

Lesson 9

“The Problem of Moral Absolutes”

Based on Lecture 5 of

Greg L. Bahnsen’s *Basic Training for Defending the Faith*

**“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ,
that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body,
according to what he has done, whether good or bad.”**

(2 Corinthians 5:10).

In our last lesson we focused on the biblical outline for your apologetic defense of the Christian faith and your philosophical challenge to the unbeliever. We noted that Proverbs 26:4–5 establishes the basic method for Christian apologetics. It warned of the “fool” and the danger of adopting his worldview (the “fool” being one who does not believe in God). Positively, this passage directed you to stand on your own Christian assumptions, not giving in to the lure of the unbelieving method. Negatively, it encouraged you to attack the unbeliever’s worldview, exposing its futility by momentarily stepping into it for sake of argument. Thus, it directed you both to present your worldview in its fullness and to critique the non-Christian’s in its emptiness.

Dr. Bahnsen also briefly introduced several samples of the indirect, presuppositional method of defending the existence of God. He drew each one of these from rather mundane life situations. Our lesson quickly surveyed some of the basics for setting up a worldview challenge by looking at human experience, rationality, aesthetics,

and ethics. You saw how any “fact” could be used to demonstrate the existence of God, due to “the impossibility of the contrary.”

In this lecture Dr. Bahnsen exposes fundamental problems in the non-Christian worldview. In that the negative portion of a two-part apologetic involves internally critiquing the unbeliever’s worldview, this will be extremely important. The non-believer needs to be challenged to give a rational account for his outlook on life. And you need to be the one to force him to look for his own foundations. Consequently, the four problems Dr. Bahnsen raises in this lecture will prove valuable to engaging in apologetics. Therefore, we will give one lesson to each of the four basic problems. In this lesson we are considering the problem of moral absolutes.

I. Central Concerns

Dr. Bahnsen refers to the problem of moral absolutes many times in his lecture series. Moral concerns are inescapable in human life. You will find that anytime you forgo beating up your neighbor, he will be grateful for your moral restraint. And what would society be if “every man did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 17:6; 21:25)? We would all fear going out in public—or even staying at home with morally unpredictable family members. Every waking moment of life involves moral challenges as we choose one action as preferable over another. We are not animals merely reacting to our environment by instinct. We are moral creatures “sovereignly” engaging our social environment according to rational, moral considerations.

The Humanist Influence

You probably are also aware of the many peculiar approaches to morality which are grabbing headlines today. For instance, consider “animal rights.” Animal rights activists do not simply resist the perverse torture of pets for amusement or deadly dog fights for sport. Nor are they simply trying to preserve “endangered species” from extinction. Animal rights are now legal and political issues that have generated an “Animal Legal Defense Fund,” the “Animal Liberation Front,” an *Animal Rights Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, and more. Many even decry “speciesism”—elevating man over animals, of all things!—, lamenting “human chauvinism,” “human supremicisim,” and “anthropocentrism.”¹

One animal rights website presents an article titled “Freedom is a Basic Right for Animals.” It opens with these words: “This article is about the central role that freedom plays in our sense of justice. According to Ruut Veenhoven, a Dutch researcher on happiness, this is the most important factor in seeking happiness. Should that be any different for animals?”² In *The Animal Question*, Paola Cavalieri argues regarding modern moral argument that: “its very logic extends to nonhuman animals as beings who are owed basic moral and legal rights and that, as a result, human rights are not human after all.”³

¹Kyle Ash, “International Animal Rights: Speciesism and Exclusionary Human Dignity,” *Journal of Animal Law*, Michigan State University College of Law (11), 195ff. (http://www.animallaw.info/journals/jo_pdf/vol11_p195.pdf)

²“Freedom is a Basic Right of Animals” at the Animal Freedom website: www.animalfreedom.org/english/opinion/freedom.html

³Paola Cavalieri, *The Animal Question: Why Non-Human Animals Deserve Human Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), back cover copy.

Many vegetarian groups argue for the immorality of eating animals.⁴ Others decry wearing fur coats or leather shoes as involving the destruction of animal life.⁵ And, of course, you are quite familiar with extreme environmentalism which can stop the building of dams or drilling for oil. A few years ago an “endangered” four inch Snail Darter fish stopped the building of the Tellico Dam on the Tennessee River, making international news for months. More recently a debate has raged over whether the federal government should allow drilling for oil on the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska.

But the more widely spread and more dangerous problem today is the denial of absolute moral standards, and especially condemning Christians for holding to absolutistic morals. You are well aware that your Christian moral values are everywhere challenged. Just think of your pro-life commitments (Ex. 20:13; 21:22–23) and note the loud uproar over the appointment of conservative judges to the various courts in America. Or your calls for the sanctity of sexual relations in marriage (1 Cor. 6:9; Gal. 5:19; Heb. 13:4) and the mockery you must endure for being “puritanical.” Or your condemnation of homosexual conduct (1 Cor. 6:9; 1 Tim. 1:10) and your being written off as one opposed to the right to privacy. These are but a few of the moral challenges Christians face in our relativistic world.

The question of moral values is an important component of the Christian’s challenge to the unbeliever. You must *always* remember that your conflict with him is at

⁴The Bible clearly allows meat-eating (Gen. 9:3; 12:4; Deut. 12:15; Mark 14:12; 1 Cor. 10:25).

⁵In Eden after the Fall of Adam, God himself made Adam and Eve “garments of skin” from animals (Gen. 3:21). He also required animal skins for the Tabernacle (25:5; 26:14; 35:7). The greatest prophet of the old covenant era was John the Baptist (Matt. 11:11), who was God’s special messenger (Matt. 11:10). He wore camel hair and leather clothing (Matt. 3:4; Mark 1:6).

the *worldview* level. And Dr. Bahnsen taught you in a previous lesson that worldviews necessarily involve three key components: metaphysics, epistemology, and *ethics*.

The Unbeliever's Emphasis

Now let us consider the particulars of the moral relativism that infects our culture today. In each of the quotations below, the emphases are mine and are not found in the original documents. The third point in the *Humanist Manifesto II* (1973) vigorously asserts autonomous, relativistic, God-denying morality.

We affirm that *moral values derive their source from human experience*.

Ethics is *autonomous and situational needing no theological or*

ideological sanction. Ethics stems from human need and interest. To deny

this distorts the whole basis of life. Human life has meaning because we

create and develop our futures. Happiness and the creative realization of

human needs and desires, individually and in shared enjoyment, are

continuous themes of humanism. We strive for the good life, here and

now.

Famed French researcher Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) was a primary figure in developing modern “scientific” sociology. He expressed moral relativism well:

It can no longer be maintained nowadays that there is one, single morality

which is valid for all men at all times in all places. . . . The purpose of

morality practiced by a people is to enable it to live; hence morality changes with societies. There is not just one morality, but several, and as many as there are social types. And *as our societies change, so will our morality.*

A recent teen publication on sexual mores and sexually transmitted disease is titled “The Quest for Excellence.” It reads in part:

Early on in life, you will be exposed to different value systems from your family, church or synagogue, and friends. . . . *It is up to you to decide upon your own value system to build your own ethical code. . . .* You will have to learn what is right for yourself through experience. . . . *Only you can decide* what is right and comfortable for you.

Pray that no cannibals read this! The Internet encyclopedia *Wikipedia* has an entry on “Moral Relativism.” It reads in part:

In philosophy, moral relativism is the position *that moral or ethical propositions do not reflect absolute and universal moral truths but instead are relative to social, cultural, historical or personal preferences*, and that there is no single standard by which to assess an ethical proposition’s truth. Relativistic positions often see moral values as applicable only within certain cultural boundaries or the context of individual preferences.

Philosopher Aldous Huxley, in his novel *Ends and Means*, presented the following:

The philosopher who finds no meaning in the world is not concerned exclusively with a problem in pure metaphysics; he is also concerned to prove that *there is no valid reason why he personally should not do as he wants to do*.

For myself, as, no doubt, for most of my contemporaries, the philosophy of meaninglessness was essentially an instrument of liberation. The liberation we desired was simultaneously liberation ... from a certain system of morality. We objected to the morality because it interfered with our sexual freedom; we objected to the political and economic system because it was unjust. The supporters of these systems claimed that in some way they embodied the meaning (a Christian meaning, they insisted) of the world. There was one admirably simple method of confuting these people and at the same time justifying ourselves in our political and erotic revolt: *we could deny that the world had any meaning whatsoever*.⁶

Humanist Max Hocutt says that human beings “may, and do, make up their own rules. . . . Morality is not discovered; it is made.”⁷ Regarding evolution and ethics, we learn that:

⁶Aldous Huxley, *Ends and Means* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1937), 272, 273

⁷Max Hocutt, “Toward an Ethic of Mutual Accommodation,” in *Humanist Ethics*, ed. Morris B. Storer (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1980), 137

The position of the modern evolutionist is that . . . *morality is a biological adaptation* no less than are hands and feet and teeth. Considered as a rationally justifiable set of claims about an objective something, ethics is illusory. I appreciate that when somebody says ‘Love thy neighbor as thyself,’ they think they are referring above and beyond themselves. Nevertheless, such reference is truly without foundation. Morality is just an aid to survival and reproduction . . . and *any deeper meaning is illusory*.⁸

One medical ethics text states:

It certainly should give anyone rather *severe doubts* that we have available to us a firmly articulated normative ethical theory that affords us a systematic knowledge of good and evil, right and wrong, such that it could give ethicists confidence that they have a moral expertise that will enable them to chart the way in applied ethics.⁹

In his “Hermeneutics, General Studies, and Teaching,” Stanford University Professor of Philosophy Richard Rorty puts it succinctly: “To say that there really are objective values

⁸Michael Ruse, “Evolutionary Theory and Christian Ethics,” in *The Darwinian Paradigm* (London: Routledge, 1989), 262–269.

⁹Kai Neilson, “On Being Skeptical About Applied Ethics,” in *Clinical Medical Ethics: Exploration and Assessment*, eds. Terrence F. Ackerman and Glenn C. Graber, et al. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987), 100.

out there, that there is a moral reality to be corresponded with, seems as *pointless* as saying that God is on our side.” Existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre writes:

The existentialist, on the contrary, thinks it very distressing that God does not exist, because all possibility of finding values in a heaven of ideas disappears along with Him; there can no longer be an *a priori* Good, since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it. Nowhere is it written that the Good exists, that we must be honest, that we must not lie; because the fact is that we are on a plane where there are only men. Dostoevsky said, “If God didn’t exist, everything would be possible.” That is the very starting point of existentialism. Indeed, *everything is permissible if God does not exist*, and as a result man is forlorn, because neither within him nor without does he find anything to cling to. He can’t start making excuses for himself.¹⁰

According to agnostic Yale University Law Professor, Arthur Allen Leff, with the rise of an empiricist philosophy of law

most likely conditioning it in fact, the knowledge of good and evil, as an intellectual subject, was being *systematically and effectively destroyed*.

The historical fen through which ethical wanderings led was abolished in

¹⁰Jean-Paul Sartre, “Existentialism,” trans. Bernard Frechtman, in *Existentialism and Human Emotions* (New York: Citadel, 1957), 23. Quoted in Ed. L. Miller, *Questions That Matter: An Invitation to Philosophy*, 3rd ed., (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1992), 396.

the early years of this century (not for the first time, but very clearly this time); *normative thought crawled out of the swamp and died in the desert*. There arose a great number of schools of ethics—axiological, materialistic, evolutionary, intuitionist, situational, existential, and so on—but they all suffered the same fate: either they were seen to be ultimately premised on some intuition (buttressed or not by nose counts of those seemingly having the same intuitions), or they were more arbitrary than that, based solely on some “for the sake of the argument” premise. I will put the current situation as sharply as possible: *there is today no way of ‘proving’ that napalming babies is bad* except by asserting it (in a louder and louder voice), or by defining it as so, early in one’s game, and then later slipping it through, in a whisper, as a conclusion. Now this is a fact of modern intellectual life so well and painfully known as to be one of the few which is simultaneously horrifying and banal.¹¹

Needless to say, University of Toronto philosopher John Rist notes that there is “widely admitted to be a crisis in contemporary Western debate about ethical foundations.”¹² This is greatly impacted by Western scientism’s commitment to materialism, which is well expressed by renowned evolutionary bio-ethicist Peter Singer: “we are evolved animals,

¹¹Arthur Allen Leff, “Economic Analysis of Law: Some Realism About Nominalism,” *Virginia Law Review* (1974), 454–455.

¹²John Rist, *Real Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1.

and that we bear the evidence of our inheritance, not only in our anatomy and our DNA, but in our behavior too.”¹³

Atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell captures the essence of the materialistic ethic: “Brief and powerless is man’s life; on him and all his race the slow, sure doom falls pitiless and dark. *Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way.*”¹⁴

Dr. Bahnsen points out the irony in the debate with the unbeliever. Even those who deny moral absolutes have at least one moral absolute: “You should not believe there are moral absolutes. You should believe there is no morality.” In effect, *they contradictorily have a morality about no morality.* They say you *should* (“should” entails moral obligation or duty) believe there are no moral absolutes. In another lecture series he illustrates the matter by mentioning that an ethics professor committed to moral relativism and denying moral absolutes will absolutely demand that his students not cheat on his exams.

This is the moral point of view of fallen man. As you have learned from worldview analysis, worldviews necessarily involve metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical considerations. Therefore, the reason that those who demand no moral absolutes are engaged in self-contradiction is because *moral absolutes are inescapable.*

Dr. Bahnsen challenges us to consider such questions as: How does the unbelieving world make sense of moral absolutes? Can it make sense of such? His answer comes back as a resounding, “No!” The non-Christian cannot make sense of

¹³Peter Singer, *A Darwinian Left: Politics, Evolution, and Cooperation* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2000), 11.

¹⁴Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian, And Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), 115.

moral absolutes, even their own absolutistic (!) relativism. We must challenge the unbeliever: “Which worldview makes sense of our human experience? Which makes human experience intelligible?” We want to demand of the unbeliever how he can make judgments regarding good and evil in the world? Just what are the options for the non-Christian? He does not accept God’s word as the authority for determining moral good. So what defines “good” for him?

The Christian obviously has notions of right and wrong. At the very foundation of your worldview stands the eternal, personal, moral God who clearly and sovereignly reveals himself in both nature and Scripture thereby showing us the unchanging character of the good. Jesus challenges the Rich Young Ruler with his understanding of the “good,” by declaring: “No one is good but God alone” (Mark 10:18).¹⁵ The very character of God is the foundation of our ethical outlook.

The Unbeliever’s Problem

Dr. Bahnsen explains that the standard modern response to defining “good” follows two basic outlooks: Good is either what evokes approval, or it is that which achieves certain ends. Let us engage in an internal critique of these two ethical approaches.

“Good is what evokes approval”

In this perspective we find two forms of the evocative approval ethic: (1) Good is what evokes *social* approval; (2) Good is what evokes *personal* approval. That is, good is

¹⁵When Christ states to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God,” He is not saying that He (Christ) Himself is not good (which would imply that He is not God in the flesh). He is seeking to see if the young man knows what “good” is and who Jesus is. This is a rhetorical question designed to see if the rich man would submit to His authority. Tragically, the young man left Jesus, preferring his wealth to Christ’s authority.

defined either by society or by the individual. Let us consider the two forms of this approach:

(1) *Good is what evokes social approval.* One Internet article summarizes the social-approval ethic:

Cultural relativism ascertains that moral standards differ from one culture to the next. It says that good and bad are relative to culture. What is 'good' is what is "socially approved" in a given culture. Cultural relativism holds that "good" means what is "socially approved" by the majority in a given culture. This means that anyone who is born into a particular culture is expected to follow the moral codes of that culture because they were already in existence. In addition, cultural relativism states that there are different ways of applying basic ethical principles from one culture to the next.

In this perspective a difficulty arises: If social approval defines good, we must ask where this leads us? When we look at the history of human culture we will discover many cultures engaged in morally reprehensible practices. If good is society-determined, then we may not condemn such practices as genocide, cannibalism, human sacrifice, infanticide, pederasty, widow immolation, or community suicides, to name but a few problems.

Genocide. Entire societies have gone along with oppressing the Jews, giving rise to what we know as anti-Semitism in general and the German holocaust in particular. The

sentence “The entire society went along with oppressing the Jews” is coherent and makes sense. But if good is that which evokes social approval, then by definition it becomes impossible to criticize a society for what it does, even for burning to death Jews in concentration camps. The *Wikipedia* article on genocide notes that “in the past century, sprees of deliberate large-scale killings of entire groups of people have occurred in what is now Ottoman Empire, Namibia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Soviet Union for example Stalin’s forced starvation of Ukrainian farmers, Mao’s murder of 20 to 60 million Chinese, Cambodia, Rwanda and Sudan.”

Cannibalism. Some societies have practiced cannibalism (also called “anthropophagy”¹⁶). The literature of ancient Chinese civilizations speaks of widespread cannibalism. The Aztec Empire in Mexico was discovered to practice cannibalism by European explorers. Not all that long ago cannibalism existed among the Aborigines in Arnhem Land, in the far north of Northern Territory of Australia. According to anthropologists, the southeastern Papua Korowai tribe and the New Guinea Fore tribe are cannibalistic cultures even today.

Human sacrifice. Human sacrifice is another cultural practice with strong moral implications. According to the *Wikipedia* article: “Human sacrifice was practiced in many ancient cultures. Victims were ritually killed in a manner that was supposed to please or appease gods or spirits. On very rare occasions human sacrifices still occur today.” This practice was known among the ancient Phoenicians, Carthaginians, and Chinese, the early mediaeval Celts, Vikings, and in the Aztec, Mayan, and Inca societies.

¹⁶“Anthropophagy” is derived from the compounding of two Greek words: *anthropos* (“man, human”) and *phagein* (“to eat”).

According to recent genetic research from *National Geographic*, “Genetic markers commonly found in modern humans all over the world could be evidence that our earliest ancestors were cannibals, according to new research. Scientists suggest that even today many of us carry a gene that evolved as protection against brain diseases that can be spread by eating human flesh.”¹⁷

Infanticide. The practice of infanticide has been widely experienced in human societies. The *Wikipedia* article on “Infanticide” comments:

Infanticide was common in all well-studied ancient cultures, including those of ancient Greece, Rome, India, China, and Japan. The practice of infanticide has taken many forms. Child sacrifice to supernatural figures or forces, such as that allegedly practiced in ancient Carthage, is one form; however, many societies only practiced simple infanticide and regarded child sacrifice as morally repugnant. The end of the practice of infanticide in the western world coincided with the rise of Christianity as a major religion. The practice was never completely eradicated, however, and even continues today in areas of extremely high poverty and overpopulation, such as parts of China and India. Female infants, then and now, are particularly vulnerable.

The article goes on to speak of the practice in high Roman culture, the darling of modern humanism:

¹⁷John Roach, “Cannibalism Normal For Early Humans?” *National Geographic News* (4/10/03). (http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2003/04/0410_030410_cannibal.html)

Classic Roman civilization can serve as an example of both aspects. In some periods of Roman history it was traditional practice for a newborn to be brought to the *pater familias*, the family patriarch, who would then decide whether the child was to be kept and raised, or left to death by exposure.

Child molestation. Ancient Greek and Roman society engaged in “pederasty.” This encourages practices that most Americans would deem nothing but child molestation and that Christian ethical standards condemn outright. According to *Wikipedia*:

Pederasty, as idealized by the ancient Greeks, was a relationship and bond between an adolescent boy and an adult man outside of his immediate family. In a wider sense it refers to erotic love between adolescents and adult men. The word derives from the combination of *pais* (Greek for “boy”) with *arrests* (Greek for “lover”; cf. *Eros*). In those societies where pederasty is prevalent, it appears as one form of a widely practiced male bisexuality. In antiquity, pederasty as a moral and educational institution was practiced in Ancient Greece and Rome. Other forms of it were common, and also found among the Celts (as per Aristotle, *Politics*, II 6.6. *Then*. XIII 603a) and among the Persians (as per Herodotus 1.135). More recently, it was widespread in Tuscany and northern Italy during the Renaissance. Outside of Europe, it was common in pre-Modern Japan

until the Meiji restoration, in Mughal India until the British colonization, amongst the Aztecs prior to the Spanish conquest of Mexico and in China and Central Asia until the early 20th century. The tradition of pederasty persists to the present day in certain areas of Afghanistan, the Middle East, North Africa, and Melanesia.

Even today in America the “North American Man/Boy Love Association” advocates free love between adults and children. On its website you can find an article that reads:

“Pederasty is the main form that male homosexuality has acquired throughout Western civilization—and not only in the West! Pederasty is inseparable from the high points of Western culture—ancient Greece and the Renaissance.”¹⁸

Widow immolation. The practice of *sati* in Hindu culture. Hinduism is the third largest religion in the world, with 900 million adherents. A widespread (though not universal) Hindu funeral custom today involves the practice of *sati*, wherein the widow immolates herself on her husband’s funeral pyre. The expectation is so strong that evidence exists for the widespread forcing of widows to burn themselves alive, even if they don’t want to. This practice dates back to around 500 A.D., and was very widely practiced in pre-modern times.

Community suicide. The Indian practice of *Jauhar* occurred in medieval times. According to *Wikipedia*, “The practice of *jauhar*, only known from Rajasthan, was the collective suicide of a community. It consisted of the mass immolation of women, and

¹⁸David Thorstad, “Pederasty and Homosexuality.” (<http://216.220.97.17/pederasty.htm>)

sometimes also of the children, the elderly and the sick, at the same time that their fighting men died in battle. It is detailed in a separate article.”

But even unbelievers who deny absolute moral standards criticize these and other societies for their moral conduct. They speak of societies that are either humane or inhumane, that are warlike or peaceable, that are puritanical or sexually tolerant of sexual practices. While decrying Christianity’s absolute moral standards, unbelievers nevertheless make moral evaluations of societies. Those evaluations, however, are meaningless if good is whatever evokes social approval and if no ultimate moral standard exists.

Furthermore, we ordinarily think of things evoking approval because they are in themselves good. We do not normally think of evoking approval as that which constitutes goodness. Why *did* some particular action evoke society’s approval? The non-Christian’s own theory of ethics is meaningless, given their philosophical ethical outlook, given their unsustainable worldview.

Dr. Bahnsen noted that if unbelievers in this school of ethics argue that good is intuited, then another problem arises: You cannot argue about good—you just intuit what is good. Once again, you cannot have a rational discussion about right and wrong, because you have no way to resolve differences of opinion. This reduces morality to subjective preferences that bind no one, not even the subjectivist who may change his view at any moment. In fact, you have no predictable way to say that a person’s intuition about good is good itself. You end up having to intuit that your intuition is right, then intuit that your intuition about your intuition is right. On and on through an infinite regress which results from not having an absolute, self-verifying standard.

So then, on this approach to ethics you cannot criticize any society. The unbeliever cannot live with that theory of defining good by social approval.

“Good is what evokes personal approval”

The personal approval approach to morality ends up with an emotivist theory of ethics: Good and evil are just expressions of our emotional responses. Good and evil do not really describe anything. This school of ethical thought claims that moral judgments cannot be deemed either as true or false. This is due to their being expressions of either individual or societal subjective preference.

Dr. Bahnsen mentions the situation in which someone says: “It is good to help orphans.” He notes that this statement is not the same when Ted says it as when Bill says it. When Ted states it, it merely means: “Ted likes helping orphans.” When Bill states it, it merely means: “Bill likes helping orphans.” Consequently, in this approach we have no objective or public quality, just subjective, emotional expressions. In such an approach, ethics becomes impossible and subjectivistic. So then: “Good is that which evokes personal approval” is not meaningful.

Good is what achieves certain ends

Some ethicists argue that good is teleological, that is, it seeks a certain end which defines goodness. In an Internet article on “Teleology and Ethics” we find this view described:

The idea that the moral worth of an action is determined by the consequences of that action is often labeled consequentialism. Usually, the

“correct consequences” are those which are most beneficial to humanity—they may promote human happiness, human pleasure, human satisfaction, human survival or simply the general welfare of all humans. Whatever the consequences are, it is believed that those consequences are intrinsically good and valuable, and that is why actions which lead to those consequences are moral while actions which lead away from them are immoral.¹⁹

But Dr. Bahnsen points out the fallacies in such an ethical system. If good is that which achieves chosen ends, this leads to certain consequences. Utilitarianism teaches that good is that which produces the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Hedonists teach that our own individual happiness and well being are the goals of good. But either way, if good is conducive to what you have chosen, the question becomes: How is it that good is the end that the “means to the end” is supposed to be toward? When the utilitarian says that the good is for the greatest number, we must ask: “Why is the greatest number determinative of good?” This assumes the end is itself good. But how do you know *that* is good? Furthermore, when whole cultures accept certain ends as “good” (such as eating one’s defeated enemy), how could we declare that end to be evil?

We then must ask what we mean by the word “good” in such views. The unbeliever knows in his heart of hearts that good is what matches God’s attitude toward things, and evil is that which is contrary to God’s attitude. They use good and evil language in absolutistic ways and then seek a theory to cover it. Paul exposes the true

¹⁹Austin Cline, “Teleology and Ethics: Actions and Consequences” at the About.Com site (http://atheism.about.com/library/FAQs/phil/blfaq_phileth_teleo.htm).

source of man's moral conscience when he writes of the unbelieving Gentiles that "when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them" (Rom. 2:14–15).

In our apologetic approach to ethics, we need to follow Paul's example at the Aeropagus. At Athens he declares: "I find you are very superstitious. This god you do not understand, I now proclaim to you." This is effectively what we need to do for the unbeliever so that he may find a true foundation for his ethics.

II. Exegetical Observations

The question of an absolute standard for ethics is an important aspect of the Christian worldview. In this lesson Dr. Bahnsen exposes the futility of non-believing ethical systems in that they lack an absolute standard. Elsewhere in his writings he defends the application of God's law to modern ethics. One important Scripture passage where the apostle Paul points out the absolute standard of morality and its applicability in the new covenant is 1 Timothy 1:8–11. Here he speaks of God's Old Testament law:

We know that the Law is good, if one uses it lawfully, realizing the fact that law is not made for a righteous man, but for those who are lawless and rebellious, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers and immoral men and homosexuals and kidnappers and liars and perjurers, and whatever

else is contrary to sound teaching, according to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, with which I have been entrusted.

We must notice several important truths contained in this statement. First, God's law is "good." He does this also in Romans 7:12 where we read: "So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good." In fact, Paul confesses that he would not have known "sin" except through the law of God: "I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, 'You shall not covet'" (7:7).

The reason the law is "good" is because it is rooted in God's own character. When we survey the Scriptural representations of the character of God's Law, we quickly discover that the same moral attributes applied to it are also used in referring to God Himself:

- God is good (Mark 10:18; Ps. 143:10); the Law is good (Deut. 12:28; Ps. 119:68; Rom. 7:12, 16); 1 Tim. 1:8).
- God is righteous (Deut. 32:4; Ezra 9:15; Ps. 116:5); the Law is righteous (Deut. 4:8; Ps. 19:7; Rom. 2:26; 8:4).
- God is just (Deut. 32:4; Ps. 25:8, 10; Isa. 45:21); the Law is just (Prov. 28:4–5; Zech. 7:9–12; Rom. 7:12).
- God is holy (Isa. 6:3; Rev. 15:4); the Law is holy (Num. 15:40; Rom. 7:12).
- God is perfect (2 Sam. 22:31; Ps. 18:30; Matt. 5:48); the Law is perfect (Ps. 1:25; James 1:25).

Consequently, God’s law reflects God’s character which defines “good.” The good is not something outside of God to which God himself must measure up. Nor is what it is because of God’s sovereign determination (for then he could change notions of “good”). Rather, good is that which reflects his own internal character and, therefore, is that which is revealed objectively to us in his word, particularly in his holy law.

Second, God’s law can be abused. “The law is good, if one uses it lawfully.” Absolute moral standards can be abused by *sinful* application. The classic example of abusing God’s law is found in the New Testament record of the Pharisees, who sought to use God’s law to put down others and to elevate themselves (Matt. 6:5; 23:2–4; Luke 18:10–11).

Third, God’s law is not oppressive. The modern charge that Christians who follow God’s law are “puritanical,” shows the unbeliever’s hatred of God’s law in that they use a term that should be commendatory to be derogatory. We should strive to be “puritans” (i.e., pure) in our moral values. The law is not a constraint upon those who would act righteously, but only upon those who do evil deeds: “law is not made for a righteous man, but for those who are lawless and rebellious” (1 Tim. 1:9).

The absolute principles of morality are designed to curb the evil desires of the sinner’s heart. God’s law condemns the “societal good” of those cultures that practiced genocide, cannibalism, human sacrifice, infanticide, pederasty, widow immolation, or community suicides—and the more mundane evils in our own culture.

Fourth, God’s law is intended for the whole world. This is true today even in this new covenant age. We know that Paul is speaking of God’s law as especially expressed

in the Mosaic law, because he often commends Moses' law (Rom. 2:13, 23; 7:7, 12; 13:8, 10). In the Old Testament we see that the Mosaic law is, in fact, *God's* law for it repeatedly refers to it as "His law," "My law," or "God's law."²⁰ In fact, he defines love by the keeping of Moses' law in our relationship to others (Rom. 13:8, 10; Gal. 5:14), as do Jesus (Matt. 22:36–40) and James (James 2:10).

Paul, who is known in the New Testament as the apostle to the gentiles and to the uncircumcised (Rom. 15:16; Gal. 2:9; Eph. 3:8), nevertheless, upheld the "Jewish" Mosaic Law as an ethical ideal for God's people. When writing to the church at Rome, he was addressing a gentile church (Rom. 1:13; 15:12; 16:4). Yet he could write: "Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good. . . . For we know that the law is spiritual" (Rom. 7:12, 14). And this was well into the New Covenant era. He even absolutely declares to these gentiles the law's continuing relevance:

- "Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, that every mouth may be closed, and *all the world* may become accountable to God" (Rom. 3:19).
- "Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, *we establish the Law*" (Rom. 3:31).

Paul expressly declares that promoting God's law is a feature of "sound teaching" and is "according to the glorious gospel of the blessed God" which had been entrusted to him (1

²⁰Deuteronomy 30:10; Joshua 24:26; 2 Kings 10:31; 17:13; 21:8; 1 Chronicles 22:12; 2 Chronicles 6:16; 31:21; Ezra 7:6, 12, 14, 21; Nehemiah 8:8, 18; 9:3; 10:28, 29; Psalms 78:1; 81:4; 89:30; 119:34, 77, 92, 97, 109, 174; Isaiah 1:10; Jeremiah 6:19; 9:13; 16:11; 26:4; 31:33; 44:10; 22:26; Daniel 6:5; Hosea 4:6; 8:1.

Tim. 1:10–11). We should also remember a previous lesson in which we studied Paul’s statement on inspiration: “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16–17). This necessarily declares God’s law (a large portion of Scripture) to be “profitable” for “instruction in righteousness.”

As Christians we have an absolute, unchanging, holy God who has revealed an absolute, unchanging, holy law to provide an absolute, unchanging, holy foundation for our ethical outlook and our moral conduct. The non-Christian can have no abiding moral standards because he has no foundations for them. He can’t even declare wrong such atrocities as genocide, cannibalism, human sacrifice, infanticide, pederasty, widow immolation, or community suicides.

III. Questions Raised

1. Why is morality an important issue in defending the existence of God?
2. List some extreme moral positions in the modern world that are helpful for showing the absurdity of attempting to establish ethics without reference to God.
3. State three moral positions for which modern Christians are denounced, showing the antithesis between the Christian and non-Christian worldviews.
4. Define what we mean by “ethical relativism.”
5. What is the contradiction involved in asserting that no one should declare absolute moral values?

6. What is the standard apologetic challenge which we make against the unbeliever? Re-phrase that challenge for use in the debate over moral absolutes.
7. What is the absolute standard for good in the Christian worldview?
8. One school of unbelieving ethics asserts that “good” is what evokes approval. Explain this position, being careful to note the two divisions in this approach.
9. State five historical reprehensible practices that have been held in various societies, which show the absurdity of the view that good is that which evokes social approval.
10. What is the problem with claiming that ethical values are intuited?
11. How would you respond to the claim that good is that which evokes personal approval?
12. How would you respond to the claim that good is that which achieves desired ends?
13. Defend from Scripture the claim that God’s law is our revealed standard of absolute good.

IV. Practical Applications

1. In our study above we mention seven grotesque examples of evils that have been deemed good by whole societies. Try to come up with three more examples.
2. Ask an unbelieving friend if he thinks morality is relative from culture to culture. Ask him how on that basis he would condemn Hitler’s slaughter of the Jews.
3. Try to think of common expressions that indicate moral relativism. For instance, we hear people say: “To each, his own”; “Different strokes for different folks”; “You can’t impose your morality on me.” What other relativistic phrases can you come up with?

4. Look up the word “law” in the New Testament. Make a list of verses that speak of God’s law as admirable. Choose one of the verses as your base verse (a verse easy to remember), then in the Bible margin at that verse jot down all the positive affirmations of God’s law.
5. Make a list of those passages that speak of God’s law in a negative fashion. Explain how these verses can be explained in light of the overarching commendation of God’s law in Scripture.
6. Go to the Covenant Media Foundation or American Vision websites and look up articles on God’s law. Prepare a 40–45 minute Bible study lesson promoting the modern applicability of God’s law and present it at a Bible study.
7. Go on the Internet and look up websites promoting moral relativism. Read a few of the articles defending this view. Write a five page paper responding to two or three of their main arguments.
8. Find the articles in our “Recommended Reading” section below. Print and put them in a three ring notebook. Begin collecting articles that either illustrate the absurdity of moral relativism or assert the value of Christian absolute morals. Keep this notebook for future additions.
9. Read the AP news report on the Internet about Sen. Rick Santorum’s denouncing of homosexuality, associating the homosexual problem with moral relativism. Jot down some of his statements that are helpful. “Sen. Rick Santorum’s comments on Homosexuality in an AP Interview” (April 22, 2003).

(<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/news/archive/2003/04/22/national1737EDT0668.DTL>)
10. Read and critique John Corvino’s “What’s Morally Wrong with Homosexuality?”
(<http://www.indegayforum.org/authors/corvino/>)
11. Read C. S. Lewis’ *The Abolition of Man*. Write a five page report on the book summarizing his points against moral relativism.

V. Recommended Reading

Copan, Paul, “The Moral Argument for God’s Existence”:

www.4truth.net/site/apps/nl/content3.asp?c=hiKXLbPNLrF&b=778665&ct=1264233

DeMar, Gary, “Homosexual Marriage, and the End of the West”:

www.americanvision.org/bwarchive/homosexual%20marriage%2011-04.pdf

“Ethical Relativism”: www.carm.org/relativism/ethical.htm

“Moral Relativism Refuted”: www.bringyou.to/apologetics/p17.htm

Gentry, Kenneth L., “Privacy, Tolerance, and Social Morality”:

<https://host186.ipowerweb.com/~kenneth1/homosexuality.htm>

Groothius, Douglas, “Confronting the Challenge of Ethical Relativism”:

www.mustardseed.net/html/tomoralrelativism.html

“Is Morality Relative?": www.truthnet.org/Christianity/Apologetics/Morality1/