One of the most common viewpoints held by today’s college students is the belief that “everything is relative.” Generally speaking, what is meant by this is not that there aren’t any absolute truths in the world, but rather that in the realm of morality, ethics, and religion, there is no truth with a capital “T”. In other words, this view, called relativism, holds that there is no ultimate fact in morality and religion by which all other viewpoints must be judged.

The argument for relativism goes something like this. Values and morals are different, depending upon the time, culture, society, and individual. What may be right in one place and time may be wrong in another place and time. Or, what may be right in one culture at one time may be wrong in that same culture a short time later.

Since moral codes vary from place to place and from time to time, there is no way to determine which of these codes is “right” and which is “wrong.” This is true at an individual level as well. Suppose you wish to have a beer at the local bar. You believe that it is okay to do so. But I do not agree. There is no way to determine which moral view is correct and which is not. Therefore, terms such as “right” and “wrong” (or “good” and “evil”) when applied to morality are fallacies. No such thing exists. It is up to the individual and/or society to determine the “rightness” or “wrongness” of something, and that can, and does, change from time to time.

The logical conclusion of relativism is that everyone does what is right in his or her own eyes. Further, since there is no absolute gauge of what is morally right or wrong, no person has the right to (1) declare another’s moral code to be in error, or (2) to “impose” his own moral code on another. Sin, then, has no meaning, since what may be sin to you is not necessarily sin to me.

Relativism is a frustrating viewpoint to deal with, especially vis-à-vis evangelism. This is because someone with a relativistic worldview quite often will not accept the idea of guilt and sin and, hence, will not see the need for a Savior. But relativism is wrong, and there is a good way to approach a relativistic worldview. I will attempt to refute relativism and show how the existence of morality necessarily means that God exists.

THE MORAL ARGUMENT FOR GOD’S EXISTENCE

As we all know, morals exist in the lives of individuals and societies. What are morals? They are statements of what is right and wrong. Everybody has morals, and no two morals seem to be alike completely. Every society has a moral code as well, though very few societies have the same moral codes.

It is my contention that the very existence of morals indicates that a moral God exists. There are several reasons for this assertion. (i) Everybody believes in
Let us first examine my first premise, that everybody believes in absolute morals. Now there are many people who call themselves relativists. That is, they say that they believe that all morals are relative. They can be relative to the individual, to the society, or to the culture at large. Their argument is based around the observation that people disagree on moral standards. This disagreement, they say, indicates that there are no absolutes in the moral realm. Is this an accurate statement?

First, we must ask the question of whether disagreement means that there isn’t an absolute truth. This is quite obviously false. Suppose four people were standing on the four corners of an intersection, and an accident occurs. The truth of the matter is that the accident happened in one specific way, and only one. Yet when you ask all four people, you will get disagreements on what happened. Does this disagreement actually mean that the accident did not happen a specific way? Is the accident relative to its observers? No, and no. Observers’ disagreement over the facts does not alter the facts themselves.

A second example of this is the shape of the earth. Many people (amazingly) still believe that the earth is flat. They obviously disagree with most people on this issue. Does the fact that there is disagreement mean that the world is neither flat nor spherical? The point is that just because people disagree on something does not mean that that something does not exist.

An objection leaps out at us at this point. Surely, we are talking about physical realities, not subjective principles. Morals can hardly be compared with atoms and molecules. This is certainly true, but the point remains. Disagreement is not grounds for dismissal.

Now we must look at whether everybody actually believes in moral absolutes. While people certainly disagree on what these may be, it can easily be shown that everybody has an absolute moral code. The argument for relativity basically can be summed up in one short phrase:

(1) Something is moral, if someone thinks it is.

This is not a straw man summation of the relativistic argument, by the way. This accurately encapsulates the core belief of the relativist. Does it hold up?

Quite clearly, this is a statement of one’s own moral code. It is absolute in its form, for the relativist is asserting a concise moral view - everything is OK. Now, aside from its inherent absoluteness, it fails when we look at some examples of behavior. Suppose I think that it is OK to beat up the relativist with a baseball bat. According to his own moral code, it would be perfectly all right for me to do so, since “something is moral, if someone thinks it is.” Yet no person really believes in this point of view, or they wouldn’t object to being beaten with my bat. So the original statement is refined to:

(1a) Something is moral, so long as it doesn’t hurt anyone else.

But this is no better. Let’s say that I still believe it is OK to beat him on the head. Now, instead of agreeing with me (which would have been consistent with pure relativism), he is now forced to say that my moral code is wrong. And whenever anybody says that someone else’s morals are wrong, then that means that there is an objective standard by which right and wrong must be judged.

Why must this be so? Apart from objective truth, right and wrong dissolve into mere preferences. “I prefer this” and “I prefer that.” Without objective morals, no action is actually right or actually wrong. It all boils down to what we would prefer to see happen in the world. But of course the pseudo-relativist (I can’t call him a pure relativist anymore) cannot say that beating him over the head is something he would merely prefer to not happen. He believes that it is wrong, plain and simple. By the way, we could substitute any number of actions in place of beating him over the head - it just happens to work nicely.

The relativist may object by saying that he really doesn’t believe that it is “absolutely” wrong to hit him over the head with my bat. Rather, he just thinks it is. But this objection does not help him. Why? He is still demanding that I stop hitting him with my bat because - and this is crucial - he thinks my view that it is okay is erroneous. In other words, he thinks his moral code is right, while mine is wrong. I must state emphatically that he does not view this as merely
two different preferences, as if we were choosing between 7-Up and Coca-Cola. No - he views my moral code (and, of course, the actions that stem from it) as something not to be allowed to happen; it must not be tolerated. But the instant he takes this position, he ceases to be a relativist and becomes, unwittingly, an absolutist!

Now, why is it important that we realize that everybody, including so-called relativists, believes in absolute morality? The reason leads us to my second point of the argument. If absolute morality actually exists, then it must have a source.

We have three options for this source. The first option is the universe itself. If the universe is really all there is, and matter, energy, time, and space are all that make up the universe, then we are forced to conclude that absolute morality flows from the same matter, energy, time, and space. Here we face a major problem. These four things which comprise the natural universe are not moral. They merely interact according to fundamental laws of physics. An atom is not “right” or “wrong” in any sense of the word. Nor is energy, space, or time. These things are brute facts of the universe. How, then, can an amoral universe produce absolute morality? It cannot, and we must press on to the second option.

If the universe itself, which is amoral, cannot produce absolute morality, then we must take it further down the chain of events. If we examine the animal kingdom, we don’t see morals until Homo Sapiens. Various animals act in ways that may appear at first glance to reflect morality, but here we must recognize what true morality is. Morality involves choices of the will to do what is believed to be right or wrong. Animals may act in ways which seem to be moral, but they merely do so for their own survival, or as the result of training.

This means that man must be the origin, or source, of this absolute morality. But is this possible? Something that is absolute is true for all time for all people. If man invented morality, then how in the world can it be considered absolute? Furthermore, this problem is not resolved even if we argue that some animals do in fact have a moral code. Anything invented by an animal species cannot truly be absolute in nature.

This forces us to a third option. If the universe cannot have produced absolute morality from amoral material and energy, and since any invention of an animal species cannot rightly be considered absolute, then we are forced to go outside the known universe for the source. What is beyond the universe?

The answer to this question is surely debatable. But the argument has taken us to this point: beyond the universe is a moral agent from whom absolute morality originates. There is no other option left. What does this moral agent look like? Is it personal? Is it God? Is it another universe which is just a little different from ours? Who knows. All we can conclude is that absolute morality must originate from a moral agent outside our universe. Without this moral agent, absolute morality simply cannot exist in our universe.

We have seen how my first two original assertions (i) and (ii) above have fit together. Now, we must press on to my third assertion (iii). It revolves around the notion that real evil actually exists. What do I mean by evil? I mean needless pain, suffering, and anguish brought about by another - this is in contrast to natural events like slipping on a banana peel and hurting your hip. By mere observation, we can readily see that this evil does in fact exist. Pick up a newspaper on virtually any day of the year, and you will read stories of people murdering people brutally, merely because they wanted to. You will find sadistic individuals who beat and maim children for pleasure. Everyone recognizes that evil exists in the world - there is little use in denying it. But this presents us with a classic problem.

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

I want to focus on this notion of the problem of evil, because it is an age-old argument which attempts to refute theism. It takes the following form:

(1) An all-good being wouldn’t want evil to exist in the world.
(2) An all-powerful being would be able to prevent evil from existing in the world.
(3) Therefore, if an all-good, all-powerful being existed, evil would not exist.
(4) God is defined as an all-good, all-powerful being.
(5) Evil exists in the world.
(6) Therefore, by (3) and (5) above, an all-good, all-powerful being does not exist.
(7) Therefore, by (4) and (6) above, God does not exist.
This argument consists of two assumptions (1) and (2), a definition (4), an observation (5), and three conclusions (3), (6), and (7). Non-theists point to the existence of evil in the world and use it as a means to deny the existence of God. In other words, either one or the other exists, but both cannot. Let us evaluate this argument. I have two objections.

**OBJECTION #1**

The argument is valid - its conclusions logically follow from its premises. But is it sound? The assumptions (1) and (2) are highly debatable. I think of my role as a father. Suppose my son is about to touch the hot stove. I sternly tell him, “NO,” but he continues to reach for the burner. I love my son dearly, and I don’t want to see him get hurt at all. Furthermore, I have the power to prevent this pain and suffering from occurring. Yet, because a greater good will come of it (i.e. he will learn never to touch the hot burner in a way that he never would by simply obeying my command), I might allow him to touch the burner. Of course, he screeches in pain, and he suffers for a while. But in the end, he’s a smarter, better person for it.

Consider another example. In the Civil War, people got limbs amputated all the time. A soldier would get an injury to his leg, and he would go to the hospital. In those days, an infection usually meant death, so the normal procedure under such circumstances was to amputate the leg. Now today, amputation is pretty painless. After all, they put you under before severing the limb. But in those days, all they did was hold you down on the table and take a saw and, like a 2x4, hack it off. Imagine the pain and anguish. But of course, it was being done to prevent you from dying. Pain and suffering, while real and never fun, can actually be a way to prevent greater evil in the future.

As a father, I don’t want to see my son get hurt. I consider it somewhat evil that he would be in such pain. But, because I know that a greater good might come of it, I allow it to happen. Who is to say that God does not act in such ways? The Judeo-Christian doctrine teaches that mankind chose to disobey God (like my son would in the example I gave). As a result, evil came into the world. Now, God, who loves us dearly (like I do my son), does not want to see us suffer. But perhaps He will allow us to suffer the consequences of our and other’s actions in order to make us better people. We see it all the time in parenting - who is to say that God doesn’t do that with us?

At the heart of this argument is the arrogant assumption that we know what is best for us, as opposed to God. We look upon our circumstances and, if they don’t happen to be to our liking, we lash out and claim that God cannot therefore exist. Well, this is nothing short of foolishness. It would be like my son claiming that I didn’t love him or worse, that he didn’t have a “real” father, just because I wanted him to learn a hard lesson. Any argument where opinions (1) and (2) form the backbone, is very suspect.

**OBJECTION #2**

I believe strongly that the problem of evil is more of a problem for the non-theist than for the theist. Why do I say this? Premise (5) asserts that evil does in fact exist. Now, let us assume that this is true. How did evil arise? The theist has an answer, but the non-theist does not.

The theist answer is like I gave above. God is all-good; He is the embodiment of goodness. Anything opposed to God is evil. Evil cannot operate in a vacuum - it can only exist in contrast to good. Evil is nothing more than opposition to good. In Christian theology, as I mentioned above, mankind opposed God (who is good), and evil resulted. You and I constantly make choices against what we know is good. This is evil.

The non-theist, however, must come up with a mechanism for evil’s existence. There are two options. Evil cannot exist apart from good. Therefore, for evil to exist, good must exist. But if God does not exist, then a source of good must exist. What is that source? We have already seen that the universe, which is amoral, cannot be the source of good. Therefore, man must be the source of good. But this is quite obviously erroneous. After all, man cannot create absolute good. He can only create subjective good. If man can create only subjective good, then that means that it isn’t truly good - it is relative. Thus, only subjective - relative - evil can exist. And anything that is relative is a matter of one’s own opinion. It thus boils down to this: if mankind is the inventor of good, then neither absolute good nor absolute evil can exist. And if absolute evil cannot exist, then that means that we are back to a matter of preferences.

Preferences, of course, do not constitute real good or real evil. Our preferences can change with the wind, and often do. Good and evil become nothing more than
vanilla and chocolate. Therefore, premise (5), which asserts that real evil actually exists, must necessarily be false. That is, unless there is an absolute good against which this evil can be contrasted.

Since this absolute good cannot come from the universe or people, we are forced once again to look outside the universe for a good moral agent against whom we oppose (which is evil). Either God exists, or evil cannot exist, and if evil cannot exist, then evil is an illusion.

Furthermore, if the non-theist does not accept this outside agent, then he must have a different idea of evil. If evil truly exists, and non-theistic evolution is true, then evil somehow evolved into society. Now, according to Darwinism, whatever exists in a species is what has enabled it to survive. This means, of course, that evil, since it exists in a species (ours), must somehow enable us to survive. Anything that enables a species to survive is “good” in Darwinian terms. Therefore, evil must be “good” in Darwinian terms. Thus, the non-theistic evolutionist is forced into a position of concluding that this so-called evil is in actuality good. Talk about a self-defeating argument!

In sum, we must remember that some things are indeed relative. The room may be an absolute temperature (78 degrees), but two different people may think two different things about that absolute fact - one may say that it is hot in the room, but the other may say that it is cold. Who is right? Well, nobody - it is relative. But notice that even relativity has at its roots absolutes.

Similarly, some morals are relative, and we must not try to force an absolute standard on things that are not absolute - that leads to legalism. However, we must strongly assert that some things are absolute, even if we cannot determine what, exactly, they are.

The bottom line is that relativism is false. In fact, nobody is a pure relativist. Simply stating the proposition, “All morals are relative,” is to assert the existence of an absolute. Ultimately, relativism is believed for two reasons: (1) because a person sees disagreement on morals all around them and concludes that since there is disagreement, there cannot be an absolute truth. Or, rather, that because there is disagreement, then even if there were absolutes, it is obvious that nobody knows them and therefore we ought to act as if there were no absolutes. Or (2) because a person wants to live a life of “freedom.” They want to enjoy the pleasures of this world free from guilt. The only way to be free from guilt is to believe that there is nothing wrong with their actions. This naturally leads someone to take a relativistic position.

Fortunately, relativism is self-refuting. Usually it takes no more than a few minutes of good questions to help a person see that. Once absolutes are established, then we can ask where absolutes come from? The answer can only be God.

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