

Week 3 – Are Truth and Morality Relative? Supplemental Material

Defining Truth and Morality

There are 4 important definitions when thinking about truth, morality, and divine revelation (the source of truth and morality).

(1) Definition of Truth #1: That which corresponds to every dimension of reality independent of the knower (e.g., human mind) as designed, defined, and revealed by God and rooted in his being (essence) and will. This is known as the *correspondence theory of truth*. For example, the propositional statements: “Grass is green” or “God is love” hold true so long as it corresponds to reality (i.e., what happens to be the case in the real world) as God has set forth.

(2) Definition of Truth #2: The specific moral virtue of truthfulness in the sense of speaking and promoting what is true (#1 above and especially #3 below), acting with integrity, trustworthiness, faithfulness, genuineness, loyalty, etc.

(3) Definition of Truth #3 (Morality): The broader moral truths (e.g., love, kindness, self-control, respect for life & property, purity, etc.) that all moral creatures (e.g., especially human beings who bear the image of God) are obligated to uphold and which reflect the perfect righteous standard God has set forth (in his moral law) and which also marks his own unwavering character. Many suggest that morality and ethics are an impersonal set of ideas or laws. But this is nonsensical. All moral truth is *personal* in nature, always coming back to how moral character affects how humans treat one another and how they relate to God which means it is *inter-personal*. This merely reflects the personal nature of the Triune God. For example, a unitarian (non-Trinitarian) God cannot be loving because love requires a personal *lover* (a personal subject of the act of loving) and a personal *loved* one (the personal object or recipient of the act of loving). Thus, when the Bible says “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16) this only makes sense because we know that the person of God the Father (the *lover* in this case) loved God the Son (the *loved* in this case) before the creation of the world (John 17:24). Therefore, the truth that “God is love” entails inter-Trinitarian love, which means only the Triune God of the Bible can be the source of morality and ethics.

Furthermore, in order for morality to carry any *moral weight* (so to speak), it must be (1) objectively, universally, and unchangingly true in all ages for all people without exception and (2) it must be a binding obligation for all people in all ages. There is an *oughtness* to moral imperatives otherwise people would be free to do whatever they want (see Genesis 6:5; Jug. 17:6; 21:25) without consequences which leads to anarchy. Also, in order for morality to be objectively true (absolute) and not relative, there must exist a perfect objective standard or exemplar of righteousness. That standard must be personal, unchanging, and perfect in righteousness. This also requires that the personal source is the judge of morality, determining when the standard is upheld or violated. Again, this can be none other than the Triune God of the Bible. No other conception of God meets this requirement. Subsequently, all moral creatures (human and angelic) are ultimately accountable to God as their Maker, Sustainer, and Judge.

(4) Definition of Divine Revelation: The in-breaking of the infinite, transcendent, sovereign, all-righteous, rational, authoritative God into the created realm of finite creatures in order to make himself known and the truth that points to him (#1, 2, & 3 above). Revealed truth rests upon an ultimate authority (God) and comes in the form of:

(a) *General/ Natural Revelation* which is made known by God in the (i) **creation** (Psalm 19:1ff) and includes general truth like “grass is green”, “1+1=2”, “God is love”, “heterosexual marriage is good”, etc. and to the (ii) **conscience** (this means the moral law of God is written on human hearts; Rom. 2:14-15). However, both aspects of this revelation are suppressed by unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18ff.) and distorted by our fallen condition.

(b) *Special Revelation* which is the most important and comprehensive truth revealed by God and deposited in the inspired written Word of God (John 17:17). This is explicit Biblical truth that is necessary for us to know God more fully, to be saved from sin, to order our lives for his glory and our benefit, and to make sense of the world we live in.

Carl F. H. Henry: “Divine revelation [both kinds] is the source of all truth, the truth of Christianity included. Reason is the instrument for recognizing [revealed truth]. Scripture is its verifying principle. Logical consistency is a negative test for truth [i.e., truth does not commit logical fallacies], and coherence a subordinate test [truth fits together in a comprehensive and cohesive worldview]. The task of Christian theology is to exhibit the content of divine revelation as an orderly whole.” *God, Revelation, and Authority* (vol. 1, p. 215).

Truth in the Christian worldview is not merely individualized, that is, given to autonomous individuals in isolation. It is both for the individual and the community (i.e., interpersonal relationships), especially the community of believers (the church). God created us as social creatures designed to be in relationship with Himself and with one another.

Truth is more than propositions (i.e., truth claims), but it is not less than words formulated into logical propositions. Christianity adheres to the notion that truth can be expressed as propositional truth.

Modernism and Postmodernism

Modernism is largely connected to the Enlightenment that took place in the late 1700’s and influenced the rise of secularism. Thinkers of the Enlightenment believed in *objective truth* but largely rejected God as the source of truth, instead locating it in nature and the autonomous reason of man as the arbiter of truth. Modernism/ Secularism seeks to establish a worldview and grounding for morality, science, medicine, education, government, etc. without God. Man is the measure of all things. For example, this has led to the denial of the supernatural in science and replaced it with naturalistic materialism (e.g., Darwinian Evolution, etc.). It has led to atheistic governmental and economic theories (e.g., Communism and Socialism). Atheism precipitated the rise of modern psychology (e.g., Sigmund Freud, Carl Rogers, Carl Jung) that seeks to address human problems apart from the need for God or the Bible (later, Christian psychology mixed the Bible with secular psychology without realizing the dangers of doing so).

Once the Enlightenment moved the notion of truth from divine revelation to the realm of nature and unaided human reason and confined it to the material world we ended up with (a) *rationalism* (autonomous human reason) and (b) *empiricism*, which gave rise to materialism and naturalism (*naturalistic materialism*) and touted scientific empirical verification as the criterion for all truth claims. This is a problem. For example, how can science account for the existence of immaterial souls or the laws of nature or logic or our moral intuitions? Nonetheless, man and nature (existing apart from an intelligent designer—i.e., God) is now the measure of truth. Revelation and the supernatural is ruled out a priori (i.e., meaning one is not allowed to presuppose God, divine revelation, or the supernatural when doing science or making truth claims).

Postmodernism rejects *objective truth* but maintains human autonomy as the source of meaning. Modernism inevitably leads to postmodernism and the loss of objective truth and meaning. How so? By rejecting revelation as a source of truth and grounding it in human rationality. But since human reasoning is imperfect (as everyone recognizes), it eventually led to the notion that truth cannot be known, and in turn this led to the idea that there is no objective universal invariant truth. Truth is now relative along with morals. Postmodernists reject objective/ absolute truth claims in the belief that such claims lead to tyranny and undermine personal freedom. Postmodernism has led us into a post-Christian culture. In Modernism, Christianity was that awkward stepchild you had to give room for. In postmodernism, there is a wholesale rejection of Christianity altogether without realizing the disastrous implications of doing so.

Note the simple self-defeating (self-refuting) nature of postmodern relativism:
Statement: "Objective truth is false." Response: "Is that statement objectively true?"

It should concern the postmodernist that we want objective truth when we build a house that will stand (engineering), go to the doctor when we are sick (medicine), use a computer to conduct our business (technology), get falsely accused of a crime (law), get paid by our employer and deposit our money in the bank (mathematics/ economics), when our senses warn us not to stand on the edge of the Grand Canyon in a stiff wind (physics), drive our car on a busy freeway (physics, math, engineering, technology, law), etc. In other words, when it comes to our personal well-being or when we want to actually achieve things, we all believe in objective truth.

Throughout most of history what is true has been a matter of evaluating rival truth claims by revelation and/or reason. Postmodernism rejects the whole notion of arguing rationally for truth claims or appealing to authority (e.g., divine revelation), since the notion of truth is neither objective nor universal. Subsequently, contemporary culture has created conditions whereby people have more regard for *personal feelings* than truth.

In postmodernism, truth is relative (subjectivism) to specific situations and problems to meet the particular needs of the moment. Moral subjectivism/ relativism reigns. No moral choice is to be preferred over another (at least in theory). However, such thinking has led to moral nihilism

(as the philosopher Frederick Nietzsche predicted). Nihilism means that life itself is meaningless and ultimately not worth living. Some nihilistic philosophers and moral skeptics have argued that imperatival ethical statements like “Hitler should not kill Jews” is little different than making preferential statements like “I hate asparagus.” Subsequently, there is no difference between moral obligations and personal feelings.

Postmodernists believe truth is socially constructed serving the aims of specific groups. They believe that the dominant social groups use their socially constructed truth claims (like capitalism, for example) to retain power over others who are powerless. Such claims need to be “deconstructed” to expose the tyrannical power of the dominate social group. This process is known as deconstructivism and it underlies current ideologies like Critical Race Theory, Black Lives Matter, transgenderism, pop psychology (self-help movements), etc.

Postmodernism elevates pragmatism. In postmodern pragmatism, asking “what is true?” is a nonsense statement. It is better to ask, “what is meaningful?” (according to John Dewey, the progressive/ liberal thinker who largely shaped modern public education) which is another way of saying, “what makes me feel good?” Feelings are king. Personal authenticity, healthiness, happiness, etc. This undergirds the whole self-esteem (self-help) movement. It represents the “triumph of the therapeutic” (Philip Rieff). Truth is *made* not *found*.

Metanarratives

Postmodernism rejects what they call metanarratives. A metanarrative is a comprehensive set of truth claims that accounts for universal, objective truth, meaning, morals and existence. It is a way of giving a comprehensive explanation for the world we live in. For example, Christianity sees the gospel as the great metanarrative of history and spells it out in the redemptive narrative arc of Scripture. All metanarratives (and especially that of Christianity) are rejected in postmodernism.

Subsequently, the reading of texts cannot result in discovering some objective meaning in that text. The reader establishes meaning not the author. In other words, meaning is *made* not *found*. Authorial intention is an illusion. Only readers can appropriate what they want to draw from a text. Texts are living, pliable documents. To seek authorial intention is to give the author power to oppress the reader. Therefore, we must dissect texts and deconstruct them (e.g., the US Constitution, Mark Twain, C. S. Lewis, the Bible, etc.) to say what we want them to say.

In Christianity, this has meant the rejection of carefully studying the Bible to uncover what the divine inspired authors originally intended by what they wrote (literal-grammatical-historical interpretation/ exegesis). In postmodernism, when the Bible is taken as the author intended to speak, it becomes oppressive—patriarchal, heterosexist, homophobic, racist, etc. Therefore, we need feminist readings, liberation theology readings, minority readings, critical theory readings, etc. to subvert these oppressive authors (that is, their *author-ity*). The author is no longer king. The king is dead. The reader is king. He is made alive. The oppressed can now rise up against their oppressors.

Modern Christianity

Consider the influence of modernism, secularism, anti-supernaturalism, atheistic science (modern science has the largest percentage of atheists), deism (the idea that God is impersonal and aloof), secular psychology, self-help, individualism (denying the importance of shared values in a community—e.g., like church), pragmatism, nihilism, and postmodernism. The accumulative impact of these ideas on modern Christianity is incalculable. Modern Christianity has become what Christian Smith calls, “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.”¹ He characterizes the beliefs of this quasi-religious outlook as follows:

- a. A God who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
- b. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
- c. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
- d. God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
- e. Good people go to heaven when they die.²

The notion of sin, moral accountability and responsibility, judgment, being spiritually lost, needing a Savior are all oppressive ideas that destroy self-esteem. We must have positive, uplifting, ‘you-are-wonderful’ messages. The epithets ‘Be all you can be’, ‘follow your heart’, ‘your best life now’, ‘you deserve a break today’, etc. feeds this notion. All authority is to be rejected, unless of course said authorities in power espouse the postmodern worldview that seeks to represent the oppressed and tear down the oppressors and their metanarratives.

The Sexual Revolution

The most striking area where these ideologies have converged is in the sexual revolution that started with the free love movement (combined with pro-drug and anti-authority sentiments) together with the first wave of feminism in the 1960’s. It then accelerated with the successive waves of radical feminism that led ultimately to using distorted ‘equality’ arguments from feminism and the civil rights movement to sanction homosexuality and then same-sex marriage in the Obergefell v. Hodges ruling by SCOTUS (2015). This in turn led to the massive shift toward transgenderism, often marked by the promotion of Bruce (Caitlyn) Jenner on the cover of Sports Illustrated magazine in 2016. Albert Mohler said it well in 2005: “Both modernism and postmodernism can be understood as lengthy and elaborate rationalizations for sexual misbehavior.” The LGBTQ+ agenda together with critical theory now largely shapes the moral relativism of modern Western culture that seeks to overturn the Christian worldview and make conservative Biblical Christianity the primary oppressor (enemy) of society.

¹ See Christian Smith, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

² Smith, *Soul Searching*, 162-63.