

MORALITY IN THE SEVENTIES

Are there any absolutes? Is everything relative? Are there any universal moral principles which are binding on all men in all places and at all times? A convergence of forces led many modern thinkers to give up the belief in moral absolutes altogether.

One of the influences which led to moral relativity is a spin-off from the ancient philosopher, Hericlitus, who said that no man ever steps into the same river twice for fresh waters are ever upon him. Another philosopher after him, named Cratylus, took this flux philosophy even one step further, declaring that no one ever steps into the same river even once. So convinced of the total relativity of all things was Cratylus that he would not even answer if one asked him whether or not he existed. All he would do is wiggle his finger, indicating that all was in a state of flux, even himself.

With the rise of modern anthropological studies more impetus was added to this ancient flux philosophy. Upon comparing the practices of various cultures it became obvious to many anthropologists that there were few if any moral principles which were practiced by all tribes everywhere. Some peoples opposed incest; some practiced it. Some groups believed in monogamy but others practiced polygamy. Some believed in killing men of other tribes and others did not, and so on. Scarcely a moral principle was found to be universally practiced by all men everywhere, thus lending credence to the flux philosophy that all morals are relative to culture and circumstances.

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On the contemporary scene the popularity of Einstein's theory of relativity simply added one more kind of relativity^{viz. scientific,} to an already growing belief that all is relative. As someone put it, what were once the absolutes of the Bible are now considered relative, and the relativity of Einstein is considered absolute. ✓

In the face of these converging forces for relativity, what does the Christian say? Is everything relative? Are there no moral absolutes? In reply we venture a bold protest to this relativity in favor of some moral absolutes. That there are moral absolutes can be defended in several ways, two of which will be discussed here; an absolute morality is philosophically necessary and culturally demonstrated.

One of the traps in which the total relativists^{is} ~~is~~ inevitably ensnared is self contradiction. In order to maintain his position that all is relative he must affirm absolutely that there are no absolutes. But if he is absolutely sure that there are no absolutes, then he really has an absolute, namely the absolute that there are no absolutes. If, on the other hand, the relativist retreats to the position that he is not absolutely certain there are no absolutes, then he leaves the door open that there may be some. In other words, he has not really eliminated all absolutes, and we are free to demonstrate that there are at least some absolutes.

Likewise, if one takes the position of partial relativism^{affirming}, that ^{almost} almost everything is relative (or that ^{almost} all he knows is relative), the door is not shut completely on the possibility that there are some absolutes. For it is possible that some things are absolute or that he does not know enough. In fact, we may say that it is certain that he does not know enough. For the very notion of something being relative makes no sense unless ultimately it

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is relative to something which is not relative. Even Einstein declared that there is an absolute Spirit to which everything else is relative. In other words, total relativism is an impossible position. The philosopher Hericlitus^{also} acknowledged this and posited an absolute logos (reason) to which everything else was relative. In brief, we need only ask the total relativists this question: to what is everything relative? Surely he will not tell us that things are relative to other things which are relative to other things on and on without end. For we will not permit the relativist to send us on an endless chase for the illusive point to which everything else is relative. The relativists trick of positing an infinite series only delays (indefinitely) giving an answer to the original question "To what is everything else relative?" As C. S. Lewis aptly put it, an infinite regress does not really explain anything; rather, it is an attempt to explain away the need for an explanation. The only adequate explanation for relativity is an absolute, not ^{an} indefinite relativity.

The force of the impossibility of maintaining a position without absolutes was brought home to me rather forcibly by a professor at a large state university who told our class that none of the ten commandments were absolute. They were all relative, said he. There were exceptions to all of them. There were times when one should murder, commit adultery, lie, etc. Furthermore, he contended, the Bible omits two very important commandments which he would have added, namely, be intelligent and be tolerant. Not being able to contain my curiosity, I raised a hand. "Professor, ~~so-and-so,~~" said I, "you have just said that God's ten commandments are relative. Now I would like to know this: are your two commandments relative or absolute?" A bit befuddled by the question, the professor paused and then replied with this neat bit of semantical gyration. "Well, I guess you might say there are no

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exceptions to the tolerance commandment except that we need not be tolerant to people who are intolerant." Not wishing to press the issue further (and wanting to pass the course) I refrained from asking the logical sequel question, "Should we be intelligent to everyone except those who are not intelligent?" The simple truth of the matter is that the professor did not want to admit that while he had rejected the biblical absolutes he had set up some absolutes of his own to replace them. It is inevitable that men do this.

Absolutes cannot be avoided. When one denies them categorically he thereby affirms one absolutely, namely the absolutes of his own certainty that there are no other absolutes. Likewise, when one attempts to affirm that everything is relative, he finds that if this were true, then even his statement that all is relative is itself relative. In other words, he has no solid ground to stand on to make the statement, if everything is really relative.

This same point can be illustrated by the pragmatic philosophy of John Dewey, the father of so-called "Progressive Education." Dewey contended that there are no fixed or final ethical absolutes. All is in a constant process of getting better by a proper use of the scientific method of experimentation. That is, what is the best course of action is discovered by experimenting in various courses of action. If a given course of action "works," then it is the right course of action in a similar way that if a given key opens the door, then it is the right key, whether or not that key was actually made to open that door. In brief, it is progress in solving human problems or achievement in the effort at social welfare which determine whether our actions ^{are} ethically right for Dewey. And there is no such thing as

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final achievement. Every goal or end attained becomes the means for reaching another end and so on. Human activity can constantly improve but it can never finally achieve. No ethical goal is stationary.

Now what apparently did not occur to Dewey is the impossibility of contending that something is progressing or getting better unless one assumes a best to which he is implicitly comparing his present state of progress. For unless there is a fixed point or goal which is absolutely perfect, it makes no sense to talk about a present state being better or worse. Without an absolute the present state of affairs can be different from the past or future, but it certainly cannot be judged to be better. There can only be a better if there is a best.

Let us move on to another point in support of moral absolutes. The case against absolutes from anthropology is very^{much} overdrawn. Human mores or ethical practices are not vastly different (and they are certainly not entirely different) from culture to culture. As a matter of fact, the mores of mankind have been strikingly similar. In a penetrating but somewhat neglected book by C. S. Lewis, The Abolition of Man, the author summarizes in an appendix many of the great moral principles of men throughout history. Far from being different, they bear a striking similarity. In essence of fact the moral principles held by men in various cultures throughout history bear a close resemblance to the second table of the ten commandments, such as duty to parents, benevolence to others, etc.

To carry the argument one step further, which Lewis does in his book Mere Christianity, there are some moral principles which have been held by all men at all times in all places. For example no culture anywhere has ever approved of rape. No peoples at any time have ever considered it

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morally right to be cruel to children. Neither have men ever believed it is right for man to have just any woman he wanted at any time. And in no culture are men who betray their benefactors rewarded with good. These are moral principles held to be universally binding on all men at all times. There are moral absolutes and all men in all cultures have acknowledged them.

The fact that some men practice cruelty, free love, etc., does not disprove that any men really believe that these are morally right. A man's belief cannot always be judged from his behavior. Christians believe in the Golden Rule but do not always practice it. It is possible (indeed, it actually happens in our experience) that a man's practice may not correspond with his principles. There is honor among thieves. Criminals, too, have codes of conduct to which they expect others to conform.

There is a better way to ^{discover} ~~what~~ what men believe ought to be done than by what they do practice in relation to others, viz., by what they really expect ~~think~~ others should do to them. In other words, the question is not how would a man like to act toward someone else's wife, property, etc? Rather, the moral point of view is discovered better by asking: how would I want someone else to act toward my wife, property, etc? And a young man should ask himself: how would I expect someone else to treat my daughter and not ~~what~~ what I would want to do with someone else's daughter? If we would know what, we ought to do we need only ask ourselves what do we ^{really} want other men to do to us. For all things that we would that men should do to us, we should do to them, as the Golden Rule demands (Matthew 7:12). An examination of what men really desire others to do to them yields not a vastly different and relative ethic. On the contrary, it yields a vastly similar ethic with

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some moral absolutes to which all men expect all other men to conform.

Basically, then, the question is not whether there are moral absolutes but which of our moral principles are absolute and which are not. But this is a topic for another occasion. For now the Christian can be content that at the basis of the biblical ethic are moral absolutes which not only are undeniable but which are actually affirmed by or implicitly believed by all men everywhere. ~~all~~ Indeed, it is by this natural law that all non-Christians will one day be judged (cf Ro 2:12-17).

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