

American Education: The Hundred Years War

On its surface, the process of educating our children appears to be fairly straightforward. First, you must determine what kind of person you want to produce at the end of their formal schooling. In other words, decide what it means to be an educated person. Then, you establish what knowledge and attitudes will accomplish this goal. Next, hire an administrator who has the ability to pull together all the necessary components; someone who knows the best, scientifically verified, teaching techniques and the best optimum environment for implementation. Finally, give the principal or headmaster the authority to hire gifted teachers who can successfully do the job or to fire teachers who cannot. There's only one problem with this simple formula: educators disagree on how to complete every one of these steps. To make matters worse, education is one of the most expensive responsibilities that our government fulfills.

In the last forty years, spending in the U.S. on K-12 education has more than doubled. In 1970 it was \$221 billion; by 2008 it rose to \$556 billion in constant dollars.[\[1\]](#) During that forty year period, enrollment has changed very little, rising from about fifty-one million to fifty-three million students. So essentially, spending today is twice the amount we spent in 1970 on about the same number of students. Naturally, one would expect to see significant gains in learning for that money. However according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress Scores, not much has changed. For the last forty years scores have remained flat. Reading scores for seventeen-year-olds have remained at 285 out of 500, and mathematics scores went from 300 to 306, a minor improvement.[\[2\]](#)

Many argue that the reason we are not making progress in our

schools is that we are using the wrong playbook. Because our educational leaders have bought into a philosophy of education based on a faulty view of human nature, they have endorsed techniques in the classroom that have marginal impact at best. This situation has not gone on without being contested. Historians of education point to a struggle going back to the beginning of the twentieth century between two factions that have very different ideas about what it means to be human and what the goal of education should be. Most Americans would be surprised to learn that there has been a century-long struggle between two distinct ways of thinking about how to educate our children.

In what follows we will look at the opposing worldviews of these two education camps and consider how their struggles have impacted our children. Join us as we look at the effect of what might be called the Hundred Years War in American education.

Progressive Orthodoxy

Education historian Diane Ravitch argues that at the end of the nineteenth century, America was facing two possible educational paths. One path led to an academic curriculum consisting of history, literature, science and mathematics, language, and the arts for all high school students. The other path endorsed a vocational emphasis for most, and an academic training only for a few.

Criticism of the academic curriculum came from pragmatic business leaders and faculty members of our newly formed colleges of education that had recently sprung up across the nation. These so-called “progressive” educators felt that schools should be focused on the needs of society and students rather than centered on the traditional content of an academic curriculum. This emphasis on making school more practical and student-centered reflects the thoughts and writings of Jean

Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau is considered by many to be one of the most influential thinkers on educational philosophy in Western culture. His book *Emile*, written in 1762, offered an extremely child-centered educational method in response to the traditional content-focused curriculum of the day.

Rousseau's educational methods sprung from his faith in a particular worldview. One critical aspect of this worldview is that Rousseau believed that humans are "good" and that they naturally worship their Creator.^{3} He also argued that all we need to know about God can be learned from nature; any other source, including the Bible, would be seeking man's opinion and authority which always turns out to be destructive. Rousseau thanked God for making him free, good, and happy like God himself.^{4} Regarding education, it's not surprising that Rousseau valued freedom above all else. He wrote, "The truly free man wants only what he can do and does what he pleases. That is my fundamental maxim. It need only be applied to childhood for the rules of education to flow from it."^{5}

The result of Rousseau's worldview is predictable. The child, rather than his teacher, knows best how to learn and what to learn. This student-centered approach leads Rousseau to a strong opinion about books and reading. He brags that, "At twelve, Emile will hardly know what a book is." He adds, "I hate books, they only teach one to talk about what one does not know."^{6} His Emile will learn from life itself but only when the need for such learning comes from within.

For Rousseau, *natural man* is always superior to *civil man* and love of oneself is always good. This focus on freedom and student centered learning would influence educators for centuries and would find a warm reception in the minds of American educators in the progressive education movement.

Rousseau's Disciples

It's ironic that the most prestigious college of education in America, Teachers College at Columbia University, began as the Kitchen Garden Association in 1880 with the goal of training young girls to work as cooks and housemaids. Later, carpentry was added to attract boys and, as a result, the name was changed to the Industrial Education Association. In 1887 it was renamed the New York College for the Training of Teachers, and five years later just Teachers College. The opening of Teachers College marked the birth of the progressive education movement in America.

If Teachers College was the birthplace of progressive education, John Dewey was its father. Dewey was probably the most influential of all American philosophers and had an immense effect on how we think about education as a nation. He saw schools as a tool for social reform, and the goal of this reform was to replace Christianity with a new secular religion of democracy. To accomplish this goal, schools should turn from the traditional curriculum that encouraged abstract thinking and handing down the best ideas of Western Civilization, and instead base their activities on the needs and experiences of children in the home and community. Children should study problems and processes that mean something to them. Shop work, sewing, and cooking were a greater need than ancient languages, mathematics, history, or theology. As a result, books were downplayed and projects centering on vocational training become the mainstay of many public schools.

While Dewey saw the value of maintaining some of the traditional academic content, some of his disciples worked to have it removed completely. William Heard Kilpatrick took the mantle of leadership for the progressive education movement from Dewey as an immensely popular professor at Teachers College. His 1925 book *Foundations of Method* described an

educational philosophy that, to this day, still controls much of American education. It argued that we should simply teach children—to be child-centered, not subject-centered—because knowledge is changing so quickly and today’s subjects will be of no use tomorrow. It celebrated whole-language over phonics and critical thinking over rote learning, tests, and even report cards. His first opportunity to design an experimental class resulted in no set curriculum, no assigned reading, math or spelling work, and no tests.

Augustine and the Academic Tradition

For the last hundred years, the progressive education movement has promoted a child-centered curriculum as a necessary remedy against a dying books-and-content-centered form of schooling. This old order was often referred to as a “liberal education” or possibly the “academic tradition.” Which worldview undergirds this academic tradition in schooling?

Progressives and traditionalists have very different views of human nature. Rousseau and the progressives argue that humans are created happy, free, and good while traditionalists see things more like the fourth century Christian Augustine of Hippo. Augustine believed that all humans are born with a sin nature and a tendency to do evil. There is a famous passage in his *Confessions* in which he describes an incident in his youth where he and his friends stole and destroyed fruit from a nearby orchard because, as he writes, “I became evil for no reason. The only motive I had for this wickedness was the wickedness itself. It was disgusting, but I loved it.”^{7}

Augustine believed that wisdom did not come from within our fallen natures, but came from God and knowledge of his word. He argued that “we should be led by the fear of God to seek the knowledge of His will . . . it is necessary to have our hearts subdued by piety, and not run in the face of Holy Scripture.”^{8} While Augustine depended on God as a source for

wisdom, he acknowledged that teachers need to use good methods if they are going to shape the minds and hearts of their students. He asked the rhetorical question, Should the wicked “tell their falsehoods briefly, clearly and plausibly, while the latter [believers] tell the truth in such a way that it is tedious to listen to, hard to understand, and . . . not easy to believe it?”[\[9\]](#)

Augustine and those who followed in his tradition down through the centuries believed that children must be trained in the beliefs and disciplines that made for a civilized society. Not just any information or content would do. A truly educated person would receive a foundation of theological training that would inform all the other disciplines. The first universities in the eleventh and twelfth centuries continued to see theology as the queen of the sciences. Although theology was still center stage through the Renaissance and the Reformation, it was removed from its throne during the Enlightenment in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The progressive education movement’s efforts to reduce the influence of Christianity on schooling in America have been successful. During the 1960s and 70s the Supreme Court issued ruling after ruling that resulted in the secularization of our public schools. Parents would have to look elsewhere to have their children instructed in a Christian environment.

Why Does This Matter?

Even the progressive education leader John Dewey understood the need to transmit the best of one’s culture to the next generation through the process of education. He wrote, “Unless pains are taken to see that genuine and thorough transmission takes place, the most civilized group will relapse into barbarism and then into savagery.”[\[10\]](#) Dewey and his disciples planned to use this transmission process to change our culture dramatically.

Dewey's goal was to change the worldview upon which educational philosophy in America was grounded. He was convinced that the only intellectually responsible philosophy was a naturalistic one. This meant that education, ethics, politics, and life itself should be devoid of any hope in, or influence from, supernatural beliefs. As a result, he worked to replace America's faith in Christianity with faith in democracy, which he referred to as a religious belief. Revelation and religious authority would be replaced with the scientific method and this new faith in democracy.

Dewey was instrumental in breaking the connection to our past as a society. His followers took his lead, offering an even more radical break from the academic tradition. For instance William Heard Kilpatrick, a mathematician, argued that mathematics is "harmful" for ordinary living, and that dancing, dramatics, and doll playing offered more potential for educational growth.[{11}](#)

At the end of WWII, progressive ideology reigned supreme in American education. But even though the battle over educational philosophy had been won, its implementation would constantly be challenged. The Russian satellite Sputnik in the 1950s caused a temporary panic and a short lived re-emphasis on science and mathematics. But by then, the enrollment in science had already declined precipitously. For instance, fewer than five percent of high school students took physics in 1955, down from nearly twenty percent in 1900.[{12}](#)

By the late sixties, only the lucky few who scored well on IQ tests received an academic high school curriculum, and our universities had begun to give in to student demands for relevancy by gutting the required curriculum and adding less challenging, highly politicized programs like women's studies, Black studies, and peace studies. To some, it appeared as if adult supervision had disappeared from our university campuses.

In recent decades, parents have resorted to homeschooling and private schools in search of rigorous academics for their children. Others have pushed for charter schools and voucher programs to re-inject greater rigor in the public schools. But it appears that the hundred years war over educational philosophy will continue well into the future.

Notes

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3. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile or On Education*, trans. Alan Bloom (Basic Books, 1979), 278.
4. Ibid., 281.
5. Ibid., 84.
6. Ibid., 116.
7. Augustine, *Confessions* 2.4.9.
8. D. Bruce Lockerbie, *A Passion For Learning* (Moody Press, 1994), 78.
9. Ibid., 80.
10. E. D. Hirsch, *The Schools We Need*, 120.
11. Diane Ravitch, *Left Back* (Simon & Schuster, 2000), 181.
12. Ibid., 350.

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A President's Educational

Choice

An Important Choice

With each presidential election Americans are called to reflect upon public policy, ranging from military funding to education reform. Once the new president is chosen, everyone looks for evidence that he will move the federal bureaucracy in a direction favorable to their own agenda.

When it comes to education, President Obama has been difficult to figure out. In early speeches he seemed to favor dramatic reform. During the campaign he said:

We need a new vision for a 21st century education – one where we aren't just supporting existing schools, but spurring innovation; where we're not just investing more money, but demanding more reform; where parents take responsibility for their children's success; where our schools and government are accountable for results; where we're recruiting, retaining, and rewarding an army of new teachers, and students are excited to learn because they're attending schools of the future; and where we expect all our children not only to graduate high school, but to graduate college and get a good paying job.[*{1}*](#)

Later, Obama appeared to move closer to those who already hold sway over how our schools operate, especially the teachers unions. An indication of this trend was the sound of relief voiced by Marty Hittelman, president of the California Federation of Teachers, who said, "It's such a clear change from what we've had. . . . Someone who's friendly to labor. . . . Someone who wants to work with teachers."[*{2}*](#) Obama has also signaled encouragement to the unions by appointing a teacher-friendly Stanford University professor to lead his education transition team.

But sometimes personal action speaks louder than political appointments. Our new president has decided to send his two children, Malia Anne and Natasha, to a well known private school in Washington, D.C. The Obama children will attend Sidwell Friends School, a private Quaker affiliated school that charges \$29,000 a year per student. Some are criticizing the Obama family for not supporting the local public schools. As a supporter of educational freedom, and choice, I personally have no problem with the president choosing the best educational setting for his children. I would do the same.

What interests me is what this choice says about President Obama's thoughts regarding educational excellence. Sidwell Friends School violates key principles that the teachers unions and other public school supporters tell us are necessary elements for excellent schools, programs and policies that reformers insist taxpayers should be providing for every student in America.

Ensuring an adequate education for all of our children is a matter of justice that Christians should be concerned about. In what follows I will look at these so-called educational necessities the teachers unions and other public school supporters demand.

What Sidwell Needs

President Obama's decision to place his daughters in Sidwell reveals something about what he thinks it takes to provide a superior education. Choosing this expensive private school raises interesting questions about President Obama's support of what might be called the "common wisdom" that public school leaders and teachers unions tell us is necessary for good schools.

Much of the following was brought to my attention by Mike

Antonucci who writes a monthly newsletter for those who are concerned about education in America and particularly the role that the unions play in shaping it. Antonucci points out six areas in which the Sidwell School might be seen as deficient by our leading reformers and especially by the teachers unions.

According to the National Education Association, the largest teachers union in the country, the first deficiency at Sidwell is obvious. On its web site the NEA argues that “the attainment and exercise of collective bargaining rights are essential to the promotion of education employee and student needs in society.”[\[3\]](#) In other words, the school simply must be unionized. How can Sidwell School hope to effectively educate students without a collective bargaining agreement? It boggles the mind to think that they can educate President Obama’s children without such necessities as union agency fees, binding arbitration, grievance procedures, and most important, teachers strikes!

How can real education occur in the absence of an angry battle between a well financed teachers union and a harried entrenched school administration? Can real learning happen in the absence of endless hours of negotiations over every aspect of the curriculum, the daily schedule, and teacher placement? Doesn’t the president know that a hostile, confrontational working environment actually improves the educational process?

In addition to this remarkable neglect, the Sidwell School forces its teachers to pay between ten and forty percent of their health care insurance premiums, contribute towards their own retirement plan, and almost unbelievably receive only two personal days off per school year. Barbaric! Everyone knows that teachers are only concerned about compensation and benefits and if they do not receive an amount above the median level paid out by other schools of similar size, they simply can’t function. These teachers are obviously being coerced to remain at this school. And to think that some have suggested

that the opportunity to work with motivated students and supportive parents in building a strong learning community might be more important than financial rewards.

More Problems with Sidwell

A key ingredient missing from the Sidwell experience will be an appropriate level of diversity. To many, diversity has become the ultimate good in education. Millions upon millions of taxpayer dollars have been spent to create highly diverse student bodies across the nation. Without a high level of diversity, it's argued, students will not develop the necessary degree of tolerance, both for people and ideas, needed for our society to prosper or even exist into the future. A diversity deficit might result in the president's children coming to the frightening conclusion that truth itself isn't diverse and that perhaps we should not accept all ideas equally.

Although the Sidwell School has a significant level of diversity – thirty-nine percent of the students are part of an ethnic or racial minority group – Washington D. C. public schools are ninety-five percent ethnic and racial minorities. How can the president send his children to a learning environment that is so far behind the level of essential diversity prominent in our capitol's public schools? If some diversity is good, isn't more diversity better?

However, this deficit of diversity pales in comparison to the next problem. The Sidwell School is a Quaker institution. It has mandatory weekly worship meetings for all its students, including the president's children. This practice goes far beyond the legitimate academic objective of learning the history of religious traditions; it requires students to participate in a religious activity.

The official National Education Association's Web site makes

it clear that “encouraging or compelling students to participate in any religious activity, such as prayer, during any type of holiday festivity or classroom activity is forbidden.”{4} Now, if such activity is harmful to our public school students, does it make sense to expose the president’s children to them?

The NEA adds that while students may study various religious expressions and practices, they may do so “as long as schools make sure different faiths are represented in school-wide or classroom activities.”{5} Does Sidwell promote Islamic or Wiccan worship? Is our president setting a good example by allowing his children to be taught in such an intolerant setting?

Sidwell’s Curriculum

Here’s another problem. It appears that Sidwell is kind of old fashioned when it comes to its curriculum. Its Web site says, “We believe that to be effective, education must be founded on secure mastery of basic skills . . . We place strong emphasis on reading, personal expression of ideas through speaking and writing, and the mastery of computational and problem solving skills. We also encourage scientific exploration, artistic creativity, physical activity, second language acquisition.”{6} Basic skills? Mastery learning? Isn’t this a throwback to the education of the nineteenth century?

In the middle school, Sidwell’s history curriculum says that “Each history course is designed to provide students with a sound foundation of knowledge in a given subject area and to develop research, writing and interpretive skills.”{7} To many modern educators, this focus on acquiring information and developing mastery of essential skills is reminiscent of educational policies that have been out of vogue for decades.

Professional educators tend to endorse something called the

Progressive Education Movement. This movement emphasized a “naturalistic,” “project-oriented,” “hands-on,” “critical-thinking” curriculum and “democratic” education policies endorsed by the philosopher John Dewey.[{8}](#) Beginning early in the twentieth century, educators challenged the emphasis on subject matter and have attempted to replace it with what might be called the “tool” metaphor for learning.

The “tool” metaphor argues that students’ minds shouldn’t be filled with lots of facts, but instead should be taught how to learn. Although various arguments are used to promote this view, the one most often heard goes something like this: “Since knowledge is growing so quickly – in fact it’s exploding – we need to teach kids how to learn, not a bunch of facts that will quickly become outdated.” Education historian Lawrence Cremin writes that our elementary schools have been dominated by this metaphor since the 1960s, and that our secondary schools are not far behind.[{9}](#) The result of this monopoly has been a reduction of what might be called “intellectual capital,” an agreed upon set of necessary facts that all well educated people should possess.

The Sidwell School seems to believe that this so called intellectual capital is important. By stressing the acquisition of key information in its curriculum it is revealing a more traditional rather than progressive education. Can this antiquated curriculum possibly prepare the Obama children for the rapid changes of the twenty-first century?

Educational Excellence

It seems, then, that the Sidwell Friends School chosen by the Obama family for their daughters violates many of what is considered to be the “best practices” in the public school sector.

On the other hand, it represents many of the factors that we know make for a superior learning environment. Almost twenty years ago the Brookings Institution published a book that made a powerful argument regarding what makes for an effective school and what doesn't.[\[10\]](#) The author's conclusions were really not that surprising. In a nutshell they found that bureaucracy kills, and if public schools are anything they are bureaucratic. In fact, the study argued that private schools are usually more effective simply because they have greater autonomy than public schools.

Exercising this autonomy begins with an educational leader. The role of a private school headmaster is often quite different from the public school equivalent, the principal. The headmaster has much more autonomy in fashioning the educational vision for his school as well as the authority for executing it. This includes shaping the curriculum and hiring and firing teachers based on their effectiveness and support for the school's program. In the end, private school leaders have much greater power to fashion the kind of educational community they envision than do public school administrators.

Private school leaders also enjoy the freedom to create a disciplined environment necessary for learning to occur. Because parents have freely chosen a private school for their children to attend, they have already bought into the way the school chooses to structure its students' time and how it deals with distractions to learning. Parents of private school children tend to be much more supportive of the school's teachers and administrators as a result. This is not to say that private schools always get it right when establishing a disciplined learning environment, but parents always have the option of pulling out if they become disenchanted with the program. This educational choice both empowers private schools and encourages change as well. Parents vote for the programs that work and take their funds elsewhere when they feel the school is not a good fit for their children. Successful

schools are rewarded; others are encouraged to change.

Private schools succeed when the headmaster, teachers, parents, and children have worked together to create a learning community. As simple as this sounds, it can be life changing for the students involved. Even students from our most challenging urban environments have benefitted from schools that have been freed from their bureaucratic straitjackets. If we hope to impact our most needy students in this country, we will do so by encouraging policies that increase the autonomy of school leaders and empower parents by giving them the kind of educational choice that President Obama enjoyed when deciding to send his children to the Sidwell Friends School.

Notes

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9. Ibid., 49.

10. John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe, *Politics, Markets & America's Schools* (The Brookings Institution, 1990)

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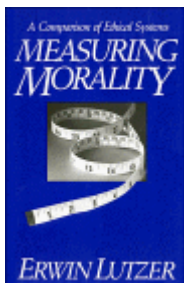
Cultural Relativism

Kerby Anderson presents the basics of cultural relativism and evaluates it from a Christian worldview perspective. Comparing the tenets of cultural relativism to a biblical view of ethics shows how these popular ideas fail the reasonableness test.

This article is also available in [Spanish](#).



John Dewey



Any student in a class on anthropology cannot help but notice the differences between various cultures of the world. Differences in dress, diet, and social norms are readily apparent. Such diversity in terms of ethics and justice are also easily seen and apparently shaped by the culture in which we live.

If there is no transcendent ethical standard, then often culture becomes the ethical norm for determining whether an action is right or wrong. This ethical system is known as *cultural relativism*.^{1} Cultural relativism is the view that all ethical truth is relative to a specific culture. Whatever

a cultural group approves is considered right within that culture. Conversely, whatever a cultural group condemns is wrong.

The key to cultural relativism is that right and wrong can only be judged relative to a specified society. There is no ultimate standard of right and wrong by which to judge culture.

A famous proponent of this view was John Dewey, often considered the father of American education. He taught that moral standards were like language and therefore the result of custom. Language evolved over time and eventually became organized by a set of principles known as grammar. But language also changes over time to adapt to the changing circumstances of its culture.

Likewise, Dewey said, ethics were also the product of an evolutionary process. There are no fixed ethical norms. These are merely the result of particular cultures attempting to organize a set of moral principles. But these principles can also change over time to adapt to the changing circumstances of the culture.

This would also mean that different forms of morality evolved in different communities. Thus, there are no universal ethical principles. What may be right in one culture would be wrong in another culture, and vice versa.

Although it is hard for us in the modern world to imagine, a primitive culture might value genocide, treachery, deception, even torture. While we may not like these traits, a true follower of cultural relativism could not say these are wrong since they are merely the product of cultural adaptation.

Clifford Gertz argued that culture must be seen as “webs of meaning” within which humans must live.[\[2\]](#) Gertz believed that “Humans are shaped exclusively by their culture and therefore there exists no unifying cross-cultural human

characteristics.”[{3}](#)

As we will see, cultural relativism allows us to be tolerant toward other cultures, but it provides no basis to judge or evaluate other cultures and their practices.

William Graham Sumner

A key figure who expanded on Dewey’s ideas was William Graham Sumner of Yale University. He argued that what our conscience tells us depends solely upon our social group. The moral values we hold are not part of our moral nature, according to Sumner. They are part of our training and upbringing.

Sumner argued in his book, *Folkways*: “World philosophy, life policy, right, rights, and morality are all products of the folkways.”[{4}](#) In other words, what we perceive as conscience is merely the product of culture upon our minds through childhood training and cultural influence. There are no universal ethical principles, merely different cultural conditioning.

Sumner studied all sorts of societies (primitive and advanced), and was able to document numerous examples of cultural relativism. Although many cultures promoted the idea, for example, that a man could have many wives, Sumner discovered that in Tibet a woman was encouraged to have many husbands. He also described how some Eskimo tribes allowed deformed babies to die by being exposed to the elements. In the Fiji Islands, aged parents were killed.

Sumner believed that this diversity of moral values clearly demonstrated that culture is the sole determinant of our ethical standards. In essence, culture determines what is right and wrong. And different cultures come to different ethical conclusions.

Proponents of cultural relativism believe this cultural diversity proves that culture alone is responsible for our

morality. There is no soul or spirit or mind or conscience. Moral relativists say that what we perceive as moral convictions or conscience are the byproducts of culture.

The strength of cultural relativism is that it allows us to withhold moral judgments about the social practices of another culture. In fact, proponents of cultural relativism would say that to pass judgment on another culture would be ethnocentric.

This strength, however, is also a major weakness. Cultural relativism excuses us from judging the moral practices of another culture. Yet we all feel compelled to condemn such actions as the Holocaust or ethnic cleansing. Cultural relativism as an ethical system, however, provides no foundation for doing so.

Melville Herskovits

Melville J. Herskovits wrote in *Cultural Relativism*: "Judgments are based on experience, and experience is interpreted by each individual in terms of his own enculturation."[\[5\]](#) In other words, a person's judgment about what is right and wrong is determined by their cultural experiences. This would include everything from childhood training to cultural pressures to conform to the majority views of the group. Herskovits went on to argue that even the definition of what is normal and abnormal is relative to culture.

He believed that cultures were flexible, and so ethical norms change over time. The standard of ethical conduct may change over time to meet new cultural pressures and demands. When populations are unstable and infant mortality is high, cultures value life and develop ethical systems to protect it. When a culture is facing overpopulation, a culture redefines ethical systems and even the value of life. Life is valuable and sacred in the first society. Mercy killing might become

normal and acceptable in the second society.

Polygamy might be a socially acceptable standard for society. But later, that society might change its perspective and believe that it is wrong for a man to have more than one wife. Herskovits believed that whatever a society accepted or rejected became the standard of morality for the individuals in that society.

He believed that “the need for a cultural relativistic point of view has become apparent because of the realization that there is no way to play this game of making judgment across cultures except with loaded dice.”^{6} Ultimately, he believed, culture determines our moral standards and attempting to compare or contrast cultural norms is futile.

In a sense, the idea of cultural relativism has helped encourage such concepts as multiculturalism and postmodernism. After all, if truth is created not discovered, then all truths created by a particular culture are equally true. This would mean that cultural norms and institutions should be considered equally valid if they are useful to a particular group of people within a culture.

And this is one of the major problems with a view of cultural relativism: you cannot judge the morality of another culture. If there is no objective standard, then someone in one culture does not have a right to evaluate the actions or morality of another culture. Yet in our hearts we know that certain things like racism, discrimination, and exploitation are wrong.

Evolutionary Ethics

Foundational to the view of cultural relativism is the theory of evolution. Since social groups experience cultural change with the passage of time, changing customs and morality evolve differently in different places and times.

Anthony Flew, author of *Evolutionary Ethics*, states his

perspective this way: "All morals, ideas and ideals have been originated in the world; and that, having thus in the past been subject to change, they will presumably in the future too, for better or worse, continue to evolve."[\[7\]](#) He denies the existence of God and therefore an objective, absolute moral authority. But he also believes in the authority of a value system.

His theory is problematic because it does not adequately account for the origin, nature, and basis of morals. Flew suggests that morals somehow originated in this world and are constantly evolving.

Even if we concede his premise, we must still ask, Where and when did the first moral value originate? Essentially, Flew is arguing that a value came from a non-value. In rejecting the biblical idea of a Creator whose character establishes a moral standard for values, Flew is forced to attempt to derive an *ought* from an *is*.

Evolutionary ethics rests upon the assumption that values are by nature constantly changing or evolving. It claims that it is of value that values are changing. But is *this* value changing?

If the answer to this question is no, then that would mean that moral values don't have to always change. And if that is the case, then there could be unchanging values (known as absolute standards). However, if the value that values change is itself unchanging, then the view is self-contradictory.

Another form of evolutionary ethics is *sociobiology*. E. O. Wilson of Harvard University is a major advocate of sociobiology, and claims that scientific materialism will eventually replace traditional religion and other ideologies.[\[8\]](#)

According to sociobiology, human social systems have been shaped by an evolutionary process. Human societies exist and

survive because they work and because they have worked in the past.

A key principle is the reproductive imperative.[{9}](#) The ultimate goal of any organism is to survive and reproduce. Moral systems exist because they ultimately promote human survival and reproduction.

Another principle is that all behavior is selfish at the most basic level. We love our children, according to this view, because love is an effective means of raising effective reproducers.

At the very least, sociobiology is a very cynical view of human nature and human societies. Are we really to believe that all behavior is selfish? Is there no altruism?

The Bible and human experience seem to strongly contradict this. Ray Bohlin's [article](#) on the Probe Web site provides a detailed refutation of this form of evolutionary ethics.[{10}](#)

Evaluating Cultural Relativism

In attempting to evaluate cultural relativism, we should acknowledge that we could indeed learn many things from other cultures. We should never fall into the belief that our culture has all the answers. No culture has a complete monopoly on the truth. Likewise, Christians must guard against the assumption that their Christian perspective on their cultural experiences should be normative for every other culture.

However, as we have already seen, the central weakness of cultural relativism is its unwillingness to evaluate another culture. This may seem satisfactory when we talk about language, customs, even forms of worship. But this non-judgmental mindset breaks down when confronted by real evils such as slavery or genocide. The Holocaust, for example, cannot be merely explained away as an appropriate cultural

response for Nazi Germany.

Cultural relativism faces other philosophical problems. For example, it is insufficient to say that morals originated in the world and that they are constantly changing. Cultural relativists need to answer how value originated out of non-value. How did the first value arise?

Fundamental to cultural relativism is a belief that values change. But if the value that values change is itself unchanging, then this theory claims an unchanging value that all values change and evolve. The position is self-contradictory.

Another important concern is conflict. If there are no absolute values that exist trans-culturally or externally to the group, how are different cultures to get along when values collide? How are we to handle these conflicts?

Moreover, is there ever a place for courageous individuals to challenge the cultural norm and fight against social evil? Cultural relativism seems to leave no place for social reformers. The abolition movement, the suffrage movement, and the civil rights movement are all examples of social movements that ran counter to the social circumstances of the culture. Abolishing slavery and providing rights to citizens are good things even if they were opposed by many people within society.

The Bible provides a true standard by which to judge attitudes and actions. Biblical standards can be used to judge individual sin as well as corporate sin institutionalized within a culture.

By contrast, culture cannot be used to judge right and wrong. A changing culture cannot provide a fixed standard for morality. Only God's character, revealed in the Bible provides a reliable measure for morality.

Notes

1. The general outline for this material can be found in chapter two of *Measuring Morality* (Richardson, Tx.: Probe Books, 1989).
2. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).
3. E. M. Zechenter, "Cultural Relativism and the Abuse of the Individual, *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 1997, 53:323.
4. William Graham Sumner, *Folkways* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1906), 76.
5. Melville J. Herskovits, *Cultural Relativism* (New York: Random House, 1973), 15.
6. Ibid., 56.
7. Anthony Flew, *Evolutionary Ethics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1968), 55.
8. E. O. Wilson, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975).
9. Robert Wallace, *The Genesis Factor* (New York: Morrow and Co., 1979).
10. Dr. Ray Bohlin, "[Sociobiology: Evolution, Genes and Morality](#)"