

Rights and Wrongs

Probe's founder, Jimmy Williams, discusses the true source of ethics.



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

During a recent meeting of college educators at Harvard University, Cornell President Frank Rhodes rose to address the issue of reforms, suggesting that it was time for universities to pay “real and sustained attention to students’ intellectual and moral well-being.” Immediately there were gasps, even catcalls. One indignant student stood to demand of Rhodes, “Who is going to do the instructing? Whose morality are we going to follow?” The audience applauded thunderously, believing that the young man had settled the issue by posing an unanswerable question. Rhodes sat down, unable or unwilling to respond.

This interchange between university president and college student hits at the most basic question in formulating any and every system of ethics, namely that of identifying the *basis* for determining the standards we humans designate as “right” or “wrong.”

What is ethics?

Ethics comes from the Greek word *ethos*, meaning, “what ought to be,” or, “a place of refuge,” such as a cave, solid and absolute. The dictionary defines ethics as

- (1) the study of standards of conduct and moral judgment, or
- (2) the system or code of morals of a particular philosopher, religion, group, etc.

Dr. Albert Schweitzer defined ethics as “the name we give for our concern for good behavior.”

Human Ethical Universality

No human lives without the ethical dimension. Statements like, "That's not fair," or "You promised," reveal the common ethical assumptions humans have come to expect of one another. This is not to say that each human always acts responsibly toward his fellows. In every culture we find individuals who choose to ignore the commonly held standards; they choose to rape, to steal, to kill. Breaking established standards is therefore a *relative* issue; that is, some do, and some don't. But an *absolute* is also involved: no one likes to be raped, robbed, or murdered.

OPTIONS FOR VALUES

One can say that every ethical value involves some standard of behavior, and every standard is defined in a *prescriptive* manner. Ethical standards are expressed in terms of "ought" and "should," or "ought not" and "should not." They transcend the language of *description*, speaking not only of "what is," but rather "what should be." Where do we find such standards? What kinds of foundational possibilities are available to us upon which to build an ethical system? The options are as follows:

The Natural Ethic (Nature)

"All nature is but art, unknown to thee;
All chance, direction which thou canst not see;
All discord, harmony not understood;
All partial evil, universal good;
And, spite of pride, in erring reason's spite,
One truth is clear, *whatever is, is right.*"

Alexander Pope

Definition: "Oughts" are derived from what "is."

Mortimer Adler called this an attempt "to get conclusions in

the imperative mood from premises entirely in the indicative mood." This view presupposes the origination of value is found in the facts, the observation of nature.

"What is ethically right is related *in some way* to what is materially true" (G. G. Simpson). Example: A man runs a red light. He cannot draw a conclusion of whether or not to run the red light without having an earlier presupposition or standard in place concerning that ethical choice: "One shouldn't run red lights."

Implications:

To have true moral values, people must get them from somewhere other than the actual world of description.

This view destroys the very concepts of good and evil, because "what is" contains both. To speak of good and evil becomes nonsensical. Charles Manson said, "If God is one, what is bad?" Baudelaire lamented, "If God exists he is the Devil."

This view does not answer the question of predatorial/survival life in nature. All that we call "human" would be destroyed if people practiced this natural ethic consistently and universally.

Not many hold this view seriously. T. H. Huxley admitted that though evolution is "true," it leads to bad ethics. Even evolutionists choose not to live in such a world. Instead, they philosophically smuggle Christian ethics arbitrarily into their system and hold it *romantically* upon their naturalistic base.

If we are to have ethics, we must find them outside the natural realm.

The Consensus Ethic (Majority Rule)

Definition: Whatever a cultural group approves of is deemed

right; whatever the group disapproves of is wrong. In America, we find the most popular expression of cultural relativism demonstrated in the opinion poll (e.g., the Clinton Scandal).

Implications:

The grand result of the Kinsey Report on American sexual ethics in the 1950's was that people bought the idea that if a *majority* of citizens accepted something as right or wrong, it was.

Cultural relativism claims to be based on a scientific view of morals. Admittedly, statistical analysis of human behavior is the true and proper task of sociologists. But within the discipline, unfortunately, there is, by design, or by inference, a strong tendency to make value judgments about the results of research. Sociology exists *only* to tell us *what* people are doing, not what they *should* be doing. True values must be found somewhere else.

Ethics by majority may actually have little to do with morality. A society can become corrupt. In New Guinea, for example, the tribe of Papuans have a 100 per cent majority in their view on the virtue of cannibalism. Does their unanimous consent on this issue make it moral? By such reasoning, if 51% of the German people assented to the extermination of Jewry by Hitler and his henchmen, then their actions were "right," and other cultures should have withheld any criticism of German sovereignty in their own internal affairs.

Cultural relativism is really "status-quoism," providing no strong motive for social change. It is also capricious over time. For example, in 1859, slavery in the United States was socially acceptable and abortion was illegal. Today, the reverse is true.

Those who prefer this ethical foundation must face one very dangerous fact: **If there is no standard by which society can be judged and held accountable, then society becomes the**

judge. When that happens, no one is safe—minorities, the unborn, the elderly, the handicapped, and perhaps even the blond-headed or the left-handed!

The Arbitrary Ethic (Power)

A teenager complains to her mother, “Why can’t I go out tonight?” Mom replies, “Because I say so!” No reason is given, other than that of the mother imposing her will on her daughter. This is the arbitrary, *de facto* use of power: “Might makes right.”

Definition: An individual or elitist group sets itself up as arbiter of values and uses the necessary force to maintain these values. Democratic consensus rules from below; arbitrary absolutists rule from above.

Critique:

The arbiter can be a dictator, a parliament, a supreme court, a political party, or any elite configuration which has the wherewithal to impose its will upon the populace.

What is enforced is based solely upon what the arbiter decides will be enforced. Emperor worship of the Roman Caesars brought persecution to Jews and Christians who refused to practice it. Plato’s Republic would be governed by its philosopher kings. The Catholic Inquisitors summarily tortured and executed unrepentant heretics. B. F. Skinner’s *Walden Two* utopia would be carefully managed by beneficent planners through total environmental control and behavior modification. Soviet Russia was ruthlessly governed by an all-powerful Central Committee and its KGB enforcers.

It is important to remember that such arbiters can make something *legal* but not *moral*. The 1972 *Roe v. Wade* decision legalizing abortion is the most pertinent contemporary example. The judges, choosing to ignore medical, legal, and religious precedents on the true humanity of the unborn, made

an arbitrary, pragmatic decision. This ruling was legal, but not necessarily moral.

The great flaw in this approach is that it presupposes great trust in those who govern. History has not confirmed the wisdom of placing such confidence in those who wield absolute power. The balancing of power in the U.S. Constitution between the various branches of government reflects the wariness of its Framers to give undue authority to any sole federal entity.

“Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely.” It leads to despotism, tyranny, and bondage.

The True Absolute (Transcendence)

“There are two ways in which the human machine goes wrong. One is when human individuals drift apart from one another, or else collide with one another and do one another damage, by cheating or bullying. The other is when things go wrong inside the individual when the different parts of him (his different faculties and desires and so on) either drift apart or interfere with one another. You can get the idea . . . if you think of us as a fleet of ships sailing in formation. The voyage will be a success only, in the first place, if the ships do not collide and get in one another’s way; and secondly, if each ship is seaworthy and has her engines in good order. As a matter of fact, you cannot have either of these two things without the other. If the ships keep on having collisions they will not remain seaworthy very long. On the other hand, if their steering gears are out of order they will not be able to avoid collisions. “But there is one thing we have not yet taken into account. We have not asked where the fleet is trying to get to. . . . And however well the fleet sailed, its voyage would be a failure if it were meant to reach New York and actually arrived at Calcutta.

“Morality, then, seems to be concerned with three things. Firstly, with fair play and harmony between individuals. Secondly, with what might be called tidying up or harmonizing the thing inside each individual. Thirdly, with the general purpose of human life as a whole: what man was made for? What course the whole fleet ought to be on? . . .”
(C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*)

Definition: C. S. Lewis has here identified the “three parts of morality,” the first two of which humans are well acquainted with: internal moral deficiencies and conflict with others through ethical choices. It is the *third* part for which all humans desperately need and long, namely, some *objective* standard to which all humans must adhere. Such a standard necessarily *transcends* the world of description. It presupposes that God exists and has spoken, or *revealed* such standards. The true absolute contends that the Creator of man AND nature has given such values that are commensurate with the way He made us and appropriate to people’s problems and aspirations.

Example: The Ten Commandments provide the boundaries for the definition of humanness; any act contrary to this true absolute is a violation of our humanity. Further, these standards are not merely *external* principles, but rather the very essence of the nature and character of God.

Implications:

Some things are **right**; some are **wrong**, and objectively so. This ethical system is based on *normative* principles rather than subjective, *utilitarian* ones.

It also provides a basis for conviction: what was right yesterday will be right today. The individual is protected against the *whole* of society—wicked kings, pragmatic judges, corrupt politicians, and decadent populace.

There is also a true and legitimate motive for fighting evil,

an objective basis for social change.

ETHICAL SYSTEMS BUILT ON THE ABOVE

Natural Ethic

1. Behaviorism

All of our actions are the result of either our genetic make-up (see Probe articles [“Human Nature”](#) and [“Sociobiology: Evolution, Genes and Morality”](#)) or our environment.

Premises:

This system presupposes that nothing exists beyond the material realm.

What is called **mind** is reduced to physical and chemical reactions.

We cannot act upon the world; rather, the world acts upon us.

Critique:

There can be no human responsibility for actions.

And yet, behaviorists themselves appeal to a standard of justice when wronged.

Contrary to the contention of the behaviorists, there *are* both philosophical reasons and scientific evidence to support the belief that we do possess an immaterial substance.

2. Darwinism

3. Marxism

Humanistic Systems

1. Cultural Relativism, consensus (See above)

2. Arbitrary Absolute (See Above)

3. Situation Ethics

This system seeks to use the rules whenever they are useful, but it discards them if they happen to conflict with love. Joseph Fletcher is the chief proponent.

Premises:

The sole arbiter of morality in any situation is love; it is the *only* absolute, according to Fletcher.

Love should be defined in utilitarian terms. William James said, "What works is right." Actions should be judged by whether or not they contribute to the greatest good for the greatest number (lifeboat ethics).

The end justifies the means.

Critique:

Everyone may have a different opinion of what is loving or unloving in a given situation. If "love" is an absolute, humanity has a very difficult time in applying it to real life. Thus, morality is reduced to a matter of personal preference: "It all depends upon your point of view."

If morality is based on the consequences, we have to be able to predict with accuracy these consequences if we want to know whether or not we are acting morally. In short, one would have to BE God in order to always do the loving thing ahead of time.

4. Emotive Ethics

In this view nothing is literally right or wrong; these terms are simply expressions of personal emotion and as such are neither true nor false.

Premises:

When we speak of good or evil, these remain simply expressions of our own subjective feelings about what we have encountered or experienced.

We can **describe**, but we cannot **prescribe**.

Thus, all actions are morally neutral.

Critique:

The most an emotivist can say is, "I don't *like* other ethical theories. I *like* my own opinion on this issue."

Emotivists cannot verify their assumption that the only meaningful utterances are statements of factual or personal observation and preference. Some other meaningful system for true moral acts may exist beyond their experience and myopic world view.

5. Hedonism

Hedonists, like emotivists, are individually directed along the lines of their personal choices and desires. The hedonist (or Epicurean), however has a goal in mind: the pursuit of pleasure. Epicurus (341-270 B.C.) believed that there were two primary choices in life—to experience either pain or pleasure. His philosophy is based on avoiding the former at all costs and relentlessly pursuing the latter with no consideration given to the consequences upon others. This, "If it feels good, do it," mentality fits well today in a society which stresses that the individual (me) is most important.

6. Pantheism

The ethical system which flows out of pantheism and new age thinking is similar to both emotivism and hedonism, and is really more *humanistic* than *theistic*. While Christian theism is God-centered, and naturalism is man-centered, pantheism is world-centered. But the focus is still upon man, and the world becomes god. In pantheism, man and nature become one, and

together become the only "god" which exists. Man thus becomes his own god; he *is* god, or at least a part of god. Ethics becomes, then, those choices which keep one in harmony with the "cosmic oneness," and salvation comes from looking *within* to maintain that harmony. This process, like all Eastern Mysticism, tends to blur reality and the ethical distinctions of "right" and "wrong."

Inadequate Absolutes: The Moral Dilemma

In summary, there are two reasons why man, acting autonomously, cannot establish a valid and satisfying moral theory on either naturalistic or humanistic moral theory.

The scientific method is limited.

Science can collect facts, but these pieces of information cannot tell us what we *ought* to do. It ignores the very real possibility that something real exists beyond the natural world, and it is thus doomed to look *within* its own self-defined "closed system" for an adequate ethical base. Unfortunately, none honestly exists, philosophically, except the natural law of nature, "red in tooth and claw."

Relativism is always self-contradictory.

Although relativism disclaims the existence of absolutes, it must assume the existence of an absolute by which other theories can be judged. The problem today is that society has abandoned belief in a transcendent, absolute truth, a morally binding source of authority that is above our rights as individuals. To modern man, then, there is no absolute other than perhaps the belief that "there are no absolutes," which is itself a contradiction.

It assumes there are no intrinsic values, yet it must assume that intrinsic values exist whenever it gives guidance in making moral decisions.

If ends and means are relative, regardless of the ethical system preferred, ones own point of reference must also be in flux.

FOUNDATIONS OF CHRISTIAN ETHICAL ABSOLUTES

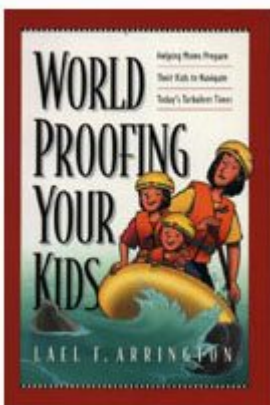
1. It is based on an authority higher than man (Creator God) and *revelation*, rather than human experience, both individually or collectively.
2. The absolute standard for morality is God Himself, and every moral action must be judged in the light of His nature.
3. Man is not simply an animal, but a unique, moral being created in the image of God.
4. God's moral revelation has intrinsic value; it is *normative* rather than *utilitarian*. If the above is true, a homeless person possesses the same God-given worth as the president of the United States.
5. Scripture is accepted as morally authoritative, the Word of God, being derived from God.
6. In the Scriptures, law and love are harmonized, and obedience to God's laws is not legalism.
7. God's moral revelation was given for the benefit of humankind.
8. These moral principles are timeless, having historical continuity, and humans—individually or collectively—experience the common grace of God whenever and wherever they are adhered to.
9. True Christian morality deals with intentions, as well as actions, seeks the glory of God instead of pleasure and self-gratification, and encourages service to others, rather than

serving self.

God alone knows all the goals, determines all morality, and allows us to “play the game.” But he does not allow us to make the rules. Modern and postmodern man, seemingly loosed from such transcendent restrictions, has chosen to make up his own. The folly of such a reference point for life is everywhere apparent.

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Worldproofing Our Kids



Lael Arrington has written a truly wonderful and exceptionally helpful book, *Worldproofing Your Kids*, [\[1\]](#) subtitled “Helping Moms Prepare Their Kids to Navigate Today’s Turbulent Times.” While she ostensibly wrote it for moms, any Christian parent who cares about helping his or her child develop a Christian worldview will enjoy it . . . and probably learn a thing or two (or three) in the process.

Lael has raised five questions that Christian parents would be wise to keep in mind, so we can relate them to what happens in our kids’ world and in the world at large. In teachable moments, we can help our kids to think through and then *own* their answers to these questions:

1. *Who makes the rules?*
2. *How do we know what is true?*
3. *Where did we come from?*
4. *What are we supposed to be doing here?*
5. *Where are we going?*

The first question truly is foundational, not just to the other questions but to a basic Christian worldview: Who makes the rules?

Who Makes the Rules?

As a nation, we used to believe that God makes the rules, and through special revelation He told us what they are. But there has been a shift in the culture, and now there are a great many people who “do not believe that moral truth is universal and final. They do not believe in special revelation from God that lays down what is morally right and wrong for all people for all time. They believe that . . . ultimately, *man makes the rules.*”[\[2\]](#)

We need to talk with our children about the consequences of each answer. When man makes the rules, when “everyone does what is right in his own eyes” (Judg. 21:25), there are dreadful consequences. Sometimes the strong and powerful lord it over the weak and defenseless. Sometimes, when man makes the rules, everything breaks down into chaos. In *Worldproofing Your Kids*, Lael Arrington provides some wonderful activities to help develop the elements of a Christian worldview. For example, she suggests we watch a video of *Alice in Wonderland* with our kids, and she provides some excellent discussion questions to bring out the consequences of what happens when anybody and everybody can make the rules.

The bottom line to communicate to our kids is that much of the

pain and suffering in this life is the result of making our own rules and violating God's.

But when we agree that God has the right to make the rules, and we follow them, life works the way it was designed. That's because there are good reasons for the rules. We need to give our kids the "whys" behind God's commands. In his book *Right from Wrong*, {3} Josh McDowell explains that God's loving heart makes rules designed to do two things: *protect* and *provide* for us. Our kids need to talk with us about *why* God doesn't want us to have sex before marriage—because purity protects our hearts and bodies, and purity provides a better sexual relationship within marriage. We need to talk to our kids about *why* God tells us not to cheat and lie: because He is truth, and He knows that honesty and truth telling protects us from the pain of lies and provides for a peace filled life.

The goal is not just to teach our kids that God makes the rules, but to choose to submit to those rules because it's the right thing to do . . . and because it will make life work better.

How Do We Know What Is True?

Truth has taken a beating.

The Christian view of truth is a belief in truth that is true for all people at all times: absolute truth. The western world used to believe that all truth was God's truth. After the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, which produced the byword "Man is the measure of all things," truth became secular. People believed that there is a body of real truth "out there" that can be discovered through our reason. God was no longer a part of it.

Now we've moved to the postmodern view of truth. There is no such thing as "true truth," nothing that is true for all people at all times. Truth is now what I make it. Truth is

whatever works for me. I create truth based on my feelings and experience.

So when we say things like “The only way to heaven is by trusting Jesus Christ,” we get responses like, “You narrow minded bigot!” and “That may be true for you, but it’s not true for me.” And the classic postmodern response to just about anything: “Whatever!”

How do we help our kids know what is true?

First, we start with the foundational truth of our lives: God’s Word. Remember, it’s not just a body of truth, it is *alive* and *active* (Heb. 4:12). We teach them the Bible’s strongest truth claims: In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1:1); people are infinitely valuable (Isa. 43:4); we have a sin problem and we need a savior (Rom. 3:22-24); Jesus claims to be God (Mark 14:62, among others [{4}](#)). Our kids need to know the truth before they can spot a lie.

Second, we teach them not to be afraid of criticism from those who do not believe in truth. Those who trumpet a postmodern worldview don’t live by it, because it doesn’t match the real world we live in. People who sneer at Christians for insisting that there is such a thing as absolute truth still stop at red lights, and they expect everybody else to do the same. They may say they decide what is true for them, but they don’t try to pay for their groceries with a one-dollar bill and insist that, for them, it’s worth a hundred dollars.

Third, we can strengthen our kids’ confidence in the truth by teaching them logic. Begin with the simplest rule of logic: A does not equal non-A. Two opposite ideas cannot both be true. One can be true, they can both be false, but they can’t both be true. Teach them to recognize red herrings, ad hominem arguments, and begging the question. Get Philip Johnson’s terrific book, *Defeating Darwinism by Opening Minds*, [{5}](#) which

has a great chapter called ["Tuning Up Your Baloney Detector."](#) He covers several false arguments.

Make it a game: "Spot the lie." Help them identify songs, movies, TV shows, advertisements, and articles that contain errors in logic or which go against biblical truth. Encourage them to recognize when people make up private meaning for words. Postmodern people who believe they can create their own truth say things like "Well, that depends on what the meaning of the word *is* is."

Truth matters to God, because He is truth. We need to teach our kids that it should matter to us as well.

Where Did We Come From?

I especially appreciated the way Arrington explained the importance of addressing the worldview question, "Where did we come from?" and the closely related question, "Who are we?" She points out that the way we answer these questions will also determine how we deal with the issues of animal rights, abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia.

The "Where did we come from?" question isn't about sex and the stork; it's about creation and evolution. There are really only two basic answers. Either God made us, or we are an accident of the universe, the unplanned product of matter plus chance plus time.

If God made us, then we are infinitely valuable and intrinsically significant because God personally called each of us into existence. And not only are we valuable and loved, but every other human on the planet is equally valuable and loved. If evolution is true—defining evolution as the mindless, impersonal chance process that produces the stuff of the universe—then there is no point to our existence. We have no value because there is no value giver. Honest evolutionists recognize this: Cornell professor William Provine has said,

"If evolution is true then there is no such thing as life after death, there is no ultimate foundation for ethics, no ultimate meaning for life; there is no free will."[\[6\]](#)

We come hard wired from the factory with a longing for transcendence, desperately wanting to be a part of a larger story where we are beloved and pursued. We long to know that there is meaning to the world and to our lives. We come equipped with an innate sense of fairness and justice, concepts that have no meaning in a world without a God who is absolutely just and moral.

As parents, we need to tap into these basic longings to teach our children that only the creation story adequately explains our legitimate thirst for relationship and for significance, for fairness and for transcendence. Then we can explain how the creation story (and I define story as "the way things happened," not "wishful thinking") also helps us understand other issues. We can teach our kids that it is not murder to use the flesh of animals for food and the skin of animals for clothing because animals are not like humans; only human beings are made in the image of God. We need to be good stewards of the animals that God made, but not elevate them to the same level as mankind—or devalue man to the level of animals.

With an understanding that the creation story makes human life sacred and holy, we can teach our kids why it is wrong to kill babies before they are born (abortion), and after they are born (infanticide). We can teach them why it is equally wrong to kill the sick and the infirm when it is inconvenient for us (euthanasia).

Lael writes, "The common thread between evolution, abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia is the devaluing of human life and the way our culture has responded with options for disposal."[\[7\]](#)

What Are We Supposed to be Doing Here?

This section of Lael Arrington's book is called "Work, Leisure, and the Richer Life: I'm tired of paddling! Are we there yet? I'm bored!"

If we were to get an honest answer to the questions, "What are you supposed to be doing here? What's your purpose in life?," many high school and college students would probably say, "To have as good a time as possible." Our culture has raised the expectation that everything is supposed to be fun and entertaining. When my mother managed the layaway department of a Wal-Mart a few years ago, she said it was frustrating to deal with the young employees. They came in feeling entitled to a paycheck but didn't want to work for it. Work wasn't "fun."

One of the greatest gifts we as parents can give our children is to cast a vision for their part in the larger story of life, one that involves a planning and purpose for their life, a calling from God to play their specially designed part. Our innate longing for transcendence means that we need to teach our children that they are a specially chosen part of the cosmic story of creation, fall, and redemption.

First, we need to teach by word and example that work has dignity and value. Work isn't part of the curse; it is part of God's perfect design for us. God gave Adam and Eve the responsibility of stewarding the garden before the Fall (Gen. 2). Part of our purpose in life is to be a difference maker, and work is part of how we do that. Whether one's work is to be a student, a fast food counter person, a house cleaner, a computer programmer, a mechanic, an administrator, or the really super important roles of mother or father, we are called to make a difference in the world and in God's kingdom.

Second, we can be a cheerleader for our children's God given gifts and talents. We need to be students of our children so

that we can understand and appreciate the unique package that God put together. It helps to explore the various personality styles to help our kids grow in understanding of themselves and others. John Trent has written a book for children using animal motifs called *The Treasure Tree*.[\[8\]](#) Tim LaHaye[\[9\]](#) and Ken Voges[\[10\]](#) have explored the temperaments in slightly different ways, but they're both very helpful.

As we discern how our children are gifted with natural talents and abilities, we need to acknowledge those gifts and encourage our kids to develop them. If our children have trusted Christ as Savior, they have received a whole new set of spiritual gifts for us to be on the alert for. Of course, we need to have a working knowledge of the gifts and learn how to spot them. God gives personality gifts, talent and ability gifts, and spiritual gifts to equip our children for whatever He has planned for their lives. What a privilege we have as parents to help them discover that they are called to a special place of service with a special set of equipment to do whatever it is God has called them to!

Where Are We Going?

The last part of the book *Worldproofing Your Kids* deals with citizenship—especially our heavenly citizenship. Another way to inspire confidence that the Christian worldview is true is to celebrate the fact that the best part of life is still ahead.

If we want our kids to recognize the larger, cosmic story of creation, fall, and redemption, then we need to point them continually to their future (Lord willing) in heaven, where we will finally experience real life, real riches, and real intimacy with God. We need to remind them that their choices on earth, for good and for bad, are determining their future in heaven. This is an important part of our roles as parents, of course—to teach them the wisdom that comes from considering

both the long term and short term consequences of their choices.

Lael Arrington urges us to take our children to biblical passages and good books that give them a glimpse of where we are going. Help them catch the vision of what C. S. Lewis was describing:

“We are half-hearted creatures, fooling around with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea.”[{11}](#)

And speaking of C. S. Lewis, please do yourself and your children the favor of reading *The Chronicles of Narnia*, which is a series of books for children of all ages which will capture their hearts for the world to come and make them fall in love with the Lord Jesus.

Lael writes, “Perhaps we are now qualifying for what degree of power and authority we will be granted when we reign with Christ. The New Testament assures us that those who endure, those who serve now, will reign later (2 Tim. 2:12, Rev. 5:10, 22:5). We can challenge our [children], ‘Are we making daily decisions to serve, to develop our gifts and talents so we will be best prepared to reign with Christ?’”[{12}](#)

I love the story of the godly old woman who knew she was about to die. When discussing her funeral plans with her pastor she told him she wanted to be buried with her Bible in one hand and a fork in the other.

She explained, “At those really nice get-togethers, when the meal was almost finished, a server or maybe the hostess would come by to collect the dirty dishes. I can hear the words now. Sometimes, at the best ones, somebody would lean over my shoulder and whisper, ‘You can keep your fork.’ And do you know what that meant? Dessert was coming!

"It didn't mean a cup of Jell-O or pudding or even a dish of ice cream. You don't need a fork for that. It meant the good stuff, like chocolate cake or cherry pie! When they told me I could keep my fork, I knew the best was yet to come!

"That's exactly what I want people to talk about at my funeral. Oh, they can talk about all the good times we had together. That would be nice.

"But when they walk by my casket and look at my pretty blue dress, I want them to turn to one another and say, 'Why the fork?'

"That's what I want you to say. I want you to tell them that I kept my fork because the best is yet to come."[\[13\]](#)

The author gratefully acknowledges the generous assistance of Lael Arrington in the preparation of this article.

Notes

1. Lael Arrington, *Worldproofing Your Kids* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1997).
2. Ibid, 42.
3. Josh McDowell and Bob Hostetler, *Right From Wrong* (Nashville, TN: Word Books, 1994).
4. See also the Probe article "[Jesus' Claims to be God](#)" on the Probe Web site (www.probe.org).
5. Phillip E. Johnson, *Defeating Darwinism by Opening Minds* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997).
6. William Provine and Philip Johnson, "Darwinism: Science or Naturalistic Philosophy?" (videotape of debate held at Stanford University, April 30, 1994). Available from Access Research Network (www.arn.org).
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The Morality of the West

Cheating in the Schools

According to a study by Rutgers University, over 70% of all university students admit they have cheated at least once. And there's probably a few more who wouldn't admit it. The most common form of cheating admitted to is plagiarism. Students have always copied from someone else's paper or stealthily brought forbidden notes into the classroom. But the incidence is rising. Nineteen percent admit they have faked a bibliography, and fourteen percent say they have handed in a computer program written by someone else. [\[1\]](#)

This report highlights the fact that many students today are either unable or unwilling to act in an ethical manner. William Kilpatrick, in his book *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right From Wrong*, brings to light the millions of crimes committed yearly on or near school property. Children go to school scared and intimidated. Many teachers contemplate and actually do leave the profession because of all the discipline and behavior problems. [\[2\]](#) A professor of philosophy at Clark

University says:

Students come to college today as moral stutterers. They haven't been taught much respect for what I call "plain moral facts," the need for honesty, integrity, responsibility. It doesn't take a blue-ribbon commission to see this. Students don't reason morally. They don't know what that means.[\[3\]](#)

Also, Mr. Michael Josephson, founder and president of the Josephson Institute for the Advancement of Ethics, said "Far too many young people have abandoned traditional ethical values in favor of self-absorbed, win-at-any-cost attitudes that threaten to unravel the moral fabric of American society."[\[4\]](#) This "self-absorbed" attitude is based on a whole new set of assumptions about how we should adopt our values and the right of individuals to construct their own values.

Where do these ideas come from? Are our young people only now discovering the difference between what their parents have preached to them and what they actually do? Is it simply due to the fact that society is changing? Or is this an ethical vacuum caused by a value system without a solid foundation?

Some have suggested that we have simply discovered more efficient ways of uncovering people's wrongdoing so it just seems that people are less moral in their dealings. In other words, we are just more aware of the imperfections that were always there. A more interesting question, however is whether the behavior is the result of values being communicated by society? Have the rules changed? and who makes these rules, God or men? The Christian and the theist turn toward the Creator of the Universe. The humanist or atheist turns toward himself. This distinction between theism and humanism is the fundamental division in moral theory.

It appears that we are rapidly approaching a Godless, valueless society in which "power ethics" or the "political rationalism" of humanism is replacing the Judeo-Christian

ethical base of traditional morality. The roots of our present dilemma go all the way back to the secular humanism of the fifteenth- and sixteenth- century Renaissance, and the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The idea of the sufficiency of human reason grew stronger during these periods, continually challenging Judeo- Christian values in an increasingly sophisticated way. Humanity was placed at the center of the universe, rather than God.

The Moral Results of Reason Alone

Just as our Lord said that man cannot live by bread alone, so man cannot live by reason alone. If we exclude revelation as a source of direction in discovering who man is and rely solely on our intellect, and our own ideas of how we came to be, then we will naturally slip into a pessimistic and ultimately depressing view of human nature.

The seventeenth-century philosopher John Locke said that all knowledge comes from sensation. In other words, the only reality is what we can see, hear, feel, smell, taste, or measure. Not much room for revelation here. Other philosophers have followed up on this idea and have concluded that man is shaped by evolutionary processes and the culture that surrounds us. The notion that man is born with some innate nature has been rejected. Men like Hegel, Darwin, and Marx believed that all living forms and social systems were nothing more than the result of progressive transformations over time. As the influence of the religious community began to wane in the nineteenth century, many began to search for a meaning to life totally apart from God. Man simply no longer believed he had a place in eternity. Therefore all he could do was hope to find his place in the movement of history.[\[5\]](#)

Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species* catapulted the abandonment of God and revelation by attempting to show that God was not even necessary in the creation of living things. If God did not create us, then we certainly could not gain our

sense of meaning and purpose from a book purportedly written by Him. Frederich Nietzsche purposed to highlight the ethical implications of Darwinism. Nietzsche's "superman" concept transformed man into the maker of his own destiny. Man was truly the measure of all things. If God is dead, as Nietzsche declared, and nature is all there is, then what is, is right. Human life was therefore stripped of any purpose or goal. The contemporary Harvard professor, E. O. Wilson has stated, "No species, ours included, possesses a purpose beyond the imperatives created by its genetic history." Elsewhere he declares that our dilemma is that "we have no particular place to go. The species lacks any goal external to its own biological nature." This will ultimately result in a sense of hopelessness, pessimism, apathy, and absurdity. William Kilpatrick in his book *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right From Wrong*, says "Suicides among young people have risen by 300 percent over the last thirty years." {6} Next to accidents it is now the second leading cause of death in teenagers. Many of the deaths due to accidents are the result of auto accidents in which alcohol has played a role which can also be traced back to a sense of hopelessness and despair. Young people who may have never heard of Nietzsche are nevertheless living their lives in accordance with his philosophy of living recklessly.

A group of scholars presented the case of biblical authority to a group of students at Princeton University. At the conclusion of their presentation, a student stood and said:

I am surprised that I found myself feeling that you two were right and all of us were wrong, at least insofar as this very basic point: why we stand where we stand makes all the difference in the world. So the weakness of your presentation was that you were arguing on the basis of logic and presuppositions and intellectual integrity with persons who are perfectly ready to dispense with all three. {7}

Our young people are so far removed from a rational discussion

of what is right and what is wrong that they are unable to even decide what criterion should be used to make the decision, let alone make the decision itself. This is the inevitable result of the philosophical trend to utilize human reason alone apart from the revelation in Scripture. As our creator, God alone has the authority and knowledge to inform us as to how we are to act. Left to ourselves, we will only be confused.

Why Are Biblical Values No Longer Taught in Schools?

Many students today are so confused that they not only don't know what ethical system is valid, but they don't even know how to evaluate them. One might ask, why aren't the schools teaching the values our children need, values that will work for them rather than against them?

To understand the lack of values being taught in our educational institutions, we need to go back to the biblical critics who were writing in Germany in the nineteenth century. The product of an attempt to operate by human reason alone, this movement placed the claims of religion and particularly the Bible outside the realm of human reason. If the Bible was not reasonable, then the Scriptures lost their foundation in real history. The traditions of the faith were seen as merely that, tradition with no basis in reality. This meant that the events contained in the Bible were to be evaluated on whether they were reasonable within a universe where the supernatural was assumed to be nonexistent or at least not involved in the real world. These scholars, called higher critics, believed that all morality is totally relative to historical time and place. The laws of the Bible were now to be seen as being understood only within the times that the Bible was describing. A Sabbath was only useful to an agrarian and shepherding culture. The same would be true for adultery or taking the Lord's name in vain.

This approach essentially denies the unity and moral integrity of the entire Bible.{8} The end result is that in people's minds, their ethics became separated from their faith. This eventually resulted in deism, a view that says that God only provided the necessary input to get the universe started but left it completely on its own after creation. He never intervened in natural or human history again. God is still there, but there is no possibility of any communication between God and His creation. Well, if you can't communicate with God and He has no influence over your life, why bother with worrying whether God existed at all? The worldview of naturalism quickly follows which says that there is no God.

Nietzsche's "madman" said, "God is dead!"{9} God was now out of the picture. Nietzsche simply took the next step. He tried to force men and women to, "feel the breath of empty space." If you have been following the train of thought here you are probably beginning to see the connection between Nietzsche's ideas and the state of our youth today. Many young people feel that there is no grand purpose for their life. Life is empty and cheap. If you believe in some form of a grand purpose, it is really only a grand illusion. All that is left, therefore, is to live for the pleasure of the moment. Gain what pleasure you can in an absurd universe. This will ultimately lead to an attitude of despair. If God is dead, what's the use of conforming to any rules. If I die as a result of my actions, so what, life is absurd anyway.

Students today often seem to be lost in relativism and are unable to think about or look into their futures. They shrivel up within the confines of their immediate surroundings. There is no longer any hope in eternity or in real justice.

Many of today's young people wander about their school halls with no hope, no dreams, no optimism about their future. Rock groups such as *Nirvana* and *Nine Inch Nails* continually fill their heads with the meaninglessness of a universe in which God is dead and life is absurd. We should be filled with great

sadness when we witness the destruction this kind of thinking results in such as the suicide of Nirvana's heart and soul, Curt Cobain. I believe we should also see such people as Jesus does, as lost sheep. They are a great mission field for which the truth and historical reality of the gospel can find fertile ground.

The Twentieth Century Results of a "God Is Dead" Universe

The Greek philosopher Plato understood that there must be some universal or absolute under which the individual things (the particulars, the details) must fit. Something beyond the everyday must be there to give it all unity and meaning. Even the atheist and existentialist, Jean-Paul Sartre, realized that a finite point is absurd if it has no infinite reference point.[{10}](#) Sartre chose to believe that this infinite reference point did not exist, therefore, the only thing worth doing is existing and making choices, regardless of what those choices may be. But how can we tell students, our children, that anything is right or wrong if there is no absolute reference point such as the Bible, to base this on?

Existentialism says that we need to make a "leap of faith"[{11}](#) and seek to find our meaning without reason. In other words, we just have to find what works for us. And as we go through life, what works will constantly be changing. If we actually try to think about it, if we try to rationalize a meaning, we will only get depressed. According to existentialism, the only way to be happy, is to not think, to be blindly optimistic.

Another perspective is power ethics or "political naturalism." Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527) was a great voice in the revival of political naturalism in the sixteenth century. In his book *The Prince*, a ruler who wants to keep his post must learn how not to be good, and use that knowledge, or refrain from using it, as necessity requires.[{12}](#) In other words, do

what you need to do to preserve your position and don't concern yourself with what is ethical. Just preserve your power. Machiavelli's ethical stance of whatever strengthens the state is right had a great influence on the thinking of Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872). Feuerbach's claim that God was merely a human invention had a lot to do with the writings of Karl Marx (1819-1883) who took these ideas as validation of his own views. His ideas provided a foundation upon which Lenin and Stalin were able to build a society around the power ethics of political rationalism. Feuerbach and Marx rejoiced in the fact that the losing grasp of religion had made it possible to create a city of man in an entirely human space.[{13}](#) In Russia there was a concerted attempt to root out Christianity and substitute an extremely intolerant and militant form of the religion of the Enlightenment.[{14}](#)

Adolph Hitler is another example. So profound was Nietzsche's philosophy upon Hitler, that it provided the framework for his tireless efforts to obliterate the Jews and the weak of this world.[{15}](#) Nietzsche had proclaimed the coming of the Master Race, and a Superman who would unify Germany and perhaps the world.[{16}](#) Hitler, in his book *Mein Kampf*, clearly announced his intent to take Nietzsche's logic and drive the atheistic worldview to its logical conclusion. In Nietzschean terms, atheism will inevitably lead to violence and hedonism.[{17}](#) Hitler personally presented a copy of Nietzsche's works to Benito Mussolini, and Mussolini submitted a thesis on Machiavelli for his doctor's degree.

When human reason is allowed to be unaccountable it becomes solely a function of power, it legitimizes the construction of a totalitarian state and in the case of Hitler the end result was the Holocaust. The real legacy of unbridled humanism is terror.[{18}](#)

The Purification of Moral Relativism

We construct museums so that we may never forget the horror of the German Holocaust. Russia is trying to recover from a total collapse of a power structure that was based on political rationalism and historical materialism. They had to find out the hard way. The fundamental dogma of the Enlightenment, the natural goodness and/or reasonableness of man, is a myth at best. It was Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn who related what he overheard two old peasants say during the blood baths of Stalin's regime, "It is because we have forgotten God. That is why all this is happening to us." Out of the rubble of a failed system rose a people desperate to reestablish an ethical base that will work for them rather than against them. An article in *USA Today* illustrates a new hope for values in Russia. It reports that:

Officials say up to 55% of Russian teachers, many of whom were former atheists, have made personal commitments to Christ. Many are using the New Testament in schools. "For ages, (Russia) was a country of believers and morality was very close to the people," says assistant principal Olga Meinikova, 32, of school No. 788. "For a short period 74 years we lost it all. All Russian teachers should teach this course; Americans too. The Bible is part of normal education."[{19}](#)

Teams of Americans are helping to train Russian teachers how to teach Judeo-Christian morals and values based on a system of biblical ethics. The military has also been retraining their staff in Judeo-Christian morality, ethics, and values. Russia reached the bottom of a Godless society and is making an effort to rebuild its ethical base.

We face a dilemma in Western culture. We can continue along the line of thinking that "reason" is our only hope and trust in the natural goodness and/or reasonableness of man. Another

extreme is to throw out reason altogether and embrace the philosophy and religion of the new age. The biblical view is to return to the concept of the fallen nature of mankind and rebuild on the traditional base of historic Christianity, which puts reason under the authority of Scripture. This is the traditional basis for ethical teaching in Western culture. It applies to all our institutions of training, including churches and ministries. The ethics modeled by too many Christian leaders is at best a utilitarian form of ethics. At worst, it is a pragmatic form of ethics that serves the self-centered goals of the individual or institution.

In conclusion, ethics based on Enlightenment thinking is not the answer. Crane Brinton, in his book *A History of Western Morals* says, "the religion of the Enlightenment has a long and unpredictable way to go before it can face the facts of life as effectively as does Christianity."[\[20\]](#) We appear to have an implosion of values in a society. Many are seeking to teach our children that there is no God and no afterlife, but if you live an ethical life it will pay off. It is a standard without a foundation, floating in mid air. Society must re-evaluate its commitment to Enlightenment ethics and thinking. Until it does, we will see a continuing loss of values and respect for humanity.

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