



STATEMENT DA-241

PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEMS WITH MORAL RELATIVISM

by Francis J. Beckwith

Summary

In moral debate in the United States today, many people resort to moral relativism. They argue that there are no objective moral values which help us to determine what is right or wrong. They claim "everything is relative." In order to defend this position, the relativist puts forth two arguments: (1) Since people and cultures disagree about morality, there are no objective moral values; (2) Moral relativism leads to tolerance of practices we may find different or odd. These two arguments are seriously flawed. In addition, the moral relativist has a difficult time explaining moral progress, moral reformation, and clear-cut cases of moral saints and moral devils.

Ethical, moral, and social issues are beginning to dominate the headlines of major newspapers and the front covers of leading magazines. Unfortunately many today seem to assume that rationality and logic have no place in discussions of moral issues, and that there is no way such questions can be answered. Many assume that we are simply stuck with our opinions, and that all opinions are relative — having no basis in any objective or unchanging moral values. Should all values and opinions be accorded equal moral weight?

The purpose of this article is to critically address the problem of moral relativism, which I believe impedes our ability as a people to critically and rationally discuss issues of great moral and ethical importance.

MORAL RELATIVISM

In his influential work, *The Closing of the American Mind*, Professor Allan Bloom makes the observation that "there is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative...The students, of course, cannot defend their opinion. It is something with which they have been indoctrinated."¹

By dogmatically asserting that there is no truth, people have become close-minded to the possibility of knowing truth, if in fact it does exist. Consequently, lurking behind most of the moral rhetoric in America today is moral relativism, the belief that there are no objective moral values that transcend culture or the individual. This is why many people begin or end their moral judgments with qualifying phrases such as, "It is only my personal opinion,"

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"Of course I am not judging anyone's behavior," or "If you think it is all right, that is okay, but I'm personally against it." Although such assertions have their place, we often use them inappropriately. Let us consider a few examples of how moral relativism affects the way many people approach public moral issues.

The Abortion Debate

Some abortion-rights advocates, in response to pro-life arguments, emote such bumper-sticker slogans as: "Pro-choice, but personally opposed," "Don't like abortion, don't have one," or "Abortion is against my beliefs, but I would never dream of imposing my beliefs on others." These slogans attempt to articulate in a simple way a common avenue taken by politicians and others who want to avoid the slings and arrows that naturally follow a firm position on abortion. It is an attempt to find "a compromise" or "a middle ground"; it's a way to avoid being labeled "an extremist" of either camp.

During the 1984 presidential campaign — when questions of Geraldine Ferraro's Catholicism and its apparent conflict with her abortion-rights stance were prominent in the media — New York Governor Mario Cuomo, in a lecture delivered at the University of Notre Dame, attempted to give this "middle ground" intellectual respectability. He tried to provide a philosophical foundation for his friend's position, but failed miserably. For one cannot appeal to the fact that we live in a pluralistic society (characterized by moral pluralism/relativism) when the very question of *who* is part of that society (that is, whether it includes unborn children) is itself the point under dispute. Cuomo begged the question and lost the argument.

The pro-abortionist's unargued assumption of moral relativism to solve the abortion debate reveals a tremendous ignorance of the pro-life position. For the fact is that if one believes that the unborn are fully human (persons), then the unborn carried in the wombs of pro-choice women are just as human as those carried in the wombs of pro-life women. For the pro-lifer, an unborn child is no less a human person simply because the child happens to be living inside Whoopi Goldberg or Cybil Shepherd. Ideology does not change identity.

Pro-choicers ought to put at least *some* effort into understanding the pro-life position. When they tell pro-lifers (as they often do) that they have a right to believe what they want to believe, they are unwittingly promoting the radical tactics of Operation Rescue (OR). Think about it. If *you* believed that a class of persons were being murdered by methods that include dismemberment, suffocation, and burning — resulting in excruciating pain in many cases — wouldn't you be perplexed if someone tried to ease your outrage by telling you that you didn't have to participate in the murders if you didn't want to? That is exactly what pro-lifers hear when abortion-rights supporters tell them, "Don't like abortion, don't have one," or "I'm pro-choice, but personally opposed." In the mind of the pro-lifer, this is like telling an abolitionist, "Don't like slavery, don't own one," or telling Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Don't like the holocaust, don't kill a Jew." Consequently, to request that pro-lifers "shouldn't force their pro-life belief on others" while at the same time claiming that "they have a right to believe what they want to believe" is to reveal an incredible ignorance of their position.

Contrary to popular belief, the so-called "pro-choice" position is not neutral. The abortion-rights activist's claim that women should have the "right to choose" to kill their unborn fetuses amounts to denying the pro-life position that the unborn are worthy of protection. And the pro-lifer's affirmation that the unborn are fully human with a "right to life" amounts to denying the abortion-rights position that women have a fundamental right to terminate their pregnancies, since such a termination would result in a homicide. It seems, then, that appealing to moral relativism (or moral pluralism ala Mario Cuomo) to "solve" the abortion debate is an intellectual impossibility and solves nothing.

Censorship and the Public Good

Another example of how ethical relativism affects the way many people approach public moral issues can be seen in the arguments concerning the right to boycott products advertised on television programs which certain groups believe are psychologically and morally harmful. The usual argument in response to these groups is, "If you don't like a particular program, you don't have to watch it. You can always change the channel." But is this response really compelling? One must point out that these groups are not *only* saying that they *personally* find these programs offensive, but rather are arguing that the programs themselves convey messages and create a moral climate that will affect others — especially children — in a way they believe is adverse to the public good. Hence, what bothers these groups is that *you* and *your children* will not change the channel.

I believe that as long as these groups do not advocate state censorship, but merely apply social and economic pressure to private corporations (which civil rights and feminist groups have been doing for some time now), a balance of freedoms is achieved. Both are free to pursue their interests within the confines of constitutional protection, although both must be willing to accept the social and economic consequences of their actions. This seems to best serve the public good. Notice that this position does not resort to ethical relativism, but takes seriously the values of freedom, the public good, and individual rights — and attempts to uphold these values in a way that is consistent and fair.

ARGUMENTS FOR MORAL RELATIVISM

There are several arguments people have put forth to defend moral relativism. Of these, two are especially popular, surfacing again and again in our culture under different forms. The remainder of this article will be devoted to examining these arguments.

The Argument from Diversity in Moral Practice

Argument no. 1 states: Since cultures and individuals differ in certain moral practices, there are no objective moral values. Several objections can be made to this argument. First, the fact that people disagree about something does not mean there is no objective truth. If you and I disagree about whether or not the earth is round, for example, this is not proof that the earth has *no* shape. In moral discussion, the fact that a skinhead (a type of young Neo-Nazi) and I may disagree about whether we should treat people equally and fairly is not sufficient evidence to say that equality and fairness have no objective value. Even if individuals and cultures held no values in common, it does not follow from this that nobody is right or wrong about the correct values. That is, there could be a morally erring individual or culture, such as Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany.

Another problem with this argument is that it does not follow from the fact that cultures and individuals differ in moral *practices* that they do not share common *values*. For example, the fact that some female islanders who live in the South Seas do not cover their breasts and British women do doesn't mean that the former do not value modesty. Due to the climate, environmental conditions, and certain religious beliefs, the people of the South Seas have developed certain practices by which to manifest the transcultural value of modesty. Although cultures may differ about how they manifest such values as honesty, courage, and the preserving of life, they do not *promote* dishonesty, cowardice, or arbitrary killing.

Second, sometimes apparent moral differences are not moral differences at all but *factual* differences. For example, many people who live in India do not eat cows because they believe in reincarnation — that these cows may possess the souls of deceased human beings. In the United States we do not believe cows have human souls. For this reason,

we eat cows — but we do not eat Grandma. It appears on the surface, therefore, that there is a fundamental value difference between Indians and Americans. This is a hasty conclusion, however, for both cultures do believe it is wrong to eat Grandma; the Indians, however, believe the cow *may be* Grandma. Thus it is a factual and not a value difference that divides our culinary habits.

Other examples can be produced to show why this first argument for moral relativism is inadequate.² It should be noted, however, that the fact there are *some* common values among peoples and cultures does not mean all cultures share *all* the same values. Obviously certain peoples and cultures may have developed some values that others have not. Hence, the discovering of a unique value in a particular society does not in any way take away from my central thesis that there are certain values to which all societies either implicitly or explicitly hold.

Third, the argument from differing practices puts an undue emphasis on differences while ignoring similarities, in addition to giving the mistaken appearance that all moral conflicts are in some sense insoluble. In discussing moral conflicts in the United States we tend to focus our attention on contemporary issues — abortion, euthanasia, affirmative action, and so forth — over which there is obviously wide and impassioned disagreement. However, we tend to ignore the fact that the disputants in these moral debates hold a number of values in common, that there are many moral issues on which almost all Americans agree (e.g., "It is wrong to molest six-year-old girls"), and that a number of past moral conflicts have been solved (e.g., slavery, women's suffrage). Hence, by focusing our attention only on disagreements, our perception has become skewed. Philosopher James Rachels illustrates this point with an example from the sciences:

If we think of questions like *this* [i.e., abortion, euthanasia, affirmative action, etc.], it is easy to believe that "proof" in ethics is impossible. The same can be said of the sciences. There are many complicated matters that physicists cannot agree on; and if we focused our attention entirely on *them* we might conclude that there is no "proof" in physics. But of course, many simpler matters in physics *can* be proven, and about those all competent physicists agree. Similarly, in ethics there are many matters far simpler than abortion, about which all reasonable people must agree.³

The Argument from the Virtue of Tolerance

Argument no. 2 for ethical relativism states: Since ethical relativism promotes tolerance of certain cultural practices that members of Western civilization may think are strange, ethical relativism is a good thing. However, although tolerance often is a virtue, ethical relativists simply cannot justify their own position by appealing to it in this way. First, the value of tolerance presupposes the existence of at least one real objective (or absolute) value: *tolerance*. Bioethicist Tom Beauchamp makes this observation:

If we interpret normative relativism as *requiring* tolerance of other views, the whole theory is imperiled by inconsistency. The proposition that we ought to tolerate the views of others, or that it is right not to interfere with others, is precluded by the very strictures of the theory. Such a proposition bears all the marks of a *non-relative* account of moral rightness, one based on, but not reducible to, the cross-cultural findings of anthropologists...But if this moral principle [of tolerance] is recognized as valid, it can of course be employed as an instrument for criticizing such cultural practices as the denial of human rights to minorities and such beliefs as that of racial superiority. A moral commitment to tolerance of other practices and beliefs thus leads inexorably to the abandonment of normative relativism.⁴

Second, tolerance can only be a virtue if we think the other person, whose viewpoint we're supposed to tolerate, is mistaken. That is to say, if we do not believe one viewpoint is better than another, then to ask us to be tolerant of other viewpoints makes no sense. For to tolerate another's viewpoint implies that this other person has a right to his

or her viewpoint despite the fact that others may think it is wrong. To be tolerant of differing viewpoints involves just that — differing *viewpoints*, all of which cannot be equally correct at the same time. The man who supposes himself tolerant while at the same time he believes nobody is either right or wrong about any moral value is actually no more virtuous than the man who supposes his virginity is chastity even though he was born with no sexual organs. Consequently, real tolerance presupposes someone is right and someone is wrong, which implicitly denies moral relativism.

It must be acknowledged, however, that there is a noble motive behind the relativists' appeal to tolerance. They believe their view of tolerance will help us to better understand other cultures and people without being hypercritical about their practices. This in turn will keep us from using such criticism to justify the forced imposition of our own cultural practices on them, such as putting blouses on the bare-breasted women of the South Seas or forcing polygamous families to divide and become monogamous. I can sympathize with this view of transcultural tolerance. As I stated earlier, however, a cultural practice is different from a cultural value. It does not follow from different practices that people have different values.

The local controversies surrounding the elimination of certain books from public school curricula and libraries is an example of how people can agree on values and yet disagree on practice. Those who favor more conservative guidelines, and who are often referred to as advocating censorship, usually propose that certain materials are not suitable for certain age groups. They argue that parents, not educational administrators, are best suited to know what is good for their children. On the other hand, their opponents, who are often referred to as advocating freedom of expression, usually propose that it should be up to the teacher and the educational administrators to choose what is suitable material, although they do believe that a line should be drawn somewhere. For example, none of these defenders of freedom of expression defend the placing of hard-core pornography in the hands of fourth graders.

This, of course, makes the debate all the more interesting, since it means that both sides agree on the following general principles: a line must be drawn, certain materials are suitable for certain age groups, and education is important. Both advocate some kind of "censorship." They just disagree on who should be the censors, what should be censored, and on what basis the decision should be made. Therefore, they both hold to many of the same values, but they disagree as to the application of these values, and the acceptability of certain factual claims.

Although this distinction between practice and value helps us to be tolerant of unusual cultural practices, we are still able to make valuable moral judgments about others and ourselves. First, we are free to criticize those intolerable cultural practices that *do* conflict with basic human values, such as in the cases of genocide in Nazi Germany and apartheid in South Africa. Second, we are able to admit to real moral progress, such as in the case of the abolition of slavery. And third, there can exist real moral reformers, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., and the prophets of the Old Testament, who served as prophetic voices to reprimand their cultures for having drifted far from a true moral practice based on basic human values.

The above three points — each of which follow from a belief in objective transcultural values — *do not* follow from a belief in ethical relativism. That is to say, to remain consistent the ethical relativist cannot criticize intolerable moral practices, believe in real moral progress, or acknowledge the existence of real moral reformers. For these three forms of moral judgment presuppose the existence of real objective transcultural values.

Although much more can be said about the justification and existence of certain values,⁵ the above is sufficient to demonstrate that ethical relativism is enormously problematic. It shows that we can rationally discuss and argue with each other about right and wrong without resorting to the claim that ethical judgments are merely subjective or relative and that all such judgments have equal validity. For to claim the latter logically leads one to the bizarre judgment that Mother Teresa is no more and no less virtuous than Adolf Hitler. I believe this is sufficient to show ethical relativism to be bankrupt.

Moral relativism has been rejected by a near unanimous number of both secular and theistic ethicists and philosophers.⁶ Yet it is still popular to espouse this view in many of our secularized cultural institutions. It is thought to be more tolerant, more open, and more intellectually respectable than the old-fashioned "absolutism."⁷ As we have seen, however, moral relativism is inconsistent with tolerance, closed off to the possibility of moral truth, and an intellectual failure.

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NOTES

¹ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 25.

² James Rachels, "A Critique of Ethical Relativism," in *Philosophy: The Quest for Truth*, ed. Louis P. Pojman (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1989), 322-23.

³ James Rachels, "Some Basic Points about Arguments," in *The Right Thing to Do: Basic Readings in Moral Philosophy*, ed. James Rachels (New York: Random House, 1989), 40.

⁴ Tom L. Beauchamp, *Philosophical Ethics: An Introduction to Moral Philosophy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982), 42.

⁵ For a philosophical defense of particular universal values, see C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 95-121; Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1984), chapters 1-5; Rachels, "A Critique," 322-24; and J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), chapter 4.

⁶ E.g., see Rachels, "A Critique"; J. P. Moreland and Norman L. Geisler, *The Life and Death Debate: Moral Issues of Our Time* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), chapter 1.

⁷ I think this is more accurately referred to as moral objectivism, since not all the values the absolutist holds are absolutely equal; some are better than others. See Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Options and Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989).

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