



Clear Ethical Thinking and The “Tyranny of Relativism”

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I once asked a young physician whether he had received any training in medical ethics during medical school. I wondered whether he had been taught how to handle some of the complex moral questions that can arise when practicing medicine. It turned out that he had taken only one ethics class during his four years of medical school, and it was a rather loose-knit affair. For the first part of each class, he told me, students were presented with medical cases that raised ethical questions. For the second part, they were asked to discuss and share their feelings about what the ethical thing to do in each case might be. This course was largely an airing of different opinions, with students never receiving any definitive ethical guidance or principles.

His experience reminded me how ready we are today to discuss *ethical problems*, but how quickly we shy away from talking about *ethical truths*. We raise ethical questions but avoid ethical answers. We encourage the discussion of options and opinions, but leave students in the lurch to “make up their own minds” about what might or might not be ethical.

This relativism corrodes clear ethical thinking. Making up our own morality as we go along has a certain appeal, of course, because it

allows us to circumnavigate some of the hard ethical answers that might require us to change our own behavior or outlook. As one bioethicist put it a few years ago:

“People want to know what it would be wise and right to do; but they don’t want to grasp a truth so lucid that they might feel actually required to walk in its light.”

This “tyranny of relativism” influences many contemporary ethical debates. Those who advocate for abortion, for example, will often declare: “If you think abortion is wrong, then don’t have one!” The message behind the soundbite is that abortion can be fine for me even if it is a problem for you; it can be right for me and wrong for you; and we can all just get along. This type of ethical schizophrenia is obviously inadequate, however. Imagine someone saying, “If you think slavery is wrong, then don’t own a slave!” Real human goods are at stake when we make moral judgments and ethical decisions — in slavery, a human life is oppressed; in abortion a human life is ended.

Not only do such ethical (or unethical) decisions affect others

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profoundly (black men and women; unborn boys and girls) but they also affect us inwardly, making us into *those who oppress, or those who kill*. In other words, human choices have consequences that affect the world. But they also cause effects in the depths of the human soul, in the inner sanctuary of our own person. One early saint said that we parent ourselves through our actions. When we freely decide to do an action, we “create” ourselves, and show the direction in which our heart is willing to go. In this world of good and evil, nothing is more important for the good of all than the excellence of the actions that manifest the ethical core of our lives.

That core cannot be rooted in the shifting and uncertain sands of moral relativism; we require the immovable guideposts of moral absolutes. No one lives without absolutes of some kind to guide their decision making. Even those who promote relativism and “freedom of choice” regarding abortion will often react with great moral indignation if someone suggests there should be freedom of choice when it comes to torturing puppies or damaging the environment.

Their favorite “causes” end up being exempted from the claim that all morality is relative. Indeed, they really are not relativists at all, but absolutists: they will insist it is absolutely right to protect animals from cruelty, it is absolutely right to protect the environment, etc. Their absolutism can end up being as firm and unbending as the absolutism of those they disagree with, such as those who defend the rights of the unborn or the rights of the elderly and infirm.

At the end of the day, we all inwardly recognize the importance of moral absolutes: some kinds of human choices really are wrong, and ethics cannot simply mean what I want it to mean. Each of us must resist the temptation to yield to the tyranny of relativism, a tyranny which encourages us to pursue moral judgments that are convenient, instead of moral judgments that are true.

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