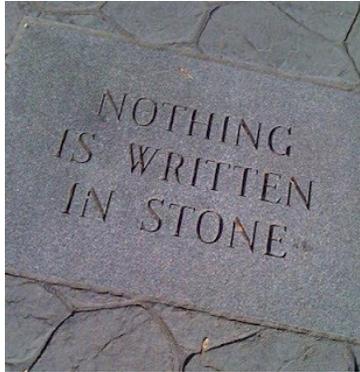


A Refutation of Moral Relativism

Peter Kreeft



Introduction

Peter Maurin and Dorothy Day defined a good society as one that makes it easy for you to be good. Correlatively, a free society is one that makes it easy to be free. To be free, and to live freely, is to live spiritually, because only spirit is free—matter is not. To live spiritually is to live morally. The two essential properties of spirit that distinguish it from matter are intellect and will—the capacity for knowledge and moral choice. The ideals of truth and goodness. The most radical threat to living morally today is the loss of moral principles.

Moral practice has always been difficult for fallen humanity, but at least there was always the lighthouse of moral principles, no matter how stormy the sea of moral practice got. But today, with the majority of our mind-molders, in formal education, or informal education—that is, media—the light is gone. Morality is a fog of feelings. That is why to them, as Chesterton said, "Morality is always dreadfully complicated to a man who has lost all his principles." Principles mean moral absolutes. Unchanging rocks beneath the changing waves of feelings and practices. Moral relativism is a philosophy that denies moral absolutes. That thought to me is the prime suspect—public enemy number one. The philosophy that has extinguished the light in the minds of our teachers, and then their students, and eventually, if not reversed, will extinguish our whole civilization. Therefore, I want not just to present a strong case against moral relativism, but to refute it, to unmask it, to strip it naked, to humiliate it, to shame it, to give it the wallop it deserves, as they say in Texas, America's good neighbor to the south.

How important is this issue? After all, it's just philosophy, and philosophy is just ideas. But ideas have consequences. Sometimes these consequences are as momentous as a holocaust, or a Hiroshima. Sometimes even more momentous. Philosophy is just thought, but sow a thought, reap an act; sow an act, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny. This is just as true for societies as it is for individuals.

How important is the issue? The issue of moral relativism is merely the single most important issue of our age, for no society in all of human history has ever survived without rejecting the philosophy that I am about to refute. There has never been a society of relativists. Therefore, our society will do one of three things: either disprove one of the most universally established laws of all history; or repent of its relativism and survive; or persist in its relativism and perish.

How important is the issue? C.S. Lewis says, in *The Poison of Subjectivism*, that relativism "will certainly end our species and damn our souls." Please remember that Oxonians are not given to exaggeration. Why does he say "damn our souls?" Because Lewis is a Christian, and he does not disagree with the fundamental teaching of his master, Christ, and all the prophets in the Jewish tradition, that salvation presupposes repentance, and repentance presupposes an objectively real moral law. Moral relativism eliminates that law, thus trivializes repentance, thus imperils salvation.

Why does he say, "end our species," and not just modern Western civilization? Because the entire human species is becoming increasingly Westernized and relativized. It is ironic that America, the primary source of relativism in the world today, is also the world's most religious nation. This is ironic because religion is to relativism what Dr. Van Helsing is to Count Dracula. Within America, the strongest opposition to relativism comes from the churches. Yet a still further irony, according to the most recent polls, Catholics are as relativistic, both in behavior and in belief, as non-Catholics. Sixty-two percent of Evangelicals say they disbelieve in any absolute or unchanging truths, and American Jews are significantly more relativistic and more secular than Gentiles. Only Orthodox Jews, the Eastern Orthodox, and Fundamentalists seem to be resisting the culture, but not by converting it, but by withdrawing from it. And that includes most Muslims, except for the tiny minority who terrorize it. When Pat Buchanan told us in 1992 that we were in a culture war, all the media laughed, sneered, and barked at him. Today, everyone knows he was right, and the culture war is most essentially about this issue.

We must define our terms when we begin. Moral relativism usually includes three claims: That morality is first of all changeable; secondly, subjective; and third, individual. That it is relative first to changing times; you can't turn back the clock. Secondly, to what we subjectively think or feel; there is nothing good or bad, but thinking makes it so. And thirdly, to individuals; different strokes for different folks. Moral absolutism claims that there are moral principles that are unchangeable, objective, and universal.

We should examine the arguments for moral relativism first, and refute them, to clear the way for the arguments against it. So first, I will refute each of the common arguments for relativism, and then relativism itself.

I. Argument for Relativism: Psychological

The first argument is psychological. In practice, psychological reasons—that is, psychological because, subjective personal motives—are usually a more powerful source

of moral relativism than logical because—that is, objective logical arguments. So we should ask, what is the main motive for preferring relativism? Since our deepest desire is for happiness, and since fears correspond to desires, it is probably the fear that moral absolutism would make us unhappy by making us feel guilty. So we call moral absolutism unloving, or uncompassionate. Turned into argument, it looks like this: Good morality has good consequences, bad morality has bad consequences. Feelings of unhappiness and guilt are bad consequences, while feelings of happiness and self-esteem are good consequences. Moral absolutism produces the bad feelings of guilt and unhappiness, while moral relativism produces the good feelings of self-esteem and happiness. Therefore, moral absolutism is bad, and moral relativism is good.

The answer to this argument is first of all that absolute moral law exists not to minimize, but to maximize human happiness, and therefore it is maximally loving and compassionate, like labels, or roadmaps. You're not happy if you eat poison or drive off a cliff. But what about guilt? Removing moral absolutes does indeed remove the sense of guilt, and this sense obviously does not make you happy in the short run. But guilt, like physical pain, may be necessary to avoid greater unhappiness in the long run, if it is realistic, that is, in tune with reality and not pathological. So the question is, does reality include objective moral laws? If it does not, guilt is an experience as pointless as paranoia. But if it does, it is as proper as pain, and for a similar reason: to prevent harm. Guilt is a warning in the soul, analogous to pain as a warning in the body.

The relativist's argument also has a question-begging assumption. It assumes that feelings are the standard for judging morality. But the claim in traditional morality is exactly the opposite: that morality is the standard for judging feelings. Finally, if the argument from self-esteem versus guilt is correct, it logically follows that if rapists, cannibalists, terrorists, or tyrants feel self-esteem, they are better persons than if they feel guilty. That Hitler's problem was a *lack* of self-confidence. Some ideas are beyond the need for refutation, except in universities.

2. Argument for Relativism: Cultural Influence

A second argument for relativism is the argument from cultural relativism. This argument seems impregnable. The claim is that anthropologists and sociologists have discovered moral relativism to be not a theory but an empirical fact. Different cultures and societies, like different individuals, simply do, in fact, have very different moral values. In Eskimo culture, and in Holland, killing old people is right. In America, east of Oregon, it's wrong. In contemporary culture, fornication is right; in Christian cultures, it's wrong, and so forth.

Descartes noted in *A Discourse On Method* that "there is no idea so strange that some philosopher has not seriously taught it." Similarly, there is no practice so strange that some society has not legitimized it; for instance, genocide, or cannibalism. Or, so innocent that some group has not forbidden it; for instance, entering a temple with a hat on, or without one. So anyone who thinks values are not relative to cultures is simply ignorant of the facts, so goes the argument.

To see the logical fallacy in this apparently impregnable argument, we need to look at its unspoken assumption—which is that moral rightness is a matter of obedience to cultural values. That it is right to obey your culture's values. Always. Only if we combine that hidden premise with the stated premise—that values differ with cultures—can we get to the conclusion that moral rightness differs with cultures. That what is wrong in one culture is right in another. But surely, this hidden premise begs the question. It presupposes the very moral relativism it is supposed to prove. The absolutist denies that it is always right to obey your culture's values. He has a trans-cultural standard by which he can criticize a whole culture's values. That is why he could be a progressive and a radical, while the relativist can only be a status-quo conservative, having no higher standard than his culture. My country, right or wrong. Only massive, media, big-lie propaganda could so confuse people's minds that they spontaneously think the opposite. But in fact it is only the believer in the old-fashioned natural moral law who could be a social radical and a progressive. He alone can say to a Hitler, or a Saddam Hussein, "You and your whole social order are wrong and wicked and deserve to be destroyed." The relativist could only say, "Different strokes for different folks, and I happen to hate your strokes and prefer mine, that's all."

The second logical weakness of the argument about cultural relativism is its equivocation on the term "values." The moral absolutist distinguishes subjective opinions about values from objectively true values. Just as he distinguishes objective truth from subjective opinions about God, or about life after death, or about happiness, or about numbers, or about beauty, just to take 5 other non-empirical things. It may be difficult, or even impossible, to prove these things, or to attain certainty about them, or even to know them at all. But that does not mean they are unreal. Even if these things could not be known, it does not follow that they are unreal. And even if they could not be known with certainty, it does not follow that they could not be known at all by right opinion. And even if they could not be proved, it does not follow that they could not be known with certainty. And even if they could not be proved by the scientific method, it does not follow that they cannot be proved at all. They could be real, even if unknown; known, even if not certainly known; certainly known, even if not proved; and proved, even if not scientifically proved.

The basic equivocation in the cultural relativist's argument is between values and value opinions. Different cultures may have different opinions about what is morally valuable, just as they may have different opinions about what happens after death. But this does not entail the conclusion that what is really right in one culture is really wrong in another, any more than different opinions about life after death entails the conclusion that different things really happen after death, depending on cultural beliefs. Just because I may believe there is no Hell does not prove that there is none and that I will not go there. If it did, a simple and infallible way of salvation would be simply to stop believing in Hell. Similarly, just because a good Nazi thinks genocide is right does not prove it is, unless there is nothing good or bad but thinking makes it so. But that is the relativist's conclusion. It cannot also be his premise without begging the question.

There is still another error in the cultural relativist's argument. It seems that just about everything that can possibly go wrong with an argument goes wrong with this one. The

argument from facts doesn't even have its facts right. Cultures do not, in fact, differ totally about values, even if the term values is taken to mean merely value opinions. No culture has ever existed which believed and taught what Nietzsche called for: a transvaluation of all values. There have been differences in emphasis, for instance, our ancestors valued courage more than we do, while we value compassion more than they did. But there has never been anything like the relativism of opinions about values that the relativist teaches as factual history.

Just imagine what that would be like. Try to imagine a society where justice, honesty, courage, wisdom, hope, and self-control were deemed morally evil. And unrestricted selfishness, cowardice, lying, betrayal, addiction, and despair were deemed morally good. Such a society is never found on Earth. If it exists anywhere, it is only in Hell and its colonies. Only Satan and his worshippers say "evil be thou my good." There are indeed important disagreements about values between cultures. But beneath all disagreements about lesser values, there always lies an agreement about more basic ones. Beneath all disagreements about applying values to situations—for instance, should we have capital punishment or not—always lies agreement about values—for instance, murder is evil since human life is good. Moral disagreements between cultures as well as between individuals would be impossible unless there were some deeper moral agreements, some common moral premises. Moral values are to a culture's laws something like what concepts are to words. When you visit a foreign country, you experience initial shock. The language sounds totally different. But then beneath the different words you find common concepts. And this is what makes translation from one language to another possible. Analogously, beneath different social laws, we find common human moral laws. We find similar morals, beneath different mores. The moral agreement among Moses, Buddha, Confucius, Lao Tzu, Socrates, Solomon, Jesus, Cicero, Mohammad, Zoroaster, and Hammurabi is far greater than their moral differences.

3. Argument for Relativism: Social Conditioning

A third argument for relativism is similar to the second, but is more psychological than anthropological. This argument is also supposedly based on scientifically verifiable fact. The fact is that society conditions values in us. If we had been brought up in a Hindu society, we would have had Hindu values. The origin of values thus seems to be human minds themselves, parents and teachers, rather than something objective to human minds. And what comes from human subjects is, of course, subjective, like the rules of baseball, even though they may be public and universally agreed to. This argument, like the previous one, also confuses values with value opinions. Perhaps society conditions value opinions in us, but that does not mean society conditions values in us, unless values are nothing but value opinions, which is precisely the point at issue, the conclusion. So the argument again begs the question.

There is also a false assumption in this argument. The assumption is that whatever we learn from society must be subjective. That is not true. We learn the rules of baseball from society, but we also learn the rules of multiplication. The rules of baseball are subjective

and manmade. The rules of multiplication are not. Of course, the language systems in which we express any rules are always manmade. But the human mind creates, rather than discovers, the rules of baseball, but the mind discovers, rather than creates, the rules of multiplication. So the fact that we learn any given law or value from our society does not prove that it is subjective. Finally, even the express premise of this argument is not fully true. Not all value opinions are the result of social conditioning. For if they were, then there could be no non-conformity to society based on moral values. There could only be rebellions of force, rather than principle. But, in fact, there are many principle non-conformists. These people did not derive their values wholly from their society, since they disagree with their society about values. So the existence of moral non-conformists is empirical proof of the presence of some trans-social origin of values.

4. Argument for Relativism: Freedom

A fourth argument is that moral relativism alone guarantees freedom, while moral absolutism threatens freedom. People often wonder how they can be truly free if they are not free to create their own values. Indeed, our own Supreme Court has declared that we have a fundamental right to define the meaning of existence. This is either the most fundamental of all rights if it is right, or the most fundamental of all follies if it is wrong. This is either the wisest or the stupidest thing the court has ever writ. This was the casing decision. Please remember what Casey did in *Casey At The Bat*.

The most effective reply to this argument is often an "ad hominem." Say to the person who demands the right to be free to create his own values that you too demand that right. And that the value system that you choose to create is one in which his opinions have no value at all. Or, a system in which you are God, and rightly demand total obedience from everyone else. He will quickly protest in the name of truth and justice, thus showing that he really does believe in these two objective values after all. If he does not do this, if he protests merely in the name of his alternative value system, which he has created, then his protest against your selfishness and megalomania is no better than your protest against his justice and truth. And then the argument can only come down to brute force. And that is hardly a situation that guarantees freedom.

A second refutation of the relativist's argument from freedom is that freedom cannot create values, because freedom presupposes values. Why does freedom presuppose values? Well, first because the relativist's argument that relativism guarantees freedom must assume freedom is really valuable, thus assuming at least that one objective value. Second, if freedom is really good, it must be freedom from something really bad, thus assuming some objective good and bad. And third, the advocate of freedom will almost always insist that freedom be granted to all, not just some, thus presupposing the real value of equality, or the Golden Rule.

But the simplest refutation of the argument about freedom is experience. Experience teaches us that we are free to create alternative mores, like socially acceptable rules for speech, or clothing, or eating, or driving. But it also teaches us that we are not, in fact, free

to create alternative morals. Like making murder, or rape, or treason right. Or making charity or justice wrong. We can no more create a new fundamental moral value than we can create a new primary color, or a new arithmetic, or a new universe. Never happened, never will. And if we could, if we could create new values, they would no longer be moral values. They would be just arbitrarily invented rules of the game. We would not feel bound in conscience by them, or guilty when we transgressed them. If we were free to create "Thou shalt murder" or "Thou shalt not murder" as we are free to create "Thou shalt play nine innings" or "Thou shalt play only six innings," then we would feel no more guilty about murder than about playing six innings.

As a matter of fact, we all do feel bound by some fundamental moral values, like justice, the Golden Rule. We experience our freedom of will to choose to obey or disobey them, but we also experience our lack of freedom to change them into their opposites. We cannot creatively make hate good, or love evil. Try it, you just can't do it. All you can do is refuse the whole moral order. You cannot make another one. You can choose to rape, but you cannot experience a moral obligation to rape.

5. Argument for Relativism: Tolerance

A fifth argument, equally common today, is that moral relativism is tolerant, while absolutism is intolerant. Tolerance is one of the few non-controversial values today. Nearly everyone in our society accepts it. So it is a powerful selling point for any theory or practice that can claim it. What of relativism's claim to tolerance? Well, I see no less than eight fallacies in this popular argument.

- **First**, let us be clear what we mean by tolerance. Tolerance is a quality of people, not of ideas. Ideas can be confused, or fuzzy, or ill defined, but that does not make them tolerant, or intolerant, any more than clarity or exactness could make them intolerant. If a carpenter tolerates 3/16 of an inch deviation from plane, he is three times more tolerant than one who tolerates only 1/16 of an inch, but he is no less clear. One teacher may tolerate no dissent from his fuzzy and ill-defined views—a Marxist, let's say—while another, say Socrates, may tolerate much dissent from his clearly defined views.
- **Second**, the relativist's claim is that absolutism, belief in universal, objective, and unchanging moral laws, fosters intolerance of alternative views. But in the sciences, nothing like this has been the case. The sciences have certainly benefited and progressed remarkably because of tolerance of diverse and heretical views. Yet science is not about subjective truths, but about objective truths. Therefore, objectivism does not necessarily cause intolerance.
- **Third**, the relativist may further argue that absolutes are hard and unyielding and therefore the defender of them will also be hard and unyielding. But this is another non-sequitor. One may teach hard facts in a soft way, or soft opinions in a hard way.
- **Fourth**, the simplest refutation of the tolerance argument is its very premise. It assumes that tolerance is really, objectively, universally, absolutely good. If the

relativist replied that he is not presupposing the objective value of tolerance, then all he is doing is demanding the imposition of his subjective personal preference for tolerance. That is surely more intolerant than the appeal to an objective, universal, impersonal, moral law. If no moral values are absolute, neither is tolerance. The absolutist can take tolerance far more seriously than the relativist. It is absolutism, not relativism, that fosters tolerance.

- **Fifth** fallacy: It is relativism that fosters intolerance. Why not be intolerant? He has no answer to this. Because tolerance feels better? Or because it is the popular consensus? Well suppose it no longer feels better. Suppose it ceases to be popular. The relativist can appeal to no moral law as a dam against the flood of intolerance. We desperately need such a dam, because societies, like individuals, are fickle and fallen. What else will deter a humane and humanistic Germany from turning to an inhumane, Nazi philosophy of racial superiority? Or, a now-tolerant America from turning to a future intolerance against any group it decides to disenfranchise. It is unborn babies today, born babies tomorrow. Homophobes today, perhaps homosexuals tomorrow. The same absolutism that homosexuals usually fear because it is not tolerant of their behavior is their only secure protection against intolerance of their persons.
- **Sixth** fallacy. Examination of the essential meaning of the concept of tolerance reveals a presupposition of moral objectivism, for we do not tolerate goods. We only tolerate evils in order to prevent worse evils. The patient will tolerate the nausea brought on by chemotherapy in order to prevent death by cancer. And a society will tolerate bad things like smoking in order to preserve good things like privacy and freedom.
- **Seventh**, the advocate of tolerance faces a dilemma when it comes to cross-cultural tolerance. Most cultures throughout history have not put a high value on tolerance. In fact, some have even thought it a moral weakness. Should we tolerate this intolerance? If so, if we should tolerate intolerance, then the tolerance objectivist had better stop bad-mouthing the Spanish Inquisition. But if we should not tolerate intolerance, why not? Because tolerance is really good, and the Inquisition was really evil? In that case, we are presupposing a universal and objective trans-cultural value. What if instead, he says it is only because of our consensus for tolerance? But his history's consensus is against it. Why impose on ours? Is that not culturally intolerant?
- **Eighth**, finally, there is a logical non-sequitor in the relativist argument too. Even if the belief in absolute moral values did cause intolerance, it does not follow that such values are not real. The belief that the cop on the beat is sleeping may cause a mugger to be intolerant to his victims, but it does not follow that the cop is not asleep. Thus, there are no less than eight weaknesses in the tolerance argument.

6. Argument for Relativism: Situationalism

A sixth and final argument for relativism is that situations are so diverse and complex that it seems unreasonable and unrealistic to hold them to universal moral norms. Even killing can be good if war is necessary for peace. Even theft can be good if you steal a weapon from a

madman. Even lying can be good if you're a Dutchman lying to the Nazis about where you're hiding the Jews. The argument is essentially this: Morality is determined by situations, and situations are relative; therefore, morality is relative. A closely related argument can be considered together with this one that morality is relative because it is determined by motive. We all blame someone for trying to murder another, even though the deed is not successfully accomplished, simply because its motive is bad. But we do not hold someone morally guilty of murder for accidentally killing another. For instance, like giving sugary candy to a child he has no way of knowing is seriously diabetic. So the argument is essentially that morality is determined by motive, and motive is subjective, therefore

So both the situationist and the motivationist conclude against moral absolutes. The situationist because he finds all morality relative to the situation, the motivationist because he finds all morality relative to the motive. We reply with a common-sense distinction. Morality is indeed conditioned, or partly determined, by both situations and motives, but it is not wholly determined by situations or motives. Traditional common sense morality involves three moral determinants, three factors that influence whether a specific act is morally good or bad. The nature of the act itself, the situation, and the motive. Or, what you do; when, where, and how you do it; and why you do it. It is true that doing the right thing in the wrong situation, or for the wrong motive, is not good. Making love to your wife is a good deed, but doing so when it is medically dangerous is not. The deed is good, but not in that situation. Giving money to the poor is a good deed, but doing it just to show off is not. The deed is good, but the motive is not.

However, there must first be a deed before it can be qualified by subjective motives or relative situations, and that is surely a morally relevant factor too. The good life is like a good work of art. A good work of art requires all its essential elements to be good. For instance, a good story must have a good plot, and good characters, and a good theme. So a good life requires you do the right thing, the act itself; and have a right reason or motive; and that you do it in the right way, the situation. Furthermore, situations, though relative, are objective, not subjective. And motives, though subjective, come under moral absolutes. They can be recognized as intrinsically and universally good or evil. The will to help is always good, the will to harm is always evil. So even situationism is an objective morality, and even motivationism or subjectivism is a universal morality.

The fact that the same principles must be applied differently to different situations presupposes the validity of those principles. Moral absolutists need not be absolutistic about applications to situations. They can be flexible. But a flexible application of the standard presupposes not just a standard, but a rigid standard. If the standard is as flexible as the situation it is no standard at all. If the yardstick with which to measure the length of a twisting alligator is as twisting as the alligator, you cannot measure with it. Yardsticks have to be rigid. And moral absolutists need not be judgmental about motives, only about deeds. When Jesus said, "Judge not that ye not be judged," he surely meant "Do not claim to judge hearts and motives, which only God can know." He certainly did not mean, "Do not claim to judge deeds. Do not morally discriminate bullying from defending, killing from

healing, robbery from charity." In fact, it is only the moral absolutist, and not the relativist, who can condemn judgmentalism of motive, since he alone can condemn intolerance. The relativist can condemn only moral absolutism.

But merely refuting the most popular arguments for relativism does not refute relativism itself. We need positive arguments for absolutism as well. Here are five simple ones.

7. Argument for Absolutism: Consequences

First the pragmatic argument from consequences. If the relativist argues against absolutism from its supposed consequences of intolerance, we can argue against relativism from its real consequences. Consequences are, at least, a relative indicator. They are clues. Good morality should have good consequences, and bad morality should have bad ones. Well, it's exceedingly obvious that the main consequence of moral relativism is the removal of moral deterrents. Just as the consequences of "do the right thing" are doing the right thing, so the consequences of "if it feels good, do it" are doing whatever feels good. Takes no PhD to see that. In fact, it takes a PhD to miss it.

All immoral deeds and attitudes, with the possible exception of envy feel good. That's the main reason we do them. If sin didn't seem like fun, we'd all be saints. Relativism has never produced a saint. That is the pragmatic refutation of relativists. The same goes for societies. Relativism has never produced a good society, only a bad one. Compare the stability, longevity, and happiness of societies founded on the principles of moral relativists like Mussolini, and Mao Tse Tung, with societies founded on the principles of moral absolutists like Moses and Confucius. A society of moral relativists usually lasts one generation. Hitler's thousand-year Reich lasted not even that long.

I think the following quotation should be sent to the U.S. Supreme Court, the ACLU, the National Teacher's Association, Hollywood, and all network TV executives:

Everything I have said and done in these last years is relativism, by intuition. From the fact that all ideologies are of equal value, that all ideologies are mere fictions, the modern relativist infers that everybody has the right to create for himself his own ideology, and to attempt to enforce it with all the energy of which he is capable. If relativism signifies contempt for fixed categories, and men who claim to be the bearers of an objective immortal truth, then there is nothing more relativistic than fascism. —Benito Mussolini

8. Argument for Absolutism: Tradition

Second, the argument from tradition. This argument should appeal to egalitarians who argue against absolutism because they think it is somehow connected with snobbery. It is

exactly the opposite. Absolutism is traditional morality, and tradition is egalitarianism extended into history. Chesterton called it "the democracy of the dead, the extension of the franchise to that most powerless of classes, those disenfranchised not by accident of birth but by accident of death. Tradition counters a small and arrogant oligarchy of the living, those who just happen to be walking around the planet today.

To be a relativist, you must be a snob, at least on this centrally important issue. For you stand in a tiny minority, almost totally concentrated in one culture: the modern west; that is, white, democratic, industrialized, urbanized, university-educated, secularized, apostate, post-Christian society. To be a relativist, you must believe that nearly all human beings in history have ordered their lives by an illusion. Even societies like ours that are dominated by relativistic experts' popular opinion still tends to moral absolutism. Like the Communists, relativists pretend to be the party of the people, while in fact scorning the peoples' philosophy. In fact, for a generation now, a minority of relativistic elitists who have gained the power of the media have been relentlessly imposing their elitist relativism on popular opinion by accusing popular opinion—that is, traditional morality—of elitism.

9. Argument for Absolutism: Moral Experience

Third, there is the argument from moral experience. This is the simplest and, I think, strongest argument for moral absolutism. In fact, it is so strong that it seems like an unnatural strain to put it into the form of an argument at all—it is more like primary data. The first and foundational moral experience is always absolutistic. Only later in the life of the individual or the society does sophistication sometimes suggest moral relativism. Every one of us remembers from early childhood experience what it feels like to be morally obligated. To bump up against an unyielding moral wall. This memory is enshrined in the words "ought," "should," "right," and "wrong."

Moral absolutism is certainly based on experience. For instance, let's say last night you promised your friend you would help them at 8:00 this morning. Let's say he has to move his furniture before noon. But you were up 'til 3:00 am. And when the alarm rings at 7:00, you are very tired. You experience two things—the desire to sleep, and the obligation to get up. The two are generically different. You experience no obligation to sleep, and no desire to get up. You are moved, in one way, by your own desire for sleep, and you are moved in a very different way by what you think you ought to do. Your feelings appear from the inside out, so to speak, while your conscience appears from the outside in. Within you is the desire to sleep, and this may move you to the external deed of shutting off the alarm and creeping back to bed. But, if instead you get up to fulfill your promise to your friend, it will be because you chose to respond to a very different kind of thing: the perceived moral quality of the deed of fulfilling your promise, as opposed to the perceived moral quality of the deed of refusing to fulfill it. What you perceive as right, or obligatory—getting up—pulls you from without, from itself, from its own nature. But the desires you feel as attractive—going back to sleep—push you from within, from yourself, from your own nature. The moral obligation moves you as an end, as a final cause, from above and

ahead, so to speak. Your desires move you as a source, as an efficient cause, from below, or behind, so to speak.

All this is primary data, fundamental moral experience. It can be denied, but only as some strange philosophies might deny the reality immediately perceived by our senses. Moral relativism is to moral experience what teaching of Christian Science is to the experience of pain and sickness and death. It tells us these experiences are illusions to be overcome by faith. Moral absolutism is empirical. Moral relativism is a dogma of faith.

10. Argument for Absolutism: Ad Hominem

Fourth, there is the ad hominem argument. Even the relativist always reacts with a moral protest when he is treated immorally. The man who appeals to the relativistic principle of "I gotta be me," who justified breaking his promise of fidelity to his own wife, whom he wants to leave for another woman, will then break his fidelity to his relativistic principle when his new wife uses that principle to justify leaving him for another man. This is not exceptional, but typical. It looks like the origin of relativism is more personal than philosophical. More in the hypocrisy than in the hypothesis. The contradiction between theory and practice is evident even in the relativist's act of teaching relativism. Why do relativists teach and write? To convince the world that relativism is right and absolutism wrong? Really right and really wrong? If so, then there is a real right and a real wrong. And if not, then there is nothing wrong with being an absolutist, and nothing right with being a relativist. So why do relativists write and teach? Really, for all the effort they've put into preaching their gospel of delivering humanity from the false and foolish repressions of absolutism, one would have thought they really believed this gospel.

11. Argument for Absolutism: Moral Language

Fifth, there's the argument from moral language. This is a very obvious argument, used by C.S. Lewis, at the very beginning of *Mere Christianity*. It is based on the observation that people quarrel. They do not merely fight, they argue about right and wrong. This is to act as if they believed in objectively real and universally binding moral principles. If nothing but subjective desires and passions were involved, it would be merely a contest of strength between competing persons. Or between competing passions within a person. If I'm more hungry than tired, I'll eat; if I'm more tired than hungry, I'll sleep. But we say things like, "That isn't fair." Or, "What right do you have to that?" If relativism were true, moral argument would be as stupid as arguing about feelings. "I feel great." "No, I feel terrible."

In fact, the moral language that everyone uses every day—language that praises, blames, counsels, or commands—would be strictly meaningless if relativism were true. We do not praise or blame non-moral agents like machines. When the Coke machine steals our money without delivering a Coke, we do not argue with it, call it a sinner, or tell it to go to confession. We kick it. So when some of our psychologists tell us that we are only very complex machines, they are telling us that morality is only very complex kicking. This is so absurd it hardly deserves an argument. I think it deserves a spanking, which is only

practicing what they preach: kicking, but more honestly. The argument is simple. Moral language is meaningful, not meaningless. We all know that. We know how to use it, and we do. Relativism cannot explain that fact.

Postscript: Cause and Cure

Finally, most importantly of all, my postscript. What is the cause, and cure of moral relativism? The real source of moral relativism is not any argument at all, and therefore its cure is not any refutation of an argument. Neither philosophy nor science nor logic nor common sense nor experience have ever refuted traditional moral absolutism. It is not reason, but the abdication of reason that is the source of moral relativism. Relativism is not rational, it is rationalization. It is not the conclusion of a rational argument. It is the rationalization of a prior action. It is the repudiation of the principle that passions must be evaluated by reason and controlled by will. That is the virtue Plato and Aristotle called self-control. It is not just one of the cardinal virtues, but a necessary ingredient in every virtue. That classical assumption is almost the definition of civilization. But romanticists, existentialists, Freudians, and many others have convinced many people in our culture that it is oppressive and unhealthy and inauthentic. If we embrace the opposite principle, and let passion govern reason, rather than reason govern passion, there is little hope for morality or for civilization.

Obviously, the strongest and most attractive of the passions is sexual passion. It is therefore also the most addictive and the most blinding. So, there could hardly be a more powerful undermining of our moral knowledge and our moral life than the sexual revolution. Already, the demand for sexual freedom has overridden one of nature's strongest instincts: motherhood. A million mothers a year in America alone pay hired killers, who are called healers or physicians, to kill their own unborn daughters and sons. How could this happen? Only because abortion is driven by sexual motives. For abortion is backup birth control, and birth control is the demand to have sex without having babies. If the stork brought babies, there'd be no Planned Parenthood.

Divorce is a second example of the power of the sexual revolution to undermine basic moral principles. Suppose there were some other practice, not connected with sex, which had these three documentable results. First, betraying the person you claim to love the most, the person you had pledged your life to, betraying your solemn promise to her or him. Second, thereby abusing the children you had procreated and promised to protect, scarring their souls more infinitely than anything else except direct violent physical abuse, and making it far more difficult for them ever to attain happy lives or marriages. And thirdly, thereby harming, undermining, and perhaps destroying your society's future. Would not such a practice be universally condemned? Yet, that is exactly what divorce is, and it is universally accepted. Betrayal is universally condemned unless it is sexual. Justice, honesty, not doing other harms—these moral principles are affirmed, unless they interfere with sex.

The rest of traditional morality is still very widely believed and taught, even in TV sitcoms, soap operas, and Hollywood movies. The driving force of moral relativism seems to be almost exclusively sexual. Why this should be, and what we should do about it, are two further questions that demand much more time and thought than we have available here and now. But if you want a very short guess at an answer to both, here is the best I can do. I think a secularist has only one substitute left for God, only one experience in a desacrilized world that still gives him something like the mystical, self-transcending thrill of ecstasy that God designed all souls to have forever, and to long for until they have it. Unless he is a surfer, that experience has to be sex. We're designed for more than happiness; we're designed for joy. Aquinas writes, with simple logic, "Man cannot live without joy. That is why one deprived of true spiritual joys must spill over to carnal pleasures."

Drugs and alcohol are attractive because they claim to feed the same need. They lack the ontological greatness of sex, but they provide the same semi-mystical thrill: the transcendence of reason and self-consciousness. I do not mean this merely as moral condemnation, but as psychological analysis. In fact, though they sound shocking, I think the addict is closer to the deepest truth than the mere moralist. He is looking for the very best thing in some of the very worst places. His demand for a state in which he transcends morality is very wrong, but it's also very right. For we are designed for something beyond morality, something in which morality will be transformed. Mystical union with God. Sex is a sign and appetizer of that. Moral absolutists must never forget that morality, though absolute, is not ultimate. It is not our *Summum Bonum*. Sinai is not the Promised Land; Jerusalem is. And in the New Jerusalem, what finally happens as the last chapter of human history is a wedding between the Lamb and His bride. Deprived of this Jerusalem, we must buy into Babylon. If we do not worship God, we will worship idols, for we are by nature worshippers.

Finally, what is the cure? It must be stronger medicine than philosophy, so I can give you only three words in answer to this last and most practical question of all. What we can do about it? What is the cure? These three words are totally unoriginal. They are not my philosophical argument, but God's biblical demands. Repent, fast, and pray. Confess, sacrifice, adore. I know of no other answer, and I can think of nothing else that can save this civilization except Saints.

Please be one.

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