



Introduction

Who Are You to Judge?

In America today we seem to think nothing of keeping *The Book of Virtues* and *The Bridges of Madison County* together on our coffee tables. And in these United States we say we firmly believe that truth and morality are relative while simultaneously decrying the absence of virtue and the rise of incivility.

We believe, or say we believe, that all people have a right to their own opinion—except those who hold that some opinions are better than others (though we believe that our opinion about them is better than their opinion about us). Our academic culture holds to the tenets of moral relativism while marginalizing those who apparently violate its rules against insensitivity, intolerance, and political incorrectness. We want to have our cake and eat it too.

And yet, despite this cultural equivalent of a multiple personality disorder, our headlines are filled with ethical, moral, and social issues, from abortion to physician-assisted suicide to affirmative action. Unfortunately, many today seem to assume that rational discussion has no place in the conflicts over moral questions and that no answers to such questions exist. Many believe that we are simply stuck with our opinions and that all opinions are relative—having no basis in any objective or unchanging moral truths.

Sex, Laws, and Videotapes

In the fall of 1992, I (Francis Beckwith) took part in a panel discussion on morality in the media. Sponsored by the Clark County Bar Association of Southern Nevada, the panel's purpose was to discuss the media's responsibility for the broadcasting of programs that contain sex, violence, and obscenity. Among the participants were two radio shockjocks, two attorneys (one of whom was a strong feminist), the owner of a phone sex line, the general manager of a local television station, a mother who schools her children at home, a Christian radio disc jockey, a television reporter, and me, a philosopher.

I agreed with most of the participants that government censorship is not the answer to our problems with the media. But I also made the point that a lack of censorship should not prevent the media from making moral judgments about their programming or from being concerned about how such programming may affect young people and the general populace negatively. Immediately following these comments, a distressed young woman in the audience raised her hand and asked me the pointed question, "Who are you to judge?" This question, of course, was not meant to be answered. It was not an inquiry from someone seeking after truth but rather was a rhetorical question. For the young lady was really saying: Dr. Beckwith, you have no right to make moral judgments about individuals or society.

Though the question was not intended to be answered, I responded anyway: "I certainly do have a right to make moral judgments. I am a rational human person who is aware of certain fundamental principles of logical and moral reasoning. I think I'm qualified." This response

absolutely shocked her. I continued, "Your claim that I have no right to make judgments is itself a judgment about me. Your claim, therefore, is self-refuting."

Although the audience was brought to laughter by this exchange, the young woman's question is a serious one raised by many people in our contemporary culture. It is serious because it assumes *moral relativism*, the view that when it comes to moral issues there are no universally objective right or wrong answers, no inappropriate or appropriate judgments, and no reasonable or rational ways by which to make moral distinctions that apply in every time, in every place, and to every person. Some people who espouse moral relativism seem to be saying that only subjective opinions exist, which are no different from one's feelings about a favorite football team, movie star, or ice cream flavor.

But the young woman in the audience did not fully comprehend the scope of her espousal of moral relativism. Although it is quite appealing in a culture whose elites instruct us to be "tolerant," "openminded," and "nonjudgmental" (even though, ironically, such values are *inconsistent* with moral relativism), people who embrace this view rarely take it to its logical conclusion.

For to deny the existence of universally objective moral distinctions, one must admit that Mother Teresa was no more or less moral than Adolf Hitler, that torturing three-year-olds for fun is neither good nor evil, that giving 10 percent of one's financial surplus to an invalid is neither praiseworthy nor condemnable, that raping a woman is neither right nor wrong, and that providing food and shelter for one's spouse and children is neither a good thing nor a bad thing.

A Joint Response

It is in this climate of contradiction, inconsistency, and even coercion that Gregory Koukl and I address moral relativism, the unofficial creed of much of American culture, especially in the areas of education, law, and public policy. We write not merely to critique, but to equip all those who seek the truth in an age of confusion.

Although there are other types of relativism,' we will deal only with moral relativism, except for a brief portion of chapter 9 where we assess the views of those who argue that morality is relative *because* no knowledge, including moral knowledge, is objective.

It is evident that relativism has infested our society, affecting nearly every aspect of our public culture. The purpose of this book is to confront the challenge of relativism in a way that is not only intellectually rigorous but accessible to ordinary people who will be confronted by relativism in a number of different places, including their child's school curriculum, workplace conversations, the college classroom, the public square, and the church.

For all the complaints that conservatives have raised against relativism, there has been precious little published that can help people in their daily lives, including in the university classroom. This book is an attempt to meet their need.

Our Way Forward

Although this book is a joint effort, each author's primary responsibility should be acknowledged. Gregory Koukl is the author of chapters 1 through 7 and 14 through 16; Francis (Frank) Beckwith is the author of the introduction and chapters 9 through 13. Gregory and Frank

coauthored chapter 8, and both critiqued, edited, and evaluated each other's work. At some points each incorporated the other's suggestions.

To avoid confusion, each author will speak in the first person plural throughout his chapter except when conveying his personal experience or something that cannot be adequately expressed in the first person plural. In those cases, he will speak in the first person singular.

In part 1 (chaps. 1-3), Gregory defines moral relativism and examines the three main varieties people encounter. He also explores the cultural setting in which relativism has become prevalent.

In chapters 4 through 7 (part 2), he sets forth a critique of this new philosophy and a defense of moral objectivism—the belief that objective moral standards exist that apply in every place, in every time, to every person.

In parts 3 and 4 Frank explains how moral relativism has influenced our public philosophy and how we approach social issues. Education is the focus of chapters 8 through 10. Chapter 8 (coauthored with Gregory) deals with the issue of values clarification and its impact on moral education. In chapters 9 and 10, Frank addresses the controversial topics of political correctness and multiculturalism, which presuppose moral relativism and deny objective truth.

How the concepts of personal autonomy and moral relativism have influenced our law and public culture are discussed in chapter 11. Chapters 12 and 13 explore the impact of relativism on three social issues: same-sex marriage, physician-assisted suicide, and abortion.

The book concludes with part 5, in which Gregory outlines responses to relativism. Chapter 14 gives tactics for refuting this philosophy.

Although one can certainly be a moral objectivist and not believe in God, in chapters 15 and 16 Gregory argues that a theistic universe—a universe in which God exists—best accounts for the existence of objective morality.

Part 1

Understanding Relativism

Chapter 1

The Death of Truth

Allan Bloom, author of the landmark critique of American education *The Closing of the American Mind*, starts his analysis this way: “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. If this belief is put to the test, one can count on the students' reaction: they will be uncomprehending. That anyone should regard the proposition as not self-evident astonishes them, as though he were calling into question $2 + 2 = 4$.”

What Professor Bloom observes is not a trend but a revolution. Like most revolutions, it did not start with a rifle shot or a cannon but with an idea that was whispered in many different environments and diverse situations. This revolution started in academia and eventually engulfed

the common person. Its growth has been so subtle and thorough that it is now a core belief--not just of the college elite, but also of the rank and file, white collar and blue collar alike.

What Is Truth?

Since the sixties we have been in the throes of this quiet but desperate revolution of thought--the death of truth. We don't mean "truth" in the sense of something being my personal opinion. Rather we refer to the death of what the late Dr. Francis Schaeffer called "true truth," the extinction of the idea that any particular thing can be known for sure.

Today we've lost the confidence that statements of fact can ever be anything more than just opinions; we no longer know that anything is certain beyond our subjective preferences. The word *truth* now means "true for me" and nothing more. We have entered an era of dogmatic skepticism.

Ideas that are whispered are seldom analyzed well, for they simply don't draw enough attention. By means of repetition and passive acceptance over time, they take on the force of common wisdom, a "truth" that everyone knows but no one has stopped to examine, a kind of intellectual urban legend.

Once ideas like these take root, they are difficult to dislodge. Attempts to do so result in Bloom's "uncomprehending" stares. The ideas become so much a part of our emerging intellectual constitution that we are increasingly incapable of critical self-reflection. Even if we did, we have little conviction that such analysis would do any good anyway. As Kelly Monroe remarked in her book *Finding God at Harvard*, "Students feel safer as doubters than as believers, and as perpetual seekers rather than eventual finders."

When truth dies, all of its subspecies, such as ethics, perish with it. If truth can't be known, then the concept of moral truth becomes incoherent. Ethics become relative, right and wrong matters of individual opinion. This may seem a moral liberty, but it ultimately rings hollow. "The freedom of our day," lamented a graduate in a Harvard commencement address, "is the freedom to devote ourselves to any values we please, on the mere condition that we do not believe them to be true."

The death of truth in our society has created a moral decay in which "every debate ends with the barroom question 'says who?'" When we abandon the idea that one set of laws applies to every human being, all that remains is subjective, personal opinion.

Pleasure as Ethics

When morality is reduced to personal tastes, people exchange the moral question, *What is good?* for the pleasure question, *What feels good?* They assert their desires and then attempt to rationalize their choices with moral language. In this case, the tail wags the dog. Instead of morality constraining the pleasures ("I want to do that, but I really shouldn't"), the pleasures define morality ("I want to do that, and I'm going to find a way to rationalize it"). This effort at ethical decision making is really nothing more than thinly veiled self-interest--pleasure as ethics.

When self-interest rules, it has a profound impact on behavior, especially affecting how we treat other human beings. The notions of human respect and dignity depend on the existence of moral truth. Without it, there is no obligation of self-sacrifice on behalf of others. Instead, we

can discard people when they become troublesome or expensive, or simply when they cramp our lifestyles.

What follows is a true story about a newborn child we'll call Baby Garcia. This event took place in a major hospital in the Los Angeles area. I pass on the exact details as Jennifer, the nurse involved, related them to me:

One night a nurse on my shift came up to me and said, "Jennifer, you need to see the Garcia baby." There was something suspicious about the way she said it, though. *I see babies born every hour*, I thought.

She led me to a utility room the nurses used for their breaks. Women were smoking and drinking coffee, their feet up on the stainless steel counter. There, lying on the metal, was the naked body of a newborn baby.

"What is this baby doing here on this counter?" I asked timidly.

"That's a preemie born at nineteen weeks," she said. "We don't do anything to save them unless they're twenty weeks."

I noticed that his chest was fluttering rapidly. I picked him up for a closer look. "This baby is still alive!" I exclaimed. I thought they hadn't noticed.

Then I learned the horrible truth. The nurses knew, and it didn't matter. They had presented the baby to its mother as a dead, premature child. Then they took him away and tossed him on the cold, steel counter in the lunch room until he died. His skin was blotchy white, and his mouth was gaping open as he tried to breathe.

I did the one thing I could think of. I held him in his last moments so he'd at least have some warmth and love when he died.

Just then one of the nurses – a large, harsh woman – burst into the room. "Jennifer, what are you doing with that baby?" she yelled.

"He's still alive..."

"He's still alive because you're holding him," she said. Grabbing him by the back with one hand, she snatched him from me, opened one of the stainless steel cabinets, and pulled out a specimen container with formaldehyde in it. She tossed the baby in and snapped the lid on. It was over in an instant.

To them, this child wasn't human. In seven more days he would have qualified, but at nineteen weeks he was just trash.

Anything Goes

The death of morality also produces an "anything goes" mentality. Sexual norms not only become more liberal, they expand without boundaries because no boundaries exist. Ann Landers recorded the following letter from one of her "morally liberated" readers:

Dear Ann:

I am a man in my early 60s, divorced and retired. My sister is in her late 50s and widowed. We go to bed together twice a week. This has been going on since her husband died 8 years ago. Actually, when we were teenagers, we fooled around a lot, but never had intercourse. This is not a love match, but it is sex, and good sex at that.

We both enjoy these escapades, and they always produce a good night's sleep. No one knows about this, and no one is getting hurt, or do you think we are fooling ourselves?

--No NAME, NO CITY, PLEASE

Dear No Name:

Sick, sick, sick. If I had your address I would send you a “get well” card.

Even more sobering is how America responded when art went on trial in a Cincinnati courthouse. At issue was an exhibit in the Contemporary Art Center of the work of Robert Mapplethorpe, a talented photographer who had distinguished himself with, among other things, still-life photography of flowers. The photographs on display included the following: a picture of a ten-year-old girl sitting in a chair with her knees up and genitals exposed; a photograph of a man who was naked except for cowboy boots, bent over with a bull-whip in his anus; and a shot of one man expelling a stream of urine into the mouth of another.

The museum was charged with exhibiting pornography. During the trial, a curator of another museum who testified on behalf of the Mapplethorpe exhibit was asked if the urination picture was art.

“Yes,” she said.

“Is it fine art?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because of the composition and the lighting.”

Each photograph was acquitted of the charge of pornography and judged as fine art, after which social commentator and radio talkshow host Dennis Prager observed, “Ladies and gentlemen, if some of the leading artists in a civilization see a man urinating in another man’s mouth and see composition and lighting and do not see their civilization being pissed upon, we are in trouble.”

And we are in trouble. A security camera in Britain records two young boys calmly leading a toddler away and later bludgeoning him to death. A mother in South Carolina fastens her own two children snugly into their safety belts and then sinks the car in the river so she can restore a romantic interest with a man who doesn’t want her kids. The leader of a national animal rights organization states that animals are the moral equivalent of humans. An upper-middle-class college couple in New Jersey deliver a child in a motel room, bash in its head, and then drop it in a dumpster. The American College of Emergency Physicians estimates that seventy thousand elderly Americans were abandoned by family members in one year, a practice called “granny dumping.” And the list goes on.

We are not trying to pander to the sensational with these illustrations. These events aren’t out of the ordinary; they can be seen almost daily in our living rooms on the evening news.

Ours is a generation that has institutionalized moral relativism. We’ve cut our eye-teeth on the philosophy that life’s most sublime goal is to be happy and that virtually any means justifies this selfish end. No longer will we allow a hint of moral censure on sexual practices that were regarded as perverse only a generation before. We consider bullwhips in the butt and urination in the face fine art, abortion a constitutional right, infanticide a reasonable alternative to caring for a child with a troublesome birth defect, lesbian and homosexual families normal, and drug use a national pastime.

“It is possible,” Prager observes, “that some societies have declined as rapidly as has America since the 1960s, but I am not aware of any.”

Traitors in Our Midst

This is not “morality” we simply tolerate; we champion it. We take pride in our tolerance, yet tolerate no one who doesn’t share our moral open-mindedness. “Who are you to pass judgment?” we ask. “Where do you get off condemning a nurse for what she does with a fetus that was dying anyways? Or for criticizing the sexual preferences of siblings? Or for challenging another’s view of art?”

This stinking stew of ethical nothingness is the sad legacy of the sixties. Yet when our own moral philosophy turns us into victims—when our personal liberty is interrupted by random acts of anarchy—suddenly something like moral consciousness tries to lift its head.

Take the Los Angeles riots of 1992, for example. As the buildings burned we watched with horror. Shops were plundered not by hooded looters but by families made up of mom, dad, and the kids—moral mutants on the shopping spree of their lives, giggling and laughing with impunity while stuffing their spoils into shopping carts and oversized trash bags.

We shouldn’t have been surprised. During the L.A. riots these families did exactly what they had been taught. Nobody wanted to “impose” their morality on anyone else, so they learned that values are relative and that morality is a matter of personal preference. Make your own rules, define your own reality, seek your own truth. In the spring of ’92, thousands of people did just what we told them to do, and civilization burned.

If we reject truth, why should we be surprised at the moral turbulence that follows? As C.S. Lewis said, “We laugh at honor and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the gelding be fruitful.”

This is the chaotic and confusing world of moral relativism, a world made more confusing because moral relativism isn’t even moral. It doesn’t qualify as a genuine moral view, as we will learn in the next chapter.

Chapter 2 What Is Moral Relativism?

Before defining moral relativism, we need to make two distinctions. The first regards what we mean when we say something is right or wrong, and the second deals with the difference between a subjective and an objective truth.

Two Wrongs, Two Rights

The statements “One ought not kill innocent people” and “One ought to believe that Kansas is in the United States” are two entirely different kinds of statements. Both make truth claims, but they differ in that each distinguishes a kind of “ought”—one the moral ought and the other the rational ought. The first suggests a moral obligation; the second an obligation based on reason.

There are two kinds of oughts, and there are two ways to be wrong about something. We can be wrong by being irrational, or we can be wrong by being unethical. Morality deals with the second.

Rational errors can be distinguished from moral wrongs in this way. Nineteenth-century philosopher John Stuart Mill pointed out that moral wrongs are the kinds of things for which punishment seems justified. We don't punish people merely for getting their sums wrong in math. Their errors would be rational, not moral. But a man who beats his wife is not simply incorrect; he's immoral. When there is a rational wrong, we correct the error. When there is a moral wrong, we correct—or punish—the person.

Two Truths

Just as there are two ways to be right or wrong, there are also two ways for something to be true: it can be subjectively true or it can be objectively true.

When I say, "Häagen-Dazs butter pecan ice cream is absolutely delicious," I have said something true, because this statement accurately reflects my personal tastes. Notice, however, that what I have said is not really about ice cream. I have not made a claim about an object outside of me, a half-eaten pint of frozen dessert sitting on my counter. Rather I have said something about the subject, me.

My statement about the taste of Häagen-Dazs ice cream is a *subjective* truth. It is true for me, the subject, but not for the object, the ice cream itself. The ice cream doesn't "taste"; I taste it. The experience of flavor pertains to me as a subject, not to the ice cream as an object. That's why when I comment on the flavor, I'm talking about something true about me, not about the ice cream—subjective, not objective.

Tastes are personal. They're private. They're individual. If you didn't like butter pecan and favored chocolate instead, it would be strange to say that you were wrong. You should not be faulted, it seems, for having different subjective tastes about desserts than someone else.

What if my claim was not about flavors, though, but about numbers? If I say that the sum of two plus two is four, I'm making a different sort of claim than stating my taste in ice cream. As a subject, I'm communicating a belief that I hold about an external, *objective* truth.

If you disagreed and said that two plus two equals five, I could claim you were wrong without being accused of an impropriety. In themselves, mathematical equations are either true or false, having one right answer. They do not have a variety of "right" answers that vary according to individual tastes. If we disagreed on the sum, we'd adjudicate between our two opinions by examining the object itself. Our goal would not be to share our feelings but to find the correct answer, because in this case we believe the truth to be objective or "out there," not subjective or "in here."

Subjective truths are based on internal preferences and change according to our whims. Objective truths, in contrast, are realities in the external world that we discover and cannot be changed by our internal feelings. External facts are what they are, regardless of how we feel about them.

Doing Their Own Thing

Building on our definitions of objective and subjective truth, we can now see that moral relativism is a type of subjectivism. It holds that moral truths are preferences much like our taste in ice cream. The validity of these truths depends entirely on the one who says, “It’s true *for me* [the subject] if I believe it.”

Moral relativism teaches that when it comes to morals, that which is ethically right or wrong, people do their own thing. Ethical truths depend on the individuals and groups who hold them.

Believing that ethical truth is subjective, moral relativists therefore react to moral judgments about sexual behavior, for example, much as if someone said they were wrong because of their choice of desserts: “Who are you to tell me what I ought to prefer?” To them the words *ought* and *should* are meaningless because everyone’s morality is equal; no one has a claim to a morality that is incumbent on others.

Relativism does not require a particular behavior for everyone in similar moral situations. When faced with exactly the same ethical situation, I might choose one thing, but you may choose the opposite. No universal rules apply to everyone.

Moral relativism is contrasted with moral absolutism, which can mean different things. Minimally, moral absolutism holds that a moral rule is true regardless of whether anyone believes it. It can’t be created by personal conviction; nor does it disappear when an individual or culture rejects it. Even if ignored, objective moral rules still maintain their ethical force and are universally binding in all similar cases.

Absolutists hold that moral rules are frequently self-evident in the same way that mathematical truth is self-evident. We don’t invent morality; we discover it like we discover multiplication tables.

Revising the Standard

Relativism as a moral system is revisionist because it seeks to redefine what it means to be moral, measuring it by a new standard.

Classically, moral systems have had at least three characteristics. First, morality has been viewed as a supremely authoritative guide to action, trumping considerations of preference, taste, custom, self-interest, or individual fancy. Moral questions are among the most important we can ask, holding the highest priority in life.

Second, morality includes a prescriptive code of conduct. It doesn’t merely *describe* a state of affairs; it *directs* how things should be. Moral rules are action guides that carry with them a sense of obligation, defining how people *ought* to conduct themselves. These injunctions apply not just to actions but to attitudes and motives as well.

Third, morality is universal. Moral rules are not arbitrary and personal but are public, applying equally to all people in relevantly similar situations. If a specific act is wrong for one person, then it is equally wrong for another.

Eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher David Hume describes the universal nature of morality this way: “The notion of morals implies some sentiment common to all mankind which recommends the same object to general approbation and makes every man or most men agree in

the same opinion or same discussion concerning it. It also implies some sentiments so universal and comprehensive as to extend to all mankind.”

These last two characteristics—the “oughtness” of morality and the universal nature of moral rules—are important criteria. Relativism, however, rejects all universal moral rules and abandons the idea of oughtness. It does not refine our understanding of what morality entails but rather rejects it.

Indeed, relativism does not even qualify as an ethical system. We can prove this a couple of ways.

No Real Difference

What’s the difference between a relativist and a person who admits she has no morality at all? There seems to be none.

How does a relativist make a moral decision? He decides for himself whatever he thinks is best. How does someone with no morality know how to act? She decides for herself whatever she thinks is best.

Even those people with no scruples whatsoever can be said to have “their own” morality. This illustrates the problem precisely. How can we make sense of an alleged morality that functions the same as not having any morality at all? If a thing cannot be distinguished from its opposite, then the distinction between the two is meaningless.

Thus the first reason relativism does not qualify as an ethical viewpoint is that the “morality” of relativism is no different than having no morality at all.

Relativism’s Moral Hero

Another way to assess the validity of a moral system is to see what kind of person it produces. Given a particular standard of morality, the person who is most moral is the one who practices the specific system's key moral rule consistently.

To assess the value of the moral rule, Love your neighbor as your-self, for example, look at the principle in action. When this ethic is practiced consistently, it produces someone like Mother Teresa, who was thoroughly selfless and always gave to others. The moral system is validated by the kind of moral hero that results.

The consistent practice of the morality of nonviolent passive resistance results in a Mahatma Gandhi. The moral principle requiring perfect obedience to the Father in heaven found its most sublime expression in Jesus of Nazareth. In each case, the quality of the moral hero—the one who most closely lives the ideal—indicates the quality of the moral system.

What kind of moral champion does relativism produce? What is the best that relativism has to offer? What do we call those who most thoroughly apply the principles of relativism, caring nothing for others' ideas of right or wrong, those who are unmoved by others' notions of ethical standards and instead consistently follow the beat of their own moral drum?

In our society, we have a name for these people; they are a homicide detective's worst nightmare. The quintessential relativist is a sociopath, one with no conscience. This is what relativism produces.

Something is terribly wrong with an alleged moral point of view that produces a sociopath as its brightest star. This is another reason relativism does not qualify as an ethical viewpoint.

Relativism does not stand in any great moral tradition. Rather, it has been universally rejected by all. The supreme moral teachers of all time—Moses, Jesus, the apostle Paul, Buddha, Aristotle, Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr.—have all condemned this view.

Relativism simply is not a moral point of view. Its "morality" is no different than having no morality at all, its moral hero is a sociopath, and it has been opposed by every moral tradition. Those who are relativists have no morality.

Some people will object to this characterization because they wish to keep the label "moral," regardless of their ethics. "How dare you say I have no morality!" they protest. "I have a morality. I do what-ever I please. That's my morality."

That's our point. Those who are relativists do whatever they want, and doing whatever one wants is not morality. Morality is doing what's right, not necessarily what's pleasant.

The Myth of Moral Neutrality

One of the most entrenched assumptions of relativism is that there is such a thing as morally neutral ground, a place of complete impartiality where no judgments or any "forcing" of personal views are allowed. Each person takes a neutral posture toward the moral conviction of others. This is the essence of tolerance, the argument goes.

Moral neutrality, though, is a myth, as the next illustration shows. Faye Wattleton, the former president of Planned Parenthood, wrote the following piece, "Self-Definition: Morality."

Like most parents, I think that a sense of moral responsibility is one of the greatest gifts I can give my child. But teaching morality doesn't mean imposing my moral value on others. It means sharing wisdom, giving reasons for believing as I do—and then trusting others to think and judge for *themselves*.

My parents' morals were deeply rooted in religious conviction but tempered by tolerance—the essence of which is respect for other people's views. They taught me that reasonable people may differ on moral issues, and that fundamental respect for others is morality of the highest order.

I have devoted my career to ensuring a world in which my daughter, Felicia, can inherit that legacy. I hope the tolerance and respect I show her as a parent is reinforced by the work she sees me doing every day: fighting for the right of all individuals to make their own moral decisions about childbearing.

Seventy-five years ago, Margaret Sanger founded Planned Parenthood to liberate individuals from the "mighty engines of repression." As she wrote, "The men and women of America are demanding that ... they be allowed to mold their lives, not at the arbitrary command of church or state but as their conscience and judgment may dictate."

I'm proud to continue that struggle, to defend the rights of all people to their own beliefs. When others try to inflict their views on me, my daughter or anyone else, that's not morality: It's tyranny. It's unfair, and it's un-American.

This is impressively and persuasively written, one of the finest expressions of this view available in the space of five short paragraphs. It sounds so sensible, so reasonable, and so tolerant, but there's a fundamental flaw.

Wattleton's assessment is based on the notion of neutral ground, a place where one can stand that implies no moral judgment. Wattleton is not neutral, however, as her own comments demonstrate.

In her article, Wattleton in effect argues that each of us *should* respect another's point of view. She then implies, however, that any point of view other than this one is immoral, un-American, and tyrannous. If you disagree with Wattleton's position that all points of view are equally valid, then your point of view is not valid. Her argument self-destructs.

In fact, Wattleton seeks to impose her own absolute on other people: "Fundamental respect for others is morality of the highest order." This is a personal moral position she strives to mandate politically. She writes, "I have devoted my career to ensuring a world in which my daughter, Felicia, can inherit that legacy." What legacy? Her point of view. How does she ensure this? By passing laws. Wattleton has devoted her career to ensuring a world in which her point of view is enforced by law.

We don't object to the political process being used to enforce a particular point of view. What is so disturbing in Wattleton's article is her implication that she is neutral, unbiased, and tolerant, when she is not. The only place of true neutrality is silence. Speak up, give your opinion, state your view, and you forfeit your claim to neutrality.

As a case in point, in May, 1994, Congress passed a law making it a federal offense to block an abortion clinic. Pamela Maraldo, then president of Planned Parenthood, commented to the press, "This law goes to show that no one can force their viewpoint on someone else." But the self-contradiction of her statement is obvious. All laws force someone's viewpoint.

Moral neutrality seems virtuous, but there's no benefit, only danger. In our culture we don't stop at "sharing wisdom, giving reasons for believing as [we] do-and then trusting others to think and judge for themselves," nor should we. This leads to anarchy. Instead we use moral reasoning, public advocacy, and legislation to encourage virtue and discourage dangerous and morally inappropriate behavior. That is, if we haven't been struck morally paralyzed by relativism.

Our Moral Illiteracy

Relativism today has produced a profound moral illiteracy. Kelly Monroe, editor of *Finding God at Harvard*, calls it "American roulette-'Just Say No' and 'Just Do It' without recognition of a moral reality to decide which to do when." A society held captive by relativism begins to lose its capacity to think in morally coherent ways or even to draw the most obvious ethical conclusions.

A perfect example of this comes from a conversation I had with an assistant in a doctor's office. While she prepped me for an examination, I decided to get her opinion about the nature of morality.

"Can I ask you a personal question?" I asked. She paused in her work, uncertain how to respond. "I'm reading a book on ethics, and I want to know your opinion about something."

"Oh," she said. "Okay."

"Do you believe that morality is absolute, or do all people decide for themselves?"

"What do you mean by morality?" she asked.

"Simply put, what's right and what's wrong," I answered.

We talked back and forth for a few minutes, and it became evident to me that she was having a difficult time even comprehending the questions I was asking about moral categories. I

thought maybe a clear-case example would make the task simpler, a question with an obvious answer, such as, Who is buried in Grant's tomb? or, How long was the Hundred Years War?

"Is murder wrong?" I asked. "Is it wrong to take an innocent human life?"

She waffled. "Well..."

"Well ... what?"

"Well, I'm thinking."

I was surprised at her hesitation. "What I'm trying to find out is whether morals, right and wrong, are something we make up for ourselves or something we discover. In other words, do morals apply whether we believe in them or not?"

I waited. "Can we say that taking innocent life is morally acceptable?"

"I guess it depends," she said tentatively.

"Depends on what?" I asked.

"It depends on what other people think or decide."

I'll make this really easy, I thought. "Do you think torturing babies for fun is wrong?"

"Well ... I wouldn't want them to do that to my baby."

"You've missed the point of my question," I said, a bit exasperated. "I may not like burned food, but that doesn't mean giving it to me is immoral. Do you believe there is any circumstance, in any culture, at any time in history, in which torturing babies just for pure pleasure could be justified? Is it objectively wrong, or is it just a matter of opinion?"

There was a long pause. Finally she answered, "People should all be allowed to decide for themselves."

In reflecting on this conversation, I realized that I would never want this woman on a jury. I would never want her as a social worker, as an employee of a bank, as a teacher, as any kind of medical practitioner, or in any branch of law enforcement. I would not want a person who thinks like this in any position of public trust.

Sadly, this woman's view of ethics is repeated time after time in every level of society. In reality, if she was awakened in the middle of the night by the plaintive screams of a young child being tormented by her neighbor next door, I'm sure she would be horrified by the barbarism. Her moral intuitions would immediately rise to the surface and she'd recoil at such evil. In a discussion of the issue, however, she seemed incapable of admitting that even this egregious wrong was actually immoral.

My conversation with the doctor's assistant shows how muddled a person's thinking can become after a steady diet of moral relativism.