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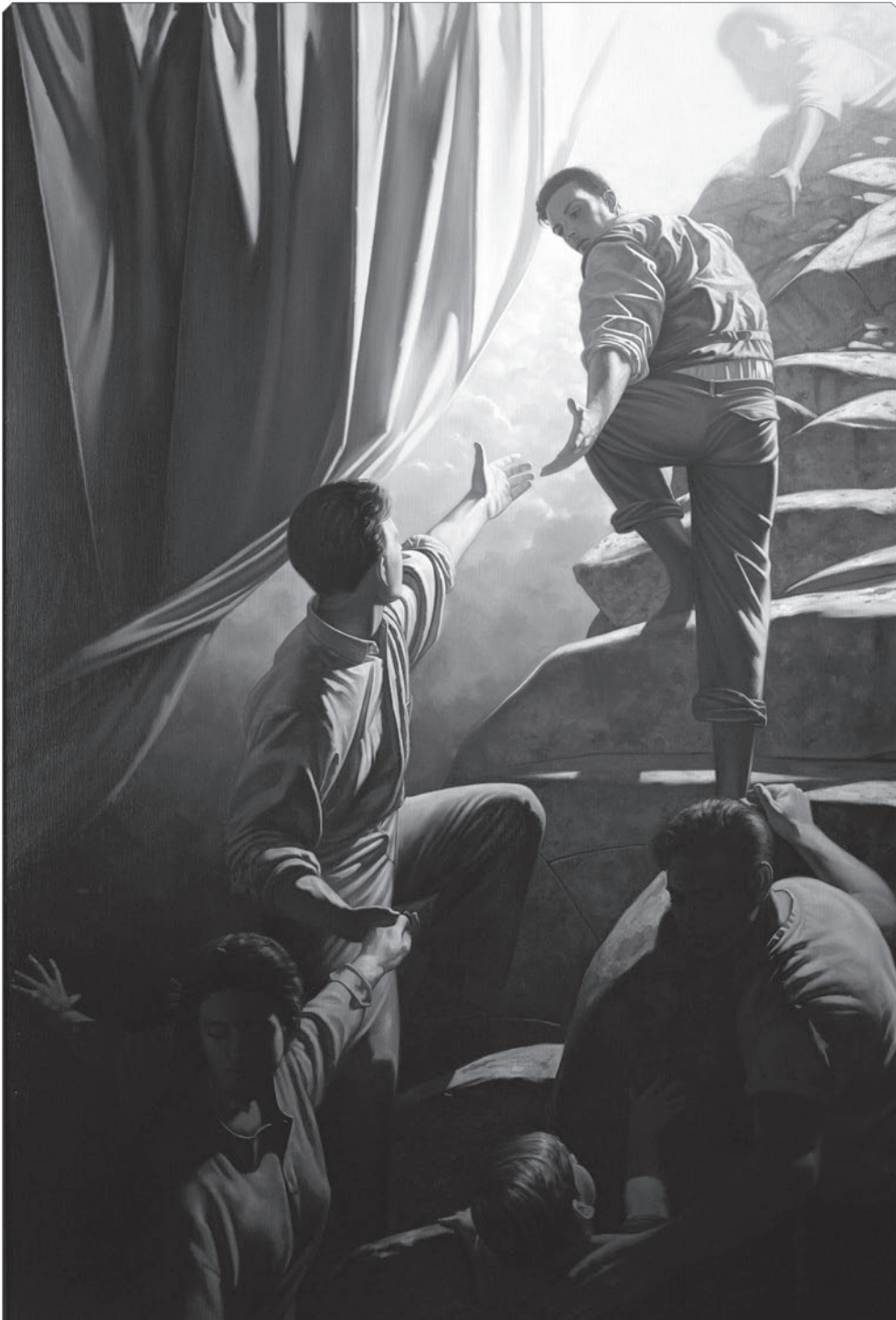
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David Lim, *Ascent*. Courtesy of Church History Museum.

Heavenly Father created a plan centered on giving everyone the opportunity to make choices and allow individuals the greatest possible progress toward a fullness of joy, happiness, and love.

# Nonjudgmentalism Strikes Back: Moral Relativism and Conviction

DANIEL H. FROST

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In his 2011 book *Lost in Transition*, sociologist Christian Smith investigates the way “emerging adults” make sense of moral choices.<sup>1</sup> Smith’s findings are not encouraging: many emerging adults are unable to engage questions about moral problems or dilemmas in a meaningful way and sometimes seem unaware that they ever confront such dilemmas. Six out of ten emerging adults in the study believed that “morality is a personal choice, entirely a matter of individual decision.”<sup>2</sup> When asked to identify a moral dilemma they had faced in recent years, 66 percent of emerging adults in this study either could not think of anything or described dilemmas that are not moral—for example, “simple household decisions, such as whether to buy a second cat litter box.”<sup>3</sup>

Concerns about “moral relativism” are common from Church leaders.<sup>4</sup> This is not surprising, given that the Church teaches that God is a God of truth and law, and has prescribed certain rules about right and wrong. Elder Dallin H. Oaks teaches, “We believe in *absolute truth*, including the existence of God and the right and wrong established by His commandments. We know that the existence of God and the existence of absolute truth are fundamental

to life on this earth, whether they are believed in or not.”<sup>5</sup> Other religious leaders have voiced similar concerns about moral relativism. In a homily given prior to the Conclave that elected him Pope Benedict XVI, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger said that our society is “building a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one’s own ego and desires.”<sup>6</sup>

For many people, the suggestion that there are real moral “truths” that apply to everyone is almost incomprehensible and even dangerous. They worry that those who believe in moral truth may want to “impose” their personal values upon others. Better, on this alternative view, to not believe in anything too strongly, so that others’ rights to freedom of thought and individual choice can be respected. But can this alternative view make sense of rights at all? Doesn’t the assertion of rights to freedom of thought and individual choice unavoidably implicate the speaker in the existence of moral truths? And if so, should these beliefs also be held lightly?

In this paper I hope to clarify some aspects of contemporary moral “relativism” as it manifests itself both in popular culture and in some influential intellectual trends. What I hope to show is that what often passes as moral relativism is not actually relativistic at all—those who assert or imply that there is no moral truth are often strongly committed to a particular moral vision, though they frequently try to avoid or downplay this fact. The combination of the appearance of moral relativism and strong moral conviction is facilitated by a vocabulary of what I call “nonjudgmental” moral concepts—concepts that mark off moral boundaries even as they advance skepticism about the possibility of moral truth. I explain what nonjudgmental moral concepts are, make some broad historical comments about how nonjudgmental moral concepts became prevalent, and show why we should be suspicious of any moral claim that implies there is no moral truth.

### Nonjudgmentalism’s Judgments

As Smith’s research shows, our culture is extremely confused about moral values. It’s not just that people disagree vehemently over what moral truth is, but that they hold contradictory views about the existence of moral truth. “Who are you to impose your private, personal values on others?” is a sentiment often expressed today. What is not often noticed is that this statement includes two contradictory claims. One is that there are no moral truths that apply to everyone. Particular individuals may believe that something is true,

and it might even be “true for them,” but there are no moral truths that apply to everyone. Morality is subjective and personal. But the same statement also suggests that some things are true for everyone. The “who are you” part of the statement necessarily implies a moral criticism that it is *wrong* to impose values on other people, a criticism which the speaker apparently takes as *true*. Thus, moral relativism and moral conviction are strangely expressed *in the same sentence*.

This strange tension—of being generally skeptical toward moral truth, but nonetheless needing it and relying on it anyway—has been facilitated by the rise of what might be called “nonjudgmental” moral concepts: tolerance, diversity, inclusion, authenticity, difference, neutrality, openness, nonconformity, multiculturalism, “otherness,” individualism, pluralism, freedom (in the sense of what was once called “license”<sup>7</sup>), and autonomy.<sup>8</sup> All of these concepts place moral limits on what humans should do, but in doing so they cut against the idea that there could be such a thing as moral truth. For example, we are sometimes told that tolerance is important because (among other reasons) we could be wrong and others could be right. Therefore, we should not judge. But if this is true, couldn’t we also be wrong about the value of tolerance itself? As Stanley Fish says in a related context, “Why should this belief be exempt from the general skepticism it announces?”<sup>9</sup> The same goes for inclusion and diversity—one might think that these concepts require us to put aside all judgment and standards so that everyone and everything can be included. But what about people and ideas that are hostile to inclusion and diversity? Should they also be included? (If they are, doesn’t that undercut the very reason these values are attractive?) In essence, these concepts seek to advance moral claims without committing to a moral foundation; they are nonjudgmental moral values.

No single value better embodies the tension within nonjudgmental moral concepts than the preeminent moral value of our time: individual autonomy.<sup>10</sup> To be autonomous in this sense is to be the author of one’s own life and actions; to not be under the authority or dominion of any other person or group.<sup>11</sup> The autonomous individual is (or aspires to be) liberated from any unchosen obligations, identities, or roles. The autonomous individual may follow moral norms, but only because that person has freely chosen them. With roots in Immanuel Kant<sup>12</sup> and elaborations in contemporary philosophers such as John Rawls,<sup>13</sup> the autonomous individual both describes what

many people think is most important about human beings and prescribes how humans ought to be treated.

One might think that because each autonomous individual is sovereign over the moral norms that govern his or her life, there could be no general account of morality—a general account, after all, would presuppose some source of moral value outside and above the autonomous individual; indeed, would suggest that particular autonomous individuals could “get it wrong.” Theorists of autonomy finesse this tension by noting that being autonomous is a matter of degree,<sup>14</sup> presupposing an idealized account of the autonomous individual—what an autonomous individual could and should be, if that individual were fully living up to his or her autonomous capacities. Here again, we see the strange dance between affirming and denying the possibility of moral truth. On one hand, proponents of autonomy claim that what is most important about human beings is their capacity to choose and define the moral boundaries that govern their lives, to be free from external constraints and norms; on the other hand, the very act of identifying these characteristics as morally relevant stakes a claim about how humans ought to be treated, constraining the law that one *can* give oneself.

Placing autonomy at the center of the moral universe has implications for the way we understand other values. With autonomy on the throne, neutrality also becomes important. Because each individual is (or should be) the ultimate author and evaluator of her choices and lifestyle, no one else is in a position to say that what she has chosen is wrong (or right). There is an important sense in which proponents of autonomy are committed to never answering the question of what constitutes a morally good life (in philosophical jargon, this view is known as “antiperfectionism”<sup>15</sup>). Though particular individuals may derive satisfaction from certain choices or lifestyles, there is nothing general that can be said about what contributes to or detracts from a morally good life. Some people may choose to work as doctors, others devote themselves to religion, others spend time in the outdoors, others consume pornography,<sup>16</sup> others raise children, and others count blades of grass.<sup>17</sup> The state and individuals must be neutral with respect to other people’s decisions about what constitutes a good life.

Second, though general statements about the good life are presumptively invalid, we do know that people will need resources to pursue the ends they happen to have. As an emphasis about the good life dwindles away, the importance of all-purpose means of pursuing what one wants

becomes important—things such as power, money, prestige, self-respect, social approval, and so on. Note the “nonjudgmental” character of these goods—they are instrumental in allowing people to pursue their aims, whatever those aims happen to be. Facilitating people’s capacity to choose, rather than encouraging them to make any particular choice, becomes a key goal. There is also a bias toward distributing such goods “equally,” because few other standards for evaluating distributions seem to be available.<sup>18</sup> John Rawls, the most influential political philosopher of the twentieth century, believes that all such goods should be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution would benefit the least well off.<sup>19</sup> Many other political theorists adopt the general commitment to equality, though the precise justification for this seems elusive.<sup>20</sup>

Autonomy, then, sums up the central contradiction of nonjudgmental moral values: humans are important because they are free, with “free” meaning unconstrained by any higher law or power, unencumbered by any unchosen values or roles.<sup>21</sup> The core of the moral outlook that motivates many people who use the vocabulary of nonjudgmental moral concepts has been summarized nicely by Christian Smith: it is “realizing the emancipation, equality, and moral affirmation of all human beings as autonomous, self-directing, individual agents (who should be) out to live their lives as they personally so desire, by constructing their own favored identities, entering and exiting relationships as they choose, and equally enjoying the gratification of experiential, material, and bodily pleasures.”<sup>22</sup> Strangely, this moral approach seems to require us to place our trust in the absence of truth, as David Bentley Hart provocatively argues:

Modernity’s highest ideal—its special understanding of personal autonomy—requires us to place our trust in an original absence underlying all of reality, a fertile void in which all things are possible, from which arises no impediment to our wills, and before which we may consequently choose to make of ourselves what we choose. We trust, that is to say, that there is no substantial criterion by which to judge our choices that stands higher than the unquestioned good of free choice itself, and that therefore all judgment, divine no less than human, is in some sense an infringement upon our freedom.<sup>23</sup>

The irony, of course, is that even though people in our society often talk as if we do not believe in moral truth, we can never quite kick the habit—we never stop believing that (at least some) moral truths apply to everyone, such as that people’s autonomy ought to be respected and protected. So we settle for rhetoric which suggests there is no moral truth while we go on indulging

our habit for moral objectivity. This leads to an important point: though there is tension within nonjudgmental values between affirming and denying moral truth, this tension is very rhetorically useful *in debates about morality*. One can employ the skeptical aspect of a nonjudgmental moral concept (“don’t impose your personal values on others,” “be more tolerant, open . . .”) to fend off rival moral views that advance truth claims. Once these have been branded as presumptively invalid for making truth claims at all (note that moral positions are often not even engaged; they are simply dismissed for being too “judgmental”), one can advance one’s own moral claims as the only possible and reasonable ones, all the while claiming to be “open to further discussion,” lest someone think that the speaker has actually adopted a truth claim. But, inasmuch as we make *any* moral claim at all (and nonjudgmental moral concepts undeniably make them), we must recognize that we treat these ideas as morally true. As Steven D. Smith says, “We cannot actually *be* neutral. But we can *pretend*—even or especially to ourselves—that we are.”<sup>24</sup>

### The Rise of Nonjudgmentalism

How did we get here? Moral reasoning in the United States has not always relied so heavily on nonjudgmental moral concepts as it does today. The “background”<sup>25</sup> set of understandings our culture holds about morality has shifted, placing a premium on individual autonomy and inculcating a general prejudice against authority of almost any kind. A comprehensive treatment of “how we got here” would take several books to tell<sup>26</sup> (if it can be fully told at all<sup>27</sup>), and I will not attempt anything like a comprehensive treatment. However, I will sketch out a few trends and events which I believe are relevant, with the caveat that much more could be said about each (and I hope to say more in future writings). They are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and other factors are surely relevant. I should also note that I do not think these developments are all or even mostly bad; some of them are, in fact, quite good. However, I do believe they have had the effect of making our thinking on moral topics less coherent, and this is a regrettable outcome.

The first, and probably most important, is the rise and dominance of scientific naturalism as a means of making sense of the world. Scientific naturalism begins from the premise that what is “real” can be investigated through the use of the senses (and instruments that augment human perception). The entities that science investigates can be observed, measured, quantified, and, in the ideal case, manipulated under controlled conditions to better understand

their properties and underlying causal mechanisms (or probabilistic tendencies). I hardly need to say that the success of the natural sciences over the past several centuries has been phenomenal: science has allowed humans to understand, predict, control, and manipulate the physical world to an extent that would have been unbelievable to humans living long ago.

The assumptions and expectations of scientific naturalism have led to a general conceptual division between “facts,” which are allegedly objective and real, and “values,” which, because they do not conform to the expectations of scientific naturalism, are seen as subjective and not truly capable of being established by “reason.” We should note that for quite some time, people who practiced empirical science also believed in moral and religious truths (and understood themselves to believe in such truths),<sup>28</sup> and many still do. And it is important to emphasize that nothing in the scientific approach *requires* one to believe that there are no moral truths; one can believe that science is a useful approach to investigating many aspects of the “real” world but still believe that some “real” things elude its grasp. However, the lesson that many people influenced by scientific thinking have taken is that *only* entities that offer themselves up for scientific investigation can be counted as fully real. “Metaphysical” concepts such as justice and morality (and worse, God) are sometimes seen as “pseudo-concepts” or even “nonsense,”<sup>29</sup> for there is nothing in the material world that is the direct, empirically verifiable referent of these terms. There have been philosophical advocates of this position, but the influence of scientific thinking seems to be more diffuse and pervasive. Even those who are not familiar with the academic philosophical debates have come to have new background expectations about what constitutes “knowledge,” about what kind of evidence is necessary to establish a claim, about the distinction between (objective) facts and (subjective) values, and so on.

In the United States, the full implications of scientific naturalism for the study of human phenomena arrived in the early twentieth century. At that time, disciplinary boundaries such as sociology, political science, economics, and psychology had formed within universities. Many of these relatively new disciplines were fighting for recognition (and funding) within universities,<sup>30</sup> and they turned to scientific thinking and categories for legitimacy. Many people who adopted the empirical scientific approach also embraced the view that there are no moral truths. Edward Purcell writes: “A sweeping ethical relativism was implicit in the basic assumptions of most social science thought throughout the twenties and early thirties. . . . Without a basis in the

supernatural, in revealed religion, or in a rationally authoritative philosophy, value systems could only be the products of social, economic, and psychological pressures operating on individuals and groups. As such, no values could be called 'higher' in any meaningful sense."<sup>31</sup>

A second development that has led to the proliferation of nonjudgmental moral concepts is the United States' encounter with totalitarianism in World War II and the Cold War. Just as moral relativism was becoming something of an establishment view within the social sciences in the early twentieth century, fascist and communist regimes required Americans to reevaluate how "relativist" they really were. As the horrors of the Holocaust and World War II unfolded, American intellectuals had to ask themselves the following questions: Is there really no sense in which we can say we are morally superior to Nazi Germany and other totalitarian regimes? Is Hitler simply one more politician, albeit one who uses power in unconventional ways? Is it really the case that there are no moral truths, thus no moral grounds on which to criticize the actions of totalitarian governments?

Some intellectuals, such as University of Chicago president Robert Maynard Hutchins, consciously rejected the relativistic tendencies of scientific naturalism and sought to ground a theory of absolute truth based on a rational grasp of ethical and political principles. Hutchins believed that a proper grasp of metaphysics, grounded in Aristotelian and Thomistic philosophy, would provide a way to assess the meaning and importance of different fields of inquiry by providing "a hierarchy of truths which shows us which are fundamental and which subsidiary, which significant and which not."<sup>32</sup> Hutchins believed that only an ordering principle that rose above empirical scientific research could provide grounds on which to claim that totalitarianism was wrong and democracy was right. Indeed, he went so far as to say that that there was no real difference between the ethical relativism that characterized American academic life and Nazi principles: "There is little to choose between the doctrine I learned in an American law school [Yale] and that which Hitler proclaims."<sup>33</sup> In Hutchins's view, ethical relativism led directly to totalitarianism.

Most American intellectuals rejected this approach and sought for a way to reconcile their broadly naturalistic approach to the world with the view that America was superior to the totalitarian regimes. The solution is what Edward Purcell calls the "relativist theory of democracy." Led by John Dewey, who had been arguing this viewpoint for some time, proponents of this view

argued that what truly made America different and better than the totalitarian regimes was its open and tolerant character. Unlike the totalitarian regimes, which have a strong view of what is "true" and then coercively impose that view on society, American democracy is always changing, always evolving, always learning from new and diverse perspectives. Dewey argued that any hierarchical system of values, such as that proposed by Hutchins, necessarily implied an elite who could implement it correctly in society.<sup>34</sup> Hierarchical systems of knowledge were fitted for a feudal society in which the few exercise power over the many, whereas nonhierarchical systems were appropriate for democracy, in which there is no official ruling class and no official creed. As David Ciepley writes, "What appealed to scientific naturalists about such a definition is that it allowed them to condemn totalitarianism, and praise democracy, without taking any 'substantive' value stance . . . If totalitarianism stands for value absolutism, then democracy is the social form that results from accepting the relativity of all value positions and is characterized by pluralism, change, voluntarism, and compromise."<sup>35</sup> On this view, the true danger was not from those who did not believe in moral truths, it comes from those who do. Hitler, after all, believed he had found the truth. In this way, proponents of the relativist theory of democracy turned the tables on Hutchins and his like, arguing that *they* were the true totalitarians.<sup>36</sup>

In the court of history, the relativist theory of democracy seems to have won out. American democracy was defined not by any substantive values it held, but rather by its resolute determination to *not* own up to substantive values. In 1943 the US Supreme Court articulated this view in a succinct and famous way: "If there is any fixed star in our constitutional constellation, it is that no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion or force citizens to confess by word or act their faith therein."<sup>37</sup> This sentence is one of the most repeated and celebrated in the Supreme Court's history, but it is also, as Steven D. Smith points out, "flatly false, not to mention incoherent . . . government officials both 'high' . . . and 'petty' . . . every day prescribe what shall be orthodox (or, in other words, correct opinion or teaching)"<sup>38</sup> in all sorts of matters. And how could it be otherwise? Inasmuch as social life is orderly, there will have to be some ideas and projects that are taken more seriously than others. When the state exercises coercive powers, as it always does in some form, that power will be brought to bear on behalf of certain ideas and against others. Our moral judgments cannot be up in the air all of the time; there are

decisions to be made, and they will be made for reasons. Those reasons are treated as true, even if those who act on them profess (often unconvincingly) that they are open to revising them in the future.

The third major development that has strengthened the place of nonjudgmental moral concepts in American society is consumerism. Consumerism as a mass cultural phenomenon seems to have become commonplace in America around the turn of the twentieth century<sup>39</sup> and then became more entrenched and prevalent after World War II with advances in communication technology and the affluence of the postwar era. Though there is much to criticize in consumerism, for our purposes the most important aspects of consumerism are the “values” it promotes. Advertising campaigns seek to convince people that their true happiness consists in a life of comfort, convenience, self-fulfillment, and vivid experience,<sup>40</sup> all of which could be bought with new (and ever changing) consumer goods and services. As Christopher Lasch observes, “Advertising serves not so much to advertise products as to promote consumption as a way of life. It ‘educates’ the masses into an unappeasable appetite not only for goods but for new experiences and personal fulfillment. It upholds consumption as the answer to the age-old discontents of loneliness, sickness, weariness, lack of sexual satisfaction; at the same time, it creates new forms of discontent peculiar to the modern age.”<sup>41</sup> Crucial to this set of messages is that there should be nothing that prevents me from achieving my desires and finding satisfaction, “the child-in-the-candy-store feeling of hovering alongside a limitless field of pleasurable options.”<sup>42</sup>

Advertising generally does not seek to persuade potential customers by explaining, with reasons, the virtues of what is being sold. Rather, advertising seeks to bypass customers’ conscious minds and create a sense of fascination with a brand or idea. Advertising succeeds when it creates unconscious (and unwarranted) associations between a brand and happiness, beauty, success, security, empowerment, self-confidence, excitement, novelty, community, self-fulfillment, competence, contentment, authenticity, and good taste. Of course, when you buy a bottle of Coca-Cola you do not actually “open happiness,” as their advertising campaign would have you believe. All you get is a sugary, carbonated, caffeinated drink—nothing more. Many marketers are upfront about the nonrational goals of their profession: former Saatchi and Saatchi CEO Kevin Roberts says that the goal of advertising should be to create “Loyalty Beyond Reason” and imbue brands with “mystery, sensuality, and intimacy.”<sup>43</sup> A new pair of shoes or a new car will not bring you lasting

happiness,<sup>44</sup> but we are constantly bombarded with images seeking to convince us that our entire happiness depends upon consuming what is for sale.

Consumerism therefore supports nonjudgmental moral concepts in complex ways. Consumerism is “nonjudgmental” in the sense that it discourages critical thinking in general; advertising does not encourage rational reflection but rather bypasses it with appeals to non-rational and sub-rational motivations. The ideal consumers, from the perspective of those who advance consumerism, are those who do not think hard about consumption choices but merely purchase. Consumerism also encourages us to be “open”—open, of course, to new consumer products. Any “rigid” belief, identity, or tradition (i.e., any belief, identity, or tradition not yet colonized by consumerism) that might make people less likely believe their happiness consists in consumption is an obstacle to consumerism.<sup>45</sup> Moral character and self-discipline—particularly if these might lead people to delay acting on their desires or feel guilty for doing so—have to be broken down in favor of a more open, tolerant, and cosmopolitan personality. The nonjudgmental values we live with today have an uncanny affinity with the kind of character traits consumerism has a vested interest in promoting: openness (try our new product), tolerance (don’t be too set in your own ways; be open to change and different perspectives/ideas/products), and authenticity (find your true self—by consuming our products). It may be impossible to state precisely how a culture of consumption makes certain moral concepts seem more plausible, but the affinity seems too striking to be accidental or inconsequential.

The fourth factor that has led to the ascendance of nonjudgmental moral concepts is the general acceptance of psychotherapeutic, or simply “therapeutic,” thinking to make sense of human life and choices. Alasdair MacIntyre argues that in a world “after virtue,” after the breakdown of any shared consensus over moral truth (or even what it would mean to arrive at moral truth), the therapist becomes a key figure of social life. Like the bureaucratic manager, who is interested only in finding effective means to reach given ends, the therapist “treats ends as given, as outside his scope; his concern is also with technique, with effectiveness in transforming neurotic symptoms into directed energy, maladjusted individuals into well-adjusted ones.”<sup>46</sup> With a few exceptions,<sup>47</sup> most therapeutic thinking does not have an explicit moral goal. Rather, the goal of most therapy is to remove impediments to people’s functionality and ability to reach their goals. Therapeutic thinking is self-consciously nonjudgmental, replacing words such as “good” and “bad” with

“healthy” and “unhealthy” and urging people to find “what works for you.” As traditional forms of community and morality have faded in relevance, the need to look inside for answers has intensified: “When so little can be taken for granted, and when the meaningfulness of social existence no longer grants an inner life at peace with itself, every man must become something of a genius about himself.”<sup>48</sup>

The nonjudgmentalism of therapeutic thinking is perhaps nowhere better expressed than in the humanistic psychology that arose after World War II. Abraham Maslow, a major figure in the movement, said that each individual has a deep need and drive for “self-actualization,” or “the desire to become more and more what one idiosyncratically is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming.”<sup>49</sup> Maslow also spoke favorably of “the total collapse of all sources of value outside the individual.”<sup>50</sup> Carl Rogers, another major figure, advocated “client-centered therapy,” in which the therapist seeks to “perceive the world as the client sees it, to perceive the client himself as he is seen by himself, to lay aside all perceptions from the external frame of reference while doing so, and to communicate something of this empathic understanding to the client.”<sup>51</sup> The premise of his approach is that when people are truly heard and treated with “unconditional positive regard,” they can see the truth of their own situation and solve their own problems. A condition of the possibility of this working is that the therapist or counselor refrain from any judgment, positive or negative, of what the client says or feels.<sup>52</sup>

Therapeutic thinking has expanded far beyond the confines of the professional practices of psychologists and other mental health professionals. Where people once turned to family, religion, and other sources for emotional support and guidance for making choices, people now turn more and more to therapists and therapeutic ideas. Books with titles such as *In Therapy We Trust*<sup>53</sup> and *One Nation Under Therapy*<sup>54</sup> highlight the ways that our society has put its faith in therapy as the answer to our practical and existential questions. Therapeutic thinking has “triumphed” in our time,<sup>55</sup> becoming the default approach to addressing questions about how we ought to live. And, so long as people have high self-esteem and can reach their goals, therapeutic thinking generally tries to be nonjudgmental about how people live their lives.

This is a good place to reiterate that I do not think the changes I have described are all bad. I am certain that therapeutic ideas have benefited many people, including myself, and science has increased many people’s quality of life immeasurably. But despite the obvious virtues of many of the changes I

have described, I still think they contributed to our current state of moral incoherence. There may be something to put against that incoherence, but it still is what it is, and we need to recognize it as such.

### Concerns with Believing in Moral Truth

Some people may worry that if we acknowledge the existence of moral truth, we will thereby be committed to establishing a totalitarian government which stifles all dissent and forces everyone to believe what “we” believe the truth to be. This sort of all-or-nothing thinking—either moral relativism on the one hand, or repressive totalitarianism on the other—blinds us to feasible options and the way we actually think. There is no way to make it through life without thinking (or acting as if) at least some things are morally true. We are confronted by unavoidable moral dilemmas: How should we live? How should we exercise influence (in the form of joining or supporting social groups or institutions, spending money, criticizing or praising the actions of others, and so forth)? And, most importantly, how should we employ the awful coercive power of the state (if we use it at all)? Regardless of what we think about terms such as “truth,” “objective truth,” or “absolute truth,” the moral beliefs we live by are *true enough* to structure our lives around and even, in certain cases, to use coercive force to defend or advance. (And those who think the use of coercive force is always wrong are some of the strongest believers in moral truth, as only such a belief could compel someone to stand back and do nothing while those one loves are killed.) As Michael Sandel notes, “For all our uncertainties about ultimate questions of political philosophy—of justice and value and the nature of the good life—the one thing we know is that we live *some* answer all the time.”<sup>56</sup> Further, it doesn’t seem to help matters much to deny we believe our reasons are true. Imagine saying to a man put in jail for some infraction, “Don’t worry—we don’t actually believe in moral truth in this country!” If it is true enough to lock up a man for life or to use lethal police or military force to defend, it is true for *literally* all practical purposes.

And believing in moral truth does not require that we “impose” all of our beliefs on others. I believe people ought to be grateful, but I would strongly resist a law that tried to coerce gratitude from the ungrateful. That something is morally true, by itself, is not enough to force others to do it.<sup>57</sup> Considerations of feasibility, effectiveness, and a due respect for individual conscience will weigh against using coercive force in many circumstances.



When pressed, some people who initially deny believing in moral truth will eventually confess to believing in some moral truths, such as that slavery or the Holocaust are wrong. (Those who do this sometimes appear to feel compromised, as if having moral beliefs is a dirty little secret that one would rather pretend is not there, but which one will admit to if it can no longer be plausibly denied). They then fall back on some version of John Stuart Mill's "harm principle:" that people should be able to do whatever they want so long as they do not harm other people.<sup>58</sup> This sounds simple enough, but it turns out that "harm" is actually quite difficult to get clear on. Evidence of this fact is Joel Fienberg's four-volume opus on the harm principle, the existence of which is a testament to just how complicated "harm" can be.<sup>59</sup> Take simply one contemporary dispute: if a Christian baker does not want to bake a cake for a same-sex wedding, how do we evaluate and weigh the harms done?<sup>60</sup> What is the precise harm suffered by the gay couple for not being able to buy a cake from that baker (presumably, it is beyond simply not getting the cake)? If the baker is forced to bake the cake, is she harmed for having to violate her conscience? Does it matter if the bakery is for-profit or non-profit (or religious)? Does it matter if there are other bakers within a reasonable distance that are willing to bake the cake? Does it matter if the bakery is willing to sell other goods to the gay couple, just not a wedding cake? Steven D. Smith has persuasively argued that the harm principle is a "receptive vessel into which advocates can pour virtually any content they like,"<sup>61</sup> meaning that the real work in moral disputes will be done by some set of background assumptions about what constitutes "harm" rather than by commonsensical notions of what harm is.

Proponents of autonomy might concede that, in some cases, some people will be imposed upon so that autonomy may be protected and promoted, but they may respond that autonomy doesn't impose moral values on people *as much as other moral theories do*, and thus it is superior. In other words, it does the least amount of imposing, and this makes it the best. But this line of thought is mistaken—the amount of "imposing" that needs to be done is entirely a matter of what the moral truth is and what moral wrongs need to be righted. When I hear this argument, I think of a conversation I once had with a friend. He said that what made John Locke's political theory so great is that his list of rights is so short: only life, liberty, and property. After we talked I had the thought: if having a short list is a good thing, we could make Locke's list even shorter—just take off one of the rights! But, presumably, what makes

Locke's list good is that it is short *without leaving off anything essential*, which means shortness, by itself, is not a virtue of lists of rights. The same point applies to moral reasoning generally: we ought to believe in all moral truths—no more, no less.

### **Conclusion: If You Don't Believe in Moral Truth, Why Are You So Upset about Injustice?**

I should be clear that in this essay I am not actually defending a theory of moral truth. What I am trying to do is demonstrate that, despite what many people say or imply these days, almost everyone believes in moral truth. More specifically, in this paper I hope to blunt the rhetorical force of statements which imply that the problem is belief in moral truth. Religious people in particular seem to be the targets of such rhetoric<sup>62</sup> because religions are generally committed to *something* (i.e., some doctrine, belief, or orthodoxy), and it is precisely this commitment to something that offends the autonomous aspiration to be perpetually free, open, and unlimited by any unchosen "truths." Too often, religious people let the implicit self-contradictions and evasions of nonjudgmental moral concepts go unchallenged. Though I do not believe that those who use nonjudgmental moral concepts do so in bad faith,<sup>63</sup> it is still the case that those who use such concepts do get an immense (and undeserved) amount of mileage out of asserting that we should just be more "open," "tolerant," and respect other people's "autonomy," as if moral belief itself ought to be reduced to a minimum (and perhaps eliminated). But it is only moral belief which could motivate this project in the first place, so moral beliefs can't be the problem.

Though the phrase "nonjudgmental moral concepts" serves as a useful label for the ideas I have been discussing, it turns out to be a contradiction in terms. All moral concepts mark off boundaries between right and wrong, good and bad (or their equivalents). Once one is committed to a moral belief, the real discussion focuses not on whether there is moral truth, but what the content of moral truth is. My plea is that we drop the charade and acknowledge that we're engaged in the same pursuit of trying to get clear on moral truth. There will be moral values that we live by and enforce, and the only real question is: which moral values will they be? My answer is simple: we ought to live by the true ones. **RE**

## Notes

1. Christian Smith, *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Referenced by Thomas S. Monson, "Dare to Stand Alone," *Ensign*, November 2011, 60. "Emerging adults" are eighteen- to twenty-three-year-olds.
2. Smith, *Lost in Transition*, 21.
3. Smith, *Lost in Transition*, 57.
4. Dallin H. Oaks, "Balancing Truth and Tolerance," *Ensign*, February 2013, 25–31;
- D. Todd Christofferson, "Free Forever, to Choose for Themselves," *Ensign*, November 2014, 16–19; Neal A. Maxwell, "Deny Yourselves of All Ungodliness," *Ensign*, May 1995, 66–68.
5. Oaks, "Balancing Truth and Tolerance," 25.
6. Joseph Ratzinger, "Homily of His Eminence, Card. Joseph Ratzinger, Dean of the College of Cardinals," 2005, [http://www.vatican.va/gpII/documents/homily-pro-eligendo-pontifice\\_20050418\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/gpII/documents/homily-pro-eligendo-pontifice_20050418_en.html).
7. David Lowenthal, *No Liberty for License: The Forgotten Logic of the First Amendment* (Dallas: Spence, 1997).
8. Similar concepts would include dissent, contestation, nondiscrimination, and so forth.
9. Stanley Fish, *The Trouble with Principle* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 103.
10. As with many other contested concepts in moral philosophy, "autonomy" has been identified with many things, including "self-legislation of moral laws, self-creation, self-authorship, the Socratic life examined, self-determination, sovereignty, authenticity, integrity, freedom from outside influence, freedom from obligations, independence, individuality, simple freedom, simple agency, or the basic capacity to make choices." Rob Reich, *Bridging Liberalism and Multiculturalism in American Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 96.
11. See Sarah Buss, "Personal Autonomy," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2014 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/personal-autonomy/>.
12. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), available at <http://www.justiceharvard.org/resources/immanuel-kant-groundwork-for-the-metaphysics-of-morals-1785/>.
13. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1971).
14. Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 154–57.
15. For a critique, see Robert P. George, *Making Men Moral: Civil Liberties and Public Morality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 129–60.
16. Ronald Dworkin, "Is There a Right to Pornography?" *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 1 (1981), 177–212.
17. On counting blades of grass, see Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 432.
18. Desert is one option, but is explicitly rejected by Rawls and other theorists of autonomy.
19. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 75–83, 90–95.
20. See Louis P. Pojman, "On Equal Human Worth: A Critique of Contemporary Egalitarianism," in *Equality: Selected Readings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), ed. Louis P. Pojman and Robert Westmoreland, 282–99; Peter Westen, "The Empty Idea of Equality," *Harvard Law Review* 95 (1982): 537–96.

21. See Alan Wolfe, *Moral Freedom: The Impossible Idea that Defines the Way We Live Now* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2001); and Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
22. Christian Smith, *The Sacred Project of American Sociology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 7–8. I realize that Smith is speaking specifically about American sociology, but I believe the description has relevance far beyond the discipline of sociology or even academia.
23. David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 21. See also D. Todd Christofferson, "Free Forever," 18: "To those who believe anything or everything could be true, the declaration of objective, fixed, and universal truth feels like coercion—'I shouldn't be forced to believe something is true that I don't like.' But that does not change reality. . . ."
24. Steven D. Smith, *The Rise and Decline of American Religious Freedom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 138.
25. See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), chapter 1.
26. Useful works in this area are Taylor, *Sources of the Self*; Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007); Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007); James Lincoln Collier, *The Rise of Selfishness in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987); Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); David Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000); Stephen D. Smith, *The Constitution and the Pride of Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).
27. See Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 4.
28. See *The Secular Revolution: Power, Interests, and Conflict in the Secularization of American Public Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), ed. Christian Smith, "Introduction," 9–12.
29. See Richard Creath, "Logical Empiricism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2014), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/logical-empiricism/>.
30. Edward A. Purcell, Jr., *The Crisis of Democratic Theory: Scientific Naturalism and the Problem of Value* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky), 27.
31. Purcell, *The Crisis of Democratic Theory*, 41–42.
32. Quoted in Purcell, *The Crisis of Democratic Theory*, 148.
33. Purcell, *The Crisis of Democratic Theory*, 157–58. Here Hutchins is referring to Legal Realism, the view that the job of legal analysis is to predict what judges will do, not what they should do.
34. Purcell, *The Crisis of Democratic Theory*, 200; see John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1920).
35. David Ciepley, *Liberalism in the Shadow of Totalitarianism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 189–90.
36. Purcell, *The Crisis of Democratic Theory*, 203.
37. *West Virginia v. Barnette*, 319 US 624 (1943).

38. Smith, *The Rise and Decline of American Religious Liberty*, 137.
39. See Susan Strasser, *Satisfaction Guaranteed: The Making of the Mass American Market* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989); William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993).
40. B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy: Work Is Theatre and Every Business a State* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1999).
41. Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Warner Books, 1979), 137–38.
42. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 478–79.
43. Kevin Roberts, *Lovemarks: The Future Beyond Brands* (New York: Powerhouse Books, 2004), 66, 74.
44. “You do not only buy an object: you buy social respect, discrimination, health, beauty, success, power to control your environment. The magic obscures the real sources of general satisfaction because their discovery would involve radical change in the whole common way of life.” Raymond Williams, “Advertising: The Magic System” in *The Advertising and Consumer Culture Reader*, ed. Joseph Turlow and Matthew P. McAllister (New York: Routledge, 2009), 23; Vance Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders* (New York: David McKay Company, 1957), 8.
45. “Market capitalism was hostile; no immigrant culture—and, to a considerable degree, no religious tradition—had the power to resist it, as none can in our time. Any group that has come to this country has had to learn to accept and to adjust to this elemental feature of American capitalist culture.” Leach, *Land of Desire*, 5.
46. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 30.
47. Feminist therapy is a notable exception.
48. Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006 [1966]), 25.
49. Abraham H. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 46.
50. Abraham H. Maslow, “Existential Psychology—What’s in It for Us?,” in *Existential Psychology*, ed. Rollo May (New York: Random House, 1960), 50.
51. Carl Rogers, *Client-Centered Therapy: Its Current Practice, Implications, and Theory* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1951), 29.
52. See, generally, Steve Vincent, *Being Empathic: A Companion for Counselors and Therapists* (Oxford: Radcliffe, 2005). For a critique, see Christina Hoff Sommers and Sally Satel, *One Nation Under Therapy: How the Helping Culture Is Eroding Self-Reliance* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2005), 68–71.
53. Eva Moskowitz, *In Therapy We Trust: America’s Obsession with Self-Fulfillment* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001).
54. Sommers and Satel, *One Nation Under Therapy*. See also Alan Petigny, *The Permissive Society: America, 1941–1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), chapter 1; Ellen Herman, *The Romance of American Psychology: Political Culture in the Age of Experts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).
55. Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*.
56. Michael Sandel, “The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self,” *Political Theory* 12 (1984): 81.
57. “Now human law is framed for a number of human beings, the majority of whom are not perfect in virtue. Wherefore human laws do not forbid all vices, from which the virtuous

abstain, but only the more grievous vices, from which it is possible for the majority to abstain; and chiefly those that are to the hurt of others, without the prohibition of which human society could not be maintained: thus human law prohibits murder, theft, and suchlike.” Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I–II, q. 96, a. 2.

58. “The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.” John Stuart Mill, *The Basic Writings of John Stuart Mill*, ed. Dale E. Miller (New York: Modern Library, 2002 [1859]), 11.

59. Joel Fienberg’s four-volume work titled *The Moral Limits of the Criminal Law* includes *Harm to Others*, *Offense to Others*, *Harm to Self*, and *Harmless Wrongdoing* (New York: Oxford, 1984–90).

60. For a discussion of this and similar controversies, see Ryan T. Anderson, *Truth Overruled: The Future of Marriage and Religious Freedom* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2015), 85–104.

61. Steven D. Smith, *The Disenchantment of Secular Discourse* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 104.

62. E.g., Robert Boston, *Taking Liberties: Why Religious Freedom Doesn’t Give You the Right to Tell Other People What to Do* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2014).

63. That is, I do not think they intend to use self-contradictory moral concepts; such concepts are simply a part of our public culture of reason-giving and -taking.