

With Relativism There is No Right or Wrong

Part 2 of a Register Series

by Edward Sri

Relativism isn't just a bad idea. It's ruining people's lives. And if we're going to be successful in motivating others to rise above the relativistic culture, we need to help them see what Pope Francis has observed: "Relativism wounds people." The ideas at the center of a relativistic outlook are dangerous. Just as bad math can lead to faulty engineering and unsafe buildings and bridges, moral relativism can cause harmful effects in people's lives, encouraging people to do things that will hurt themselves and others.

We can see this especially in the relativistic culture's view of freedom. Authentic freedom is the ability to perform actions of high quality. It's for something. If I possess the skills of violin playing, I'm free to play the violin with excellence. If I possess the skills of race-car driving, I'm free to race the car around the track at high speeds. And if I possess the life skills known as the virtues, I am free to give the best of myself in my relationships and thus find happiness. Virtue gives me the freedom to love other people.

But the modern notion of freedom supporting the relativistic outlook is self-centered. It's simply the ability to make choices. It's merely about being free from anyone controlling me. How one chooses to use his freedom, however, doesn't matter. There are no good or bad choices. It doesn't matter what one chooses; all that matters is that one chooses: "It's my life. I'm free to do whatever I want to do with my life. Don't tell me what to do."

A Tale of Two Marriages

A true story about two married couples who lived in the same neighborhood at the same time can highlight the world of difference between these two views of freedom. One young couple had been happily married for several years with two children when the wife was diagnosed with terminal cancer. She quickly lost the ability to walk and knew she'd be in a wheelchair for the remainder of her life. This wasn't what her husband was expecting when they got married. The emotional and financial pressure was too much. He wanted a different kind of life. So, in the middle of her battle with cancer, he left his wife and kids for another woman.

According to the modern view of freedom, we can't say what he did was wrong because that's his choice. There are no right or wrong choices, this mindset says. Maybe you wouldn't do that, but we all should celebrate his freedom: He's free to do whatever he wants. And if he wants to leave his dying wife and kids, that's his free choice.

Just blocks away was another couple. The wife was diagnosed with an aggressive form of multiple sclerosis. She also quickly lost mobility and had to be pushed in a wheelchair for the rest of her life. But her situation was more incapacitating. She couldn't bathe herself, clothe herself or feed herself. She couldn't even speak.

Her husband was just hitting his stride in his business, but decided to retire early so that he could take care of his slowly dying wife. He went through practically all of his savings, fully realizing that he would not have much left for himself in his golden years. But that didn't matter. He lovingly poured his life out for her in her remaining years, serving her, feeding her, bathing her and dressing her. Every day he'd take his wife outside for walks in the neighborhood. He constantly read to her and talked to her, telling her about the weather, their friends and family, what was happening in the world and her favorite baseball team — even though she could not say a single word back. For years, he never had even one conversation with the love of his life. But he was always by her side, all the way to the end.

Hero of Your Life

The tale of these two couples encapsulates the main contrasts between the classical and relativistic worldviews. Both husbands saw their life story take an unanticipated turn. And at that pivotal moment, one revealed himself to be a hero, while the other walked away from love and his responsibility to his family. One lived a kind of life we might expect an individualistic, relativistic culture to produce. The other rose above the mainstream and reminds us of what true greatness is all about. His life was not about him — it was about giving himself to others, most especially his wife.

Relativism allows people to justify selfish acts that hurt other people. If there is no right or wrong, then I am free to do whatever I want with my life — no matter what consequences there might be for the poor, the unborn and the people God has placed in my life, whether friends, co-workers, family or, in this case, a dying wife and the kids who will be left behind. When we fail to give people a moral compass for their lives and instead train them in the relativistic view of freedom, we shouldn't be surprised when selfish acts like this occur and people get hurt in our culture. For relativism isn't just a bad idea. It wounds people.

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This series is based on his newest book, [Who Am I to Judge? Responding to Relativism with Logic and Love](#) (2017, Ignatius Press).

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