"Who Are We to Judge?"

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The proper method for dealing with meta-ethical questions in introductory ethics courses requires that the instructor consider and address at least some of the meta-ethical views most commonly held by the instructor's own students. Too often the meta-ethical views that students bring to their courses are simply ignored, and the relation of these views to the highly abstruse theories and positions discussed in the readings and in class is not made clear. It may be the case that many popular meta-ethical views are confused, unclear, ill-supported, and subversive to the values presupposed by a rational inquiry into morality. But if this is true (as many instructors of philosophy are inclined to believe), then it is all the more important to address these popular views.¹ For students' uncritical acceptance of them can be a distinct hindrance to getting them to think critically about moral questions. Many popular beliefs about the status of morality deny the possibility of a rational inquiry about moral questions. These preconceptions must be addressed and attended to, otherwise some of our students are unwilling to engage in the kind of critical and rational reflection on moral questions that we aim to achieve in courses in moral philosophy. We face a strange situation, in that many of our students come into our classes with the firm, if not always clearly formulated, belief that there is no point in trying to do what we (and the authors that we read) are doing. It is almost impossible to get anywhere in our classes unless we can persuade our students to at least suspend this belief.

This paper addresses one set or family of preconceptions about the status of moral judgments which, I think, needs to be considered in introductory ethics courses. My special concern will be the views and attitudes of students who think it objectionable or in some sense wrong to make moral judgments, and, therefore, objectionable or wrong to engage in philosophical reflection which has as its aim the rational justification of moral judgments. The passion with which many students fight attempts to provide reasons for moral judgments indicates more than a mere arm chair relativism/skepticism/irrationalism. In a substantial number of cases, the conviction that reason cannot provide an adequate basis for answering moral questions is augmented by a deep-seated disapproval of the very notion of making moral judgments. Significant numbers of students

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find the very idea of moral philosophy offensive. In my own experience I have found these views and attitudes especially common among fundamentalist students. The family of preconceptions about morality to which I shall address myself can be summed up in the rhetorical question "Who are we to judge?" Few who have ever taught an introductory course in ethics can fail to have heard this question. Most of us, to be sure, cringe at its utterance. However, too few of us attempt to find out what is being asked and provide some kind of useful response to the question. The question is discouraging because it, in effect, constitutes a rejection of the aims of the courses that we teach—a rejection of the claim that it makes sense to attempt to gain a rational understanding of moral questions. I have found through hard experience that I am likely to hear the question "Who are we to judge?" even on the last day of classes, unless I take the bull by the horns earlier.

In this paper I present a number of considerations and arguments which often motivate the view that it is objectionable to make moral judgments. I pay special attention to religious motivations for this view, and argue that the reasons offered for the view that it is objectionable or wrong to make moral judgments provide no plausible basis for the position and further that, in many forms, the position is self-defeating or self-refuting. The final section of the paper is a discussion of the special pedagogical problems raised by the issues considered in the paper. There I make some suggestions for dealing with the more general phenomenon of student relativism. Among other things, I shall argue that it is important to distinguish between judgments about the praiseworthiness and blameworthiness of people and judgments about the rightness or wrongness of actions. Once this distinction is made clear most students are less inclined to think it objectionable to make judgments about the rightness or wrongness of other people's actions. I shall also argue that it is a mistake to try to persuade student skeptics/relativists/irrationalists to abandon their views. Relativism and irrationalism are most effectively criticized indirectly by getting students to see the counter-intuitive consequences of these views and by providing convincing examples of rational justifications for particular moral judgments.

The Question: Motivations and Arguments For and Against

1) The rhetorical questions "Who are we to judge?" and "Who's to judge?" express a certain reluctance on the part of the speaker to make moral judgments—at least a reluctance to make moral judgments about the issue or issues in question. The question "Who's to judge?" not only expresses the speaker's reluctance to make moral judgments, but also the suggestion that others ought to be wary of making moral judgments. People don't say "Who am I to judge?" but rather "Who are we(you) to judge?" or "Who is (anyone) to judge?"

The question is characteristically raised as a reproach or expression of disapproval for those who make moral judgments and is usually intended to convey the message that those who make moral judgments are guilty of some kind of arrogance or presumption. Asking "Who are we to judge?" is often a
shorthand way of stating a version of moral skepticism. We are not to judge because we are incapable of attaining knowledge about moral questions. (The moral skeptic allows that moral judgments can be objectively true or correct.) On the other hand, some of those who ask "Who are we to judge?" are more inclined towards a version of ethical relativism or meta-ethical relativism, according to which moral judgments aren't objectively true or false, but, at most, true or correct for individuals. 2

2) The view that it is wrong or objectionable to make moral judgments seems to be self-defeating or self-refuting. For, to say that it's wrong for anyone to make unfavorable moral judgments about other people is to make an unfavorable moral judgment about others. The moral judgment that it is wrong to make moral judgments applies to itself. Those who ask "Who are we to judge?" in a tone of reproach or indignation are often guilty of precisely what they condemn or disapprove of in others.

3) Some of those who ask the question "Who are you to judge?" in response to unfavorable moral judgments about other people may have in mind the following line of thought: "Since you don't know all of the relevant facts that led S to make the decisions that he made, you aren't in a position to judge him; only he knows the facts, so only he can judge." There are two important elements of truth contained in this line of thought. First, there is no doubt that our moral judgments are called into question if we are ignorant of or mistaken about any relevant facts. Second, an agent about whom one makes a moral judgment is often in a much better position to know the relevant facts about the act in question that one is oneself. For example, if I condemn someone for shooting an intruder in his home, I may not know (as he does) that the intruder was armed.

The two truths acknowledged above show that all moral judgments are fallible. Any moral judgment that one accepts might be false. It is always possible that facts, about which we are now ignorant, could turn up and compel us to reject the judgments that we now accept. But it does not follow that no one could ever have good evidence for factual claims which underlie unfavorable moral judgments about other people. Further, agents are not always in the best position to determine the facts relevant to an assessment of their own actions. I am in a much better position to assess the facts relevant to the extermination of the Jews (e.g., facts relating to the moral depravity of Jews alleged in Nazi propaganda) than were the guards in the concentration camps who killed them.

4) Most of us feel strongly about the need to be tolerant of people whose beliefs about morality and other important matters are different from our own. Some people hold that to make moral judgments and claim that they are objectively correct (this, of course, implies that the judgments of those who disagree with one are false or mistaken) constitutes an expression of intolerance, or at the very least, disrespect, for the views of others. This leads some people to disapprove of those who make moral judgments and believe that their own judgments are objectively correct. But this line of thought rests on a mistake. Suppose that I claim to know that abortion is morally wrong, whereas you claim that it is morally right. It follows that I think that your view is mistaken. But it
does not follow that I think that your view is reprehensible, foolish, or ill-considered. Nor does it follow that I wish to compel you to adopt my view or prevent you from expressing your own view. Further, it is doubtful that a relativist can give a satisfactory account of the view that we ought to be tolerant. Consider the following exchange:

MILL:—it is wrong to kill or jail people who express political views contrary to one’s own.

HITLER:—it is permissible to kill people who express political views contrary to mine.

The relativist cannot say that Mill’s view is correct and Hitler’s mistaken; he is committed to saying that both views are equally correct or equally valid.

5) If it were generally accepted and followed the moral principle that it is wrong to make (unfavorable) about others would make it impossible for any society to have a viable moral code. Children do not possess an innate knowledge or understanding of morality. The moral code of a society cannot be viable unless children acquire it through an appropriate sort of moral training. Moral training, as we know it, is impossible unless those who train children are willing to make at least some moral judgments about others, if only the children in question. One cannot give a child adequate moral instruction unless one is prepared to remonstrate the child for morally objectionable conduct and praise the child for morally acceptable conduct. Moral training thus requires that one make moral judgments about the conduct of the children one is training. Although my argument does not depend on this, I think that something stronger can be said here as well. Any feasible method of moral training requires that the child consider a great many different cases which illustrate moral principles. Numerous individuals and actions must be held up to the child as good and bad examples. This requires that one make both favorable and unfavorable moral judgments about a great many third parties.

6) The question “Who are you to judge?” or “Who are you to tell me what to do?” is sometimes intended to avoid or deflect criticism of oneself for conduct which is ostensibly immoral. It is a statement of one’s refusal to consider seriously the possibility that some of the things that one does are morally wrong. This is both intellectually dishonest and morally objectionable. To think honestly about moral questions is to entertain seriously the possibility that some of the things that one does are wrong and to listen seriously to criticisms to that effect. To refuse to do this is to refuse to recognize one’s own moral and intellectual fallibility. Moreover, to act on the assumption that one can do no wrong is virtually to guarantee that one will do things which are morally objectionable.

Religious Motivations for the Question

1) People often respond to moral judgments (or at least certain kinds of moral judgments) with the claim that making such judgments is tantamount to “playing God.” “Playing God” is something that is strongly disapproved of; those who
“play God” are thought to be doing things that only God is justified in doing. Talk about “playing God” occurs most frequently in connection with decisions whether or not to continue some kind of life-sustaining treatment for a patient. The claim being made by those who disapprove of such decisions on the grounds that the people who make them are “playing God” is that such decisions are “not for us to make.” It follows that it is also wrong for philosophers to advise people as to how they should act in such cases. It is “for God to decide” who is to live and who is to die and it is wrong for us to try to usurp His prerogative. However, it is not clear how we are to determine what God’s intentions are and what we should do to avoid thwarting those intentions. For example, would I be guilty of playing God and thwarting God’s plain if I gave first-aid to an accident victim? Some human beings (such as doctors and soldiers) are often faced with choices that will determine whether certain individuals live or die. Often these decisions cannot be avoided; to walk away or do nothing is often tantamount to a decision to allow someone to live or die. Given that such decisions cannot be avoided, it is surely absurd to condemn them morally on the grounds that they are tantamount to playing God. It makes sense to claim that a certain decision or action is morally wrong or morally objectionable, only if the person who made the decision or performed the action could have avoided the decision or action in question. To say that something that I did was wrong is to say that I should have done something else (that would not have been wrong) instead.

The claim that it is wrong to make moral judgments, because doing so is “playing God” is itself a moral judgment and is, therefore, self-defeating in just the same way as some of the other positions considered earlier. There are other reasons why religious believers (at least those who accept anything resembling an orthodox version of any of the three great monotheistic religions) should want to reject this position. Most religious people believe that we must conform our conduct in accordance with certain moral standards. A person cannot be said to follow a set of moral principles, unless he judges that he should or should not do certain things. In trying to follow a particular moral idea I must make moral judgments of the following sort: “it would be wrong for me to do x” and “it would not be wrong for me to do y.”

2) Here, it might be objected that the foregoing argument only shows that it is necessary to make moral judgments about what one does oneself. One could still claim that it is wrong to make moral judgments about others, because only God is justified in making such judgments. But, again it needs to be pointed out that this itself is an unfavorable moral judgment about others. Thus, the principle in question applies to itself and is self-defeating. One could avoid inconsistency by ceasing to make any moral judgments (or expressing any disapproval for those who make moral judgments) and merely reporting that God disapproves of and will punish those who make moral judgments. (“God will punish you if you judge others. I’m not judging you, just reporting a fact.”) This position is consistent, several famous passages from the Bible, Deut, 1:17, (John, 7:8, Matthew, 7:1, and Luke, 6:37, are often taken to constitute prohib-
itions against making moral judgments. However, as I shall now argue, this position is not a correct reading of any of these passages. Nothing in the Bible or the Christian tradition commits one to either the present view or the self-refuting view discussed in above. Further, these views are seriously inconsistent with a great deal of what the scriptures say and with many basic tenants of orthodox versions of Christianity.

a) "judgment is God’s" (Deut, 1:17). Many take this to be God’s command that humans not make moral judgments. But the context of this passage makes it clear that this is not what is meant. In Deut, 1:16-17, God admonishes judges to “judge righteously” and

hear the small as well as the great; ye shall not be afraid of the face of man;
for the judgment is God’s: and that cause that is too hard for you, bring it unto
me, and I will hear it.

In saying that “judgment is God’s,” God is offering us his guidance and authority to help us make difficult judgments.

b) Some of those who are critical of people who make unfavorable moral judgments of others are motivated by Christ’s words to a group of men about to stone an adulteress to death: “He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone” (John, 8:7). This passage cannot be taken in support of the claim that it is wrong for morally imperfect people, (i.e., any of us) to make moral judgments. Christ can be taken to be expressing his disapproval of individuals who wish to impose a very cruel form of capital punishment for adultery. However, metaphorical meanings notwithstanding (“don’t throw stones”), making an unfavorable moral judgment about another person (even in the unusual case that doing so constitutes some kind of public condemnation or humiliation) is not the same as stoning him/her to death.

c) “Judge not, that ye not be judged” (Matthew, 7:1). “Judge not and ye shall not be judged” (Luke, 6:37). Taken out of context these passages appear to constitute prohibitions against making “judgments” (it is not clear that this means moral judgments). However, a look at the contexts of these passages makes this interpretation much less plausible. Reading on in Matthew we find:

For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. And why beholdest thou the mote
that is in thy brother’s eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thy own
eye? Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote of thine
eye; and behold, a beam is in thine own eye? Oh hypocrite, first cast out the
beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote
of thy brother’s eye (Matthew, 7:2-5)

Reading on in Luke:

condemn not and ye shall not be condemned; forgive and ye shall be forgi-
ven. . . For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be meted out
to you. . . Can the blind lead the blind? Shall they not both fall into the ditch?
And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye, but perceivest
not the beam that is in thine own eye? . . . Thou hypocrite, cast out first the
beam out of thine own eye and then shalt thou see clearly to pull out the mote
that is in thy brother’s eye (Luke, 6:37-42).

God will judge us in accordance with the principles by which we judge others.
So, we must judge others according to principles which we would be willing to
be judged by ourselves. These passages are an implicit threat against those who
judge others harshly or unfairly. We must first attend to our own serious imper-
fections (cast the beams out of our own eyes), then we will be in a position to
make clear judgments about others. These passages in Matthew and Luke are
not a general prohibition against “judging,” but rather a warning that judges
should first attend to their own imperfections and then judge fairly and mercifully.

d) No reading of any of these passages which makes them out to be general
prohibitions against (or expression of God’s disapproval for) unfavorable moral
judgments about other people can be squared with other parts of the scriptures.
For the prophets and apostles frequently make unfavorable moral judgments
about others. The context of these judgments makes it clear that the author or
authors of the Bible see nothing objectionable about these judgments. To take
the passages in which God reserves “judgment” for himself as constituting a
strict prohibition against all (unfavorable) moral judgments about others (or as
an expression of God’s disapproval of all who make such judgments) is to give
a reading of the Bible which renders it internally inconsistent. Any reasonable
set of principles for interpreting the Bible or any other text requires that, other
things being equal, an interpretation which renders the text inconsistent should
be considered less plausible than one which permits us to view the text as
internally consistent. Those who believe the scriptures to be divinely inspired
should be particularly reluctant to accept interpretations of a particular passage
which render the Bible inconsistent. (Presumably, it is reasonable to think that
the Bible is morally authoritative, only if it is, in some sense, divinely inspired.
The argument (presently under consideration) for thinking that it is wrong
to make moral judgments presupposes that the Bible is morally authoritative.)

E) Here, it would be well to add that “judge not . . .” has never been
interpreted by any notable Christian sect in such a way as to constitute a prohibi-
tion against all unfavorable moral judgments about other people. The great
majority of Christians and Christian sects have always been prepared to make
unfavorable moral judgments about other people in certain circumstances. (There
is no shortage of attacks on “sin.”) Few, if any, Christians have considered such
judgments to be objectionable, at least in principle. Of course, most Christians
would regard unfavorable moral judgments about others made in an unforgiving
or uncharitable spirit as morally objectionable, but that is another matter altogether
(and one, I think, on which we should all agree).

3) Most fundamentalist students are willing to make some moral judgments.
(In some cases their doing so is inconsistent with general pronouncements which
they make about the unacceptability of making moral judgments.) But whether
consistent or not, many of the same fundamentalist students who are prepared
to make moral judgments find the activity of moral philosophy objectionable. Moral philosophy is thought to be objectionable, because it involves an implicit rejection of the proper authority of the Bible for answering moral questions and providing moral guidance. In order to determine what we ought to do in any given situation, we should simply look to the scriptures. This argument does not wash. Let us grant the fundamentalist’s belief in the literal truth of every statement in the Bible (or, more tellingly, the inerrant truth of his/her preferred translation and interpretation of the Bible). It does not follow that it is wrong to attempt to find a rational independent basis for answering moral questions; the Bible does not prohibit such attempts. Nor does it follow that moral agents have no need to give rational answers to moral questions. The Bible is not intended to be a substitute for thinking very hard about moral questions and there are many pressing moral questions for which the Bible does not provide clear unequivocal answers: abortion, capital punishment, criteria for just and unjust wars, censorship, nuclear deterrence, resistance to conscription, highway speed limits, obligations to preserve the environment for the benefit of future generations, and economic sanctions against unjust regimes. Such general principles as “do unto others as you would they do unto you,” “love your neighbor as you would yourself” cannot without substantial interpretation and analysis give guidance for cases of this sort. In the absence of such analysis, these principles do not afford clear answers to any of the above questions. The kind of interpretation and analysis needed is found only in theology and philosophy. (See Kant’s Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals for a rigorous interpretation of a principle very much like the golden rule; see Mill’s Utilitarianism Chapter 2 for an interpretation of the principle “love your neighbor as yourself”).

Pedagogical Issues

1) The Question “Who are we to judge?” and the views and attitudes discussed above raise many of the same issues as the whole amorphous topic of student/relativism/skepticism/irrationalism. The present paper does not purport to give a thorough treatment of all of the philosophical and pedagogical issues surrounding student relativism. The distinctive claim of this paper is that instructors need to recognize that many students find the very idea of making moral judgments objectionable; their views and attitudes need to be addressed in the classroom.

2) In the case of many students, the whole problem of thinking it objectionable to make moral judgments can be defused by carefully distinguishing between judgments about the rightness or wrongness of actions and judgments about the praiseworthiness or blameworthiness of people. The visceral feeling of many students is that there is something wrong about condemning others or saying that someone is a “bad person.” Moral judgments about the rightness or wrongness of actions do not imply judgments about the praiseworthiness of the agents in question. My saying that it was wrong for S to have done x leaves it open for me to say that the act nonetheless displayed his character in a favorable light. For example, my saying that it was wrong for soldiers to have fought for an
metaethical positions (and hold students accountable for such definitions in some way). Then one can draw from those views consequences which most students will find unacceptable. This alone is usually sufficient to cause most student relativists to take seriously the possibility that their position may not be correct. It is best if one can get students to discover the implications of their own positions. Here is a very brief example of how this might be done. Having carefully defined metaethical relativism and compelled students to learn the definition, an instructor asks the class how a metaethical relativist would view the following dispute.

**ABRAHAM LINCOLN:** —“Slavery is morally wrong.”

**JEFFERSON DAVIS:** —“Slavery is not morally wrong.”

Extreme metaethical relativism commits one to the view that both judgments are equally correct. Lincolns judgment is “true for him” and Daviss judgment is true for Davis. But most student relativists are unwilling to accept this consequence of their position and think that at least some reason can be given for thinking that the view that slavery is wrong is more plausible than the view that slavery is morally permissible. In addition to causing students to ask whether they really want to be metaethical relativists, this exercise has other significant pedagogical virtues. It demonstrates to students the need to carefully examine and formulate theories and positions in order to see what does and does not follow from them. It also teaches the very useful lesson that often positions that we are inclined to accept (perhaps even regard as obviously true) prove upon examination to have consequences that we are unwilling to accept.

5) Should faculty aim at persuading student moral relativists/skeptics/irrationalists to abandon their views? I think not. It would seem that questions about the status and justification moral judgments are issues on which reasonable people can and do disagree. It is not obvious that all forms of moral relativism/skepticism/irrationalism are mistaken. Even if one could be certain that all forms of moral relativism/skepticism/irrationalism were untenable, the issues involved are so difficult and the arguments that would be required to refute all forms of relativism/skepticism/irrationalism are so complex that one could not hope to make a compelling case against these views in the context of an introductory course. Any attempt to do so would be likely to backfire, since students resent attempts by instructors to “impose their views on students.” Even if an instructor succeeded in persuading substantial numbers of students to abandon pernicious metaethical positions, there is a great danger that many students would do so because they are willing to submit to the authority of the instructor, rather than through rational persuasion. The pedagogical problem as I see it is not that many students are relativists or skeptics, but rather that some are so confident of their views that they are unwilling to give serious attention to attempts to give reasoned answers to moral questions. Readings, lectures, and class discussion wash over them just as much sophistry or rhetoric. Those students who in addition to being skeptics/relativists/irrationalists disapprove of making moral judgments are even more resistant to the aims of courses in moral philosophy.
6) The best way to make a case for the view that moral judgments can be rationally justified is to provide a rational justification for a substantive moral judgment. No amount of abstruse meta-ethical discussion alone is likely to convince students of the claim that moral judgments can be rationally supported. The real test of the claim that moral judgments can be rationally supported lies in discussion of substantive moral issues. 8 This point should be stressed in class. Because of this it is a mistake to spend much time on meta-ethical issues at the beginning of an introductory course before rational techniques for addressing substantive moral issues have been introduced. (I do find it necessary to say something like the following when students raise the issue of relativism very early in the term: “the authors who we will read attempt to provide rational justifications for certain moral judgments. Let us examine their arguments and see whether or not they have succeeded in providing a rational justification for any moral judgments.”) I do not address meta-ethical questions at length until the middle of my courses after students have encountered a number of sustained attempts to reason about concrete moral issues and (it is to hoped) have found at least some of these attempts to be plausible or compelling. In my lectures on meta-ethics I always attempt to provide students with several examples of compelling rational justifications of particular moral judgments. I have found particular success using the example of the Nazi Holocaust. It would also be useful to briefly consider such question as “is it permissible to kill randomly selected strangers?” Classes in moral philosophy tend to deal with controversial issues. Focusing on such issues alone tends to give the misleading impression that it is nearly impossible to justify moral judgments. 9

Just as the general claim that some moral judgments can be rationally justified cannot adequately be defended unless one provides a rational justification for some particular moral judgment, so the claim that it is not objectionable to make moral judgments and ask questions about morality cannot be adequately supported unless the instructor makes moral judgments and asks moral questions in an unobjectionable way. The instructor must be fair and undogmatic in the views he/she expresses, open to criticisms, tolerant and charitable towards students who disagree or fail to understand “obvious” points, respectful of student views, and without bile or rancor in unfavorable moral judgments about others. 10

Notes

I am indebted to the Editor of *Teaching Philosophy* and to several referees for many helpful criticisms and suggestions. I would also like to thank my former colleague Elizabeth Malbon for her help with matters of biblical interpretation.


2. My use of the term “meta-ethical relativism” is consistent with the standard terminology. See Richard Brandt, “Ethical Relativism,” in *The Encyclopedia of Philos-
ophy, (MacMillan, 1967) and William Frankena, Ethics, second edition, (Prentice-Hall, 1973), p. 109. For a detailed discussion of this distinction, see Chapter 3 of my book The Status of Morality (D. Reidel, Philosophical Studies Series in Philosophy, 1984). Since “who are we to judge?” often constitutes a statement about the finitude of the human intellect, the beliefs and intentions of those who ask this question may be more accurately classified as versions of skepticism rather than relativism. If there are truths to be discovered, then our inability to discern them is a reflection of our own limitations. On the other hand, if there are no truths about morality, then there is nothing for any conceivable rational being to know and our alleged lack of knowledge about morality cannot be said to reflect any human limitations.


4. This same point is made at much greater length by Stephen Satris in his paper “Student Relativism,” Teaching Philosophy, 9:3 (Sept. 86):

Here, SR (student relativism) is primarily a method of protection, a suit of armor, which can be applied to one’s own opinions, whatever they may be—but not necessarily to the opinions of others. “Who’s to say?” is not an expression of one’s own intellectual humility, broadmindedness, or unwillingness to condemn others. Rather, it is an expression of the idea that no one step forward and judge (possibly criticize) one’s own opinions . . . It is a form of psychological insulation designed to protect its bearer from all other opinions, values, points of view, etc. (pp. 197-198)

Satris goes so far as claim that SR is not a position, but rather an attitude—a stubborn unwillingness to think critically about normative questions. This is too strong; most students who share this attitude are willing to state positions in defense of it. The positions which students defend in such contexts are all roughly versions of student relativism. However, Satris is correct to suggest the attitudes underlying relativism are often more deeply held than any positions that students hold and thus not something that can be easily altered through rational criticism of those positions marshalled in their defense. In this paper, I have attempted to diagnose one set of attitudes which often underlies student relativism.

5. I am indebted to the Editor for making this point clear.

6. The foregoing suggestion is of considerably less use to those who, unlike myself, espouse some version of “virtue ethics” or who use texts from philosophers in that tradition, e.g., Aristotle. Judgments about persons as opposed to judgments about the actions of person are a major focus of such courses. Such courses will inevitably involve the consideration of attempts to justify unfavorable moral judgments about other persons. Those who slant introductory ethics courses to a consideration of the virtues and the notion of character will tend to experience the kind of student resistance discussed in the present paper to a greater degree than those who focus on questions of right and wrong.


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