

## Session #3: The Case Against Relativism

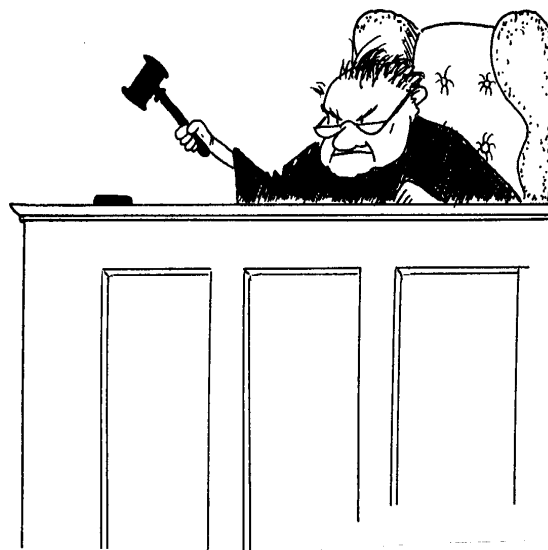
---

- I. Intro: Tell me the difference between these two types of claims:
- A. “Chocolate ice-cream is better than vanilla.” (subjective, changes w/tastes)
  - B. “It’s wrong to torture babies for fun.” (objective, true in spite of tastes)
- II. Topic: “Can Anyone Be Right About Anything: The Case Against Relativism”
- III. Significant, because many people today don’t know the difference between the two types of claims I mentioned above. Indeed, at street level, relativism is the single biggest challenge to a Christian worldview.

- A. Relativism defined: What’s right and wrong is up to us to decide either individually or as a society. There are no objective standards of morality that we are beholden to independent of personal tastes or culture.

Example #1: Bumper Sticker: “Don’t like Abortion? Don’t have one!”

1. Notice the key word: “like.”
2. That single word entirely changes the kind of claim the pro-lifer makes. Remember! Pro-lifers don’t oppose abortion because they find it distasteful. They oppose it because it intentionally kills an innocent human being. True, the pro-lifer may be wrong about that, but we shouldn’t confuse the type of claim the pro-lifer makes.



Example #2: Nick Cannon—“Can I Live?”

1. Here’s the line that got Nick in trouble: “Mom, I hope you’ll make the right decision and not go through with the knife incision.”
2. Some people were angry—not because Nick was wrong in his description of abortion (no one challenged that), but because he claimed to be right. They said things like “Who are you to judge?” and “You shouldn’t force your personal views on others.”

Example #3: University of Maryland student Greg Dickinson in the school paper:

*After seeing the gruesome display on Hornbake Mall, I was once again reminded why I am pro-choice. Abortion is a horrible act that should only be reserved for when the health of the mother is in danger or when the circumstances of impregnation were brutal. However, to me this argument is brushed aside. As a gay student who grew up in a conservative area, I know firsthand what it is like to be*

*judged, harassed, humiliated and denied the basic rights to marry the one I love and have a family. These are rights that I feel are universal, but conservative moralists have denied me of them. This is why I have developed an unwavering, uncompromising belief that personal morals must be kept personal, because no matter how strong my personal beliefs are, I would never have my moral convictions pressed upon another person. Our entire society is built on choice, and it is this freedom of choice that must be respected and preserved.*

Example #4: The re-definition of “tolerance”

1. Classic view of tolerance: I think your idea is mistaken, but I will tolerate you expressing your view and making your case. The classical view tolerates persons as being equally valuable, but rejects the claim that all ideas are so. Indeed, the very concept of tolerance presupposes I think you are wrong. Otherwise, I’m not tolerating you. I’m agreeing with you!
2. Current view of tolerance: All ideas are equally valid, especially in religion and ethics. Don’t you dare claim your idea is superior to some one else’s idea, especially in religion and ethics. (Hence, the popular bumper sticker, “Celebrate Diversity.”)

B. Three types of Relativism (as noted by Beckwith, Koukl, Smith):

1. *Society-Does Relativism*: Claim—The absence of consensus means an absence of truth. Yet how does it follow that because people disagree, nobody is right? People once disagreed on slavery—did that mean nobody was correct? Society Does Relativism is descriptive not proscriptive. That is, it only describes what cultures do, not what they *ought* to do. Moreover, if the presence of disagreement means there are no objective truths, the relativists own claim is falsified. After all, non-relativists disagree with relativists!
2. *Society-Says Relativism*: Claim—Each society determines right and wrong for itself. What’s right for one society may not be right for another. Morality is reduced to a social contract and is determined by popular consensus. But if this is true, there can be no such thing as an immoral society or an immoral law. If a particular society chooses to enslave women or practice racial genocide, who are we, as outsiders, to judge? Indeed, the Nazis used this very defense at the Nuremberg Trials, claiming they had merely followed orders within the framework of their own legal system, one that varied from outside nations. Moreover, if society is the final measure of morality, then all of its judgments are moral by definition. Those who oppose those judgments—that is, moral reformers like Martin Luther King Jr. and Ghandi—are therefore immoral. Society cannot be improved, only changed.
3. *I-Say Relativism*: Claim—Morality is up to the individual. I determine right and wrong for myself, meaning no one has a right to judge me. Problem is, if “I Say” relativism is true, there can be no such thing as an immoral individual.

IV. Thesis: Relativism is seriously flawed for at least four reasons:

- A. Flaw #1: Relativism is self-defeating—that is, it can't live with its own rules. Notice the language used by University of Maryland student Greg Dickinson above: He claims morality is personal, but then emphatically states that personal morals must be kept personal and freedom of choice must be respected. Question: Says who? Is that his view? If so, who is he to push his personal views onto pro-lifers who disagree? Remember: The person who says, “you shouldn't judge” just judged you. The person who claims that you shouldn't force your views on others just forced that view on you.
- B. Flaw#2: Relativism can't say why anything is truly wrong, including intolerance. If morals are relative to culture or the individual, there is no ethical difference between Adolph Hitler and Mother Theresa; they just had different preferences: The latter liked to help people while the former liked to kill them. Who are we to judge? But such a view is counterintuitive. We know there's a difference between starving a child and feeding him. Greg Koukl writes: “Relativists find themselves in the unenviable position of having to admit that there is no such thing as evil, justice, fairness, and no obligation of tolerance.”
- C. Flaw #3: Relativists inevitably make moral judgments. If the relativist thinks it's wrong to judge, how can he say that pro-lifers are mistaken in the first place? Isn't he just pushing his socially conditioned view on me? Whenever a relativist says you shouldn't force your views on others, the first words out of your mouth should be, “Why not?” Any answer given will be an example of forcing a view on you.
- D. Flaw #4: Relativism is not neutral. Some relativists, echoing political philosopher John Rawls, hope to convey a more sophisticated claim, namely, that society should confer a large degree of liberty by not legislating on controversial moral issues for which there is no consensus, especially if those issues involve comprehensive moral doctrines based on prior metaphysical commitments. Embryonic stem cell research (ESCR), so the argument goes, is a divisive and controversial issue. Therefore, government should not restrict it. To say government should remain neutral on metaphysical questions is itself a metaphysical claim, a comprehensive moral doctrine about how government should function. It's also controversial: Do we have a consensus that we should not legislate on divisive matters like ESCR? Moreover, slavery and racism were controversial issues. Was it wrong to pass laws against them?

**Putting it into practice:**

Suppose a university professor tries to paint you as intolerant. During his sociology lecture, he points at you and says, “So, Ms. Davis, what's your view on same-sex marriage?” Before engaging his question head-on, you calmly ask, “I'll answer your question, but first, do you consider yourself a tolerant person or are you going to judge me for my answer. In other words, is it safe to reply or do you only treat charitably those who agree with you?” If he jumps down your throat at that point, he looks like an intolerant fool.