

Moral Relativism

DOGMA & THEOLOGY

The last lesson of this unit confronts what has become, in our generation, the default ethical atmosphere of the Western world. Moral relativism teaches, in its many forms, that there are no universally binding moral truths — that what is right or wrong depends upon the individual, the culture, the calculus of pleasure and pain, or the motive behind the act, but never upon any fixed good revealed by God and written into the nature of things. The tragedy is that this atmosphere is now the air our young people breathe in schools, in films, on every social platform they open. The Barna Research Group's finding that 81% of young Americans now believe that all truth is relative to the individual and his or her circumstances is not a statistic to shake the head over; it is a description of the catechetical challenge lying before every servant. This lesson sets out the three great secular accounts of ethics — cultural relativism, utilitarianism, and Kantianism — examines where each fails, and then lays before the servant the Orthodox vision of morality as the pure love of God worked out in the heart and the life.

What Is Moral Relativism?

Moral relativism, in the broadest sense, is the claim that when it comes to questions of right and wrong there are no universally objective answers. Morality is held to be the product of the individual, or of the culture, or of some inner calculation, but not the deliverance of any absolute standard outside the self. In its popular form the claim runs something like this: since people disagree about moral questions, and since different cultures have held different moral rules across history, there can be no fixed truth of the matter. Only subjective opinions exist, no more weighty than a preference for one flavor of ice cream over another or one football team over another. Morality is not objective; it is an individual matter; moral truth depends on the individual who holds it.

This posture has much in common with contemporary New Age thought, which prioritizes individual spiritual experience and personal truth over any received doctrine, any established moral code, any external authority that might correct the self. Both movements raise the autonomy of the individual into an absolute, and both reject any external standard by which that individual might be judged.

The prevalence of this view in our own generation has now been measured. The Barna Research Group has reported that 81% of young Americans agree that all truth is relative to the individual and his or her circumstances. Almost nothing in the moral landscape of the generation we are forming has escaped this premise. The children in our Sunday School, the teenagers in our youth groups, the young adults entering marriage — all have been catechized into this view by the culture before they ever came to us. A servant who cannot engage moral relativism clearly and patiently will be outmatched before he opens his Bible.

The first pastoral task in the face of the claim is to notice that it is self-contradictory. If moral relativism is true, then the statement "moral relativism is true" is itself only one opinion among many, with no

more claim on us than any other. If it is false, then there is at least one objective moral truth after all — namely, that moral relativism is wrong. The position collapses upon its first serious examination. But that does not make it less tenacious; the weakness of a creed has never by itself prevented its wide acceptance. It can only be dismantled one form at a time, and we must examine each.

Cultural Relativism

Cultural relativism is the form of relativism that locates moral authority in the culture rather than the individual. Each culture, it is said, has its own set of morals, and outsiders have no right to judge those morals by standards drawn from elsewhere. If a given culture considers a practice permissible, who are we — the question is asked in a tone of sophisticated humility — to tell them they are wrong?

The first thing to notice is that the very claim contains a moral absolute of its own. The cultural relativist is insisting, with great firmness, that it is always morally obligatory to respect other cultures — not to judge them, not to impose upon them, not to hold them to any outside standard. But if that duty of respect is real, then it cannot itself come from culture, because cultures differ about it as they differ about everything else. The relativist must therefore be drawing the duty of non-judgment from some source outside any particular culture — which is precisely the universal moral order he claimed does not exist. The ground cuts out from under his argument while he is still speaking it.

The second thing to notice is that cross-cultural moral disagreement is often not what it looks like. Many disputes that appear at first to concern fundamental values turn out, on closer examination, to concern differences in the perception of facts.

- The debate over abortion is frequently presented as a collision between a culture that values human life and a culture that does not. But both sides, in the great majority of cases, agree that innocent human persons are inviolable. They disagree about whether the unborn child is in fact a human person. The dispute is a factual one dressed up as a values dispute.
- The genocidal crimes of the twentieth century depended on the same kind of fact-level distortion. Hitler did not disagree with the universal moral rule against the murder of innocents; he classified his victims as sub-human so that the rule would not apply to them. The values were shared; the deception was factual.

Closer study therefore narrows the range of genuine moral disagreement across cultures and reveals, beneath the surface diversity, a remarkable common substrate. All cultures, without exception, value human life at some level. All cultures prohibit some form of murder, however narrowly they draw the circle of the protected. All cultures prohibit theft within the community, all cultures prohibit betrayal of trust, all cultures prohibit the violation of the helpless. These commonalities are not accidents; they are the visible trace of what St. Paul calls the law written on the heart, by which even the Gentiles who did not have the revealed law show the work of the law inscribed in their own conscience (Romans 2:14-15).

Cultural relativism breaks down most plainly at the point where a practice is objectively harmful. Female genital mutilation, the burning of widows, the ritual killing of twins, the enslavement of defeated peoples — each of these has been a cultural norm somewhere in history, and each has been brought to an end not by a more successful culture imposing its taste but by the gradual recognition

that the practice violates a real good that transcends culture. The cultural relativist, consistently applied, has no tools with which to call any of these practices evil. The fact that he still, in his heart, wants to call them evil is the proof that his theory is wrong.

Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is the form of ethics that locates moral worth not in any fixed standard but in the calculation of pleasure against pain. Its classical formulation is given by Jeremy Bentham in the eighteenth century.

“Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do.” — Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789)

From this foundation the theory builds outward. Actions that cause pleasure are permissible; actions that cause pain are impermissible. In the social application — the form associated with John Stuart Mill — the greatest-happiness principle states that the right action is the one that produces the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people within a given society or group. Ethics becomes arithmetic: pleasure on one side of the ledger, pain on the other, and the action with the higher net balance wins.

A first look at the theory makes it seem simple. A closer look reveals a tangle.

- Many actions produce a mixture of pleasure and pain. A medical treatment may cause immediate pain and deliver long-term health. Marriage may involve years of sacrifice that feel painful and deliver a depth of joy that feels pleasant. How is the calculus run?
- The experience of pleasure and pain is subjective. What brings pleasure to one person brings pain to another. Whose pleasure is to count, and whose pain?
- Pleasures differ in kind as well as in quantity. An hour of intellectual contemplation and an hour of physical indulgence may register the same intensity on the utilitarian meter, yet most moral intuitions rightly protest that they are not equivalent. Utilitarianism has no satisfactory way to rank qualitative differences.
- Consequences extend indefinitely into the future. An action pleasant today may prove devastating in a generation. How far down the chain is the calculation required to go?
- Most damningly, the greatest-happiness principle can be used to justify the trampling of individual rights. If enslaving a minority produces greater total happiness than freeing them, the utilitarian calculus has no in-principle objection. The person becomes a unit of utility, not an image of God.

The deep defect of utilitarianism is that it has reduced the good to the pleasant. But Scripture and the Fathers know of goods that are not pleasant — martyrdom, chastity in the face of every desire, fasting, the care of the leper, the forgiveness of the enemy. The Cross itself is the decisive refutation of the theory. On any utilitarian calculus, the Cross is an evil: it produced immense pain in the innocent and no measurable pleasure at all in the moment. Yet the Cross is the supreme good, the central event of human history, the self-offering of God. A theory that cannot see the Cross as good cannot be the

theory by which we read the moral world.

Kantianism

The third great secular ethics is Kantianism, the theory associated with the eighteenth-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant. In sharp reaction against utilitarianism, Kant insisted that the moral worth of an action is determined not by its consequences but by the motive of the one who performs it. An action is right when it is done out of a sense of duty, according to a rule that the actor could will to be a universal law, treating every rational person as an end in himself and never merely as a means.

This is called the categorical imperative, and it has several admirable features. It refuses to reduce human beings to units of utility. It insists that a person must be treated with dignity and respect. It grounds morality in reason and duty rather than in feeling. And in its rejection of lying, of manipulation, of the use of another person as a mere tool, it recovers something that the utilitarian calculus had surrendered.

Yet Kantianism, for all its seriousness, cannot be the Christian ethic.

- Kant makes morality an exercise of autonomous reason — the human mind legislating to itself. The Christian tradition confesses that the moral law is not our self-legislation but God's revelation. We do not invent the good; we receive it.
- Kantianism describes right acts but cannot by itself produce a good person. It can tell us what the rational agent ought to will; it cannot give that agent the heart to will it. The Christian life is not only a matter of doing the right thing because duty commands; it is a matter of being transformed in the heart so that we want the right thing because we love God.
- Most fundamentally, Kantianism is another form of moral autonomy. The self is still at the center, now legislating rationally rather than preferring emotionally, but still sovereign. The Christian moral life begins with the recognition that the self is not sovereign and cannot be — that we are creatures, under a Creator, bound to a law not of our own making.

Kant saw more than the utilitarians; he did not see enough. The categorical imperative is a noble scaffolding on which the true moral life can be hung, but it is not itself that life.

Orthodox Morality: The Pure Love of God

Against each of these accounts the Orthodox Church holds out a different vision — older than cultural relativism, deeper than utilitarianism, warmer than Kantianism. It is a vision not of rules in isolation but of a whole transfigured life. The essence of Orthodox morality, and of every moral rule that falls within it, is love for God shown by the striving for purity of heart and by the love of neighbor. Our Lord Himself stated the principle when the lawyer tested Him:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.” Matthew 22:37-40

And the goal set before us is not moderate improvement but the fullness of divine likeness:

“Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.” Matthew 5:48

This fundamentally changes the shape of the moral life. For the Christian, not merely our actions are important; every thought, every word, every deed is brought under the judgment of God and the purifying action of His grace. The Lord Himself pressed this interior reach of morality into the opening beatitudes and into the great reinterpretations of the old law: anger in the heart already has the seed of murder; the covetous look already has the seed of adultery. We are not only called to keep our hands clean. We are called to be clean in the heart from which the hands move.

Two texts of the New Testament stand as our primary ethical handbooks, and the Fathers return to them again and again.

The first is the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). Here our Lord sets out the shape of the Christian life in its full interiority — the beatitudes, the prohibition of anger and lust in the heart, the teaching on almsgiving, prayer, and fasting, the command to love our enemies, the two ways set before every soul.

The second is the Epistle of St. James. Here the interior faith of the Sermon on the Mount is required to become active in the world — faith that works through love, speech controlled by the bridle of the Spirit, care for the widow and the orphan, plainness of dealing, patience under affliction, and the prayer of the righteous that avails much.

Taken together, these two texts frame the whole Orthodox moral vision: the interior purity of the Sermon enacted in the practical mercy of the Epistle. And this moral vision is carried into daily life by the spiritual disciplines that the Church has always practiced — prayer without ceasing, the regular fasts of the Calendar, almsgiving given in secret, frequent confession, frequent Communion. These are not optional add-ons to a moral code; they are the means by which the moral code itself becomes possible. A Christian ethic apart from the ascetical life is a code without the grace to keep it.

The Objective Ground of Orthodox Morality

Why is Orthodox morality not merely another preference in the marketplace of moral theories? Three reasons can be stated.

The first is that the Christian moral law is not the invention of the human mind but the revelation of the Creator of the human mind. The law was given at Sinai, deepened in the Sermon on the Mount, and summarized by the Lord Himself in the twin commandment of love. It is not a code we have constructed; it is a code we have received, from the One who made us and who knows what our flourishing actually is.

The second is that the moral law is written into the nature of things — into the very structure of the human person, into the pattern of human relations, into the design of the cosmos. This is why St. Paul can say that even the Gentiles who did not have the revealed law show the work of the law written on their hearts (Romans 2:14-15). The objective moral order is not arbitrary; it reflects the design by which we were made, so that violations of it damage the violator as surely as violations of physical law

damage a body thrown off a cliff. A culture that permits murder damages itself. A person who practices lust damages himself. The damage is not merely social consequence; it is the wound the nature takes when it is forced against its grain.

The third is that the moral law has a Person at its center. Every philosophical ethic, whether cultural or utilitarian or Kantian, ends up with a rule. Christian ethics ends up with a Face — the face of Christ, the Way, the Truth, and the Life. To be moral is, at the deepest level, to become like Him, to put on the mind of Christ (Philippians 2:5), to be transformed from glory to glory into His image (2 Corinthians 3:18). No rule can be this. Only a Person can, and only a Person who loves us and who has descended to us.

Teaching the Next Generation in a Relativist Age

A final word for the pre-servant, because the field in which this lesson must actually be preached is not a seminary but a Sunday School classroom, a youth meeting, a coffee shop after church.

The young person we speak to has almost certainly absorbed the Barna figure without knowing it. The claim that truth is relative to the individual will sound to them like common sense, and any challenge to it will feel to them like old-fashioned rigidity. The servant's task is not to shout at them; it is to love them patiently and to point out, gently and often, the internal contradictions in which they already live. They will object when someone steals from them. They will object when someone betrays them. They will object when a powerful culture oppresses a weak one. They will invoke, in those moments, the very objective morality they have said they do not believe in. We need not argue them into the objective moral order; we need only help them notice that they are already inside it.

And once they see that they are inside it, the question becomes who authored it, and what it is for. That is the question only Christ can answer. Our Lord did not give the world a philosophical refutation of cultural relativism; He gave the world Himself, broken and risen for every one of them. The servant who has been formed by Him has something to offer the relativist young person that no textbook can offer — a Person who loves them, a Body into which they may be grafted, a moral life that begins not with self-legislation but with baptismal death and resurrection. We are not selling a superior ethical theory. We are witnessing someone.



Review Questions

1. What is moral relativism? (A: Moral relativism suggests that when it comes to moral issues, there are no universally objective right or wrong answers.)
2. Moral relativism is also referred to as _____ beliefs. (A: New Age)
3. Morality is not _____. (A: objective)
4. How is cultural relativism different? (A: It is when morality is relative to one's culture, in which each culture has a different set of morals.)
5. What is the essence of orthodox morality? (A: The essence of orthodox morality

revolves around the love for God shown by striving for purity of heart and by love for our fellow man.)