

IS TRUTH A MATTER OF PERSONAL OPINION?

By: Arnold Kennedy.

Is truth just a matter of personal opinion? Isn't one person's view of ethics just as valid as another person's? Are not all views, in essence, the same? And does the whole issue of truth and ethics really matter? Does it make any difference? Can the honest seeker of truth decide without accurate data? In our consideration of ethics -- the moral evaluation of what is right and what is wrong -- we will need to overcome some common misconceptions people hold in this arena of ethical determination.

Misconception #1: ALL TRUTH IS RELATIVE

Personal opinion doesn't determine reality. For example, I can choose to believe that the earth is flat, but the reality of the matter is that the earth is spherical not flat! I may still choose to believe that it's flat, but I'm still wrong! Another way of stating the claim that all truth is relative is to say, there are no absolutes! Yet in response to this claim I must ask, "Are you absolutely sure there are no absolutes?" It is humorous to note that the rejection statement -- "There are no absolutes." -- is, in fact, an absolute!

Is the statement "All truth is relative," true? No, it's impossible since it is a self-refuting statement, one which contradicts itself. It is, in fact, making a statement of absolute truth when it claims, there is no absolute truth!

Some examples of self-refuting propositions would include, "I'm a truthful liar"; "I'm an honest thief"; "I'm a compassionate killer". All of these statements are false since they are internally contradictory and therefore self-defeating!

Applying this idea of moral relativism would say that each person is entitled to act on his or her own personal system of right and wrong regardless of the results. Hitler applied this philosophy and it is claimed by some that he caused the murder of six million Jews. And if right and wrong are relative, then he was just as entitled to act on his system of belief as you or I. 'That's absurd!' you say. And that's exactly my point.

To continue to assert the idea of moral and ethical relativism is absurd and is an attempt to construct an imaginary world filled with chaos. For example, while letting your car run outside the store one day, you see some-one getting into your car to drive off with it. You run outside and say, "You can't do that!" Their response is, "That's just your opinion, so why should I listen to you?" You tell them that it's wrong to take your car. They remind you that truth is relative, and their opinion is just as valid as yours.

Misconception #2: ALL VIEWS ARE EQUALLY VALID

This is partly a restatement of the first misconception that all truth is relative. If you had a brain tumour that was cancerous and needed to be treated, whose opinion would be more valid – would you go to a brain surgeon in Auckland or would you go to Ford Plumbing on Waiheke? If all views were equally valid, then it wouldn't matter whose opinion you accept.

Once some people were taught that the earth was the centre of the solar system, whilst others held the sun to be the centre. Are each of these views equally valid and true? Since these views are mutually exclusive both cannot be true at the same time. Investigation and evidence proves the falsity of earth centricity and the truthfulness of sun centricity. Let's apply this same reasoning to the religious arena as we consider the question of Jesus' identity. Christianity claims that Jesus is God, Islam asserts he is a great prophet, but not God. And Judaism and Hinduism believe Jesus to be a great moral

teacher, but nothing more. Can all these views be equally valid when they are contradictory? Of course not. Such a conclusion is absurd! Therefore, all views cannot be equally valid nor true! One must, therefore, look to the evidence available to observe that which is true apart from our opinion.

Misconception #3: IT'S WRONG TO FORCE YOUR VIEWS ON ANOTHER PERSON

This statement is deceptive, because it has an element of truth; but it does not state the heart of the issue accurately. First, no person has the ability to force you to believe anything. The old adage says it well, "A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still." Therefore, it's impossible to "force" a person to believe something; since believing is a matter of wilful choice. Secondly, most, if not all, would agree that it is unacceptable to use force, manipulation or coercion to attempt to persuade a person. When these first two issues are cleared up, we see that the real issue underlying this misconception is that some people falsely think it is wrong to hold one view above another; since they believe all "truth" is relative. One result of this third misconception is to falsely think that it's unacceptable to attempt to prove that any particular view in question is false. Yet those who hold this view forcibly argue that their view should be adopted over and above another. Strange lot. Aren't we?

Therefore, the real issue is -- is it acceptable to attempt to persuade someone to a particular view while preserving their freedom to accept or reject that view? Yes, it is; and we readily do it all the time in the market place of ideas. Let's look at a couple of pointed illustrations concerning the legitimate use of persuasion.

If a friend of yours was thinking about committing suicide, wouldn't you try to convince him to the contrary? We have, in fact, a moral responsibility to communicate truth to others for their own well-being. Persuasion can be both morally right and the responsible thing to do. If a research chemist found the cure for AIDS, would it be acceptable for him to keep it quiet and tell no one; since he wouldn't want to force his views on anyone else? Of course not! Rather, he should communicate the truth as clearly and gently as possible and allow each person to choose whether to accept or reject the solution.

Now that we've looked at some common misconceptions, let's look at the proper foundation for truth.

THE PROPER FOUNDATION FOR TRUTH

So far, we have seen that objective and absolute truth does indeed exist and that this truth is not relative. We have discussed that not all views are equally valid, because some views are false and others are true. And we have considered the legitimacy of persuasively discussing one's views in order to convince.

I have said before, that anyone who does not believe that two plus two equals four is an idiot. There is only one right answer and an infinite number of wrong answers. And your math professor wouldn't be rude or narrow-minded to insist that four is the only right answer!

Since there are absolute laws, does it not stand to reason, that there must be a Law Giver? Since there is ultimate truth does it not suggest that there must be one who is Ultimately True? This Law Giver, therefore, must be the source of both natural law and special revelation. I am, of course, talking about God, the Creator, the ultimate Law Giver and source of all truth. There is nothing wrong with considering the ultimate authority to be the ultimate authority. If an absolutely morally perfect God exists, then by his very nature he is the ultimate authority for what is good and what is not.

Truth is objective because God exists outside ourselves; it is universal because God is above all; it is constant because God is eternal. We must realise, "It is impossible to arrive at an objective, universal, and constant standard of truth and morality without bringing God onto stage. Therefore, there is only one source for objective absolute truth: God.

But there are two avenues through which it has been revealed: special revelation and natural law. Natural law includes the make-up of the world and the moral absolutes that are observable and deducible from evidence in our world. Note that these absolutes are observed by us, not determined by us. Examples of natural law include the fact that most people agree that the murder of innocent people is wrong, that the wilful starvation of young children is wrong, and the violent act of rape is morally wrong. Yet natural law must always be tested by God's spoken revelation to mankind.

We have spent some thousands of years trying to drag ourselves out of the primeval slime by searching for truth and moral absolutes. In place of Truth we have discovered facts; for moral absolutes we have substituted moral ambiguity. We now communicate with everyone . . . and say absolutely nothing. Our society finds Truth too strong a medicine to digest undiluted. In its purest form Truth is not a polite tap on the shoulder; it is a howling reproach. What Moses brought down from Mount Sinai were not Ten Suggestions . . . they are Commandments. Are, not were. The Ten Commandments, which were given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai, represent the most famous codification of absolute truth in the history of mankind.

THREE TESTS FOR ETHICAL EVALUATION

Ethics deal with what ought to be, not what is. Seeking to ethically evaluate an action or moral system apart from an absolute moral basis is like jumping into a car and driving to an unknown city without a road map or any sense of which direction to travel. Therefore, we need a moral compass or yardstick by which to measure and discern the moral rightness of a particular action or ethical statement.

First, is the **means** by which an action or an event is carried out. Is it right to accomplish something good if immoral means are used?" No, it is not morally right to do so!

Second, what is the **motive** behind the action or thought? Is it love, concern, compassion, kindness, or is it greed, selfishness, pride or self-promotion? Proper motive alone, however, is not a sufficient test to determine the rightness of an action. One could have an altruistic motive and yet, the means accomplishing the task be faulty. We have been created with a desire and a need to know God. Therefore, is it moral to seek to know that God? Yes, but there are both morally acceptable and morally unacceptable means by which to do this. Certain religions of the ancient Middle East were involved in child sacrifices to appease and commune with their gods. The motive might be positive, yet the means and the results are morally and ethically wrong. Why is it wrong? It's wrong because of the immoral means and the harmful manifestations it produces. Yet, most critically, it is wrong because the Absolute Law Giver, God the Creator, has said, "Thou shall not murder!

Third, we are to be concerned with the **manifestation** or the intended "results" of the action. Does my action cause people to be harmed or helped, truth to be propagated or lies to be embraced? It's not enough that my motive be pure and the means be moral; but to be comprehensively morally good, I must also have the intention of a good moral

result. For example, a dearly loved friend might be suffering great pain due to a temporary illness; and out of compassion and concern, I might be motivated to ease that pain. But if, as the physician, I ease his pain by knowingly injecting him with an overdose of morphine, my act is morally wrong. This situation reflects the moral motive of compassion, the means of medicine, but an immoral result, which is premeditated murder.

If something is truly right, it must flow from the proper foundation of absolute truth and pass the tests of motive, means, and manifestation reflected by objective and universal truth.

IS THERE REALLY NEITHER GOOD OR EVIL.

Hinduism, paganism, and witchcraft make statements like this.

"All good and all evil is relative to the individual point of growth . . . but, in the highest sense, there can be neither good nor evil". - Swami Prabhavananda

"When your intellect has cleared itself of delusions, you will become indifferent to the results of action, present or future". - Bhagavad-Gita.

So what difference would it make whether we praise or curse, counsel or rape, love or murder someone? If there is no final moral difference between these actions, then absolute moral responsibilities do not exist. Cruelty and non-cruelty are ultimately the same. Good and evil are illusionary distinctions

Pagans and witches express their ethical views in more positive terms than that of Hinduism. Yet, they still reflect the moral relativism and subjective ethics that accompanies pantheism. They claim that morality is a subjective experience... a learning thing without any ultimate right and wrong learned as you progress through life. If it is subjective, however, it can change from day to day and from circumstance to circumstance.

If there is no absolute moral standard, then one cannot say in a final sense that anything is right or wrong. But, if right and wrong are determined by how I feel, and how I feel can change, then what I perceive to be right or wrong can change too. The abandonment of an absolute moral standard leads irresistibly to the absence of ethics and morality. The result is that each person determines his or her own moral standard. Humans, then, become their own gods and decide, each in their own way, what is good and what is evil. The end result is that evil becomes good and good becomes evil. That is upside down morality!

The Hebrew prophet Isaiah observed and condemned this inverted morality when he said, "Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness; who substitute bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!"

Witches do not believe that true morality consists of observing a list of thou-shall-nots. Their morality can be summed up in one sentence, "Do what you will, so long as it harms none." In law New Zealand has gone this way. We hear talk about victimless crimes. If we think this through, we can understand our huge increase in crime. We are busy passing laws which conflict with each other; these are what our Commissioners of this and that can never cope adequately with. With the prevailing philosophy, they must and do favour the criminals at the expense of the victims.

For us to evaluate if something is harmful or helpful, there must be an objective standard by which to determine harm. All but one of our political parties have no objective standard. It is up to us to decide what sort of future we want to have as a country. Otherwise our ship of State will drift with the prevailing winds and will inevitably suffer shipwreck. This shipwreck need not be a sudden crash but rather a slow moral deterioration. Deterioration is never sudden. No person suddenly becomes base. Slowly, almost imperceptively,

certain things are accepted that once were rejected. Things once considered hurtful are now secretly tolerated. At the outset it appears harmless, perhaps even exciting; but the wedge it brings leaves a gap that grows wider as moral erosion joins hands with spiritual decay. The gap becomes a canyon. That way which seems right becomes, in fact, the way of death. Evil is first abhorred, then ignored, then tolerated, then participated in with a very compromising and sometimes socially accepted means. What was once considered evil is now good and what was considered good is now evil. In the language of a witch, *"May there be understanding and love among all people of all ages, of all races, of all nations, of all sexual orientations, of all lifestyles and of all religions . . . and whatever your particular spiritual orientation is . . . call to Mother Earth if it feels right for you"*.

Simply because something "feels right for you," does not make it morally right in the least bit. Is it right to accept all sexual orientations without regard to any objective ethical and moral evaluation? If so, could we not argue that paedophile activity, which is sexual activity with children, is acceptable? If you say that it's wrong, I will ask, "On what basis do you make your conclusion?" This scenario is a logical conclusion to an ethical system that is subjective and which advocates the principle, "If it feels right, do it."

Let's apply the harm principle to two conflicting opinions concerning the question of what happens to a person at and following death.

THE TWO VIEWS.

The first view is that of reincarnation, which is held by witches, pagans and the entirety of pantheism. The idea of reincarnation seems to witches to be not only much older, but more reasonable and right than the concept of only one short life, to be followed by heaven for the righteous and hell for the wicked . If the idea of reincarnation is wrong, then to believe it will ultimately result in great and eternal harm for the individual. Reincarnation, in fact, would not have its name carved on the pillars of heaven, but rather on the gates of hell.

The second view is that of physical resurrection and moral accountability held by Biblical Christianity. The New Testament declares, *"It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes the judgement"*. This conflict in truth claims is neither imaginary nor trite; rather it's an issue of incredible importance and consequence.