in God, or in any combination of gods, if it were necessary for loving cause." The martyrs did not follow such advice, even when their lives and those of their families were at stake. As a result they were killed. If morality is judged by results based on this world's value system, as the situationists propose, then such conduct is immoral.

When pressed to choose between the two methods of evaluating a moral act, situationists prefer to remain ambiguous. Fletcher uses both meanings throughout his writings, giving the impression that everything is perfectly clear. There is, of course, an advantage to such double-talk; it gives the moralist an opportunity to keep shifting ground in an ethical debate. Someone like Joseph is considered moral because of his good intentions (the bad consequences are ignored); conversely an adulterer is judged by whether he hurts or helps others (consequences are the criteria for morality). Fletcher is able to jump from one corner to another, never claiming any given one as his own. Or to change the metaphor slightly, the situationist thinks he is secure in walking the middle of the road, but in reality he bumps into people going both ways. The Greeks had a race in which a man put one foot on one horse and the other foot on another horse. The race went fine as long as the horses stayed together. When they began to separate, the man had a decision to make! The situationist must also decide. He cannot have both definitions at the same time.

Fletcher has a third description of love which is quite unrelated to the two previous definitions. Love is regarded as a faculty which helps discern what to do. "Love, in the imperative mood of neighbor-concern, examining the relative facts of the situation in the indicative mood, discovers what it is obliged to do." Since Fletcher rejects the idea of conscience giving direction in moral decisions, it is difficult to know how love is capable of making a moral choice. In *Honest To God* Bishop Robinson expresses a similar idea of love—that it has a built-in moral compass that intuitively relates to the need of another in a given situation. Whether this definition of love is satisfactory will be discussed in subsequent chapters. It is sufficient to note here that such a view is quite distinct from the preceding accounts of what love is and how it works.

It is painfully obvious that Fletcher has not given any definition of the word *love*; he has instead presented three incompatible descriptions of how love becomes the basis for judging conduct. Each one of these three descriptions has its own peculiar difficulties; to accept all three at the same time is intolerable. It is this equivocation that led James Gustafson to remark,

“Love,” like “situation,” is a word that runs through Fletcher’s book like a greased pig (if I may be excused an allusion to my rural county-fair past). Nowhere does Fletcher indicate in a systematic way his various uses of it. It refers to everything he wants it to refer to.

If love is the criterion for good and evil, and if there is no clear statement as to what constitutes a loving act, then morality becomes at best confusing. Some of the practical results of this theory already become evident. No one could ever be judged for an act *per se*; each action is morally neutral, and only the intention *or* the consequences (not both!) can be evaluated to see whether he is guilty or innocent. However, there are even more serious difficulties which accompany an ethic which is based on love without specific content. It may even be possible to demonstrate that the difficulties turn out to be impossibilities; in fact, the new morality will be shown to be neither *new* nor a system of *morality*.

UTILITARIANISM

The question of whether the new morality is really *new* is not only asked by the curious; from a philosophical standpoint, the question is of more than passing interest. Various ethical theories have been advanced since the time of Plato. Each has had its merits and shortcomings adequately exposed by friend and foe. But what of situationism? Is it a new species, or is it a revival of some previous philosophy?

The answer (to use a Barthian dialectic) is both yes and no. Since “there is nothing new under the sun,” it is not surprising to find that situationism is directly related to the utilitarian theory of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. Fletcher admits pointedly, “It takes over from Bentham and Mill the strategic principle of ‘the greatest good of the greatest number.’”

Bentham is generally regarded as the founder of the utilitarian movement. He discovered the principle of utility expressed by David Hume and applied it to social and ethical problems. Briefly, the theory is that moral decisions can be made by calculating the pleasures and the pains involved in the consequences of any act. In the calculation each individual is treated equally; hence morality is democratic. A moral action is one that produces more pleasure and less pain than any substitute action. In an immoral action the pain would outweigh the pleasure. But in order to achieve the correct balance, pleasures and pains must be measured. Bentham listed seven factors which are necessary to determine their value. In each calculation of pains and pleasures, one must consider the (1) intensity, (2) duration, (3) certainty or uncertainty, (4) propinquity (i.e., nearness) or remoteness, (5) fecundity (its chance of being followed by other pleasures), (6) purity (its chance of not being followed by pains), and (7) its extent (the number of people who are affected by it).

Bentham then says that one must find the total degrees of good tendency (i.e., pleasure) and the total degrees of bad tendency (i.e., pain) when making a moral decision. He thought this was possible by using the seven criteria and multiplying the respective totals by the number of people involved. Morality is now on a scientific basis. Only in this way can one be sure that the greatest

good for the greatest number of people will prevail—or more accurately—that the amount of pleasure in the world will be greater than the amount of pain.

Some of the practical implications of Bentham's utilitarianism are of particular interest. While it may be somewhat difficult to make moral calculations in some instances, it is apparent that the theory has frequently been implemented, especially by some political regimes. Since Bentham was interested in the principle of utility for governmental action, Gordon Clark provides a concrete example of how utilitarianism operates when properly applied. Clark writes:

Let us suppose a nation [were] composed of ninety per cent indigenous stock, blond Nordics, and ten per cent of a despised and hated minority—Jews, for instance. Now, the indigenous, homogeneous stock, having been reared in the rigorous, warlike, and superior virtues of primitive Teutonic barbarism, finds great pleasure, not in scalping white men with tomahawks, but in a more refined and scientific torturing of Semites. It is all good, clean fun, and very profitable, too. The execution or torture of each member of the inferior race gives pleasure to millions. Even if—the point need not be debated—even if the pain of torture is greater than the pleasure of any one of the superior Nazis, the pain cannot outweigh the sum of the pleasures of the millions. If there should be any possibility of the pain's being greater than the pleasure, the least scientific of a race of scientists could easily adjust the degree of torture; or, better, the national department of education could step-up the courses in torture-appreciation. And the greatest good of the greatest number will prevail.

The most famous English utilitarian was John Stuart Mill. He agreed with Bentham that the principle of utility cannot be proved; but since each person desires his own happiness, the theory was legitimate. He recognized that a fundamental problem with Bentham's hedonistic calculus was that all pleasures were considered qualitatively equal. Bentham was concerned only with the *quantity* of pleasure; Mill wanted to introduce *quality* as well into the mathematical equation. For example, he said that it was better to be Socrates *dissatisfied* than a fool satisfied. This makes the new factor of quality the moral determinant, not the pleasure as such. But if that which produces pleasure for the greatest number distinguishes a moral from an immoral act, then clearly the pleasures of sexual indulgence, guzzling liquor, playing tennis, reading Shakespeare, and those that exist on God's right hand cannot be distinguished. There is no way that we can distinguish between a high or low pleasure without merely appealing to personal preference.

Fletcher acknowledges that his ethical theory forms a coalition with Bentham and Mill. After an illustration of situationism at work he concludes, "This is the agapeic calculus.... Our situation ethics frankly joins forces with Mill; no rivalry here. We choose what is most 'useful' for the most people." The new morality is therefore a moral system based on the utilitarianism of the past. Why then is it called the *new* morality?

One aspect of this ethical theory which is generally regarded as a novelty is that utilitarianism is given a *Christian* flavor. Thus while embracing utilitarianism, Fletcher wishes at the same time to make a slight distinction between situationism and utilitarianism. Speaking of his coalition with the theory he affirms,

Observe that this is a genuine coalition, even though it reshapes the "good" of the utilitarians, replacing their pleasure principle with *agape*. In the coalition the hedonistic calculus becomes the agapeic calculus, the greatest amount of neighbor welfare for the largest number of neighbors possible.

Thus Fletcher takes the procedural principle of utilitarianism but changes the *content* to love. In this way, he attempts to differentiate between utilitarianism and the *new* morality. The difference between the two is plausible if the *content* of love is specifically defined. Whether Fletcher—or any situationist—is capable of giving specific guidelines as to what constitutes love is a matter for dispute. Nevertheless, the new moralists attempt to do what Mill did and failed. Fletcher is evidently fully aware of the difficulty (although one would not suspect it immediately), and realizes that he is incapable of distinguishing his brand of ethics from utilitarianism. While he may insert the word *love* for pleasure, the point is that many may regard the most loving thing as that which brings pleasure while an unloving act brings pain. This throws situationism completely back into the lap of utilitarianism. Fletcher realizes that his original distinction between situationism and utilitarianism is precarious. He writes:

We need not try to assert some supposed mutual exclusion as between *agape* and the “happiness” that utilitarians want. All depends upon what we find our happiness in: all ethics are happiness ethics. With hedonists it is one’s own pleasure (physical or mental); ... The Christian situationist’s happiness is in doing God’s will as it is expressed in Jesus’ Summary. And his utility method sets him to seeking his happiness (pleasure, too, and self-realization!) by seeking his neighbors’ good on the widest possible scale.

In a more recent essay, written for professionals, Fletcher admits he has frequently avoided the issue of situationism’s union with utilitarianism. He recognizes that his distinction from utilitarianism can no longer be defended. He admits the union is complete.

But we can now cut through this issue cleanly: I am ready to turn the coalition into an organic union. Let’s say plainly that *agape* is utility; love is well-being; the Christian who does not individualize or sentimentalize love *is* a utilitarian.... Then what remains as a difference between the Christian and most utilitarians is only the language used, and their different answers given to the question, “Why be concerned, why care?”—which is again the metaethical question.

Along with utilitarianism, Fletcher is forced to accept the view that the end justifies the means. “What was once charged as an accusation against the Jesuits is here frankly embraced: *finis sanctificat media*.” Fletcher relates the story of how Lenin was becoming weary of being told that he had no ethics because he used force in foreign and civil wars. Some Tolstoyan idealists accused him of believing that the end justifies the means. Finally, he shot back at them, “If the end does not justify the means, then in the name of sanity and justice, *what does?*” Fletcher agrees wholeheartedly. If the end does not justify the means, then nothing else does.

Throughout history, utilitarianism with its “end justifies the means” philosophy has been implemented by political regimes. Hitler chose a certain end and had a minority group executed to achieve his desired goal. Communism has a history of bloody revolutions and massacres. All of these actions are conducted in line with the pragmatic, ethical theory of utilitarianism, with which Fletcher has formed his coalition. These leaders have spent time calculating the consequences and thereby decided what was the most useful for the most people. Morality depended on the situation.

However, situationism is not to be rejected simply because it can be used to justify torture and massacre. Consequences cannot be used to refute an ethical theory. They merely explain the practical application of the principle. If situationism is correct, the consequences will have to be accepted. While some may have a suspicion that an ethical theory which can be used to justify genocide is to be rejected, we cannot object to the theory unless it be proved that such brutality is ethically wrong. For this reason, the discussion turns to other considerations which may render the situational-utilitarian coalition untenable.

*Fletcher labors to put as many contemporary scholars as possible in the situationist camp. Perhaps he thinks his position is more secure if it can be demonstrated that “the whole mind-set of the modern man ... is on the nominalists’ side” (p. 58). Paul Ramsey appropriately comments, “Which is enough said in behalf of mind-set even if it could be demonstrated to be a species of thoughtlessness.” Paul Ramsey, *Deeds and Rules in Christian Ethics* (New York: Scribner, 1967), p. 156. For criticisms regarding Fletcher’s evaluation of contemporary theologians, see pp. 154-55 of Ramsey.¹

¹ Lutzer, E. W., & Clark, G. H. (1972). [*The morality gap: an evangelical response to situation ethics*](#). Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers.

Love and Predicting Consequences

IN THE STATEMENT “The end justifies the means,” there are two factors, namely, the end and the means. It has already been demonstrated that situationism (which adopts this philosophy) is unable to give direction as to what ends are desirable, that is, loving. In fact, there is no agreement whatever as to what ends love is to seek. Yet, there is a further criticism of situationism.

Let us assume that a detailed value system could be provided. Suppose that all of the theological and philosophical debates of the past were finally settled, and Fletcher would be able to provide a detailed account of what ends are valuable. Situationism still could not give moral direction because it is impossible to predict the consequences of action. In other words, one could never be sure if the *means* employed would achieve the desired *ends*.

Fletcher candidly admits, “We can’t always guess the future, even though we are always being forced to try.” Yet the fact is that unless certain desired consequences result, the action is then immoral. Fletcher must be taken at face value when he says (despite the contradiction that motives determine morality), “Christians say that nothing is right unless it *helps* somebody.”

G. E. Moore in *Principia Ethica* gives a lucid account of the difficulties in predicting moral consequences. He reminds us that it is not sufficient to calculate only the immediate results, rather we must take account of all consequences throughout an infinite future. The chain reaction set in motion by an act would have to be calculated in toto. This means that we would need some reason to believe that no consequence of our action in the future will reverse the balance of good which we hope will be accomplished by our act. Clearly, such prognostication demands omniscience. Moore correctly writes, “Our utter ignorance of the far future gives us no justification for saying that it is even probably right to choose the greater good within the region over which a probable forecast may extend.”

After summarizing the problem distinctly, Moore attempts to answer his own objection by suggesting that after a few centuries the effects of an action would only be trifling; the immediate consequences are more prominent, and therefore, we can assume that the distant future need not enter into the calculation. But such an assumption is unprovable. Therefore, he adds, “Failing such a proof, we can certainly have no rational ground for asserting that one of two alternatives is even probably right and another wrong.”

The fact is that it is impossible to predict even the most immediate consequences of any action. If we judge morality by results, as a minimum we must know (1) all immediate consequences and the number of people affected, (2) the remote consequences and the number of people involved, and (3) the length of time each result (good or bad) lasted in each case. Thus the number of people could be multiplied by the length of desirable or undesirable consequences to determine which decision is moral.

Throughout Fletcher's books it is assumed that the consequences are always certain, but usually the relative details of the consequences are not even considered. Fletcher attempts to avoid this criticism of situationism by ignoring the matter or pretending it does not exist. He modestly admits that there is human error and that situationism may assume too much when it holds that people have the ability to know the facts and weigh them. Yet for the most part, Fletcher assumes that consequences can be easily predicted and tabulated. Only such naïveté can account for his doctrinaire ethical judgments.

Two illustrations will be given to show how imprecisely consequences are calculated. A Puerto Rican woman in East Harlem made friends with a married man in order to have a child. When the minister told her she should repent, she replied, "Repent? I ain't repentin'. I asked the Lord for my boy. He's a gift from God." Fletcher's verdict is: "She is *right*." His judgment does not merely refer to the goodness of the gift of the son. Fletcher believes she was right in the *act done*. He gives us no clue as to how his verdict was so confidently reached. There is no evidence that all of the consequences were accurately calculated.

In this case the man enticed was married. What was the outcome of this liaison so far as his wife was concerned? Did it help their marriage? Did it ruin it? Did they have children? If so, what effect did the unfaithfulness of their father have on them? What about the spiritual and psychological effect on the man who broke his marriage vows? These are only a few of the questions which would have to be accurately calculated before Fletcher could say the woman did right. Apparently, his verdict was reached completely apart from the facts of the situation. No attempt is made to calculate all of the relevant factors. Upon discussing the consequences of acquiring such a simple object as a thesaurus, he writes:

Finally, every serious decision maker needs to ask the fourth question, What are the foreseeable *consequences*? Given any course of action, in the context of the problem, what are the effects directly and indirectly brought about, the immediate consequences, and the remote (sequelae)? This last question means, we must note, that there are more results entailed than just the end wanted, and they *all* have to be weighed and weighted. Along with getting the thesaurus, there may come other things: impoverishment, a neurosis nurtured, professional growth, resentment by a wife or creditor, successful completion of an important thesis.

Yet in the instance of the illegitimate child (involving consequences much more complicated than those of acquiring a thesaurus), Fletcher did not carefully weigh the results even *after* the action happened. It is obvious that to calculate the consequences *before* making a moral decision is even more difficult.

When discussing his view regarding the identity of love and justice, he repeats a story about an Indian who was deeply in debt; he inherited a fortune and gave it away to the poor, leaving his creditors unpaid. This story has been used at times to show that love and justice sometimes are at variance. Fletcher believes love and justice are the same. Inexplicably, he says, "The Indian failed in *agape*, and was therefore unjust." Once again (since Fletcher quotes the story from another source), he made his verdict without a calculation of the facts in the situation. From a situational standpoint, the Indian should be commended for doing the right thing. Is it not "probable" that the poor needed the money more than the creditors? Surely by helping the poor the Indian was doing what he considered to be the greatest good for the greatest number. He was concerned about serving more neighbors rather than fewer, as Fletcher suggests we do.

Situationally, the only way the Indian could be condemned is if Fletcher could prove that the good done to the poor was less than the harm done to the creditors. At any rate no judgment can be made upon the Indian unless all of the facts are considered.

The impossibility of such ethical calculations can be demonstrated by reading Bentham, who attempted to make moral decisions on the basis of mathematical calculations. Even the simplest ethical decision is impossible on such a basis. Suppose one is faced with the ethical decision of telling a lie to an employer. If he tells the truth, he suspects (who can know for sure!) he will be fired. If he is fired, what will the consequences be? He may find a better job and make more money, or he may find one that pays less. Can he predict how far he will be able to work his way up in each case? Perhaps he will be better off in the long run if he is fired. But what if he tells a lie and is not fired? Other questions must also be answered. If he is detected, will his fellow employees find out? How will they react? How will all of the related factors balance out over an extended period?

Of course, Fletcher would answer by saying that probability is sufficient. But Clark, when speaking about a similar situation asks,

How can the required knowledge of what is probable be obtained? ... It would require the original calculation to be completed in a large number of situations; and only when these results can be tabulated, could it be seen whether or not lying is usually unprofitable.

An actual instance of lying will serve to illustrate how untenable situationism is in practice. Several years ago the State Department lied about the U-2 spy plane incident. This may have been done out of love for 180 million Americans, because their trust in the honesty of the government is crucial. Also it preserved good relations with Russia and kept a military secret which was necessary to insure future security measures. Although the original explanation by the State Department was plausible, the lie was discovered. This resulted in greater hatred among nations, and the confidence of many Americans was lost. Was the lie the *right* thing to do in that situation?

It is difficult to know how Fletcher would answer, but if an action is not right unless it helps somebody, then the lie was moral only until it was discovered. Afterward it resulted in greater harm for the greatest number. Despite the initial embarrassment, goodwill would have been gained by the nations of the world if the truth had immediately been told. If Fletcher were to say that the lie was moral because of the good intentions, he would again be contradicting his basic thesis that only what helps people is good. (Even legalists have good intentions!) Also, he would be falling into the very error he elsewhere deplors. To assert that a lie is moral merely because of good motives (apart from good consequences) is to have an *intrinsic* view of right and wrong; namely, the lie is inherently right regardless of the outcome. If this is what Fletcher believes, he cannot criticize legalists who insist that a lie is always *evil* apart from its outcome!

Logically, we might assume that a situationist would hold that the lie (though told lovingly) was immoral. If this is the case, the fact that results cannot be predicted is highlighted. Even probability is so remote that no individual can make an ethical judgment with certainty. In fact, no decision could be classified as moral until all of the results were tabulated and weighed mathematically. On a practical level, morality is impossible.

But even if the results could be computed, the calculations would still not be complete. For in addition to the results, the motives of action (despite the contradiction noted) would also have to be evaluated. “The new morality weighs motive heavily [*sic*] in its scales, along with means and ends.” Exactly what Fletcher means by “heavily” is undetermined. The *intensity* of the motive would also have to be calculated in order for it to be weighed. Add to this the question of what motives are desirable, and morality becomes out of reach.

Fletcher apparently is not concerned with calculations. He does acknowledge that “with the development of computers all sorts of analytical ethical possibilities open up.” However, computers would not only have to be able to predict the future (so far little success has come from such attempts), but also some decisions would have to be made as to what kind of a future should be sought. Fletcher theorizes: “It is possible that by learning how to assign numerical values to the factors at stake in problems of conscience, love’s calculations can gain accuracy in an ethical *ars major*.” However, such calculations are as yet impossible. In the meantime no person can ever be sure he is making a moral decision. Hence, the moral life is as yet impossible too.

Fletcher often ridicules legalists, asserting that they “like to wallow or cower in the security of the law.” While such colorful ad hominem arguments seem to put the “intrinsicists” on the side of ignorance and insecurity, Fletcher has not provided an alternative that can survive analysis. Until he does so, he is in no position to criticize those who believe that morality should be within the ability of the humble and uneducated. With Fletcher’s view, only the educated who are capable of shrewd manipulation and scientific calculation have the possibility of being moral. Perhaps morality is not beyond the reach of the common man. This can only be true, however, if the moral worth of an action is sought in the act itself and not in its results.²

² Lutzer, E. W., & Clark, G. H. (1972). [*The morality gap: an evangelical response to situation ethics*](#). Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers.

2 CORINTHIANS 3		
Old Covenant		New Covenant
		Ministers of the new covenant (vs. 6)
Of the letter (vs. 6)		Of the Spirit (vs. 6)
The letter kills (vs. 6)		The Spirit gives life (vs. 6)
Ministry of Death (vs. 7)		Ministry of Spirit (vs. 8)
Written/Engraved on stones (vs. 7)		
Ministry of condemnation (vs. 9)		Ministry of righteousness (vs. 9)
Glorious (vss. 7,9,11)		Much more glorious (vss.8-9,11)
Passing away (vs. 7)		Remains (vs. 11)
Veil on Moses's face (vs. 13)		Great boldness of speech (vs. 12)
Veil remains in reading O.T. (vs. 14)		Veil taken away in Christ (vs. 14)
Veil lies on their heart (vs. 15)		Veil taken away when one turns to the Lord (vs. 16)
PASSAGE	ATTITUDE	ACTION
John 4:24	spirit	truth
Joshua 24:14	sincerity	truth
Ecclesiastes 12:13	fear God	keep commands
Acts 10:35	fear Him	work righteous
James 2:17	faith	works
1 John 3:18	word/tongue	deed/truth
Deuteronomy 10:12-13	fear/love—heart	walk/ways
Romans 1:9	with my spirit	in the gospel

Situation Ethics—Extended Version

by [Dave Miller, Ph.D.](#)

Human beings throughout history have been susceptible to a desire to be freed from the dictates of higher authority. Most people wish to be free to do whatever they desire to do. This attitude runs rampant among the baby boomers whose formative years occurred during the 1960s. Expressions that were commonplace at the time included “Do your own thing” and “Let it all hang out.” These simple slogans offer profound insight into what really was driving the countercultural forces at that time. Underneath the stated objectives of love, peace, and brotherhood were the actual motives of self-indulgence and freedom from restrictions. This ethical, moral, and spiritual perspective has proliferated, and now dominates the American moral landscape.

The Israelites at Mt. Sinai provide a good case study of this. Their unbridled lust manifested itself when they cast aside restraint. Awaiting the return of Moses, they “sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play” (Exodus 32:6)—“play” being used euphemistically to refer to sex play (cf. Genesis 26:8) [Harris, et al., 1980, 2:763; Clarke, n.d., 1:464]. The drinking and dancing (vs. 9) apparently included lewd, even nude, party-like revelry, with the people being “naked” (KJV), “broken loose” (ASV), “unrestrained” (NKJV), or “out of control” (NASV—vs. 25). The “prodigal son” was gripped by this same “party on” mentality. He went to the far country to party, to live it up, and to “get down.” There he indulged himself in riotous, loose living—totally free and unrestrained in whatever his fleshly appetites urged him to do (Luke 15:13).

Despite all of their high and holy insistence that their actions are divinely approved, and the result of a deep desire to do Christ’s will and save souls, could it possibly be that those within Christendom who seek to relax doctrinal rigidity are, in reality, implementing their own agenda of change simply **to relieve themselves of Bible restrictions**? Is it purely coincidental that the permissive preachers have been both willing and eager to accommodate the clamor for “no negative, all positive” preaching? Is it completely accidental and unrelated that many voices are minimizing strict obedience under the guise of “legalism,” “we’re under grace, not law,” “we’re in the grip of grace” (Lucado, 1996), and that we are “free to change” (e.g., Hook, 1990)?

No, these circumstances are neither coincidental nor unrelated. They are calculated and conspiratorial. Those who have aversion to law have breathed in the same spirit that has led secular society’s psychological profession to view guilt as destructive, while unselfish, personal responsibility is labeled “co-dependency.” They have embraced the same subjective, self-centered rationale that secular society offers for rejecting the plain requirements of Scripture in order to do whatever they desire to do: “God wants me to be happy!” and “It meets my needs!” The spirit of liberalism has indeed taken deep root, both in the country and in the Christian religion (see Chesser, 2001).

SITUATIONISM DEFINED

In the mid-1960s, Joseph Fletcher published the book, *Situation Ethics*, thereby securing for himself the dubious distinction “the Father of Situation Ethics” (1966). Of course, Fletcher was by no means the first to advance the ideals of situationism.

Men like Emil Brunner (*The Divine Imperative*), Reinhold Niebuhr (*Moral Man and Immoral Society*), Harvey Cox (*The Secular City*), Dietrich Bonhoeffer (*Ethics*), and John A.T. Robinson (*Honest to God*) promoted ethical relativism before Fletcher's popular expression of the same. Existentialist philosophers like Sartre, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger promulgated this same subjectivism. Though Fletcher at first attempted to deny this tie to existential philosophy (1967, p. 75), he ended up admitting it (pp. 77,234). However, we need not think that situation ethics is a twenty-first-century phenomenon that was invented by modern theologians and social scientists. Situationism goes all the way back to Eden when Satan posed to Eve circumstances that he alleged would justify setting aside God's law (Genesis 3:4-6).

Fletcher summarized his ideas in terms of six propositions that he came to identify as "the fundamentals of Christian conscience" (1967, pp. 13-27). This ethical theory stresses "freedom from prefabricated decisions and prescriptive rules" in exchange for "the relative or nonabsolute and variant or nonuniversal nature of the situational approach" (p. 7). "Right and wrong depend upon the situation" (p. 14). The "situation" is defined as "the relative weight of the ends and means and motives and consequences all taken together, as weighed by love" (p. 23). The situation ethicist feels free to "tinker with Scripture" and to form "a coalition with the utilitarian principle of the 'greatest good of the greatest number'" (pp. 18-19; cf. p. 56).

Situationism is simply ethical relativism, in that it moves "away from code ethics, from stern and ironbound do's and don'ts, from prescribed conduct and legalistic morality" (p. 24). Situationism bears close affinity with existentialism (pp. 26,77,234). "Imitative practice," uniformity and conformity, and "metaphysical morals" are all disdained (pp. 26,106,240). Objective principles and abstract rules are repudiated, in exchange for "freedom and openness" (pp. 72,76,233,235). Concrete absolutes are viewed unfavorably as "authoritarianism" and "rules-bound thinking" (p. 240).

In contrast, situationism calls for "creative" moral conduct, accommodation to "pluralism," "freedom," and "openness," as well as "spontaneity and variety in moral decision-making" (pp. 78,123-124,235,241). Constant emphasis is placed on "love" as the only intrinsic good, with the loving thing to do depending on each situation that arises. Since "love" is the only inherent, intrinsic value, the moral quality or value of every thing or action is extrinsic and contingent—depending upon the situation (pp. 14,26,34,38,55,76,123-124).

Though Fletcher offered formal expression to these concepts several decades ago, it would not be an exaggeration to state that situationism has "gone to seed" in American society and now constitutes the prevailing approach to making ethical decisions. As pollster guru George Barna remarked in a 2003 survey of American moral behavior:

This is reflective of a nation where **morality is generally defined according to one's feelings**. In a postmodern society, where **people do not acknowledge any moral absolutes**, if a person feels justified in engaging in a specific behavior then they do not make a connection with the immoral nature of that action.... Until people recognize that there are moral absolutes and attempt to live in harmony with them, we are likely to see a **continued decay of our moral foundations** (2003, emp. added).

FLAWS IN SITUATIONAL THINKING

At least two foundational errors cause Fletcher's theory of situationism to be irreparably flawed. The first is the failure to grasp the Bible's identification of the **central** concern of human beings: to love, honor, glorify, and obey God (Ecclesiastes 12:13; Micah 6:8; Matthew 22:37; 1 Corinthians 6:20; 2 Corinthians 5:9; 10:5; 1 Peter 4:11). Fletcher is virtually silent

on this dimension of human responsibility. Instead, he focuses his entire theory on love for fellowman. While love for fellowman is certainly crucial to Christian ethics and absolutely mandatory for the Christian (e.g., Luke 10:25-37) it must be viewed in its rightful position, subsumed beneath the greater, higher responsibility of loving God. One cannot love God without loving one's neighbor (e.g., 1 John 4:20-21). But, theoretically, one could love another person without loving God. Consequently, love for fellowman must be viewed in the larger framework of focusing one's life on pleasing God first and foremost. Since this must be the singular all-consuming passion of human beings, God's Word must be consulted in order to determine **how** to love God and fellow man. In other words, to comply with the number one responsibility in life, one must consult the absolute, prefabricated, prescriptive, ironbound do's and don'ts of Scripture! This, by definition, is love for God (1 John 5:3; John 14:15). It follows, then, that Fletcher is incorrect in identifying the **only intrinsic good** as "love" for fellow man (1967, p. 14). According to the Bible, intrinsic good **includes** fraternal love. But superceding even this love is **filial** love, i.e., love for God (Matthew 22:36-37; cf. Warren, 1972, pp. 87ff.). Consequently, God defines what love entails in man's treatment of both God and fellow man. But those definitions are found in the Bible in the form of prescriptive rules, regulations, and ironbound do's and don'ts.

The second fundamental flaw of Fletcher's brand of situationism is the subtle redefinition of "love." While Fletcher was correct when he identified love as an active determination of the will rather than an emotion (pp. 20-21), his idea of "love" is materialistic and secular, rather than scriptural or spiritual. "Love," to Fletcher, is what **human beings** decide is "good" or "best" in a given situation. This humanistic approach allows man and his circumstances to become the criteria for defining morality, rather than allowing God to define the parameters of moral behavior: "The metaphysical moralist with his intrinsic values and laws says, 'Do what is right and let the chips fall where they may.' The situational moralist says, 'Whether what you do is right or not depends precisely upon where the chips fall!'" (1967, p. 26). But the Bible simply does not place law and love in contradistinction to each other. In fact, according to the Bible, one cannot love either God or fellow man **without** law. The only way for an individual to know how to love is to go to the Bible and discern there the specifics of loving behavior. When Paul declared, "love is the fulfilling of the law" (Romans 13:19), he did not mean that it is possible to love one's neighbor while dispensing with the law (see Fletcher, 1967, p. 70; Hook, 1984, p. 31). Rather, he meant that when you conduct yourself in a genuinely loving manner, you are automatically acting in harmony with the law (i.e., you are not killing, stealing, coveting, bearing false witness, etc.). God, in His laws, **defined and pinpointed how to love**. To treat any of God's laws as optional, flexible, or occasional is to undermine the very foundations of **love**.

In situationism, human beings become the standard of morality. The human mind, with its subjective perceptions of the surrounding moral environment, becomes the authority, in direct conflict with the words of an inspired prophet: "O Lord, I know the way of man is not in himself; it is not in man who walks to direct his own steps" (Jeremiah 10:23). The psalmist certainly could be accused of being a "metaphysical moralist with his intrinsic values and laws." In his great psalm on the law of the Lord (Psalm 119), the writer conveyed his conviction that objective, prescriptive rules and prefabricated principles were indispensable to his survival. Observe closely a small portion of his unrelenting extolment of divine laws: "You have commanded us to keep Your precepts diligently" (vs. 4); "I would not be ashamed, when I look into all Your commandments" (vs. 6); "Behold, I long for Your precepts" (vs. 40); "I will delight myself in Your commandments, which I love" (vs. 47); "I will never forget Your precepts, for by them You have given me life" (vs. 93); "Through Your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way" (vs. 104); "The entirety of Your word is truth, and every one of Your righteous judgments endures forever" (vs. 160); "My soul keeps Your testimonies, and I love them exceedingly. I keep Your precepts and Your testimonies, for all my ways are before You" (vss. 167-168).

To Fletcher, “love” directed toward one’s fellowman is a materialistically defined love that he calls “personalism.” “Personalism” is “the ethical view that the highest good, the *summum bonum* or first-order value, is human welfare and happiness” (1967, p. 33). Fletcher’s ethical humanism is “a personalist devotion to people, not to things or abstractions such as ‘laws’ or general principles. **Personal interests come first**, before the natural or **Scriptural** or theoretical or general or logical or anything else” (p. 34, emp. added). What such assertions really mean in practical, behavioral terms is that, ultimately, human beings may do whatever they deem “good” or “best.” A glance at Fletcher’s illustrations shows that the most “loving” decisions are those that ease physical pain, alleviate hardship, lessen emotional suffering, or accommodate human desire and personal preference. For Fletcher, “evil” is physical imprisonment, separation from family, the hardship of unjust labor, an unpleasant marriage, or lack of commitment to a person (e.g., pp. 32,39). “Human happiness” is, by definition, **what human beings think** will make them happy—not what God says actually will bring **true** happiness—even in the midst of, and while enduring, unjust or unpleasant circumstances.

Sin, in situationism, is not “transgression of God’s law” (1 John 3:4). Rather, “sin is the exploitation or use of persons” (p. 37). It is withholding what a person perceives to be the means to personal happiness. But this understanding of sin is a radical redefinition of love and happiness in comparison to the Bible. In contrast, Scripture makes clear that “intrinsic evil on the purely physical level does not exist” and “neither pain nor suffering is intrinsically evil” (Warren, 1972, pp. 93,40). Since sin (i.e., violation of God’s law) is the only intrinsic evil, “evil” and “good” exist only in relation to the will of God (pp. 39,41).

By Fletcher’s definitions, many people in Bible history were not sinners as previously supposed, but were, in fact, mature, responsible individuals who acted lovingly: Eve (Genesis 3:1-6); Cain (Genesis 4:3); Lot and Lot’s wife (Genesis 13:12; 19:16,26); Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10:1-3); the Israelites (Numbers 21:4-6); Balaam (Numbers 22-24); Saul (1 Samuel 13:9; 15:9,21); and Uzzah (2 Samuel 6:6ff.). On the other hand, if situationism is correct, many persons in the Bible were not righteous, as is claimed, but were slaves to abstract rules and principles, and were unloving in their conduct toward their fellow man including: Noah (Genesis 6; 2 Peter 2:5); Joseph (Genesis 39:7-12); Joshua and Caleb (Numbers 14:6-9); Phinehas (Numbers 25:6-9); Joshua (Joshua 7:24-25); and John the baptizer (Mark 6:18-19). Here were people who set aside the preferences of their fellow man, ignoring their contemporaries’ desire for “happiness” and “self-fulfillment,” and instead followed divine prescriptions—even though those precepts were considered to be contrary to the consensus view.

Taking into account the components of “the situation” as Fletcher recommends—“the end, means, motive, and foreseeable consequences” (1967, p. 25)—Uzzah would have to receive Fletcher’s sanction as a loving, moral person (2 Samuel 6:1-7). His **motive** was unquestionably good, since he wanted to avoid the unpleasant **end** and **foreseeable consequences** of the Ark of the Covenant toppling from its precarious resting place. The **means** that Uzzah used were the only ones available to him at that particular moment in time. His only mistake, which resulted in his immediate execution by God, was his failure to give heed to the prefabricated, prescriptive, abstract, legalistic, absolute, metaphysical, **ironbound “don’t”** of Numbers 4:15 [For a useful treatment of situation ethics, especially for young people, see Ridenour, 1969].

SITUATIONISM ILLUSTRATED

The true nature of any false philosophy or ethical system is often apparent in the concrete examples that advocates set forth as illustrative of their position. Fletcher is no exception in this regard. He approves of divorce “if the emotional and spiritual welfare of both parents and children in a **particular** family can be served best” (1967, p. 23, emp. in orig.). He would approve of the suicide of a captured soldier under torture to avoid betraying comrades to the enemy (p. 15). Two additional instances are seen in the following comments. Fletcher said that he knew of

a case, in which committing adultery foreseeably brought about the release of a whole family from a very unjust but entirely legal exploitation of their labor on a small farm which was both their pride and their prison. Still another situation could be cited in which a German mother gained her release from a Soviet prison farm and reunion with her family by means of an adulterous pregnancy. These actions would have the situationist’s solemn but ready approval (p. 32).

Additional examples of situation ethics at work are seen in the statements: “Lying could be more Christian than telling the truth. Stealing could be better than respecting private property” (p. 34). Fletcher asks: “Is the girl who gives her chastity for her country’s sake any less approvable than the boy who gives his leg or his life? No!” (p. 39). Further,

a couple who cannot marry legally or permanently but live together faithfully and honorably and responsibly, are living in virtue—in Christian love. In this kind of Christian sex ethic the essential ingredients are caring and commitment.... There is nothing against extramarital sex as such, in this ethic, and in **some** cases it is good (pp. 39-40, emp. in orig.).

Consider the situation ethicist’s view of abortion:

When anybody “sticks to the rules,” even though people suffer as a consequence, that is immoral. Even if we grant, for example, that generally or commonly it is wrong or bad or undesirable to interrupt a pregnancy, it would nevertheless be right to do so to a conceptus following rape or incest, at least if the victim wanted an abortion” (p. 36; cf. Hook, 1984, p. 34).

When one abandons the **objective** standard conveyed by the eternal God from Whom flows infinite goodness, the means for assessing human behavior is “up for grabs” and pitched into the subjective realm of human opinion in which “everyone does what is right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25). Such a person will inevitably begin misrepresenting the **biblical** treatment of Christian liberty and freedom, and will maintain that “freedom in Christ” means being relieved of the “burden” of a “legal code.”

FREEDOM IN THE BIBLE: JOHN 8:12-59

The Bible certainly speaks of the wonderful freedom that one may enjoy in Christ. But biblical freedom is a far cry from the **release from restriction, restraint, and deserved guilt** touted by the antinomian agents of change (cf. Hook, 1984, pp. 43ff.). The Bible does not speak of the “flexibility and elasticity” of God’s laws (pp. 29-31). Rather, with sweeping and precise terminology, Jesus articulated the sum and substance of what it means to be “**free** in Christ.” In a specific context in which He defended the validity of His own testimony (John 8:12-59), He declared the only basis upon which an individual may be His disciple.

To be Christ's disciple, one must "continue" in His word (vs. 31). That is, one must live a life of obedience to the will of Christ (Warren, 1986, pp. 33-37). Genuine discipleship is gauged by one's persistent and meticulous compliance with the words of Jesus.

Freedom in Christ is integrally and inseparably linked to this emphasis upon **obeying** God. While it is ultimately God and Christ Who bestow freedom from condemnation upon people, they do so strictly through the medium of the written words of inspiration (vs. 32). The "perfect law of liberty" (James 1:25) is the law that gives liberty to those who are "doers of the word" (James 1:22). These same words will function as judge at the end of time (John 12:47-48).

It thus becomes extremely essential for people to "know the truth" in order for the truth to make them free (vs. 32). What did Jesus mean by "the truth?" "The truth" is synonymous with: (1) the Gospel (Galatians 2:14; Ephesians 1:13; Colossians 1:5-6—genitive of apposition or identification); (2) the Word (John 17:17; 2 Timothy 2:15; Hebrews 4:2); (3) the Faith (Acts 14:21-22; Ephesians 4:5); and (4) sound doctrine (1 Timothy 1:10-11). In other words, "the truth" is the content of the Christian religion. It is the New Testament—the doctrines of the one true religion (cf. James 5:19). For a person to "know" the truth, he or she must both understand it and submit to it. Christ's teachings must become the supreme law of daily life. The servant must both know his master's will, and act in accordance with that will (Luke 12:47).

The freedom that Jesus offers through obedience to His truth is noted in His interchange with the Jews over slavery. Those who sin (i.e., transgress God's will—1 John 3:4) are slaves who may be set free only by permitting Christ's teachings to have free course within them (vs. 34-37). This kind of freedom is the only true freedom. Genuine freedom is achieved by means of "obedience to righteousness" (Romans 6:16). Freedom from sin and spiritual death is possible only by **obedience** to God's words (vs. 51).

Nevertheless, these Jews—though they were believers (vs. 30-31)—were unwilling to obey Christ's will, and to function in a faithful manner as Abraham had (vs. 39). Consequently, Jesus labeled them children of the devil (vs. 44). They were not "of God" because they were unwilling to "hear" God's words, i.e., **comply** with them (vs. 47). Though they **believed**, they would not **obey** the truth. "Indignation and wrath" await those who will not "obey the truth" (Romans 2:8). J.W. McGarvey summarized the interpenetration of freedom, obedience, and knowing the truth: "Freedom consists in conformity to that which, in the realm of intellect, is called truth, and in the realm of morality, law. The only way in which we know truth is to obey it, and God's truth gives freedom from sin and death" (n.d., p. 457).

SITUATIONIST PROOF TEXTS: THE ADULTEROUS WOMAN

Another way to grasp the substance of a false philosophy is to assess the way in which the Scriptures are given treatment to support the philosophy. The remainder of this article will confine itself to examining several favorite proof texts frequently marshaled in an effort to defend situationism.

"What about the woman taken in adultery? Didn't Jesus **free her** from the rigid restrictions of the Law?" One of the most misused, mishandled, and misapplied passages in the Bible is the narrative of the woman caught in adultery, recorded in John 8:1-11. [For a discussion of the technical aspects of this passage as a textual variant, see Metzger, 1968, pp. 223-224; 1971, pp. 219-222; McGarvey, 1974 reprint, p. 16; Woods, 1989, p. 162.] This passage has been used by situation ethicists (e.g., Fletcher, 1967, pp. 83,133), libertines, and liberals to insist that God is not "technical" when it comes to requiring close adherence to His laws.

The bulk of Christendom has abetted this notion by decontextualizing and applying indiscriminately the remark of Jesus: “He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first” (vs. 7). The average individual, therefore, has come to think that Jesus was tolerant and forgiving to the extent that He released the woman from the strictures of God’s law that called for her execution. They believe that Jesus simply “waved aside” her sin, and thereby granted her unconditional freedom and forgiveness—though the Law called for her death (Leviticus 20:10). After all, isn’t it true that Jesus places people “in the grip of grace” (Lucado, 1996)?

Those who challenge conclusions such as these are derided as “traditionalists” who lack “compassion,” and who are just like the “legalistic” scribes and Pharisees who cruelly accused the woman and wanted her handled in strict accordance with Mosaic Law. Did Jesus set aside the clear requirements of Mosaic legislation in order to demonstrate mercy, grace, and forgiveness? A careful study of John 8:1-11 yields at least three insights that clarify the confusion and misconception inherent in the popular imagination.

First, Mosaic regulations stated that a person could be executed only if there were two or more witnesses to the crime (Deuteronomy 19:15). **One** witness was insufficient to invoke the death penalty (Deuteronomy 17:6). The woman in question was reportedly caught in the “very act” (vs. 4), but nothing is mentioned about the identity of the witness or witnesses. **There may have been only one**, thereby making execution **illegal**.

Second, even if there were two or more witnesses present to verify the woman’s sin, the Old Testament was equally explicit concerning the fact that **both** the woman **and** the man were to be executed (Deuteronomy 22:22). Where was the **man**? The accusing mob completely sidestepped this critical feature of God’s Law, demonstrating that this trumped-up situation obviously did not fit the Mosaic preconditions for invoking capital punishment. **Obedience to the Law of Moses in this instance actually meant letting the woman go!**

A third consideration that often is overlooked concerning this passage is the precise meaning of the phrase “He who is without sin among you...” (vs. 7). If this statement were to be taken as a blanket prohibition against accusing, disciplining, or punishing the erring, impenitent Christian, then this passage flatly contradicts a host of other passages (e.g., Romans 16:17; 1 Corinthians 5; Galatians 6:1; 2 Thessalonians 3:6,14; Titus 3:10; 2 John 9-11). Jesus not only **frequently** passed judgment on a variety of individuals during His tenure on Earth (e.g., Matthew 15:14; 23; John 8:44,55; 9:41; et al.), but also enjoined upon His followers the necessity of doing the same thing (e.g., John 7:24). Peter could be very direct in assessing people’s spiritual status (e.g., Acts 8:23). Paul rebuked the Corinthians’ inaction concerning their fornicating brother: “Do you not **judge** those who are inside? ...Therefore put away from yourselves **that wicked person**” (1 Corinthians 5:12-13, emp. added). Obviously, Paul demanded that Christians must **judge** (i.e., make an accurate evaluation of) a fellow Christian’s moral condition. Even the familiar proof text so often marshaled to promote laxity (i.e., “Judge not, that you be not judged”—Matthew 7:1) records Jesus admonishing disciples: “...then you will see clearly to remove the speck out of your brother’s eye” (vs. 5). The current culture-wide celebration of being **nonjudgmental** (cf. “I’m OK, You’re OK”) is clearly out of harmony with Bible teaching.

So Jesus **could not** have been offering a blanket prohibition against taking appropriate action with regard to the sins of our fellows. Then what did His words mean? What else could possibly be going on in this setting so as to completely deflate, undermine, and terminate the boisterous determination of the woman’s accusers to attack Him, by using the woman as a pretext? What was it in Christ’s words that had such power to stop them in their tracks—so much so that their clamor faded to silence and they departed “one by one, beginning with the oldest” (vs. 9)?

Most commentators suggest that He shamed them by forcing them to realize that “nobody is perfect and we all sin.” But this motley crew—with their notorious and repeatedly documented hard-heartedness—would not have been deterred if Jesus simply had conveyed the idea that, “Hey, give the poor woman a break, none of us is perfect,” or “We’ve all done things were not proud of.” These heartless scribes and Pharisees were brazen enough to divert her case from the proper judicial proceedings and to humiliate her by forcibly hauling her into the presence of Jesus, thereby making her a public spectacle of her. Apparently accompanied by a group of complicit supporters, they cruelly subjected her to the wider audience of “all the people” (vs. 2) who had come to hear Jesus’ teaching. They hardly would have been discouraged from their objective by such a simple utterance from Jesus that “nobody’s perfect.”

So what is the answer to this puzzling circumstance? Jesus was striking at precisely the same point that Paul drove home to hard-hearted, hypocritical Jews in Rome: “Therefore you are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge, for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge **practice the same things**” (Romans 2:1, emp. added). Paul was especially specific on the very point with which Jesus dealt: “You who say, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ do you commit adultery?” (vs. 22). In other words, no person is qualified to call attention to another’s sin when that individual is in the **ongoing practice of the same sin**. Again, as Jesus previously declared, “Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck out of your brother’s eye” (Matthew 7:5). After all, it is the “**spiritual**” brother or sister who is in the proper position to restore the wayward (Galatians 6:1).

Consequently, in the context under consideration, it may well be that Jesus knew that the woman’s accusers were **guilty of the very thing** for which they were willing to condemn her. (It is not beyond the realm of possibility that the fellow with whom the woman had committed adultery was in league with the accusers.) Jesus was able to prick them with their guilt by causing them to realize that **He knew** that they, too, were guilty. The old law made clear that the witnesses to the crime were to cast the **first** stones (Deuteronomy 17:7). The death penalty could not be invoked legally if the eyewitnesses were unavailable or ineligible. Jesus was striking directly at the fact that these witnesses were unqualified to fulfill this role since they were guilty of the same sin, and thus deserved to be brought up on similar charges. They were intimidated into silence and retreat by their realization that Jesus was privy to their own indiscretions—and possibly on the verge of divulging them publicly.

Observe carefully that at the withdrawal of the accusers, Jesus put forth a **technical legal question** when he asked to: “Woman, where are they? Did no man condemn thee?” (ASV), or “Woman, where are those thine accusers? Hath no man condemned thee?” (vs. 10, KJV). The reason for Jesus to verify the absence of the accusers who had brought the charges against the woman was that the Law of Moses mandated the presence of eyewitnesses to the crime before guilt could be established and sentence passed. The woman confirmed, “No man, Lord” (vs. 11). Jesus then affirmed: “Neither do I condemn you....” The meaning of this pronouncement was that if two or more witnesses to her sin were not able or willing to document the crime, then she could not be held legally liable, since neither was Jesus, Himself, qualified to serve as an eyewitness to her action. The usual interpretation of “neither do I condemn you” is that Jesus was flexible, tolerant, and unwilling to be judgmental toward others or to condemn their sinful actions. Ridiculous! The Bible repudiates such thinking on nearly every page. Jesus was declaring the fact that the woman managed to slip out from under judicial condemnation on the basis of one or more legal technicalities. But, He said (to use modern-day vernacular), “You had better stop it! You were fortunate this time, but you must cease your sinful behavior!”

Incredible! These scribes and Pharisees were trying to catch Jesus in a trap. Yet Jesus, as was so often the case (e.g., Matthew 21:23-27), “turned the tables” on His accusers and caught **them** in a trap instead! At the same time, He demonstrated a deep and abiding respect for the governing beauty and power of law—the law that He and His Father had authored. Jesus was the only person Who ever complied with Mosaic legislation perfectly (2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 4:15). He never sought to excuse human violation of law, nor to minimize the binding and authoritative application of law to people. Any interpretation of any passage that depicts Jesus as **violating God’s law** in order to forgive or accommodate man is a false interpretation, as is any interpretation that relegates law to a status of secondary importance (cf. Deuteronomy 6:24; 10:13; Psalms 19:7-11; Romans 7:12). Jesus was not in sympathy with the permissive mindset of today’s doctrinally lax thinkers who soften doctrine and the binding nature of law in the name of “grace,” “freedom,” or “compassion.”

SITUATIONIST PROOF TEXTS: THE SPIRIT AND LETTER OF THE LAW

“But doesn’t the Bible make a legitimate distinction between the ‘letter of the law’ and the ‘spirit of the law’?” It is argued that sometimes it is necessary, even mandatory, to violate the “letter of the law” in order to act in harmony with the “spirit of the law.” According to this line of thinking, those who insist that obedience to the law of God is **always** required without exception are “hung up on the letter of the law” instead of being led by the “spirit of the law” (cf. Hook, 1984, p. 42). This perspective naturally breeds and nurtures a relaxed attitude toward obedience. It militates against a desire to be precise and careful in conformity to biblical teaching. One individual explained how his feelings of devotion to Jesus made him feel that as long as he maintained a close “sense of nearness” to Christ, he did not have to fret over “nit picky” concerns, like whether Christians should be meticulous in their obedience to the laws of the land. Another person avowed that she did not “sweat the small stuff” since she was living her life in recognition of God’s grace, and felt certain that Jesus would “cut her some slack.” The “small stuff” to which she referred included such things as whether God would accept instrumental music in worship to Him, whether God would approve of unscriptural divorce and remarriage, and whether sprinkling may pass for New Testament baptism. The primary passage in the New Testament marshaled in an effort to support the “spirit vs. letter” antithesis is Paul’s remarks to the church of Christ in Corinth (2 Corinthians 3:4-18). I urge the reader to pause and read the third chapter of Second Corinthians before reading the analysis that follows. Two phrases are typically excised from the context and used as proof texts to support a notion contrary to the chapter: “not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (vs. 6), and “where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty” (vs. 17). These phrases are set forth by some as proof that Christians ought not to be too meticulous in conforming strictly to various New Testament directives. Those who suggest such assume that “letter” refers to the commands of God—the written statements of Scripture that specify and regulate human behavior. They also assume that “spirit” refers to one’s attitude or feelings. Hence, if the individual **feels** devoted, concerned, and sincere, he or she is deemed in line with “the spirit of the law.” On the other hand, the individual who appears inflexible and rigid, or overly concerned with strict obedience, is perceived to lack “compassion” and “sensitivity,” and too concerned with “the letter of the law.”

However, if a person takes the time to study God’s Word and refrain from mishandling its intended meaning (Acts 17:11; 2 Corinthians 4:2; 1 Timothy 4:13; 2 Timothy 2:15), he or she will see that neither Paul nor any other inspired writer agreed with such thinking. In a pericope dealing with his apostolic ministry, Paul crafted a beautiful allegory—what D.R. Dungan called “the most perfect antithesis to be found in the whole Bible” (1888, p. 349).

By arranging the contrasting phrases of the antithesis into two columns, the Bible student is able more easily to grasp Paul's intended meaning:

2 CORINTHIANS 3	
Old Covenant	New Covenant
	Ministers of the new covenant (vs. 6)
Of the letter (vs. 6)	Of the Spirit (vs. 6)
The letter kills (vs. 6)	The Spirit gives life (vs. 6)
Ministry of Death (vs. 7)	Ministry of Spirit (vs. 8)
Written/Engraved on stones (vs. 7)	
Ministry of condemnation (vs. 9)	Ministry of righteousness (vs. 9)
Glorious (vss. 7,9,11)	Much more glorious (vss.8-9,11)
Passing away (vs. 7)	Remains (vs. 11)
Veil on Moses's face (vs. 13)	Great boldness of speech (vs. 12)
Veil remains in reading O.T. (vs. 14)	Veil taken away in Christ (vs. 14)
Veil lies on their heart (vs. 15)	Veil taken away when one turns to the Lord (vs. 16)

Comparison of "the letter" vs. "the spirit" of the law (O.T./N.T.)

It should be immediately evident to the unbiased observer that "the two legs of the antithesis are the New Covenant in contrast with the Old Covenant" (Dungan, p. 268). Precisely the same meaning is conveyed by the same terminology in Paul's letter to the Romans (2:29; 7:6). The Old Testament legal system, though an excellent system for what God had in mind (Romans 7:12), was unable to provide ultimate forgiveness for violations of law and, in that sense, "kills." It took Jesus' death on the cross to make "life" possible, i.e., actual cleansing from sin.

When one recognizes the existing contextual meaning, it becomes apparent that these verses **have absolutely nothing to do** with the alleged "spirit vs. letter" contention! In fact, the Bible nowhere postulates such a thing. Like all liberal thinking, one must refrain from thinking too much about it if one does not wish to see the absurdity and nonsensical nature of it. The "spirit vs. letter" contrast is "better felt than told" gobbledygook that makes no sense. In an article titled "The Letter That Killeth" written on April 3, 1897, J.W. McGarvey responded to just this type of thinking:

Just once in the course of his writings Paul makes the declaration that “the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life” (2 Corinthians 3:7); and no remark that he ever made has been applied in a greater number of unlicensed ways. If a man insists upon preserving some ordinance in the very form of its original appointment, such an ordinance as baptism or the Lord’s Supper, for example, he is accused of contending for the letter that killeth, while the man who makes the charge, and who changes the ordinance, claims that he is following the spirit that giveth life. All of that large class of writers who make free with the Scriptures while claiming to reverence their authority, employ this device to excuse their departures from the word of God, while those who remonstrate with them for their license are denounced as literalists or sticklers for the letter that killeth. In all these instances, it seems to be claimed that if you stick close to the ordinance as Christ gave it, you will kill somebody. The last example that attracted my attention was in connection with the number of elders that should be appointed in a church. The writer says: “It has been thought to be a greater evil to have a congregation without a plurality of elders than to have an eldership without the requisite qualifications;” and he adds: “This is to do violence to the spirit of the New Testament in an effort to be loyal to its letter.” But which, in this case, is the letter, and which is the spirit? To have a plurality of elders is certainly the letter of the New Testament; that is, it is the literal requirement; and the literal requirement also is to have elders of prescribed qualifications. Where, then, is the spirit as distinguished from the letter? Echo answers, Where? The writer was so in the habit of using this favorite expression where he wished to justify a departure from Scripture precedent that he evidently applied it in this instance from pure habit and without thought. The watchful reader will have seen many examples of the kind (1910, pp. 160-161).

Indeed, redefining the biblical expressions “spirit of the law” and “letter of the law” enables the situationist to promote his agenda under the cloak of Bible backing.

If one wishes to use the expression “the spirit of the law” to refer to a proper attitude, and “the letter of the law” to refer to compliance with the explicit dictates of Scripture, it is certainly true that a person can distort or disregard “the spirit of the law” while following carefully “the letter of the law.” A person may engage in external, rote compliance without heartfelt, genuine love for God and His will. But it is impossible to represent faithfully “the spirit of the law” (i.e., to have the right attitude) while acting out of harmony with the specific details of the law. When Jesus said, “If you love Me, you will keep My commands” (John 14:15), He pinpointed the fact that “love” for Him **includes** “obedience.” It is possible to obey and not love; but it is not possible to love and not obey. One may have good intentions in one’s religious pursuits, but if those religious actions are contrary to God’s specified will, the activity is unacceptable to God. The situationist’s claim that sincerity and feelings of “love” legitimize whatever action “love” takes, is in direct contradiction to Bible teaching.

The fact of the matter is that God has always required that people approach him “in truth,” i.e., according to the divine directives that he revealed to man. The only worship that has ever been acceptable to God has been that worship which has been undertaken with (1) a proper attitude, frame of mind, and disposition conducive to spirituality, and (2) faithfulness to the specific items which God pinpointed as the proper external acts to be performed. Jesus Christ made this fact very clear in His encounter with the Samaritan woman (John 4:23-24). God has never accepted one without the other. He has always required both. He has always required two facets of response to His will: the right action with the right attitude.

Notice the following chart of scriptures:

PASSAGE	ATTITUDE	ACTION
John 4:24	spirit	truth
Joshua 24:14	sincerity	truth
Ecclesiastes 12:13	fear God	keep commands
Acts 10:35	fear Him	work righteous
James 2:17	faith	works
1 John 3:18	word/tongue	deed/truth
Deuteronomy 10:12-13	fear/love—heart	walk/ways
Romans 1:9	with my spirit	in the gospel

To emphasize one dimension of obedience over the other is to hamper one's acceptance by God. Bible history is replete with instances of those who possessed one without the other and were unacceptable to God. The Pharisees (Matthew 23:3), Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:2-4), and the people of Amos' day (Amos 5:21-24) engaged in the **external forms**, but were unacceptable because of their **insincerity**. Paul (Acts 22:3; 23:1), Cornelius (Acts 10:1-2), and Uzzah (2 Samuel 6:6) all demonstrated **genuine motives**, but were unacceptable to God because of their failure to observe the **right forms**.

Think for a moment of the many in biblical history who failed to approach God "in truth," that is, they approached God, but did so without sufficient attention to complying with the details and guidelines that God had articulated. Adam and Eve, regardless of the condition of their attitude, were condemned by God for the **external act** of eating the forbidden fruit (Genesis 2:17; 3:11). Likewise, Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10:1-3), the Sabbath breaker (Numbers 15:32-36), Moses (Numbers 20:11,12), Achan (Joshua 7), Saul (1 Samuel 13:13,14; 15:19-23), Uzzah (2 Samuel 6:1-7; 1 Chronicles 15:12,13), King Uzziah (2 Chronicles 26:16-18), and Ezra's contemporaries (Ezra 10)—all experienced the displeasure of God for their deviation from divine directions.

God has not changed in His insistence upon man's loving obedience to His instructions (John 14:15; 15:14; 1 John 5:3). The Old Testament was written, among other reasons, in order for Christians to learn from the example of those who departed from God's way (Romans 15:4; 1 Corinthians 10:11). New Testament faith, the kind of faith that Christians must possess if they wish to be pleasing and acceptable to God, is **obedient** trust—trust that conforms to God's will (Hebrews 11; James 2).

The psalmist understood that God's truth consisted of God's written words (cf. Psalm 119:30,43,142,151,160). So did Jesus when He said, "Thy word is truth," and declared that the basis of judgment would be the words that He spoke (John 17:17; 12:47-48).

Worshipping God "in truth" is equivalent to "doing truth," which entails "deeds" or external actions which are prescribed by God (John 3:19-21; cf. loving "in truth" in 1 John 3:18). When Jesus taught the way of God "in truth" (Matthew 22:16), He related information that accurately represented God's will. When the Colossians heard "the word of the truth of the gospel" (Colossians 1:5), they heard the specific tenets, doctrines, requirements, and teachings to which they had to conform their lives.

Situationism, antinomianism (freedom from law), and liberalism (loosing where God has bound) share in common their mutual aversion to law keeping. Christians must not fall prey to these sinister forces that attempt to soften and obscure the clear call from God to render obedience to His directives. What He seeks from people is conformity to His laws out of hearts full of sincerity, earnestness, and love.

SITUATIONIST PROOF TEXTS: THE GRAINFIELD

“But what about that time when the Pharisees reprimanded Jesus’ disciples for picking grain and eating on the Sabbath? Was not that incident a clear case of Jesus advocating freedom from the ‘letter of the law’ in order to keep the ‘spirit of the law’? Was not Jesus sanctioning occasional violations of law in order to serve the higher good of human need and spiritual freedom?”

A chorus of voices within Christendom is insisting that the report of Jesus’ disciples plucking grain on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:1-8) does, indeed, advocate Christian “freedom” (i.e., freedom from law) and its priority over rule-keeping (e.g., Clayton, 1991, pp. 21-22; Collier, 1987, pp. 24-28; Lucado, 1989; Woodruff, 1978, pp. 198-200). Abilene Christian University professor David Wray wrote in reference to Jesus: “He healed and allowed his disciples to pick grain on the Sabbath. Jesus then used ‘theological reflection’ to help his followers understand that **people take priority over rule keeping** and legalism” (1992, p. 1, emp. added). Richard Rogers claimed: “Jesus taught...that people took priority over **the rules**” (1989, p. 14, emp. added). Compare these statements to the one made by Randy Fenter: “It is not **what** we follow, but **who** we follow; not a set of values but a Person. ...Are you committed to a set of Christian values, or are you committed to Jesus Christ who died for you?” (1993, p. 1, emp. in orig.). Frank Cox claimed that Jesus had “the power to **modify or change the rules** of Sabbath observance. Sabbath observance must **bend to human needs**” (1959, p. 41, emp. added). Another writer insisted that “there are occasions when **necessity outweighs precept**, as Jesus himself indicated in Matthew 12:1-5” (Scott, 1995, p. 2, emp. added). Still another writer claimed that Jesus was suggesting, “the Sabbath commandment was **optional if inconvenient**” (Downen, 1988, emp. added). Hook insists, “David and his soldiers ate the bread of the Presence and **Jesus gave His approval of the action**” (1984, p. 30, emp. added).

Interestingly enough, these remarks are insidiously reminiscent of the very ideas promoted by the most theologically liberal sources imaginable. The “Father of Situation Ethics,” himself, wrote that “Christians, in any case, are commanded to **love people, not principles**” (1967, p. 239, emp. added). He referred specifically to Matthew 12 when he said that Jesus was “ready to **ignore** the Sabbath observance” and that He “put his stamp of approval on the **translegality** of David’s action, in the paradigm of the altar bread” (pp. 15,17, emp. added). A Fort Worth First United Methodist Church minister stated: “Instead of putting the Scriptures first we should put God first” (as quoted in Jones, 1988, 1:8). This sort of humanistic inclination constitutes a great threat to the stability of the church and the Christian religion. It undermines the authority of Scripture, and further fosters the shift to emotion, feelings, and subjective perception as the standard for decision-making (see “The Shift to Emotion” in Miller, 1996, pp. 52-63).

It never seems to dawn on those who promulgate the “love Jesus vs. love law” antithesis that they are striking directly against the Bible’s own emphasis. Their contrast is not only unbiblical, but borders on blasphemy. Was the psalmist “legalistic” when he declared to God, “Oh, how I love Your law!” (Psalm 119:97)? Was he “idolatrous” or guilty of “bibliolatry” (book-worshipping) when he declared: “How sweet are Your words to my taste; sweeter than honey to my mouth!” (Psalm 119:103)? Over and over again, he affirmed his **love** for God’s Word:

“...Your commandments, which I **love**” (vss. 47-48); “I **love** Your law” (vs. 113); “I **love** Your testimonies” (vs. 119); “I **love** Your commandments more than gold” (vs. 127); “Your word is very pure; therefore Your servant **loves** it” (vs. 140); “I **love** Your precepts” (vs. 159); “I **love** Your law” (vs. 163); “Great peace have those who **love** Your law” (vs. 165); “I **love** them exceedingly” (vs. 167). He claimed that God’s words were **his delight** (vss. 24,35,70,77,92,143,174), **his hope** (vss. 43,49,74,81,114,147,166), and **his life** (vs. 50). He even stated: “I opened my mouth and **panted** for, I **longed** for Your commandments” (vs. 131; cf. vss. 20,40).

The fact of the matter is one cannot **love** God or Jesus **without loving** and being devoted to **Their teachings**. That is why Jesus said, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments” (John 14:15). “He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me” (John 14:21). “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word” (John 14:23). “He who does not love Me does not keep My words” (John 14:24). John echoed his Savior when he said: “[W]hoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him” (1 John 2:5), and “For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments” (1 John 5:3). How ludicrous and contrary to the essence of deity to place **in contrast**—to pit **against** each other—God and God’s laws. This is a bogus, unscriptural juxtaposition. It is not a matter of either/or; it is both/and. To minimize one is to minimize the other. Those who do so are surely in the same category as those of whom Paul spoke: “...they did not receive the **love** of the truth, that they might be saved” (2 Thessalonians 2:10, emp. added). It likewise does not seem to dawn on those who espouse the “rules must bend to human necessity” philosophy that they are insulting the God of heaven—He Who **authored** the rules. Does it even remotely begin to make sense that God would author a law, tell humans they are obligated to obey that law, but then “take it back” and tell them they do **not** have to obey that law if it is “inconvenient,” or if it is in conflict with “human need,” or if necessity requires it? And **who**, precisely, is to make the determination as to whether God’s law in a particular instance is “inconvenient”? Surely not man—since “it is not in man who walks to direct his own steps” (Jeremiah 10:23). And **which** people in all of human history **ever** found conformity to God’s laws “convenient”? “**Every** way of a man is right in his **own eyes**” (Proverbs 21:2, emp. added; cf. 16:2).

Imagine parents telling their children that it is the will of those parents that the children obey the following instructions: “Do not steal, cheat, or lie.” Then imagine those same parents additionally stating: “But kids, if any of these requirements are inconvenient, or if your friends ask you to go help them steal a car, or if you feel you must cheat on a test to insure graduation, hey, ‘people take priority over rules,’ so if you must, feel free to ignore these requirements.” Those parents who take this approach to parenting inevitably produce lawless, undisciplined, unruly, irresponsible children. In fact, those parents eventually find that their children **do not love them!**

MEANING OF MATTHEW 12:1-8

Many commentators automatically assume that the charge leveled against Jesus’ disciples by the Pharisees was a scripturally valid charge. However, when the disciples picked and consumed a few heads of grain from a neighbor’s field, they were doing that which was perfectly **lawful** (Deuteronomy 23:25). **Working** would have been a violation of the Sabbath law. If they had pulled out a sickle and begun **harvesting** the grain, they would have been violating the Sabbath law. However, they were picking strictly for the purpose of eating immediately—an action that was in complete harmony with Mosaic legislation (“but that which everyone must eat”—Exodus 12:16). The Pharisees’ charge that the disciples were doing something “not lawful” on the Sabbath was simply **an erroneous charge** (cf. Matthew 15:2).

Jesus commenced to counter their accusation with masterful, penetrating logic, advancing successive rebuttals. Before He presented specific scriptural refutation of their charge, He first employed a rational device designated by logicians as *argumentum ad hominem* (literally “argument to the man”). He used the “circumstantial” form of this argument, which enabled Him to “point out a contrast between the opponent’s lifestyle and his expressed opinions, thereby suggesting that the opponent and his statements can be dismissed as **hypocritical**” (Baum, 1975, p. 470, emp. added). This variety of argumentation spotlights the opponent’s **inconsistency**, and “charges the adversary with being so prejudiced that his alleged reasons are mere rationalizations of conclusions dictated by self-interest” (Copi, 1972, p. 76).

Observe carefully the technical sophistication inherent in Jesus’ strategy. He called attention to the case of David (vss. 3-4). When David was in exile, literally running for his life to escape the jealous, irrational rage of Saul, he and his companions arrived in Nob, tired and hungry (1 Samuel 21). He lied to the priest and conned him into giving them the showbread, or “bread of the Presence” (twelve flat cakes arranged in two rows on the table within the Tabernacle [Exodus 25:23-30; Leviticus 24:5-6]), to his traveling companions—bread that legally was reserved **only** for the priests (Leviticus 24:8-9; cf. Exodus 29:31-34; Leviticus 8:31; 22:10ff.). David clearly violated the law. Did the Pharisees condemn **him**? Absolutely not! They revered David. They held him in high regard. In fact, nearly a thousand years after his passing, his tomb was still being tended (Acts 2:29; cf. 1 Kings 2:10; Nehemiah 3:16; Josephus, 1974a, 13.8.4; 16.7.1; Josephus, 1974b, 1.2.5). On the one hand, they condemned the disciples of Jesus, who were **innocent**, but on the other hand, they upheld and revered David, who was **guilty**. Their inconsistency betrayed both their insincerity as well as their ineligibility to bring a charge against the disciples.

After exposing their hypocrisy and inconsistency, Jesus next turned to answer the charge pertaining to violating the Sabbath. He called their attention to the priests who worked in the temple on the Sabbath (12:5; e.g., Numbers 28:9-10). The priests were “blameless”—**not guilty**—of violating the Sabbath law because their work was authorized to be performed on that day. After all, the Sabbath law did not imply that everyone was to sit down and **do nothing**. The Law gave the right, even the obligation, to engage in several activities that did not constitute violation of the Sabbath regulation. Examples of such authorization included eating, temple service, circumcision (John 7:22), tending to the care of animals (Exodus 23:4-5; Deuteronomy 22:1-4; Matthew 12:11; Luke 13:15), and extending kindness or assistance to the needy (Matthew 12:12; Luke 13:16; 14:1-6; John 5:5-9; 7:23). The divinely authorized Sabbath activity of the priests **proved** that the accusation of the Pharisees brought against Jesus’ disciples was false. [The term “profane” (vs. 5) is an example of the figure of speech known as metonymy of the adjunct in which “things are spoken of **according to appearance**, opinions formed respecting them, or the claims made for them” (Dungan, 1888, p. 295, emp. added). By this figure, Leah was said to be the “mother” of Joseph (Genesis 37:10), Joseph was said to be the “father” of Jesus (Luke 2:48; John 6:42), God’s preached message was said to be “foolishness” (1 Corinthians 1:21), and angels were said to be “men” (e.g., Genesis 18:16; 19:10). Priestly activity on the Sabbath gave the **appearance** of violation when, in fact, it was not. Coincidentally, Bullinger classified the allusion to “profane” in this verse as an instance of catachresis, or incongruity, stating that “it expresses what was true according to the **mistaken notion** of the Pharisees as to manual works performed on the Sabbath” (p. 676, emp. added)].

After pointing out the obvious legality of priestly effort expended on the Sabbath, Jesus stated: “But I say to you that in this place there is One greater than the temple” (12:6). The underlying Greek text actually has “something” instead of “One.” If priests could carry on tabernacle/temple service on the Sabbath, surely Jesus’ own disciples were authorized to engage in service in the presence of the Son of God! After all, service directed to the person

of Jesus certainly is greater than the pre-Christianity temple service conducted by Old Testament priests.

For all practical purposes, the discussion was over. Jesus had disproved the claim of the Pharisees. But He did not stop there. He took His methodical confrontation to yet another level. He penetrated beneath the surface argument that the Pharisees had posited and focused on their **hearts**: “But if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless” (12:7). In this verse, Jesus quoted from an Old Testament context (Hosea 6:6) in which the prophet of old struck a blow against the mere external, superficial, ritualistic observance of some laws, to the neglect of heartfelt, sincere, humble attention to other laws while treating people properly. The comparison is evident. The Pharisees who confronted Jesus’ disciples were not truly interested in obeying God’s law. They were masquerading under that **pretense** (cf. Matthew 15:1-9; 23:3). But their problem did not lie in an attitude of desiring careful compliance with God’s law. Rather, their zest for law keeping was **hypocritical** and unaccompanied by their own obedience and concern for others. They possessed critical hearts and were more concerned with scrutinizing and blasting people than with honest, genuine applications of God’s directives for the good of mankind.

They had neutralized the true intent of divine regulations, making void the Word of God (Matthew 15:6). They had ignored and skipped over the significant laws that enjoined justice, mercy, and faith (Matthew 23:23). Consequently, though their attention to legal detail was laudable, their **misapplication** of it, as well as their **neglect and rejection** of some aspects of it, made them inappropriate and unqualified promulgators of God’s laws. Indeed, they simply did not fathom the teaching of Hosea 6:6 (cf. Micah 6:6-8). “I will have mercy, and not sacrifice” is a Hebraism (cf. Matthew 9:13) [McGarvey, 1875, pp. 82-83]. God was not saying that He did not want sacrifices offered under the Old Testament economy (notice the use of “more” in Hosea 6:6). Rather, He was saying that He did not want sacrifice **alone**. He wanted mercy **with** sacrifice. Internal motive and attitude are **just as important** to God as the external compliance with specifics.

Samuel addressed this same attitude shown by Saul: “Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams” (1 Samuel 15:22). Samuel was not minimizing the essentiality of sacrifice as required by God. Rather, he was convicting Saul of the pretense of using one aspect of God’s requirements, i.e., alleged “sacrifice” of the best animals (1 Samuel 15:15), as a smoke screen for violating God’s instructions, i.e., failing to **destroy** all the animals (1 Samuel 15:3). If the Pharisees had understood these things, they would not have accused the disciples of breaking the law when the disciples, in fact, had not done so. They “would not have condemned the **guiltless**” (Matthew 12:7, emp. added).

While the disciples were guilty of violating an injunction that the Pharisees had made up (supposing the injunction to be a genuine implication of the Sabbath regulation), the disciples were not guilty of a technical violation of Sabbath law. The Pharisees’ propensity for enjoining their uninspired and erroneous interpretations of Sabbath law upon others was the direct result of cold, unmerciful hearts that found a kind of sadistic glee in binding burdens upon people for burdens’ sake rather than in encouraging people to obey God genuinely.

Jesus placed closure on His exchange with the Pharisees on this occasion by asserting the accuracy of His handling of this entire affair: “For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath” (vs. 8). In other words, Jesus affirmed His deity and, therefore, His credentials and authoritative credibility for making accurate application of the Law of Moses to the issue at hand. One can trust Jesus’ exegesis and application of Sabbath law; after all, He wrote it!

Matthew 12 does **not** teach that Jesus sanctions occasional violation of His laws under extenuating circumstances. His laws are **never** optional, relative, or situational—even though people often find God’s will inconvenient and difficult (e.g., John 6:60; Matthew 11:6; 15:12; 19:22; Mark 6:3; 1 Corinthians 1:23). The truth of the matter is that **if the heart is receptive** to God’s will, His will is “easy” (Matthew 11:30), “not too hard” (Deuteronomy 30:11), nor “burdensome” (1 John 5:3). If, on the other hand, the heart resists His will and does not desire to conform to it, then God’s words are “offensive” (Matthew 15:12), “hard,” (John 6:60), “narrow” (Matthew 7:14), and like a hammer that breaks in pieces and grinds the resister into powder (Jeremiah 23:29; Matthew 21:44).

SITUATIONIST PROOF TEXTS: "LEGALISM"

“But this all sounds so legalistic! I thought the Bible condemned legalism.” One pervasive cultural phenomenon in American society is the predilection to be averse to law, restriction, and limitation. “Freedom” gradually has come to be conceptualized as freedom from restraint. Those who do not embrace a lax, casual, and open attitude toward moral value and ethical behavior are labeled “intolerant” and “mean-spirited.” Even within Christian circles, stressing the need to conform strictly to the will of God in all matters of faith and practice can cause one to be labeled as a “fundamentalist.” He is set aside as an immature and pharisaical misfit who simply has never “grown” to the point of grasping the true spirit of Jesus. He is “negative” and lacks “compassion.” And, yes, he is a “**legalist**.”

Listening carefully to the majority of those who fling about the term “legalistic,” it is soon apparent that they understand the term to refer to **too much attention to legal detail**. In the 1960s, Fletcher pinpointed the popular notion of “legalism”:

In this ethical strategy the “situational variables” are taken into consideration, but the circumstances are always subordinated to predetermined general “laws” of morality. Legalistic ethics treats many of its rules idolatrously by making them into absolutes.... In this kind of morality, properly labeled as legalism or law ethics, obedience to prefabricated ‘rules of conduct’ is more important than freedom to make responsible decisions (1967, p. 31).

It would be difficult to underestimate the cataclysmic consequences of this depiction on the moral fiber of human civilization. Typical of the widespread misconception that “legalism” has to do with giving too much attention to complete obedience, is the illustration given by a preacher, college professor, and prominent marriage and family therapist in a university lecture titled “Getting Ahead: Taking Your Family With You:”

I found out when you’re dialing numbers...you have to dial about eighteen numbers to get started, and then you have to dial eighteen more—you know what I’m talking about? And if you miss, what? If you miss ONE—just ONE—you say ugly things to yourself, don’t you? Because you know you blew it again. It is amazing how **legalistic** the telephone company is (Faulkner, 1992, emp. added).

The very idea that **obedience to God’s laws** would one day be viewed as **negative** by those who profess adherence to Christianity, and then for this obedience to be denounced as “**legalism**,” is utterly incomprehensible. Such a posture should be expected to shake the very foundations of a nation’s standards of morality, stimulating a corresponding widespread relaxation of moral behavior. Yet is this not precisely what has happened to American civilization in the last forty years?

What exactly is “legalism” according to the Bible? Is “legalism” to be equated with too much concern for obedience? Is “legalism” equivalent to ardent determination to keep God’s commandments? One who possesses such a view would naturally tend to gloss over “details” of New Testament teaching, relegating to the realm of minimal importance various matters that he or she deems are not “weightier matters of the law.” In the words of one rather permissive preacher, “We don’t sweat the small stuff.”

Surprisingly, the term “legalism” does not actually occur in the Bible. However, many extrabiblical words have been coined to describe biblical concepts (e.g., “providence”). In its classical, negative usage, “legalism” entails **trusting one’s own goodness**. Legalism pertains to one’s **attitude** about his own person (i.e., having an inflated sense of self-importance—Luke 18:11-12; Proverbs 25:27; Romans 12:3) and practice (i.e., thinking he or she can **earn or merit** salvation on the basis of performance—Luke 17:10; Romans 3:9-18,23; 11:35; 1 Corinthians 9:16). Legalism does not pertain to the propriety of the practices themselves. God always has **condemned** the person who is proud of his obedient actions, who trusts in his own goodness, and who expects to receive God’s grace **on the basis of** those actions (cf. Luke 18:9ff.; Romans 9:31 ff.). But He always has **commended** the person who maintains absolute fidelity to the specifics of His commands (e.g., John 14:15; Romans 2:6-7,13; 6:16; Hebrews 5:9). The difference between the former and the latter is the **attitude** of the individual—a factor that only God is in a position to perceive (Luke 6:8). How presumptuous it is for one Christian to denounce another Christian simply on the basis that the latter exhibits meticulous loyalty to God’s Word—as if the former is able automatically to know his brother’s motive, and thus somehow read his mind. Purveyors of religious error often **redefine** otherwise good terms, placing their own spin on the word, thereby subtly slipping their false doctrine in on unsuspecting listeners. The liberal has redefined “legalism,” shifting the meaning from the **attitude** of being self-righteous to the **action** of conscientious obedience to all of God’s Word.

As proof of this contention, consider the classic examples of “legalism” in the New Testament: the Pharisees. Why may the Pharisees be classified as legalists? To answer that question, one must examine wherein Jesus found fault with the Pharisees. He reprimanded them for three central failings. First, they were guilty of **hypocrisy**. They **pretended** to be devoted, and went to great lengths to **appear** righteous, but they did not actually follow through with genuine, loving obedience to God (Matthew 23:4-7,25-28). Second, they gave attention to **some** biblical matters, but neglected **others** of greater importance (Matthew 23:23; Luke 11:42). Jesus referred to this tendency as straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel (Matthew 23:24). (Of course, He was, thereby, neither advocating nor endorsing gnat swallowing.) Third, they **misinterpreted** Mosaic law (Matthew 5:17-48), and even went about binding and enforcing their fallacious interpretations, elevating these human traditions, laws, and doctrines to the level of scripture (Matthew 15:1-9; Mark 7:1-13). Jesus repeatedly upbraided the Pharisees for these three spiritual maladies. But with these three shortcomings in mind, notice that the “legalism” of the Pharisees did **not** have to do with fervent attention to fulfilling the “letter of the law.” The Pharisees were **not** condemned because they were too zealous about strict obedience to God’s will. They were condemned because “they say, and do not” (Matthew 23:2).

As a matter of fact, God **always** has been vitally concerned that those who wish to be pleasing to Him give great care to **obeying the details and particulars** of His instructions (e.g., Leviticus 10:1-3; 2 Samuel 6:1-7; 1 Chronicles 15:12-13). Jesus even equated this crucial sensitivity to obedience with **love for Him** (John 14:15; 15:14). Many who possess a flippant, blasé attitude toward rigid obedience, think that they are avoiding a “legalistic” syndrome, when they actually are demonstrating lax, weak spirituality and unfaithfulness.

“Faithfulness” is, by definition, **obedient** trust or loyal compliance with the stipulations of God’s will (James 2:17-26). “Righteousness” is, by definition, **right doing** (Acts 10:34-35; 1 John 3:7). Abraham understood this (Genesis 26:5; Hebrews 11:8). Moses understood this (Deuteronomy 4:2; 6:17; 10:12; 11:8,13,22,27-28). Joshua understood this (Joshua 23:6,11; 24:14-15). John understood this (1 John 5:3). So did Paul (Romans 6:16).

In reality, outcries of “legalism” can serve as a convenient smoke screen to justify departure from the faith, and to cloak an agenda that seeks to introduce unbiblical worship innovations into the body of Christ. Make no mistake: there are hypocrites in the church, as well as those with critical hearts whose demands for conformity arise out of self-righteous arrogance. But the **major** threat confronting the people of God today is the perennial problem of humanity: a stubborn, rebellious propensity for deviation/apostasy—i.e., an unwillingness to submit humbly to God’s directives (e.g., Genesis 4:7; 1 Samuel 15:22-23; Ecclesiastes 12:13; Micah 6:8; Matthew 7:13-14; Romans 3:10-12; 6:16; 10:21; 2 Thessalonians 1:8). That is precisely why, after rebuking the Pharisees for neglecting the “weightier matters of the law,” i.e., justice, mercy, faith, and the love of God (cf. John 5:42), Jesus reiterated: “These [i.e., the weightier matters—DM] you ought to have done, **without leaving the others [i.e., the less weightier matters—DM] undone**” (Matthew 23:23; Luke 11:42, emp. added). This is also why Jesus declared: “Whoever therefore breaks one of the **least** of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven.... For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:19-20). He meant that careful attention to all of God’s commandments—including those deemed “least”—demonstrates a conscientious regard for pleasing God. Whether under Judaism or in the kingdom of Christ, seeking to obey God with an humble attitude is paramount. Those who relegate some doctrinal matters to a status of less importance (e.g., worshipping God without human additions—like instrumental music, praise teams, choirs, and baby dedications), and teach others to participate in these unscriptural innovations, thinking that God will not be “nit-picky” over such “minor” things, will find themselves facing eternal tragedy.

Yes, we must avoid “legalism.” A smug sense of superiority and spiritual self-sufficiency will cause a person to be lost eternally (e.g., Luke 18:9-14). But who would have imagined—who could have anticipated—that the day could come when God’s demand for **obedience** would be circumvented, derided, and set aside as “**legalism**”? Those who advance this viewpoint are, in actuality, advocating “**illegalism**”! We dare not mistake “legalism” for loving obedience to the will of God in every facet of our lives. Instead, we must carefully “do all those things which are commanded” (Luke 17:10), recalling Jesus’ words: “Why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?” (Luke 6:46). We must stake our lives upon the grace of God, but then we must love and obey Him, remembering that “this is love for God: that we keep his commandments” (1 John 5:3).

SITUATIONIST PROOF TEXTS: 1 CORINTHIANS 6:12; 10:23

Another allusion to Scripture by the situationist in an attempt to bolster his case is Paul’s statement: “All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful; all things are lawful for me, but all things do not edify” (1 Corinthians 10:23; cf. 6:12). Fletcher appealed to this statement by Paul as proof that moral absolutes are not binding in all situations:

As Paul said twice in his letter to Corinth (chs. 6:12; 10:23), this approach fails to perceive that it is not its being “lawful” that makes a thing good but whether it is expedient, edifying, constructive—whether it builds up. What else could make a thing “lawful” (i.e., loving) except agapeic expediency?

Theodore Roosevelt was either not quite candid or not very thoughtful when he said, “No man is justified in doing evil on the ground of expediency.” He was much too mired down in “intrinsic” moralism (1967, p. 22; cf. Hook, 1984, pp. 47-48).

Fletcher makes precisely the same mistake that the Corinthians had made in misunderstanding Paul’s teaching. In context, Paul was referring to the legality of consuming foods sacrificed to idols, in contrast with the inexpediency of doing so in light of weaker brothers. He was teaching that Christians must be willing to make concessions on indifferent, **technically lawful**, matters for the sake of weak Christians.

Paul certainly was **not** saying that absolute, unchanging laws do not exist, or that God’s laws possess a “flexibility and elasticity” that enables them occasionally to be set aside! As McGarvey and Pendleton observed, the Corinthians “had erred in taking the rule as to things indifferent, such as natural appetites, and so applying it as to make it cover not only sinful things, but even those grossly so, such as sensuous lusts” (n.d., pp. 76-77). So when Paul said “all things are lawful for me,” he was not referring to the absolute laws of God; he was referring to things that are **legally optional**. The eating of meat to which the context refers was **lawful**. But to eat or not to eat it was a matter of option and personal opinion. In such cases, **and only in such cases**, Paul taught that one’s decision must be made on the basis of **expediency**, i.e., how it affected the spiritual condition of others (cf. Woods, 1986, 2:161-162). Fletcher is guilty of the very thing for which the Corinthians were rebuked and corrected.

CONCLUSION

Probably no greater threat to the stability of society exists in our day than the humanistic, antinomian philosophy of situationism and its multi-faceted pluralistic and/or post-modernistic manifestations. It is part and parcel of the general rebellion against the authority of God’s Word that engulfs America. Vast numbers of people are living life and making decisions based upon their own subjective perceptions and personal feelings. For them, the concepts of right and wrong, truth and error are obscure, blurred, hazy, gray, and complex. What is wrong in one situation may be right and acceptable in another situation. Satan has done his job well. He has made great strides in American culture in the last half century in his effort to break down biblical values and moral absolutes. He has succeeded in replacing this framework with a tolerant, open, permissive attitude and outlook that refrains from passing judgment on anybody or anything. The “I’m Okay, You’re Okay” perspective has been embedded firmly into American civilization.

The mindset of today’s situationist is not new. We humans do not generally regard rules and regulations as positive phenomena. We usually perceive them as infringements on our freedom—deliberate attempts to restrict our behavior and interfere with our “happiness.” Like children, we may have a tendency to display resentment and a rebellious spirit when faced with spiritual requirements. We may feel that God is being arbitrary and merely burdening our lives with haphazard, insignificant strictures. But God would **never** do that. He has **never** placed upon **anyone** any requirement that was inappropriate, unnecessary, or unfair. During the Israelites’ final encampment on the plains of Moab prior to entrance into Canaan, Moses articulated a most important principle: “[T]he Lord commanded us to observe all these statutes...**for our good always**” (Deuteronomy 6:24, emp. added; cf. 10:13). God never would ask us to do anything that is harmful to us. He does not restrict us or exert His authority over us in order to purposely make us unhappy. Quite the opposite! God knows exactly what will make us happy. **Compliance with His wishes** will make a person happy (John 13:17; James 1:25), exalted (James 4:10), righteous (Romans 6:16; 1 John 3:7), and wise (Matthew 24:45-46; 7:24).

Those who wish to relieve themselves of restriction will continue to invent ways to circumvent the intent of Scripture. They will continue to “twist” (2 Peter 3:16) and “handle the word of God deceitfully” (2 Corinthians 4:2). They will exert pressure on everyone else to “back off,” “lighten up,” and embrace a more tolerant understanding of ethical conduct. But the “honest and good heart” (Luke 8:15) will “take heed how [he/she] hears” (vs.18). The good heart is the one who “reads...hears...and **keeps those things which are written therein**” (Revelation 1:3, emp. added). After all, no matter how negative they may appear to humans, no matter how difficult they may be to obey, they are given “for our good.”

The Bible simply does not countenance situation ethics. Jesus always admonished people to “keep the commandments” (e.g., Matthew 19:17). He kept God’s commands Himself—**perfectly** (2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 4:15; 7:26). And He is “the author of eternal salvation to all who **obey Him**” (Hebrews 5:9, emp. added).

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APOLOGETICS PRESS - QUESTIONS & ANSWERS:

Does the Story of Rahab Mean God Condone Lying?

Q.

One of the best-known stories in the Old Testament concerns the unusual manner in which the Israelites conquered the city of Jericho while they were in the process of inhabiting the land of Canaan (which God had promised to give them as an inheritance after their escape from Egypt). A woman named Rahab not only provided sanctuary in her house for two Israelite spies but, when asked by the king's men about the matter, lied in order to protect them. Later, the lives of Rahab and her household were spared when Jericho was destroyed—a fact that has provided grist for the mill of Bible critics who suggest that this account establishes God's approval of "situation ethics." Their argument is as follows. Rahab lied. But the situation required that she do so for good reason—to protect the spies. Rahab was blessed, and her household was spared certain death. Thus, God must approve of situation ethics (e.g., lying under certain conditions). How should the Bible believer respond to such a suggestion? Does God approve of situation ethics?

A.

In the sixth chapter of the Old Testament book of Joshua we find the familiar story of the Israelites' siege of the famous city of Jericho. The people of the city had heard of the many successes of God's people as they defeated various enemies throughout the land of Canaan. And they were determined that Jericho would not fall to the Israelites as so many other cities around them had. Joshua 6:1 confirms that fact by observing that "Jericho was securely shut up because of the children of Israel; none went out, and none came in." Therefore, the Lord gave Joshua several specific commands relating to how the Israelites were to overcome the city. God said to Israel's leader:

You shall march around the city, all you men of war; you shall go all around the city once. This you shall do six days. And seven priests shall bear seven trumpets of rams' horns before the ark. But the seventh day you shall march around the city seven times, and the priests shall blow the trumpets. Then it shall come to pass, when they make a long blast with the ram's horn, and when you hear the sound of the trumpet, that all the people shall shout with a great shout; then the wall of the city will fall down flat (Joshua 6:3-5).

Prior to the Israelites' attack on the city, however, Joshua sent two men to Jericho as spies to examine the city secretly (Joshua 2:1). Upon their arrival, they came to the house of a woman by the name of Rahab who was a harlot and lodged there. Apparently the fact that two strangers had entered the closed city raised suspicions among some of the townspeople, who then told the king of the strangers' arrival. He, in turn, sent his representatives to investigate. Arriving at Rahab's house, they said to her: "Bring out the men who have come to you, who have entered your house, for they have come to search out all the country" (2:3). The text goes on to indicate that Rahab had hidden the spies under stalks of flax on the roof of her house.

She then told the king's messengers: "Yes, the men came to me, but I did not know where they were from. And it happened as the gate was being shut, when it was dark, that the men went out. Where the men went I do not know; pursue them quickly, for you may overtake them" (2:5).

While the king's men gave chase along the road to the Jordan River, Rahab pleaded with the spies:

I know that the Lord has given you the land.... For the Lord your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath.... Now therefore, I beg you, swear to me by the Lord, since I have shown you kindness, that you also will show kindness to my father's house, and give me true token, and spare my father, my mother, my brothers, my sisters, and all that they have, and deliver our lives from death (2:9,11-13).

The spies answered her, "Our lives for yours, if none of you tells this business of ours. And it shall be, when the Lord has given us the land, that we will deal kindly and truly with you" (2:14). The two men then instructed Rahab to place a scarlet cord in the window of her house (which adjoined the wall of the city). This would be a sign to the Israelite army that she and her family were to be spared because they had helped God's people.

THE PROBLEM OF RAHAB'S LIE AND THE LORD'S BLESSING

Critics of the Bible have charged that this particular story involves God in a moral contradiction. Rahab lied to the king's messengers. Yet God blessed Rahab, as is evident from the fact that: (a) she and her family were the only ones spared when the Israelites invaded Jericho; and (b) she is commended in two separate New Testament passages (Hebrews 11:31; James 2:25). The critics have claimed, therefore, that Rahab was blessed by God as a direct result of her lie—a sin that the Bible elsewhere condemns (Exodus 20:16). How should a Bible believer respond to such a charge?

In addressing the critics' allegations, let us first admit the obvious. Rahab **did** lie—not once, but twice. When the king's emissaries came to interrogate her, she lied when she feigned ignorance about the spies being Israelites. She then lied a second time when she told the intermediaries that the spies had left the city through the main gate under cover of darkness. Let us also freely admit that Rahab and her household were the only ones saved during the assault upon Jericho (Joshua 6:17).

The question is not whether Rahab lied. She did. The question is not whether she was saved during Jericho's destruction. She was. The questions that must be addressed are these: (1) Did God bless Rahab **as a result of her lie?**; and (2) Is "situation ethics" acceptable? That is to say, can a person lie on certain occasions (if the situation warrants it) and still be pleasing to God?

First, what does the Bible have to say about lying? Of the Ten Commandments, the ninth forbade lying (Exodus 20:16). And, in both the Old and New Testaments the telling of a falsehood is condemned (Leviticus 19:11; Proverbs 6:16-19; Ephesians 4:25; Colossians 3:9). As one writer stated the matter, "Just as there are no exceptions to the adultery commandment, there is none for the Ninth Commandment" (Webster, 1993, p. 2). God has denounced explicitly any form of lying and has made it clear that those who commit such a sin without repenting shall spend eternity "in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone which is the second death" (Revelation 21:8).

Second, a close examination of the actual events of Joshua 2 is in order. Note, for example, that the spies never asked Rahab to lie for them. In fact, there is no indication in the text that the spies even knew Rahab **had** lied. Since they were hiding on the roof (Joshua 2:8), it is highly unlikely that they had any knowledge of her sin. It is wrong to suggest that Rahab received God's blessings **as a result of her lie**. The two New Testament passages that mention Rahab do not commend her for the sin of lying. Quite the opposite, in fact. The writer of Hebrews placed Rahab in the great "hall of fame of faith" (Hebrews 11) because "she received the spies with peace" (vs. 31). James acknowledged that she was "justified by works when she received the messengers" (2:25). Nowhere in Scripture is Rahab's sin of lying spoken of approvingly. Instead, it is her faith and her righteous works that are commended and approved. As one writer observed:

What she is commended for is her faith or that which prompted her to deliver the spies from her townspeople, **not** the **means** by which she accomplished it. She had heard about God's dealings with Egypt and how He had delivered Israel through the parting of the Red Sea. So, the word of hearing profited her, because it was united by faith (Heb. 4:2). James did not write, "...was not Rahab the harlot justified by lying, in that she spoke an untruth to the king's men and sent the spies out another way?" Her faith was evidenced in the work of receiving the spies and sending them out another way (Lloyd, 1990, p. 357, emp. added).

Furthermore, it is important to consider the entire context of Rahab's life and vocation. She was a prostitute, living in a pagan city. As Wayne Jackson commented:

The case of Rahab is an example of where God honored a person due to their obedient faith in spite of a personal character flaw. Consider the following facts about this incident. Rahab was from a pagan environment. Her concept of morality and her personal lifestyle (she was a harlot) needed considerable refining. In spite of this sordid background, she had developed a genuine faith in Jehovah (Josh. 2:9ff.). She referred to Him as "God in heaven above, and on earth beneath...." Accordingly, when the spies approached her, she was not "disobedient" as were the others of Jericho, who perished in the destruction of the city, for she, through faith in God and His promises, received the spies in peace (Heb. 11:31), hid them, and sent them out another way (Jas. 2:25) [1986, 22[6]:23].

Should we be surprised that a prostitute, living in pagan surroundings, would lie to governmental authorities? Hardly. But she was not saved because she lied—a critical point that needs expanding. In addressing this idea, Allen Webster wrote: "Rahab lied, true, but God never complimented this action. She was a heathen, not yet even converted to Judaism.... She was saved **in spite** of her lying, and not **because** of it. She was a prostitute, but this text does not authorize such activity" (1993, p. 2, emp. in orig.). This is a part of the story that seems to have been missed by the Bible critics who have isolated Rahab's lie not only from the context of the story itself, but from the remainder of her life and additional biblical commentary on that life.

DOES TEMPORARY SIN IMPLY PERMANENT CONDEMNATION?

Having established the fact that Rahab's lie was not the reason for her commendation within the pages of Scripture, the question arises: Why, then, was she honored within the great "hall of fame of faith" in Hebrews 11 and spoken of by James as having been "justified"? There can be no doubt that Rahab occupies a special place within the biblical text, since she is one of only five women listed as being within the lineage of Christ. [She married Salmon, an Israelite, and became the mother of Boaz, Jesse's grandfather, joining Tamar, Bathsheba, Ruth, and Mary in the Lord's ancestry.]

Surely, the answer to the question has to do with the fact that Rahab did not remain in her sinful state. In fact, “her repentance is implied since the New Testament writers commend only those Old Testament characters whose lives **as a whole** reflect an obedient faith” (Grizzell, 1986, 15[9]:70, emp. in orig.). The operative phrase here, of course, is “lives as a whole.” Rahab was not mentioned favorably by the writers of the books of Hebrews and James because she told a lie at one point in her life. Rather, she was commended for a lifetime of righteousness that followed a previous life of sin.

Consider three other famous Old Testament characters who sinned, yet who overcame those sins and were counted as faithful in God’s eyes. Noah, for example, was “righteous,” “perfect in his generations,” and a man who “walked with God” (Genesis 6:9). Yet after the Flood he became drunk in front of his sons and as a result, his nakedness was exposed before one of them (Genesis 9:20-23). Gary Grizzell addressed this issue when he wrote:

There is absolutely no record of anyone reproving Noah for his sin. There is no record of his repentance. This is the extent of the Old Testament revelation of Noah’s retirement years. Did Noah die in an unrepentant state? No, just as Rahab did not die a harlot and a liar.... In the twenty-seven books of the New Testament there is not one hint of the historical fact of his sin of drunkenness. The only logical conclusion is that this implies his repentance prior to his death (1986, 15[9]:70).

We know this to be the case because, like Rahab, Noah is mentioned specifically in Hebrews 11:7 and even is referred to as having become “an heir of righteousness which is according to faith.”

Consider also the example of Abraham. In Genesis 12:10-20, Abraham deceptively told an Egyptian pharaoh that Sarai was his sister, rather than admitting that she was also his wife. Later, he similarly deceived Abimelech, king of Gerar, regarding the same matter (Genesis 20:1-2). To protect his own life, Abraham intentionally deceived the two rulers, while at the same time offering his wife sexually to the potentates. What faithful husband would act in such a manner and allow his wife to be taken by another man, without at least letting that man know that she was, in fact, his wife? Nevertheless, in James 2:23, Abraham is referred to as “the friend of God.”

Lastly, consider the example of Israel’s popular, beloved King David. He had taken his vows before God (see Psalm 101). He had insisted on righteousness in his nation. The people had been taught to love, respect, and honor the God of heaven. David, their sovereign, also was their example—a man after God’s own heart (1 Samuel 13:14). But he committed the sin of adultery with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11-12), and then had her husband, Uriah the Hittite, murdered. The consequences of David’s sin were horrible indeed. The child growing in Bathsheba’s womb died after birth. And Nathan, God’s prophet, made it clear to the great king that “the sword shall never depart from thy house,” and that God would “raise up evil against thee out of thine own house” (2 Samuel 12:10-11).

David’s life never again would be the same. His child was dead. His reputation was damaged. His influence, in large part, was destroyed. David paid for his sin with twenty years of strife, heartbreak, and the loss of a child that meant everything to him. Yet the king did not try to deny his sin or cover up his mistakes. In fact, he said quite simply, “I have sinned” (2 Samuel 12:13).

His description of the consequences of sin on the human heart is one of the most vivid in all of Scripture, and should move each of us deeply. His agonizing prayer is recorded in Psalm 51. David cried out: “Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness.”

Many years later, the apostle John would write: “Hath not the scripture said that the Christ cometh of the seed of David?” (John 7:42). Luke even went so far as to refer to Christ as “David’s son” (Luke 20:41). From the loins of a sinful king who was willing to repent was formed an important part of the Messiah’s lineage.

In addressing these very matters, Walter Kaiser correctly observed:

...divine approval of an individual in one aspect or area of his life does not entail and must not be extended to mean that there is a divine approval of that individual in **all** aspects of his character or conduct (1983, pp. 270-271, emp. added).

Or, as Grizzell noted: “God judges a man by the whole of his life, not one act of sin in his life” (1986, 15[9]:70). Neither Noah, Abraham, nor David should be condemned permanently because of a temporary occurrence of sin. As these three men stood accountable before God, each accepted personal responsibility for his actions. They became noteworthy characters in biblical history not because of their sinful mistakes, but because of their eventual repentance and lifetimes spent in God’s service.

CONCLUSION

Does the Bible condemn lying? Indeed it does. The concept that “the end justifies the means” never has been correct. As Steve Lloyd wrote: “Simply because something works out in the end does not imply that the means are justifiable before God” (1990, p. 356). As with any other sin, if a person lies and does not repent, they will spend eternity in hell. This is especially true for Christians, as the Hebrew writer pointed out quite clearly when he wrote: “For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins” (Hebrews 10:26).

If critics of the Bible would consider the Scriptures in their entirety, rather than isolating individual passages in an attempt to justify their preconceived conclusion that the Bible contains contradictions and discrepancies, controversy over such matters would cease to exist. Furthermore, it reeks of inconsistency for the critic to “pick and choose” matters that at first glance appear to support his allegations and to ignore the plain and simple passages that refute those same allegations. As Eddie Miller put it:

...the person who argues for situation ethics by using the example of Rahab is making a serious mistake in terms of sound Biblical exegesis. He has taken one sketchy, obviously incomplete story about a prostitute who lied, to overturn many clear statements of scripture (Exo. 20:16, Col. 3:9, Eph. 4:25). Surely that is not dealing honestly with the Bible text. (Incidentally, how would they deal with God’s disapproval of the lies of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-6?) The truth is that proper interpretation takes place when we allow explicit statements of scripture to explain or modify the examples, **not** *vice versa* (1983, 19[12]:4, emp. and parenthetical comment in orig.).

Additionally, we might add that there is nothing inherently wrong with questioning, or even doubting, what the Bible contains—as long as a person is willing to invest the time and effort to find the answers and resolve the doubts. This is the same procedure that people use in every other area of human interest (science, philosophy, etc.) on a daily basis. Why, then, should it not be employed in matters concerning God’s Word? In addressing this very point, Trevor Major suggested:

It is a human failing that, on occasion, we simply cannot decide whether something is true.... Doubt, left unresolved, can become a serious problem. God holds us responsible for addressing the cause of our doubt, and for seeking the remedy so that doubt does not prevent us from doing what faith

demands.... Doubt, then, is in some way an impediment to belief or faith. However, it is not the opposite of belief; it is not a denial of faith. This would be **disbelief**, that is, believing a claim to be false. Rather, doubt is a matter of **unbelief**—an occasional inability to admit a particular claim.... If we do not know whether God answers prayers, then how can we honestly go to God in prayer? If we eat meat sacrificed to idols (or the modern equivalent), and yet we are not sure that this is something we should do, then how can we have a good conscience before God? These are the negative consequences of unresolved doubts, but doubt may also be resolved in favor of greater faith, or even faith itself (1995, 15:94, emp. in orig.).

Rahab—a prostitute from a pagan background—humbled herself before the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. When she cried out, “I know that...the Lord your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath” (2:9), she confessed her willingness to acknowledge both His existence and His sovereignty. It was not enough, however, for her merely to express her faith verbally. Rather, she had to **act** upon it by: (a) keeping silent about the spies’ mission (Joshua 2:14,20); (b) binding the scarlet cord in the window of her house (2:18); and (c) remaining inside that house, which would be the sole location of her deliverance when God destroyed Jericho (2:18-19).

God expects, and deserves, the same kind of obedience from us today. Critic and Christian alike should be willing to say, as did this laudable lady from days of old, “According unto your words, so be it” (Joshua 2:21). What an admirable attitude—and how worthy of being imitated! Rahab sinned, repented, and obeyed. If we today should sin, surely those of us who know more about God, His Word, and His will for our lives ought to follow her example in repentance, obedience, and service.

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Did Jesus Endorse Situation Ethics?

By [Wayne Jackson](#)

•

At that season Jesus went on the sabbath day through the grainfields; and his disciples were hungry and began to pluck ears and to eat.

But the Pharisees, when they saw it, said unto him, "Behold, thy disciples do that which it is not lawful to do upon the sabbath."

But he said unto them, "Have ye not read what David did, when he was hungry, and they that were with him; how he entered into the house of God, and ate the showbread, which it was not lawful for him to eat, neither for them that were with him, but only for the priests?"

So reads the inspired narrative of Matthew's Gospel record (12:1-4). There are those who employ this narrative as biblical precedent for the philosophy of situation ethics.

Situation ethics is the notion that there are no absolute rules governing right and wrong. Rather, all human activity is determined by the situation of the moment—supposedly guided by love alone. The aforementioned case regarding Israel's great king is cited as authoritative for this concept of human conduct.

On a certain occasion, David and his men were hungry (see 1 Samuel 21:6). In a time of crisis, they resorted to eating the sacred bread that was reserved for priests. This act was not lawful, but the desperation of the hour justified the conduct—so we are told.

It is alleged that Jesus himself cited **with approval** what David did. Supposedly, Christ endorsed David's practice of situation ethics, and, thereby, justified the law-breaking conduct of his own disciples.

Joseph Fletcher contended that Jesus "blessed David's act on the basis of the situation." And so, he argued, it is clear that "only the end justifies the means: nothing else" (1966, 133; cf. 85, 86).

This philosophy of situation ethics is bereft of merit, and for the following reasons:

First, human conduct cannot be regulated solely upon the basis of some sort of ambiguous “love.” That is like a criminal court judge admonishing all the participants in a trial to merely be fair, without any regard for a recognition that law exists.

Similarly, love, outside the boundary of specific guidelines (e.g., the law of Christ [1 Corinthians 9:21; Galatians 6:2]), is but a subjective, unregulated emotion. And one person’s love can be another person’s hate.

Suppose one should argue that Adolf Hitler acted in “love” when he exterminated six million Jews. On what possible ground would such a claim be made? On the basis that Hitler felt that by eliminating those whom he considered to be inferior, he was nudging humanity toward a higher plateau on the evolutionary scale (see [The Holocaust: Why Did It Happen?](#)). Never mind how perverted his thinking was, the issue is if he believed he was acting in love, was his conduct moral?

Subjectivity can never be the standard for human conduct. “All the ways of a man are clean in his own eyes” (Proverbs 16:2). If situation ethics is valid, there is **no act** under heaven that cannot be justified!

Second, the narrative in Matthew 12 does not provide support for the dogma of situation ethics. On a certain Sabbath day, the Lord and his disciples were passing through a grain field. The disciples, being hungry, began to pluck grain and eat it. Certain Pharisees saw this and charged the Savior’s men with breaking the law of Moses.

Did the disciples violate divine law? They did not. Admittedly, they transgressed the uninspired **traditions** of the Jewish elders, but they had not broken the law of God. Alfred Edersheim, himself of Jewish extraction, carefully discussed this passage. He observed that the disciples’ conduct “was not a breach of the Biblical, but of the Rabbinic Law” (1947, 56).

Additionally, it is not accurate to suggest that Jesus endorsed David's conduct in partaking of the showbread, which only priests were authorized to eat. In fact, just the opposite is true. The Lord said that Israel's king ate that "which it was not lawful for him for him to eat" (v. 4). Could a statement be plainer?

That, then, brings us to this question: why did Christ introduce the case of David and the temple bread?

The use of this Old Testament illustration is an example of a form of reasoning known as ad hominem argument. An ad hominem (literally meaning, "to the man") argument is not made for the purpose of establishing positive truth. Rather, it is employed to highlight an opponent's inconsistency. The Lord's point may be paraphrased as follows:

You Pharisees revere David as a great king and Hebrew hero. David once broke the law of Moses by the illegal consumption of sacred food. But you do not condemn him for that!

By way of contrast, my disciples have violated only your silly traditions—yet you charge them with sin. How very inconsistent you are!

J. W. McGarvey described the matter in this fashion:

Now the real argument of Jesus is this: David, when hungry, ate the showbread, which it was confessedly unlawful for him to eat, yet you justify him: my disciples pluck grain and eat it on the Sabbath, an act which the law does not forbid, and yet you condemn them (n.d., 104).

This incident contains not a vestige of support for the concept of situation ethics. Those who attempt to justify situation ethics by the use of Matthew 12:1ff have totally misconstrued the force of Christ's argument.

Situation ethics is a vogueish belief in a world of immoral rebels who are determined to cast off divine restraints and "play God."

Apologetics Press :: Bible Bullets

Not the Way to Make Decisions!

by [Kyle Butt](#), M.A.

Each day, people make thousands of decisions. Some people decide to get married, while others decide to get divorced. Some people decide to become doctors and save lives, while others decide to become murderers and take lives. Why do people make the decisions that they make? Of course, that question cannot be answered definitively in a brief article such as this one. But one very small facet of the question can be addressed.

Many people make decisions based on the **consequences** of that decision. They do not factor into the decision whether or not the action that they are taking is a just, fair, or moral action. They only ask themselves, "What will happen to me if I do this or do not do that?" This approach to making decisions, usually referred to as "situation ethics," sometimes can lead a person to do morally right things. For instance, a person employing situation ethics might decide not to steal because he does not want to go to jail, or he may decide not to drive drunk because he does not want to lose his driver's license or have a car wreck.

Yet, even though situation ethics could lead a person to do right on certain occasions, what happens when the consequences for doing something morally wrong are more desirable than those that would result from doing something morally right? In this instance, a person who weighs the **consequences** for each action, instead of the **morality** of the action, would decide to do the morally wrong thing.

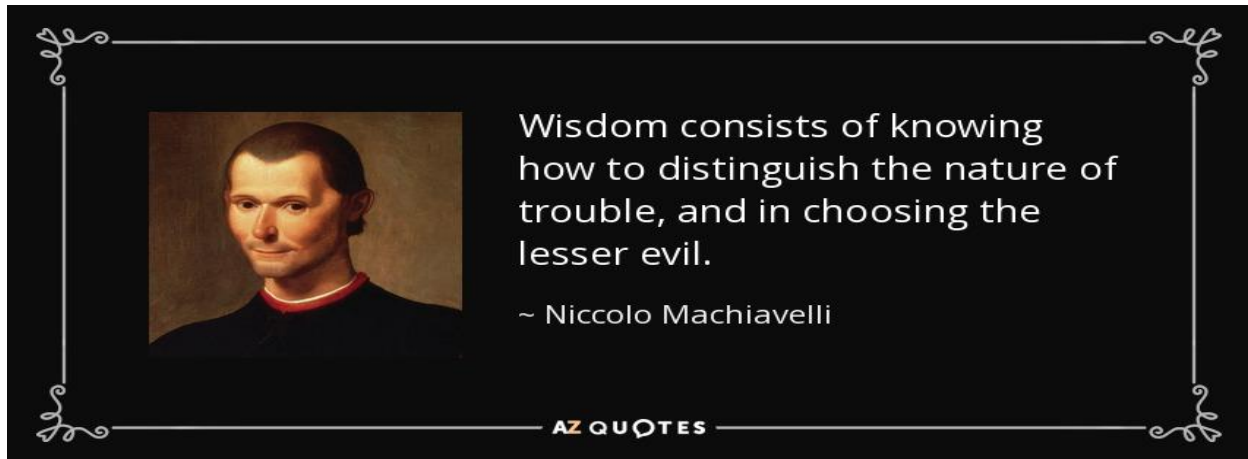
The Bible gives the perfect picture of situation ethics in Matthew 21:23-27. In this passage, the Pharisees approached Jesus and demanded that He tell them by what authority He was doing the marvelous deeds that He did. Jesus responded by saying that He would answer their question—if they would tell Him whether the baptism of John was from heaven or from men. Matthew 21:25-27 records their reasoning and answer:

And they reasoned among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' He will say to us, 'Why did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'From men,' we fear the multitude, for all count John as a prophet." So they answered Jesus and said, "We do not know."

Notice how these corrupt Jewish leaders **did not** make their decision. They did not ask if John's baptism actually came from heaven. Nor did they weigh the evidence which proved that it did not come from men. Their sole concern rested on the **consequences** of the decision as it affected them, not on the moral rightness or wrongness of their actions or statements.

transmitted disease. But, instead of making decisions based on situation ethics, the guiding principle behind every action should be the **moral rightness** of the action.

In Acts 5:29, after the chief priests had threatened and beaten the apostles, they called them before the council again and reiterated their strict command that the apostles should not teach about Jesus. In reply to this injunction, Peter answered: "We ought to obey God rather than men." Indeed, the only unchanging standard upon which to base decision-making is the will of Almighty God.



[Aeria Gloris](#)

The End Justifies The Means

(Although mostly attributed to Machiavelli, the phrase "the end justifies the means" is not one of his creation.)

The basic interpretation of "the end justifies the means" is:

"At the beginning of an action I might not be able to determine whether that action is morally right or wrong, but when the morally right goal is successfully achieved, then the steps which led to it must be morally right too."

When a little twist is introduced to this interpretation, it becomes:

"I shall do a minor evil to achieve a greater good." or
"My aim for greater good makes all the evils I have done right."

If we set the game of morality aside, "the end justifies the means" becomes "the result proves the means to be efficient" - which is somewhat obvious.

What can we learn from "the end justifies the means"?

From a moral standpoint, we can say that the morality of an act can be determined only at the point in time when it is committed; we have to make a decision with insufficient information, and it is only the intent at that point which determines the morality of the action.

On the contrary, if we would presume that the morality of an act can be determined at a later time with more information present, then we could conclude that we could determine it with greater accuracy at an even later point in time - and so on, at which point the question of morality loses sense.

Morality aside, "the end justifies the means" teaches us not to shoot ourselves in the foot:

If the vision, the goal which we have set ourselves is incomplete, then the worst thing that could happen to us is to accomplish that goal with all means necessary.

At that point, we would realize that the goal we have set ourselves is not the goal we have desired - we have failed to clearly create our vision.

By focusing only on a small part of the complete vision, we may ignore and mess up the rest.

Be careful what you want, because you might get it. And when you do, no amount of justification will help you.

WHAT WE KNOW AND WHAT WE DON'T Certainty, Humility, and Good Judgment

PAVING THE ROAD TO HELL

Our actions have two sources of moral value: one subjective and the other objective. Both are important. First, we must always follow our consciences. That is, we must do what we *believe* to be right. Second, what we believe to be right must coincide with what *truly* is right. In other words, the goodness of our action also depends on the correctness of our moral judgment. We must choose truly good things. A person of good conscience wants to do the right thing and not just to feel complacent about “trying” to do the right thing. Conscience looks for real answers, and for these it must look beyond itself and its own sincerity for the objective truth.

Many people seek ethical advice. Unfortunately, some counselors merely respond, “Follow your conscience.” Yet to tell someone simply to “follow your conscience” is to tell him nothing at all. It is often equivalent to saying, “There is no right or wrong answer in this case. Do whatever you please. Whatever you choose in conscience is fine.” In fact, such advice is often an invitation to take the low road of what is easiest. To declare that, in a given moral sphere, “It’s a question of conscience” sends a clear message that a right moral answer simply doesn’t exist.

A person seeking moral advice above all needs *content* for his or her moral decision-making. What he needs is not just *encouragement*, but moral *principles*. The reason he has come seeking counsel is because he is *already* following his conscience, which has impelled him to get better information, precisely because he realizes that he lacks the necessary moral reference points to make a good moral decision.

It’s said that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. This means that when people do evil things with good intentions, they still do evil things. Our intentions don’t change the essential goodness or badness of our choices. Intentions are undoubtedly important. Acting with a good intention far surpasses acting with a bad intention. But for a truly good person, it isn’t enough. Acting with a good intention, in its deepest sense, means wanting to really know and do *the right thing*. We desire the objective assurance that what we are doing *really* is good.

We all make mistakes, and a vague appeal to “acting in conscience” cannot justify wrongdoing. Sometimes we do wrong because we don’t listen to our consciences; other times, however, our consciences themselves are mistaken in their judgments. Therefore, along with our duty to *follow* conscience comes a duty to *form* our consciences, so that their judgments will guide us according to moral truth rather than subjective whim.

Conscience is a tool for knowing the truth, but what matters most is the *truth* we are seeking. Conscience is important because moral truth is important. A good conscience does not seek arguments to justify doing what one feels like, or what most gratifies one’s immediate desires. By its nature it seeks moral truth, as much as that may cramp our style and pinch our desires. Conscience doesn’t serve our urges and pleasures; it serves the truth.

Christian ethics has consistently held that the end doesn’t justify the means. That is to say, some things should never be done, even if we expect all sorts of good to come from our bad action. Does a noble goal justify absolutely any means to get there? Nazi doctors in World War II concentration camps conducted all sorts of vile experiments on their prisoners, and through them medical science gained useful new knowledge about the human condition. Yet do any number of medical advances justify the abuse of those prisoners? Of course not. They became innocent victims of medical progress, and the conduct of the doctors was unconscionable.

There is a certain asymmetry to morality. Bad intentions can corrupt good actions, but good intentions cannot rehabilitate bad actions. Everything needs to be in place for an action to be good. Therefore, if I ostentatiously give money to the poor in the hopes of being esteemed, my objectively good action is vitiated by my bad intention. But if I commit adultery even with the best of intentions, it is still wrong. Good acts done for the wrong reasons are bad, but so are bad acts done for the right reasons. **To be truly good, an action must be totally good.** In other words, the action must be good in itself *and* done for the right reasons. This is what ethicists mean by the Latin saying “*Bonum ex integra causa, malum e quocumque defectu*” (“An action is good when good in every respect; it is wrong when wrong in any respect”). If any of these factors is missing, the action will be bad.

What fundamentally makes an act bad or good is its conformity with moral truth, not with subjective moral perception of that truth. We strive as far as possible to adjust our moral perceptions to the truth, since the goal is not a subjectively “clean conscience” but truly *good actions*, which correspond with right reason and are pleasing to God. An “honest” mistake is still a mistake and, whenever possible, must be avoided. When we make no effort to correct or avoid “honest mistakes,” then we must begin to wonder whether our mistakes are really “honest” after all. When they are accepted, they become at least to some extent deliberate.

HABITS OF SIN OR VIRTUE

Sin not only affects our moral state; it also affects the way we perceive reality, especially moral reality. All of us have experienced this. The first time we commit a particular sin, we can feel broken up and profoundly sorry for having offended our Lord in this way. After a while, however, when we have committed the same sin over and over, we no longer react so acutely. Repeated sin often brings with it a softening of our ethical criteria. After a while, what once seemed morally repugnant no longer strikes us as so terribly bad. Since we no longer *feel* so bad, we begin to *think* that certain actions really mustn't be all that serious. *Who knows—we think—maybe they're not wrong at all?*

What is true of vice is also true of virtue. Though we can never recover lost innocence, we can reform the habit of doing the right thing. The more we focus on pleasing Christ, for example, the more sensitive our consciences become. We notice things we would never have noticed before. Soon we find that even slight failures to love put us out of sorts. We have recovered what was lost.

To continue fine-tuning our understanding of the true nature of conscience, we need to look more closely at the relationship between *moral knowledge* and *action*. What is the connection between the *judgments* of conscience and the practical *decisions* we make? Is it enough to *know* what is right in order to always *do* what is right? Do we do wrong only out of ignorance, or are there other factors in play? ³

³ Williams, T. (2008). [*Knowing right from wrong: a christian guide to conscience*](#). New York City, NY: FaithWords.

Is There a Moral Law We Can Know?

THE CASE FOR OBJECTIVE MORALITY

The idea that morality is objective and corresponds with the way things ought to be in a moral universe is often called “moral realism” by philosophers. To put it a bit more technically, this is the view that moral facts exist and are independent of our attitudes and beliefs about them. I use *moral realism* and *moral objectivism* (the view that moral values are objective, not subjective) interchangeably, though there are some technical differences between the two. For the most part, however, they are talking about the same thing—that there is such a thing as moral truth, or moral knowledge, and that it exists independently of how we feel about it.

Objective morality best corresponds to our commonsense way of talking about morality. We typically don’t talk about moral matters as though they are entirely subjective or relativistic. We use argument, debate, and good reasons for our moral views, assuming that moral discussion can be like other forms of debate and argument (unlike talking about someone’s preference for flavors of ice cream). We commonly apply the laws of logic to moral discussion, and we regularly assess moral arguments as either valid or invalid. Philosopher Russ Shafer-Landau insists, “Were we convinced that there was no truth of the matter, most would see their continued disagreement as pointless; as pointless as, say, entering an intractable debate about whether red or orange was *really* the most beautiful color.” For those who don’t believe there is a moral law that can be known, moral persuasion doesn’t make any sense. Virtually everyone who engages in moral debate about substantial issues tends to act as though there is a right answer, either awaiting consensus or begging for persuasion.. Objective morality makes the best sense of our passion to persuade others about the truth of our views on issues critical to our continuing life together in community. If morality is nothing more than an expression of our personal tastes and preferences, it is very difficult to make sense of the way we debate moral issues.

In addition, objective morality makes the best sense of how we commonly talk about moral mistakes. The converse of this is also true—that moral realism makes the best sense of how we talk about moral progress. Unless morality is objective, the notion of moral progress makes little sense. For the relativist, there is no such thing as moral progress, since the cultural consensus determines morality. Further, the very idea of moral progress assumes there is a standard by which progress, or lack of it, is measured.

Finally, objective morality best accounts for the “oughts” of ethics. If morality is a matter of subjective tastes and preferences, then it is very difficult to explain where the “ought to” of ethics comes from. Expressions of preference cannot give us moral norms, nor can desires give us moral values. Neither can the cultural consensus of the relativist give us those norms, since one cannot derive a moral norm simply from a description of the cultural consensus or one’s moral preferences. To put it another way, moral psychology cannot give us normative ethical principles and virtues.

So, if we accept that morality is objective and not fundamentally a human creation, that it is something discovered, not invented by human beings, that raises the question, “Where did it come from?” That is, how do we account for the origin of morality? Objective morality insists that moral values and virtues are hardwired into the world—they are a part of the world as it is, similar to the laws of physics and mathematics.

An increasingly common way of answering the question “Where did morality come from?” is provided by evolutionary biology. That is, instead of morality being “written on our hearts,” morality is written on our genes, the product of evolutionary forces. Our moral instincts arose as a result of evolution, similar to the belief in our physical evolution. Sociobiologist E. O. Wilson insists that “ethical codes have arisen by evolution through the interplay of biology and culture.” He cites the parallels in behavior between animals and human beings and claims they originated similarly. “Each kind of animal is guided through its life cycle by unique and often elaborate sets of instinctual algorithms. We may reasonably conclude that human behavior originated the same way.”⁷ Wilson suggests that the coming debate over ethics will pit the “transcendentalists,” as he calls them (or those who favor objective morality that has a transcendent source), against the empiricists (who see morality as having a purely material origin, namely in biological evolution). He says, “Ought is the product of a material process.” Philosopher Michael Ruse expresses the idea this way:

The position of the modern evolutionist ... is that humans have an awareness of morality ... because such an awareness is of biological worth. Morality is a biological adaptation no less than are hands and feet and teeth.... Considered as a rationally justifiable set of claims about an objective something, ethics is illusory. I appreciate that when somebody says, “Love thy neighbor as thyself,” they think they are referring above and beyond themselves.... Nevertheless, ... such reference is truly without foundation. Morality is just an aid to survival and reproduction ... and any deeper meaning is illusory.

In this view, morality could still be objective but not originating from a transcendent source such as God’s commands or natural law. Moral behavior has thus evolved in human beings, because it is more advantageous to our survival living in large groups to have morality. Traits such as cooperation, respect, and civility are conducive to our survival and thus are passed on to succeeding generations in the form of moral norms and standards. These standards can evolve over time as the needs of societies change. So, what might have been conducive to survival in one era might not be the case in another, and thus the standards are not necessarily unchangeable.

In the years to come, this evolutionary view of morality will likely increasingly challenge the view that morality has a transcendent source. And let’s be clear so that we don’t confuse this view with the idea of moral progress. In one sense, our moral discernment does change. For example, for the majority of the history of civilization, human beings have been enslaved, and for most of that time, there was little moral objection. But our changing consensus on slavery is an example of moral progress. Society’s moral beliefs and practices improved as slavery was abolished around the world.

But what do we say to the notion that morality is “written on our genes”? Two responses may be helpful here. First, think about the moral virtues that don’t seem to contribute to our ongoing survival at all and actually appear to undercut our survival. Think, for example, about self-sacrifice and heroism. We often link heroic behavior with extreme self-sacrifice that often results in the death of the hero. Think of the person who instinctively rushes into a burning building to save a child, not knowing if he or she will come out alive. Or take the driver who sees a car plunge into a river. He or she instinctively rushes into the water to save the people in the car without giving much thought to his or her own well-being. In the evolutionary view of morality, there is no place for the person who “lays down his life for another.” He’s wasted his life. Professor Glenn Sunshine pointedly says:

Evolutionary psychology is based on the Darwinian principle of natural selection. Natural selection occurs within a species. It is me, out competing someone else that is human to pass my genes down to the next generation. That is the principle behind Darwinism. *Under those circumstances the Marine who throws himself on the grenade is a loser.* He does not pass his genes down to the next generation. His competitors in the platoon get to do that. He is a loser. Are you willing to say that? Does your moral sense tell you that his self-sacrifice is the act of someone who is not fit to survive? If the answer is no, then you’ve got an internal incoherence in your analysis.

Nor does an evolutionary view of morality seem to square with the idea that human beings are free moral agents with real free choices—as opposed to our choices being somehow determined by our genetic makeup. In contrast to E. O. Wilson’s earlier analogy with animals’ moral instincts (their instinctual algorithms) being parallel to those of human beings, human beings make free choices and as a result are morally accountable in ways that animals are not. Michael Miller of the Acton Institute explains: “We experience ourselves as moral agents with freedom.... I’ll give you an earthy example. A dog makes decisions, but they don’t make free choices. A dog looks at the food in front of them, and says, ‘There’s a lion back there. I won’t eat it, because I don’t want to get eaten by the lion.’ But no dog looks at another dog and thinks, ‘Wow! She is beautiful, but I think I’ll wait until marriage.’ That doesn’t happen.”

Philosopher William Lane Craig says this about our freedom and moral accountability:

If there is no mind distinct from the brain (which is the case in a materialist view of a human being), then everything we think and do is determined by the input of our five senses and our genetic makeup. There is no personal agent who freely decides to do something. But without freedom, none of our choices is morally significant. They are like the jerks of a puppet’s limbs, controlled by the strings of sensory input and physical constitution. And what moral value does a puppet or its movements have?

That is, on an evolutionary view of morality and its corresponding materialist view of the world, concepts like genuine freedom to choose and the accompanying accountability are both illusions devoid of adequate grounding.

So, if there are good reasons to think that morality is objective and can be known, and that moral claims are capable of being true or false, and if there are reasons to be skeptical that morality is written on our genes, then how do we account for the origin of morality? This is where a Christian worldview can provide a coherent account of where objective morality comes from.

A view of morality is a part of every worldview, whether it is based on some kind of religion or some secular philosophy. In other words, since everyone has a worldview, everyone has a view of morality, though the degree to which it is thought out varies widely.

The view of objective morality that the Bible assumes is part of the natural law tradition. What this means is that God embedded morality in his world as a part of his creation. That is, God structured morality into the world he made in the same way he ordained the laws of physics and mathematics. The Bible indicates that there is a fixed order of physical laws that govern the universe (Jer. 31:35–36; 33:20–21, 25–26), which is reflected in some of the psalms that disclose God’s general revelation, such as Psalm 19: “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands” (v. 1). The wisdom literature puts this in terms of God’s embedding wisdom in his creation. For example, Proverbs maintains that God’s wisdom was structured into his world, and human beings’ exercise of dominion over the world includes unlocking what God has fixed into it (Proverbs 3:19–20; 8:22–31). Proverbs 8:32–36 makes clear it is *moral* wisdom that is entrenched in God’s world, for the admonition there is a moral one.

This is very similar language to the moral advice throughout Deuteronomy, based on the specially revealed law of God. In Proverbs, however, it is based on the law of God embedded in his world. The Bible seems to have a play on words with this idea that God’s wisdom is *engraved* in his world, since the term for “fixed order” (often translated “decree,” Heb. *huqqah*; Jer. 31:35–36) is the same term used in the Old Testament law for “statute” (Lev. 18:3–4). Scripture seems to be making a parallel between what God has literally engraved in his law (a reference to the tablets of the Mosaic law) and what he has figuratively engraved in his world. That is, what is engraved in the world is moral wisdom analogous to what is engraved on the tablets of the Law. Thus, God engraved an objective moral order into his world and wrote it on the hearts of human beings (Rom. 2:14–16), thereby giving them an innate moral sense. Of course, God also gave human beings moral values and virtues in his Word, through what theologians commonly call “special revelation.” Ethics is primarily the task of discerning, or discovering, right and wrong both from God’s Word and God’s world.

The Founding Fathers of our nation essentially espoused this view of natural law and morality in the Declaration of Independence. From the very first line—“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”—they conveyed that the fundamental rights they were protecting (equality, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness) were endowed by our Creator and were both self-evident and inalienable (they could not be forfeited or taken away). They held that these rights were built into the fabric of the world. They understood well that government did not endow human beings with these rights, since rights bestowed by the state could just as easily be confiscated by that same state. They also held that they were self-evident, by which they meant that they were so clear it is expected that everyone would recognize them without a need for any additional argument about the matter.

GOD AND MORALITY

Certainly, from a Christian worldview, belief in God and objective morality are closely connected. An objective moral law is consistent with the idea that God embedded objective morality in his world and has given human beings the tools to uncover those values and virtues. Special revelation in the Bible clarifies those moral principles and character traits in addition to providing all we need when it comes to matters of salvation and eternity. In fact, if God exists, then the ideas of morality and moral accountability make sense in a way one cannot claim about nontheistic views of the world. If God doesn't exist, then morality is nothing more than a human convention or evolutionary survival instinct, making morality entirely subjective and nonbinding.

Moral language may be used to describe things that society thinks are good ideas, but they are nothing more than that. Anyone who acts differently is not doing anything wrong, just being a nonconformist. Yet, as we have seen, that's not the way we live or the way we talk about morality. This is part of what I mean when I say the culture has an incoherent view of morality. Philosopher Richard Taylor pointedly says:

The modern age, more or less repudiating the idea of a divine lawgiver, has nevertheless tried to retain the ideas of moral right and wrong, not noticing that, in casting God aside, they have also abolished the conditions of meaningfulness for moral right and wrong as well.... Contemporary writers in ethics, who blithely discourse upon moral right and wrong and moral obligation without any reference to religion, are really just weaving intellectual webs from thin air; which amounts to saying that they discourse without meaning.

It is surely the case that some atheists are more moral than some Christians. Moreover, it is entirely possible to have a system of ethics without belief in God. Systems such as utilitarianism (morality is determined by the consequences of one's actions—those who produce the greatest good for the greatest number of people are moral) or ethical egoism (morality is determined by that which advances one's self-interest) are examples of moral systems not at all dependent on theism. The question we are entertaining in this section is this: Can objective morality be adequately grounded apart from God existing?

If God does not exist, then there is no such thing as objective morality. Yet we have seen that objective morality makes the best sense out of how we live and talk about morality, especially when we are the victims of injustice and when we make moral judgments, which we do routinely. C. S. Lewis, in *Mere Christianity*, argued for a universal moral law and maintained that only with a being such as God did objective morality make sense. If it is true that morality is objective and not a human creation, as I have already suggested, then either there is a moral lawgiver (something like God), or objective morality has always existed and could even be eternal. This is the view of some philosophers and even goes back to the ancient Greeks, such as Plato, who held that the Good just existed and did not necessarily require a god or gods who had ordained it. Keep in mind, however, that Plato did not have a materialist view of the world at all. He believed there was much more to the world than merely its physical stuff. He actually held that the Good was something basic and intrinsic to the world—that it was part of the structure of the world. For some, this view that objective morality has always existed somehow seems more rational than believing God is the moral lawgiver behind the moral law. But that is no less a step of faith than it is to believe God ordained morality.

It is far more plausible to believe a moral God invested his world with moral properties and obligations than it is to believe moral obligations are just part of the world we live in. Think about it this way. If there is no God and all that exists is the material universe (this is the worldview of philosophical naturalism, sometimes referred to as materialism), and it is the result of chance, directionless forces of evolution, then there is no adequate way to account for moral properties such as obligations, right and wrong, and the guilt universally felt when failing those obligations. C. S. Lewis said it like this: “[What] I have got to believe in is a Something which is directing the universe, and which appears in me as a law urging me to do right and making me feel responsible and uncomfortable when I do wrong. I think we have to assume it is more like a mind than it is like anything else we know, because after all the only other thing we know is matter, and *you can hardly imagine a bit of matter giving instructions.*”

If not on an evolutionary basis, it is not obvious where the nature of moral obligation comes from in a purely material universe. Without a moral lawgiver, notions of right and wrong are merely human conventions and have no universally binding qualities about them. Objective and binding moral properties that fit the way we live and talk about morality simply do not follow from a materialist view of the world. This is what Yale law professor Arthur Leff describes as the “grand sez who” when it comes to moral demands. In a materialist worldview, there is no adequate answer to that question. Leff correctly describes the “death of God” movement as also the death of normative ethics and legal systems, a movement from “an exultant ‘We’re free of God’ to a despairing ‘Oh God, we’re free.’ ”

Here’s another way to think about this. In a materialistic world, where the material stuff of the world is all there is, there is nothing else besides this life. In addition, we live in a world where we experience moral obligations and judgments when we fail to live up to those obligations. Further, we experience many moral obligations, which in the materialist world result in net losses of benefit to those who keep them (for example, the moral obligation to rescue someone in need, to repay a debt, to keep a promise, or to refrain from stealing; in fact, you could make a good case that most of our moral obligations conflict with our self-interest, which is why we often refer to moral tension as “temptation”). Nevertheless, if the person fails to keep an obligation, he or she is subject to judgment, if not shame, and the greater the failure, the greater the sense that the person is somehow defective in character. But having those obligations only makes sense if, as philosopher George Mavrodes puts it, “reality itself is committed to morality in some deep way. It makes sense only if there is moral demand on the world too, and only if reality will in the end satisfy that demand.” And reality, on a materialist view of the world, cannot satisfy that demand. That is, the radical demands of morality that most often bring losses to one’s life when viewed from the materialist view of the world seem absurd. **Unless there is a moral lawgiver who has invested the world with morality and who provides a framework for the demands of morality resulting in good to the one who upholds them, the demands of morality make little sense. This is precisely what a Christian worldview does for the enterprise of morality—it makes sense of the moral world we both live in and talk about.**⁴

⁴ Rae, S. B. (2013). [Doing the right thing: making moral choices in a world full of options](#) (pp. 39–61). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

DIFFICULT CHOICES

Moral Dilemmas and How to Resolve Them

What would you do if you were on a sinking ship with eleven people, and the only available lifeboat could hold just ten? Whom would you leave out—the elderly brain surgeon, the young mother, the ten-year-old boy? We have all heard these hypothetical ethical dilemmas put forward to stump students and supposedly teach them to reason ethically. Many modern methods of teaching ethics involve placing students in a moral bind and helping them work through it. The moral dilemma—an extreme situation that seems to have no good ethical solution—serves as a paradigm for making choices. Students are asked to consider the many conflicting values that come into play and to defend various ways of reaching a morally acceptable solution.

Unfortunately, this common method suffers from a fatal flaw from which many students of ethics never recover: the inclination to see dilemmas as the moral *norm*, rather than the *exception*. Just as in jurisprudence “hard cases make bad law,” so, too, in ethics moral dilemmas make bad ethical models. The fundamental problem with dilemma-based morality is that it leads one to suppose that making moral decisions regularly entails a Herculean effort at moral calculation, involving countless variables, which rarely, if ever, yields an ethically certain outcome. Morality begins to look like such a complicated affair that, in the end, one is tempted to throw up one’s hands and exclaim, “There is no right or wrong answer! It’s anybody’s call!”

Compare this, for a moment, with your own experience. How often each day do you find yourself in situations where you simply *don’t know* what the best course of action is? How many times a day do you scratch your head wondering what in the world God wants you to do? Granted, these occasions *do* exist, and we have all experienced them, but they are far from the norm. Often, too, we may scratch our heads wondering what in the world *God* is doing in our lives, or *why* he does what he does, but we usually know *what* he wants from *us*, at least in the present moment.

Here we could distinguish two types of moral dilemmas. Each is resolved in a very different way. The most common moral dilemma occurs when the voice of conscience is clear. We know what we ought to do, but it demands sacrifice. We really don’t want to do it. We waver not at the level of *conscience* (knowing what we *should* do), but at the level of *choice* (deciding what we *will* do). Will we take the easier way out, avoiding a mountain of problems by renouncing our consciences, or will we do the right thing, no matter what the consequences may be? Sometimes by telling a lie—to take one example—we can get out of many difficulties, but at the cost of moral compromise.

This first sort of moral dilemma is resolved through the formation of virtue and the humble petition of God’s grace. In its original sense, *virtue* means *strength*. It means the ability to do the right thing even when it’s difficult. This demands tremendous courage and moral mettle. The more we build up the habit of doing good, the easier it becomes, since we ourselves are morally stronger. But even the strongest Christian needs God’s grace. Prayer give us access to God’s omnipotence and reinforce us in our weakness. Some of the most extraordinary examples of moral heroism often come from the weakest among us, even mere children. God chooses the weak and gives them his own strength (see 1 Cor. 1:27–29; 2 Cor. 12:9–10).

A second type of moral dilemma occurs when conscience offers insufficient light to guide us. We sincerely want to do the right thing but cannot figure out what it is. Like a navy captain, we desperately want to guide our craft surely through the night, avoiding shoals and shipwreck, yet sometimes the fog becomes so thick that we simply cannot see where we are going.

For all our caution and goodwill, we still waver in our decision because we do not *know* what to do. This is a doubt of conscience or moral dilemma in the true sense. Its resolution involves more than courage and virtue—it requires education and counsel.

It probably goes without saying, but this second type of moral dilemma concerns those who are sincerely committed to doing the right thing, no matter what. A person who is willing to compromise with conscience, cut ethical corners, and make moral “deals” will never have a true moral dilemma (except maybe of how far he is willing to bend!).

AGONIZING OVER ETHICS

One solution to moral dilemmas is the *anguish theory*. For some, to be an ethical person means that the most important thing is not to choose well but to agonize over one’s decisions. We see this all the time in the newspapers. “It’s the hardest thing I’ve ever done,” Annette Faulkner said of her decision to “interrupt,” in her own words, a pregnancy. “Twelve years on, there is not one day that I don’t think about it.” Stories of heart- wrenching and ultimately immoral choices, like this one described in the July 4, 2004, issue of Australia’s *Sun- Herald*, increasingly find their way into leading newspapers. The more one reads these stories, the more a common thread emerges: whatever you do, no matter how terrible, it’s okay as long as you had to anguish over the decision.

The May 13, 2007, issue of the *New York Times* delivers a similar line. “For many women and their partners, the decision to terminate a pregnancy after a prenatal diagnosis of a serious genetic defect can be harrowing, often coming after a painful assessment of their own emotional and financial resources.” Another article in the *New York Times* (July 14, 2004) narrated the agonizing internal struggles of Mrs. Florence Tauber, leading up to her decision to procure a lethal dose of medicine so her husband, Al, could take his life, in accordance with Oregon law. Al had recently been diagnosed with chronic lymphatic leukemia, and doctors estimated that he had six months to live. “It was a very difficult decision for me,” Mrs. Tauber relates. “But he made it easier by saying he was giving me the best of himself and not leaving me with ugly memories of him diminishing.”

Or take this further example from the May 20, 2004, issue of the same newspaper. The story describes the deliberation of family members of eighty- two- year- old Macie Mull, an Alzheimer’s patient, over whether or not to have a feeding tube inserted, since she could no longer eat on her own. The entire article is framed in terms of the intense emotional struggle of those who must make these ethical choices. Reference to numerous conflicting voices and opinions—all of apparently equal moral weight—accentuates the turbulent nature of the decision. Even the title of the piece—“Stolen Minds, Tough Choices”—underscores the vexation of those who must deal with these ethical issues. In this particular case, the family eventually chose to insert the feeding tube, but the article ends with the “crisis of conscience” of geriatrician Douglas Nelson, who filed a position paper with his state medical society affirming that tube feeding was not good medicine for end- stage dementia patients. “My advice is to let the patient die peacefully,” Nelson announced.

Intended or not, this style of “unbiased” reporting serves a specific purpose—the shaping of public opinion on key moral issues ranging from prenatal testing and embryonic stem cell research to euthanasia and gay marriage. The message is not that one side is right and the other wrong, though a clear proclivity toward the liberalization of laws and moral codes clearly comes through. Rather, we learn that good arguments can be made for all sides of nearly any case and that, in the final analysis, right and wrong reside within the individual. Proof of “good intentions”—manifested by anguished internal debate—suffices to justify any final outcome.

On reading these accounts, one is gently but firmly pushed toward the conclusion that many moral choices are so hopelessly complex that no right or wrong moral answers exist. If even the experts disagree, who are we to naively propose black- and- white principles to follow? Such moral simplicity

is a throwback to medieval obscurantism, one surmises. In the end, provided you have lost enough sleep over your dilemma—the reader concludes—you are morally entitled to elect any option.

I do not wish to casually dismiss these dilemmas as if such moral choices were easy. Nearly all people suffer terribly over the hard decisions they must make during life. A lack of clear alternatives and family support, or the prospect of seemingly unbearable future difficulties, can even make some feel that they have no choice. And, indeed, some situations really do present moral dilemmas that require expert guidance, prayer, and prudence.

Yet from the earliest appearance of ethical theories some twenty- five hundred years ago, praise and blame were given according to the correctness of people’s moral choices, and not according to the difficulty they had reaching a decision. The purpose of moral deliberation was to reach a good moral choice. The formation of virtue aimed at making right choices easier and more “natural.” The current focus on the interior struggles involved in choosing seems to be a subtle way of justifying what another, less- sophisticated generation might have called “bad choices.” Politically incorrect Christians might be tempted to call it a *rationalization of sin.*

As we have seen, many times the difficulty we experience in making moral choices doesn’t proceed from the complexity of the factors involved, but rather from the sacrifices entailed in doing the right thing. In other words, we would rather not. We scrape around for *reasons to justify choices that, though immoral, make life easier.* It comforts us to know that informed opinions vary all over the map, and that we have taken our choices seriously, even to the point of agonizing over them. But in the end, *this anguish- based ethics serves only as a sedative to conscience and to relieve us of our real responsibility to do the right thing.*

COOPERATION IN EVIL

All this being said, we must still recognize that authentic moral dilemmas do exist. There are times in our lives when we must make decisions—often big decisions—and the ethical road is anything but clear. In these cases, how do we illuminate conscience to make good ethical judgments? What aids do we have to clear up our doubts?

A particular problem of conscience arises when we are associated professionally or socially with those whose actions are immoral. We ourselves would not willingly choose to engage in their behavior, but the help we provide can make us wonder whether we have an obligation to speak out or to formally disassociate ourselves from their actions. Though this problem appears relatively simple in theory, in practice it can be tremendously difficult to discern.

Let’s say, for example, you work at a publishing house that also produces pornography. Are you obliged to protest or even to quit? What about owning stock in a pharmaceutical company that manufactures contraceptives and abortion pills? Or what if the company you work for engages in unethical practices overseas, such as child labor that may even border on slavery? What if you work for a firm that is hiding an important defect in its product? Are you obliged to publicize the truth, or even to resign?

The hypothetical cases are far too many to enumerate. Traditional Christian morality offers guidance in forming one’s conscience to be able to decide the moral path to take. Ethicists make a fundamental distinction between *formal cooperation* (where you directly participate in the immoral action or share the intention of those who are doing so) and *material cooperation* (where you play some indirect part in the process, without intending or willing the outcome). Since formal cooperation means making the evil act your own, it is always morally wrong. Material cooperation can sometimes be permitted, when we disassociate ourselves from the evil actions of others and do not directly participate in their wrongdoing. On the other hand, we must also try to avoid scandal and be willing to bear witness to the truth, even when to do so may be personally disadvantageous.

To refuse to take part in committing an injustice is not only a moral duty; it is also a basic human right. No one should be forced to perform an action that is incompatible with human dignity. What is at stake is an essential right, which should be acknowledged and protected by civil law. For example, the opportunity to refuse to take part in the phases of consultation, preparation, and execution of acts against human life should be guaranteed to physicians, health-care personnel, and directors of hospitals, clinics, and convalescent facilities. Those who have recourse to conscientious objection in these cases should be protected both from legal penalties and also from any negative effects on their careers or earning possibilities.

RESOLVING MORAL DILEMMAS

In chapter 12 we outlined some important sources of moral knowledge that will help us in evaluating tough moral cases. The first was knowledge of God's Word, including the Ten Commandments, but also encompassing a closer familiarity with Christ and his moral criteria. A second source was the natural law, the unwritten expression of God's eternal law on the human heart. The third guide we discussed—Church teaching—is especially important for the resolution of moral dilemmas. As we saw, the assistance that the teaching Church offers proves particularly precious in these difficult times where moral quandaries abound. Modern society presents many new ethical enigmas unheard of in past generations.

Along with these sources of moral truth, over the centuries ethicists have also developed a series of helpful insights that can assist us in facing tough moral choices. First, we ought to apply general moral guidelines to our specific case. Let's look at some of these.

REALIZE THE END DOESN'T JUSTIFY THE MEANS

In other words, **we cannot do evil to achieve good**. A good result doesn't legitimize bad means to get there and it's not enough that "everything worked out in the end." We are responsible not only for the final outcome of our choices, but also for the choices themselves—with all that they entail. The choice to commit murder in order to save other people can never be a good choice, since the act we are committing (murder!) is never justified by a good end. If one innocent person is expendable, then a million people are no less expendable.

PRACTICE THE GOLDEN RULE

A second principle is the *Golden Rule*: do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Many of our moral doubts are resolved when we put ourselves in the other person's place. We naturally seek our best interests, so by putting ourselves in another's shoes, we more readily discern the best way to act. Since we would like to be treated fairly, we should be fair toward others. Since we would like a second chance when we have made a mistake, we should give others the same opportunity. Since we would like to be forgiven when we have apologized for our errors, we should extend the same mercy to others. We spontaneously tend to be softer on ourselves than on others, excusing our own actions and judging others with severity. The Golden Rule helps us to be more objective and impartial in our moral judgments.

CONSIDER IT BETTER TO SUFFER EVIL THAN TO DO EVIL

Socrates makes this remark in the *Gorgias*, when he is arguing against Polus's conception of the good life. A person who cares about his true well-being should be concerned never to do injustice. Being an unjust person, *in itself*, is a bad state to be in. No matter what benefits might result from one's vicious actions, it is always better to choose the virtuous course of action. From Socrates' point of

view, doing wrong harms the soul. Since in his view the soul is the most valuable thing there is, it is important to protect the soul from this harm. Suffering evil, in contrast, doesn't harm the soul. It might harm the body. It might be psychologically difficult. But it doesn't harm the most valuable thing. So doing evil is worse than suffering it.

This reminds us of Jesus' rhetorical question, "For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?" (Luke 9:25 rsv). He also counsels his followers to have no fear of those who can kill the body, but cannot kill the soul (Matt. 10:28). No bodily benefit can outweigh the good of our souls, and this is why the physical evil we suffer can never be as bad for us as the moral evil we commit. The martyrs bear a wonderful witness to the lengths to which some will go to live out this principle. Sometimes our faith is costly. Following Jesus means a willingness to follow him to the cross.

USE THE PERSONALIST PRINCIPLE

A fourth general norm is called the *personalist principle*, which states that a person should always be treated as an *end* and never as a mere *means*. This norm has profound consequences for our ethical choices. We cannot simply apply a utilitarian calculus to decide how to act, where persons are involved. According to the utilitarian spirit that pervades our society, the best human actions are those that are most useful to the majority. We judge the worth of our actions by their net results. This doesn't work in the case of persons. According to a Christian worldview, persons are not "useful"—they are good for their own sake. They cannot be evaluated simply by their productivity or the "quality" of their lives. They not only possess value for others, they possess *dignity* in themselves. Persons and nonpersons are fundamentally different, since persons exist for their own sake whereas things exist for the sake of persons. Persons have an intrinsic worth that must always be recognized and respected. *Things* are to be used; *people* are to be loved. In other words, we should never treat the people in our lives as mere instruments for achieving our own purposes.

On examining specific cases, it becomes evident that there is no magic formula for determining the right thing to do in every possible situation. Again, the vast majority of our moral choices don't involve such intense deliberation. Most are rather simple. As we have seen, the more we strive in every moment to do God's will and to love him with all our hearts, the more spontaneously we reach good moral judgments. Nothing helps moral conscience like the pureheartedness of a soul in love with the Lord.

Conscience will continue to be a matter for debate for decades to come. Some will use conscience as an excuse for doing as they please—claiming that no one has the right to question the decisions they make in conscience. Others will insist that conscience is a vestige of an earlier stage of human evolution, no more useful or reliable than the appendix. For those who sincerely seek a morally good life—Christians and non-Christians alike—conscience will be a precious gift, and the best tool we have to reach sound moral judgments. Christians especially will thank God for this invaluable instrument for knowing God's will and living it out in their daily lives.⁵

⁵ Williams, T. (2008). [*Knowing right from wrong: a christian guide to conscience*](#). New York City, NY: FaithWords.