



Thinking about Moral Absolutes

"Many people's moral lives are crashing and burning because they fail to respect the objective moral roadmap guiding our human journey. They've slipped into thinking that they can make up their own rules as they go along."



When Pope Benedict XVI visited the United States in April of 2008, I had the chance to attend the opening ceremony at the White House South Lawn. As I listened to President Bush's remarks to the Pope, I was caught off guard by a powerful line in his welcoming speech:

"In a world where some no longer believe that we can distinguish between simple right and wrong, we need your message to reject this dictatorship of relativism and embrace a culture of justice and truth."

The President was expressing how we live in a time of history marked by *moral relativism*. This is the belief that there really is no right and wrong, just your opinion and mine about right and wrong, and we should simply "agree to disagree" and learn to get along. That is to say: you may believe that abortion, same-sex marriage, and embryonic stem cell research are fine, and I may not, but there's really no point in arguing, since everything is relative anyway – morality is up to me and you to decide individually. In such a view, there are no moral absolutes or universals, and morality shifts freely with each person's perspective.

Ultimately, however, this position is unreasonable. If morality were merely about your and my opinions, the results would be disastrous. If I believed racism and the institution of slavery built upon it were wrong, but you believed they're okay, could we both go our merry ways and live according to our own morality? Clearly not, and the United States had to undergo a terrible civil war to address this very question. If I believe serial murder and rape are wrong, but you believe they're OK, can we both go off and live according to our own positions? Clearly not, since both positions cannot be true.

These obvious examples illustrate what each of us already knows, namely, that in the real world "relative" truth doesn't work. Suppose you and I each drive towards an intersection with a traffic light. If it were up to each of us to make up our own minds about what color the light was, without any reference to its real color, there would certainly be a lot of accidents at our intersections. What many fail to realize is that the moral world works the same way. Many people's moral lives are crashing and burning because they fail to respect the objective moral roadmap guiding

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In the movie *Schindler's List*, much of the action takes place in a Nazi labor camp. The camp commandant decides to take a young Jewish girl to be his personal maid-servant. At one point in the film, this girl has a private and very disturbing conversation with another man, Oskar Schindler, the protagonist of the film. With deep fear in her voice she says to him, "I know that someday my master will shoot me." Schindler at first can't believe what he is hearing, and he does his best to reassure her that the commandant is really quite fond of her. But she insists, "No, someday he will shoot me." She then speaks of what she had witnessed the previous day. She had seen him walk out of his quarters, draw his gun, and shoot a Jewish woman who was walking by with a bundle in her hand. She described the woman: "Just a woman on her way somewhere. No fatter, or thinner, or slower, or faster than anyone else; and I couldn't guess what she had done [to provoke him]. The more you see of the commandant, the more you see there are no set rules that you can live by. You can't say to

yourself, 'If I follow these rules, I will be safe.'"

Fr. Raymond Suriani, commenting on this famous scene from the movie noted how this girl was absolutely correct: *In a world of moral confusion, in a world of moral relativism, there can be no safety, and, consequently, no peace.* She understood that in the "world" of that Nazi labor camp, right and wrong had been blurred to such an extent, that she couldn't determine what was "right" even in the mind of the commandant. What pleased him at one moment might not please him in the next. And if he happened to have power, or to have a gun in his hand when he wasn't pleased, she knew she could easily end up being his next victim.

Universal moral absolutes speak powerfully to us as humans. We draw strength from the prophetic and protective voice of the Church, speaking tirelessly to us of these moral absolutes and pointing out the threat to our humanity posed by every agenda of relativism.

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