

Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air

by Francis J. Beckwith and Gregory Koukl.

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reviewed by Johan D. Tangelder

Albert Einstein (1879-1955), often regarded as the greatest scientist of the 20th century, founded the theory of relativity, which had all kinds of direct and long-term consequences in physics, astrophysics, and the development of nuclear power. Relativism was much talked about in the 1920's, but few people actually understood what it meant. Many people thought that Einstein's theory contradicted absolute rules everywhere, especially in morals. Einstein was horrified by this misinterpretation and abuse of his work as he was an "old-fashioned absolutist." But relativism continued to spread and eventually prevailed. It undermined the teaching of the Holy Scriptures, led to the permissive society of the 1960s, the spread of Aids, the "coming out" of homosexuals without the restraints of the law, high divorce rates, the flourishing of the abortion industry, pornography, and other vices. Every day we are told, "There is no truth. Truth is whatever you believe. Therefore, you ought to tolerate the viewpoints of everyone and not pass judgement on their behavior and attitudes." But if we deny the existence of objective moral absolutes, we must admit that Mother Teresa was no more or less moral than the vicious dictator Adolf Hitler.

No Basis for Morality

The title of the book, "Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air," tells exactly what Francis Beckwith and Gregory Koukl think of moral relativism. It cannot offer a solid and objective foundation for values and morality. It leads to barbarism. The authors' approach reflects their indebtedness to the late Dr. Francis Schaeffer (1912-84), widely regarded as a preeminent Reformed/Evangelical apologist (defender of the faith). Schaeffer taught that only by returning to Biblical absolutes can the rapid deterioration of morals be reversed. He admonished evangelicals to stand firm on the inerrancy of Scripture and to take a public stand against social and moral evils.

His purpose in writing his many books was both evangelistic and pastoral. Although the content of his starting point was the infinite personal triune God, the propositional revelation in Scripture, and redemption through Jesus Christ, Schaeffer invited people holding conflicting truth claims to see and verify for themselves the truth claims of the Gospel. He showed that without the infinite personal God, relativism reigns. He argued that moral standards are absolute (universal and necessary) because they rest in God's character.

Moral Lawgiver

In their book, Beckwith and Koukl follow Schaeffer's "verification of truth" method in their incisive critique of moral relativism, which they call the unofficial creed

of much of American culture, especially in the area of education, law, and public policy. In chapters 1 through 3, they define moral relativism. Moral truths are considered preferences much like our taste in ice cream. The cultural setting in which it has become prevalent is also discussed. Chapters 4 to 7 show the bankruptcy of this new philosophy and provide a defense of moral objectivism - the belief that objective moral standards exist that apply in every place, in every time, in every human being, Chapter 8 focuses on values clarification and how it has impacted education in the public school system. Students are told that there are no objective moral standards - right and wrong. They must create their own values. Chapters 9 and 10 address political correctness and multiculturalism, which presuppose relativism and deny objective truth. Chapter 11 discusses what happens when autonomous man defines his own concept of existence. It also shows how moral relativism influenced America's law, culture, and especially sexual politics such as the equality of lifestyle for homosexuals. Chapters 12 and 13 explore the impact on three social issues: same-sex marriage, physician-assisted suicide, and abortion. Chapter 14 provides tactics for refuting relativism. For example, we can readily show the obvious contradictions of relativism. The authors state that it is impossible for relativists to talk in a way that is consistent with their beliefs. And the two concluding chapters argue for a universe in which the triune God exists, which alone can account for the existence of objective morality. "Moral law," the authors claim, "suggests a moral law-giver, one who communicates his desires through his laws. He expects his imperatives to be obeyed." A violation of law, therefore, is not just a broken rule but an offense against God who made the rule.

Although "Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air" is written primarily for Americans, using illustrations solely from current trends in the United States, Canadians can also profit from the arguments of this book. It is a great resource for pastors, catechism instructors, and Christian schoolteachers. Our covenant youth need to know the disastrous implications of moral relativism and how to defend their faith.