

# RELATIVISM'S SEVEN FATAL FLAWS

## Where would we be if relativism were true?

Moral accountability, evil, praise, blame, justice, fairness, moral improvement, moral discourse, and tolerance all seem to be concepts that have meaning apparent to our moral common sense. Each is justified by moral intuition, yet relativism renders them all meaningless. If these moral notions are valid yet are inconsistent with moral relativism, then relativism must be false.

There are at least seven flaws of relativism that point to its bankruptcy.



Relativists can't accuse others of wrongdoing. Relativism makes it impossible to criticize the behavior of others because it ultimately denies

such a thing as wrongdoing. If you believe morality is a matter of personal definition, then you surrender the possibility of making moral judgments about others' actions, no matter how offensive they are to your intuitive sense of right or wrong. You may express your emotions, tastes,

*Reprinted, by permission, from Francis J. Beckwith and Gregory Koukl, Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1998). Francis J. Beckwith is Associate Director of the J. M. Dawson Institute of Church-State Studies, and Associate Professor of Church-State Studies at Baylor University. Gregory Koukl is President of Stand to Reason Ministries and Host of "Stand to Reason," a live weekly radio talk show aired on the west coast of the United States.*

and personal preferences, but you can't say they are wrong.

Nor may you critique, challenge, praise, or fault them. It would be like trying to keep score in a game with no rules or putting a criminal on trial when there are no laws.

To illustrate, relativists cannot object on moral grounds to any form of racism or cultural imperialism if those actions are consistent with the perpetrator's personal moral understanding of what is right and good. What sense can be made of the judgment "apartheid is wrong" spoken by a relativist? What just ideation is there to intervene? Certainly not human rights, for there are no objective rights in relativism because there are no rights or wrongs of any kind. As former Attorney General Ramsey Clarke once said, one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter. It would be inconsistent for the same car to sport the bumper stickers "Pro-choice" and "End Apartheid." Relativism is the ultimate pro-choice position, because it legitimizes every personal choice—even the choice to be a racist.

Nor can lying be wrong, even if the lie perverts justice and condemns an innocent person. In fact, there is no real difference between one who is guilty and one who is innocent because in relativism, guilt and innocence are meaningless distinctions.

The notion of a promise is also empty. A promise is not just a statement of intent about the future but also entails the moral obligation to fulfill the intent. That's why changing one's mind is different from breaking a promise, a distinction lost in relativism. No contract could ever have any moral force. Marriage vows would be empty words, providing no comfort or protection for spouses and no stability for families.

There can be no accountability in relativism. Those who answer to themselves ultimately answer to no one of consequence. And this makes it impossible to distinguish relativistic morality from self-interest or ethical egoism.

Further, if morality is an individual call, and if moral wrong is the kind of error for which punishment seems to be justified, then all punishment would have to be approved by the individual responsible for the "immoral" conduct.

This is the first law of relativism: When right or wrong are a matter of personal choice, we surrender the privilege of making moral judgments on others' actions. But if our moral intuition rebels against these consequences of relativism—if we're sure that some things must be wrong and that some judgments against the conduct of others are justified—then relativism is false.

## TWO

Relativists can't complain about the problem of evil. The reality of evil in the world is one of the first objections raised against the existence of God. The common argument says that if God is absolutely powerful and ultimately good, He would deal with evil. But since evil exists, God appears too frail to oppose it or too sinister to care.

The entire objection hinges on the observation that true evil exists. The only way one can have this complaint about God is if evil is "out there" as an objective feature of the world. Evil can't be real if morals are relative to the subject.

Relativism is inconsistent with the concept that true moral evil exists because it denies that some things are objectively wrong. Evil as a value judgment marks a departure from some standard of moral perfection. But if there is no standard, there is no departure. As C. S. Lewis notes, a portrait is a good or bad likeness depending on how it compares with the "perfect" original.

Relativism denies such a standard. This was a serious problem for Lewis: "My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he

has some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust? . . . Of course, I could have given up my idea of justice by saying it was nothing but a private idea of my own. But if I did that, then my argument against God collapsed, too—for the argument depended on saying that the world was really unjust, not simply that it did not happen to please my private fancies."<sup>1</sup>

If relativism is true, the objection against God based on evil vanishes. There is no true evil to discuss, only differing opinions about what is pleasant or unpleasant, desired or not desired.

This point was made clear in the movie *The Quarrel*. The main characters, Hersh and Chiam, grew up together but separated because of a dispute about God and evil. Then came the Holocaust, and each thought the other had perished. Reunited by chance after the war, they become embroiled once again in their boyhood quarrel. Hersh, now a rabbi, offers this challenge to the secularist Chiam: "If there's nothing in the universe that's higher than human beings, then what's morality? Well, it's a matter of opinion. I like milk; you like meat. Hitler likes to kill people; I like to save them. Who's to say which is better?"

"Do you begin to see the horror of this? If there is no Master of the universe, then who's to say that

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Hitler did anything wrong? If there is no God, then the people that murdered your wife and kids did nothing wrong."

The approach many relativists take at this point is confused. First, they say that the Holocaust was evil and ask why God would allow such depravity. Later, when the tables turn and their own behavior is in question, they argue that morality is merely a matter of opinion. This reduces their earlier objection to, How could a good God allow things that are contrary to my opinion?

Moral relativism and objective evil are strange bedfellows. They couldn't possibly both be true at the same time. If morality is ultimately a matter of personal tastes, like preferring steak over broccoli or brussels sprouts, the argument against God's existence based on the problem of evil vanishes. Relativists must surrender this objection.

If, however, it seems legitimate to raise the issue of evil in the world, then relativism can't be true.

## THREE

Relativists can't place blame or accept praise. Relativism renders the concepts of praise and blame meaningless, because no external standard of measurement defines what should be applauded or condemned.

Without absolutes, nothing is ultimately bad, deplorable, tragic, or worthy of blame. Neither is anything ultimately good, honorable, noble, or worthy of praise. It's all lost in a twilight zone of moral nothingness.

Relativists are almost always inconsistent here. They seek to avoid blame but readily accept praise. C. S. Lewis notes that our habits of welcoming praise and of making excuses to avoid blame evidence our deep commitment to objective morality: "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

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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>2</sup>

B. F. Skinner argues in *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* that humans are simply biological machines whose conduct is determined by a mixture of biology and environment. In *Walden II*, his description of the brave new world founded on principles of behavior modification, the concepts of praise and blame are portrayed as completely meaningless. Morality is a fiction.

In like fashion, relativists must remove the words *praise* and *blame* from their vocabularies. But if the notions of praise and blame are valid, then relativism must be false.

## four

Relativists can't make charges of unfairness or injustice. Justice and

fairness are two more concepts that don't make sense in a world devoid of moral absolutes. Under relativism, these notions are incoherent for two reasons.

First, the words themselves have no meaning. Both concepts dictate that people receive equal treatment based on an external standard of what is right. This outside standard, though, is the very thing repudiated by relativists. After all, how can there be justice or fairness if there are no moral requirements to be just or fair? It's not wrong to punish an innocent person, nor is it immoral to release the guilty.

Second, there is no possibility of true moral guilt. Justice entails, among other things, punishing those who are guilty. Guilt, however, depends on blame, which we have seen cannot exist. If nothing is ultimately immoral, there is no blame and subsequently no guilt worthy of punishment.

People give away their true intuitions about justice and fairness by their language. “A nation may say

treaties do not matter,” says Lewis, “but then, next minute, they spoil their case by saying that the particular treaty they want to break was an unfair one. But if treaties do not matter, and if there is no such thing as Right and Wrong . . . what is the difference between a fair treaty and an unfair one?”<sup>3</sup>

If relativism is true, then there is no such thing as justice or fairness. Both concepts depend on an objective standard of what is right. If the notions of justice and fairness make sense, however, then relativism is defeated.

## five

Relativists can't improve their morality. With moral relativism, moral improvement or reform is impossible. Relativists can change their personal ethics, but they can never become better people.

How can one get “better”? Moral reform implies an objective rule of conduct as the standard to which we ought to aspire. But this rule is exactly what relativists deny. If there is no better way, there can be no improvement.

Further, there is no motive to improve. Relativism destroys the moral impulse that compels people to rise above themselves because there is no “above” to rise to, ethically speaking. Why change our moral point of

view if it serves our self-interest and feels good for the time being?

In relativism, by definition one's ethics can never be more “moral” at one time than another. Morals can change, but they can never improve. If, however, moral improvement seems to be a concept that makes sense, then relativism can't be true.

## six

Relativists can't hold meaningful moral discussions. Relativism makes it impossible to discuss morality. What's there to talk about? A meaningful ethical dialogue can be held only when moral principles are seen as universal action guides.

Ethical discourse involves comparing the merits of one view with another to find which is best. But if morals are entirely relative and all views are equal, then no way of thinking is better than another. No moral position can be judged adequate or deficient, unreasonable, unacceptable, or even barbaric.

A. J. Ayer agrees, arguing that ethical statements are meaningless because they are not empirically verifiable: “We find that argument is possible on moral questions only if some system of values is presupposed.”<sup>4</sup>

Ayer's own view, called emotivism, denies that ethical statements are anything more than raw expressions of emotion. As such, they have

no more content than words like “Wow!” or “Yuck!” “If a sentence makes no statement at all, there is obviously no sense in asking whether what it says is true or false. And we have seen that sentences which simply express moral judgments do not say anything. They are pure expressions of feeling and as such do not come under the category of truth and falsehood.”<sup>5</sup>

If Ayer is right, then moral education is impossible, because the words themselves are meaningless. One can’t even have a moral dispute. Yet quarrels seem to entail meaningful moral discussions, as Lewis points out: “Quarreling means trying to show that the other man is in the wrong. And there would be no sense in trying to do that unless you and he had some sort of agreement as to what Right and Wrong are; just as there would be no sense in saying that a footballer had committed a foul unless there was some agreement about the rules of football.”<sup>6</sup>

If ethical disputes make sense only when morals are objective, then relativism can be lived out consistently only in silence. For this reason, it’s rare to meet a thoroughgoing relativist. Most are quick to impose moral rules like, It’s wrong to push your morality on others.

The only course of action truly consistent with moral relativism is complete silence. If you view all morality as relative and you’re con-

sistent, you can’t ever make a moral recommendation.

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

Those who believe that ethical truth is relative cannot say anything further that is morally meaningful. But if the notion of moral discourse makes sense intuitively, then moral relativism is false.



Relativists can’t promote the obligation of tolerance. Finally, there is no tolerance in relativism, because the relativists’ moral obligation to be tolerant is self-refuting.

The principle of tolerance is considered one of the key virtues of relativism. Morals are individual, relativists argue, and therefore we ought to tolerate the viewpoints of others and not pass judgment on their behavior and attitudes.

It should be obvious that this attempt fails through contradiction. To relativists, tolerance means, “I (morally) ought to tolerate the moral opinions and behavior of others who disagree with me. I (morally) should not try to interfere with

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their opinions or behavior.”<sup>7</sup>

If there are no objective moral rules, however, there can be no rule that requires tolerance as a moral principle that applies equally to all. In fact, if there are no moral absolutes, why be tolerant at all? Why not force my morality on others if it’s in my self-interest and my personal ethics allow it?

Relativists violate their own principle of tolerance when they do not tolerate the views of those whose morality is nonrelativistic. They only tolerate those who hold their ethical viewpoint. They are, therefore, just as intolerant as any objectivist appears to be.

The principle of tolerance is foreign to relativism. If, however, tolerance seems to be a virtue and we owe a measure of respect to those who differ with us, then relativism can’t be true.

### **The Sum of All Flaws**

What kind of world would it be if relativism were true? It would be a

world in which nothing is wrong—nothing is considered evil or good, nothing worthy of praise or blame. It would be a world in which justice and fairness are meaningless concepts, in which there would be no accountability, no possibility of moral improvement, no moral discourse. And it would be a world in which there is no tolerance.

Moral relativism produces this kind of world. The late Dr. Francis Schaeffer’s remark could well apply to relativists, who “have both feet firmly planted in mid-air.” □

### **REFERENCES**

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3. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
4. A. J. Ayer, “Emotivism,” quoted in Louis P. Pojman, ed., *Ethical Theory: Classical and Contemporary Readings* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1995), p. 416.
5. *Ibid.*
6. C. S. Lewis, *ibid.*, pp. 3, 4.
7. J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1987), p. 247.