



Questions Asked: Cultural Relativism

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“Aren’t morals relative to each culture?” This is a very common question on the secular landscape. I have been asked this by people who find God’s laws unnecessary and inhibiting to their passions. I have also been asked this by Christians who have struggled to find answers to the question posed in their workplaces and communities.

If you are a materialist, the idea that society determines morals is nearly the best and safest explanation for morals you can invent. If the universe came about of nothing, by nothing, and for nothing, then how else would morals be devised? They certainly do not come about in the clouds or a test-tube. Morality, in this view, is often associated entirely with law-making and social pressures. Many in our culture do not believe ethics rise above the laws of the land. Many others believe that even if laws are not created regarding morality, there are still socially acceptable practices that we ought to follow.

While this view makes a noble attempt at explaining morals, society simply cannot be the originator of morals, as we shall see. Laws can be made by society, but morals cannot. In fact, it could very well be argued that the laws of a society are there to protect us from actually breaking moral laws.

Those who believe in cultural relativism have problems with two major objections, one from without and the other from within. As for the objection from without, let us consider a historical precedent. In the early 1940’s a German society agreed to exterminate Jews in the name of the Third Reich. If society alone determines morals, what right had any of the Allied forces to impose the Nuremberg Trials on Nazi Germany for doing what was wrong? Cultural relativism would say that since America was a separate culture from the German culture, America had no right to say the Nazi’s were immoral for murdering innocent people. All they could say, at the most, would be, “We have chosen not to murder innocent people in our country.” But since the Nuremberg Trials were not about cultures but about universally accessible morals, the world has seen conclusively that Nazi Germany was flagrantly

immoral in its crimes. It revealed just how evil a society, unhinged from God, can become.

It seems obvious that one society can judge another based on universal morals, but what if someone disagreed with his own society within the culture? Can cultural relativism hold up under that test?

Martin Luther King is one example among many. He was valiant for the cause of civil rights, speaking out against discrimination. He said, "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by their character." Through his marches and speeches, he swayed people and politicians to change the laws on civil rights. Notice, he swayed them to change the civil laws; he never changed morality.

Because of it, he became a hero. But I often wonder why those who believe in cultural relativism—that society invents morality—would think Martin Luther King a hero. He went against his entire culture to state his view. According to cultural relativism, King was deeply immoral for speaking out as a minority. But if morals come from God, then King was simply

proclaiming what was right with hopes that society would stop doing what was wrong.

Finally, let us reflect on the words of agnostic philosopher Immanuel Kant, who said, "Out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made." We saw this first at Babel (Genesis 11), and we've seen it from civilization to civilization ever since. Without God, morality and a justification for morality fade into oblivion. A crooked culture cannot make things straight. And there is good news that a good God came to show us what was right, how to make it right, and how to keep it right—that the whole world may know peace.

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