



# The Nature of Morality and Its Implications for Chiropractic Educators in Ethics

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## ABSTRACT

It is well known that chiropractic colleges teach ethics and professional responsibility to chiropractic students. Casual observation shows faculty members and college administrators share frustration over the anxiety and hours of work devoted to students that violate these expectations. Although it is clear that chiropractic students are taught to behave in an ethical manner, on what moral ground is this message given? The answer to this question is currently unknown. This article compares ethical relativism, the notion that there are no universal moral principles that transcend culture and personal interpretations, with ethical objectivism, the philosophical opposite of relativism. It seems that if chiropractic educators are to insist on ethical behavior, an understanding of these two ethical theories is necessary for explaining why students ought to behave in certain ways. Since objectivism seems to be the superior ethical system, codes of ethics based on objectivism carry more force than just institutional power, giving students immersed in relativism prior to chiropractic college a robust reason why they ought to be ethical. (J Chiro Humanities 2004;11:11-23)

## INTRODUCTION

One need not look far for news reports about cheating in undergraduate, graduate, and professional schools. Chiropractic colleges are no exception. It is well known in the chiropractic profession that chiropractic students face moral dilemmas from the moment they enter school. Currently there is no known published data about cheating in chiropractic colleges, but it is common knowledge that most if not all schools have student honor codes and institutional policies about cheating. Conversations among

colleagues at professional and academic conferences reveal that chiropractic college teachers share frustration over academic cheating and the lack of professionalism. Over 15 years ago, one of my colleagues talked about many students being “morally bankrupt”.

In addition, chiropractic college administrators and teachers face instances of classroom disrespect and harassment of fellow students and teachers. During clinical training students must be monitored to prevent theft, records falsification, and graduation requirements falsification. A multiplicity of cultures with different understandings of moral behavior is the norm at many colleges, and this makes disciplinary action more difficult when the college

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policies and student honor codes are violated. Anecdotally, it is widely believed at my institution that unethical behavior in school likely predicts the same behavior in practice.

A casual look at the records of Boards of Chiropractic Examiners in virtually any state will provide all manner of ethical violations concerning sexual impropriety, fraudulent billing and advertising, and substance abuse. I have functioned as an expert witness in disciplinary cases as well as a liaison to the California Board of Chiropractic Examiners, and have first-hand knowledge of such things.

All of this is not to say that ethical violations are rampant and all student behavior is out of control, however, common experience shows that even a handful of violators cause many hours of stressful administrative and legal dealings with the individuals and the consequences. It is frustrating to the faculty, who often ideally expect that students are going to “behave as adults.” But it seems that in many cases the students *are* behaving as adults – those that see no reason why they *should* be ethical until and unless they are challenged, and even then they often resist the consequences of their actions, often on the grounds of ethical relativism, although it is unclear that they consciously understand that is the case. Doubtless many an administrator and faculty member can recount instances when, in spite of being caught red-handed at some unethical behavior, a student acts as though the person in authority has no right to challenge the wrong action, incredulous that the behavior is called into account, and even more incredulous that a disciplinary action follows. As chair of the Student Grievance Committee at my institution, I can directly testify to these facts.

A conversation with a colleague who teaches the ethics course at the author’s institution was informative. When asked if he used any

particular ethical foundation or theory to teach ethics, the answer was “no.” The content of the course aims at avoiding unprofessional behaviors – the obvious things for which chiropractors are disciplined. But other than to avoid punishment and “be professional because it is good to be professional,” there is apparently no “why” in the course curriculum. This raises questions. Other than for self-interest or avoiding punishment, why *should* anyone behave in a moral, and by extension, professional way? How should anyone know what is right and wrong and from where moral principles originate?

It is currently unknown as to whether educators in ethics at chiropractic institutions use any particular ethical theories as a foundation for their course content. But if systems of ethics such as virtue ethics are to be promoted in chiropractic college classrooms, it stands to reason that instructors as well as students should understand what underpins their system of thought and how well it stands up to scrutiny. I hope that this article will provoke critical thought and reflection among educators in professional ethics, as well as dialogue about morality and ethics that goes deeper than the obvious in the chiropractic profession.

## DISCUSSION

### Foundational Premises

“What is the nature of morality?” is an ancient question. In today’s world a fundamental dispute about *relative* and *objective* morality occupies many pages of popular and academic literature, and is the content of many a conversation and debate in classrooms and the public square - whether or not the participants fully understand the implications of their arguments. Ethical

relativism, the notion that there are no universal moral principles, and that right or wrong is relative to cultures and/or individual interpretations, seems to rule the day. Its philosophical opponent, ethical objectivism, holds that there are at least some universal rights and wrongs applicable to all people; it also takes an unpopular back seat in the classroom.

To illustrate, columnist John Leo<sup>1</sup> reported in the *U.S. News and World Report* that a professor in upstate New York found, "... 10 to 20 percent of his students could not bring themselves to criticize the Nazi extermination of Europe's Jews." This was based on a reluctance to "judgmentally attack" another culture.

In a medical ethics essay contest, winner Peter Moschovis criticized cultural relativism as the foundation of ethics when he wrote about the practice of female genital mutilation in African countries, and how a physician should handle the hypothetical case of a young African woman that requests the procedure in the US to avoid the consequences of poor medical conditions in her home country. He indicated that the ethical force for opposition to the practice in addition to the implied shortcomings of relativism is found in the moral mandates of medicine, that is, doing good and avoiding harm. However, there is no clear appeal in the essay to a universal principle *outside of medicine*, such as "do not mutilate girls or young women," that crosses all boundaries of time and culture. This seems to be a form of cultural ethical relativism in disguise, with the medical community as just another culture. In the end, Moschovis<sup>2</sup> is careful to say, "By combining humility, respect, and commitment to the patient's good, a physician can *remain true to the principles of multiculturalism and justice* while maintaining an ethically sound position" (emphasis added). This is

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interesting when the title of his essay is "When Cultures are Wrong," and a relativist reader might well ask, "Whose justice?"

When college students defend an ethically questionable action on the grounds of culture, do they recognize they are defending moral relativism? When a doctor has trouble going so far as to say the practice of female genital mutilation is simply wrong despite cultural justifications, does he recognize, albeit possibly unintended, that he defended ethical relativism?

From the classrooms to the street, the public is regularly bombarded by direct and indirect messages that no one can make a claim about truth or morality without being labeled as arrogant, narrow-minded, and even fascist. However, if moral truth is left to individual fiat or societal consensus, what becomes of the foundation for lawmaking for an orderly society? What becomes of how doctors in any discipline care for their patients when health care costs and reimbursement clash with patient needs? What becomes of ethics in business? These and other potential conflicts in any society demand a reasonable answer, and because they are real issues, they cannot be dismissed and tossed into the garbage can of the slippery slope.

For our purpose, if the nature of morality can be discovered, what impact does this have on the chiropractic profession? It seems reasonable to determine the nature of morality and act by that nature personally and professionally, whatever the outcome of the investigation.

In the following sections, two general theories of morality are defined and compared: *relativism* and *objectivism*. Relevant subtypes of these classifications are discussed and arguments for and against each presented. Based on the available evidence, objectivism seems to stand out as the best explanation among competitors for the nature of morality. Its origin seems best explained by a being that has a special relationship to and interest in humankind, as opposed to an origin from naturalistic explanations or brute fact.

### **Ethical Relativism Explained**

Ethical relativism, also called moral relativism, is the position that there are no universal moral truths that apply to all persons, which transcend time, place, culture, and individual interpretations.<sup>3</sup> Ethical relativism has classically been the conclusion of two premises, the diversity thesis and the dependency thesis.<sup>3</sup> The *diversity thesis* is derived from anthropology. Ruth Benedict, a noted anthropologist, made this observation as a result of studying diverse cultures in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century:<sup>4</sup>

We do not any longer make the mistake of deriving the morality of our locality and decade directly from the inevitable constitution of human nature. We do not elevate it to the dignity of a first principle. We recognize that morality differs in every society, and is a convenient term for *socially approved habits*.

Cultures vary widely in their moral practices, and this reality appears to count against a universal moral principle of any kind. For example, in the People's Republic of China, the practice of aborting female fetuses even against the will of the parents is well known.

However, in the United States, no woman can be forced to have an abortion. In some cultures, it is understood that conscious deception in business practices is included in the rules by which business is done.<sup>5</sup> In other cultures this behavior is unacceptable and is punishable under the law. In industrialized societies, women's upper bodies are expected to be clothed; however, in some tribal societies in Africa and South America, women go about their daily lives bare-breasted. The comparisons are seemingly endless, and the natural intuitive conclusion from these observations might be that morals concerning the same actions are different in diverse cultures. Therefore, many people from all walks of life and every level of education conclude there are no moral principles that can be found in common across cultures today, to say nothing of cultures across time.

To further support relativism, the *dependency thesis* asserts that actions are considered right or wrong depending on the society to which a person belongs, or upon individual interpretation.<sup>3</sup> The culture's moral beliefs and practices necessarily find their validity in the culture's language, economy, institutions, and patterns.<sup>6</sup> Individuals "absorb" moral training from their surroundings without conscious effort, and often do not know why the morals are what they are.

It is conceivable that unless people study other cultures or receive training in ethics, they might never examine their own moral foundation in any critical fashion. It is also assumed in the dependency thesis that people from one society cannot appraise another society's moral principles from a noncultural perspective. Because they are so deeply imbued with their own society's values and practices, they cannot "see" another culture's code, except by being immersed in the other culture. Moreover, even after immersion, it would not be allowable to criticize the other

culture, simply because it is another culture with its own moral practices. Morality then, in the relativistic worldview, is the sum total of societal customs, rules, and practices that are peculiar to a society.

Relativism is not homogenous, and can be further divided into *subjectivism* and *conventionalism*. Subjectivism is the notion that individual belief makes right, or that individuals do as their conscience dictates according to some personal moral code. Beckwith and Koukl<sup>7</sup> refer to this position as “I say” relativism. In this view, people make moral decisions that may or may not adhere to their societal norms, because what is right for them might not be right for someone else. A typical comment that reflects subjectivism is “Don’t force your morals on me!”

Conventionalism, on the other hand, plays out as cultural relativism. That is, a society or culture constructs its own moral code and its members adhere to the code because cultural acceptance makes right for that society. Beckwith and Koukl<sup>7</sup> refer to this type of relativism as “Society says” relativism.

### **Critique of Ethical Relativism – Subjectivism**

What is anyone to make of the claims of relativism? At least on the surface, the defense of relativism seems sound. How can anyone claim that the practice of an individual or society is wrong, in light of cultural and individual differences? Are not all viewpoints equally valid, and should critics be allowed to escape the charge of arrogance if they claim there are universal or absolute moral principles that transcend time, cultures, and individual interpretations? Let us begin with subjectivism and see if there is any reason to discard it as a foundation for morality.

First, the difference between a *preference-claim* and a *moral-claim* must be established. Francis Beckwith notes that people often confuse the two as if they were the same thing, and defines how the two kinds of statements differ.<sup>8</sup> An example would be as follows:

1. I like coffee ice cream with Oreo<sup>®</sup> mini-cookies.
2. Gang-raping a teenage girl for failure to cover her face is wrong.

The first statement is a preference-claim, involving likes and dislikes. There is no moral imperative. The person making the statement is not saying that since he likes coffee ice cream with mini-cookies, everyone else *ought* to like them, too. He is not going to introduce legislation that will require everyone in society to indulge in coffee ice cream and mini-cookies. The second statement, however, is a moral claim that is *prescriptive*, that is, it explicitly states the wrongness of the act of gang-rape, and it implies that anyone reading the statement *ought* to agree with and abide by the statement. It has nothing to do with likes or dislikes.

A real-life example from my own experience will help to illustrate further. In the author’s course entitled, “Philosophy and Reasoning,” a guest speaker was lecturing on the meaning of evidence-based health care. A woman asked a question about a divisive topic in the chiropractic profession, and the speaker anticipated the direction of her question. He interrupted her and answered in a brusque manner that embarrassed her. Nothing further was said during the class. But after the class, the woman and one of her classmates stormed into the author’s office. She was quite angry, and her opening statement repeated virtually verbatim, “Dr. Wells, I don’t believe there is any such thing as right and wrong. Everything

is *relative!* But what he did to me was *wrong!*”

Note the logical contradiction in this statement. There is no right and wrong, yet woman perceived that the speaker’s action was wrong. This simultaneously illustrates the confusion of preference-claims (I dislike being embarrassed) with moral claims (speakers ought not to demean human value by humiliating their audience members), and illustrates subjectivism (*for me*, someone going out of their way to embarrass me is wrong). In the ensuing discussion, it was evident she wanted “something done” about the guest speaker. But on the grounds of her statements, what action should have been taken?

According to her own subjectivism, it was wrong for someone to embarrass her. But apparently according to the speaker, it was acceptable to interrupt and embarrass someone in the audience because she had the audacity to imply he might be mistaken about his position. Whose moral principle is correct?

This example shows the failure of subjectivism to perform one of the most important functions in moral decision-making - the *resolution of conflict* when different moral principles collide. Subjectivism cannot help us solve moral dilemmas because there are no inherently right or wrong actions. The best the woman could hope for is to convince the guest speaker to share her dislike for embarrassment. Unless there is a universal principle, “do not intentionally humiliate others,” there is nothing that can be done other than to ask the speaker to reconsider his actions and hope for the best. If the woman insists that an action should be taken against the speaker, she is appealing to something beyond her own “I say” morality. At least on the surface, subjectivism seems attractive

because it seems so tolerant of everyone’s view – until there is a “victim.”

Taken to its logical conclusion, subjectivism as a moral thesis fails on other counts. Since everyone acts according to their own conscience and personal code, the implication is that people are *morally infallible*, and all will just naturally do the right thing.<sup>9</sup> But this seems intuitively absurd, as it is unlikely that a person who prefers to torture innocent babies for the fun of it and believes this to be morally acceptable would be counted as a rational moral agent, or that his moral judgment would be thought of as good as everyone else’s judgment. It is also unlikely that individuals truly believe themselves to be morally infallible. In addition, subjectivism logically allows obviously immoral acts such as rape, because no one can claim that another person’s subjective assessment of morality is faulty or wrong, only distasteful.<sup>9</sup> Since subjectivism fails as a moral system, does conventionalism fare any better?

### **Critique of Ethical Relativism – Conventionalism**

Conventionalism is in essence the dependency thesis in action on a group basis; morals are relative to cultures and societies. Since moral practices and principles vary from culture to culture, and even within cultures, there are no universal or objective moral principles to which all must be accountable. Since there is disagreement over morality, which in some of the “hot button” social issues such as abortion seems insurmountable, then disagreement counts as evidence for conventionalism. However, there can still be a true or “most correct” answer even when there is vehement debate about an issue. Even though there is deeply emotional disagreement about abortion in the United States, it does not follow that no one can know whether the human fetus is an innocent person that should not be killed. In

addition, it will not do to insist there is no truth or true answers, for if a relativist insists there is no truth, she has made a self-referentially absurd statement. She has made a truth-claim about truth, that is, "There is no truth." If the claim is correct, it is either false because it purports to be true, or meaningless because the statement includes the speaker of the claim, who says she knows the "truth-about-truth." We would be justified in asking how she gained the special epistemic access to this enlightened position about truth, since in essence she is claiming to have all knowledge about truth claims.

Cultural disagreement is overrated. Beckwith points out that although it is factual that cultures disagree on moral issues, it is false that there are no shared values or objective morals that are binding across all barriers.<sup>8</sup> Consider the strife over abortion. Do pro-choice advocates value life less than the pro-life advocates, and therefore have conflicting values? It seems unlikely this is the case. What is at issue is a *factual disagreement* about the nature and status of the fetus as a person. As Schick observes,<sup>9</sup> moral *standards* do not equate to moral *judgments*. He illustrates with a formula: Moral standard + factual beliefs = Moral judgment.

Both sides of the abortion debate value life (the *standard*), but their *factual beliefs* about the fetus are different, therefore the *moral judgment* is different. But, it is unlikely that a pro-choice advocate would disagree with the principle, "preserve innocent human persons," as a moral standard.

Pojman provides another example. A tribe in East Africa throws its deformed children into the river because it believes the deformed infants belong to the god of the river, the hippopotamus. However, this is based on a mistaken belief, rather than a moral code that devalues life.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it does not follow

that different practices resulting from different beliefs equate to substantively different morals.

Another problem cultural relativists face is how to define a society or culture.<sup>3</sup> People can belong to different cultures and "subcultures." Which of these should they follow, especially if the values in each conflict? If a man is both a Catholic and a US citizen, which culture should be morally relevant? If he chooses to divorce his wife, he is both wrong (in Catholicism) and not wrong (as a US citizen), no matter what he does. How should a friend advise this man if he asks what he should do? Which culture holds the superior moral choice?

Conventionalism faces yet another problem. There can be no true ethical progress or moral reformers. If there are no universal moral standards independent of cultures to which society can aspire, then the abolishment of slavery, the reversal of repressive laws concerning women, and fair treatment for the disabled are not *better* moral conditions; they are only *different*. In addition, in a society that cherishes slavery, the moral reformer is acting against the code of his society, and is therefore immoral. Logically, a culture should repress anyone who seeks change for the better if culture determines morals. However, this is absurd in the face of historical precedents that strive to improve the lots of oppressed people around the globe.

Another defense of conventionalism is the argument for tolerance, which is sometimes equated with respect. It is common for a person who takes a stand on truth or morality to be accused of intolerance, judgmentalism, and exclusivism. To judge the actions of another culture is ethnocentric and elitist. But, tolerance has taken on an erroneous meaning in today's society. By "tolerance," many mean that people should affirm all viewpoints

and practices as equally valid and acceptable – to even celebrate all things by virtue of their diversity. When properly understood, tolerance implies disagreement. There is no reason to tolerate those we agree with. We only tolerate those we *disagree* with. Hopefully, mature disagreement entails respect for other persons. But today it seems that when there is disagreement, it (erroneously) necessarily follows that *people are disrespected* rather than *viewpoints are disagreed with*. This confusion is not warranted, especially if true tolerance prevails.

Tolerance is a “prime directive” for cultural relativists. In their insistence, they are presupposing the existence of a universal normative value: tolerance. If everyone *ought* to be tolerant, then tolerance is a universal principle.<sup>8</sup> However, this refutes the notion that there are no universal moral values. And ironically, when those who insist on tolerance attempt to force tolerance on others, they are acting in the same judgmental way that they abhor in the first place. Additionally, if everything is truly relative, why *should* anyone be tolerant? Why take that position seriously, or believe it has any more value than intolerance?

In addition, what of societies that do not embrace tolerance? Should respect be given to societies or cultures that repress women or sanction rape as punishment? Humanist author Xiaorong Li,<sup>10</sup> commenting on universal human rights and the People’s Republic of China, observes:

What if the respected or tolerated culture disrespects and advocates violence against individuals who dissent? When a girl fights to escape female genital circumcision or foot-binding or arranged marriage, when a widow does not want

to be burned to death to honor her dead husband, the relativist is obliged to “respect” the cultural or traditional customs from which the individual is trying to escape. In so doing, the relativist is not merely disrespecting the individual but effectively endorsing the moral ground for torture, rape, and murder. On moral issues, ethical relativists cannot possibly remain neutral – they are committed either to the individual or the dominant force within the culture. Relativists have made explicit one central value – equal respect and tolerance of other ways of life, which they insist to be absolute and universal. Ethical relativism is thus repudiated by itself.

It seems that conventionalism as an ethical theory cannot stand on its own merits. However, the deficiencies of ethical relativism do not establish a case for objectivism, which follows in the next section.

### **Ethical or Moral Objectivism Explained**

Moral objectivism is the position that there are at least some universal moral principles that transcend time, place, cultures, and individual interpretations.<sup>3</sup> Examples would include tell the truth, do not rape, and do not kill innocent persons. Objectivism includes the categories of *absolute* morals (absolutism) and *objective* morals (objectivism, or moderate objectivism.) Metaphysically, absolute morals and objective morals are synonymous. They are transcendent, universal moral properties that exist independent of whether anyone believes them or talks about

them. Epistemologically (how we know morals), absolute and objective morals are also the same; we know them by reason or special revelation (if a person is a theist). But these categories of objectivism differ in their *application*. Absolutism holds that moral principles are without exception and non-overridable.<sup>3</sup> But, this is a difficult position to defend in the face of genuine moral conflict. For example, if a non-Jew in Nazi Germany was hiding a Jew to protect her from extermination and Nazi soldiers came to the door demanding to know if any Jews were hidden in the house, a dilemma arises for the absolutist. The principles “tell the truth,” and “protect and preserve innocent life” clash. One principle cannot override the other and the protector faces violation of a moral principle no matter what the choice. But, in nonabsolutist or moderate objectivism, moral principles are hierarchically ordered, and “protect innocent life” overrides “tell the truth” as the more important choice.

A critic might charge that the previous example supports relativism rather than objectivism, but this is not the case. Objectivism does not entail that circumstances and situations and cultures are *irrelevant* in moral decision making, nor does it ignore the *difficulty* of some decisions in the face of these things. However, relativism as an *ethical theory* and as a *normative ethical application* does not necessarily follow from consideration of situations, circumstances, and culture. Consider another example of hierarchical decision making. A man steals bread because he and his family are homeless and he has no money to feed them. Another man steals bread because he likes the thrill of taking what is not his. In objectivism, both have violated “do not steal.” But in the first case it is understandable why he stole the bread, and although he is guilty of stealing, he could be shown *compassion* and *mercy* based on the principle, “provide for the poor and

show mercy.” But in relativism, both men are guilty or not guilty depending on the culture and the party in power at the time, not because there is an objective principle that was violated.

To support objectivism, according to the principles of logic, if it can be shown that there is at least one universal moral principle independent of cultures and subjective personal codes, then relativism is incorrect or false as an explanation of morality, since relativism holds that there are *no* universal moral principles. This does not yet take into account the *origin* of universal moral principles, but only that it is possible at least one exists. For example, it is wrong to torture innocent babies for the fun of it.<sup>3</sup>

It is difficult to imagine a culture where its members approve of this action, *just for fun*. A critic might observe the history of cultures performing infant sacrifices and other tragedies against children, but this harkens back to the difference between a moral standard and factual beliefs that are in error, such as, “there are gods that will punish us unless we provide an infant sacrifice.” In addition, a relativist that doggedly sticks to his guns is in the dilemma put forth by Beckwith and Koukl:<sup>7</sup>

This [refusal to declare an action wrong] puts relativists in an untenable position, caught coming and going. If they speak, they surrender their relativism. If they do not speak, they surrender their humanity. It’s inhuman to be mute in the face of egregious evil, to be silent in the face of flagrant injustice.

Intuitively, it seems there are other principles that cross cultures, such as, rape is wrong.

Even if it is accepted that objectivism is the most correct explanation for morality, a debate arises as to the source of moral principles. Where do these come from if they are not simply social constructions in cultures that serve to underpin some sort of orderly society? Although there are many theories on the source of ethical principles in general, some main themes loom large in the discussion about the origin of objective morality: *naturalistic*, *neo-Platonic* (brute fact), and *theistic* explanations. It is beyond the scope of this article to address neo-Platonism, but the notion of morals simply existing as brute fact is not functionally different from naturalism as an explanatory source when compared to theism. That is, although “brute fact” *allows* for objective morals, it still seems inadequate as an explanation for their *origin*.

### **Naturalism versus Theism as the Origin of Moral Principles**

Naturalism is the philosophical position that all things have natural causes, including ethics. There is no “otherworldly” realm in which God, spirits, and nonmaterial entities such as moral principles exist. All things are reduced to scientific properties that are biological, psychological, sociological, or physical in nature.<sup>11</sup> In this view, moral principles are simply properties that have evolved as a byproduct in humans along with the phenomena of mind, love, and other manifestations of humanness.

Pojman describes objective ethics in terms of natural law, drawing on and critiquing its history from the Stoic philosophers and Thomas Aquinas.<sup>3</sup> Natural law refers to human nature as common to all humans, as opposed to varying natures among different humans, which then generates common principles that can be apprehended by reason and experience. One outcome of natural law

is the existence of objective moral standards that humans recognize by virtue of a common human nature. Natural law does not necessarily depend on God, although it did for Aquinas, therefore natural law might be a consequence of naturalism *or* a theistic worldview. In Pojman’s view, the Stoics and Aquinas established an absolutist version of natural law, but absolutism, regardless of its origin, has already been shown to be difficult to defend if *all* moral principles are exceptionless and non-overridable. Therefore it seems reasonable to accept a moderate version of objective ethics based in natural law, where some principles might be absolute and non-overridable, such as “do not torture innocent babies for the fun of it,” and others are not absolute, such as “tell the truth,” which might be overridden for a higher good.

Although Pojman discusses at length the relationship of ethics to religion in his book, it is clear that he is an objectivist that does not ground ethics in theism. Consider the following comments:

I want to propose a more modest version of objectivist ethics, one that is *consistent with evolutionary theory* but that could be seen as a nonabsolutist version of the natural law theory.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, we do not know for certain whether there is a God or life after death.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, even if a divine being exists, we don’t have the kind of compelling evidence needed to prove that our interpretation of God’s will and ways is the right one. Religion is based *largely on faith rather than on hard evidence*, so that it behooves believers to be modest about their policies.<sup>3</sup>

Pojman does not declare whether he is an atheist or a theist; but note that Pojman assumes a dichotomy between “faith” and

“hard evidence.” Since the specific meanings of his statements are not developed, interpretation must be tentative. Nevertheless, the tone is hard to miss; faith is divorced from evidence, and in many minds, reason. A detailed examination of faith, reason, and evidence is beyond the scope of this article, but there are many volumes written about the subject from both atheistic and theistic camps.

Philosophers that are both atheistic and objectivist are clear about their views, that is, God does not exist, and the evidence about morals points to naturalistic causes.

Atheist philosopher Michael Martin<sup>12</sup> states:

Atheists do not assume a moral universe. They find what appears to be one. Atheists and theists both agree that *prima facie* this is a moral universe with objective moral values. Atheists who are moral realists attempt to show this appearance is not deceptive and that such a universe is possible without God.

Martin attempts to defend how moral laws can be real, as just byproducts of naturalistic evolution in the absence of God. However, atheist philosopher John L. Mackie<sup>13</sup> argues against atheistic objectivism in an oft-quoted statement:

[Objective moral values] constitute so odd a cluster of qualities and relations, that they are most unlikely to have arisen in the ordinary course of events, without an all-powerful god to create them. If, then, there are such intrinsically prescriptive objective values, they make the existence of a god more probable than it would have been without them.

***“...ethical thinking and behavior in chiropractic colleges... is fertile ground for research.”***

Theists often argue that moral principles are real in the sense of actual existence. That is, there is a mind-, theory-, and language-independent world in which immaterial things exist, such as moral principles, numbers, and the laws of logic. It should be noted that atheists and theists alike are not homogenous about moral principles. They might believe morals are relative and *not* real, or they might accept moral principles as objective and real in the sense of a theory-independent reality. In this latter view, theists contend that objective moral principles without God are impossible. There are many reasons why theistic moral realists defend this position, but one major reason is the “should” question. That is, why *should* anyone be moral?

As Beckwith and Koukl point out,<sup>7</sup> the answer to this question is found in examining the options for the origin of morals. Since relativism is false or highly untenable at best, then some form of objectivism must be true. Objectivist possibilities are that moral laws are just accidents, or are naturalistically determined akin to Pojman’s explanation. The other possibility is that morals are the result of an intelligent being that has a special relationship to human beings.

If the first option is the case, the “should” question arises. Since moral duty is owed to *persons* and not abstractions such as “moral principles that are just part of the universe’s furniture,” why should anyone obey them if it is not in their self-interest to do so? If evolution is the origin of the species and survival of the fittest is evolution’s blind

guide, why should anyone be accountable to accidental principles?

Secondly, even if nontheistic natural law succeeds in establishing objective moral principles based on common human nature, which humans should get to define that common nature and determine the objective moral principles to be what they are? The need for an orderly society will not do as an explanation, for this still does not explain why anyone *should* care about society. In addition, what if an individual decides to form her own society, in which her personal egoistic needs are the prime directive at the expense of others?

Fear of punishment does not explain morals, either. It merely explains why it would be a good idea to act morally, in order to avoid the consequences of immoral acts, but there is still no explanation as to the sense of duty or moral outrage when some egregious act is reported in the media. Societal conditioning cannot explain duty, for it is obvious that humans have learned to assess their own “condition” and can still choose to act contrary to the social mores.

Intrinsic human dignity and value will not suffice to explain the “ought-ness” of moral duty. If humans are just “matter-in-motion” and the products of evolution, what makes humans any more valuable than lower animals? In addition, what is the explanation for the sense of guilt and pain when immoral acts are committed? It makes no sense to feel shame toward an abstract principle rather than a person.<sup>14</sup> It could be argued that moral duties are in fact owed to persons, and that is simply a brute fact. But who is the authority that declares what moral duties are owed to whom? Who or what justifies these choices? Ultimately, it seems that moral duty, the sense of “ought-ness” in human actions, is best explained by God as the highest authority.

With this in mind, it seems that the moral universe is best explained by an intelligent being and designer. It is beyond the scope of this paper to argue for the existence or non-existence of God, especially as to how God’s existence relates to ethics, or to argue “whose god?” For a good start on the matter, interested readers might wish to investigate debates on the issues between atheist and theistic philosophers.<sup>15-17</sup> These debates inevitably include discussions of an ancient question called the *Euthyphro* dilemma, and the *divine command theories*,<sup>3</sup> in which God’s relationship to morals and goodness are considered at length. Atheists consider the apparent insolubility of this Platonic riddle the crux of whether God can be the origin of moral principles, even if he exists, while theists maintain the *Euthyphro* is a false dichotomy that can be solved.

## CONCLUSION

If objectivism is the correct way of looking at ethics, then chiropractic students should be informed that their duty is at least to a collective human nature and expectation that humans naturally recognize, and that culturalism and subjectivism cannot be a foundation for ethics or excuses for ethical violations. This adds an element of the foundation for morality to the already pragmatic “behave professionally and avoid violations” ethical training that is most likely given in college.

Ultimately, if theistic objective morality is the true or most correct view, then students ought to be encouraged to consider this argument, as well. The actuality that theistic ethics might be contentious should not prevent academic freedom in contending for the best explanation in the “marketplace of ideas.” Regardless of the origin of objective moral principles, we have seen that subjectivism and

culturalism cannot be used to rationalize behavior.

It seems that ethical thinking and behavior in chiropractic colleges, as well as how chiropractic students are fundamentally trained in ethics, is fertile ground for research. In the end, it is possible that appealing to objectivism as a foundational underpinning for ethical behavior in chiropractic college and practice might bring change to the current situation; that of course, remains to be seen.

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