How to Defend Moral Truth in a Culture of Relativism
By Jay Wegter

We live in a society that decries the rise of crime, the absence of virtue, and the increase in incivility while at the same time believing that truth and morality are relative—this is moral and spiritual insanity. The academic culture marginalizes those who deny moral relativism (accusing them of insensitivity, intolerance, and/or political incorrectness). As a culture we are philosophically marooned on a desert island—stuck with the belief that all opinions are relative with no objective basis in unchanging moral truth. This present state of affairs is evidence of God’s wrath revealed from heaven (Rom 1:18-23).

It’s common to hear, “Who are you to judge?” As a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, I answer back, “I certainly do have a right to make moral judgments—I am a rational person aware of fundamental principles of logical and moral reasoning. I think I am qualified.” Popular culture assumes moral relativism—that there are no universally right and wrong answers, thus no appropriate judgments by which to make moral distinctions (which apply to every person, time, and place—only subjective opinions—like tastes and preferences). To be a consistent moral relativist one must admit that Mother Theresa was no less or more moral than Adolf Hitler. To argue for moral relativism is to argue that no knowledge, including moral knowledge (moral truth), is objective.

I. Truth with a capital “T” had to die before relativism could become popular.
A. Author Alan Bloom notes that students entering university are nearly all moral relativists. And that if that belief (moral relativism) is put to the test their reaction will be uncomprehending. They are astonished that moral relativism is not self-evident. The trend started in academia and then engulfed the common person. It started with the death of truth in the 60’s—namely the denial that anything could be known for certain—all we can know now are opinions. “Students feel safer as Doubters than as Believers, as perpetual seekers rather than as eventual finders.”

B. Like an immense wrecking ball, secular humanism has been moving through society for the better part of a century. It has left destruction in its wake. The ‘wrecking ball’ of naturalism has systematically broken down the boundaries set by God. Philosphic naturalism has so thoroughly permeated our culture, it has for all intents and purposes become our national worldview. The secularists have used the philosophy of materialism to target the divine ‘blueprint’ given by God by which His creatures are to interpret the world, and order their lives and society. Naturalism has been ‘shredding’ the divine blueprint—a blueprint which has God’s moral government at its center. C. S. Lewis observes that secularism views man as a biological machine—an abstraction, rather than the image of God.

II. What is Moral Relativism?
A. Moral relativism teaches that ethical truths don’t come from God, but depend upon the individuals or groups that hold them (ethical truth as subjective). Thus when it comes to sexuality, “ought and should” are meaningless; everyone’s morality is equal. By contrast the moral truth claims of God’s Word maintain their ethical force universally even when individuals or cultures reject them—still true and
binding. Moral relativism is revisionist because it seeks moral definition by a new standard; thus the burden of proof falls on those who espouse a new standard which erases the ‘ought and should’ that is self-evident in conscience and natural law.\textsuperscript{vi}

\textbf{B. Relativism fails to explain morality because it is no different than having no morality at all.} A moral system is validated by the kind of moral person it produces (i.e. Jesus, Moses, the Apostle Paul). What kind of person does relativism produce? It cannot produce a moral teacher. Nor can it condemn a sociopath since it is opposed to every moral tradition. A person wed to situation ethics will not make the sacrifices required to cultivate virtue. The all too common attitude today is: “How dare you impose your morality on me. I do whatever I please. That is my morality.” One of the most entrenched assumptions of relativism is that there is moral neutrality—moral impartiality—that a person may assume a neutral posture toward the moral conviction of others—as if this is the essence of tolerance.\textsuperscript{vii}

\textbf{C. Relativism’s tenet of moral neutrality is a myth.} In a letter from Faye Wattleton (former pres. of Planned Parenthood), the protection of the rights of the unborn is referred to as “tyranny.” Wattleton implies that any view but hers is immoral, un-American, and tyrannous. The only “true” neutrality then is silence. Wattleton has devoted her career to enforcing her view by law. The position of moral neutrality may posture as virtuous but it is dangerous—when, as a culture, we stop use of moral reasoning, public advocacy, and legislation to encourage virtue, and discourage dangerous and immoral behavior—we are opening the door to anarchy.\textsuperscript{viii} Those in favor of abortion frame the issues as if the choice to kill the unborn is moral high ground. A recent T-shirt against pro-life reads, “Stop the long war against choice.”

\textbf{D. Relativists assume that no objective standard of morality applies to all people in all times and places.} Alan Bloom says that the moral relativism of the college student is manifested in the idea that the condition of a free society is “Not to correct the mistakes of others and really be right; it is rather NOT to think you are right at all.” Students have been indoctrinated; but they cannot defend their position.\textsuperscript{ix}

(Note: In our course on Apologetics at The Master’s College, we instruct students in how to answer the following question: “Why it is NOT arrogant to say one has the truth?”)

\textbf{E. If we abandon the idea that one set of laws applies to every human being, then all that remains is subjective, personal opinion.} Once morality is reduced to personal tastes, people exchange the moral question, “What is good?” for “What feels good?” Morality is reduced to preference (emotivism). They assert their desires and try to rationalize them with moral language. This is thinly veiled self-interest—pleasure as ethics—pleasure defining morality. Without moral truth, respect and dignity are eroded away. Without moral truth, self-sacrifice on behalf of others dries up. A society held captive by relativism begins to lose its capacity to think in morally coherent ways and to draw ethical conclusions (the seared conscience, 1 Tim 4:2). History unequivocably teaches us that moral irrationality devastates lives.\textsuperscript{x}

Attempts to be ‘consistent’ with moral relativism produce horrific results. The following account took place in an American neo-natal hospital ward. A Christian nurse pulled a dying ‘preemie’ to her bosom to comfort it in the last seconds and spasms of life. The head nurse yelled, “What do you think you are doing!”—as she snatched the infant from her arms and threw it into the trash, jamming the lid closed. Comforting a dying fetus was considered absurd and irrational to the head nurse.
F. If all morals are merely personal preference; then all moral judgments (justice) are indeed ‘imposing your morality on another, and we are only pretending to be ‘morally liberated.’ But, argues C. S. Lewis, why praise animal instinct? Why such praise for those who have submitted to the inevitable? If we reject moral principles, we sentence ourselves to fall into the position in which all we have left are natural impulses. A dogmatic belief in objective value is necessary to the very idea of rule which is not tyranny and obedience which is not slavery. Amen, Lewis! As Vishal Mangalwadi has stated, our founding fathers understood that man’s fallen nature needs to be restrained, if not by the Bible; then by the bayonet.

III. Relativism’s Offspring is “The Abolition of Man” (C. S. Lewis): What is the best explanation for moral rules?

A. Why do they exist? The increasingly popular answer to these questions has been evolution. Can Darwinism account for moral principles? Evolution suggests that morals evolved by natural process without a divine lawgiver. Neo-Darwinian evolution attributes morality to chemical relationships in the genes. Love, hate, guilt, remorse, gratitude, envy, (and even virtues such as kindness, faithfulness, maternal love, and self-control) may all be explained mechanistically through cause and effect of chance genetic mutations and natural selection. Logically, this constitutes a declaration of war upon moral free agency; for according to this worldview man cannot be held responsible for his ethical decisions (as a free moral agent) if crime is genetic (traceable to his genes).

B. It is absurd to say that the mechanics of genetic chemistry have cultivated behaviors we call morality. Evolutionists must admit (if consistent) that what we call a higher moral truth is nothing more than a shameless ploy of nature—genetic conditioning to aid in survival and reproduction. Naturalism doesn’t explain morality; it denies it. Evolutionist Robert Wright suggests that traits conducive to survival will become more widespread—even the “trait” of morality! Suggests Wright: species adjust to survive and one of those ‘adjustments’ is morality. Naturalistic forces ‘choose’ certain behaviors to promote existence. Whether a mother’s care, or marital fidelity, or the Protestant work ethic—each of these is attributed to the stratagems of the genes. Genetic predisposition accounts for behavior (thus we have moral genes). But this prompts the question, “Is there a fundamental difference in chromosomal makeup between Mother Theresa and Hitler? If so, how could we praise one and condemn the other if genes determined the behavior? Where is culpability?”

C. Robert Wright states that morality is a product of nature. Yet he lapses suggesting that we may transcend nature by helping those who cannot help you in return (the Golden Rule). He uses words like, “tragic, misuse, pathetic.” He can’t help himself, he is actually refusing to live and think as a biological machine—he wants a morality determined by nature AND a moral standard that transcends nature. He wants the transcendent morality to judge the evolutionary morality. He recoils from social Darwinism—hating the idea of exploiting the weak—murder, rape, robbery are in some sense ‘natural’ but it is up to us to decide how abhorrent we find such things and how hard we want to fight them. You see, Darwinists cannot give us a reason why we ought not destroy the weak and why the law of the jungle should not be allowed in society. If no moral restraints exist and all moral options are legitimate, then the strong ruling the weak is logically acceptable. (Hitler, Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot saw this clearly.)
D. Morality has ‘ought-ness’, it has moral obligation—it is essentially prescriptive. Moral behavior, supposedly observed among chimps, doesn’t go beyond descriptive—that is not the essence of morality. Why shouldn’t we be selfish, rape, kill, steal? Darwinists cannot give an answer without smuggling in morality. Moral choices by their nature and character are made by free moral agents—they are not determined by internal mechanics. Darwinism reduces morality to mere descriptions of behavior while ignoring motive (ought) and intent. “As a Darwinist, why should I be moral tomorrow?”

E. When man is defined as a ‘biological machine’ (an abstraction)—it leaves an immense moral vacuum. One has no rational basis for morality if man is a biological machine determined by the forces of nature and genetics. Ethics require beings that are free; rational; non-determined moral agents. And, as Bible-believing Christians, we would add that these moral agents answer to an external, fixed, universal standard of morality which corresponds to conscience (Rom 2:12-16). If one is to be consistent with evolutionary naturalism; one must deny free moral agency—thus the only way to arrive at ethics is to take an irrational leap into the non-objective. Naturalism’s model of human nature is mechanical and determined—in the worldview of naturalism, freedom, dignity, and morality become fiction.

F. Is all of our behavior (including morality) the result of being ‘fooled’ by our selfish genes? Darwin’s bankrupt explanation of human behavior destroys rationality. If you start with a view of reality grounded in impersonal forces operating by chance (naturalism); then, in time you will end up with naturalism in moral, social, and political philosophy. Naturalism, when taken to its logical conclusions for morality, suggests that our genes deceive us into thinking that there is “disinterested objective morality binding upon [us], which all should obey.”

If all behavior is adaptation (the consequence of ‘selfish genes’); then there can be no such thing as objective morality (Eph 4:17-19). Materialist authors Atran and Boyer have made the following statement concerning religious belief including Christianity, “Religion is a brain malfunction that kicks in at a certain level of evolutionary advancement.” This can only take us deeper into absurdity; ethical darkness; and moral stupidity. Evolutionary psychology suggests that maternal love is nothing more than genetic self-interest; and infanticide is as ‘normal’ as the maternal ‘instinct’ of nurture.

Is our every decision determined by the forces of evolution? The assumptions of Darwinism mitigate against the theory itself. Darwinism dissolves traditional religion and ethics because even morality is traced to material causes. But the theory turns on itself; for if the very possibility of objective truth is undermined by evolution, then evolution cannot be true. Do Darwinian ideologues really think their own ideas evolved? If all ideas are not really true; only ‘useful’ for survival; then evolution is not true either, why should the rest of us pay any attention? What folly, for if we can’t think an ‘un-Darwinian’ thought, then we’re locked into the mechanistic determinism of evolution and we only imagine that we are thinking independently of our selfish genes.

G. If we are but ‘survival machines’ utterly determined by and dependent upon our genetic masters; then what is the source of freedom? Richard Dawkins’ answer is a wonderful display of absurdity. He says that we have the power to turn against our creators (our genes); and “rebel against the tyranny of our selfish replicators.” But where does the ‘power’ to rebel come from—is it the only thing about us that is
not determined and genetically programmed? But, to be consistent, how could we make an ‘un-
Darwinian’ decision? Dawkins’ leap of faith has zero support from his own theory. What Dawkins has
done (because of his discomfort about offering a genetic excuse for immorality and criminality) is to leap
into an ‘upper story’ view of freedom and responsibility that is clearly stolen from the Christian
worldview! For his worldview cannot give an account of ethics and morality.

C. S. Lewis suggests that we have hidden our flight from virtue by defining man as a
biological machine. The true significance of what has been going on has been concealed by the use of
the abstraction of man.\textsuperscript{xvi} If you keep reducing man to a biological machine—sooner or later you lose
meaning—you have abolished “Man.” You have ‘amputated’ the soul. The life of man becomes no more
than low voltage electricity passing across synapses—and all the chemical reactions in the nervous system
are reduced to pre-determined actions of mechanistic evolution—the genes tricking us into imagining a
degree of autonomy when actually we are doing their bidding all the time.\textsuperscript{xvii}

IV. What are Morals, and why do we need them?
A. Reality is God’s relation to His creation—it is the ordering principle of the universe. The law and
the gospel only make sense in a world in which our omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent God is
Creator, Owner, Upholder, Lawmaker, Ruler, Redeemer, and Judge. The gospel has no point of contact
in a world in which philosophic naturalism has replaced biblical cosmology. This is why there is an
increasingly desperate need to define categories as God does—that He is Ruler, Sustainer, Owner of His
creation—and that the designations and definitions He has made concerning His creation are absolutely
essential for accurately interpreting reality. Only by what God has said in His infallible Word do we
know what is true, real, right and wrong.\textsuperscript{xviii} We are utterly dependent upon God’s revelation in order to
accurately interpret ourselves and our existence.\textsuperscript{xix} Thus, man’s rebellion (moral relativism) is seen in his
opposition to the Creator’s right to define mankind’s entire existence.

B. In the Scripture we find a perfect co-mingling of the physical created order and the moral order in
the universe (Ps 19). These truths are meant to control our understanding of reality. Throughout the
Word we see the twin themes of creation and moral order. Creation has order to it that is maintained by
God (Ps 96). God is the ruler over what He has made. This is the polar opposite of the deist picture of a
prime mover who is detached and who allows mankind to invent its own morality (as if moral order can
be divorced from God’s creation structures and His involvement in His creation).\textsuperscript{xv}

The Psalms especially assert that the fixity of creation is simultaneously physical and moral. The
Psalms describe the whole creation as the worshipping chorus of God. Not only does the creation praise
God for His power, wisdom, goodness, and handiwork, the creation praises God for His justice. The
Psalms proclaim God as establisher of an unbreakable continuity between the physical world and moral
order—the world is pictured as delighting in His righteousness (Ps 50:6; 72:3).\textsuperscript{xxi}

C. The inseparable coherence between the physical order of creation and the moral order of creation is
behind Paul’s declaration in Romans one—the creation gives ample evidence concerning God’s
character and moral expectations. Those who disobey are without excuse. Because there is an
unbreakable coherence between the structure of the world and the moral order of human life; men have no
alibi for rejecting the glory of God and the duty of man—both of which are evident in creation.\textsuperscript{xiii}

According to Romans 1-2, every person knows that God is their transcendent Creator; that He is righteous and good; and that He will judge them someday. According to Romans 2:12-16, there is not a living soul on the face of the earth ignorant of God’s moral requirements. (Note the ‘de-evolution’ of religion—the willful loss of the knowledge of God—spelled out in Romans chapter one.)

D. When unbelieving sinners create an illusory world in their imaginations—it does not produce a new reality. Their experience is always testifying to the fact that this is God’s world. They find themselves ‘bumping up’ against God’s creation structures everywhere they look. Try as they may, they cannot escape the testimony of God which He has placed in the \textit{transcendentals} that make up human existence (\textit{transcendentals} such as beauty, majesty, logic, rationality, morality, harmony, order, conscience, love, law, justice, etc. These cannot be traced to material causes—they each argue for a personal Creator.)

\textbf{God’s precepts keep us from self-destruction. Yahweh’s commandments are the safeguard of love to God and neighbor.} Wise travelers don’t fret at the guardrails along the highway—they are grateful for the protection they afford from the cliffs below.\textsuperscript{xiv} To fear and reverence God is to hate sin and turn from it. The proportion of our fear of God is revealed in our level of our hatred of sin (Ps 119:9-11; 53, 38, 45; Prov 1:7). The Word of God is that which produces the fear of God. Because this universe is Yahweh’s creation, there is a common ethical system for all humans. Moral and physical order permeates every part of the universe. Therefore the ridiculous advertisement that one may take a ‘moral holiday’ in Las Vegas is patently absurd (Ps 97:6).\textsuperscript{xv} Remarkably, the Las Vegas ad, “What happens here stays here,” was responsible for an immense uptick in business for ‘sin city’.

V. To live wisely in Yahweh’s world is to live according to His justice; and not by fleshly desires, and amoral pragmatism (‘situation ethics’).

A. \textit{A life of wisdom is a life of conformity to God’s norm of righteousness—His law} (Ps 94:12).\textsuperscript{xvii} \textit{Obedience is to be universal—a whole life response to Yahweh.} We are to please Him in all areas of life by respecting the divine order He has constructed in the world. Without this there will be moral failure and failure to please God (Ps 86:11-12).\textsuperscript{xviii} God’s Word was given to us to allow us to recall during times of temptation the boundaries God has set. To be conversant with these boundaries helps the man who fears God to do what is right and what pleases God in times of temptation (Ps 25:12-15; 101:3).\textsuperscript{xix}

B. When we embrace God’s blueprint and standard it is not simply an attempt to master a moral code—it is submission to God’s holiness—it is submission to God Himself who is our Source of life—for God’s commands constitute His character in code. Knowledge of God’s holiness and obedience to His precepts are bound up together (Ps 119:18, 38, 66). The relativist insists on directing his own life. He demands autonomy at all cost; even if it results in his eventual destruction. The fool makes personal preferential undefined freedom his chief value. By these rebellious choices his folly is evident; for he opposes his own welfare; he hurdles toward destruction as a result (Ps. 10:3-15; 50:16-22; 107:17).

C. \textit{The character of God is the basis for discerning right from wrong.} Right and wrong do not change, because God’s character does not change. Our moral foundation has a truth foundation. The Webster’s
definition of truth, “Fidelity to an original” is fidelity to the very nature and character of God. God’s commands are not for Him, but for us. They are for our good. They are to protect us and to provide for us. They are the safeguard of love. EXAMPLE: Like an umbrella, if you remove yourself from obedience, you remove yourself from protection and provision. We must teach our young people that God’s moral absolutes flow from His love to us. He is trustworthy. He wants to provide for us and protect us.

During my experiences in personal evangelism I frequently ask the unsaved person (regarding their roommates), “Do you think you can resent, hate in your heart; plan the murder of; treat as a sex object to discard; slander; steal from; lie to—a person and be loving them?” They always answer “no”—but cannot give an account of where these morals originate or why they are binding. This provides a valuable opening for the sharing of the gospel because I explain to them that those ethical questions are drawn from six of The Ten Commandments.

D. The sowing and reaping principle is built into the very fabric of the universe (Ps 92:6-9; Gal 6:7). Moral cause and effect is ineffable. The wheels of God’s justice grind slowly but they grind exceedingly small. God’s justice is more comprehensive than a sinner can possibly imagine; it extends to the thoughts, intents, and secrets of the heart (Ps 73:18-20; 91:8; Heb 4:12; Rom 2:16; Matt 5:21-22, 28). In a moral universe sin is irrational. This is Yahweh’s world; that’s why secret sin is ‘a lie lived out’—there are no compartments in our lives that are not in Yahweh’s world (Ps 26:2; 90:8; 139:7-23).

E. Life in a Moral Universe means there are two paths; the path of life and the path of destruction.
As the only creature made in the image of God, every action man takes is either an affirmation or denial of God’s moral government. These two moral directions are described in Scripture as two paths—one of life, and the other of destruction (Jer 6:16-19; Matt 7:13). The book of Proverbs, as the rest of the Bible, teaches us to think in terms of antithesis—that there are two opposing ways of looking at life, a right way and a wrong way. In the book of Proverbs we find right and wrong continually contrasted, and often these occur even in a single verse. Here is one for example: “In all labor there is profit, but idle chatter leads only to poverty” (Prov 14:23, NKJV).

Jay Adams has this to say about the principle of antithesis. In the Bible, where antithesis is so important, discernment—the ability to distinguish God’s thoughts and God’s ways from all others—is essential. Indeed, God says that “the wise in heart will be called discerning” (Proverbs 16:21).

From the Garden of Eden with its two trees (one allowed, one forbidden) to the eternal destiny of the human being in heaven or in hell, the Bible sets forth two, and only two, ways: God’s way, and all others. Accordingly, people are said to be saved or lost. They belong to God’s people or the world. There was Gerizim, the mount of blessing, and Ebal, the mount of cursing. There is the narrow way and the wide way, leading either to eternal life or to destruction. There are those who are against us and those who are with us, those within and those without. There is life and death, truth and falsehood, good and bad, light and darkness, the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan, love and hatred, spiritual wisdom and the wisdom of the world. Christ is said to be the way, the truth, and the life, and no one may come to the Father but by Him. His is the only name under the sky by which one may be saved.
F. Jesus clearly taught this idea of two ways in His famous Sermon on the Mount: “Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult [or, confined, constraining] is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Matt 7:13-14, NKJV). All of us are either on the narrow way that leads to life, or we are on the broad way that leads to death. There is no other alternative. There is no gray area. There is no neutral ground to stand upon.

G. In order to teach right from wrong, one must teach the truth. Culture has changed; relativism has ushered in a deadly perspective that believes we no longer have morality, only differing opinions—postmodernism has become a lifestyle. By contrast, God’s moral principles are grounded upon His absolute truth. Ethics can’t operate without truth (situation ethics demonstrate that ethics divorced from truth cannot provide an immutable standard).

VI. Right from wrong is the revelation of God’s righteous character.
A. Something is right or wrong because it is true in God. Why does the Bible say, “You shall not murder?” The reason is because God is life. He is the source and giver of life. The command flows from and is the expression of God’s very Person and nature! It is the life of God that gives sanctity to life. We are to pursue sexual purity because God is pure and holy. Because our culture has adopted the twisted values of relativism and postmodernism; we must be all the more diligent to teach biblical morality the Scriptural way; by connecting the precept to the Person of God and His immutable character.

B. Moral rules are communication—intelligent statements of meaning communicated from one mind to another. Morals have a force we feel prior to the behavior. They have incumbency—ought-ness—they appeal to our will—they compel. When we choose to disobey we feel a deep discomfort when we violate clear and weighty moral rules. Ethical pain makes us aware that we have done something wrong and deserve punishment—it speaks of God’s ownership of us. Real moral guilt produces the dread and exposure of having to answer for our misdeed. Apart from divine forgiveness in Christ, the pain never disappears entirely.

C. God expects his laws to be obeyed—as our Creator, He has the right to require moral perfection from us. Because God is moral governor of the universe and we are the creatures made in His moral image—ethical pain is true moral guilt. Conscience is God’s moral mark upon us and a subpoena to His day of judgment. Reality grounded in God explains our hunger for justice—our desire for a day of reckoning when crimes are answered for and wrongs made right—when innocent suffering is finally redeemed—the wicked are punished and the righteous rewarded. This also explains a personal sense of dread—we will have to answer to God for our own crimes and iniquity.

D. God’s character has determined an absolute standard of goodness. His moral rule encompasses both proposition and command (both features of minds). A duty is something owed—there is no such thing as duty in isolation. Moral obligation is unintelligible apart from the idea of God. The existence of God is joined to the incumbency of morality (“should” and “ought”).
FLAW 1 – **Relativists cannot accuse others of wrongdoing.** If you are dogmatic that morals are but personal opinions then you have surrendered your right (and possibility) to make moral judgments about the actions of others (no matter how offensive). Issues such as racism, Apartheid, Pro-choice, cannot be legitimately fought within a relativistic worldview because relativism legitimizes EVERY personal choice. Lying and promise-breaking and condemning the innocent cannot be wrong because moral distinctions are lost. Accountability is lost. Self-interest and ethical egoism are foundational to relativism. Thus, ultimately (since morality is but a personal choice) punishment would have to be approved by the one who invented his own code of conduct.xxx

FLAW 2 – **Relativists cannot complain about the problem of evil** (an objection commonly raised against the existence of God). The argument hinges upon the fact that objective evil exists—which demands that some standard of morality exists. But where does the concept originate—this idea of just and unjust? How does one identify the crooked without the straight? If morals are but private fancies, desires, opinions—or preferences about what is pleasant or unpleasant, then there is no evil to discuss. If there is nothing higher than humans, then absolute judgment has no basis—every moral observation is but opinion and preference (or “taste”).xxxi

FLAW 3 – **Relativists cannot place blame or accept praise.** These concepts are rendered meaningless if there is no external standard of measurement that defines what should be applauded or condemned. Without absolutes, what is good, decent, honorable, noble, worthy of praise is relative to the individual and his culture. If we are determined biological machines then praise and blame are meaningless.

FLAW 4 – **Relativists cannot make charges of unfairness or injustice.** These concepts do not make sense in a world devoid of moral absolutes. The words themselves have no meaning in a world without an external standard of what is right. How can there be justice and fairness without a moral requirement to be just and fair? Why is it wrong to punish the innocent and free the guilty? Real moral guilt depends upon blame which depends upon an objective external moral standard.

FLAW 5 – **Relativists cannot improve their morality.** Reform is impossible without an objective rule of conduct to which we ought to aspire (but this is what relativism denies). After all, why change our moral point of view if it serves our self-interest and feels good for the time being? In relativism one’s ethics can never be more moral—morals cannot change or improve.

FLAW 6 – **Relativists cannot hold meaningful moral discussions.** Without moral principles for universal action guides, meaningful ethical discussion is impossible. If morals are entirely relative then no one way of thinking is superior to another. No moral position can be judged as immoral, unacceptable, barbaric, deficient, or unreasonable. Moral dialogue is only possible if some system of values is presupposed (A. J. Ayer). Moral education becomes impossible. Ethical debate about morality is impossible without a moral standard. For these reasons it is rare to meet a thorough-going relativist—because it is a position that can only be lived out in silence.xxxii (EX. Solution: surrender your relativism
and regain your rationality, or remain a relativist and surrender your humanity. For it is inhumane to remain silent in the face of flagrant evil and injustice.) (EX. In evangelizing a skeptic we often ask the question, “Are you capable of moral indignation?” “What would trigger that response?” “Why, isn’t that response just your perspective?”)

FLAW 7 – Relativists cannot promote the obligation (ought) of tolerance. Tolerance is supposed to be a key virtue in relativism. But in relativism there is no tolerance because the relativist’s obligation to tolerance is self-refuting. We are to tolerate all viewpoints and not pass judgment on behavior and attitudes. But if there is no objective moral rule, then where does the “ought” of toleration come from? In reality the relativists only tolerate those who hold to their ethical viewpoint (thus practicing their own form of ‘intolerance’). The “sum of all flaws”—if relativism were true then nothing is wrong, evil, or praiseworthy. Justice and fairness are meaningless. Moral improvement is impossible. There is no tolerance. Moral relativism produces this kind of world.

VIII. Tactics to refute Relativism
TACTIC 1 – Show that there is an infinitely high price to pay to be a consistent moral relativist. A person may talk that way but one cannot live that way. It is an impossible worldview to live out. Moral relativism simply does not fit the experience of human nature. As creatures made in the image of a righteous God, we yearn for justice. We protest when we are the targets of injustice. Cross a relativist on the highway, or politically, or in line, and they squeal in protest that their rights have been violated or their trust has been betrayed. This inconsistency is pivotal in proving relativism false. The goal is to show that relativism is self-refuting and is an affront to moral intuition.xxxiii

TACTIC 2 – Show the contradictions of relativism—it is almost always self-refuting in practice. (EX. “There are absolutely no moral absolutes,” is a morally absolutist statement. A philosophy that is self-referentially absurd is a sure sign that it is fatally flawed.)xxxiv Relativists get stuck on their own objections Alvin Plantinga calls this the ‘philosophical tar baby’. They want moral rules to apply to others and not themselves. “You shouldn’t force your morality on me.” “Why not?” Two very powerful words because to answer, one must own that they believe their system is superior—it forces the person to state a moral rule while denying that moral rules exist. “By saying only your view is right, you are overturning the very thing that you objected to me saying.” “Why don’t you believe in morality?” “Each person should decide.” “That’s what I’m doing by deciding that your position is immoral.” “It sounds like you are telling me I’m wrong— isn’t that pushing your morality on me?” “Actually I am the only one who can talk about morality in this conversation because I’m the only one who believes in an ethical system that allows judgments.” “As a relativist you can’t even say my judgments are wrong.”

Some one says “Who are you to say?” Answer back, “Who are you to say?” “I’m appealing to reason, not asserting authority.” “Who are you to say?” is a cheap shot—at best self-defeating. It is an attempt to challenge moral judgments but itself implies a moral judgment. Radio talk show host Dennis Prager recently commented on the destructiveness of moral relativism, “Most of the problems with our culture can be summed up in one phrase: ‘Who are you to say?’”
TACTIC 3 – Have a ready defense. A common response when relativism is critiqued is “Whose values are right?” It sounds like a valid refutation, but it’s not. It’s an attempt to dismiss by suggesting that true absolutes don’t exist or are nearly impossible to distinguish. This mixes the ontological question (do moral absolutes exist?) with the epistemological question (how do we know what they are?). “So who is to judge what is right or wrong?” “We are!” We do so on the basis of the best reasoning with sympathy and understanding. Our beliefs may be closer to the truth than those of another culture. This certainly is true in the areas of scientific and factual matters. (EX. Note Vishal Mangalwadi’s example of East Indians refusing medical care in an effort to gain better karma.) (EX. Witnessing question, “Can you define anarchy?” “Why is it so destructive?”)

“How does it follow that if people have different points of view, then nobody is right?” “Isn’t it immoral to dock a professor’s pay because they are Jewish, or female, or African American?” When we cite a moral absolute, they will often cite those who disagree—thinking they have made their case. They haven’t—they have only changed the subject. “Can you tell me how your conclusion follows that relativism is true simply because those individuals or cultures have different values?” Objections to moral intuition take two forms. Some deny the existence of genuine evil, justice, fairness, honesty, tolerance, moral improvement, and virtue, etc. Frankly we don’t believe them! What do they teach their children? Plus, their speech is filled with statements that imply moral judgments. The burden of proof is upon them, but they can’t win or make a case that torturing the innocent and the helpless is morally benign.

A second approach is “They have their values/morals, and I have mine.” Therefore morals are relative—as if differences prove that no one is correct. If you dispute our case for moral common sense, we can give clear reasons why it is wrong to punish the innocent. Each of our points has a universal quality and leads to careful justification of our view. A contrary claim requires the same careful justification. (EX. Witnessing question, “Can you think of an historical figure who stepped outside traditional morality and attained power and then used that power benevolently?” —C. S. Lewis.)

The principle of tolerance does not follow logically from relativism. If relativists conclude that morality is relative, then they certainly cannot conclude that they may impose the objective moral rule of tolerance on other cultures. As we said earlier, where does the “ought” originate that all people ought to be tolerant of others’ viewpoints?” A tactic in confronting the new tolerance is to force the issue. Ask the question, “What’s wrong with judging?” The principle of tolerance only makes sense in a world in which absolutes exist, and only if one of those absolutes is “All people should respect others’ right to differ.” The ethic of tolerance can be rational only if moral truth exists and is objective and absolute. Tolerance cannot be derived from relativism because tolerance is a morally absolutist principle.

IX. CONCLUSION:

A. Relativism casts us adrift without a rudder; it is futile to search for ethics in a landscape without truth. We cannot know right from wrong without understanding truth. When ethics are divorced from the character of God, they become vices (killing the unborn and calling it reproductive rights). The highest virtue used to be justice, now it is the new tolerance (namely that morality is relative to the individual and therefore making a moral evaluation constitutes intolerance).
B. We’ve seen that relativism is self-refuting and makes morality unintelligible. If man is nothing more than a ‘gene machine’ or a biological robot; then moral freedom and human dignity have no rational basis. We’ve also gained some insight into why relativism is so attractive. Relativists think they can get rid of both morality and God—then guilt and judgment will disappear—as if by eliminating hospitals and doctors disease and suffering will disappear.

C. Either relativism or morality is true. Either we live in God’s world and are beholden to Him—accountable to His laws, or we live in a universe where morality is a meaningless concept. The truth is that people made in the image of God are drowning in a sea of relativism. The consequences are serious. Relativism produces people without scruples. It destroys the conscience. It provides no moral impulse to improve. This is why in our homes we don’t teach relativism to our children—we teach them the opposite—we teach them right and wrong and the consequences of each. We don’t want others to be relativists—we want them to treat us decently.

Relativism is dangerous, at Auschwitz Hitler declared, “I freed Germany from the stupid and degrading fallacies of conscience and morality. . . . We will train young people before whom the world will tremble.” There are only two choices: morality is absolute and objective; or morality is personal and subjective, mere opinion. The proper answer has radical consequences for how we see the world. As C. S. Lewis has said, “The idea that without appealing to any court higher than the instincts themselves, we can yet find grounds for preferring one instinct above its fellow [instincts] dies very hard.” History teaches us what happens to people who see instinct as the source of value. They lose their civilization.

I will close the almost ‘prophetic’ insights of author Richard M. Weaver (1910-1963) who wrote the following philosophical observations concerning America’s morality in 1948:

Since Francis Bacon, the world has been running away from first principles (self-evident natural laws) NOT toward them. On a verbal level, facts have been substituted for truth. Thus the assumption of empiricism is that experience will tell us what we are experiencing. Modern man trained by the media imagines that an industrious acquisition of particulars will render him a man of knowledge. He believes knowledge is power. The assumption is that we can interpret the world by the world, and not by Logos.xxxix

The man of self-control is the man who can consistently perform abstraction. He is trained to see from the perspective of eternity. Those truest in culture are deepest in forms—this distinguishes him from the barbarian and the degenerate. [By contrast] today there is a desire for immediacy—a dissolving of the aspects of form. People are controlled by desire alone [which results in] a person who has nothing in self by which to spiritualize. He associates all sorts of forms with the machinery of oppression which he has fled and proposed to oppose politically. We are seeing an effort at the emancipation from symbolism—a ‘freedom’ from indirect methods. . . . and a posture condemning forms [or transcendental universal moral truth] as useless inconvenient veils placed between them and ‘truth’. Forms are viewed as standing in the way of expression of natural man. How we need to remember the bitter lessons of Romanticism [i.e. the French Revolution].xl

Today man looks with derision on prohibitions of the 19th C. He assumes violation of them is without penalty. The consequences of debauchery are out of view—man loses his powers of
moral discrimination. [In so doing, he] disrobes the moral drapery from our naked shivering natures. The downward pull ends ideational life. Today education is without abstraction. Insistence on less is to merge with exterior reality and/or capitulate to endless induction of empiricism. Our age provides an example of the ravages of immediacy. The clearest symptom is a failure of the modern mind to recognize obscenity. The media is filled with a hunger for titillation—not only sexual but gratuitous violence [seen in the radical decay of Puritan ideals].

Only the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ can put us right with God’s righteousness. Once a sinner is in Christ, then striving for moral excellence becomes the logical outgrowth of receiving God’s precious and magnificent gospel promises (2 Pet 1:3-5).

Endnotes:

ii Ibid., 11-13.
iii Ibid., pp 15-18.
v Kelly Monroe, Finding God at Harvard, p. 15
viii Ibid., pp 30-31.
ix Ibid., pp. 32-33.
x Ibid., pp. 76-79.
xI Ibid., pp. 34-35.
xIII Ibid., p. 73.
xIV Beckwith, Koukl, pp. 156-160.
xVI Atran and Boyer in Pearcey, pp. 210-212.
xVII C. S. Lewis, p. 74.
xVIII Ibid., p. 80.
xXI Myers.
xXII Ibid.
xXIII Ibid.
xXVI Ibid., p 36, 38
xxvii Ibid., pp. 38
xxviii Steve Gallagher, At the Altar of Sexual Idolatry, (Pure Life Ministries, 1986) 257-258.
xxx Ibid., pp.168-170
xxxi Ibid., pp. 61-63.
xxxii Ibid., pp. 64-65.
xxxiii Ibid., pp. 68-69.
xxxiv Ibid., pp. 143-147.
xxxv Pearcey, p. 216-217.
xxxvii Vishal Mangalwadi, Must the Sun set on the West?
xxxix Ibid., pp. 154-156.
xl Richard Weaver, Ideas have Consequences (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1948) 13.
xx Ibid., pp. 23-25.
xxx Ibid., pp. 26-27.