

DO YOU BELIEVE?
A BOOK SERIES FROM RATIO CHRISTI

IS RELATIVISM ABSOLUTELY TRUE?

*WHY "YOUR TRUTH & MY TRUTH"
THINKING IS INCONSISTENT,
SELECTIVE, & UNLIVABLE*

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 RATIO
CHRISTI

FAITH & REASON are at odds in our culture. For many, faith has come to mean little more than wishful thinking and blind belief. Such a concept is completely foreign to the pages of Scripture and historical Christianity. As Edward Feser notes, “In short, reason tells us that there is a God and that he has revealed such-and-such a truth; faith is then a matter of believing what reason has shown God to have revealed. In that sense faith is not only not at odds with reason but is grounded in reason.”

WHAT IS RATIO CHRISTI?

Ratio Christi, Latin for “the reason of Christ,” wants to help reverse this trend of anti-intellectual Christianity. We organize apologetics clubs at colleges, universities, and even for high school groups in order to strengthen the faith of Christian students and faculty and challenge the rampant atheism and secularism on most campuses. Our mission is to fill the intellectual gap, to make Christianity something worth thinking about, both personally and in the public square.

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Ratio Christi isn’t just another apologetics organization. We use our theological training to share the Gospel on college and university campuses across the globe. We reach the people that nobody else can – and we need your help.

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INTRODUCTION

At the 2018 Golden Globe awards, former talk show host Oprah Winfrey said that “speaking *your* truth is the most powerful tool we all have.” She was chiming in about the “Me Too” movement and the importance of believing women who claim they have been sexually assaulted. While we should take such claims seriously, we have to ask: “What does ‘your truth’ even mean?” What happens when “your truth” differs from “my truth”? Why should we believe one over the other? Is truth just a matter of *perspective or opinion* or *preference or feeling*? And why should we favor one person’s perspective over against another’s? How do we decide?

Perhaps conflict-avoidance is behind a lot of the “your truth” thinking. In 2016, a five foot, nine inch adult American white male interviewed students at the University of Washington.¹ He asked them: “What if I told you I was Chinese? Or six-foot five? Or a woman?” Some students affirmed them by saying, “Good for you!” Others weren’t so sure. They hesitated, but they figured it’s better to be nice and affirming than to disagree with him. To take a different view would seem mean and intolerant, wouldn’t it?² Who am *I* to say that someone else is wrong? The late educator Allan Bloom described this mind-set well: “Conflict is the evil we most want to avoid.”³

And if you are a Christian, and you talk about Jesus being the “only way” to salvation, others may consider you arrogant and intolerant—which brings us back to Oprah. She claimed that there couldn’t be just one way. Rather, there are “millions of ways” to what people call “God.”⁴ That seems to be the more “accepting” and “tolerant” way, and it seems to avoid conflict, at least on the surface. This, of course, does raise questions about authority: if we have to choose, do we go with *Jesus* or with *Oprah* as the more reliable spiritual guide?

This is the world of relativism—the notion that *a belief or an idea can be true for one person or culture and its opposite be true for another*. One’s belief is *relative* to that individual’s feelings, circumstances, or culture. For example, I may believe that adultery is wrong, but it’s not true for all people. Though this view of relativism is *common*, it’s not *common-sensical*. It’s widely *accepted*, but it’s *not accepting* of criticism. It seems to be so *open*, but it

is *closed-minded*. It claims that *all* beliefs are just opinions—except *that* opinion that all beliefs are just opinions.

In this booklet, we'll explore the claim that truth and morality are relative. In our brief journey, we'll look at a number of points to help bring clarity to matters of truth, reality, knowledge, and morality. As we'll see, one inescapable reality is that of *authority*. The relativist doesn't accept any external authority or any authority statements about truth, morality, or God, but the relativist *acts* as her own authority. As it turns out, taking an authoritative stance on truth, morality, and God is inescapable. The question is: *Who* turns out to be the most reliable source of authority?

TRUTH IS A MATCHUP WITH REALITY, WHICH IS UNCONSTRUCTED & INESCAPABLE

What Is Truth?

If a statement, idea, or a story is true, what *makes* it true? The answer is quite simple and intuitive: *Reality* makes something true. (In philosophy, the study of ultimate reality—what is really real—is called *metaphysics*.) *Truth is a matchup with the way things really are*. If I claim that the earth is flat, that the moon is made of cheese, and that Washington DC is the capital of France, I am saying something *false*. Why? Because it doesn't match up with the way things really are. What is true corresponds to reality—like a socket wrench fitting onto a bolt. If we deny this truth-reality correspondence, we will say something that's confused and self-contradictory. How so? Because we are still holding to a belief that we think matches up with the way things really are. In other words, to say that the truth is something other than a “matchup with reality” is to make a claim that matches up with reality.

Reality: Fixed or Constructed or Inaccessible?

Some might challenge the idea that there is any such thing as a fixed reality. They might claim that reality is simply a human construct. (This view is known as anti-realism—that truth or reality are dependent on human thought, language, and other cultural forces.) This is to view reality like a wet lump of clay that we humans shape in any way we want. Others might insist that reality—if it even exists—is inaccessible and that the realm of reality is closed off to us—impenetrable, utterly unknowable. So let's briefly address these two claims.

CLAIM 1: “REALITY IS A CONSTRUCT.” As we reflect on what is real,

our everyday experience can help get us started. For one thing, a world exists outside of our own minds: a world containing other human beings who have wills and agendas different than our own; a world containing stars like the sun that warms the Earth and causes plants to grow; a world with gravity and other forces of nature that set limits to what our bodies can do; a world of traffic jams, nations in crisis, sickness, disease, and eventually death for all of us. What we note about this outside world is that it can't be self-constructed because it keeps getting in our way: we find our capacities to accomplish what we want, hemmed in by a host of things outside our control; we find ourselves unable to meet needs, fulfill desires, or realize our aspirations; in short, we find ourselves bumping into a reality that is definitively NOT of our making.

A deeper problem is that those who say reality is a construct are saying at least *something* about reality that can't be constructed: they are saying *the one unconstructed thing about reality is that it is constructible by human minds*. Even if one were able to shape reality—like a wet lump of clay— then “shapeability” would be the definitive state of reality; you cannot escape some kind of unchangeable reality.

Let me add just a bit more on this. The late philosopher Richard Rorty allegedly claimed that “truth is what our peers will let us get away with saying.”⁵ So if one can get away with cheating on income taxes, then it's true or okay for them to do so, but if the government finds out about it, then it's no longer true or okay. But this, of course, means that truth can change from day to day. Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga points out the absurdity of this whole idea by offering these suggestions:

*...if we all let each other get away with saying that there just isn't any such thing as AIDS, then on this Rorty-esque view it would be true that there isn't any such thing as AIDS; and if it were true that there is no such thing as AIDS, then there would be no such thing. So all we have to do to get rid of AIDS, or cancer, or poverty is let each other get away with saying there is no such thing. That seems a much easier way of dealing with them than the more conventional methods, which involve all that money, energy, and time.*⁶

Let's move on to the second claim.

CLAIM 2: “REALITY IS INACCESSIBLE TO US.” The philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) claimed that we can't know *the world as it is* (the “noumenal” realm). All we can know is *the world as it appears to us* (the “phenomenal” realm). Like Kant, many postmodern thinkers also hold that reality is inaccessible to us. For example, Sabina Levibond refers to “our *lack of access* to any distinction between those of our beliefs which are *actually true*, and those which are merely *held true* by us.”⁷ But how does someone *know* that there even is a reality inaccessible to us? Think about that: to know this is to know at least *something* about reality—namely, that it is characterized by

being inaccessible to humans. But how would one know this without having at least some access to that reality? Those who say that we humans are merely imprisoned in a world of appearances and are cut off from reality strangely miss the bigger picture: the only way they can hold this view is to forget that they are in the same prison as everyone else.⁸

Both these claims show that, however we try to explain away reality, we will always be assuming some reality. To say reality is a construct is to know that something about it is “constructible.” To say it’s unknowable is to *know* something about it.

Truth, Tolkien, and Temperature

Some thinkers claim that for a belief or story or statement to be true, it must be coherent (the “coherentist” view). Others claim that if something “works,” its “working” is what makes it true (the “pragmatist” view). Let’s take a look at these two notions of truth—coherentism and pragmatism—more closely.

COHERENTISM A story or statement or belief *isn’t* true simply because it’s coherent or “rational.” After all, J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy refers to Middle Earth, orcs, hobbits, and elves, and it tells a marvelous, coherent story. But Middle Earth and its creatures don’t exist in reality. While we can learn some valuable lessons and moral truths from Tolkien’s work, this coherent world is fiction and not reality. It’s not describing historical events. What’s more, we can imagine two or more such stories that are coherent within themselves but offer conflicting viewpoints or scenarios (e.g., contrasting *Lord of the Rings* with the *Star Wars* or *Harry Potter* series). Conflicting coherent scenarios or stories may all be false, but they can’t all be true. Why not? They don’t match up with the fixed reality that is. So while coherence is a necessary *component* of truth, it doesn’t *constitute* truth. Something more than coherence or rationally fitting together is needed to make something true.

PRAGMATISM What about those who claim that truth is simply “whatever works”—the pragmatist view of truth? “Whatever floats your boat” or even “Whatever makes you happy” reflects this kind of pragmatic view. We’ve already mentioned the pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty, who is associated with the statement that “truth is what your peers let you get away with saying.” That is, if what I claim to be true seems to work just fine for me and no one is challenging me on it, then why not just call it “truth”? The problem here is at least twofold.

First, something that is *true* will often *work*, but that’s different from saying that truth is whatever works. For example, it’s true that adultery is immoral, and the practical damage adultery does to relationships and the upheaval that it brings is fairly apparent to us. But what if an adulterous couple with no conscience seems to get away with their

regular sexual trysts and no one finds out about it? Their adultery may “work,” but it reflects a false view of moral reality. Or a friend can get away with lying to you, and you may never find out about it, but if you did, you would know something was deeply wrong, and you would feel betrayed.

Here’s a more mundane example. If the current temperature at the North Pole is -20 degrees Fahrenheit (almost -29 degrees Celsius), it may be utterly irrelevant to virtually anyone’s practical life. This accurate temperature reading may not make anything “work” in a person’s life. It may not motivate me to be, say, an athlete or an explorer. But the temperature reading is still true. Why? It matches up with the reality that the temperature is well below the freezing point for water.

The point is that truth is objective, and it doesn’t matter what I believe or know or what works. Truth doesn’t depend on my deep sincerity. Whatever is going on in my mind or my life doesn’t change the polar temperatures. Of course, we may *experience* the weather differently based on our own biological “thermometer.” For example, wolverines can endure subzero temperatures quite well. They don’t seem to mind such cold temperatures, but most people would find it unbearably cold. But, again, the temperature would still be the same in our scenario. If the *temperature* is *truly* -20 degrees Fahrenheit, then it is so for both the wolverine and human beings, however different they may *feel* the weather.

While it’s become commonplace to deny truth and reality, what we’ve observed here is that truth and reality are inescapable. If we deny them, we will affirm them in one way or another. There are some fixed, undeniable realities, and once we recognize that fact, we are in a position to make the necessary adjustments to reality and not expect truth and reality to conform to us and our preferences.

“MY TRUTH” & “YOUR TRUTH” THINKING RESULTS IN TRIVIALITY OR CONTRADICTION

“My Truth” and “Your Truth”?

We’ve seen good reasons to believe that truth is *objective*. Truth, which is anchored in reality, is independent of human thinking or feeling or preference. It’s not “my truth” or “your truth.” While some people are members of the Flat Earth Society, we don’t say that their flat-Earth-ism is “true for them” or that this is “their truth.” What is *objective*—like the round Earth—is true for all people, even if they hold to their false belief. And even if people in the past believed certain problematic views, that view wasn’t “true for them” back then either.

Consider the 1857 Dred Scott Supreme Court decision—an event that was a terrible blot on U.S. history. The outcome was that someone Black was deemed to be two-thirds of a person. That became the “law of the land” for a time. Did that mean that this decision was “true for them” back then? Blacks—whether enslaved or in free states—knew better. And when the Civil Rights Act of 1964 became the law of the land, the dignity and worth of Black Americans didn’t suddenly become “true.” They had dignity all along. That moral truth wasn’t *invented* or relative to one time period versus another. It was *discovered*.

This invented-discovered distinction illustrates the difference between *objective* and *relative*. *Objective* is the opposite of *relative*. A belief or idea is *relative* if it is person-dependent, culture-dependent, feeling-dependent, or history-dependent. The belief is relative to a person or culture or feeling or period of history. What is objective is true independent of person, culture, and so on. For example, we’re familiar with the slogan, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” Of course, it’s good to be flexible and adapt to other cultures when we travel. But keep in mind that in the Greco-Roman world, unwanted children were abandoned, left exposed to the elements to die. This was wrong, and we would be wrong to imitate the Romans in this practice.

Consider this modern-day example to illustrate the difference between *objective* and *relative*: a 69-year-old Dutchman wanted to have his birth certificate officially changed by 20 years because he *felt* like he was 49 years of age. (Incidentally, he confessed that he didn't get any hits on his Tinder dating app by posting 69 as his age!) Thankfully, a commonsensical judge ruled on the side of reality (objective) rather than mere feeling (relative) and denied the man's request.⁹ One's birthdate doesn't depend on how one feels. A person can *look* younger than she is, but she can't *be* younger than she is. *Reality* confers truth on something. Reality is the truth-maker.

Indeed, we can't escape the fact that we keep bumping up against realities that we can't change and that don't depend on us—traffic jams, diseases, earthquakes, hurricanes, death. We don't *invent* reality. We *discover* it. As we've said, if we *deny* the truth, we are actually *affirming* the truth. We're saying that it's *true* that there is no *truth*—which is a contradiction and a confusion of thought.

Ice Cream and The Relativist's Dilemma

You probably have your favorite ice cream flavor. Mine is Ben & Jerry's New York Super Fudge Chunk. It has a base of chocolate ice cream with white and dark fudge chunks, pecans, walnuts, and fudge-covered almonds—delicious! Now *you*, the reader, may really enjoy some other ice cream flavor—mint chocolate chip, cookie dough, cookies and cream. I'm glad you can enjoy this, and I don't think you're immoral or showing bad judgment if you enjoy another flavor. But maybe you just haven't *tasted* New York Super Fudge Chunk!

When we're talking about ice cream flavors, we're dealing with *preferences*. This is a lot different from racism, concentration camps, and genocide—deeply moral issues that we ought not to approve of. It's all wrong to say, "You may prefer racism, but I prefer being non-racist." If someone prefers genocide, we would consider this person a great danger—or, at best, a person who needs to be institutionalized or cordoned off from others.

Let's stick with this "ice cream preference" idea for a bit longer. Consider the relativist's view that truth is all a matter of *preference* or *opinion* or *perspective*. When truth is relativized and there is no truth for all people, then what you are left with is a viewpoint that is either trivial or self-contradictory. By "trivial" I mean that to treat weighty issues as if preferences—as if choices of ice cream—is to trivialize them. By "self-contradictory" I mean that when the relativist asserts her viewpoint, defends, or debates it, she is arguing for its objective truth—she is arguing that it is not merely a preference. This is a contradiction, is it not? The result is that the relativist's view is either *trivial* or *self-contradictory*. That is, to take the view of a relativist is to believe something that is *insignificant*—like your own ice cream preference—or *anti-relativistic* (that is, objective or absolute). How does this work?

The relativist claims that his view is *just his* view, but if he gets upset or angry or tries to debate the correctness of his view, then he clearly believes his view is true for all others, not just for himself. That is, if you disagree and debate with the relativist about truth being a matter of preference or perspective, the relativist believes you are *really wrong*. In other words, the self-proclaimed relativist isn't acting like one; the relativist doesn't believe his relativism. He wants to persuade you to believe it too!

Consider the statement: "Truth is just a matter of perspective."

Trivial: The relativist's viewpoint is just as much a preference or perspective as anyone else's. So why believe it? (This is like saying you prefer your own ice cream flavor.)

Self-contradictory: The relativist believes his perspective is universally true. And if you disagree with his perspective, you're wrong. (This is like saying another person ought to prefer your ice cream flavor too!)

Ultimately, relativism relativizes itself.

The British philosopher of religion Don Cupitt claims that "reality has now become a mere bunch of disparate and changing interpretations."¹⁰ But we have to ask if this is just Cupitt's interpretation. How does he know this is all there is to reality? Why does he think he has the inside scoop that none of us has?

Think of the following quotation by philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche: "There are no facts, only interpretations." Scholars will debate whether Nietzsche was being playful and ironic; others say he was denying universal truth.¹¹ But for our purposes, let's assume he is being a relativist (which Nietzsche was not). If the relativist says, "There are no facts, only interpretations," we can ask, "Is that a *fact*, or only an *interpretation*?" If it's a *fact* (like the current temperature at the North Pole), then interpretations don't undermine the actual temperature. If it's only an *interpretation*, then why pay attention to it?

The late philosopher Roger Scruton stated in his book *Modern Philosophy*: "A writer who says that there are no truths, or that all truth is 'merely relative,' is asking you not to believe him. So don't."¹²

Why Believe Anything at All?

This leaves us with an interesting question: *Why believe anything at all?* The quick—and obvious answer—is this: the reason we ought to believe something is *because it is true*—not because we *prefer* it, *like* it, or *feel comfortable* with it. The truth often has a hard edge to it. If truth is truth, it must exclude something—namely, *error*. As we've observed, the truth is that lots of uncomfortable things come our way: we get terminal cancer, we get laid off from a job, our bank account has no more money in it. We don't *like* these things,

but we must accept this reality and live in accordance with what we can't change.

Here's a problem that only encourages relativism, which often boils down to *not wanting to say anyone is wrong*. Compared to any generation of the past, we live in an age of safety-ism. Many in the rising generation believe the following ideas: *What doesn't kill you makes you weaker* (rather than stronger). *Always trust your feelings*. *Life is a battle between good and evil people*. If we believe these things, we'll want to live in protected, conflict-free environments. But this contributes to weakening our intellectual, social, and emotional lives. Any conflict of ideas becomes a trigger. Free speech traumatizes certain university students. But catering to this mindset makes it harder for us to become autonomous adults, to deal with challenges, to learn character-building lessons from facing life's trials.¹³

What about us? Do we believe only what makes us comfortable? Do we refuse to discuss opposing ideas—ideas that may challenge our thinking and potentially call us to revise our beliefs? Do we reject the free exchange of ideas on a university campus? Do we refuse to listen to any beliefs that don't confirm our own biases? I came across a sign posted on the campus of Colorado State University that read, "*If you (or someone you know) are affected by a free speech event on campus, call your parents and ask them to come and take you home. You're not ready for university yet.*"

A lot of relativists believe in rights *but only on their own terms*—the right not to have anyone disagree with them. But if we believe in rights like free speech, human rights, and civil rights, where do these rights come from? What grounds those rights? If a person is a relativist, the idea of rights is meaningless. Since truth is relative, the practical result is that those who have the power can simply trample on any who stand in their way, whether they are relativists or not. But we'll talk about this more in a later chapter.

TRUTH IS ESSENTIAL TO KNOWLEDGE, & HAVING GENUINE KNOWLEDGE HAS PRACTICAL RELEVANCE

Truth, Belief, and Knowledge

Before getting into discussions of loaded words like *judging* and *tolerance* as definitions of morality, we should consider something basic: what is the relationship of truth to knowledge? And why is knowledge important? Of course, like truth and reality, knowledge is inescapable. As we've seen, to deny the truth is to assume it; in essence, a person says that "it's *true* that there is no truth." Likewise, to say that you *can't know* is to say that you *know* you can't know, which is self-contradictory. It's very much like the person who says, in perfect English, "I can't speak a word of English." Or it's like someone who wants you to believe her when she says, "Don't believe a word I'm saying." Or, further, consider the authoritative-sounding bumper sticker that commands you to "question authority." Who is the authority behind the person who says "question authority"?

What is *knowledge*? We can talk about three kinds of knowledge—personal, procedural, and propositional. *Personal* knowledge has to do with knowing a person rather than being aware of facts about that person. We can know facts about someone, but that doesn't mean we know them. *Procedural* knowledge involves knowing how to do something, having a knack or a skill for, say, fixing things or drawing pictures or programming video games. Finally, *propositional* knowledge has to do with truth: propositions deal with *true* or *false* statements. "Snow is white" is a true proposition. "Birds are human beings" is a false proposition. Our focus will be on this last type of knowledge—*propositional*.

The ancient philosopher Plato recognized that knowledge includes three components: it is (a) a *belief* that is (b) *true* and that (c) *has a reason* or *justification* or *is warranted*. Let's look at this a bit more closely:

(a) **Belief:** To know something requires *believing* it. If I say that I *know* that the

earth is round but I don't really *believe* that it is, I should get some psychiatric help. Knowing requires believing. But there's more.

(b) True: If I claim to know something, then what I claim to know can't be a falsehood. If I say that I *know* the earth is flat, that's a problem. Why? Because the earth *isn't* flat. Knowledge requires that a belief be true.

(c) Warranted: Even if I have a true belief, that still isn't a guarantee that I *know* it. I could be *accidentally* right, so something more is needed. For example, you have a 3:00 appointment, and you've forgotten both to take your iPhone and wear your watch. You had lost track of time for a while as you were running errands. But you get back on track to go to your appointment, walk past a shop, and see a clock in the window that reads 2:50. You are relieved. The appointment is just a few minutes away. You're going to make it on time! Now, when you looked at the clock, it really *was* 2:50. But you were only *accidentally* correct.

As it turns out, you are walking past that same shop window the next day, but this time it's about noon. You look at the clock, and it *still* reads 2:50! You realize that the clock in the window hasn't been working all along. Yesterday you were right by accident. You *happened* to believe correctly only because the actual time and the time on the stopped clock fortuitously coincided. But you couldn't say that you *knew* it was 2:50. Now, you would have been *warranted* or had *reason* to think that it really was 2:50 on the previous day *if*, for example, you had looked over the shoulder of a passerby with an iPhone and clearly saw the time, and you corroborated this by looking around the corner at the bank clock, which faithfully gives the time of day; and so on.¹⁴

Truth is bound up with knowledge, and something more than mere true belief is necessary to bump it up to knowledge.

Truth, Error, and Everyday Life

Why are truth and knowledge important? I think intuitively we know why, but it will help us to be explicit and to think about the question very practically. If truth is truth, we've seen, it must exclude something—namely, error. But for the relativist, what does truth even *mean*? And what are the potential consequences of being wrong, misled, or deluded? The problem for the relativist is that error or falsehood doesn't mean anything deep or serious. *There is no objective reality to which beliefs must conform to be true.* Just let a relativistic pilot try flying a plane based on that idea! Beliefs just happen to be false for some people but not for others based on preference or feeling. But besides relativism's self-contradictory nature, the *implications* of this relativistic view have serious,

even scary, consequences.

So let's explore this a bit by discussing a common reason for psychiatric wards, the legal system, journalism, and the like.

WHY DO WE HAVE PSYCHIATRIC WARDS OR ASYLUMS FOR PEOPLE? Very often, it's because their thinking is wholly detached from reality. What they believe simply isn't true—and at the most dramatic levels. If a person thinks he's Napoleon or Julius Caesar, we'd say he's wildly out of touch with reality. So, for the relativist to say that this is “his truth” or “that's just true for him” is just counter-intuitive and opposes all common sense. We all know better, and we can strongly suspect the relativist does too. We all should simply acknowledge delusion for what it is. We know that the person claiming to be Napoleon believes deep falsehoods, and these false beliefs ought to be corrected if he is to live a somewhat normal life in society. And we certainly don't want people who are so detached from reality to be caring for our children, running our country, or flying commercial airplanes.

WHY DOES OUR LEGAL SYSTEM INSIST THAT WITNESSES IN A COURTROOM “TELL THE TRUTH, THE WHOLE TRUTH, AND NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH”? What's the problem with a person telling the jury and judge falsehoods that keep her out of trouble? Or what if I am being framed for a crime I didn't commit? What if someone publicly slanders me and ruins my reputation just because she disagrees with me? What if a character witness who could clear my name tells lies about me that will send me to jail while she gets kickbacks from those who have framed me? Are the things she says just “true for her” and “false for me”?

WHAT IF I'M A JOURNALIST WHO FINDS HIMSELF IN A POSITION OF REPORTING ACCORDING TO PREFERENCE? Do I report on what favors my own opinion and simply hide or ignore any events that don't confirm my bias? Do I cover up what I don't like reporting? Think of the late *New York Times* journalist, Walter Duranty, who favored Communism and reported that Communism was “working” in the Soviet Union—even though people were starving; he presented Soviet propaganda as if it were real news. The noted journalist Malcolm Muggeridge called Duranty the biggest liar he had ever met.

Muggeridge tried to expose the terrible conditions under Communism. But Duranty got away with his lies, and Muggeridge was under constant attack by those whom he valiantly tried to expose.¹⁵ But for the relativist, is there any difference between propaganda and serious journalistic reportage? Why believe anything we hear on the evening news? Isn't one person's “fake news” another's legit news?

What about lying in general? What is *that* for the relativist? Is a lie just “true” for one person but false for another? We assume truth-telling when we check the weather, look at

the stock exchange reports, review our bank and credit card statements. While we may be good at deceiving others, we don't like it when people deceive us.

In our everyday lives, we do take the reality of truth and knowledge for granted. John Adams once said, "Facts are stubborn things." As we've just seen, we are routinely confronted with a whole constellation of inescapable facts like difficult bosses, flooded basements, family crises, or childhood trauma. These stare us in the face, and there is no dancing around them. These things just come to us. Throughout most of life, we attempt to deal with these as best we can. In the depths of our being, we know that life doesn't work in a relativistic fashion.

Something More Personal?

Perhaps what lurks behind a person's relativistic beliefs isn't something intellectual. After all, relativism isn't all that difficult to refute. I suspect a deeper concern is that the relativist has felt betrayed when people she has loved and trusted end up abusing that trust. And maybe she has become jaded to the reality and importance of truth because truth-claims made by the significant authorities in her life haven't lived lives of integrity themselves. So it's not surprising to see relativists take the course that they do. Perhaps many relativists simply find it too painful to continue to trust anyone anymore. It's like the singer Pink's song "What About Us?" She asks questions like: "What about all the times you said you had the answer?" "What about all the plans that ended in disaster?" "What about love? What about trust? What about us?"¹⁶

TO TOLERATE SOMETHING IS TO PUT UP WITH IT—NOT TO CELEBRATE IT

Tolerance: Two Versions

In a buffet line, we pick out the things we prefer. Perhaps we'll avoid brussel sprouts or liver and onions in favor of foods we *enjoy*—like steak and French fries. If you go to someone's home, however, you may end up being served something you don't like all that much, but out of politeness, you'll eat it. You are showing gracious *tolerance* as a guest even though you are less than enthusiastic about the food.

For the relativist, a misguided tolerance—*acceptance of all beliefs*—is the chief virtue. Tolerance, we're told, is the embracing and even celebration of all beliefs. But this isn't the classic—and consistent—definition of tolerance. While we don't *approve* of all beliefs or actions that are on offer in the world, we often *put up with* or *endure* beliefs we find problematic or false. *This* is the classical view of tolerance.

Within this classical understanding of tolerance there is a degree of negativity built into it. Tolerance means *putting up with what we find disagreeable or false*. We *put up with* the person sitting next to us on a plane who has body odor; we *don't like* body odor. We may breathe through our mouth or put cologne or perfume under our nose. We don't tell the person to put on deodorant or have the flight crew evict him from the plane.

You see, we *don't* tolerate the pleasant fragrances; we *do* tolerate the body odor. We put up with it. We don't enjoy it—like we enjoy chocolate. *Tolerance simply isn't enjoyment*. It assumes we don't like or approve of something.

The modern revised definition of tolerance as “accepting” or “affirming” all views as true is flawed and problematic. To say that “tolerance means accepting or celebrating all views as true” leads to contradictions. For example, we can't approve or accept *both* the idea (a) that God exists (as the Christian believes) *and* (b) that God doesn't exist (as the Buddhist believes). But the Christian can treat the Buddhist kindly—and vice versa.

A quick qualification: what may be tolerated in some spheres may not be tolerated

in others. Though adultery is *morally* wrong, it is *legally* tolerated. That is, our society doesn't criminalize adultery. However, within the setting of a church or synagogue, adultery would certainly not be tolerated.

The twentieth-century British author Dorothy Sayers wrote about the dangers of this false tolerance:

*In the world it calls itself Tolerance; but in hell it is called Despair. It is the accomplice of the other sins and their worst punishment. It is the sin which believes nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, loves nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and only remains alive because there is nothing it would die for.*¹⁷

This false tolerance turns out to be nothing more than apathy. It's a refusal to think critically and to get appropriately angry at real injustices in the world. If we never get angry, it shows we don't care; in fact, the opposite of love isn't hatred at all, it's *indifference*—it's not caring even when there is injustice.

Judging: Two Versions

No one at this “cultural moment” wants to be considered “judgy.” But, as we'll see, there is a good way to judge and a bad way.

We can't escape making judgments. The question is: will we do it *properly* and *wisely* or *superficially* and *arrogantly*? Perhaps we could distinguish between *judgmentalism* and *making judgments*. *Judgmentalism* is always wrong—that is *feeling morally superior at the failure of others*. However, making judgments isn't always wrong. While to be judgmental is to make a judgment, not all judgments can be called judgmentalism.

For a lot of people, their mental image of the judgmental, self-righteous individual is the religious hypocrite—the disapproving, finger-wagging cleric. But it was, in fact, Jesus who said,

...with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, “Let me take the speck out of your eye,” when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

MATTHEW 7:2-5

While there isn't space to fully comment on Jesus' moral teaching, let me make a few observations about what it is and isn't to be judgmental. First, *Jesus isn't promoting a lack*

of judgment or discernment. A truly discerning person will make wise judgments. Second, *proper judgment means to critically assess on the basis of substance, not superficiality.* Jesus said elsewhere, “Do not judge by mere appearances, but make a right judgment” (John 7:24).

Third, *we should examine ourselves first*—that is “take the log out of our own eye.” This assumes a humble posture when we attempt to address a trouble spot in another’s life. And fourth, our judgments or “corrections” of others are for their benefit, not our satisfaction. Proper judgment should be other-centered. Wisdom is the product of a long track record of discerning (judging) rightly, not a track record of judging nothing. Wisdom is mature, gracious, refined judgment, not the absence of judgment.

We can’t avoid making judgments. But we should make right judgments with a humble spirit, scrupulously aware of how far short we fall in our own lives.

A Final Word on Tolerance and Judging

Those who adopt the flawed, inconsistent versions of tolerance and judging will end up contradicting their own relativistic worldview. Because if intolerance and judging are wrong, where did *this* moral standard come from? It shouldn’t be a problem to ask relativists, “What do you mean by ‘intolerance’ and ‘judging’?” Ask for their definition rather than just letting them assume one. If relativists define intolerance as “not being accepting of all views,” then it is worth pointing out that these relativists *aren’t* being accepting of *your* view. And if relativists define judging as “saying that someone else is wrong,” then you might graciously point out that these relativists are in fact saying that *you’re* wrong. As we’ve noted, we can’t escape making moral judgments. Relativists try to do so, but end up making moral judgments anyway.

MORAL RELATIVISM IS A SYSTEM OF ABSOLUTES

We've talked about relativism in relation to truth, reality, and knowledge mostly, but here I want to shift a bit to *moral* relativism: "Your view is right for you but not for me," that is, morality is merely personal and subjective, and what I consider moral isn't necessarily moral for you.

Perhaps you're a relativist. You believe you have *your* truth, *your* reality, and *your* morality, and other people have theirs. As we've seen, while people can have their own individual opinions or beliefs or tastes, we cannot confuse taste or preference with truth. There are probably "foodies" who view culinary choices as moral obligations, but they're not. Choosing between French and Italian cuisine may be a dilemma, but it's not a moral one. Preferring French food to Italian food is different from preferring loving your neighbor to murdering him.

Of course, we can have well-grounded beliefs about truth and morality, but my beliefs aren't true by virtue of it being mine or because I prefer it. They're true because of something *independent* of me—that is, reality.

The truth is, while moral relativists want to keep away from "absolutes," they have their own set of absolutes. Here is a list of absolute moral beliefs commonly held by relativists:

- "If you're not a relativist, you're absolutely *mistaken*." (That is, only the relativistic viewpoint is the correct one.)
- "You should *never* say that someone else is wrong." (The relativist, however, can say that those who disagree with her are wrong.)
- "It's *absolutely* true that all views are equally acceptable." (Not to accept someone's view is immoral.)
- "It's *wrong* to impose your morality on others." (Where does this moral standard come from?)

- “You should *always* be tolerant.” (Not to do so is morally wrong.)
- “You should *never* judge.” (Of course, this is an example of judging someone for judging.)
- “You *ought* to be open-minded.” (But is the relativist open-minded to the absolutist’s ideas?)
- “It’s arrogant, bigoted, and imperialistic to be ethnocentric.” (But isn’t ethnocentrism a universal moral wrong?)

Despite the claim that relativism is tolerant, that’s only the case if you agree with the relativist.

But there’s more. Because relativism goes against our deepest moral intuitions or instincts, even relativists will have to pull back on their moral claims, and they’ll do this by tacking on moral *absolutes* to their *relative* statements.

- “You can do whatever you want—*just as long as you don’t hurt anyone.*”
- “You can do whatever you want—*just as long as it’s between two consenting adults.*”

Moral Relativism’s Selectivity

The only way to be a relativist is to be a selective one. We’ve seen that this is the case when it comes to *truth*. The relativist typically won’t reject the idea that the winner of the World Cup was “true for you but not for me” or that the label on a medicine bottle is “true for the pharmacist but not for me.” Sports scores, the stock index, the current weather outside is not “true for the meteorologist but not for me.”

The same is the case when it comes to *morality*—matters of duty, of right and wrong. People tend to become relativistic when it comes to moral standards. They will say that morality—right and wrong, good and bad, ought and ought not—is relative. Relativists will ask, “Who are *you* to impose your moral values on others?” Of course, they are appealing to a moral standard when they state: “It is always wrong to impose moral values on others.” But why is *anything* wrong for the relativist? Why should the relativist get upset when her personal preferences are ignored or violated?

I was once speaking at Kennesaw State University just outside of Atlanta, Georgia, and I was asked to speak on relativism. When the inviting party asked what I should entitle my talk, I suggested, “When Racism and Bigotry Are Okay.” Some of the staff at the student newspaper were reluctant to publish this upcoming “intolerant” talk, but others rightly asked, “If relativism is the case, why is anything—including racism and bigotry—wrong?”

On another occasion, I was speaking at the State University of New York in Oswego, and during the Q&A time, a female student accused me of being ethnocentric (which she took to be immoral!). I asked her why she thought so. She said, “You believe that your morality should be imposed on other people.”

I replied: “Let me ask you something. What if you are walking down a dark alley and there is someone who is about to sexually assault you, but there is a bystander who would be willing to step in to protect you. Would you want that bystander to impose his morality on your attacker?”

She answered, “You’re distorting what I’m saying.”

I said, “No, I’m not distorting what you are saying. I’m saying that it’s easy to talk about morality being relative when it’s ‘out there’ and not affecting me, but when someone steals *my* property or violates *my* rights or violates *me*, then I suddenly believe in right and wrong.”

In the West, it’s easy to get away with this selective relativism, but if you’re living under the Taliban or in North Korea, you don’t have the luxury of saying that “tyranny may be right for some people but not for me.” Tyrants don’t allow for fence-sitters, let alone those who resist tyranny.

Real Morality

Think about things that get you angry—perhaps you were bullied or abused as a child, or maybe people judged you according to the color of your skin rather than the content of your character. We don’t really have to wonder whether torturing babies for fun is wrong. Sexual assault and wife-beating are wrong too. There are many things that are objectively wrong, and I believe that can be said unapologetically. Here are a few other observations about objective morality.

I. MORALITY IS PROPERLY BASIC. Unless people are under the influence of drugs or alcohol, they are right to assume that their sense perceptions (sight, hearing, etc.) as well as their reasoning abilities are basically functioning properly. The same goes for our moral awareness. At a fundamental level, we understand justice and fairness and when deep wrongs are done against us. Children on the playground get this: they recognize something is unjust or unfair when someone cuts in line, when a bigger kid picks on a smaller kid, when someone betrays another’s confidence. We ought to assume these basic moral intuitions or judgments are innocent unless proven guilty.

Atheist philosopher Kai Nielsen affirms that we know that wife-beating and child abuse are utterly wrong—for all people. And we should believe *that* rather than any skeptical theory that denies it. Nielsen adds: “I firmly believe that this is bedrock and right and that anyone who does not believe it cannot have probed deeply enough into the grounds

of his moral beliefs.”¹⁸

When discussing judging and tolerance, we saw that in the relativist’s rejection of moral standards, the relativist can’t escape holding to her own set of moral standards (“judging and intolerance are wrong”). We’ve also seen that any talk of rights or social justice for the relativist simply reflects the personal preference of the relativist. There are no objective rights. The cry for “social justice” is merely about how a person *feels* since no standard of objective justice actually exists.

2. THE “REFORMER’S DILEMMA” PRESENTS A PROBLEM FOR THE RELATIVIST. Why think that abolishing slavery, ending apartheid in South Africa, establishing civil rights in America were such great moral gains? For the relativist, there is no “better” or “worse,” morally speaking. If we went back to institutionalized slavery, this wouldn’t be a moral decline since morality is relative. But we know better.

3. HUMAN DIGNITY AND WORTH UNDERMINE RELATIVISM. If we really believe morality is relative, then human beings have no intrinsic worth. Where would this kind of dignity come from? From blind, mindless, valueless, material processes? That’s quite a jump. In fact, it is very difficult to derive human rights and human dignity apart from a foundational belief in God. If morality is relative so is the worth of human beings, subject to what price any given dictator wants to assign to it. Human rights and human dignity are grounded in the biblical notion that, uniquely, human beings are made “in the image of God” (Genesis 1:26-27). Apart from this good personal Creator (or a view much like it), it’s hard to see where human worth and moral duties would come from. How could value arise from valueless processes? It makes more sense that our value is the product of some objective source of value independent of us. Indeed, there are plenty of atheists—J.L. Mackie, Jean-Paul Sartre, Friedrich Nietzsche, and many more—who have recognized that if God doesn’t exist, then human dignity as well as right and wrong don’t exist.

If relativists say that assaults on human dignity are just “true for you but not for me,” we can call into question their stance about morality. We can ask them *why* we should *reject* what seems intuitively or plainly obvious and *accept* a view that treats the dignity and protection of human life as a matter of preference. In fact, we can truly *doubt* whether relativists *really* believe that torturing babies for fun, sexual assault, wife-beating, and child pornography aren’t objectively wrong—wrong for all people everywhere. The philosopher Nicholas Rescher correctly observes that if members of a particular tribe “think that it is acceptable to engage in practices like the sacrifice of first-born children, then their grasp on the conception of morality is somewhere between inadequate and nonexistent.”¹⁹

4. DISTINGUISH BETWEEN KNOWING MORAL TRUTHS AND BEING A MORALLY SIGNIFICANT BEING. A common claim is, “I don’t need God to be good” or “I don’t need a God to tell me right from wrong.” Of course,

if we're made in the image of God, whether atheists, relativists, or theists, we can all recognize the same basic moral truths that enhance our proper function as human beings. But *knowing* moral truths doesn't go far enough. The more basic question is, how did we come to *be* moral beings in the first place? *Being* is more fundamental than *knowing*. God's existence furnishes the basis for affirming our dignity as human beings, which enables us to *know* moral truths.

Relativism's denial of objective moral values, duties, and human dignity is a denial of fundamental features of our humanity. Why embrace a view that doesn't help us to make sense of the depths of our humanity, which includes moral knowledge? We are on surer footing if we embrace what seems more obvious to us than to deny it for the sake of a view that does very little by way of explaining how we function as human beings.

A FINAL WORD

Learning to Disagree Well

Something pervasive in the culture, and amplified by social media, is the belief that to “disagree” with people is to “disapprove” of them as persons. Moral relativism actually stunts an important aspect of social development—learning to disagree well, learning to disagree without disparaging. To disagree well requires us to make two important distinctions.

First, distinguish between the *person* and the *belief*. Just because a person *disagrees* with you doesn’t mean the person is *rejecting* you. People can have debates and disagreements but do so as friends over a pint in a pub (I’m in England as I write this!). People regularly “agree to disagree.” Friendships should be thick and strong enough to endure disagreements. The best of marriages will have disagreements interspersed throughout. Friendships grow stronger through mutual understanding and perhaps discarding certain ideas because we’ve heard better ones. This kind of deep friendship is one that allows iron to sharpen iron (Proverbs 27:17). The ancient historian Plutarch wrote,

I do not need a friend who changes when I change and nods “yes” when I nod “yes” (my shadow does these things better!); but I want a friend who joins me in the search for truth and, like me, decides for himself.²⁰

A second distinction is important too: differentiate between *attitude* and *person*. Just because a person disagrees with another person doesn’t mean that disagreement must be unkind and counterproductive. If we are wise, we can often navigate by being gracious, by being a good listener, and by asking good questions. The book of Proverbs says that a gentle answer can often dissolve anger (15:1). We can speak the truth with love (Ephesians 4:15)—not with arrogance or with a disagreeable manner.

In the end *truth* should be what imposes, not *persons*. For this reason, we should seek to *persuade* people about what we take to be true—if they are willing to listen. Mere

disagreement is not “cramming your view down my throat.” In fact, we try to persuade people about our favorite restaurants and, yes, ice cream flavors. How much more when it comes to issues of meaning and significance and purpose? If we discover something that is true and life-changing, we pass on good news in this spirit of love and concern for others—not out of a sense of superiority.

Learning to Trust Authority

The philosopher John Searle—an atheist—has argued that what drives relativism isn't rational argument but the desire to be in control, to be one's own authority.²¹ This may seem like relativism is just a power grab, but for many, they have good reason to distrust immoral authorities: they've been hurt, abused, and controlled by someone claiming moral expertise. While relativism seemingly protects us from all would-be moral authorities, I would suggest that a wiser, more satisfying path is to take a step toward trust. One way to do that is to draw a very clear line between those who simply *claim* moral authority, and God, who actually *has* it.

As a theist and as a Christian, I am well aware of why many reject the authority of churches, clerics, and institutional religion. But this is not the same thing as rejecting the moral authority of God or of Jesus himself.

“What is truth?” This is the question the Roman governor Pontius Pilate asked Jesus at his trial before his crucifixion. This was in reply to Jesus' bold, breath-taking statement of his own authority. With unheard-of authority, he said things about himself that no other world religious leaders—Muhammad, Buddha, Confucius, Lao Tzu—said about themselves. Here is an example of one such assertion: “For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice” (John 18:37). That is, Jesus is claiming that listening to his voice, living under his authority, is an indication that one is in proper touch with ultimate reality. And this connects with our basic understanding of what truth is. Truth, as we have seen, is inseparable from reality.

I will not argue for the moral authority of a particular church, person, or institution, but I would commend Jesus—the Jesus of the Gospels. As professor of philosophy for the past twenty-five years, suffice it to say, I have read and read about *plenty* of people regarded as or claiming to be a moral authority. Jesus is different. Just read the Gospels and see for yourself.

Putting Yourself Under the Proper Authority

Though Jesus walked this earth two thousand years ago, he was no ordinary man. He called himself God's unique agent—the “Son of God”—and still commands authority

today. He calls any weary and burdened person to come to him. He describes himself as both humble and gentle in heart (Matthew 11:29-30) and promises rest for the soul. Yet he claims to have the kind of authority that only God has—the authority to forgive sins (Mark 2:7-11), to be the judge of all people (Matthew 7:22-23).

Jesus routinely said things that angered his opponents because he was “making Himself equal with God” (John 5:18). In one sense, Jesus’ authority is one that earns the right to be heard. Though divine (John 1:1-3), he partook of our human condition—“became flesh” (John 1:14)—identifying with our weakness and limitations yet doing no wrong. Though in our own actions, we substitute ourselves for God, salvation is ultimately God substituting himself for us. Jesus took our place, living the life we couldn’t live, dying the death that we deserved, and obtaining victory and glory for us through his bodily resurrection—amazing things we could not have hoped for or attained by our own efforts. This is good news—that God is *with* us and God is *for* us. He loves us as we are, but he loves us too much to leave us as we are.

Very often, if we don’t have trustworthy authorities to whom we can look, we will ultimately become our own authorities. We can escape living by someone else’s authority, but we *will* live by some authority, perhaps our own authority. But the question is, Whose authority is the most trustworthy? How reliable an authority are you? Jesus is credible in way that none of are, and as the Gospels reveal, he is an authority worthy of our trust.²²

ENDNOTES

- 1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xfO1veFs6Ho>
- 2 See my PragerU video: “True for You, But Not for Me” (released 12 August 2019): <https://www.prageru.com/video/true-for-you-but-not-for-me/>.
- 3 Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today’s Students* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster 1987), 228.
- 4 This statement was aired on the Oprah show (Harpo Productions), February 15, 2007.
- 5 Whether or not Rorty spoke these precise words, he and his followers would certainly endorse its meaning.
- 6 Alvin Plantinga, “Christian Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century.” This essay is found in a number of places dating back the 1990s, but can be found here online: <https://www.wilmingtonfav.com/christian-teaching/christian-philosophy-at-the-end-of-the-20th-century-alvin-plantinga.html>.
- 7 Levibond, *Realism and Imagination in Ethics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 37 (my emphasis).
- 8 “Christianity and the Creed of Postmodernism,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 23 (Dec. 1993), 123.
- 9 Natalie Musumeci, “Man Loses Bid to Lower Age on Birth Certificate,” *New York Post* (Dec. 3, 2018), <https://nypost.com/2018/12/03/man-loses-bid-to-lower-age-on-birth-certificate-by-20-years/>.
- 10 Cited in Roger Trigg, “Theological Realism and Antirealism,” in Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro, *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 216.
- 11 See Robert Solomon, *What Nietzsche Really Said* (New York: Random House, 2000).
- 12 Roger Scruton, *Modern Philosophy* (New York: Penguin, 1996), 6.
- 13 These themes are taken from Jeff Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure* (New York: Penguin, 2018).
- 14 Dallas Willard defines knowledge as “the ability to represent a respective subject matter [*belief*] as it is [*true*], on an appropriate basis of thought and/or experience [*warrant* or *reason*]” “Knowledge and Naturalism,” in *Naturalism: A Critical Analysis*, eds. J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig (New York: Routledge, 2002), 31.
- 15 Here is some documentation on Durant’s false reporting: “U.S. Committee for Ukrainian Holodomor-Genocide Awareness,” <https://ukrainegenocide.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Duranty-and-Ukraine-Holodomor-Mar-2021-final.pdf>.
- 16 Pink, “What About Us?” RCA Records, 2017.
- 17 Dorothy Sayers, *Letters to a Diminished Church: Passionate Arguments for the Relevance of Christian Doctrine* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 98
- 18 Kai Nielsen, *Ethics Without God* (Buffalo, New York: Prometheus Books, 1990), 10-11.

- 19** Nicholas Rescher, *Moral Absolutes: An Essay on the Nature and Rationale of Morality*, Studies in Moral Philosophy vol. 2 (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), 43.
- 20** Plutarch, *Adulator* 8.
- 21** John R. Searle, *Mind, Language and Society: Philosophy in the Real World* (New York: Basic, 1998), 17.
- 22** Thanks to Rick James for helpful input on a previous draft of this book.

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