

On September 26th, 2014, Equal Rights Institute trained a group of Biola University students. Then on September 30th we brought them to CSU Fullerton so they could put what they learned about dialogues about abortion into practice. We set up a simple poll table as a way to get conversations started.



Relating to Relativists

By Timothy Brahm

Since I started working as a pro-life advocate in 2011, I have deeply struggled with how to have productive conversations with moral relativists. I could “win a debate” with them, but I have a loftier goal of actually changing their minds, and I was nowhere near meeting that goal.

For a while my strategy was to ask moral relativists really uncomfortable questions, such as “Is slavery immoral?” But this strategy almost never worked. If they believed morality is subjective to the individual, they would say, “No, I just don’t like it.” If they believed morality is subjective to the culture, they would say, “It’s wrong *now*, but only because our culture came to decide that.” Strangely, no one ever seemed to be uncomfortable after giving those responses.

Next I tried pointing out the logical inconsistency of them on one hand claiming there is no objective morality, and on the other hand implying I had moral failings for disagreeing with them about something like abortion. That also did not seem to help, either because they could not understand the logic or because they chose to ignore it. One time I even pretended to steal a guy’s bicycle, but he found that to be more cute than persuasive.

Last fall I tried something different when I met an alternative version of me.

Troy came up to our “Should Abortion Remain Legal?” poll table at CSU Fullerton and started talking to one of our volunteers. The discussion shifted quickly from being about abortion to Troy’s relativistic views, and I was invited to join the conversation.

After wrestling with Troy’s worldview for a while, I felt frustrated. I started to have those unfortunately all-too-familiar prideful feelings I get sometimes when I talk to someone who believes something I do not respect. But I really wanted to understand why he believed something so puzzling, so I tried a different tact. I asked:

Tim: Troy, how did you first come to be a relativist? I don’t mean, “What is your current argument for it?” I’m asking an autobiographical question, more like, “What’s the story for how you landed there?”

Troy: I was raised by Christian parents. I was never convinced that God really existed, and when I was about twelve I stopped believing altogether because they couldn’t answer my arguments. They were Christians

because they wanted to believe, it felt comforting to them, but I’m more rational than that. I figured out that religion was just invented to control people and it didn’t make sense to be anything but a relativist.

Tim: Did your relationships with your parents become strained when you stopped believing in God?

Troy: Ha, yeah, you could say that.

Tim: I’m sorry to hear that. That seems unfortunately common. Help me understand something. Did you become convinced of relativism and then stop believing in God as a result, or did you become convinced of atheism and then stop believing in objective morality? In other words, did you become an atheist because you became a relativist, or did you become a relativist because you became an atheist?

Troy: I stopped believing in God, and without God it didn’t make sense to believe in objective morality, so the latter.

Tim: I was wondering if that was the case! This is going to sound really strange coming from a Christian, but I completely agree with your logic.

Troy: Huh?

Tim: I actually think it makes sense to be a relativist if God doesn't exist. It seems to me like you need an objective moral lawgiver in order for objective moral laws to exist. That's even an argument Christians use for theism. We'll reason:

- 1: If there is no God, then there is no objective morality.
- 2: But there *is* objective morality (clearly something like rape is objectively morally wrong).
- C: Therefore, God must exist.

You're using the same first premise, you're just arguing for a different conclusion with it. For you, it goes:

- 1: If there is no God, then there is no objective morality.
- 2: There is no God.
- C: Therefore, there is no objective morality.

So it seems like the real disagreement between us isn't about objective morality. The fundamental thing that makes us come to such different conclusions is that I believe in God and you don't. In some other possible world, if I'd become convinced that there was no God, I'd probably be *very* similar to you. Let me ask you this: if you were convinced that God does exist, would that instantly make you a non-relativist?

Troy: Well yeah, if God exists then he can make the rules however he wants, so I'd have to stop believing in relativism.

Tim: Well, it doesn't make sense for us to argue about whether abortion is wrong if you don't believe anything is objectively wrong, and it doesn't make sense to argue about whether anything is objectively wrong if your disbelief in God is the thing driving your relativism. Let's talk about whether we should believe God exists.

Unfortunately, while Troy agreed with me and was interested in that discussion, by then he had spent over an hour with us and he needed to go to his next class.

I have taken this approach a few times now with people who ascribe to moral relativism, and those conversations have been far better than the ones I used to have. I think there are two reasons for this improvement.

First, Troy and I clarified our foundational disagreement. While Troy and I had other topics we could argue about, the question of whether or not God exists turned out to be the root cause of many of our other disagreements, so getting to that root cause helped us to have a more meaningful discussion.

Second, I showed respect to him. I am not saying that it is always wrong or unhelpful to challenge a moral relativist with the uncomfortable implications of his view. However I worry such challenges can have the unintended consequence of suggesting to the relativist that I think he is stupid.



Timothy Brahm engages with pro-choice students at CSU Fullerton while training pro-life students from Biola who went through our seminar.

Let me be very clear: the point of this letter is not to say that this is a one-size-fits-all answer to relativism. Rather, this is the approach I took that helped me to have a better conversation with Troy. The point of this letter is to illustrate one of our core values at Equal Rights Institute: **we want to respond to people, not just statements.**

I feel good about how this conversation went because I connected well with Troy; it isn't that I think I discovered the key to responding to any relativist. Two factors that helped me have a successful conversation with Troy were that I showed him respect by going to great lengths to understand what his view actually was, and he *knew* I was trying hard to understand his view.

In a future newsletter, I will share with you what I do when a conversation about abortion turns into a disagreement about whether God exists (and what I would have said to Troy).

Personal Note from Josh

We are starting the new year off at full-speed! I'm going to be the keynote speaker at Iowa Right to Life's march and conference, and the following week I will be in Washington, D.C. and San Francisco to speak at both of Students for Life's national conferences.

Our major focus at the office is designing the outreach tools we will use this spring at our campus events. While Tim and I focus on these projects, Jacob is handling the logistics for our spring events and will soon build two ten-foot kiosk displays for our campus outreaches that can be broken down and checked on an airplane. Thanks so much for your prayers and support!

