



**The only standard we have for judging all of our social, economic, and political institutions and arrangements as just or unjust, as good or bad, as better or worse, derives from our conception of the good life for man on earth.**

**—Mortimer J. Adler**

---

---

## THE MYTH OF MORAL RELATIVISM

**Dr. Jonathan Dolhenty**

**T**he purpose of this brief essay is to show that moral (or ethical) relativism is a philosophical myth that is accepted by no one who has critically examined its tenets and that those who claim to be moral relativists are really not. We are dealing here with two aspects of a specific condition:

\* First, with a “belief” that states there are no fixed values, there are only fluctuating human valuations, or that ethical truths are relative, that is, the rightness of an action depends on or consists in the attitude taken towards it by some individual or group, and hence may vary from individual to individual or from group to group.

\* Second, with “actions” based on this belief which clearly show that the agent is, more or less, acting or behaving in a way that is consistent with the belief that moral relativism is, in fact, the true and only philosophical position.

As is usually the case in this type of reflective situation, the belief comes first, the action follows, but the action taken tells us something about the commitment to the belief under-girding the action taken.

It is easy in our contemporary society to find statements which apparently show a commitment to moral relativism. Consider just a sampling:

- \* What's true for you may not be true for me.
- \* Nothing is really right or wrong, but thinking makes it so.
- \* Ethical judgments are just a matter of personal opinion.
- \* Anything goes.
- \* One man's meat is another man's poison (in regard, of course, to morals).
- \* We should not judge another's personal morality.
- \* No society is better or worse than another (in regard to social ethics).

The above statements, and ones similar to them, are now bandied about in ordinary conversation as if they were truths about which no one should disagree. Moreover, those who claim to be moral or ethical relativists and are bold enough to declare it would simply say: "All morals are relative and that's the end of it," or some such "philosophical" assertion.

Opinion surveys recently taken in America have shown the pervasiveness of the position promoted by moral relativism. For instance, in one survey where adults were asked if they agreed with the statement "there are no absolute standards for morals and ethics," seventy-one percent said that they agreed with it. Other surveys have shown even higher numbers who think that morality and ethics is a matter of personal opinion and that there are no universal standards by which one can determine the rightness or wrongness of a human act.

Now, I never question what a person tells me regarding his or her personal beliefs, unless I have a valid reason to think otherwise. If someone tells me that truth is a relative matter, then I accept that that is what that person believes. I then consider that person's actions to see if they are consistent with the beliefs stated. And that is where the "rubber meets the road," so to speak. I find that those who claim "all truth is relative" may spout that belief, but they

never act as if its true. Similarly, I find that those who say they believe in moral relativism never act as if they really do. In fact, I find them to be moral absolutists, not moral relativists. Belief is one thing; actions are another. And it is in the realm of action that moral relativism takes the fatal “hit.”

The old adage “actions speak louder than words” has a special significance here. If the “words” (beliefs) are really committed to by the moral relativist, then his or her “actions” should be consistent with those words or beliefs. And it is precisely here that moral or ethical relativism becomes a “myth.” While many may claim to be moral relativists, their actions show they are not. In fact, their behavior shows them to be moral absolutists of a type, the very opposite of what they claim to be. And it is this point that I want to address in the remainder of this essay.

The self-proclaimed moral relativist does not and cannot maintain his or her commitment to the “philosophy” of moral relativism. In fact, the record clearly shows that these “moral relativists” are not relativists at all, but moral absolutists. This assertion is based on their behavior, not on their alleged support of a philosophical position. To wit:

\* Modern “liberal” political groups who promote “political correctness.” These groups want to suppress what they consider to be offensive language and views. Most of these people claim to be moral relativists, yet they promote a doctrine that includes an “absolutist” program, that is, “statements that are politically incorrect must be eliminated or even made illegal.” No relativism here.

\* Groups promoting “Multiculturalism.” All the beliefs and practices of non-Western cultures must be considered as “good” regardless of the belief and practice, but Western civilization and the “white European” are evil and to be eliminated as soon as possible. No relativism here.

\* Pro-abortion groups. Claiming that morality is a matter of personal opinion, these groups are now attempting to legally quash any opposition to their position. They want “special protection” and do not want to confront any philosophical opposition. No relativism here.

The above are simply examples of “absolutist” behavior parading as moral relativism. But there is more. One of the most vocal and

active groups to promote moral relativism in America is the so-called “Feminist Movement.” Yet, even here, we find, not moral relativism as claimed, but moral absolutism. To wit:

\* The “Feminist Movement” says that the Taliban government in Afghanistan was “wrong” in its treatment of women. But, to be consistent, the feminists should say, it is after all just a “cultural” thing and we have no business judging the rightness or wrongness of Taliban culture.

\* The “Feminist Movement” labels child-adult sexual activity as “wrong,” but, to remain consistent, it should say, it’s merely a “personal” opinion. No one should be punished for engaging in such behavior.

\* The “Feminist Movement” should say, to be consistent, “rape” is really in the eye of the beholder. What is rape to one person is making love to another. It’s a matter of one’s point of view.

Now, the “Feminist Movement” is not going to take the moral relativist position; they will take the position of the moral absolutist, the very position they condemn in those who are not in agreement with their particular views. They will say:

\* The treatment of women by the Taliban is wrong and should be changed.

\* Child-adult sexual activity is wrong and should be criminally punished.

\* Rape is wrong, regardless of the perpetrator’s opinion, and should be criminally punished.

None of the above judgments regarding a human act can be judged as right or wrong without appealing to some standard used as a criterion for judging the behavior. This standard, by its very nature, is “absolutist.” Moral relativism cannot appeal to a standard, simply because “relativism” itself means there are no standards.

I could continue with many other examples of the “moral absolutist” masquerading as a “moral relativist.” But brevity forbids it. And, besides, I want to make another important point. The pseudo-moral relativist (because that’s what they really are!) do not really want to convince you that his or her philosophical position is correct or true by engaging in an intellectual discourse.

Rather, in American society, the pseudo-moral relativist wants to appeal to the legislative bodies (Congress, et al) or the judiciary bodies (the Supreme Court, etc.) to have their “beliefs” encased in law. This means that what is “legal” is the same as what is “moral,” and nothing else. And this is the final nail in the coffin of the moral relativist.

We are not talking about morality at all! We are talking about positive law. Morality or ethics has nothing to do with the situation. Positive law is now all that matters. Making some “human act” legal is to be distinguished from the “morality” of any human act. All we need to do, according to this philosophical position, is declare something to be “legal” and it is, ipso facto, “moral.” This, by the way, is, in my opinion, the current state of affairs in American society today.

Okay, let us accept that for the sake of the current argument: What is “legal” is equivalent to what is “moral,” as a defining example of moral relativism. The so-called moral relativist is dead in the water. Because if “legality” is to define “morality” then any outrage against such phenomena as the Nazi “Holocaust” or the attack on America by terrorists on September 11, 2001 or the “circumcision” of little girls in many black-African countries or the “abuse” of women in Taliban Afghanistan or the practice of owning black slaves in 19th-century America is misplaced and unfair. These are or were “legal.” Therefore, according to the logic of this type of moral relativists, all these practices are or were “moral.”

No moral relativist I am familiar with will accept the above. They will insist these are “evil” acts. But by what standards, or on what grounds, or by what criteria, if judging human acts is relative matter and there are no absolute standards that can be used to make a judgment? Either all moral principles are relative or there is at least one moral principle which is absolute, or, in the case of the logical positivists and some others, morality is simply a semantic game which has no real content (which is not at issue here since no one really believes that anyway, including the logical positivists who promoted it).

Now, let’s get real. If moral relativists were really sincere in their beliefs, they could not condemn the following practices and would have to say...

\* Cannibalism is permitted if you think it is morally correct.

- \* Raping two-year olds is acceptable if that is part of your cultural tradition.
- \* Brutalizing your wife is understandable if that is part of your ethical system.
- \* Castrating young boys is permitted for the sake of your cultural heritage.
- \* Torture is a morally accepted part of your criminal justice system.
- \* Human sacrifice is allowed as part of your religious system.
- \* Certain groups defined as unwanted by your society can be destroyed.
- \* There is no such thing as a war crime; it's in the eye of the beholder.
- \* Adolf Hitler should not be judged as morally reprehensible since he was acting lawfully.
- \* Josef Stalin was not acting immorally when he killed millions of innocent people.
- \* The suicide bombers of September 11, 2001 were acting properly in their own interests.
- \* Anything goes. Anything goes. Anything goes. We cannot judge.

There is no way the declared moral relativist can get around this issue. If there is not at least ONE absolute, objective standard or principle or proposition of moral philosophy or ethics, one that can be used to further develop a system of objectively-based moral philosophy, then “anything goes.”

Finally, I get back to the initial position I was trying to argue. Moral or ethical relativism is a “myth.” That is, no one really believes in moral relativism, in spite of what one might say. All one has to do is look at the “actions” of the moral relativist instead of concentrating on the beliefs espoused. Self-proclaimed moral relativists appear to be guilty of hypocrisy, saying one thing but practicing the opposite. And, finally, moral relativism is just another example of “intellectual insanity,” the attempt to remake and reshape reality into what one wants it to be, rather than accepting reality as it is and dealing with it rationally.

There has to be at least ONE rational, objective standard by which human beings can judge the rightness, the correctness, or the appropriateness of human actions. There may be more, but there has to be at least one. It is the discovery of this rational, objective standard that is the object of what we call moral philosophy or ethics.





*My good friend and colleague Dr. Jonathan Dolhenty is president of the Center for Applied Philosophy, which he describes as a think-tank in cyberspace, and webmaster of The Radical Academy website, a discussion of philosophy, politics, and the human condition. He spent over seventeen years in the field of education as a public school teacher, school administrator, and college professor before embarking on a career in writing, editing, publishing, and advertising. Dr. Dolhenty holds B.A. degrees in philosophy, political science, and education, a master's degree in education, an earned doctorate in education and philosophy, and an honorary doctorate in divinity.*

<http://radicalacademy.com/>

=====

## **WELCOME NEW MEMBERS**

**Bill Freeman**

**Tim Smith**

\*\*\*\*\*

### **THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE**

is published weekly for its members by the  
**CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS**  
 Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann  
 Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor

E-mail: [TGIdeas@speedsite.com](mailto:TGIdeas@speedsite.com)

Homepage: <http://www.thegreatideas.org/>

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.  
Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.