

# Politics and the Problem of Moral Relativism

(Lecture notes)

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I. **What is the Problem of Politics and Moral Relativism?** If the purpose of politics is to advance the common good, but relativism says there is no common good, then how is it possible to have a just political regime?

II. **Some moral rules:**

- Love your neighbor as yourself
- Thou shalt not commit adultery
- Do not intentionally kill the innocent
- Do not take what is not yours without permission
- Parents ought to care for their infant children
- Shun ignorance and try to live at peace with your neighbors
- One ought not to rape anyone.

If you believe that these moral rules—and perhaps others not mentioned—ought to be obeyed by everyone regardless of time, place, or culture, then you are a moral objectivist. You believe that morality is real and that it can be known by everyone, that morality is more like mathematics than it is like the rules of etiquette. On other hand, if you believe that morality depends exclusively on one's time, place, or culture—that there is no universal objective morality that transcends society and circumstance—then you are a moral relativist.

III. **Why are some people moral relativists?** Two main reasons: (1) There is just too much diversity on moral issues both in and across cultures, and (2) It is intolerant to believe that one's moral view is universally true and others wrong. We will call the first, *The Argument from Disagreement*, and the second, *The Argument From Tolerance*.

a. ***The Argument from Disagreement.*** “Disagreement on moral issues is everywhere. In the United States alone there are an array of questions over which sincere citizens hold contrary views. Think of also of all the civilizations throughout history that thought it was perfectly permissible to enslave fellow human beings, torture heretics, or rape and pillage conquered nations. So, it seems that there is no objective universal morality.”

Problems with this argument:

- i. **The fact of moral disagreement does not entail moral relativism**, just as the fact of disagreement over the shape of the Earth does not entail that the Earth has no shape. Perhaps some cultures and individuals have gotten morality wrong, which is something we all down deep already believe.
- ii. **Disagreement can be used against relativism.** In order for the argument from disagreement to work, the moral relativist must assume this proposition: whenever there is disagreement on any issue (e.g., the correct moral position on X), there is no universal objective truth on the matter.
- iii. **Disagreement is overrated.** Examples: disputants over abortion, critical race theory, and the nature of marriage often appeal to the *exact same* moral goods and principles to justify their positions: fairness, justice, relief of suffering, love, and protection of

the vulnerable. Where they disagree is over the proper application of those goods and principles and the right way to answer questions about the nature of the reality to which they are being applied (e.g., What *is* marriage? Is systemic racism *really* everywhere?). This is why the Catholic Church teaches that even though objective morality is known by all, it is “not perceived by everyone clearly and immediately. In the present situation sinful man needs grace and revelation so moral and religious truths may be known ‘by everyone with facility, with firm certainty and with no admixture of error.’”<sup>1</sup>

- iv. **Argument from disagreement leads to absurd consequences.** If moral relativism is correct (that there is no universal objective morality), then it is not wrong everywhere and always to rape another person, intentionally kill the innocent, torture children for fun, judge Mother Teresa as no better than Adolph Hitler, and abandon one’s infant offspring to the elements if one finds them inconvenient. It also means that there can be neither moral progress nor moral reformers.
- b. **The Argument from Tolerance.** “Because it is intolerant to believe that one’s moral views are right and others’ wrong, it follows that moral relativism—the view that there is no one universal objective morality—best establishes tolerance.” Problems with this argument:
  - i. **The moral relativist seems to be affirming at least one absolute moral principle: tolerance.** But in that case, she is no longer a relativist.
  - ii. **Moral relativism need not lead to tolerance.** After all, someone could say, “Although I believe all morality is culturally relative, I prefer my culture’s morality to all others, and thus I want my nation to ban all immigrants from other cultures.”
  - iii. **The practice of tolerance seems valuable because it establishes certain goods.** These include living at peace with others and better understanding those with whom one disagrees. But these goods seem to be functioning as if they were part of some universal objective morality, which is inconsistent with moral relativism.

#### IV. Politics and Moral Relativism: Insights from Aquinas

- a. There is a natural law: those goods to which human beings are ordered for which law and political institutions exist. Aquinas argues that we are rational creatures with natural inclinations to pursue what we believe is good, preserve our lives, beget and educate children, know truths about the world and the divine, and live in a community at peace with our neighbors. The natural law is what we can’t not know, as University of Texas philosopher J. Budziszewski puts it. But how is this possible?
  - i. It is presupposed when we speak of human rights and unjust laws, e.g., Universal Declaration on Human Rights, M.L. King’s Letter from a Birmingham Jail.
  - ii. It can even account for our deep disagreements. Consider, as examples, the following precepts of the natural law.
    - 1. “It is morally wrong to kill another person without justification.” All societies prohibit homicide. All also carve out exemptions, but only do so by justifying them.
    - 2. “It is morally wrong to intentionally tell a falsehood to someone who is entitled to the truth.” The requirement of truth-telling is universally affirmed. There are exemptions, but only those that are justified by appealing to other goods.

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<sup>1</sup>*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1960, quoting from Pius XII, *Humani Generis* (12 August 1950), 3.