

Relativism is Not Neutral

Part 5 of a Register Series

by Edward Sri

Imagine if the next time someone says to you, “Don’t be so judgmental,” you gently pushed back and said, “Excuse me. Are you judging me?” Imagine the conversation going something like this:

Friend: “Don’t be so judgmental.”

You: “Excuse me. Are you judging me? I’m feeling judged right now. Are you saying I’m a mean, intolerant, judgmental person?”

Friend: “Uh, no ... I’m not quite saying that ...”

You: “But you just told me not to be judgmental.”

Friend: “Well, when you say something is immoral, it sounds like you’re judging others.”

You: “Look. You’re free to believe whatever you want. If you want to believe there’s no truth, no moral right or wrong, you can do that. I’ll disagree with you because that doesn’t make any sense to me. But if you want to have faith in moral relativism and believe that there is no moral order to the universe, you’re free to do that. But whatever you do, please do not impose your belief in no truth — your faith in relativism — on me! Please don’t make me have to follow your religion of relativism!”

Friend: (Silence)

You: “Now, tell me about your relativism. I’m curious: Do you really believe that there is nothing at all that is morally wrong for everyone? How about murder? Rape? Genocide?” The benefit of this approach is that it quickly turns the conversation to a fundamental issue: Is there moral truth? Too often, we Christians are having to do all of the explaining — answering point by point people’s questions about our faith. Let’s turn the tables and start asking our relativistic friends to defend their position. “Tell me about your relativism. Explain to me why you think that there’s no real right or wrong in the universe. How does that work if each individual makes up his own morality?”

Listen to them. Let them talk. After a while, ask them a question like, “If a man says, ‘For me, kidnapping is okay and rape is a good thing,’ does that make it okay for him to kidnap children and rape women?” Most people have never stopped to think about their relativistic assumptions. It’s just something they’ve taken in from the culture. Fewer people have ever had to give a rational account for this position. So when they actually have to talk about and explain their relativistic worldview, they often admit at least some things are morally right or wrong (“You shouldn’t hurt other people”) or they start talking in circles and realize they are skating on thin ice. And when that happens, then they might be more open to hearing an alternative way of looking at the world.

This approach is likely to be more fruitful than most discussions about morality today, which remain on a heated personal and emotional level: “What are you saying about me? Who are you to judge? Who are you to say what’s right and wrong?” Relativists aren’t expecting a Christian to play their own “Don’t Judge” trump card on them. And when that happens, it might get them to think about deeper issues. And you might have the chance to have a more rational conversation.

Relativists like to portray themselves as holding a neutral position. It’s better to be open-minded toward all points of view, they say: Since we can’t know truth, no one is right. No one is wrong. All groups can come together under the one big tent of relativism. At first glance, this seems like a good way to promote tolerance of diverse views. But we must understand very clearly that relativism, in fact, is not value-neutral. Relativism itself is a certain way of looking at the world. And this view — that there is no right or wrong — is being imposed on us.

In other words, the belief that there is no moral truth is itself a point of view. And those who do not agree with this relativistic perspective are being forced to play by its rules or risk being labeled as “judgmental” if they uphold traditional moral values. As Pope Benedict once observed, “The more relativism becomes the generally accepted way of thinking, the more it tends toward intolerance, thereby becoming a new dogmatism ... it prescribes itself as

the only way to think and speak — if, that is, one wishes to stay in fashion. Being faithful to traditional values and to the knowledge that upholds them is labeled intolerance, and relativism becomes the required norm.”

He encourages us to push back: “I think it is vital that we oppose this imposition ... which threatens freedom of thought as well as freedom of religion.” For relativism is “a kind of new ‘denomination’ that places restrictions on religious convictions and seeks to subordinate all religions to the super-dogma of relativism.” Relativism is not moral Switzerland. It is not a neutral, impartial, unbiased position. It is a certain point of view, a way of looking at the world, and we should not allow others to force this worldview upon us.

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This series is based on his newest book, [Who Am I to Judge? Responding to Relativism with Logic and Love](#) (2017, Ignatius Press).

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