

Morality and Society - Ethical Relativism

To argue for an absolute moral standard one must first believe in God. The very idea of an absolute “good” more than implies a Supreme Being; that from which the absolute obtains its standard. This cannot be dismissed by pointing out that even among those who believe in God there is a great variety of moral values. Christians who truly follow God do indeed hold to the absolute standard as personified in God. But, calling a person a Christian does not make him one. Calling a group or society Christian does not mean they unequivocally adhere to the absolute moral standard of the Christian God.

We therefore cannot compare societies in this sense in an effort to determine the existence of an absolute standard. Within our own society, which long ago was dubbed “Christian,” we have discontinued many practices which at one time were considered morally acceptable, but later deemed immoral. Our society did not come to these revelations based on a new moral value in line with the times; rather, it was a change of acceptance based on a predetermined moral standard.

Slavery did not suddenly, or even over time, become immoral. It was always immoral. In our society, however, it was at one time accepted; even if not by the whole of the society. If morality is relative, then when was slavery, as practiced in the United States of America, ever moral? If the relativist is to argue that we grew morally, from a society that in the least tolerated slavery, to one that completely abolished it, then what standard did they base that growth upon? How can they call it growth, maturity or progress if morality is relative? If they are to call it progress to grow from a Union of slavery to one without, then they must concede that there is some standard that they have based that progress on. If not, then it is entirely possible that slavery will someday once again become an acceptable practice within our society; acceptable

relative to the situations of the time. And if there is a standard by which we judge the growth, maturity or progress of moral values, then the only logical conclusion is that there must be an absolute moral standard. There must be a standard that does not change; otherwise there could not possibly be a way of comparing or assessing the growth or progress of a society.

The relativist will argue that there are too many societies in our world that practice what we consider “horrible” acts in the name, or for the cause of virtue. This, they say, proves that there is nothing that is considered morally good by all men. Therefore, they go on to argue, there must be no absolute moral value. Once again we must come back to the notion that the fact that we measure the progress of a society by what they deem to be morally acceptable, implies an absolute moral standard. And an absolute moral standard in turn implies a Supreme Being. We must realize, then, that “good” is applied to our lives by the standard that is set outside our lives. That standard is God. We cannot use, therefore, the fact that horrible practices are found in all societies, as proof that there is no universal good. If God is good, and if He is the standard which we should apply to our lives in order to attain the absolute moral standard, then it follows that man must by nature be evil. And, if man is by nature evil, then it is only natural that he will practice horrible acts until he begins to apply the absolute moral standard to his life.

A society may change its moral laws, codes, and standards, but that does not mean that the absolute standard has changed. All morality is applied based on a standard; whether that standard is acknowledged or not. One society’s moral values may be exactly opposite of another’s, but ultimately both must judge their differences based on the same standard. At some point along the growth continuum for each society there must be a common base standard. Otherwise there would be no basis for comparison. What one society considers immoral in the other society is based on the same absolute standard that causes the other society to feel the lack

of that same act in the first society as immoral. The standard is the same; how they choose to look at it and interpret it differs.

Morality does not change, society changes. Therefore, in two societies, where their moral values are in opposition to each other, both cannot be right. Both can, however, be wrong. It is possible that neither society has created a moral code that acceptably fits within the absolute moral standards. Societies might make laws, and it would be morally acceptable for its citizens to obey those laws, but that does not make the laws moral. It only makes the act of obeying them moral. Current moral ideas do not make them correct moral standards.

This brings us, then, to the individual who must make the decision to follow, or not follow, the moral values of the society in which he or she lives. It is by looking at the individual that we should see there is no basis for moral relativity. This is true because if we are to accept the premise that morality is relative, then this premise must be extended to the individual. It cannot be said of the society that morality is relative, but for the individual morality is absolute. Morality is practiced ultimately by the individuals of the society. It is the individual practices that form the moral basis for the society. Whether or not these practices conform to the absolute moral standard is not the question at this point. What needs to be realized here is that no society comes with a set of rules, laws or moral standards without those standards first being acted out and declared acceptable by the individuals of that society.

Therefore, if a society's moral values are relative, then it must follow that each individual's moral values are relative. And it is here that we can see crisis of believing in moral relativity. If each individual bases his moral standards on the relative situation in which he finds himself at the time, then there could not possibly be a structured society. The very definition of a

society is a group of people who come together for mutual benefit. And this mutual benefit requires that each individual of the society subject themselves to rules, laws and moral values.

Again, the fact that a society is created and based on agreed to moral standards, does not necessarily make their standards in compliance with the absolute moral standard. It does, however, show a need to have a moral standard by which to create their society. If morality was relative, a group of people would never be able to catch up with the morality of the day, and keep it long enough to create a society based on that morality.

The center of moral standards must lie somewhere. Otherwise there would be no basis for morality, nor any possibility of ever creating standards for any one group. It can be argued that individuals who, for the most part, agree to a set of moral values can come together to create a society. But this is the same as saying each individual creates his own moral standards. To say that the individual creates his own moral standards is to admit that there must be a moral absolute. Otherwise the individual would live the unsettled life that carries on under the weight of a moral uncertainty that says what is morally acceptable today may not be morally acceptable tomorrow. This must be the outcome of the premise that morality is relative. Structure in society, and the mental well-being of the individual depends on the existence of an absolute moral standard.