

Lecture 15 – Excursus: Cultural Relativism & the Moral Law

“However subjective they may be about some traditional value, Gaius and Titius have shown by the very act of writing *The Green Book* that there must be some other values about which they are not subjective at all. They write in order to produce certain states of mind in the rising generation, if not because they think those states of mind intrinsically just or good, yet certainly because they think them to be the means to some state of society which they regard as desirable. ... The important point is not the precise nature of their end, but the fact that they have an end at all. They must have, or their book (being purely practical in intention) is written to no purpose. And this end must have real value in their eyes. ... Their skepticism about values is on the surface: it is for use on other people’s values: about the values current in their own set they are not nearly skeptical enough. And this phenomenon is very usual. A great many of those who “debunk” traditional or (as they would say) “sentimental” values have in the background values of their own which they believe to be immune from the debunking process.”

C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (Simon & Schuster: New York, 1996), 41-43.

Key Terms

Tao, diversity, dependency, boundaries, concern, caution, command

Objectives

- *Identify some of the issues and distinctions within the discussion of cultural relativism.
- *Respond intelligently and biblically to the problem of cultural relativism.
- *Explain Lewis’ use of the Chinese term *tao* in discussing a universal moral law.

Excursus: Cultural Relativism & the Moral Law

Universality of Moral Law

I. The Fact of Cultural Diversity

A. Accepted reasoning

1. Diverse moral practices > no universal standard of morality
2. Ancient ethicists: Heroditus 5 BC
3. Distinguish cultural relativism from moral relativism

II. Four responses

- A. Observe logical fallacies. Diversity does not prove that no standard exists, only that...
- B. There may be unity in the diversity so that...
- C. Similarities do exist across cultures.
- D. Some practices may be relative to culture and others not.

III. Theory of Cultural Dependency

- A. Independent rational judgment vs. causally dependent judgment
- B. Response: Distinguish between cultural transmission and cultural determinism
 1. Historically, there have been internal critiques...
 2. Across cultures, there are exceptions to diversity. Are they due to...?
- C. Example: non-marital sex
 1. Ethics of caution—will I get hurt?
 2. Ethics of concern—will I hurt someone else?
 3. Ethics of command—consequential in nature.

Question & Answer