



Living a Catholic Life No. 12 *Moral Relativism*

“Living a Catholic Life” is a collaboration between Knights of Columbus councils, parishes, grassroots organizations, and The National Catholic Bioethics Center to educate the laity on principles of the moral life and their application.

Moral relativism is the view that there are no moral absolutes. It is remarkably protean, at one and the same time the oldest and the newest of doctrines. Indeed, moral relativists feel at home in hedonism, utilitarianism, emotivism, subjectivism, and situationism. Taken to its logical conclusion, relativism is self-refuting: “there are no absolutes” would itself be an absolutely true statement. Often refuted as a theory, relativism keeps coming back. Why? Any sound ethical theory must have flexibility. Since not everything in ethics is an absolute, there *is* room for some relativity. For example, in his account of the natural law, St. Thomas Aquinas makes use of primary and secondary precepts (see *Summa theologiae* I-II.94). But while flexible, Aquinas is not a relativist. On the other hand, the moral theory of relativism is nothing if not flexible: all is secondary, nothing is primary.

The Greek Sophist Protagoras is regarded as the father of relativism. Plato in several of his dialogues takes issue with Protagorean thought, and the Socratic search for universal definitions of the virtues such as courage and justice poses the problem of relativism versus absolutism from the very start of Western philosophical reflection. In the nineteenth century, Nietzsche’s “transvaluation of all values” is often linked to relativism. His invective against Socrates is an attack on the notion of absolute standards of right and wrong. In the late twentieth century, a critique of ethical relativism is one of the leitmotifs of Pope St. John Paul II’s *Veritatis splendor*. The Pope mentions relativism in the very first paragraph and returns to the theme over and over again.

Moral relatives versus moral absolutes—the same battles waged by the ancients are still being fought by us moderns. Case in point is Carol Gilligan, the Harvard educational psychologist who has earned her place in feminist circles by taking on the male psychological establishment. Largely on the strength of her 1982 volume, *In a Different Voice*, Gilligan is attributed with the discovery of a distinctly feminine voice in ethics. Men and women, in her view, arrive at moral judgments in different ways: men by an ethic of rights and detachment, women by an ethic of care and attachment. For both approaches to be applied simultaneously, however, one must move away from moral absolutes. This and the accompanying awareness of the complexity of moral decision-making are indicators of moral growth, in Gilligan’s estimation. While cloaked in the language of contemporary psychology, her “different voice” turns out to be another variation on the siren song of Protagoras. Gilligan’s moral methodology is much in evidence when it serves to give a veneer of ethical respectability

to the practice of abortion. Since there are no moral absolutes, the act of abortion can be “made moral” by subjective intention.

Gilligan is not alone in seeing the merits of relativism. Another case in point is “A New Ethic for Medicine and Society,” a minor classic of an editorial that appeared in the September 1970 *California Medicine*. In barely 1,100 words, the editorialist speaks of *relative* four times and “quality of life” five times in making the case for the triumph of relative over absolute, of quality of life over sanctity of life. As in Gilligan’s case, moral relativism is put to immediate use and on the very same issue: “The process of eroding the old ethic and substituting the new has already begun. It may be seen most clearly in changing attitudes towards human abortion. . . . One may anticipate further development of these roles as the problems of birth control and birth selection are extended inevitably to death selection and death control.” In its latest reincarnation, relativism clothes itself in the tunic of technological progress, and physician-assisted suicide is an ineluctable part of this changing of the moral guard.

Legend has it that when the philosophy building at Harvard was ready for occupancy in 1903, the president of Harvard, Charles Eliot, asked the members of the philosophy department what inscription they would recommend for the edifice. They chose the classic relativistic dictum of Protagoras: “Man is the measure of all things.” When the philosophers returned from their summer sojourns, Emerson Hall had a far different inscription: “What is man that thou art mindful of him?”

The American experiment began with that boldest of statements: “We hold these truths to be self-evident.” How would a relativist interpret that quaint belief in the power of the human mind to know the truth? Read the newspaper headlines and watch the evening news if you want to see a relativistic hermeneutic. In *Veritatis splendor*, the Pope warns of its danger: “This is *the risk of an alliance between democracy and ethical relativism*. . . . Indeed, ‘if there is no ultimate truth to guide and direct political activity, then ideas and convictions can easily be manipulated for reasons of power. As history demonstrates, a democracy without values easily turns into open or thinly disguised totalitarianism.’”

The next time we hear the words of the Declaration of Independence or reflect on the legacy of relativism as we hear of the latest malady afflicting the American soul, we would do well to keep the words of the encyclical in mind. While relativism may be a permanent temptation of human culture, William James may have said it better: “We are absolutists by instinct.”