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**Ethical Relativism And Truth**

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For over five thousand years the world has lived from the script of a Story: the Bible. Actually, more than five thousand years old in oral form, the Story goes back to the beginning of time. This Story is a story about who we human beings are, where we came from, and where we are headed, in relationship to God. This Story, which gives us our identity, purpose, and future hope, shapes us both personally and culturally. Whether all people believed the Story by faith or were merely shaped by the benefits derived from it, it is the framework within which human beings have made sense of life.

The Story told by God through prophets, priests, and disciples was an integral part of the world's ability to make sense of life until the period known as the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century. During this "modern" period, the promises of science, based on reason at the expense of the rejection of the spiritual, offered an alternative to the Story of God. Beginning with the Enlightenment, people tried to live by the benefits of the story (its ethical principles) while rejecting the Story itself as true.

By the beginning of the twentieth century it was clear that this attempt had failed. From this point on, how the world lost its Story is reflected in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche and others who championed the overthrow, not only of the Story, but of the ethical principles that the Story itself produced. Nihilism, a belief in the meaninglessness of life, became a virtual reality for many.

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Today, it is clear that the world has lost much of its Story. A secular approach to life attempts to re-interpret some teachings of the Story in secular terms. The mystery and spiritual nature of the Story has turned into practical helps for living. Instead of people believing they are made by God, are accountable to God, and must stand before God in Judgment, a secular version of who we are and where we are headed is proposed with scientific answers. This approach has given rise to belief in human progress and the dreams of a more perfect world. Thus far, this has taken the form of Nazism, Communism and, more constructively, Capitalism.

In the twenty-first century, the breakdown of moral character, the deterioration of ethical behavior, the over-emphasis on the freedom of the individual, and the loss of meaning and purpose in life continues to be evident in theatres, the internet, and on TV. We suffer more and more the loss of the Story God tells. This loss of the Biblical Story or Narrative in our world has led to utilitarianism in public ethics and ethical relativism in personal morality.

“It is not unusual,” says Gilbert Meilaender, “when teaching ethics to find that a student, having written a paper carefully analyzing the arguments presented by an author about a moral problem, should then conclude (almost in these words), ‘Of course, this is only his opinion, one among many.’ We move quickly and easily from the observation that no moral standpoint seems universally persuasive to the conviction that no moral standpoint can claim to be true.”<sup>2</sup> The assumption here is that moral convictions are not true or false, but only chosen. In one of the first medical ethics classes I taught at Concordia I was comparing the death of Socrates with the death of Jesus as a way of illustrating two understandings of death. Socrates died in prison by being compelled to

drink poison. Before he died, however, he spent his last days preparing his disciples for his death. He taught them not to fear death. Socrates defined death as the soul's release from imprisonment in the body. The soul is reincarnated and the cycle of life continues. Death, he taught, is therefore a *friend* to be embraced. Socrates did not shed a tear and evidenced complete control over his dying. When the time came, he willingly drank the hemlock, laid himself down peacefully, and described for his disciples the encroachment of death until he was dead. Jesus, on the other hand, spent his final hours in the Garden of Gethsemane evidencing agony and fear in the face of death, pleading with his heavenly Father to "remove this cup" and sweating, "as it were" great drops of blood, until he finally submitted to the greater will of his Father. If death was an friend to Socrates, death was an enemy to Jesus. Jesus understood death to be an enemy to be conquered, which upon doing so, he announced "it is finished." In class, I made the observation that Socrates understood death to be a friend because he misunderstood death. Jesus, on the hand, knew death for what it is, "the wages of sin." It became clear to the students that I favored Jesus' view over that of Socrates and a startled student raised his hand and asked, "Are you saying that Jesus was right and Socrates was wrong?" to which I answered, "Yes!" I asked the student for his response and he replied, "I've just never heard anyone make a judgement like that." And with a wry smile he said, "That's awesome." What surprised him was not the contrast I drew between Socrates and Jesus, . . . ethical relativism allows for differences . . . but the fact that I would make a judgement that Jesus was objectively right and Socrates wrong.

In the classical tradition, teaching ethics has been a matter of handing down to succeeding generations the knowledge of right and wrong. But not today! As

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<sup>2</sup> *The Theory and Practice of Virtue* p. 48.

Meilaender says, Plato would not have asked, “What is your opinion? What do you think?” According to Plato the student should first be introduced to the disciplines which present the rationale and argument for an ethic and only then might the student challenge such arguments. I remember Stanley Hauerwas (Duke University) telling me in his own unique way, how he said what Plato said: “You students have no right to an opinion until you have heard what I have to teach you in this ethics course.” But this is not the way ethics is generally taught today or, for that matter, for several decades.

For some time now children from earliest years have been taught that there are no objective moral principles and that right and wrong are relative to the culture or person holding them. The pedagogical method of teaching this is called Values Clarification, and it is still going on. The claim is that Values Clarification allows the student to define and clarify his own values for himself without the influence or interference of other value judgments around him. But even the way Values Clarification is taught is not really objective. Richard Baer, author of *Values Clarification as Indoctrination* (1977) presents a typical encounter between child and teacher:

Student: Yesterday I poured blue paint all over my cat.

Teacher: How do you feel when that happened?

Student: I felt terrible. I should have used red paint.

Teacher: No. I meant, how did you feel about getting paint all over the cat?

Student: Oh, I felt terrible. I shouldn't have done anything to harm my cat.

Even here, Values Clarification cannot be morally neutral. The teacher's clarification brings to the supposedly neutral environment the teacher's own values, in this case, that it is a bad thing to cover a cat with paint. The child learns, from the teacher's clarification of the question, that concern for the cat is more important than

concern for the color of the paint. Of course, this absence of moral neutrality on the teacher's part is not bad. It is only bad if we think our method is morally neutral when it is not. Values Clarification claims to be morally neutral, but in fact, most likely the teacher's own liberal values are being passed on. Meilaender comments, "The trick, then, is not to be morally neutral but to avoid whatever constitutes objectionable indoctrination. Michael Scriven (*Cognitive Moral Education* 1975) suggests that legitimate indoctrination [for young school children] would require explanation, justification, and permission [from parents] before attempting to change a child's values in the classroom. This is seldom done.

Ethical relativism is a philosophy that is founded on an argument with a logical premise. Louis Pojman (*Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong* 1999) presents the logic as follows:

- What is morally right and wrong varies from society to society.
- Whether or not it is right for an individual to act in a certain way depends on the society in which he finds himself.
- Therefore, there are no absolute or objective moral standards.

The fallacy here is that the observation of cultural differences need not lead to the conclusion it does as the only possible conclusion. It may also be concluded that there is a shared core of moral values, but that their *application* varies from culture to culture, in which case one might also argue that some applications are morally right and others are morally corrupt. For example, it may be that the moral principle of "regard for parents" is missapplied in the Eskimo culture when adult children place their elderly parents on an ice flow to die rather than care for them. We may argue that this is not a good way to show regard for parents, but the moral principle may be the same as that practiced by the

Japanese who would make great personal sacrifices for their parents no matter what the cost. If there are so-called varying moral principles – or more accurately, varying application of moral principles – from culture to culture, it does not necessarily follow that morality is either relative or morally neutral. It may be that some cultures are morally corrupt or have lost their moral foundations, as witnessed by the fact that although the Nazis admitted to no wrongdoing, few today would view the killing of six million Jews as a morally neutral act of any given culture.

But if the logic that attempts to justify ethical relativism doesn't hold, there are other reasons that ethical relativism may seem attractive to some. For example, embracing ethical relativism may seem to some to be better than embracing a rigid absolutism insensitive to people's needs. The fallacy here is the assumption that the only choice in ethics lies between that of ethical relativism and rigid absolutism. The truth is that there are other choices beside rigid absolutism. For example, Aristotle has been enjoying a comeback in recent years in a reaffirmation of Aristotle's virtue-based ethics. Virtue-based ethics aims at the development of moral character through the practice of virtue. Support for this ethic was evident in the recent presidential campaigns. The questionable moral practices of former President Bill Clinton motivated many voters to look for a successor with a strong moral character.

Another alternative to the narrow choice between ethical relativism and rigid absolutism is called Moral Objectivism. Moral objectivism, like Absolutism, also believes in moral absolutes but where there is a conflict between moral principles, moral objectivism permits a higher moral principle to override a lower moral principle. An example of this might be seen in the rationale for the bombing of Japan at the end of

World War II; the higher moral principle being that is better to sacrifice a city (or two) than permit the continued slaughter of allied soldiers with no end in sight. Moral Objectivism may be the secular version of Luther's "sin boldly" when forced to choose between the lesser of two evils in a moral conflict.

Finally, there is the ethic of Utilitarianism, in which the rightness or wrongness of an act is judged by its consequences. A version of utilitarianism is expressed in the popular expression, "The end justifies the means." This is the predominant American ethic today that attempts to justify such things as the making and unmaking of human embryos for research, "for the betterment of mankind." The weakness of utilitarianism in any form is that it does not really concern itself with what is objectively right or wrong, but simply accomplishes what it sets out to accomplish, allowing others to decide its morality or immorality.

The search for truth has existed throughout history. Even pagans show evidence of things touching the truth, at least in part, as St. Paul says, when they "show the requirements of the law written on their hearts." Plato's (*Republic* Book VII) classic myth of the cave illustrates the ancient search for truth. Here Plato proposes that people, deceived by the shadows of a surrealist world must be dragged out into the light if they are to see the truth. The myth goes like this: Human beings from birth sit in a cave, facing a wall. A fire burns behind them, casting shadows of movements behind them upon the wall in front of them. They can only comprehend life by the shadows of things that pass by behind them since they are unable to turn around and see for themselves. They become quite skilled in learning, but never see the truth themselves. They cannot see the reality of things. It is only when someone sitting facing the wall is compelled by

someone behind them to turn and walk out of the cave into the light that they see the reality of things. Even then it takes time and some refuse to do so. Plato's point is that we cannot force people to accept reality, that is, truth, but only help them consider turning away from the wall of the cave.

Plato himself did not know the Truth who is Jesus Christ, but he had a glimpse of truth, in part. There are secular evidences of truth, in part, in our world today. When we as Christians find ourselves opposing someone who is not a Christian over a question touching on truth we may discover a grain of truth in what that person says. It is good for us to acknowledge that grain and recognize it as common ground for turning toward the light. When Pilate asked Jesus, "What is truth?" it may have been an expression of cynicism much like the cynicism expressed by ethical relativism today. Or, it may have been an expression of classical uncertainty, albeit respect for truth as Plato and others had desired to know. And yet, Pilate, with the Light of the World standing before him, refused to see Jesus Christ as the Incarnate Truth. So it is for many.

### The Incarnate Truth

The secular search for truth is only rewarded with a "grain of truth," not the whole truth. Plato was right in some things but wrong in the most important thing. The temptation to hubris in the possession of a "grain of truth" is not in claiming it to be true, but in claiming that the grain is more than a grain, it is the whole truth. The grain of truth becomes a worldview, a way to see the world through the lens of a grain. And whenever a grain of truth is made into a worldview, it becomes an idol. So, the moral claim to reproductive freedom, for example, becomes the whole and no limits are permitted to be placed on the use of reproductive technologies. When the moral claim that the "relief of



suffering” is more than just a grain of truth in the pursuit of healing, assisted suicide and euthanasia follow because they relieve suffering. The grain has become the whole.

The whole of Truth cannot be *discovered* in the grain. The whole of Truth can only be known by *revelation* to us in Jesus Christ. So, it becomes the task of the Church to persuade the world to turn from the grain to the whole, or in Plato’s analogy, from the cave wall to the light of day. This turning is accomplished by the work of the Holy Spirit. As St. Paul says, “we persuade all” to turn. And yet it is the work of God that does the turning. Our task as pastors is to speak the truth in love; it is not to necessarily *succeed* in the turning people to Christ as the Truth. Our task is to nurture the grain of truth others display so that it can be exchanged for the whole Truth in Jesus Christ.

Truth is expressed in Law and Gospel. The Law enables us to find common ground in the grain of truth with unbelievers who do not know the whole truth. In ethics, the Law can be discovered, in part, by means of reason. The Gospel of God’s gracious love for us enables us to love graciously those who do not know the truth. We have nothing to feel superior about as if we have come to the truth by ourselves. In ethics, the Gospel is the proclamation of the forgiveness of our sins of pride and it is also the transforming power that makes faith grow and makes us a new creation. “Therefore, since through God’s mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways: we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God. . . . The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers so that they cannot see the light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” (2 Cor 4:1-4)

In conclusion and in the light of what we have said about ethical relativism and truth, the following ought to be given serious consideration:

1. If we are going to speak the truth, that is the Gospel, to a world without a Story we had better learn how to build on the grain of truth in what people say as the point of contact between their need and God's Truth that brings wholeness.
2. We, as the Church, need to teach the Story: from creation and fall to redemption and eternal hope, and all this, "for us." The Story proclaims the truth to be the Gospel (Eph. 1:13). But the Gospel is not Gospel until it has been applied to life, not as Law, but as Gospel.
3. Finally, if we have this ministry of reconciliation which is to turn the world upside down, then it must be done by the Truth incarnate, Jesus Christ. No gimmicks, strategies, or appeal to man's ideas will do it.

To God be the Glory!