Worldview II: Moral Relativism

Module #11

Learning Guide

Worldviews 2
Moral Relativism, Nihilism & Existentialism

Before you start...

- Post your response to last week’s forum question onto Moodle and interact on social media
- Consider this week’s forum question, then complete 2 hours pre-reading from recommended and optional sources on Moodle (cf. Resource boxes below), to help answer this question
- From the reading, come prepared to share a question, challenge, implication & application
- Download this learning guide (and the associated powerpoint pdf), and have it open on your computer ready to edit if you are a class-based student

1. INTRODUCTION

In this module we continue our three part consideration of “Alternatives to Christian Belief” (Section C). This time we tackle worldviews which posit moral relativism, including nihilism and existentialism. In the first session, we will practice one minute “big story” answers to tough questions, pray for non-Christian friends, and debrief the pre-reading for this module’s focus. Then, leading into the break, we will consider Nietzsche’s parable of the “Madman”, manifested in contemporary media and youth culture through Hollywood’s various “anti-heroes”. In the second session of the lecture, we will unpack moral relativism, before forming into four groups to discuss issues such as abortion, homosexuality, legalized drug use, and freedom of speech/tolerance. This will carry into the third session of the lecture, where we will close with open Q&A on the vexed question of Same-Sex Marriage, in light of changing understanding and practice of sexual ethics, and the Safe Schools campaign on gender identity fluidity.

Next week, concluding our exploration of “Alternatives to Christian Belief”, we address Eastern pantheistic monism, New Age syncretism, and occultism. Side-stepping heavy content, we will explore personal stories of those leaving mysticism for Christ, and the role of imaginative apologetics and desire in transformation.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this module are to:
- Consider contemporary expressions of nihilism, existentialism, and moral relativism.
- Form cogent responses to one or more of these worldviews, drawing on diverse apologetic types. Practice responding to claims of bigotry regarding biblical understanding of sex/marriage.

OUTCOMES

On completion of this module, students should be able to explain the main tenets of the three considered worldviews, and offer a simple but multifaceted reply.
Aligned with the Unit Guide Outcomes, students should be able to:

Knowledge (know and understand):
A4. Alternatives to Christian Belief
A5. Strategies to defend and commend Christian faith

Skills (be able to):
B3. Evaluate alternatives to Christian belief from a Christian perspective
B4. Engage in Christian apologetics
B5. Present an analytical evidence-based argument or perspective

Application (be in a position to):
C3. Defend and commend the truth claims of the Christian faith

SESSION FLOW (lecture runs 6:15-9:00pm, breaks from 7:05-7:10pm, and 7:55-8:05pm)
6:15  Big Story Recap and Responses + Prayer + Reading debrief (20 mins) + Introduction to Nihilism via Nietzsche’s “Madman” and Current Movies (20 mins) + Response to University Existentialist (10 mins)
7:10  Intro Moral Relativism (20 minutes) + Ethics Role Plays: Preparation, Dialogue, Debrief (25 mins)
8:05  Workshop and Q&A on “Everything’s Bent” re: SSM (Same-Sex Marriage) (55 minutes)

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1 Paul dialogues with the Athenian council of Elders at Mars Hill (Acts 17)
2. BIG STORY “CAUGHT OUT” RESPONSES + READING REVIEW

“The big story is that God designed us all for good, but through our bad choices we’ve been damaged by evil. But, through Jesus’ life, death on the cross, and resurrection, we’ve been restored for better. If you’re humble enough to admit to God that you fall short, and ask Him to forgive you for the wrong you’ve done, putting God first, then you can connect with life to the full—what God always intended for you. Then you can join other Christ-followers, empowered by God’s Spirit, sent together to heal a hurting world, waiting for the day when God will set everything right by judging all the evil and restoring the whole universe.”

Class Activity 11.1 — 10 minutes
Using the post-it-notes from module one, two students will each select one of the five circles from “The Big Story”, then randomly choose a paper slip from that circle. Each student will take up to 1 minute to respond to this question or objection, as if in conversation with the person who posted the slip. Afterward, the class can unpack what did/didn’t work in this response, and other ways to dialogue.

(Wanting some encouragement evangelistically in “Answering Tough Questions”? See Benson 2010.)

Class Activity 11.2 — 10 minutes
Whether as a whole class, or in smaller groups, share your response to the pre-reading for this module:

- a question — something you don’t get, or want to clarify
- a challenge — something you disagree with, or want to nuance
- an implication — “so what” for our apologetic practice
- an application — something useful right now in your context

Consider how these readings relate to your life and witness in general and ministry context in particular. ... This is the ideal time to bring up whatever is confusing, or questions you have in regards to the course material, so don’t be shy!

If time permits, feel free to discuss the forum question from last module, or get a jump start on the question for this module: Respond to one of the following statements: (a) “Who are you to say what is morally right and wrong? How intolerant!”; or (b) “Anyone who judges homosexuality on religious grounds is a bigot; provided people give their full consent, and no harm is done, everything is permissible and your opposition is oppression”; or (c) “You don’t need to be religious to be good, nor believe in God to objectively discern the difference between right and wrong.”
3. NIHILISM AND EXISTENTIALISM

Resource 11.1: Nihilism and Existentialism

Our central focus in this module is on Moral Relativism and how Christians might better respond to the cultural press for Same-Sex Marriage. Nevertheless, Nihilism and Existentialism are significant worldviews flavouring (perhaps tainting?) the ideological water we in the West drink every day. These few sources should help you get a handle on the core beliefs, and offer some leads for how to respond:

- James Sire’s *The Universe Next Door* (2009) maps the lay of the land in Ch. 5 “Zero Point: Nihilism” (94-116) and Ch. 6 “Beyond Nihilism: Existentialism” (117-143). For a helpful summary of the third edition of this book, see here.
- Various online Encyclopaedias of Philosophy (e.g. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, and the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy) have excellent introductory articles to big concepts including Relativism, Moral Relativism, Moral Skepticism (includes Moral Nihilism), Nihilism, and The Meaning of Life. For excellent videos embodying secular answers to related questions, see Alain de Botton’s “School of Life,” including videos on David Hume (empiricist and sceptic, a precursor to moral relativism), Nietzsche (Father of Nihilism; speaks about the Ubermensch aka Superman), Søren Kierkegaard (Christian, and Father of Modern Existentialism), Fyodor Dostoyevsky (who we quote below on moral relativism resulting from the “death of God”), Blaise Pascal (arguably a precursors to Kierkegaard), The Meaning of Life (here and here), What Is ‘Normal’ (short answer: no-one), Pessimism, Pop Culture and Philosophy (something we do in this session; also, What Is Cinema For?), and Existential Crisis.
- For a brilliant example of pop-culture critique of nihilism at the heart of the X-Men Movie *Logan*, see Garbarino (2017) “‘Logan’ Offers Viewers A World Of Meaningless Despair.”

3.1 Nietzsche’s Parable of the Madman (1882)

Listen to Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900; article here) prophetically proclaim “God is dead!” in his “Parable of the Madman,” as read by Ravi Zacharias:

Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly: "I seek God! I seek God!"—and as many of those who did not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. "Has he got lost?" asked one. "Did he lose his way like a child?" asked another. "Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? Emigrated?"—Thus they yelled and laughed.

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. "Whither is God?" he cried; "I will tell you. We have killed him—you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying, as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space?"
Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning? Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.

"How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed; and whoever is born after us—for the sake of this deed he will belong to a higher history than all history hitherto."

Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners; and they, too, were silent and stared at him in astonishment. At last he threw his lantern on the ground, and it broke into pieces and went out. "I have come too early," he said then; "my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men. Lightning and thunder require time; the light of the stars requires time; deeds, though done, still require time to be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than most distant stars—and yet they have done it themselves.

It has been related further that on the same day the madman forced his way into several churches and there struck up his requiem aeternam deo. Led out and called to account, he is said always to have replied nothing but: "What after all are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchres of God?"

► What signs are there that the madman’s time is now?

By his own admission, the madman was before his time. That time, however, is now for our culture at large. We are a culture technologically on the rise, but morally on the decline. What is up, what is down? Where can we go from here? For many youth, Nietzsche’s nihilism, expressed through suicide, has become increasingly palatable.

Following Sire (2009; summary here) and his mapping of worldviews by answers offered to seven big questions, Nihilism (i.e., pessimistic naturalism) may be understood as believing (whether by arguing or presupposing) that:

- GOD/ULTIMATE REALITY: There is no God. The cosmos appears not to care, to value goodness or be rational. All is ultimately absurd
- COSMOS/PRIME REALITY: It operates either from necessity or chance, with no inherent value or meaning. Prime reality provides no answers and, again, is absurd
- HUMANS: We possess no objective value, meaning, or even self. Freedom and consciousness are thus undermined
- KNOWLEDGE/REVELATION: There is no foundation for knowledge, given that there is no reason to think that the brain as pure matter would lead us to ‘truth’. Truth and illusion are indistinguishable
- ETHICS: There is no basis for moral values, rendering all values relative, for you cannot produce moral “oughts” from biologically/materially what “is” the case
- DEATH: Our physical end marks the extinction of consciousness, personality and individuality, finally absurd and meaningless
- HISTORY: There is no objective direction or purpose. The individual and world history are meaningless (sounds like Ecclesiastes 1:1-11, no?).
3.2 Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov* (1880)

*Fyodor Dostoyevsky* (1821-1881; article here), in *The Brothers Karamazov* (pp1243-1244), follows a similar line (though as a Christian), exploring how God’s non-existence affects morality. Confused and agnostic Mitya explores the connection between God’s existence and morality with his Christian brother Alexey, concerned by his brother Ivan who has denied God’s existence and on this basis feels justified in killing his despicable father—“If God doesn’t exist, all is permitted”:

“It's God that's worrying me. That's the only thing that's worrying me. What if He doesn't exist? What if it's an idea made up by men? Then if He doesn't exist, man is the chief of the earth, of the universe. Magnificent! Only how is he going to be good without God? That's the question. I always come back to that. For whom is man going to love then? To whom will he be thankful? To whom will he sing the hymn? Rakitin, my atheist friend, says that one can love humanity without God. Well, only a snivelling idiot can maintain that. I can't understand it. Life's easy for Rakitin. He says, 'You'd better think about the extension of civic rights, or even of keeping down the price of meat. You will show your love for humanity more simply and directly by that, than by philosophy.' I answered him, 'Well, but you, without a God, are more likely to raise the price of meat, if it suits you, and make a rouble on every copeck.' He lost his temper. But after all, what is goodness? Answer me that, Alexey. Goodness is one thing with me and another with a Chinaman, so it's a relative thing. Or isn't it? Is it not relative? A treacherous question! You won't laugh if I tell you it's kept me awake two nights. I only wonder now how people can live and think nothing about it. Vanity! Ivan has no God. He has an idea. It's beyond me. But he is silent.”

► If you were Alexey (*Brothers Karamazov*), how would you respond to Mitya’s troubled musing?

3.3 Subjective Morality and Existentialist Meaning-Making

Clearly Nihilism is literally a dead-end. Why would you get up in the morning? Why do anything, if all is ultimately meaning-less? Why even bother writing these reflections? Is all action purely fueled by naked desire for survival and power, like Nietzsche’s Superman?

The loss of an “objective” basis to morality and moral reasoning doesn’t particularly worry many (post)moderns, who presuppose the death/non-existence—or at least, irrelevance—of God.

And yet, it should (cf. Lewis 2015; Zacharias 2014).
It’s arguable that our present societal stability in the West is structurally borrowed from yesteryear’s confidence in the existence of a divine being. God’s very nature grounds what is “good”, solving *Euthyphro’s classic dilemma* (for instance, see William Lane Craig’s response [here](#)): right and wrong is not arbitrary, even as it must be socially constructed and enacted, albeit in a fallen manner, in each time and place. God’s existence is arguably the only grounds for objective and transcendent moral standards.

So, once you get rid of God at the heart of your view of reality, rationalising behaviour on the basis of self-interest, or national advancement of your particular tribe through whatever means of social engineering, becomes palatable, even irresistible (despite Sam Harris’s 2011 protestations in *The Moral Landscape*, that biological flourishing is sufficient to separate right from wrong, an argument demolished by William Lane Craig [here](#) and [here](#)). And that is largely the story of the 20th Century. Nietzsche’s prophetic warnings became present reality, as *Democide* (*Death by Government*) on the political left (Communism) and right (Fascism/Nationalism) took hold. Following political scientist and scholar *R. J. Rummel’s math* (also [here](#)), between 1900 and 1999, 174,000,000 (that’s 174 million) people were murdered by their own rulers (excluding world wars, killing people from other nations). That’s more murders than the previous 19 centuries combined, overwhelming any deaths from religious crusades.

Nihilism literally ends in death, either one’s own through inaction, or that of the other through coercion.

Not surprisingly, then, human nature—reflecting our divine maker who created us to pursue life rather than death—abhors this nihilistic vacuum. Rejecting the existence of God, we rebel by constructing a personal and reason-less purpose for life. Without revelation from above, Kierkegaard’s “leap of faith” into the light reduces to an “escape from meaningless,” diving with reckless abandon into the dark. The best we can do is hope for a subjective sense of fulfilment, despite the absurdity of life.

In this spirit, Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980; article [here](#)) coined the phrase, as a self-description, *existentialist*.

Again, following Sire (2009; summary [here](#)), *Existentialism* (i.e., optimistic naturalism) may be understood as believing (whether by arguing or presupposing) that:

- **GOD/ULTIMATE REALITY**: There are two disunited forms: objective (matter) and subjective (my experience of freedom)
- **COSMOS/PRIME REALITY**: The universe consists of objective “essences” which, while ultimately absurd, are governed by nature’s laws and logic
- **HUMANS**: Existence precedes essence (for humans alone), wherein we are free to define ourselves, albeit alienated from the world
- **KNOWLEDGE/REVELATION**: Objective reality is knowable by logic and science, but the “self” is removed from analysis
- **ETHICS**: Humans must “revolt” against absurdity and create their own value. Good actions are those that are consciously and freely chosen, though there is ultimately no objective reality to the right or wrong of what is chosen, merely that the decision is owned
- **DEATH**: Our physical end is an undeniable absurdity, so face it boldly as the final exercise of revolt
- **HISTORY**: The progress of time, also, is meaningless. However, temporary individual meaning may arise through choices and personal encounters.

This “revolt” may be political, anarchic and destructive, as in the music of my favourite 90s genre bending “Rap metal funk metal alternative metal nu metal” band, *Rage Against the Machine* (official page [here](#)). (Check out “Killing in the Name of” ...” for a taste, here.)

Or, this rebellion against the meaninglessness of reality may take the form of the insanity of hope, making meaning by our determined resistance to “not go gently into the night” (poem of Dylan Thomas [here](#)). We see this in the postmodern musings of pop-philosopher Jason deSilva (2013; video [here](#), article [here](#)).
3.4 Hollywood’s Hope-Lessness

Now, I’m hardly going to claim that Hollywood is the best gauge for where culture is truly at. It’s driven by marketforces that feed the masses what they think will sell. And yet, cinema is a collision of diverse artistic forces (song, image, dance, literature), an unearthing and repackaging of rich metaphors, analogies and allegories, pieced together by scriptwriters and directors who typically do desire to actually say something. In this regard, it’s noteworthy that Hollywood seems to have taken a hope-less turn of late.

Gone are the neat, happy endings, where the hero triumphs over evil, cape flapping effortlessly in the breeze as (typically) he faces the sun of a “brave, shining world of tomorrow”. Instead, welcome the age of the anti-hero, with the rejoinder to the superman: “You must be delusional... And your cape's on backwards.”

A collection of bad-boys and bad-girls, most leading lights are now selfish, unprincipled, and cynically dragged against their will into battle, for a cause that they barely believe in.
(Think of the contrast and showdown in Superman vs. Batman.) And any “victory” secured seems fleeting and ironic, a chasing after the wind. As a TV Trope, the anti-hero may be characterised as “a protagonist who has the opposite of most of the traditional attributes of a hero. They may be bewildered, ineffectual, deluded, or merely apathetic. More often an antihero is just an amoral misfit. While heroes are typically conventional, anti-heroes, depending on the circumstances, may be preconventional (in a ‘good’ society), postconventional (if the government is ‘evil’) or even unconventional. Not to be confused with the Villain or the Big Bad, who is the opponent of Heroes (and Anti-Heroes, for that matter). ... What amoral antiheroes learn, if they learn anything at all over the course of the story, is that an existence devoid of absolute values offers a lot of isolation. Which may be to their liking. ... Traditionally, in literary analysis, the meaning of antihero was effectively the opposite of the now common usage, lacking the elements that make a hero ‘cool’ rather than the elements that make them ‘good’.”

The excess of scare-quotes around ‘good’ and ‘evil’ might tip you off that our moral compass is vacillating. Granted, it’s hyperbole, caricature in this comical characters. But, Hollywood is simply amplifying our contemporary quandry over how to tell right from wrong, and whether it’s worth the fuss of fighting over.

While time is too short to watch these clips in class, it’s worth borrowing out The Dark Knight (the start of rebooting Batman’s image in a more realistic and yet jaded/cynical form) and watching it with your understanding of modernism, nihilism, existentialism, postmodernism, and moral relativism in mind. I’m sure you’ll find it a powerful social commentary. To help with the decoding, consider the Joker as a nihilist (and thus a moral relativist), while Harvey Dent represents a modernist (with his perceived control over chance, until his coin and face burns, at which point he becomes a jaded existentialist, defining his existence by choice), while Commissioner Gordon and Batman are largely moral objectivists doing their best to operate in a broken world, Batman definitely cast as the anti-hero.

Here are the key scene markers for the meaty bits:

► What other recent movies come to mind as Exhibit A of nihilism, existentialism, and moral relativism?
The 2017 final Wolverine instalment, as part of the X-Men Franchise, is particularly poignant (watch official trailer here). Here’s how Collin Garbarino framed his insightful review:

As art, a piece like Logan can be read in multiple ways. Garbarino rightly notes the explicit parallels in Logan to the old Western, Shane. He concludes (*spoiler alert*) thus:

“Back in 1953, in the funeral scene for Shane, they recite the Lord’s Prayer at the graveside. Sixty-four years later, we see people reciting the words of Shane at a funeral. The heroes of man have displaced the divine in even the most sacred rites. In the final seconds of Logan, Laura [Wolverine’s troubled daughter and fellow mutant, hunted and on the run] takes the rough cross on Logan’s grave and turns it on its side in homage to Logan’s role as one of the X-Men. Perhaps she merely means to testify to the greatness of this fallen hero. Or perhaps she’s communicating that the deeds of Logan are on par with or exceed the deeds of Christ. Either way, she leaves herself and the audience without any hope. If this is our hero, none of us can expect to be saved” (emphasis mine).

Definitely bleak. However, as I include in the Moodle pdf here, artist and Christian James Alley (response to my Facebook post, on March 12, 2017) retells the story like this:

“The subtext film to me seemed to be about how a broken violent man can find a sense of belong, family and home. It isn’t hopeless. Charles is a type of flawed father to an outcast Logan. He is continually trying to teach Logan that life is about helping the ‘other’ and the ‘marginalised’ even when it seems hopeless. Wolverine wants to escape the world, Charles pulls him back into the moment by pointing out the needs of others. … Charles: we need to help them | Logan: someone will come along | Charles: someone already has

They are invited into a struggling family life. Food and conversation. Acceptance and love. There are crucifixes and references to Shiloh in the family home. A place of peace.

But while we experience a taste of peace in the family home it doesn’t come in fullness in a fallen world. It ends badly, Logan can’t escape the violence of his past. He fights with a younger more violent version of himself.

The reviewer tries to compare Logan to Jesus. That’s a problem because it isn’t what the director is saying. I think the director, in subverting the cross is pointing and that Logan isn't a saviour, he’s just a man that needs one. Did you notice the song at the end of the film? ['Hurt’ by Johnny Cash, lyrics here originally by Nine Inch Nails, capturing Cash’s late conversion as a crippled anti-hero finding grace amidst sin/regret].”

Perhaps these paradoxical interpretations are a window into our conflicted contemporary context? Indeed, it reflects the conflicted nature of humanity (Romans 7), our grandeur in God’s image and yet our demonic fall from grace into self-will and cynicism. Perhaps it’s a good thing that movies deconstruct human heroes?
3.5 Empathetic Apologetics for Hurting Nihilists and Empty Existentialists

Before we can helpfully dialogue with today’s nihilists and existentialists, we need to empathetically enter this place of Hurt. (Chap Clark’s ethnographic work with teenagers in *Hurt*, and *Hurt 2.0*, come to mind.)

► In your own words, explain nihilism. Also, explain existentialism. What are the defining features of each, both in ideas/words, and behaviour? What form do they take today?

► Following Sire’s framework—*The Universe Next Door*—what drove the transition from naturalism to nihilism to existentialism? How does this relate to (a) rationality; (b) morality; (c) existential concerns such as purpose and hope in life.

► Existentialism posits that life is irrational and meaningless, thus we create meaning by our choices—i.e., a leap of faith from meaningless nature to a meaningful and happy life. What are the problems in this venture? And how is this similar or different to the Christian’s “leap of faith”?

► What are the key charges the nihilist and the existentialist would bring against Christianity? How would you respond?

► What key arguments may help expose the problems with nihilism and existentialism?

► Consider the following thoughts sent to me by a young university student and former Christian struggling to come to grips with the suffering, evil, and meaningless of the world. *How would you respond?*
First, a poem she sent me, to express her state of mind:

“I used to believe in living. I used to believe in a better time. I used to believe in the rainbow after the storm. I used to believe in the giddy feeling after the wave had its way with you. I used to believe in the first sunray of summer on your skin after a long winter. I used to believe in the breath after nearly drowning. I used to believe in the perfect kiss that gave you butterflies and love that gave you a smile whether they were physically next to you or not. I used to believe in seeing your smile with your teeth showing again. I believed in a soul mate, an equal, to lean on and be leant on. I used to believe in the happily ever after. I used to choose to continue because I believed everything would fix, heal, mend, improve. Now I only do it because I never learnt another way. I do not believe anymore. I hope. Hope is what you have when belief abandons you, but you’re too afraid to give up. When you’re incapable of giving up.”

Then, her reflection [typos and all!]:

“Well maybe all the evil and pain in the world is the way its supposed to be....just as my parents always say to me "well thats just life" maybe thats just it ..thats how its supposed to be...But i think that if god does exist ...then he must be cruel because how could someone want life to be like this. ... Maybe thats just it... good and bad its just life bad things happen and good things happen...life isnt fair thats just the way it is...i think that makes sense. when theres nothing left to believe in, when belief abandons you...your left with hope, hope that things will change, hope that things will get better, hope that youll find belief again. I dont think they are lies...How can a feeling be a lie...if this is how i feel then how can it be a lie. I dont think it says that i might as well commit suicide...but i am worthless maybe.

I think that because you believe in god thats all there is to you thats the only option you see, so you think any other way is wrong or stupid or pointless. You say that is life is seriously this pointless and random then why on earth would u be happy and content...why would i be happy and content if i believed in god...whats the difference...what is the difference of believing in something you cant see, cant hear, cant feel and putting all your hope and trust in him when your never gonnabe good enough...no ones perfect which means no one is good enough for god if he is perfect so constantly feeling like your crap, worthless just not good enough. So what is the difference between that and believing that life is pointless that its not existing for any real reason...and becaus eit just is there is pain and ther eis suffereing but there is also happiness... honestly what is the difference...you get the same feelings in both situations dave....except with the second one im not constantly feeling like im letting someone down im not really feeling like im not good enough. ... maybe this is what I really think about the world and maybe you dont NEED to have god. ... plenty of people are happy without him and you know wat plenty of people are unhappy and they have him. just because i talk negatively about life doesnt mean im unhappy just becaus ei talk negatively about myself doesnt even mean im unhappy. ive been content for a long time sure i get down...but who doesnt. its life.”

Reflection Activity 11.1 – Distance Students

In place of class discussion, online/distance students are required to complete a series of reflections—four per week. For each reflection activity/question, journal at least 30 (meaningful) words, and tick off the related boxes in the middle of the Unit Guide.

# 11.1 What one question might you ask this person, that would help to reframe her view of God/life? Compose a sentence that captures the heart of how you would empathetically respond.
4. MORAL RELATIVISM

Philosophically understood, Relativism, roughly put, is:

the view that truth and falsity, right and wrong, standards of reasoning, and procedures of justification are products of differing conventions and frameworks of assessment and that their authority is confined to the context giving rise to them. More precisely, “relativism” covers views which maintain that—at a high level of abstraction—at least some class of things have the properties they have (e.g., beautiful, morally good, epistemically justified) not simpliciter, but only relative to a given framework of assessment (e.g., local cultural norms, individual standards), and correspondingly, that the truth of claims attributing these properties holds only once the relevant framework of assessment is specified or supplied. Relativists characteristically insist, furthermore, that if something is only relatively so, then there can be no framework-independent vantage point from which the matter of whether the thing in question is so can be established.

But what does that mean in everyday terms? And how does it map onto the narrower issue of moral relativism? Before unleashing another torrent of sources, let’s prime the pump with some dialogue:

► In your own words, what is moral relativism?

► What forms does it take in our culture today—both in actions and words?

► After watching 2 video clips—Katie Perry’s “I Kissed a Girl” and Nickelback’s “If Everyone Cared”—discuss how these two approaches to morality can thrive simultaneously. Are we truly relativists?

► How does moral relativism alter a person’s understanding of and receptivity to the gospel?

“Christ promises forgiveness of sins: But what is that to those who, since they do not know the law of nature, do not know that they have sinned? Who will take medicine unless he knows he is in the grip of disease? Moral relativity is the enemy we have to overcome before we tackle Atheism.”

(C. S. Lewis, letter to a friend)

“Christianity tells people to repent and promises them forgiveness. It therefore has nothing (as far as I know) to say to people who do not know they have done anything to repent of and who do not feel that they need forgiveness.”

(Lewis, Mere Christianity)

1 Chris Gowans (2015) in his article on “Moral Relativism” at the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy [SEP] site here, identifies it as “associated with an empirical thesis that there are deep and widespread moral disagreements, and a metaethical thesis that the truth or justification of moral judgments is not absolute, but relative to the moral standard of some person or group of persons. Sometimes ‘moral relativism’ is connected with a normative position about how we ought to think about or act towards those with whom we morally disagree, most commonly that we should tolerate them.” Cf. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong’s (2015) article on “Moral Skepticism” at SEP here. Few people are thoroughgoing “dogmatic moral skeptics” who “claim that nobody ever knows that any moral belief is true.”
As we get into this topic of moral relativism, it’s important to remember that apologetics isn’t an end in itself. Rather, it’s a tool to serve our mission in the world, joining in what God is already doing. Our mission (as unpacked in Modules 1 and 2 of the Christian Worldviews Course) involves working for both shalom and salvation. We are to evangelise, make disciples and particularly love other believers (i.e., salvation, comprised of the Great Commission and New Commandment), so that all people may enter back into their original/created purpose, of cultivating the world, loving God and loving others as oneself (i.e., shalom, comprised of the Cultural/Dominion Mandate and the Great Commandments). For more on this, Chapter 6 “The Story and the Mission” (181-220) of John G. Stackhouse’s 2011 book, Making the Best of It: Following Christ in the Real World (summary here).

My point is that when it comes to apologetics engaging moral relativism, the point is not to get everyone to agree with your moral position on each and every issue, through tight argumentation and skilful persuasion. Rather, as regards the narrower concern for salvation, the point is to remove obstacles to truly hearing the gospel, recognising one’s objective sin before a holy God, and the need to repent. And regarding the wider concern for shalom, apologetics serves public theology (cf. Module 10 of this course) in making space for Christian witness and our particular contribution/perspective in a pluralistic society, seeking policies that we truly believe will make for the flourishing of all citizens and creation as a whole.

There is *no* way that this Module can even supply a sufficient introduction to ethical reasoning. It can, however, introduce you to some of the hot-button issues, and how you might go about responding apologetically to clear the way for sharing the gospel and seeking the peace of the secular city.

Resource 11.2: Moral Relativism & Hot Button Issues

**Answer ’Yes’ or ’No’: Abortion? Legalising drug-use? Freedom of speech? Same-sex marriage?**

**Moral reasoning** is tricky business. Even a moment’s thought reveals that these are incredibly complex issues that could occupy a lifetime of study and policy making. And as Christians, our practical wisdom expressed in a pluralistic society should draw from and integrate at least the four sources of Scripture, tradition, scholarship (reason applied to disciplined academic discourse), and experience (see Module 2 of “Everyday Theology” here; cf. Stackhouse, Need to Know [2014]). It’s not sufficient to cherry pick Bible passages.

So, it will take hard work to move beyond a simple deontological ethic of religious duty that delineates a timeless right from wrong. Instead, we must seek a virtuous response in light of the whole biblical narrative, constructing a teleological ethic that seeks faithful improvisation in between the garden where we fell, and the garden-city where all is redeemed. Trajectory matters, and what initially appears initially righteous may not necessarily be faithful or fruitful. It takes a Spirit-filled community to discern.

(Note that Christian teleological ethics is far more nuanced than consequentialism or utilitarianism, where the end justifies the means and ‘right’ ethical decision is that which results in the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Rather, following N. T. Wright (2012, 170), the classic structure of virtue is “glimpse the goal [telos, New Creation], work out the path toward it, and develop the habits which you will need to practice if you are going to tread that path.”)

The following sources should give you a well-marked path into this huge field of debate, concerning ethical reasoning, moral arguments for God’s existence (cf. Module 5), a broad approach to ethical apologetics amidst contention, and some specific leads on hot-button ethical issues. Turn to the reference list at this Module’s end for hyperlinks for the books/talks in their entirety, and try the “recommended readings” first. …


Repeating some material from Module 9, Section 3, on the non-neutrality of sociology, we must remember that ethical reasoning is hardly “neutral”. Much of our ethical discourse has broken down in the face of incommensurable claims emerging out of different paradigms of thought and larger metanarratives presupposing the way the world is (cf. Keller 2016; Kelly 2017; Haidt 2013; Lilla 2017; MacIntyre 2007, 2008, 2016). While some contest any transcendent grounding to our sense of morality and law (see Leff 1979), we have solid warrant for allowing the biblical narrative to shape our identity, character, vision of the future/ telos, and sense of virtue and ethics. For a leading light making this argument, see Stanley Hauerwas (1974, 1989, 2005a+b).

Interestingly, our natural human intuition that some things truly are right, and other things truly are wrong irrespective of culture, time and place—such as torturing babies—is a strong argument for God’s existence. This isn’t to say that non-theists are immoral bad people. It is, however, to say that there is no solid warrant nor grounding for belief in objective moral values apart from a divine moral law giver. For more on this, see William Lane Craig (here, here, and video here), Justin Brierley here, C. S. Lewis on “The Moral Tao” (appendix to *Abolition of Man*, 2013 [1943]; cf. blog here), Ganssle’s contention that “Moral Facts Point to God” (2004), Keller (2016) on “The Problem of Morals” (Ch. 9) and “A Justice that Does Not Create New Oppressors” (Ch. 10), Paul Chamberlain (1996) on *Can We Be Good Without God?*, and Volume 6 (2004) of CASE, “Is Morality a Matter of Fact?”

Our current societal context is highly complex (cf. Benson 2009, 46-85). It takes great wisdom to understand the times, and know how to speak and act in response. To help you get your bearings, see Francis Beckwith’s many great books, especially *Politics for Christians: Statecraft as Soulcraft* (2012). Alongside Beckwith, Gregory Koukl offers perhaps the best overall introductory text on the worldview of relativism, providing insightful critique and clever strategies for challenging its claims. See their book, *Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air* (Beckwith and Koukl 1998). Koukl heads the apologetics group *Stand to Reason*, and shares a brilliant collection of short, sharp and memorable deconstructions of relativism here. For my own presentation on these themes, see the apologetics talk “Morality: Who Are You to Say?” (Benson and Sargent 2005c; summarised in section 4.2 below; discussion guide, mp3, and powerpoint on Moodle). For a wide-ranging consideration of “Faith in the Media”, see Ethos’ *Zadok Perspectives* Vol. 129 (Summer 2015). And, repeated from Module 10, for rigorous insights into religious freedom and questions of tolerance and discrimination, see Monsma and Carlson-Thies (2015). As you step into the public square to make comment, be aware that “We Are a Minority” now (Gray 2013), and cannot expect to speak without challenge. And yet, as David Gushee explores in his manifesto, *A Letter to My Anxious Christian Friends: From Fear to Faith in Unsettled Times* (2016), we must act with love and patience on issues such as sexual standards and abortion, lest we betray Christ’s central mission of witness in the world.

The single best book on the contentious issue of abortion, taking a philosophical line, is by Christopher Kaczor (2015), entitled *The Ethics of Abortion: Women’s Rights, Human Life, and the Question of Justice*. Again, PE420/620 isn’t an ethics subject, so I’ve provided few sources on these hot-button issues. But, for more on abortion, see Benson and Sargent (2005a; discussion guide, mp3 and powerpoint on Moodle). I have uploaded a range of talks and articles on various ethical issues to here, all freely downloadable. The Australian Christian Lobby addresses most topics.
**Reflection Activity 11.2 – Distance Students**

In place of class discussion, online/distance students are required to complete a series of reflections—four per week. For each reflection activity/question, journal at least 30 (meaningful!) words, and tick off the related boxes in the middle of the Unit Guide.

# 11.2 What major challenge to the gospel does moral relativism pose? And, in light of the objection you answered in Class Activity 11.4 above, how might our current cultural context create an opportunity for Christian witness?

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**4.1 The Paradox of Moral Relativism: Some Youth Culture Observations**

- 2/3 Gen Y believe “right & wrong” is just an opinion ... “everything is relative; who am I to judge?”
- sexual ethics, experimentation, and antiquated Biblical beliefs
- homosexuality, fornication, cohabitation, abortion
- reinforcement: media, educators, parents
- And yet ... conscience, “no harm,” influence

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2 The following notes are taken from David M. Benson, “The Thinking Teen: An Exploration, Evaluation and Application of Three Apologetic Strategies in Commending the Bible to Contemporary Western Adolescents” (MCS Thesis, Regent College, 2009), 56-61. See this source online for complete references.
In a climate of suspicion toward unifying metanarratives, some form of moral relativism is to be expected. Moral relativism—defined by Walt Mueller as “the view that each person’s personal standard of right and wrong is as legitimate, true and authoritative as any other”3—has pervaded youth culture. Across Canada, America and Australia, roughly two-thirds of youth believe that “what is right or wrong is a matter of personal opinion.” Concerning morality, the majority claim “everything is relative.”4 Moral relativism is most evident in the area of sexual ethics. The Biblical ideal of monogamous heterosexual union within marriage sounds positively antiquated to most of Generation Y, for whom “losing virginity is considered a rite of passage into maturity.”5 The median age of first vaginal intercourse for Australian youth has dropped from nineteen (in the 1960s) to sixteen (in the late 1990s).6 The primary reason youth gave for rejecting religion was disagreement with Biblical teaching opposing homosexuality, followed by church refusal to ordain women and then restrictive rules about pre-marital sex and abortion.7 In Canada, 80 percent of youth approve of sex before marriage when partners “love” each other; 60 percent condone sex if they merely “like each other.” Roughly 90 percent of teenagers expect to marry and stay married for life—a conservative stance—yet the same proportion approve cohabitation and a “try before you buy” mentality, believing this will safeguard marriage from divorce.8 The “pro-life” (or “anti-choice”) position also appears antiquated when upward of 30 percent of Canadian teenage pregnancies since the 1990s ended in abortion.9 Meanwhile, over 50 percent approve of homosexual relations—double that of 1984.10 In sum, youth occupy the centre of their moral universe, free to determine right and wrong for themselves.11

This sense of autonomy and relativism is societally reinforced. The media offer a “map of reality” by which teens may evaluate moral decisions: what comperes praise or denigrate shapes adolescent moral norms. By depicting upward of nine sexual scenes per hour, and affirming alternative sexual orientations as authentic expressions of identity, MTV teaches teens that sexuality is just a pleasurable game.12 Educators also sow

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3 Mueller, Engaging, 66.
4 Bibby, Canada’s Teens, 248; Smith and Denton, Soul Searching, 143-45; Mason and others, Gen Y, 92-93, 327.
6 Mason and others, Gen Y, 41.
7 Ibid., 80, 114.
8 Bibby and Posterski, Teen Trends, 56.
9 Bibby, Canada’s Teens, 91, 143-44; Hughes, Putting Life Together, 107; Arnett, Emerging Adulthood, 108-116.
10 Bibby and Posterski, 56.
11 Bibby, Canada’s Teens, 89-90, 185.
12 Ibid., 98.
relativistic seeds through the “hidden curriculum” of tolerance toward all lifestyles and guidance-free “values clarification” activities.14 Meanwhile, parents often support their lying and cheating children toward academic advancement, the end justifying almost any means.15

Adolescent morality appears to be built solely upon preference and pleasure: youth are adrift on the sea of postmodern amorality, lost without a moral compass that would point them to any standard beyond themselves.16 Such an evaluation is, however, incomplete. Most youth claim to follow their inner light of conscience to the right choice that balances their primary drive to “enjoy life” with their concern to bring “no harm” to others.17 Over 80 percent said they made moral decisions by doing what they believed to be right, while fewer than 10 percent simply did what brought happiness. If they are internally unsure of right from wrong in a particular situation, however, nearly 40 percent revert to whatever makes them happy, with 30 percent seeking parental advice, and only 8 percent following the Bible. Many youth do feel free to draw from the guidance of individuals and institutions in choosing their own position: 37 percent take notice of the moral views of those they respect.18 Furthermore, the myth of self-determination blinds youth to the fact that their “independently” formed views are in fact influenced by many sources—including parents, a latent cultural Christianity, friends, school, and the media—whether they like it or not.19

As such, the moral behaviour youth exhibit is usually more conservative than what they condone. In the last decade, even as sexual experimentation has increased, there has been a linear decrease of around 10 percent in the proportion of adolescents having sexual intercourse and terminating pregnancies. Additionally, while 7 percent of youth admit same-sex attraction, less than 4 percent of teens identify themselves as lesbian, gay, or bisexual.20 Even for supposed “relativists,” it is not a case of “anything goes”: fewer than 10 percent of Canadian adolescents approve of extra-marital sex, and rape is consistently condemned.21 Teens defend their right to choose, yet as they experience the physical and emotional fallout from “alternative lifestyles,” they often seek a better way.22 Youth cannot easily change, however, without upsetting their clique.

Chap Clark suggests—based upon a six-month ethnographic study and a corresponding literature review—that contemporary youth feel abandoned by adults. As a result, youth form especially close friendship “clusters.” Each group constructs its own ways of relating and a binding moral code: a “world beneath” adult awareness.23 Youth do have ethical standards—they recognize lying and cheating are wrong—but such concerns are a “second-tier ethic,” pragmatically relativized to protect oneself and one’s friends.24 Patricia Hersch concurs: youth are not “moral mutants,” rather, “they hold morality tightly to their immediate lives where they might have a glimmer of control.”25

14 Santrock, Adolescence, 417-19.
16 Mueller, Engaging, 89, 97.
18 Ibid., 105-6.
19 Smith and Denton, Soul Searching, 172-75, 233.
21 Bibby, Canada’s Teens, 91; Pipher, Reviving Ophelia, 205-6, 219.
22 Ibid., 218-19.
23 Chap Clark, Hurt: Inside the World of Today’s Teenagers (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 59, 98.
24 Ibid., 146-52.
Beyond the cluster’s code, and even while saying that most moral matters are merely opinion, only one in ten teenagers deny that “some things are right and other things are wrong.”\textsuperscript{26} The pretence of relativism is quickly discarded in the face of personal abuse, societal injustice, and terrorist attacks.\textsuperscript{27} Over two-thirds of youth are quick to condemn homophobia, racism, genocide, global poverty, environmental degradation, and the moral failings of clergy.\textsuperscript{28} Furthermore, youth are quick to commend the spirituality of individuals such as Nelson Mandela and Mohandas Gandhi, who suffered and persevered toward the wellbeing of others.\textsuperscript{29} A number of studies have noticed a recent but promising shift back toward world engagement and social concern, stemming from adolescent idealism.\textsuperscript{30} Accordingly, “few teenagers consistently sustain such radical relativism. ... What almost all U.S. teenagers—and adults—lack, however, are any tools or concepts or rationales by which to connect and integrate their radical relativistic individualist selves, on the one hand, with their commonsensical, evaluative, moralist selves on the other.”\textsuperscript{31}

Smith and Denton’s short interview and gentle but prodding questions had Steve, an agnostic, swing from protecting the poor one minute, to begrudgingly accepting an evolutionary rationale for their extermination the next: “I wish it didn’t have to be that way,” Steve laments. He has one eye on a moral compass of sorts, though no “compelling language” to ground his moral intuition.\textsuperscript{32} Mason, Singleton and Webber noted the apparent incongruity in which the “strongest moral value” they encountered among adolescents was the “taboo” against putting your values on others.\textsuperscript{33} Such irony is lost on most teens, further evidence of adolescent failure to integrate their relativistic and moralistic selves. Barna’s research, while confirming adolescent moral relativism, discovered that most sense morality is a critical issue upon which they haven’t spent sufficient time to formulate solid views: “Only one out of every six youths has a firm opinion on moral truth.”\textsuperscript{34}

How, then, should we respond? We may commend the general moral posture of youth: “Judge not, lest ye be judged” (Matthew 7:1). Yet, we must challenge the ensuing relativism—which makes any notion of sin (and consequently grace) nonsensical\textsuperscript{35}—as vacuous rhetoric, unliveable, and ultimately harmful. Tolerance, whilst important, is a particularly anaemic cardinal virtue. Furthermore, we must challenge the “fantasy of a risk-free existence” promulgated by popular culture.\textsuperscript{36} Whilst we must not alter God’s moral laws for public consumption, we must address the barrier of adolescent attitudes toward Christianity as an irrelevant system of rules, out of step with contemporary life. Only a compelling case for Christian morality will help “choosers’ come to accept external authority [such as Scripture] in beliefs and morals.”\textsuperscript{37} We help bridge this divide as we discuss with teens their moral beliefs, lovingly test their moral house for structural integrity, and then commend a more solid Scriptural foundation and life-giving ethic in walking Jesus’ way.

\textsuperscript{26} Bibby and Posterski, Teen Trends, 56.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 177-78.
\textsuperscript{28} Mason and others, Gen Y, 31, 78-80, 110-14, 210-14; Hughes, Putting Life Together, 96, 108, 114.
\textsuperscript{29} Hughes, 110.
\textsuperscript{30} For instance, Howe and Strauss, Millennials Rising, 216, 301-3.
\textsuperscript{31} Smith and Denton, Soul Searching, 144; emphasis mine.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 95-96, 101.
\textsuperscript{33} Mason and others, Gen Y, 323.
\textsuperscript{34} Barna, Real Teens, 63, 90-92.
\textsuperscript{35} Cornelius Plantinga Jr., Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Eerdmans, 1995), x-xiii, 199.
\textsuperscript{36} Peter L. Berger and Brigitte Berger, The War Over the Family: Capturing the Middle Ground (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 135.
\textsuperscript{37} Mason and others, Gen Y, 339.
4.2 “Morality: Who’s to Say?”: An Apologetics Talk

THE BIG IDEA

MORAL RELATIVISM IS A MAJOR FOUNDATION OF SECULAR HUMANIST THOUGHT WHICH CLAIMS THAT MORALS ARE RELATIVE TO PEOPLE OR CULTURES. THIS VIEW IS OFTEN PUT FORWARD AS MORALLY NEUTRAL AND TOLERANT, BUT ON CLOSER INSPECTION MORAL NEUTRALITY IS A MYTH AND COMPLETE TOLERANCE IS BOTH UNATTAINABLE AND UNDESIRABLE. CHRISTIANS NEED TO LEARN TACTICS FOR HOW TO DEAL WITH THESE FALSE IDEAS IN A GENTLE AND RESPECTFUL WAY IN ORDER TO REACH THOSE TO WHOM IT IS A STUMBLING BLOCK.

But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. (Romans 2:8-9)

See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. (Colossians 2:8)

We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ. (2 Corinthians 10:5)

Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life’. (John 14:6)

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see ... (Matthew 5:14-16a)

4.2.1: What Is Moral Relativism?

Moral Relativism is a major pillar of contemporary (largely secular humanist) thought. It is taught to our students. It has been passed on through philosophy and the mass media. It pervades our culture to such an extent that to simply utter a phrase that seems to contradict it earns a person the label of intolerant, arrogant, judgemental and bigoted. Unless we learn to deal with this idea, all talk of morality and Christian principles can be instantly shut down and ignored, thereby gutting the gospel that calls for repentance.

To highlight just how damaging this idea has been, you only have to look at the changes over the last 60 years. In 1940 in America, teachers were asked to identify the top problems in their schools. They responded with things such as talking out of turn, chewing gum, making noise, running in the hall, cutting in line, dress code infractions, and littering. In 1990 the same question was asked the problems were identified as drug and alcohol abuse, pregnancy, suicide, rape, robbery and assault.

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38 The following outline accompanies the apologetics talk by David Benson and Craig Sargent (2005c). See Moodle for the complete discussion guide, mp3, and powerpoint.
Whilst the problems may not be as drastic in Australia, anyone who teaches here would likely conclude that the problems in their schools are closer to the second set than the first.

To explain what moral relativism is, is simple. It is the belief that morality is a preference. Think about your favourite food. You may like it, but others may not. When you talk about how you like your favourite food, you are not talking about the food itself, but your own likes and dislikes. That is what moral relativism is like. It is about what you like.

Moral objectivism, however, is the belief that morality reflects an external, transcendent standard that is ultimately independent of society’s constructs. I.e., it is an objective truth. It exists whether we believe it or not, or want it or not. Although it is not material, objective moralis are as real as the chair you are sitting on.

But back to relativism. What happens if you don’t like the same food as someone else? Is there some way to can work out who is right or wrong, or has the better preferences? Should you be concerned? Do you think less of the person? Do you think the government should force people to like the same food? No! … Even asking these sorts of questions seems ridiculous.

This is just what people who believe in moral relativism say they think morals are like. They make comments like “If you don’t like abortion, fine, don’t have one.” “I personally disagree with abortion, but I wouldn’t force my views on others.” Whilst many people don’t even know they are using relativist arguments, having simply learned that these arguments shut people up, the real problem is, when you observe their actions, no one really believes it. Which is why no one is really neutral.

4.2.2: Can Anyone Be ‘Morally Neutral’?

How often do we hear the statement “You shouldn’t impose your beliefs on someone else”? Doesn’t it sound so reasonable? So neutral? So tolerant?

You can see this in the media. Even after ISIS has taken the world stage, many major media organisations have a policy not to use the word ‘terrorist’. Some even defend this by saying they have to be neutral and that one man’s freedom fighter is another man’s terrorist. That isn’t neutral; it is giving terrorists the same moral standing as someone fighting to free their country from a cruel dictator. It’s the view that we shouldn’t or can’t judge between terrorists and freedom fighters. People pretend to be neutral when really they are just trying to push their own views. And everyone has their own views, and they think those views are true … which is why they believe them and why neutrality is impossible.

A clear example of this happened in May 1994, the US Congress passed a law making it a federal offense to block an abortion clinic. Pamela Maraldo, then president of Planned Parenthood, commented to the press, “This law goes to show that no one can force their viewpoint on someone else.” The self-contradiction of her statement is obvious: The law enforces her viewpoint.

Another example is the Schapelle Corby case (2005), sadly mirrored in April 2017 with the detainment of 22 year old Cassie Sainsbury in Columbia, suspected of drug-trafficking. Everyone has a view about it. Everyone makes a judgement about how Indonesia, or Columbia, should act. Or consider the Bali bombings (2002, 2013), the Sydney Seige, and countless ISIS attacks in the last decade. How many people will defend the suicide bombers’ rights to define their own morality? So much for relativism! We expect our actions to be quietly tolerated, even encouraged, yet our moral outrage soon surfaces when we’re the ones affected.

39 This same political correctness has resulted in a reframing of ‘female genital mutilation’ as ‘genital cutting’, the New York times avoiding what they consider a “culturally loaded term”. While Fox News (2017) exaggerates this “bias alert”, the reframing of crimes in a morally relativistic direction is a disturbing sign.
4.2.3: The Three Flavours of Moral Relativism

<flavour one> Society does Relativism
This is the observation that different societies do different moralities. It is often used as a justification for the other 2 types of relativism. Proponents take the differences in moral opinions between cultures as support for relativism. They say that since each culture has a different morality, none is justified in claiming that its own brand of morality is correct.

However, society does relativism is a descriptive view, not a prescriptive view. That is, it merely describes that different societies seem to follow different moral rules. As such, it does not provide any justification to prescribe what societies should do, and so does not show that morality is relative. For example at one time some people thought the earth was flat and some thought it was round, but just because there were different views on the shape of the earth did not make the earth shapeless.

So, even granting that different societies seem to follow different moral rules (which is itself a highly debatable point), it does not demonstrate/prove that morality is relative. As such, it is incorrect to use this as the basis for the other two types of relativism.

<flavour two> Society says Relativism
This is the belief that society as a whole decides what morals they prefer for that society. Under this type of relativism you often hear people saying things like “It’s legal” to justify their behaviour (cf. drug use).

There are major problems with this view, because if it is society that decides what is wrong or right then we cannot criticise any society for wrongs, even Nazi Germany or Stalin’s Russia. Also, there can be no such thing as a moral reformer (e.g. Luther, Gandhi), and no such thing as moral ‘progress’ (i.e., Society can’t get ‘better’. So much for secular humanism and progress!). However, clearly people think that society’s morals improved with the abolition of slavery.

<flavour three> Individual says Relativism
This is the most commonly expressed form of relativism, where an individual’s preferences decide what is moral, but only for themselves. Essentially morality becomes simply what a person likes or dislikes, which is probably why it is so popular, as you get to do exactly what you like as it is ‘moral’.

However, with this view, there can be no grounds for criticising anyone’s morality and no way that you can say one person’s morality is better than the other. You cannot compare them at all. In fact, if you think about this view, the moral hero (i.e. the person who follows their own ideas of right and wrong without any thought of others’ views) is what psychologists call a socio-path.
4.2.4: What If Moral Relativism Were True? … The Fatal Flaws of Relativism

In order to be able to dialogue well with a moral relativist, we need to be able to recognize when they are not being consistent with their own position so that this inconsistency can be challenged. If someone is professing moral relativism, then any of the following actions are inconsistent.

a) Accusing others of wrongdoing, unfairness or injustice (e.g., racism can’t be labelled wrong)
b) Complaining about the problem of evil (which, if relativism is true is like saying “I don’t believe in God because of brussel sprouts”)
c) Praising or blaming in general (for nothing can essentially be considered good or bad)
d) Improving their or others’ morality (i.e., no moral reformers, no moral growth)
e) Trying to hold meaningful moral discussions (for you can’t distinguish between moral systems...much like you may like Cookies ‘n’ Cream and I like Rum ‘n’ Raisin, but we can’t discuss it other than to say we like it)
f) Using words like should, ought, good, bad in reference to others

g) Promoting the obligation of tolerance (because imposing an all encompassing moral standard of tolerance implies relativism is false, which is self refuting).

4.2.5: Shouldn’t We Tolerate Other Views?

Moral relativists often say since morals are relative and people have different views everyone should tolerate those different views. But note the contradiction. If moral relativism is true, then there can be no moral principle that everyone should follow because moral principles are decided by the individual. It’s merely a pragmatic guideline to help different, even polarised, people get along—nothing more or binding.

The true definition of tolerance is to treat all people with equal respect, but to treat ideas unequally. The definition pushed by moral relativists however is the complete reverse. ‘Tolerance’ today means treating all ideas as equally valid, but not necessarily people as equally worth of respect.

So what is going on? How is it that anytime a stand is taken for moral principles, a person is labelled as intolerant, mean and arrogant? Well, it’s a trick. Moral relativists have redefined what tolerance means in order to allow more permissive behaviours, and to disallow anyone from objecting.

4.2.6: Responding to Relativism: What I Learned from TV

Maybe, like us, you deeply desire to lead those you care for away from harmful beliefs, and instead lead them toward Christ. The thought of barging into the conversation with “repent or perish” doesn’t quite cut it, however, and you’re worried they’ll ask tough questions you just can’t answer. How then to reply? Welcome to the Columbo tactic (video here), designed by philosopher Greg Koukl (www.str.org; cf. Koukl 2009 in Module 4), modelled off 70s icon Peter Falk. The best offence is often a strong defence, and this strategy requires you to know little, yet allows you to remain in the driver’s seat through strategic questioning, opening up a rewarding dialogue that may even make obvious to your friend any errors in their beliefs. (Cf. Module 4, summarised below.)
Q1) **What?** E.g. “What do you mean by that?”
.duration
Clarify what they have said ... the more questions the merrier!

Q2) **Why?** E.g. “Why do you believe that?” or “How did you come to that conclusion?”
.duration
Reversing the burden of proof is essential—don’t accept the hot potato back!

Q3) **What’s wrong?** Ask yourself “What’s wrong in the logic?” ([yourlogicalfallacyis.com](http://yourlogicalfallacyis.com))
.duration
Construct questions to help lead them to the logical flaws and re-examine their beliefs
.duration
Pray for openness, and speak humbly whatever God gives you to say (Luke 21:14-15)

### 4.2.7: **SO, WHO ARE WE TO SAY?**

Who are we to say? Can we talk about morality when it comes to abortion? Sex outside of marriage? Pornography? Drug use? Who are we to say? *We are citizens in a democratic society with a good understanding of logic and reasoning who all have a say in how our country should be governed and ordered. That is who we are.* So who are they to say who are we to say?

The challenge for a Christian is to

1) Always remember that as Christians, our first calling is the Great Commission;
2) Don’t be scared of living out this commission because of what people say;
3) Engage with, rather than escape culture. Read & learn how to respond, sharpening skills with interaction (get used to asking questions on belief);
4) Be gracious and truthful. Our aim should not be to win arguments but to help people to get past irrational ideas that are a barrier to their salvation;
5) Be a thermostat, not a thermometer. Live out and speak biblical ideals in God’s power—
   the most compelling witness which cannot be contradicted (Luke 21:15).

**Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.** *(Colossians 4:5-6)*

Imagine you were on a TV show like “The Project”, on a mixed panel discussing premarital sex. You are asked about the Christian view, after which point another panellist shoots back “You are so judgmental and intolerant. Let them do what they want. Anyway, who are you to say what is right and what is wrong?” ... How would you respond?
4.3 Ethics Role Plays: Entering the Other’s Head Space

Class Activity 11.5—Preparation, Dialogue, Debrief (25 mins)

In this activity you’ll explore one of four ethical quandaries of the 21st Century. The aim is to empathetically enter your neighbour’s head space. Then, you’ll work through what a biblical position could be, composing a 30 second sound-bite appropriate as a response in this high-pressure context.

**<Step 1>** Choose a topic & read through the relevant scenario below in your small group of 4-5 students.

**<Step 2>** Remembering the meta-apologetic method from Module 2, come up with 3 key points that capture the hopes and fears common to your interlocutor. What terms and concepts must be clarified for a productive dialogue to ensue? And what admissions must you make to begin the dialogue in grace?

**<Step 3>** Spend 7 minutes as a group outlining the key points to make in your response. What is a biblical position that leads towards the gospel?

**<Step 4>** Spend 5 minutes composing a 30 second (70 word) sound-bite to winsomely make a substantial point in response to the accusations of your differently believing neighbour. Share and debrief as a class.

**Abortion (Group 1)**

In your genetics and human physiology class, a student praises modern medical tests allowing early detection of foetal defects. The lecturer agrees, stating that abortions, in these circumstances, prevent unnecessary suffering of both mother and child, additionally saving our country billions of dollars in health care that would be outlier over the course of one’s life if the pregnancy continued.

**Freedom of Speech, Religious Pluralism & Tolerance (Group 2)**

In your Studies in Religion course, the current turmoil connected with religiously-motivated terrorist activities (particularly those carried out by ‘Islamic Fundamentalists/Extremists’) is discussed. One student expresses their frustration over why religious tension exists at all, as “all religions are different paths to the same God, virtually identical at their core.” The lecturer states that fundamentalism (meaning passionate religious commitment based on faith), whether it be Islamic, Christian, or otherwise, is always harmful for society. In a multicultural and religiously plural society such as ours, tolerance is a must. As such, laws such as those passed in Victoria (2001 religious vilification/hate laws), which suppress critical comment being made on any belief system, are a good thing for society. Outward expression of one’s religious beliefs should be removed from the public sphere. The class nods approvingly.

**Legalising Drug-Use (Group 3)**

As you enter University for another day’s lectures, you are held up by a throng of people protesting over megaphones. They are contesting our State’s laws that prohibit the use of both ‘soft’ (marijuana) and ‘hard’ drugs (ecstasy, heroin etc.). They claim that the Government has no right to impose their standards on them, that soft drugs are not harmful, whilst injection rooms should be provided for hard drugs to clean up the black-market and keep those who choose to use drugs safe. They hold up a picture of Uni-student who recently died of a drug-overdose, blaming the Government as this was avoidable if injection rooms were provided. Christian “conservatives” are blamed for blocking progress toward safer drug-use.

**Sexuality—both gay & straight (Group 4)**

Your sociology lecturer isn’t beating around the bush today: “Bigoted. Homophobic. Prudish. There are no other words to describe those who continue to discriminate against homosexuals in the 21st Century. How anyone can condemn what is genetically determined and not even the other’s choice is beyond me. Some would have us return to the dark ages where sex was considered a sin, though if you must do it, keep it safe within marriage. With the enlightenment we’ve learned that humans are simply highly evolved animals, nothing more, nothing less. Such ‘spiritual’ superstition has no place in today’s society. It should be entirely up to the individual to determine what’s right and wrong for them, for as we’ve established, one man’s meat is another man’s poison. Who are they to impose their standards on others, even seeking to force morality through law?” The lecturer asks if anyone has the courage to disagree.
Reflection Activity 11.3 – Distance Students

In place of class discussion, online/distance students are required to complete a series of reflections—four per week. For each reflection activity/question, journal at least 30 (meaningful!) words, and tick off the related boxes in the middle of the Unit Guide.

# 11.3 Based on Class Activity 11.5 above, choose one of the four scenarios (Abortion; Freedom of Speech, Religious Pluralism & Tolerance; Legalising Drug-Use; Sexuality—both gay & straight), and write a 30 second sound-bite reflecting ideally how you would like to respond to the strongest case made by a person objecting to Christian morality.

4.4 How ‘Relative’ Are Different Ethical Absolutes? Lewis and the Tao

A key pillar of the moral relativist argument is that what is ‘objectively’ right and wrong greatly differs from culture to culture. Thus, the relativist concludes, “one’s man’s [sic] meat is another man’s poison.”

Yet, perhaps the premise shouldn’t be so quickly granted. For instance, it may be true that for a Hindu a ‘cow’ mustn’t be killed because it is sacred, while for the average Westerner, a ‘cow’ is an essential ingredient in one’s hamburger. An apparent conflict? But look deeper for the meaning of each ethic. For the Hindu, the cow represents the highest reincarnation of what was a human. It could be your grandma. Thus, for both the East Indian and the Westerner, it is always wrong to murder and eat your grandma.

Underlying each system is a deeper belief that ‘murder’ of another human is wrong.

In his appendix to The Abolition of Man (viewable here, with excellent article here), C. S. Lewis uses “the Tao” as shorthand to describe "the doctrine of objective value, the belief that certain attitudes are really true, and others really false, to the kind of thing the universe is and the kind of things we are." Lewis cites examples from different societies and ages to demonstrate the universality of certain human truths. Following is the full text of the first law to give you a flavour of his analysis.

"The following illustrations of the Natural Law are collected from such sources as come readily to the hand of one who is not a professional historian. The list makes no pretence of completeness. It will be noted that writers such as Locke and Hooker, who wrote within the Christian tradition, are quoted side by side with the New Testament. This would, of course, be absurd if I were trying to collect independent testimonies to the Tao. But (1) I am not trying to prove its validity by the argument from common consent. Its validity cannot be deduced. For those who do not perceive its rationality, even universal consent could not prove it. (2) The idea of collecting independent testimonies presupposes that ‘civilizations’ have arisen in the world independently of one another; or even that humanity has had several independent emergences on this planet. The biology and anthropology involved in such an assumption are extremely doubtful. It is by no means certain that there has ever (in the sense required) been more than one civilization in all history. It is at least arguable that every civilization we find has been derived from another civilization and, in the last resort, from a single centre—‘carried’ like an infectious disease or like the Apostolical succession."

I. The Law of General Beneficence
II. The Law of Special Beneficence
III. Duties to Parents, Elders, Ancestors
IV. Duties to Children and Posterity
V. The Law of Justice
VI. The Law of Good Faith and Veracity
VII. The Law of Mercy
VIII. The Law of Magnanimity
[Here is an example of his citations in support of the first Law.]

I. The Law of General Beneficence

(A) Negative

- "Do not murder." (Ancient Jewish. Exodus xx. 13.)
- "Terrify not men or God will terrify thee." (Ancient Egyptian. Precepts of Ptahhetep. H. R. Hall, Ancient History of Near East, p.133 n.)
- "In Nastrond (= Hell) I saw . . . murderers." (Old Norse. Volospá 38, 39.)
- "I have not brought misery upon my fellows. I have not made the beginning of very day laborious in the sight of him who worked for me." (Ancient Egyptian. Confession of a Righteous Soul. ERE v. 478)
- "I have not been grasping." (Ancient Egyptian. Ibid.)
- "Who meditates oppression, his dwelling is overturned." (Babylonian. Hymn to Samas. ERE v. 455.)
- "He who is cruel and calumnious has the character of a cat." (Hindu. Laws of Manu. Janet, Histoire de la Science Politique, vol. i, p. 6.)
- "Slander not." (Babylonian. Hymn to Samas. ERE v.445.)
- "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour." (Ancient Jewish. Exodus xx. 16.)
- "Utter not a word by which anyone could be wounded." (Hindu. Janet, p.7.)
- "Has he...driven an honest man from his family? Broken up a well cemented clan? (Babylonian. List of Sins from incantation tablets. ERE v. 466.)
- "I have not caused hunger. I have not caused weeping." (Ancient Egyptian. ERE v.478.)
- "Never do to others what you would not like them to do you." (Ancient Chinese. Analects of Confucius, trans. A. Waley, xv.23; cf. Xii. 2.)
- "Thou shalt not hate thy brother in they heart." (Ancient Jewish. Leviticus xix. 17.)
- "He whose heart is in the smallest degree set upon goodness will dislike no one." (Ancient Chinese. Analects, iv. 4.)

(A) Positive

- "Nature urges that a man should wish human society to exist and should wish to enter it." (Roman. Cicero, De Officiis, I. lv.)
- "By the fundamental Law of Nature Man [is] to be preserved as much as possible." (Locke, Treatises of Civil Govt. ii. 3.)
- "When the people have multiplied, what next should be done for them? The Master said, Enrich them. Jan Ch’iu said, When one has enriched them, what next should be done for them? The Master said, Instruct them." (Ancient Chinese. Analects, xiii 9.)
- "Speak kindness...show good will." (Babylonian. Hymn to Samas. ERE v. 445.)
- "Men were brought into existence for the sake of men that they might do one another good." (Roman. Cicero, De Off. I. VII.)
- "Man is man’s delight." (Old Norse. Hávamál 47.)
- "He who is asked for alms should always give." (Hindu. Janet, i. 7.)
- "What good man regards any misfortune as no concern of his?" (Roman. Juvenal, xv. 140.)
- "I am a man: nothing human is alien to me." (roman. Terence, Heaut. Tim.)
- "Love thy neighbour as thyself." (Ancient Jewish. Leviticus xix 18.)
- "Love the stranger as thyself." (Ancient Jewish. Ibid. 33, 34)
- "Do to men what you wish men to do to you." (Christian. Matt. Vii. 12.)
5. “EVERYTHING’S BENT”: WORKSHOP + Q&A ON SAME-SEX MARRIAGE

5.1 ‘Homophobia’ Today

While working on my Masters Thesis, “The Thinking Teen” (Benson 2009), I spent a lot of time with my head in adolescent and emerging adult sociological data. It was striking how centrally sexuality featured in young people’s attitudes to Christianity generally, and the Bible in particular.

Consider, for instance, these observations and case-studies from Australian Generation Y research:

*Michael is an example of the prevalent SECULAR Spirituality type (p. 28ff.):*

Michael is a 23 year old education graduate who is gay: “Michael is what we describe in later chapters as a Secular—someone who eschews religious and spiritual beliefs and follows a secular path in life.” ... “His spirituality now is decidedly non-religious. 'I'm proud to say I have no religion, I don't believe in them, I don't affiliate with the church. I guess it’s pushed me away ... I feel very strongly about homosexual rights, I don’t identify as heterosexual myself.'

Asked whether he ‘draws upon the ideas of a particular religion or philosophy,’ Michael responds: ‘I do—negatively—it informs how I think about things, but in the negative. I see Christianity really negatively because of its extreme stance on things like homosexual marriages, abortion, premarital sex. Things that I think are OK, churches that I have seen on TV seem to condemn. So in that sense I totally distance myself from them. ... I guess what it is that turns me off most about it is Christian people who I talk to. You know, people who try and harass you about their faith, and also media portrayals of it.’

Michael strongly affirms personal autonomy, especially in the area of sexuality, and he was angry and defiant when he described in the interview what he sees as the moralism of the churches.”

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40 Note that Generation Y are people born between 1981-1994. They were teenagers at the time of my project (2009). This case study and commentary comes from Australia’s most comprehensive study of adolescent spirituality: Michael Mason, Andrew Singleton, and Ruth Webber, The Spirit of Generation Y: Young People’s Spirituality in a Changing Australia (Mulgrave, Australia: John Garratt Publishing, 2007), pp. 28ff., 78ff., 110ff.
“48% of Gen Y indicated that they did not identify with any religion or denomination” ... (currently that is) ... nearly all of those raised this way remained so, but the group grew by about 20% (1/5) of the other religious groups (p. 78).

“In fact, 20% of those raised as Christian have already, before reaching the age of 25, rejected membership of any church. In our lengthier interviews, we spoke to many of these. In most cases, the link to church was never very strong; there was little involvement with the church on the part of either their parents or themselves.”

The primary reason raised why they were no longer associated with their religion/denomination was to do with issues with the church:
Church failings (68/138 interviewed on phone who offered reasons)
Don’t accept moral teachings (103/138)
Don’t accept beliefs (69/138)

“The moral teaching most often objected to was the church’s attitude to homosexuality.”

“Teachings about homosexuality were also the major reason, across all categories, young people gave for not identifying with a religion. Other notable moral teachings people disliked included the church’s attitude to women, especially the ordination of women, rules about sex before marriage and the prohibition of abortion” (p. 80). ... “The negative publicity about sexual abuse by church personnel was also noted by many participants” (p. 110).

One reason is the exclusion of gays and people with differences in sexuality; women can’t be priests and priests can’t marry. And they're against pre-marital sex or remarriage after divorce.” (This antagonism was especially directed at Catholics re: sexual ethics [abortion, sex before marriage, contraception, homosexuality, and role of women].)

*In general, “The most prominent reasons stated in these very detailed accounts were the following:

• Disagreement with church moral teaching, especially on issues of sexual ethics such as homosexuality, contraception, and premarital intercourse; both participants and researchers described this as the 'irrelevance' of the church to modern life;

• Dissatisfaction with church leadership at many levels: problems mentioned included especially sexual abuse, authoritarianism, discrimination against women, poor homilies, unenlightened policies; a perceived lack of tolerance; also problems with particular priests” (p. 114).

These findings mirror the Olive Tree Media commissioned “Australian Communities Report” (2011) for the Australian population as a whole (20% of non-Christians who are “open to change” say that the church’s attitude to homosexuality is their biggest belief blocker), and studies of emerging adults in the USA (Kinnamon and Lyons 2007, 97-119; Kinnamon with Hawkins 2011, 149-167; these studies, respectively, found that young people outside the church consistently characterised [perhaps caricatured] Christians as “anti-homosexual” and “repressive”, factoring into the exodus of younger generations from active belief to becoming “religious nones”).

So, when it comes to the divisive issue of Same-Sex Marriage (SSM), and surrounding questions of fluid and non-binary gender identity espoused by programs such as “Safe Schools”, how might we respond?

In this Module’s final section, based on the “Everything’s Bent: Rethinking ‘Normal’” article (Benson 2012a [ I and II]) and discussion guide (Benson 2013), we will informally workshop and Q&A toward a constructive stance in a polarised society. That is, like Module 10, we’ll reframe apologetics as public theology seeking shalom in the secular city.
Resource 11.3: (Homo)Sexuality and Gender Identity

Given the paucity of reputable information in these debates—each side grabbing studies of questionable integrity and relevance to make their pre-determined point—I’ve pieced together a treasure-trove of excellent sources, grouped in six categories: I. Changing societal attitudes outside and within the church to homosexuality; II. An overarching theology of sexuality; III. A narrower theology of homosexuality; IV. Broad and integrative arguments (sociological, philosophical, physiological) on homosexuality; V. A collection of popular apologetic responses, mostly modelling constructive ways forward; VI. Related research and responses on Gender Dysphoria, Sexual Identity, and ‘Safe Schools’.

I. CHANGING ATTITUDES:

See Neilsen (2017) for a record of parliamentary proceedings on the agenda of Same-Sex Marriage (SSM). Societal attitudes have radically changed toward homosexuality and SSM in the last 30 years. For just how much, read blogs/articles from an antagonistic (i.e., against Christianity) perspective such as by Adamczyk (2017), the ABC Q&A episode on “Peace, Ideology and Free Speech” (2015; it features the first openly Gay Bishop, Gene Robinson), the SBS programme “Gay Marriage” (2013), Johnson (2015), Jones (2015 “What Really Lies Behind Conservative Opposition to Same-Sex Marriage?”; 2016 “Breaking News: Marriage Has Very Little to Do With Religion [and Vice Versa]”), and van Mill (2015 “Same-Sex Marriage Should Not Be a Matter for a Conscience Vote”). For Christian reporting of the youth and young adult exodus of believers from church, significantly associated with attitudes toward (homo)sexuality, see Kinnamon and Lyons (2007) and Kinnamon with Hawkins (2011), as well as Olive Tree Media’s “Australian Communities Report” (2011) and Mason et al (2008).

Granted, conservative bodies such as the Queensland Baptists (2015) can still rally the troops to offer a unified “Position Statement on Sexuality and Marriage” for its leaders. And yet, this consensus in many evangelical quarters is fracturing. In recent years, a string of high profile and noteworthy church leaders and ethicists have reversed their position, now supporting the full incorporation of LGBTIQ+ people within the church, generally provided they hold to a monogamous covenantal relationship with their partner (e.g., Gushee 2014; Brownson 2013; Chalke 2013; Robinson 2013; Rogers 2009). Much of this is well motivated, based upon previous exegetical and pastoral failures of the church, a concern to keep the gospel rather than political wranglings central in our cultural engagement, and personal exposure to gut-wrenching stories of “gay Christians” who are stuck in limbo, with no meaningful place in Christian community (e.g., Ali 2016; “LGBTQ” Liturgists Podcast 2015; Roberts 2012; and “Sexuality, the Bible, and Ministry” Homebrewed Christianity Clobbercast 2016). Even so, most evangelicals—myself included (Benson 2012b)—find these attempts to square the Bible with a positive stance on homosexuality an inconsistent revisionism driven by social agendas that relativise the orthodox Christian message (Guthrie 2015; Stackhouse 2015).

With this collision of perspectives, unsurprisingly there has been an increase in hard-edged “debates” (typically shouting matches where the arguments pass by each other with no common ground). See, for instance, Penny Wong vs. Cory Bernardi (2015), former Australian Christian Lobby [ACL] head Jim Wallace on the 7PM Project (2011 “Aussie Conservatives Rally Against Gay Marriage”) and Channel 7’s Sunrise show (“Sunrise: Same Sex Showdown”), alongside a range of “Christians on Same-Sex Marriage” here. Moving from the public square to the academic conference room at a theological college near you, debates between Christians holding polar perspectives have also raged (e.g., Via and Gagnon 2003; Sprinkle, Loader, DeFranza, Hill, and Holmes 2016).

All said and done, then, the rapidly changing views among secular/pluralist culture and within our churches has made most leaders (perhaps rightly) cautious to speak. As John Stackhouse notes, “Before You Talk or Write about Homosexuality ...” (2014), there are at least 13 considerations and things you should know, lest you speak foolishly out of turn and compromise your gospel witness.
II. THEOLOGY OF SEXUALITY:
Before we can answer questions on a biblical response to SSM and the normalising of homosexual relationships in society, we must answer: “what is sex for?” What are relationships and human union for, within God’s economy and our mission of shalom and salvation in the world? Again, we must move beyond static commands, to get a sense of how the biblical narrative flows: the creation of good structures, the fall into idolatry and dis-order, and the healing that comes through redemption, bought by Christ.

For some of the best books on the purpose/meaning of sex and human union, see Budziszewski (2014), Grant (2015), Hollinger (2015), Messmore (2017), and a fantastic animation of C. S. Lewis’s talk “On ‘Sexual’ Morality”, from Book 3 Ch. 5 of Mere Christianity (2013). For a theology attentive to physiology/biology, see Kamal Weerakoon’s Zadok Paper, “Towards an Evangelical Sexual Anthropology and Ethic” (2015, 1-15). Additionally, the Centre for Christian Apologetics, Scholarship and Education (CASE) provides some excellent Australian reflection in Vol. 12 of their Case Quarterly journal, on the theme of “Family Foundations” (2007). While I differ with Gushee (2014) on his stance regarding monogamous covenantal Same-Sex unions fulfilling all that God requires—complementarity seems intrinsic and essential, rather than incidental, in the narrative—his work with Stassen on Kingdom Ethics applied to Gender Identity and Sexual Ethics is a balanced guide, exploring both creational good and idolatrous distortion of sexuality (Gushee and Stassen 2016, 234-269).

III. THEOLOGY OF HOMOSEXUALITY:

IV. INTEGRATIVE ARGUMENTS:
Multi-faceted questions require integrated answers. The following sources fuse theology, ethics, philosophy, physiology, and sociology, in suggesting a response to this “wicked problem” so resistant to resolution (cf. Stackhouse 2014, “Before You Talk or Write About Homosexuality”).

Taking more of a physiological and psychological bent, though still bringing this into conversation with theology and philosophy, see the incredibly insightful collection of essays as part of Morling College’s *The Gender Conversation* symposium, Part VII on “Gender, Biology and Identity” (Murphy and Starling 2016, 315-363). One of the contributors, sexologist Patricia Weerakoon, is ably interviewed by Simon Smart and the team at CPX [Centre for Public Christianity] on the topic, “Same-Sex: Homophobia and the Church” (2011). See also the work of internationally renowned expert, Professor of Clinical Psychology and the head of the Institute for the Study of Sexual Identity [ISSI], Mark Yarhouse. His book, *Homosexuality and the Christian: A Guide for Parents, Pastors, and Friends* (2010, 11-14, 199-221) is an excellent start.

A key in responding to “wicked problems” is to first sit with the people most affected and implicated by the issue and your reply—being LGBTIQ+ people, not simply an abstraction of what “they” think, speaking on their behalf—and patiently hearing their stories. This spirit of compassion, in continuity with the early church’s call to “Embrace the Excluded”, is modelled by developmental/educational psychologist Rebecca Yin Foo (2017; manuscript and mp3) in her ReEvangelise talk at Malyon. Raising challenging stories that lead the authors to accept gay relationships, listen to The Liturgists “LGBTQ” podcast (2015). On the orthodox side, listen to Min Soo Kang’s testimony “Uncovered: An Honest Look at Love & Sexuality” (2016), read Wesley Hill’s story in *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality* (2016), and dwell with Rich Nathan as he reframes our homosexual neighbours in his book, *Who Is My Enemy? Welcoming People the Church Rejects* (2002, 13-205). Likewise, see Chad Thompson’s *Loving Homosexuals as Jesus Would* (2004).

My single favourite source combining personal stories with solid biblical and secular scholarship is Preston Sprinkle, *People to Be Loved: Why Homosexuality Is Not Just an Issue* (2015, 13-25, 121-126, 177-189). Given his exceptional research, I have scanned the full end-notes if you want to go deeper.

V. POPULAR APOLOGETIC RESPONSES:
How, then, to respond?

Raising significant issues, though more within a “culture wars” conservative frame, see Faust (2016), “Aussie Conservatives Rally Against Gay Marriage” (2011—see associated interviews in reference list), and the various articles tagged “Gay Marriage” by the Australian Christian Lobby online here. David Phillips (2006), head of the Festival of Light, offers a position paper on “The Status of Marital Status”, taking a firm line worth considering, whatever final approach you prefer. Similarly, the Queensland Baptists (2015) have outlined their position as applies to QB Leaders (not necessarily mandated for congregants), serving in-house wisdom and wider cultural commentary if pressed.

As outlined in Module 10, my preferred approach is to ask good questions, listen well, and form a meaningful dialogue in which apologetics is reframed as public theology for pluralistic *shalom*. In this, I want the gospel to be heard as truly good and gracious news, meaningful dialogue in which apologetics is reframed as public theology for pluralistic *shalom*.


If all of this is *way* too much, then start with Dan Paterson’s booklet “Gospel, Culture, Homosexuality: A Guide for Christians” (2014), watch the CPX video where Simon Smart Interviews John Dickson on “Gay Marriage” (2012), and see how seasoned public Christian intellectuals and apologists tackle tricky questions labelling them bigots and demanding that the church stay out of sexual politics: Tim Keller here; Ravi Zacharias here; Ryan Anderson here and here. The single best apologetic source bringing all of this together is Paul Copan (2008) in his book, When God Goes to Starbucks: A Guide to Everyday Apologetics. See the Moodle recommended reading for Chapters 8-10: “Does the Bible Condemn Loving, Committed Homosexual Relationships?” (77-93), “Aren’t People Born Gay?” (94-107), and “What’s Wrong with Gay Marriage?” (108-118).

VI. GENDER DYSPHORIA, SEXUAL IDENTITY, AND ‘SAFE SCHOOLS’:
Lucky last, we now turn out attention to some of the many side-issues emerging politically, and the even more recent vexed question of gender dysphoria and sexual identity, arguably replacing homosexuality (which is seen as already settled in the affirmative) as the hot-button issue for Christians to squarely face:

See here for the official “Safe Schools Coalition” website, here for the Australian Government framing of this programme, here for The Conversation’s (i.e., Australian Universities collective blog site for “academic rigour, journalistic flair”) positive pieces supporting Safe Schools including and championing LGBTIQ+ diversity (simultaneously downplaying its “radical gender theory” and outspoken Marxist views of founder, Roz Ward), and here for a sample news-beat up depicting Former Prime Minister John Howard as a confused bigot for resisting Safe Schools (Stott 2016). Standing against this normalisation of non-binary gender identity, see the Australian Christian Lobby’s sites here and here, and Stephen McAlpine’s blog, “Safe Schools No Match for Safe Churches” (2016). Concerning the subsequent backlash against Safe Schools in the general public, see Tomasin (2016).

Touching on Safe Schools, but mostly focused on sexual identity, see my dialogue with an agnostic about a Christian perspective on “Trans-Sexuality and Gender Dysphoria” (Benson 2016). In this, I draw heavily on the work of Mark Yarhouse. In particular, I’m summarising his popular piece on “Understanding Gender Dysphoria” (Yarhouse 2015), his earlier book Sexual Identity: A Guide to Living in the Time Between the Times (Yarhouse 2003, 3-33), and perhaps his best source of all bringing this mega-resource box to a close, his chapters on “Sexuality in Theological Perspective” and “Gender Dysphoria”, in his book with Erica Tan, Sexuality and Sex Therapy: A Comprehensive Christian Appraisal (2014, 13-43 and 318-339, respectively).
5.2 Wicked Problems, Contested Definitions, Crucial Questions

According to the Austin Centre For Design (AC4D), a **wicked problem** is:

*a social or cultural problem that is difficult or impossible to solve for as many as four reasons: incomplete or contradictory knowledge, the number of people and opinions involved, the large economic burden, and the interconnected nature of these problems with other problems.*

“Wicked” here denotes “resistance to resolution, rather than evil”. And whatever you think of Same-Sex Marriage (SSM) and Homosexuality, a **wicked problem** it most definitely is.

Take this terse exchange between myself and a pro-Safe Schools advocate, both responding to Stott’s (2016) painting of John Howard as a “bigot” for not supporting this programme. *Language Warning*

+++ Will McRostie · Small Town Transformations Administrator at Regional Arts Victoria

I really wish reporters would pull these people up on their language. Nobody is at risk of being “persecuted”, they are at risk of being criticised. Whether bigots conflate the two because they’ve never been criticised before is their problem. It’s this subtle inflation of the stakes that gives their whinging power.

Like · Reply · 23 · 28 February 2016 09:44

Dave Benson · Founder, Director at Christ’s Pieces

You raise a fair point: ‘persecution’ is splashed around too freely. But, at the same time, your own labelling of anyone who opposes same sex marriage as a ’bigot’ is itself unhelpful and blatantly wrong. A ‘bigot’, according to the Cambridge Dictionary of English, is: “a person who has strong, unreasonable beliefs and who does not like other people who have different beliefs or a different way of life.” i.e. someone who discriminates without a rational basis, out of pure intolerance of, or hatred for, another group.

You may not agree with the rationale of those defending purely heterosexual marriage, but to claim that there is no rational basis to their claims is ignorant. To suggest that they hate those holding a different position does not logically follow. Thus, your labelling is to demonstrate bigotry, rather than work toward a constructive debate, irrespective of what position you hold. ...both 'sides' need to clean up their rhetoric, lest we continue to fragment any type of common ground and common good in our rapidly polarising country.

Like · Reply · 22 hrs · Edited

+++ Will McRostie · Small Town Transformations Administrator at Regional Arts Victoria

Dave Benson I don’t recognise any argument against marriage equality as rational or reasonable. What would the outcome of your “constructive debate” be? What concessions would you make? Because I am here for full legal equality for my relationship and nothing less. You are here to deny me that. There is no common ground.

This whole “tone” argument is a bullshit tactic of people like yourself who are determined to prolong this debate for as long as possible while you continue to enjoy disproportionate privilege, power and influence. Get out of the way and take your archaic, damaging beliefs to the fringe where they belong.

Like · Reply · 22 hrs

+++
Welcome to the public square!!

Unfortunately, it doesn’t get much happier even on a moderated morning TV show like Channel 7’s Sunrise.

(See youtube [here](#), or permanent download [here](#).)

Everything is up for debate: definitions, data, directives ... we barely even agree on the questions.

Even if it is a case of “fools rush in”, this issue is pressing and polarising. At least some Christians must be equipped to wisely and winsomely speak into this space, representing a righteous view.

Even so, John G. Stackhouse, Jr., in his 2014 blog (online [here](#)), suggests a litany of considerations “Before You Talk or Write About Homosexuality”:

+++ A few friendly tips, if I may, for those Christian leaders, preachers, professors, pundits, activists, and anyone else who wants to participate in our culture’s ongoing discussion of homosexuality, whether same-sex marriage, bullying in schools, the rights of religious institutions or individuals to discriminate on the basis of their traditions, and so on:

• Do your homework: You can’t plausibly discuss matters from a serious Christian point of view—or even just about Christian views you don’t share—unless you’ve actually studied the main text of the Christian religion, the Bible. No more quoting just a few choice verses on this side or that. Either study the whole Bible’s teaching on sexuality, or keep quiet. Otherwise, you’re really just reasoning from your own intuitions and pasting on a few Bible verses as ornaments...or firing them as ammunition.

• Same with the legal and political situations. Don’t just refer vaguely to “the Charter” or “the Bill of Rights” or this or that piece of legislation, but actually find out what is and isn’t legal, what is affirmed and what is merely tolerated, and what is being proposed and what isn’t.
• Situate anything you say about homosexuality within the context of sexuality in general. If you’re discussing the ethics of homosexuality, make sure you’re discussing them in the context of a comprehensive sexual ethic. If you’re discussing homosexuality and church life, make sure you’re discussing it in terms of all the church needs to say and do about sexuality. If you’re considering homosexuality and public policy, make sure you’re considering all of sexuality and public policy, not just the parts dealing with one, small sector of the population.

• Make clear that you appreciate that everyone faces sexual challenges. Sex is so deeply connected with matters of identity, self-esteem, happiness, social relations, and more that no one could plausibly claim to be perfectly healthy in this regard. So always talk about homosexuality as just one aspect of universal aspirations, struggles, successes, frustrations, joys, dysfunctions, delights, and sorrows in the sexual sector of life.

• Keep matters in proportion. Make sure heterosexuality, and particularly heterosexual misbehaviour, comes in for its proportionate share of attention. Make clear why homosexual behaviour is treated so seriously in Scripture…and then deal with the fact that the Church has rarely been as concerned as it ought to be about all the those things listed [such as divorce and abuse] alongside homosexual actions.

• Acknowledge ambiguity. Don’t be more clear, or categorical, or comprehensive than the Bible is. In fact, it’s always a good rule not to try to be more holy or strict than God.

• Tell the hard truths. Tell them lovingly, but tell them. Avoid the easy yeses and noes, but don’t avoid the hard yeses and noes. Otherwise, we’re just “making nice” and not seriously addressing serious issues.

• Make sure those hard yeses and noes include matters of love as well as truth, matters of compassion alongside matters of correctness, matters of health alongside matters of happiness, matters of forbearance as well as matters of faithfulness, and matters of discipline alongside matters of welcome.

• Know some people who identify as homosexual or LGBTQ+ or whatever, and know how things look and sound and feel from their (various) points of view. Don’t settle for generalizations about “the homosexual community” (as if there is one and they meet down at the “homosexual lodge” on Thursday nights). Then keep considering how what you’re about to write or say is going to be heard by your homosexual friends or neighbours or family members. You might decide not to say it. You might still say it, but it won’t sound the same coming from someone who is truly connected personally with the issues in this way. We need to know, “Do you see? And do you care?”

• Watch your language. Use terms carefully and define them. “Homosexuality,” “homosexual,” and the like are terms of relatively recent coinage, and those who want to offer leadership in these debates had better know something of the history and nature of this terminological thicket. Likewise, keep clear the differences among words such as “orientation,” “identity,” “desire,” and “action,” and understand at least something of the contests over their definitions and relationships. Certain activists, and both “pro” and “con,” prefer to blur these terms together as if they simply have to come as a package, and it will be both psychologically and politically helpful to keep them properly distinct. (I, for example, have particular desires of a particular orientation, but how I then act in regard to those desires reflecting that orientation is open for ethical consideration: I, and the Christian tradition generally, do not claim that I am entitled to act sexually simply on the basis of my sincerely held desires and authentic orientation. They are not necessarily a package.)

• Beware the cheap or loaded analogies. Sexual behaviour just isn’t the same as being a woman, or having an ethnic identity, or belonging to a particular religion. Yes, in some ways some of the matters involved are matters of civil rights on the same plane as women’s suffrage, say, or the just treatment of formerly oppressed ethnic groups. Yes, in some ways the matters involved are matters of individual or corporate freedom, as is the case with religious persons or communities. But in some ways choosing with whom you have sex just isn’t the same as being a woman or being black or belonging to a religion. So if you’re not just trying to score points but actually pursue the truth, be careful about what is similar and what is different and avoid the misleading equation of This with That.
• Don’t talk or write about this terribly painful and political issue at all unless you can say everything you want to say about it. Don’t just “mention” it in passing in a sermon or column, and certainly don’t use it as an example of some other point you’re making. As soon as it comes up nowadays, everything else stops and our attention is riveted on it. So bring your whole message, or don’t even start.

• On any issue, an effective speaker or writer has to connect with his or her audience in terms of reason (logos), yes, and in terms of integrity (ethos), yes, but also in terms of feeling (pathos). All three have to be evident and abundantly evident in discussions of these vexed questions. So don’t try to get by with only a good argument, or a good reputation, or a good heart.

I have turned down far more invitations than I have accepted to discuss this issue in the media, in print, and in person because I truly don’t want to make things worse in a painful, polarized situation. It is so easy on this set of issues about which we all feel so strongly and about which so many are ready to quarrel simply to add gas to the fire, suffering to the wounded, frustration to the alienated, and fog to the confused.

So I take my time before I speak into this culture-wide, and now church-wide, set of conversations. And perhaps this checklist can help you prepare well for when you want to venture into them, also.

+++  

Class Activity 11.6—15 minutes

Watch the “Sunrise Showdown” clip and then skim the Stackhouse (2014) blog on “Before You Talk or Write About Homosexuality”, both in the notes immediately above.

Now, consider the three primary perspectives on ethical reasoning (Normative = Scripture + Tradition; Situational = Scholarship; and Existential = Personal Experience and Story). As relates to the domains of Church, Community and State, brainstorm all the facets of this debate and questions you need to address in order to come up with a faithful and fruitful “biblical” answer to the question of Same-Sex Marriage in Australian society.

Given the size and complexity of this issue, are we better not to speak at all? What is gained and lost?

As I introduced in Module 10, a practical public theology method is ideal for dealing with these kinds of wicked problems. In five movements, it boils down a big issue to a series of crucial questions, inviting even-handed discussion: What’s going on and why? What should be going on? How will we respond?
Space and time don’t permit a reproduction of the “Everything’s Bent” discussion guide and workshop below. Nevertheless, the following structure, stimulus and questions will provoke you to think and truly dialogue, that we might together—to everyone’s surprise!—find common ground for the common good.

<<Key stimulus includes “Everything’s Bent: Rethinking ‘Normal’” article (Benson 2012a I and II) and discussion guide (Benson 2013) with accompanying powerpoint (slides & handout)>>

5.2.1: THE DESCRIPTIVE EMPIRICAL MOVEMENT

First, the descriptive-empirical movement involves gathering information that helps us discern patterns and dynamics in particular episodes, situations, or contexts. It is characterised by a spirituality of priestly listening that seeks to answer the driving question, What is going on?

Using your own personal experience alongside more empirical findings from your research, attempt (without interpreting why) to accurately describe the experience (including behaviours, feelings, beliefs and actions) of the following groups in relation:

1. Homosexual seekers and Christian Gays within the Church

2. Non-Christian Gays with the Church/Christians in general

3. Non-Christians with the Church/Christians in the public sphere (media and politics) re Gay Marriage

4. Churches/Christians with Gays within the Church

5. Churches/Christians with Gays outside the Church

6. Churches/Christians with non-Christians in the public sphere (media and politics) re Gay Marriage

---

**Doctrine & Practice**

- Homosexuality: 20% 15% 25%
- Hatred & condemnation: 25% 15% 20%
- The role of women: 20% 14% 26%
- Suffering: 20% 14% 26%
- Science & exclusion: 20% 14% 23%
- The Bible: 21% 14% 19%
- Supernatural elements: 20% 12% 25%

**Christianity’s Top Ten Belief Blockers**

1. Church abuse 6. Issues around money
2. Hypocrisy 7. Outdated
5. Suffering 10. Exclusivity

**Christianity & the Church**

- Church abuse: 55% 21%
- Religious war: 60% 22%
- Hypocrisy: 40% 26%
- Judging others: 41% 29%
5.2.2: THE INTERPRETIVE MOVEMENT

Second, the interpretive movement involves drawing on theories of the arts and sciences to better understand and explain why these patterns and dynamics are occurring. It is characterised by a spirituality of sagely wisdom that seeks to answer, *Why is this going on?*

Thinking of the 6 key group relations in the descriptive-empirical movement above, how might the following perspectives help us interpret *Why is this happening?*

1. What insight does the normative perspective (Scripture + tradition) offer on the situation?
2. What insight does the situational perspective (various disciplinary reflections) offer?
3. What insight does the existential perspective (personal, communal, spiritual experiences) offer?

5.2.3: THE NORMATIVE MOVEMENT

Third, the normative movement involves using theological concepts to interpret particular episodes, situations, or contexts, constructing ethical norms to guide our responses. It is characterised by a spirituality of prophetic discernment that seeks to answer, *What ought to be going on?*

What key passages must be considered? And what does the Bible say about

(a) Homosexuality?
(b) How we should treat Gay believers?
(c) How we should interact with Gay unbelievers?
(d) How the Church should speak into/influence the public sphere (e.g., media, politics, education)?

How does each leg of the Biblical journey further direct our present “faithful improvisations” ...

*Creation*

*Fall*

*Israel*

*Jesus*

*Church*

*New Creation*
5.2.4: THE CORRELATIVE MOVEMENT

Fourth, the correlative movement involves explicitly cross-disciplinary dialogue between contemporary understandings and the Christian tradition via contrasting and comparing thick practices and theory. It is characterised by a spirituality of therapeutic mediation that seeks to answer, *Where is the common ground?*

Bringing our Biblical perspective into dialogue with the concerns of homosexuals and the agenda of the gay lobby (think Jim Wallace and Kerryn Phelps in the initial debate) ...

1. Where do we affirm each other = *compare*
2. Where do we refuse or challenge each other = *contrast*
3. How can we move beyond the current impasse in a synergistic solution = *create*

That is, where is there genuinely *common ground* upon which we may construct faithful and fruitful proposals for new action in the pragmatic movement? *List two key aspects of common ground below:*

- __________________________________________________________________________
- __________________________________________________________________________

5.2.5: THE PRAGMATIC MOVEMENT

Fifth, the pragmatic movement involves determining strategies of action that will influence situations in ways that are desirable and entering into a reflective conversation. It is characterised by a spirituality of servant leadership that seeks to answer, *How might we respond?*

*Discuss:*

- Should the church support gay marriage, stay silent, or oppose any such proposal?
- Based upon the theological reflection we have previously undertaken, why do you argue this way?
- If you had 30 seconds to represent your personal position on gay marriage, what would it be?
- Would this position be different if you were speaking on behalf of the Churches of Australia?

In light of your analysis, how would you rate these apologetic responses (what is good, bad, and what would you change if you were given anywhere from 30 seconds to 8 minutes to reply in a Sunrise TV style interview/debate?): Tim Keller *here;* Ravi Zacharias *here;* Ryan Anderson *here and here.*
Who would Jesus Christ have us be for Him, today? Dot point key actions and ideas on 4 fronts:

1. The Church’s response to homosexuals within the Church
   • ______________________________________________________________________
   • ______________________________________________________________________

2. The Church’s response to homosexuals within Society at large
   • ______________________________________________________________________
   • ______________________________________________________________________

3. The Church’s response to homosexuality within the Public Sphere
   • ______________________________________________________________________
   • ______________________________________________________________________

4. The Church’s response to gay marriage within Politics
   • ______________________________________________________________________
   • ______________________________________________________________________

5.2.6: BRINGING IT TOGETHER: ACTION PLAN

Reflection Activity 11.4 – Distance Students

In place of class discussion, online/distance students are required to complete a series of reflections—four per week. For each reflection activity/question, journal at least 30 (meaningful) words, and tick off the related boxes in the middle of the Unit Guide.

# 11.4 List here two key insights gained through this process of practical theological reflection.
What changes will you make in your practice of relating with people who are homosexual?
What next steps and actions will you take in response to this transformative theological reflection?

If we were to present a talk, or lead a forum discussion, on what would we most profitably focus?
5.3 STIMULUS: “Everything’s Bent: Rethinking ‘Normal’” (Benson 2012a I and II)

How long until homosexual marriage is legally enshrined in your country? British PM David Cameron has come out in support of ‘Marriage Equality’. So, too, has US President Barack Obama. Everything is topsy turvy in the land Down Under: PM Julia Gillard has cautiously allowed a conscience vote, but still contends that marriage is technically a life-long commitment between a man and a woman. But with the Marriage Equality (also here) movement gaining momentum, and yet another wave of Senate Inquiries to hit our shores, many wonder if Gillard will drown in a deluge of anti-discrimination.

The rhetoric is at fever-pitch. Take our morning TV program, Sunrise. On a cold winter’s dawn, hundreds gather out front of the studio waving over-sized placards. “I Do!” “Children Need a Mother and a Father.” “End the Discrimination!” They’re gathered for ‘The Great Marriage Debate’. The contenders autograph t-shirts like MMA sluggers before taking their corner. You can feel the heat on youtube (also here), even if the fight generates no light. Each waits a turn to call the other crazy.

(Watch this clip below—click for link. Also, see here and here. For how the Aussie media depicts the general population’s views of Same Sex marriage, see here and here, and the Insight SBS programme special here.)

My favourite placard was “1 in 10.” This rally-cry is of course a throw back to Alfred Kinsey’s highly questionable social-science statistics, claiming one in ten people are gay. With all the international press, it’s not surprising that many think it’s more like one in four. Our 2011 Census data pegs it closer to one in forty, a number sure to stay in the closet. Ironically, the only stat for 1 in 10 is the number of Aussies preferring to live alone. From all accounts, even when homosexual marriage is legislated, fewer than 10 percent of gays actually want to tie the knot.

So why all the fuss? Genuinely, I don’t mean to be dismissive. Atrocities have been committed against homosexuals. I’m glad there are already equal rights for gay civil partnership. I recognise that over 60 percent of Australians consider the Church’s attitude against homosexuality a blocker to believing in Christianity. My question, though, is this: given that only about 0.2% of the population want to marry someone of the same sex, why is this particular issue such a powder keg?

So why all the fuss? Genuinely, I don’t mean to be dismissive. ... My question, though, is this: given that only about 0.2% of the population want to marry someone of the same sex, why is this particular issue such a powder keg? I may well be wrong, but I sense it’s primarily a fight over one word.

**Normal.**

What is normal? And who’s to say? In an age of autonomy, surely I have the right to self-definition—particularly as it relates to my core identity as a sexual being? One man’s meat is another man’s poison, so don’t judge. Besides which, perhaps I was born this way? We can’t fight nature, can we?

Is it just semantics? Gay vs. Straight? We need to rethink.

What if everything is bent?
Let me borrow from the layered words of C. S. Lewis.

In the first book of his futuristic Space Trilogy, *Out of the Silent Planet*, we read of philologist Dr. Ransom and interplanetary scientific entrepreneur Professor Weston on a journey to Mars—or Malacandra, as the inhabitants call it. Each planet is under the rulership of a mighty Oyarsa, or Spirit being. Earth (*Thulcandra*, the Silent Planet) is under the sway of a rebellious overlord, who has turned everything inward upon itself. Humans are known by the many and varied Malacandrians as *Hnau*. This label has a ring of grandeur as the literary expert first understands: a rational creature. On further investigation, however, Ransom discovers the etymological truth: *Hnau* means ‘bent ones’.

Precisely how bent we are comes out as Professor Weston defends his plans for Mars, translated by Ransom into *Old Solar* language for the enlightenment of all Malacandrians:[1]

Weston: “(1) To you I may seem a vulgar robber, (2) but I bear on my shoulders the destiny of the human race. (3) Your tribal life (4) has nothing to compare with our civilization—(5) with our science, (6) law, (7) armies, and (8) transport system which is rapidly annihilating space and time. (9) Our right to supersede you is the right of the higher over the lower.”

Ransom’s translation: “(1) Among us, Oyarsa, there is a kind of *hnau* who will take other *hnau’s* food—and things, when they are not looking. Weston says he is not an ordinary one of that kind. (2) What he does now will make very different things happen to those of our people who are not yet born. (3) Among you, *hnau* of one kindred all live together (4) It is different with us. (5) We know much. (6) We have many bent people and we kill them or shut them in huts and that we have people for settling quarrels between the bent *hnau* about their huts and mates and things. (7) We have many ways for the *hnau* of one land to kill those of another and some are trained to do it. (8) We can carry heavy weights very quickly a long way. (9) Because of all this, Weston says it would not be the act of a bent *hnau* if our people killed all your people.”

Lest I be misunderstood, I am not polarising gay and straight, as though “marriage equality” is equivalent to Weston’s rhetoric. No, my point is deeper. It relates to all aspects of life: science, law, armies, transport, and most definitely our sexuality. And it sits in the cosmic biblical drama of creation, fall, and redemption (Benson 2016 I & II).

There was a time—let’s call it straight—when all of humanity lived happily and flourished within the form given it by God. Sexuality was to image the committed complementarity of the Triune God: a loving unity forged out of diversity. Like Lewis depicts in his second novel, *Perelandra*, we were truly “naked and unashamed”, defined by the Creator and content in trust.

But we shut God out and spurned His love. With no definitions from outside, we turned inward and became the silent planet. Now we live in a time—let’s call it bent—when everything has missed its created purpose. It’s not that we’re as bad as we could be; rather, nothing is as good as it should be. *Nothing is straight.* We all follow our broken desires to fashion a form that fits, even if it leads to death. The choice of chastity or committed heterosexual monogamy sounds like a curse. Yet it is our sexual instinct that is out of whack.[2] It’s now normal for most marriages to end in divorce. It’s normal for teens to sexually experiment à la Katie Perry: “it felt so wrong, it felt so right, don’t mean I’m in love tonight.” It’s normal for spouses to have affairs and singles to have one-night-stands. It’s painstakingly normal for loving couples to go childless, and childish adults to beget then abuse and neglect a couple. We still see the original forms colouring our grey world—like fidelity and commitment in both homo- and heterosexual unions, which we should champion. Still, this side of the fall, what’s natural is not the way it’s supposed to be; what’s normal means everything is bent. *Hnau*: we rationalise our rebellion, but that doesn’t make it right.
**Straight. Bent.** But the story isn’t over. God has broken the sound barrier and stepped in to make things Better. There is hope of redemption. Whatever your bent, a progressive re-orienting of desire can begin now, re-forming so our instincts align with what actually brings life. I’m not naively or dangerously suggesting that all gays should marry their opposite and live happily ever after. But I am suggesting that we each, in our particular form of ‘bentness’, can be reconnected with our Creator, and reshaped into something better.

No judgment. No name calling. No twisting of words nor explosive rhetoric. I’m not sure precisely what this means for the current debate. But just perhaps by acknowledging our true equality as bent sinners before the cross—Hnau, ten in ten—we may begin our journey towards a new normal.


[2] Lewis comically explores our disproportionate desire for sex in *Mere Christianity*, Bk. III, Ch. 5. See doodle [here](#).

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**TOWARDS BELIEF EPISODE 8: HOMOSEXUALITY**

**MERE CHRISTIANITY**

*By C.S. Lewis*

*Broadcast: Sunday, 11th October 1942, 2:50 p.m.*

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**Sexual Morality by C.S. Lewis Doodle (BBC Talk 14, Mere Christianity, Bk 3, Chapter 5)**

<<The following was from a group email sent by Ryan Messmore, Director of The Millis Institute, conveying The Pillar Newsletter, iss. 10, August 26, 2015, entitled, “What Is Marriage?”>>

Listening to the state of today’s public debate about marriage reminds me of a comment that Dorothy Sayers made almost 70 years ago in her essay “The Lost Tools of Learning”:

Have you ever, in listening to a debate among adult and presumably responsible people, been fretted by the extraordinary inability of the average debater to speak to the question, or to meet and refute the arguments of speakers on the other side? … Have you ever followed a discussion in the newspaper or elsewhere and noticed how frequently writers fail to define the terms they use?

The Millis Institute has launched a new initiative to help students contribute to public conversations in a more thoughtful, coherent and winsome way. We call it Socrates in Senior School, and the goal is to assist Year 11 and 12 students to think through the right questions concerning timely issues. Last Friday we held our inaugural event entitled “Marriage: What Questions Should We Ask?,” featuring Dr Ryan Anderson from The Heritage Foundation in the U.S. (and author of Truth Overruled: The Future of Marriage and Religious Freedom).

<Dr Ryan Anderson discusses the most important questions to ask concerning marriage to an audience of over 200 young people at the Millis Institute’s inaugural Socrates in Senior School forum.>

With a logical precision that would have made Dorothy Sayers proud, Anderson examined the definitions and arguments about marriage proposed in today’s public square. He noted that the average citizen assumes marriage is a permanent, monogamous, sexually exclusive institution between two adults. Many, however, want to continue to uphold those norms while redefining marriage in terms of consenting adult romance.

Anderson pointed out that this is logically problematic. If marriage is redefined as a relationship between two caring adults regardless of their gender, it is hard to identity any principle that would require marriage to be:

- permanent (after all, feelings often change over time);
- monogamous (what if some people think that sexual openness will help their relationship?);
- between only two people (what if three people share intense intimacy?).

Furthermore, redefining marriage to mean simply a relationship of intimacy and care-giving would not justify the government getting involved in it in the first place.
Anderson urged the students to engage in a more logically consistent conversation by first focusing on the most important question regarding marriage: *What is it?* Citizens cannot have logically coherent conversations about marriage equality or discrimination unless they first define what it is they are talking about. According to Anderson,

> We all want marriage equality. We all want the law to treat all marriages equally. The question is, what type of relationship is a marriage? … The only way to know whether your definition of marriage is respecting marriage equality is to know the reality of what marriage is in the first place. You have to first ask *What is marriage?*

In contrast to viewing marriage in terms of consenting adult romance, Anderson outlined a philosophically robust vision of marriage as a union binding a man and woman together to care for any children their love brings about. This relationship is distinguished from other forms of intimacy and care-giving by its comprehensive nature. It is comprehensive

- in the *levels* at which it unites spouses—including a physical one-flesh union “so complete that 9 months later it might require a name”;
- in the *goal* to which it is naturally ordered—i.e. creating and raising a new human life;
- in the *commitments* it calls for—i.e. monogamy and sexual fidelity “’til death do us part.”

This definition explains not only why we ascribe norms of permanence, monogamy, etc. to marriage but also why the government has a vested interest in it (i.e. it’s inherently related to the birthing and raising of future citizens). Indeed, Anderson argued that this definition matters because it maximizes the possibility that a child’s father commits to the mother and that the two of them commit to the child. He suggested that it’s a matter of social justice that we provide children the greatest opportunity possible to receive the unique benefits of mothering as well as fathering:

> A law that redefines marriage to make fathers optional … makes it harder to say that the fathers [who are] missing in their children’s lives matter. … If you care about social justice … you have to care about marriage and you have to care that the State gets [the definition of] marriage correct.

In “The Lost Tools of Learning,” Sayers lamented, “Is not the great defect of our education today … that although we often succeed in teaching our pupils ‘subjects,’ we fail lamentably on the whole in teaching them how to think?” I applaud the schools that participated in this inaugural *Socrates in Senior School* event for encouraging their students not only to learn about an important issue but also to cultivate the ability to think and discuss that issue in a logical and civil manner.

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**Class Activity 11.7—5 mins.**

After working through the five movements of the practical/public theological reflection above, consolidate in a 30s-1min response your answer to the question:

**As a Christian what is your response to the cultural push for Same-Sex Marriage? Why will, or won’t, you support “marriage equality”?**

Share these in pairs, then debrief as a group.

What “actions” must accompany this apologetic?
6. PREPARATION FOR THE NEXT CLASS

Forum Activity Module 11

For each of modules 1 through 12 of the course, please submit a forum post, comprising:

(a) A 250 word first-person response to the set question/comment, tailored for explaining your beliefs to a twenty-something Australian who is post-Christian in attitude but pre-Christian in understanding. Note that when options are available, indicate to which of the statements you are responding. Additionally, this response must demonstrate a sound grasp of underlying course/Module content, and interaction with at least one (PE420) or two (PE620) pre-readings, whether recommended or optional (reference these). Across modules 1-6, and then 7-12, you must demonstrate a range of apologetic approaches, defending and commending the plausibility, credibility, and relevance of Christian belief. Post this to Moodle *before* the following class.

(b) Interaction with at least one other person that advances the conversation, perhaps through a comment or question. Note that this interaction can be with other students on the Moodle forum, but may also be through the “Australian Apologetics & Evangelism” Facebook group or your own social media site, as people interact with your posted response. Interaction isn’t in the word count.

Group five of the first six forum posts, and the interaction with others, into one word.doc for submission via the Moodle assessment tab by March 28 for assessment requirement 1a, and then a further five posts from module 7-12 by May 23 for requirement 1b.

For each Moodle Module, I’ve set up a forum bubble.

THIS WEEK’S forum question/comment awaiting your response, before next class, is this:

Week 11: Respond to one of the following statements: (a) “Who are you to say what is morally right and wrong? How intolerant!”; or (b) “Anyone who judges homosexuality on religious grounds is a bigot; provided people give their full consent, and no harm is done, everything is permissible and your opposition is oppression”; or (c) “You don’t need to be religious to be good, nor believe in God to objectively discern the difference between right and wrong.”

You will have time to discuss your responses to this forum question in your small group during the first session of our next class together.

All students respond on the Moodle Forum (250 words)

Preparation for Next Week ...

- Forum post work (as per the unit guide assessment requirement) both addressing the set question, and interacting with others. Post this to Moodle before next class.
- 2 hours pre-reading from recommended and optional readings on Moodle.
  Come ready to share on each of the following:
  - a question—something you don’t get, or want to clarify
  - a challenge—something you disagree with, or want to nuance
  - an implication—“so what” for your our apologetic practice
  - an application—something useful right now in your context, to help your holistic witness
Significance for Christian theology, life and thought...

*What in this session is most significant to you personally, in forming your own theology, life and thought?*

Is God a moral dictator wanting to boss us around? Does He set some arbitrary ‘standard’ of right and wrong—a boundary we must stay within; a line not to cross—and then wait for us to screw up so He can keep us on a leash, feeling guilty and destined to serve?

For many, that’s how they see God. But let’s try another image. *If you were a parent, and your six year old wanted to put a fork into a live power-socket, would you intervene?* Would you say something, both in warning before hand, and even scolding afterward if he or she had ignored your explicit command?

Francis Schaeffer saw God’s morality as “freedom within a form”. All life needs a form to be truly free. Without a cell wall, the cell collapses. Without banks, a river floods. Without soil, a plant withers. And without air, we expire.

God created life; He knows how it works best. He created us to live with Him at the centre, in the form of love which brings true freedom. Morality is not arbitrary. Right and wrong are natural extensions both of the nature of a holy and righteous God, and applications of life lived in accordance with our created form.

So, when we *trust* His commands, life works as it should—albeit in a fallen world where much is outside of our control ... we align with the way things were prior to the fall, and *will be* when Jesus returns to set everything in the right, aware that righteous living now aligns with the general direction of creation, but that at times our straight path in a crooked world may bring its own pain. ... But by and large, living God’s way leads to freedom now, and future hope. It’s what we were created for. In obedience to God’s law is fullness of life, but the one who lacks self-control is like a city without walls.

For me, this means that I can worship God in the everyday, by trusting His commands; *and*, I can find further warrant for my extension of trust as I see life work better when I walk Jesus’ way.

This is not a dry argument for moral objectivism, nor a swipe at moral relativism, but it is existentially what it means to me to

“*trust and obey, for there is no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.*”

3 “Beautiful Jesus” painting by Nigerian artist, Mariama McCarthy
7. REFERENCES


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