

# WHY I AM NOT A MORAL RELATIVIST

FRANCIS J. BECKWITH

In his influential work, *The Closing of the American Mind*, the late philosopher Allan Bloom made the observation that “there is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative. . . . The students, of course, cannot defend their opinion. It is something with which they have been indoctrinated.”<sup>1</sup> Bloom was talking about both *moral* relativism and *epistemological* relativism. The latter is the view that there is no such thing as objective truth, that knowledge is relative to one’s self, culture, and/or point of view. This type of relativism will be addressed in the next chapter. In this chapter, however, I will focus on moral relativism, a view that is not limited to indoctrinated college freshmen but is dominant in North American culture.

Moral relativism is the view that when it comes to questions of morality, there are no absolutes and no objective right or wrong; moral rules are merely personal preferences and/or the result of one’s cultural, sexual, or ethnic orientation. The fact that one believes there are exceptions or, to be more precise, exemptions to moral rules does not make one a moral relativist. For example, many people who believe lying is wrong nonetheless believe it is not wrong to lie in order to protect someone’s life. These people are not moral relativists, for to permit certain exemptions to a rule one must first acknowledge the general validity of the rule. The moral relativist rejects the idea that any such moral rules exist at all.

Many people see relativism as necessary for promoting tolerance, nonjudgmentalism, and inclusiveness, for they think if one believes one’s moral position is correct and others’ incorrect, one is closed-minded and intolerant. They typically consider moral relativism the indispensable cornerstone of our pluralistic and modern democratic society. Unless we all embrace relativism, they fear we will likely revert to a moralistically medieval culture.

In this chapter, we will see why the arguments for relativism fail and why relativism itself cannot live up to its own reputation. But why, you may ask, is a critical evaluation of relativism important to the case for the Christian faith? First, Christianity teaches that

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<sup>1</sup> Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 25.

there are objective moral norms that apply to all persons in all places and at all times.<sup>2</sup> Relativism says that there are no such norms. If relativism is true, therefore, Christianity must be false. But if relativism is incorrect, Christianity cannot be dismissed on the grounds that it affirms objective moral norms. Second, if moral norms exist, then materialism as a worldview is false, because moral norms are nonmaterial things.<sup>3</sup> If materialism is false, then other nonmaterial things such as God, angels, and souls cannot be ruled out on the grounds that they are not material. Thus, the falsity of materialism helps support the truth of Christianity. Ultimately, the claim “I am not a moral relativist” is not based on the fact that I am a Christian. Rather, I am a Christian at least in part because I am convinced that moral relativism is completely false.

In this chapter, I will first briefly discuss how moral relativism has affected our ability to engage in moral discourse. Then I will present and critique two arguments for moral relativism. Finally, I will argue that given the existence of objective moral norms, the God of theism is the best explanation of the source of their existence.

## MORAL RELATIVISM AND MORAL DISCOURSE

Moral relativism has stunted our ability to grasp the nature of moral claims. People in our culture often confuse *preference* claims with *moral* claims or reduce the latter to the former. To understand what I mean by this, consider two statements:<sup>4</sup>

1. I like vanilla ice cream.
2. Killing people without justification is wrong.

The first statement is a preference claim, since it is a description of a person’s subjective taste. It is not a *normative* claim. It is not a claim about what one ought or ought not to do. It is not saying, “Since I like vanilla ice cream, the government ought to coerce you to eat it as well,” or, “Everyone in the world ought to like vanilla ice cream too.” A claim of *subjective* preference tells us nothing about what one *ought* to think or do. For example, if someone were to say, “I like to torture children for fun,” this would tell us nothing about whether it is wrong or right to torture children for fun.

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2 There are many works that defend the notion that the Bible teaches objective moral norms. See, for example, Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Options and Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989).

3 Materialism is the worldview that holds that matter is all that exists. Since the God of the Bible is nonmaterial, if materialism is true, the Christian God does not exist.

4 Hadley Arkes’s work, *First Things: An Inquiry into the First Principles of Morality and Justice* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), was instrumental in helping to better understand the difference between the two statements.

The second claim, however, is quite different. It has little if anything to do with what one likes or dislikes. In fact, one may *prefer* to kill another person without justification and still know that it is morally wrong to do so. This statement is a moral claim. It is not a descriptive claim, for it does not tell us what, why, or how things are, or how a majority of people in fact behave and think. Nor is it a preference claim, for it does not tell us what anyone's subjective preference may be or how one prefers to behave and think. Rather, it is a claim about what persons *ought* to do, which may be contrary to how persons in fact behave and how they prefer to behave.

Unfortunately, the espousal of moral relativism has made it difficult for many people in our culture to distinguish between preference claims and moral claims. Rather than pondering and struggling with arguments for and against a particular moral perspective, people sometimes reduce the disagreement to a question of personal preference or subjective opinion. Take, for example, the issue of whether parents and other concerned citizens have a right to boycott products that are advertised during television programs these citizens find to be morally inappropriate, especially for children. The usual reply to these citizens is, "If you don't like a particular program, you don't have to watch it. You can always change the channel." But does the person who employs this reply really understand what these citizens are saying?

These groups are not merely saying that they don't prefer these programs. In fact, these citizens and their children may actually be tempted to watch these programs; that is, in terms of sheer untutored appetite, they may actually *prefer* these programs, though they still may know these programs are not good for them, just as one may prefer a candy bar but still know it's not good for him or her. To put it another way, these citizens are saying something a bit more subtle and profound than their detractors are likely to recognize let alone admit: These programs convey messages and create a moral climate that will affect others, especially children, in a way that is adverse to the public good. Hence, what troubles these citizens is that *you* and *your children* will not change the channel. Furthermore, it concerns these people that there is probably somewhere in America an unsupervised ten-year-old who is, on a consistent basis, watching late night HBO or listening to radio shock-jock Howard Stern. Most of these people fear that their ten-year-olds, who are not watching or listening to such programs, may have to interact socially with the unsupervised ten-year-old. Others, who may not have young children, are concerned for the declining moral health of their communities, which is sometimes manifested in an increasing level of rudeness, disrespect, incivility, crime, or verbal and physical violence.

There are, in fact, many well-educated and reasonable people who believe that such a community concern is justified, especially in light of what we know about how certain forms of entertainment and media affect people, especially the young. Just as a concern for people's lungs and physical health has resulted in criticism of and reprisals against tobacco companies, concern for people's souls and spiritual health sometimes results in criticisms of and reprisals against different media. Thus, such concerns cannot be relegated to a question of one's personal preference. The real question is whether *any* community or social action is *ever* permissible and would best serve the public good.

Moral relativists, to be consistent, must answer no, while common sense seems to tell us otherwise.

Consider another example: the debate over abortion rights.<sup>5</sup> Many who defend a woman's right to abortion (pro-choicers) sometimes tell those who oppose abortion rights (pro-lifers), "If you don't like abortion, then don't have one." The intent and effect of such rhetoric is to reduce the abortion debate to a mere preference claim. That is, the objective moral rightness or wrongness of abortion (i.e., whether or not it involves killing an innocent human person) is declared, without argument, to be irrelevant. But this is clearly a mistake, for those who oppose abortion do so because they believe that the fetus (during most if not all of a woman's pregnancy) is a human person with a right to life, and it is generally wrong, both objectively and universally, to violate a person's right to life. For this reason, when the pro-lifer hears the pro-choicer tell her that if she doesn't like abortion she doesn't have to have one, it sounds to her as if the pro-choicer is saying, "If you don't like murder, then don't kill any innocent persons." Understandably, the pro-lifer, committed to objective moral norms, finds such rhetoric perplexing as well as unpersuasive. Of course, a number of sophisticated pro-choice advocates are not moral relativists and recognize the error of substituting preference claims for substantive moral debate.<sup>6</sup> But it does seem that in the popular debate, pro-choicers tend to reduce the question of abortion to a question of preference, proving they have been more affected by moral relativism than have their opponents.

## ARGUMENTS FOR MORAL RELATIVISM

Two arguments are often used to defend moral relativism. The first is the argument from cultural and individual differences and the second is the argument from tolerance.

### THE ARGUMENT FROM CULTURAL AND INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

In this argument, the relativist concludes that there are no objective moral norms because cultures and individuals disagree on moral issues. To defend this premise the relativist typically cites a number of examples, such as cross-cultural and intra-cultural differences over the morality of sexual practices, abortion, war, and capital punishment. Hadley Arkes, an opponent of moral relativism, has sardonically observed, "In one society, a widow is burned on the funeral pyre of her husband; in another, she is burned on the beach in Miami. In one society, people complain to the chef about the roast beef, in

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<sup>5</sup> For an overview of the abortion debate from different sides, see Louis P. Pojman and Francis J. Beckwith, eds., *The Abortion Controversy 25 Years After Roe v. Wade: A Reader*, 2d ed. (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Louis P. Pojman, *Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong*, 2d ed. (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1995). Pojman, a supporter of abortion rights, is a critic of moral relativism as well as a defender of moral objectivism. For his defense of the pro-choice position, see Pojman, "Abortion: A Defense of the Personhood Argument," in *Abortion Controversy*, 275–90.

another, they send back the roast beef and eat the chef.”<sup>7</sup> There are at least four problems with the argument from cultural and individual differences.

*Relativism does not follow from disagreement.* The fact that people disagree about something does not mean that there is no truth. For example, if you and I were to disagree on the question of whether the earth is round, our disagreement would certainly not be proof that the earth has no shape. Likewise, the fact that a skinhead (a type of neo-Nazi) and I may disagree on the question of whether we should treat people equally is certainly not sufficient reason to conclude that equality is not an objective moral value. Even if individuals and cultures hold no values in common, it simply does not follow that nobody is ever right or wrong about the correct values. Despite the existence of moral disagreement, it is still quite possible that an individual or an entire culture, such as Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany, are simply mistaken.

If the mere fact of disagreement were sufficient to conclude that objective norms do not exist, we would then have to acknowledge that there is no objectively correct position on such issues as slavery, genocide, and child molestation, for the slave owner, genocidal maniac, and pedophile clearly have an opinion that differs from the one held by those of us who condemn their actions. In the end, moral disagreement is simply a sociological observation that proves nothing about the true nature of morality.

*Disagreement actually counts against relativism.* Suppose, however, that the relativist, despite the logical failure of his case, sticks to his guns and maintains that disagreement over objective norms proves the correctness of relativism. The relativist has set down a principle—disagreement means there is no truth—that unravels his own case. After all, some of us believe that relativism is a mistaken view. We, in other words, disagree with the relativist over the nature of morality. We believe that objective moral norms exist whereas the relativist does not. But according to the relativist’s own principle (i.e., “disagreement means there is no truth”), he ought to abandon his own opinion that relativism is the correct position. To make matters worse for the relativist, his “disagreement” principle is a proposition for which there is no universal agreement and thus on its own grounds must be rejected. As Arkes points out, “My disagreement establishes that the proposition [i.e., disagreement means there is no truth] does not enjoy a universal assent, and by the very terms of the proposition, that should be quite sufficient to determine its own invalidity.”<sup>8</sup>

*Disagreement is overrated.* Although it is true that people and cultures disagree on moral issues, it does not follow that they do not share the same values or that certain moral norms are not binding on all nations at all times and in all places. Take, for example, the Salem witch trials. During colonial days in Massachusetts, certain individuals were put to death as punishment for practicing witchcraft. We do not execute witches today, but not because our moral norms have changed. Rather, we don’t execute witches because we do not believe, as the seventeenth-century residents of Massachusetts did, that the practice of

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<sup>7</sup> Arkes, *First Things*, 149.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

witchcraft has a fatal effect on the community. But suppose we had evidence that the practice of witchcraft affects people in the same way that secondhand cigarette smoke affects nonsmokers. We would alter the practice of our values to take into consideration this factual change. We may set up non-witch sections in restaurants and ban the casting of spells on interstate airplane flights. The upshot of all this is that the good of the community is a value we share with the seventeenth-century residents of Salem, but we simply believe they were factually wrong about the actual effect of witches on the community.<sup>9</sup>

Philosopher James Rachels presents another example of how the knowledge of certain facts may help us understand why it *seems* other people have different values.<sup>10</sup> He points to the Eskimos' practice of infanticide (on primarily female babies). On the surface, this practice seems to show that the Eskimos have a radically different value of human life than we do. And because one's view of human life is so fundamental, it seems to follow from this that moral relativism is correct. Rachels does not agree. He explains that once one realizes that certain factual considerations have made the practice of infanticide a necessary evil for the Eskimos, one sees that the Eskimos' value of human life is not all that different from ours. Writes Rachels:

But suppose we ask why the Eskimos do this. The explanation is not that they have less affection for their children or less respect for human life. An Eskimo family will always protect its babies if conditions permit. But they live in a harsh environment, where food is often in short supply. . . . Infant girls are readily disposed of because, first, in this society the males are the primary food providers—they are the hunters, according to the traditional division of labor—and it is obviously important to maintain a sufficient number of food gatherers. But there is an important second reason as well. Because the hunters suffer a high casualty rate, the adult men who die prematurely far outnumber the women who die early. Thus if male and female infants survived in equal numbers, the female adult population would greatly outnumber the male adult population. Examining the available statistics, one writer concluded that “were it not for female infanticide . . . there would be approximately one-and-a-half times as many females in the average Eskimo local group as there are food-producing males.”

So among the Eskimos, infanticide does not signal a fundamentally different attitude toward children. Instead, it is a recognition that drastic measures are sometimes needed to ensure the family's survival. Even then, however, killing the baby is not the first option considered. Adoption is common; childless couples are especially happy to take a more fertile couple's “surplus.” Killing is only the last resort. I emphasize this in order to show that the raw data of the anthropologists can be misleading; it can make the differences in values between cultures appear greater than they are. The Eskimos' values are not all that

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<sup>9</sup> See C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 26.

<sup>10</sup> See James Rachels, “A Critique of Ethical Relativism,” in *Philosophy: The Quest for Truth*, ed. Louis P. Pojman (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1989), 317–25.

different from our values. It is only that life forces upon them choices that the rest of us do not have to make.<sup>11</sup>

This is not to say that the Eskimos are right or that we should not try to persuade them to believe their practice is wrong. Rather, this example simply shows that so-called moral differences may not really be moral differences at all, after one carefully examines why a certain practice, such as female infanticide, is performed.

Consider again the issue of abortion. The conventional wisdom is that the moral and legal debate over abortion is a dispute between two factions that hold incommensurable value systems. But the conventional wisdom is mistaken, for these factions hold many values in common.

First, each side believes that all human persons possess certain inalienable rights regardless of whether their governments protect these rights. That is why both sides appeal to what each believes is a fundamental right. The pro-life advocate appeals to "life" whereas the pro-choice advocate appeals to "liberty" (or "choice"). Both believe that a constitutional regime, in order to be just, must uphold fundamental rights.

Second, each side believes that its position best exemplifies its opponent's fundamental value. The pro-choice advocate does not deny that life is a value but argues that his position's appeal to human liberty is a necessary ingredient by which an individual can pursue the fullest and most complete life possible.

On the other hand, the pro-life advocate does not eschew liberty. She believes that all human liberty is limited by another human person's right to life. For example, one has a right to freely pursue any goal one believes is consistent with one's happiness, such as attending a Los Angeles Lakers basketball game. One has no right, however, to freely pursue this goal at the expense of another's life or liberty, such as running over pedestrians with one's car so that one can get to the game on time. The pro-life advocate argues that fetuses are persons with a full right to life. Since the act of abortion results in the death of the unborn, abortion, with few exceptions, is not morally justified.

The pro-choice advocate does not deny that human persons have a right to life. He just believes that this right to life is not extended to fetuses since they are not human persons. The pro-life advocate does not deny that people have the liberty to make choices that they believe are in their best interests. She just believes that this liberty does not entail the right to choose abortion since such a choice conflicts with the life, liberty, and interests of another human person (the fetus).<sup>12</sup>

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11 Ibid., 322–23.

12 Sophisticated pro-choice advocates argue that fetuses are not human persons, and for this reason, fetuses do not have a right to life if their life hinders the liberty of a being who is a person (i.e., the pregnant woman). See H. Tristram Englehardt Jr., "The Ontology of Abortion," *Ethics* 84 (1973–74): 217–34; Michael Tooley, *Abortion and Infanticide* (New York: Oxford, 1983); Michael Tooley, "In Defense of Abortion and

Thus, when all is said and done, the debate over abortion is not really about conflicting value systems, for we all generally agree that life and liberty are fundamental values.

*Absurd consequences follow from moral relativism.* First, if it is true that no objective moral norms apply to all persons at all times and in all places, then the following moral judgments must be denied: Mother Teresa was morally better than Adolf Hitler; rape is always wrong; it is wrong to torture babies for fun. Yet to deny that these judgments are universally true certainly seems absurd. Every instinct within us tells us that at least some moral judgments are absolutely correct regardless of what other cultures or individuals may think.

Second, if the relativist claims that morality is relative to the *individual*, what happens when individual moralities conflict? For example, Jeffrey Dahmer's morality apparently permitted him to cannibalize his neighbor; his unfortunate neighbor likely did not share Dahmer's peculiar tastes. What would the relativist suggest be done to resolve this moral conflict between the cannibal and his reluctant dinner? Since nobody's morality is in principle superior, should we then flip a coin or simply conclude that "might makes right"? In addition, if the moral life is no more than a reflection of people's individual tastes, preferences, and orientations, then we have no legitimate basis for telling young people that it is morally wrong to lie, steal, cheat, and kill their newborns.

Third, even if the relativist were to make the more modest claim that morality is not relative to the individual but to the individual's culture (i.e., that one is only obligated to follow the dictates of one's society), other problems follow.

First, the cultural relativist's position is self-refuting. J. P. Moreland explains what it means for a position to be self-refuting:

When a statement fails to satisfy itself (i.e., to conform to its own criteria of validity or acceptability), it is self-refuting. . . . Consider some examples. "I cannot say a word in English" is self-refuting when uttered in English. "I do not exist" is self-refuting, for one must exist to utter it. The claim "there are no

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Infanticide," in *Abortion Controversy*, 209–33; Pojman, "Abortion: A Defense of the Personhood Argument," in *Abortion Controversy*, 275–90; and Mary Ann Warren, "On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion," in *Problem of Abortion*, 2d ed., ed. Joel Feinberg (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1984), 102–19. For critiques of these and other views, see Francis J. Beckwith, *Politically Correct Death: Answering the Arguments for Abortion Rights* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993); Francis J. Beckwith, *Abortion and the Sanctity of Human Life* (Joplin, Mo.: College Press, 2000); Patrick Lee, *Abortion and Unborn Human Life* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996); J. P. Moreland and Scott B. Rae, *Body and Soul* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000); Stephen Schwarz, *The Moral Question of Abortion* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1990); and Don Marquis, "Why Abortion Is Immoral," *The Journal of Philosophy* 86 (April 1989): 183–202.

truths” is self-refuting. If it is false, then it is false. But if it is true, then it is false as well, for in that case there would be no truths, including the statement itself.<sup>13</sup>

How is cultural relativism self-refuting? The supporter of cultural relativism maintains that there are no objective and universal moral norms and for that reason everyone ought to follow the moral norms of his or her own culture. But the cultural relativist is making an absolute and universal moral claim, namely, that everyone is morally obligated to follow the moral norms of his or her own culture. If this moral norm is absolute and universal, then cultural relativism is false. But if this moral norm is neither absolute nor universal, then cultural relativism is still false, for in that case I would not have a moral obligation to follow the moral norms of my culture.

Second, since each of us belongs to a number of different “societies” or “cultures,” there is no way to determine objectively which culture’s norms should be followed when they conflict. For example, suppose a woman named Sheena is a resident of a liberal upscale neighborhood in Hollywood, California, attends a Christian church, and is a partner in a prestigious law firm. In her neighborhood, having an adulterous affair is considered “enlightened,” and those who do not pursue such unions are considered repressed prudes. At her church, however, adultery is condemned as sinful, while at her law firm adultery is neither encouraged nor discouraged. Suppose further that Sheena chooses to commit adultery in the firm’s back office with a fellow churchgoer, Donald, who resides in a conservative neighborhood in which adultery is condemned. The office, it turns out, is adjacent to the church as well as precisely halfway between Sheena’s neighborhood and Donald’s neighborhood. Which society’s morality should apply? If the cultural relativist responds that Sheena is free to choose, then we have regressed to individual relativism, which we have already determined to be absurd.

Third, if morality is reducible to culture, there can be no real moral progress. The only way one can meaningfully say that a culture is getting better or progressing is if there are objective moral norms that exist independently of the progressing culture. There must be some superior moral principles to which the progressing society may draw closer. However, if what is morally good is merely what one’s culture says is morally good, then we can say only that cultural norms *change*, not that society is progressing or getting better. Yet who can reasonably deny that the abolition of slavery in the United States was an instance of genuine moral progress? Did America change for the better, or did it simply change?

In addition, if cultural relativism is true, there can be no true or admirable reformers of culture. Moreland writes:

If [cultural] relativism is true, then it is impossible in principle to have a true moral reformer who changes a society’s code and does not merely bring out what was already implicit in that code. For moral reformers, by definition, *change* a society’s code by arguing that it is somehow morally inadequate. But if [cultural] relativism is true, an act is right if and only if it is in society’s code; so the

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13 J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 92.

reformer is by definition immoral (since he adopts a set of values outside the societycode and attempts to change that code in keeping with these values). It is odd, to say the least, for someone to hold that every moral reformer who ever lived—Moses, Jesus, Gandhi, Martin Luther King—was immoral by definition. Any moral view which implies that is surely false.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, in order to remain consistent, the cultural relativist must deny that real moral progress or real moral reformers exist, for such judgments presuppose the existence of objective and absolute moral norms.

### THE ARGUMENT FROM TOLERANCE

Many people see relativism as necessary for promoting tolerance, nonjudgmentalism, and inclusiveness. If you believe your moral position is correct and others' incorrect, you are viewed as closed-minded and intolerant, even bigoted. They usually base this premise on the well-known differences of opinion on morality between cultures and individuals. The moral relativist embraces the view that one should not judge other cultures and individuals, for to do so would be intolerant. There are at least four problems with this argument, all of which maintain that tolerance (rightly understood) and relativism are actually incompatible with each other.

*Tolerance supports objective morality, not relativism.* Ironically, the call to tolerance by relativists presupposes the existence of at least one nonrelative, universal, and objective norm: tolerance. Bioethicist Tom Beauchamp explains:

If we interpret normative relativism as requiring tolerance of other views, the whole theory is imperiled by inconsistency. The proposition that we ought to tolerate the views of others, or that it is right not to interfere with others, is precluded by the very strictures of the theory. Such a proposition bears all the marks of a non-relative account of moral rightness, one based on, but not reducible to, the cross-cultural findings of anthropologists. . . . But if this moral principle [of tolerance] is recognized as valid, it can of course be employed as an instrument for criticizing such cultural practices as the denial of human rights to minorities and such beliefs as that of racial superiority. A moral commitment to tolerance of other practices and beliefs thus leads inexorably to the abandonment of normative relativism.<sup>15</sup>

If everyone ought to be tolerant, then tolerance is an objective moral norm. Therefore, moral relativism is false. Also, tolerance presupposes that there is something good about being tolerant, such as being able to learn from others with whom one disagrees or to impart knowledge and wisdom to others. But that presupposes objective moral values, namely, that knowledge and wisdom are good things. Moreover, tolerance presupposes that someone may be correct about his or her moral perspective. That is to say, it seems

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14 Ibid., 243.

15 Tom L. Beauchamp, *Philosophical Ethics: An Introduction to Moral Philosophy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982), 42.

that part of the motivation for advocating tolerance is to encourage people to be open to the possibility that one may be able to gain truth and insight (including moral truth and insight) from another who may possess it. If that is the case, then objective moral truths exist that one can learn.

*Relativism is itself a closed-minded and intolerant position.* After all, the relativist dogmatically asserts that there is no moral truth. To illustrate this, consider a dialogue (based loosely on a real-life exchange) between a high school teacher and her student Elizabeth.<sup>16</sup> The teacher instructs her class, “Welcome, students. This is the first day of class, and so I want to lay down some ground rules. First, since no one has the truth about morality, you should be open-minded to the opinions of your fellow students.”

The teacher recognizes the raised hand of Elizabeth, who asks, “If nobody has the truth, isn’t that a good reason for me not to listen to my fellow students? After all, if nobody has the truth, why should I waste my time listening to other people and their opinions? What’s the point? Only if somebody has the truth does it make sense to be open-minded. Don’t you agree?”

“No, I don’t. Are you claiming to know the truth? Isn’t that a bit arrogant and dogmatic?”

“Not at all. Rather I think it’s dogmatic as well as arrogant to assert that no single person on earth knows the truth. After all, have you met every person in the world and quizzed them exhaustively? If not, how can you make such a claim? Also, I believe it is actually the opposite of arrogance to say that I will alter my opinions to fit the truth whenever and wherever I find it. And if I happen to think that I have good reason to believe I do know the truth and would like to share it with you, why wouldn’t you listen to me? Why would you automatically discredit my opinion before it is even uttered? I thought we were supposed to listen to everyone’s opinion.”

“This should prove to be an interesting semester.”

Another student blurts out, “Ain’t that the truth,” provoking the class to laughter.

*Relativism is judgmental, exclusivist, and partisan.* This may seem an odd thing to say since the relativist asserts that his viewpoint is nonjudgmental, inclusivist, and neutral when it comes to moral beliefs. But consider the following.

First, the relativist says that if you believe in objective moral truth, you are wrong. Hence, relativism is judgmental. Second, it follows that relativism excludes your beliefs from the realm of legitimate options. Thus, relativism is exclusivist. And third, because relativism is exclusive, all nonrelativists are automatically not members of the “correct thinking” party. So relativism is partisan.

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<sup>16</sup> This dialogue is presented in slightly different form in Francis J. Beckwith and Gregory P. Kousser, *Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 74.

Tolerance makes sense only within the framework of a moral order, for it is within such a framework that one can morally justify tolerating some things while not tolerating others. Tolerance without a moral framework, or absolute tolerance, leads to a dogmatic relativism, and thus to an intolerance of any viewpoint that does not embrace relativism.

*The “tolerance” of moral relativism either condones barbarism or is self-refuting.* As I pointed out above, some moral relativists embrace tolerance because they believe that such a posture is appropriate given the diversity of moral and cultural traditions in the world today. Humanist author Xiaorong Li points out the fallacy in this reasoning:

But the existence of moral diversity does no more to justify that we ought to respect different moral values than the existence of disease, hunger, torture, slavery do to justify that we ought to value them. Empirical claims thus are not suitable as the basis for developing moral principles such as “Never judge other cultures” or “We ought to tolerate different values.” . . .

What if the respected or tolerated culture disrespects and advocates violence against individuals who dissent? When a girl fights to escape female genital circumcision or foot-binding or arranged marriage, when a widow does not want to be burned to death to honor her dead husband, the relativist is obligated to “respect” the cultural or traditional customs from which the individuals are trying to escape. In so doing, the relativist is not merely disrespecting the individual but effectively endorsing the moral ground for torture, rape and murder. *On moral issues, ethical relativists can not possibly remain neutral—they are committed either to the individual or to the dominant force within a culture.*

Relativists have made explicit one central value—equal respect and tolerance of other ways of life, which they insist to be absolute and universal. *Ethical relativism is thus repudiated by itself.*<sup>17</sup>

## GOD AND MORALITY

Given the failure of moral relativism, it must be the case that objective and universal moral norms exist.<sup>18</sup> But if they exist, what is their source? Where do they come from? I will argue that the God of theism best explains the existence of universal and objective moral norms. The case I will make here is certainly not irrefutable proof of God’s existence. It is more like a prosecutor’s legal argument for a defendant’s guilt based on circumstantial evidence. In other words, given the “fingerprints” one finds on moral norms when one reflects on their nature, they are best explained as the result of the hand

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17 Xiaorong Li, “Postmodernism and Universal Human Rights: Why Theory and Reality Don’t Mix,” *Free Inquiry* 18, no. 4 (fall 1998): 28.

18 The argument I am presenting in this section was developed by Gregory P. Koukl in *Relativism*, chapters 14 and 15. My presentation in this chapter differs slightly from Koukl’s version of the argument. The argument also has affinities with C. S. Lewis’s argument in *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), chaps. 1–5.

and mind of the God of theism. Although one may reject this conclusion (i.e., one may conclude that “reasonable doubt” exists), it is difficult to conceive of a better explanation for the evidence taken as a whole. In the words of philosopher Paul Copan, “Objective moral values are quite at home in a theistic universe. Given God’s existence, moral realism is natural. But given an atheistic universe . . . , objective morality—along with its assumptions of human dignity, rights, and moral responsibility—is unnatural and surprising and ‘queer.’ ”<sup>19</sup>

### THE NATURE OF MORALITY

Given the existence of moral norms, there are some observations we can make about them. First, they are known, for if they were not known, then we would have to be moral skeptics. The above critique of moral relativism, however, shows that moral skepticism is not an option.

Second, moral norms are not physical. They have no physical properties such as extension, weight, height, and they do not consist of chemicals, particles, or other parts that can be measured by scientific instruments. We do not discover them by using our sense organs; rather, we encounter them through introspection and reflection. Thus, if moral rules exist and they are not physical, then materialism as a worldview is false.

Third, moral norms are a form of communication, an activity in which one mind through statements conveys meaning to another mind. Moral norms are found in imperatives (e.g., “One ought to keep one’s promises”), commands (e.g., “Keep your promises”), and descriptions (e.g., “Keeping promises is good”).

Fourth, there is an incumbency to moral norms. As Gregory Koukl puts it, moral norms “have a force we can actually feel *prior* to any behavior. This is called the incumbency, the ‘oughtness’ of morality. . . . It appeals to our will, compelling us to act in a certain way, though we may disregard its force and choose not to obey.”<sup>20</sup>

Fifth, when we break a significant and clear moral rule, it is usually accompanied by feelings of painful guilt and sometimes shame, for we are cognizant of our moral failure and realize we deserve to be punished. Only sociopaths succeed in overcoming their conscience completely.

### THE SOURCE OF MORALITY

Moral norms, therefore, are known nonmaterial realities that are a form of communication for which we have a sense of incumbency and about which we feel painful guilt when we violate them. I believe there are only three possible sources of

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<sup>19</sup> Paul Copan, “Can Michael Martin Be a Moral Realist?: *Sic et Non*,” *Philosophia Christi* series 2, 1, no. 2 (1999): 58.

<sup>20</sup> Koukl, *Relativism*, 166.

these moral norms: (1) They are an illusion; (2) they exist but are accidents, a product of chance; or (3) they are the product of an intelligence.

*Morality is an illusion.* This, of course, is the position of the relativist. As we have seen in this chapter, however, this position fails. Morality, therefore, is real; it is not an illusion.

*Moral norms are accidents, products of chance.* If moral norms are products of chance, then they are the result of unguided evolution. But this does not seem adequate, for if moral norms have no mind behind them, then there is no justification to obey them. Consider this illustration: If while playing Scrabble the letters randomly spell, “Go to Baltimore,” should I obey the command, buy a plane ticket, make hotel reservations, and/or take up temporary residence in Baltimore? Of course not, for “the command” is a chance-created phrase and is thus really no command at all. As Koukl points out, “Commands are communications between two minds. Chance might conceivably create the appearance of a moral rule, but there can be no command if no one is speaking.” A command created by accident “can be safely ignored.”<sup>21</sup>

Suppose, however, that an evolutionist replies that morality exists because it is necessary for survival. According to this view, moral rules against adultery, murder, stealing, and so on are the result of the forces of natural selection “choosing” those genes that perpetuate traits that are more conducive to the preservation of the human species. In the words of Robert Wright:

If within a species there is variation among individuals in their hereditary traits, and some traits are more conducive to survival and reproduction than others, then those traits will (obviously) become more widespread within the population. The result (obviously) is that the species’ aggregate pool of hereditary traits changes.

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Behavioral patterns that help sustain these species-preserving traits are part of what we call “morality.” There are several problems with this viewpoint.

First, since helping the weak, the genetically marred, and the needy are not evolutionarily helpful (i.e., they do not advance the “survival of the fittest”), why is it that we have a sense of duty and incumbency to help those less fortunate than ourselves? Suppose the evolutionist answers that we would not have this sense of duty and incumbency unless it were helpful to human evolution. That is, it must be helpful even if we do not know exactly how. There are at least two problems with this answer. (1) The question we are asking is whether evolution can *explain* all our moral senses. It is circular reasoning to presuppose that whatever moral senses we have must be the result of evolution. (2) Because it is clear that not every human being has a moral sense that he or she has a duty and incumbency to help those less fortunate, on what grounds could the evolutionist say

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21 Ibid., 167.

22 Robert Wright, *The Moral Animal—Why We Are the Way We Are: The New Science of Evolutionary Psychology* (New York: Pantheon, 1994), 23.

that these human beings are mistaken in their moral viewpoint? After all, people who lack this moral sense have existed all over the globe for generations, and if they too are the products of evolution, perhaps having such people in our population is necessary for the preservation of the species. If that is the case, then “moral sense” is personally relative and is not universally binding. But this is pure relativism, and as we have seen, it fails as a moral theory. On the other hand, suppose the evolutionist bites the bullet and maintains that those who lack the moral sense to see that they have an obligation to those weaker than themselves are morally wrong regardless of what moral sense they may feel. Then there is a morality above evolution by which we can make moral judgments about the moral senses of different segments of our population that resulted from unguided evolution. Thus, evolution lacks explanatory power in accounting for morality.

Second, evolution is concerned only with the sorts of *behavior* that are conducive to the preservation of the species. But morality is more than just behavior, for it includes, among other things, motive and intent. In fact, a moral judgment is incomplete without taking these into consideration, for one can be immoral without any behavior, simply on the basis of motive and intent. For example, I can intend to carry out a murder and by my sloth or incompetence fail to do so. My bad intentions alone are clearly immoral. One can also be immoral simply on the basis of motive and intent even if the behavior has “good” results. For example, if I intend to trip someone in order to harm them, but it results in the person not being hit by a car and thus saving his or her life, the results are good even though what I did was clearly immoral.

“Bad” results may be part of a morally good act simply on the basis of motive and intent. For example, if a surgeon operates on a terminal patient with the intent to remove a cancer, but during the operation the patient dies of cardiac arrest, the surgeon has not acted immorally. Since evolution, at best, can only *describe* what behaviors are conducive to the preservation of the species and does not address the role of motive and intent in evaluating those behaviors, evolution is an inadequate explanation for the existence of moral norms.

Third, the evolutionary explanation of morality is merely *descriptive*. That is to say, it merely tells us what behaviors in the past may have been conducive to the survival of the species and why I may have on occasion moral feelings to act consistently with those behaviors. But evolution cannot tell me whether I ought to act on those feelings in the present and in the future. Granted, I am grateful that people in the past behaved in ways that made my existence possible. But why should I emulate only those behaviors that many people today say are “good”? After all, some people in the past raped, stole, and murdered. And I know of many people today who have feelings to rape, steal, and murder. Perhaps these behaviors are just as important for my existence and the preservation of the species as the “good” behaviors. Unless there is a morality above the morality of evolution, it is difficult to see how one can distinguish between morally good and bad actions if both types may have been conducive to the preservation of the species.

*Moral rules are the product of intelligence.* Since moral norms are neither illusory nor the product of chance, only one option remains: They have their source in an intelligent

being. As C. S. Lewis explained in *Mere Christianity*, the existence of moral law implies a moral *lawgiver*. But what sort of intelligence is this being, this lawgiver?

It must be the sort of being who could be the ground of morality. It could not be a contingent intelligence, one whose existence and moral authority is dependent upon something else outside itself, for in order to be the *ground* of morality, a being must not receive its existence and moral authority from another, for that other being, if it is not contingent, would then be the ground of morality. Moreover, the source of morality must be the sort of being who has the moral authority to enforce universal moral norms. Therefore, the source of morality must be a self-existent, perfectly good being whose realm of authority is the entire universe. It seems fitting to call such a being “God.”

## CONCLUSION

Moral relativism is a philosophical failure. The two main arguments for moral relativism—the argument from disagreement and the argument from tolerance—are seriously flawed in numerous ways. Given the failure of moral relativism, we must conclude that objective moral norms do exist. Since they exist, morality cannot be an illusion, and if it is not an illusion, it is either a product of unguided evolution (i.e., chance) or a self-existent mind. We have seen that the second option clearly makes more sense. Thus, the objective moral norms that exist are best explained by a being we call God.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Geisler, N. L., & Hoffman, P. K. (2001). *Why I am a Christian : Leading thinkers explain why they believe* (Page 15). Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books.