



## ***TRUE TRUTH and Why It Matters—“What are the Three Enemies of Truth?”***

### **Part 4**

### ***RELATIVISM: THE FIRST ENEMY OF TRUTH***

**(Romans 1:18, 25)** “For **the** wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress **the truth** in unrighteousness,” “For **they** exchanged **the truth** of God for a lie, and worshiped and served **the** creature rather than **the** Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.”

The notion of relativism is an old idea, not a “hip” invention of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The book of Judges 17:6 says that in Israel, “In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes.... Again in Greek thought (Protagoras of Abdera) held that “man is the measure of all things” and that “truth is what appears to each individual”.<sup>i</sup> Sadly, relativism is in vogue today such that true, truth seems archaic, civil interaction escapes us, and doing justice eludes us.

Christian Philosopher, Peter Kreeft quotes C.S. Lewis, on the importance of this issue which he called “subjectivism”. In *The Poison of Subjectivism*, Lewis speaks on the perils of moral relativism and says:

“...it will certainly end our species and damn our souls.” Kreeft comments, ‘Please remember that Oxonians (those from Oxford University) are not given to exaggeration. He continues, why does he say, “Damn our souls?” Because Lewis is a Christian, and he does not disagree with the fundamental teaching of his master, Christ, and all the prophets in the Jewish tradition, that salvation presupposes repentance, and repentance presupposes an objectively real moral law. Moral relativism eliminates that law, thus trivializes repentance, and thus imperils salvation.”<sup>ii</sup>

This issue is a big deal and if you care about the truth pay close attention. In this part of we will be: looking at relativism as an enemy of truth that expresses itself *culturally, societally, and individually*. Thus we will consider its implications and offer alternative solutions.

### EXAMINING THREE KINDS OF RELATIVISM<sup>iii</sup>

Perhaps you've experienced in a witnessing situation someone's rejection of Jesus with the words, "well that may be true for you but it's not true for me." Celebrity Jennifer Aniston from the television show "Friends" is quoted to have said from Hollowverse.com: "I don't have a religion. I believe in a God. I don't know what it looks like but it's MY God, My own interpretation of the supernatural."<sup>iv</sup> This is a classic example of having a *mere* subjective view of the divine.

#### **CULTURAL RELATIVISM**

This form of relativism is descriptive. That is, it's an anthropological approach to morals that suspends making judgments, and focuses on the facts which are being observed of any particular culture.

For example, in the United States the rule of law is "king", whereas in North Korea the rule that governs is the "fist". This is a mere description of how two different countries govern their people. Its mere purpose is to describe what is. Philosopher Peter Kreeft explains this position,

"This argument seems impregnable. The claim is that anthropologists and sociologists have discovered moral relativism to be not a theory but an empirical fact. Different cultures and societies, like different individuals, simply do, in fact, have very different moral values. In Eskimo culture, and in Holland, killing old people is right. In America, east of Oregon, it's wrong. In contemporary culture, fornication is right; in Christian cultures, it's wrong, and so forth."<sup>v</sup>

The first problem here is confusing a fact from a value. Facts describe—what is whereas values prescribe—what ought to be. Consider the abortion controversy. People on both sides *value* human life and hold that it is wrong to take the life of an innocent human being. But is it a *fact* that the fetus is a person? Here's where the lines are often drawn concerning the "facts" and

disagreement obtains. Some believe the fetus is an innocent human person, others see the fetus as an intruder in the body of the mother.<sup>vi</sup> Confusing facts from values is not the only problem with cultural relativism.

Another problem is that it falsely assumes that moral discrepancies between cultures demonstrate that no objective moral values exist. This is not necessarily the case. With the example of abortion, the problem is not with the values but with the perception of the facts. But just because there is a disagreement regarding the facts, it does not follow that no view can be correct.

### ***SOCIETAL RELATIVISM***

Unlike cultural relativism which is descriptive, societal relativism is prescriptive. That is, it does not merely observe the facts of a particular culture, but here a society tells people what they *ought* to do, or how they *should* behave. This prescriptiveness obviously differs from one culture to another.

The problem with societal relativism is that it supports the view that one *ought* to do what their society tells them to do. But what if you lived in Germany under Hitler's politics? Would you be *morally justified* in obeying your countrymen to confiscate the Jews possessions, put them into forced labor, and finally to exterminate them, all because the law permitted it?

We all know that just because something is lawful does not necessarily make it right. There's a difference between what is *morally right* and what is *legal*. A clear point, it seems, is the civil rights movement championed by Martin Luther King Jr. Under societal relativism Dr. King would have been wrong to protest the ill treatment Black people were undergoing in his day.

The fact is, under cultural relativism his protest would be morally criminal because he challenged the moral consensus of his society. Today no one would consider Dr. King a criminal but a hero because he championed the cause of ill-treated Blacks. But he did not do this by appealing to culturally relativistic view, but argued from a place of transcendent truth grounded in the Creator God of Scripture. Is that even considered today?

## **INDIVIDUAL RELATIVISM**

Cultural relativism describes a culture's values and suspends judgment; societal relativism does not suspend judgment but prescribes what individuals ought to do in their respective cultures. Individual relativism, also known as ethical subjectivism, is the view where *personal preferences* are the governing factor of behavior. So if I want to marry someone of the opposite sex, same sex, or even my dog, it does not matter, because there's no qualitative difference. As long as it's my personal preference, it's right for me.

When individual relativism is taken to its logical conclusion, it will lead to anarchy—the absence of any order. For if the individual is the standard by which all behavior is deemed right or wrong, who can blame the anarchist for championing his cause?

How about the sociopath? If the most moral individual is the one who lives most consistently to the beat of his “own moral drum” then the best example is the sociopath.<sup>vii</sup> Sociopaths have antisocial personality disorders characterized by a lack of regard for the moral or legal standards in the local culture. They're unable to get along with others or abide by societal rules. They are also called psychopaths.<sup>viii</sup> These people fill our prisons across the nations and wreak havoc on society.<sup>ix</sup>

As the moral champion of individual relativism, should they be allowed to express themselves? Is it unjust to stop their self-expression of murder, rape and thievery? You may object “oh c'mon” that's ridiculous. Yes it is, but nevertheless the sociopath embodies this individual relativism.

## **ANALYZING RELATIVISM BY RESPONDING TO OBJECTIONS**

These three views of relativism are daily lived out by millions of people and at times, unwittingly. It's everywhere in our culture under the banners of: “personal autonomy”, “be true to yourself”, “tolerance”, “love”, or “progress”. Sometimes the best way to analyze a view is by responding to its objections through example. The following examples of relativism and its flaws are worthy of note.

### ***“DON’T TELL ME I’M WRONG!”***

The first error of relativism is that it forbids any sort of correction from one person to the other. That is, you (E.g., mom, dad, coach, teacher, officer, etc.) can’t tell another they are wrong—*about anything*. The scenario goes something like this:

“If what I do is right for me but not right for you; who cares? As far as I’m concerned we don’t need to dialogue especially about my need to improve because I can do whatever I please. I’m the measure of all things and therefore there’s no room for improvement”.

People who think in this way and live out the implications of their view are difficult to bear. But if relativism is true, then the father who chooses to commit adultery on his wife and destroy the life of his children is within his rights to do so. If relativism is true, then the student who cheats on his SAT’s is not wrong. If relativism is true, then the burglar who boosted the neighbor’s car is within her rights.

At the end of the day while disagreements may occur, it does not matter morally. The reason is because, “It’s right for me! You can’t tell me what “*I*” ought to do.”

### ***“DON’T COMPLAIN TO ME!”***

The second flaw of relativism is that it eliminates any kind of complaining. Atheists often use the problem of evil as a “proof” that God does not exist but if he does exist then the problem of evil demonstrates that God is weak, cruel and disinterested in people. But if relativism is true, then the objection against God based on evil disappears.

If there’s no *true* evil to discuss, only differing opinions about what is pleasant or unpleasant desired or not desired, then; it does not matter if we torture babies for fun; it doesn’t matter if planes crash into Twin Towers; it doesn’t matter if women are raped for sport. It’s just another day in this relativistic world.

I can also say that what Cuba’s Dictator, Fidel Castro, did to my wife’s uncle by imprisoning him in a Cuban jail for political differences, was not evil, but perhaps inconvenient; that the Castro regime’s confiscation of my in-laws

property was “right” for the cause; and Adelita just needed to get with the program. At the end of the day, neither of them could complain about evil or injustice if relativism is true.

### **“DON’T BLAME ME OR PRAISE ME!”**

The third weakness of relativism hits a nerve with everyone I know—including me. When we’re praised for some action performed or a quality possessed we glow inside, but when we’re blamed or reprimanded for some misgiving we want to hide. If relativism is true, then it eliminates any kind of praise or blame from our lips.

The concept of praise or blame is meaningless in a relativistic framework because there is *no standard by which we measure what is good, or bad*. It’s easy to accept praise, but who wants to receive blame? The truth is we all have a deep commitment to objective morality which is evidenced in our habits of receiving praise and avoiding blame. Consider C.S. Lewis’ observation regarding this matter:

The truth is, we believe in decency so much—we feel the Rule or Law pressing on us so—that we cannot bear to face the fact that we are breaking it, and consequently we try to shift the responsibility. For you notice that it is only for our bad behavior that we find all these explanations. It is only our bad temper that we put down to being tired or worried or hungry; we put our good temper down to ourselves.<sup>x</sup>

So if the notions of praise and blame are indeed valid, this argues against relativism not for it.

### **“DON’T TELL ME, IT’S NOT FAIR!”**

My children love to point out what is or is not fair when their siblings get something they did not get. Be it a treat for good grades or a time out for disobedience, their moral compass is working quite well. In this fourth defect of relativism one is prohibited from making statements like, *“That’s not fair”* or *“that’s not just.”* This too is a complaint, but instead of the problem of evil, it encompasses the problem of *injustice*.

When it comes to political debate and public policy, how is one going to show the “moral rightness” of their position or proposed legislation if there’s no such thing as true justice (E.g., Same Sex Marriage)?

When it comes to meting out punishment and rewards how is this to be done? If we can’t complain about injustice, then it would be right to punish someone like a *Mother Theresa* for her kind acts of tending to the destitute and starving in Calcutta India<sup>xi</sup> for most of her life, while rewarding and applauding *Adolf Hitler* for exterminating over six million Jews<sup>xii</sup> in Germany in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Do we really want to live in a world like this?

### **“DON’T TELL ME TO IMPROVE!”**

For the most part, we all like the status quo; we want things to never change. The fifth flaw of relativism supports this notion because there’s no such thing as an *improved moral compass*. Improvement or reform is absolutely impossible if challenging one to improve their behavior is forbidden.

While the relativist may be able to change their ethic, they can never become a *better person*. The habitual liar can’t improve, for in order to improve, the implication is that there is an objective moral rule for which to strive (i.e., “thou shall not bear false witness”).

This view does not motivate or give one the incentive to improve. After all, why should one change something that is self-serving, and makes them feel good? Do we want to live in a society that teaches children to be self-serving, self-absorbed?

### **“Don’t Moralize With Me!”**

The sixth flaw of relativism is that *you can’t have a meaningful moral discussion*. If an objective standard does not exist, we can’t have a meaningful dialogue. Why? This is because there’s no category for a *better* point of view. Here, disputation is impossible. After all, disputing means that one tries to show the other person’s view is wrong.

It’s senseless to quarrel if one can’t come to some agreement as to what is right and wrong. This leaves the possibility of making a moral suggestion absurd. As Christian author and apologist Greg Koukl put it:

This puts relativists in an untenable position, caught coming and going. If they speak, they surrender their relativism. If they do not, they surrender

their humanity. It's inhuman to be mute in the face of egregious evil, to be silent in the presence of flagrant injustice.<sup>xiii</sup>

The rub here is that if one believes ethical truths are relative, they have placed themselves out of the moral discussion. They're not on the pitch but in the stands, they're out of bounds and thus *ought* to be silent.

### ***"DON'T TELL ME TO BE TOLERANT!"***

Today the idea of tolerance is vastly different from the classical understanding, which according to apologist Greg Koukl:

The classical view of tolerance is synonymous with "acceptance." Accept (respect) all people based on our shared humanity. Don't accept (treat as legitimate) all behavior or all ideas. Some conduct is unacceptable and some ideas are unsound.<sup>xiv</sup>

The seventh flaw of relativism disallows commanding anyone to be *tolerant*. The problem however is that if there's no standard, then there's no tolerance, because there is no "ought." We might as well shut our pie holes in this case.

Tolerance is considered to be a key virtue of relativism. The problem is that, if there are no objective moral rules then there can't be a rule that requires people to tolerate opposing positions. This position is self-refuting because it fails to meet its own criterion. The reason is because when a Relativist *rejects* the objectivists view he is guilty of not being *tolerant*.<sup>xv</sup> It appears they are therefore no different than an objectivist.

## **CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

Relativism is a dangerous enemy of truth and deeply flawed. If you can't: tell me I'm wrong; can't complain about the problem of evil; can't blame or praise me; can't say, "that's not just"; can't improve on your morality; can't have a meaningful moral discussion and you can't tell me to be tolerant, then how does a society like that last? I don't see how it can because and friends we're now there.

<sup>i</sup> (Accessed 2/18/2014) from <http://www.ucd.ie/philosophy/staff/mariabaghrmian/Brief%20History.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> (Accessed 2/19/2014) [http://www.peterkreeft.com/audio/05\\_relativism/relativism\\_transcription.htm#1](http://www.peterkreeft.com/audio/05_relativism/relativism_transcription.htm#1)

<sup>iii</sup> Unless otherwise noted, much of what follows on the topic of relativism is taken from: Beckwith, Francis J. & Gregory Koukl, *Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air*, Pgs. 19-25, 36-39, 43-53, © 1998 by Francis J. Beckwith & Gregory Koukl, Baker Book House. This book tackles the issue of postmodernism as it relates to moral relativism. The authors are clear, concise, and witty in presenting their arguments.

<sup>iv</sup> (Accessed 2/18/2014) Credit: Tom Kershaw, Hollowverse.com

<sup>v</sup> (Accessed 2/19/2014) [http://www.peterkreeft.com/audio/05\\_relativism/relativism\\_transcription.htm#1](http://www.peterkreeft.com/audio/05_relativism/relativism_transcription.htm#1)

<sup>vi</sup> See Francis Beckwith, *Politically Correct Death: Answering the Arguments for Abortion Rights*, © Baker Book House (April 1993). He provides a thorough explanation of sixty-nine ethical and philosophical arguments sometimes given to defend a pro-choice position and persuasive pro-life responses to each.

<sup>vii</sup> Beckwith & Koukl, *Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air*.

<sup>viii</sup> (Accessed 2/18/2014) "Profile of the Sociopath" <http://www.mcafee.cc/Bin/sb.html>

<sup>ix</sup> (Accessed 2/18/2014) The website: "Profile of the Sociopath" <http://www.mcafee.cc/Bin/sb.html> summarizes some of the common features of descriptions of the behavior of sociopaths. Some behaviors are: First, ***glibness and a superficial charm*** where they appear to be charming, yet are covertly hostile and domineering, seeing their victim as merely an instrument to be used, they may even dominate and humiliate their victims. Second, being ***manipulative and conning*** where they never recognize the rights of others and see their self-serving behaviors as permissible. Third, they have a ***grandiose sense of self*** where feelings of entitlement rule their motives. Fourth, they are ***pathological liars***. These have a complex web of belief in their own powers and abilities; they are extremely convincing; able to pass lie detector tests; and eventually believe their lies after a while.

<sup>x</sup> Quoted in: Beckwith & Koukl, *Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air*. Pg.65

<sup>xi</sup> (Accessed 2/18/2014) [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mother\\_Teresa](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mother_Teresa)

<sup>xii</sup> (Accessed 7/1/2015) [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Holocaust#cite\\_note-Evans-NYRB-2015-07-02-4](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Holocaust#cite_note-Evans-NYRB-2015-07-02-4) Non-Jewish victims of broader Nazi crimes include: Gypsies, Poles, communists, homosexuals, Soviet POWs, and the mentally and physically disabled.

<sup>xiii</sup> Beckwith & Koukl, *Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air*, Pg.68

<sup>xiv</sup> (Accessed 7/1/2015) <http://www.str.org/Media/Default/Publications/1-2%202006%20Solid%20Ground%20Intolerance-1.pdf>

<sup>xv</sup> *Ibid.*, Pgs. 68-69