

# What is Moral Relativism?

## Article 1 of 2: No Right and Wrong

By Robert A. Mimiaga

Welcome to the first article of a two-part series on *What is Moral Relativism?* We've all heard this term spoken occasionally in conversations and in the news, but what does it mean, and how does it affect our culture? Let me give you an interesting example... Take a closer look at this article's header image above this text. What do you see, and how would you describe it? This is similar in appearance to M. C. Escher's famous artwork titled *Relativity*, which is less about a literal place and more about a visual paradox, a world where normal rules of reality do not agree. As you study this image in more detail, you will recognize multiple gravity directions at once, people walking on steps, walls, and ceilings, and staircases going up and down at once, and it all seems to be logically inconsistent. The artist is suggesting that to the observer, what is true depends on your point of view. Each figure in the image represents a coherent reality, but those realities conflict with one another. This image represents a thought-provoking example of moral relativism, where there is no absolute, universal, or objective standard for determining right and wrong. So how does this correspond to the worldview in our modern society? Let me provide you with a real-live example of moral relativism in our culture today.

### **Justified Retribution?**

On the morning of December 4<sup>th</sup>, 2024, the CEO of UnitedHealthcare, Brian Thompson, was gunned down outside a Manhattan hotel. New York police say the suspect shot Thompson in the chest in a "brazen, targeted attack" at 6:46 a.m. ET outside of the New York Hilton Midtown Hotel—moments before the annual investor conference for UnitedHealthcare's parent company was set to begin. "Brian's experience, relationships, and values make him especially well-suited to help UnitedHealthcare improve how health care works for consumers, physicians, employers, governments, and our other partners, leading to continued and sustained long-term growth," Andrew Witty, CEO of UnitedHealth Group, said in a release at the time. Thompson is survived by his wife and two children, according to media reports.<sup>1</sup>

Several days after Thompson was gunned down on a street in New York City, Luigi Mangione was taken into custody about 9:15 a.m. ET on Monday at a McDonald's in Altoona, Pennsylvania, after police got a tip that he was eating there. NYPD Commissioner Jessica Tisch said the suspect was carrying multiple fake IDs.

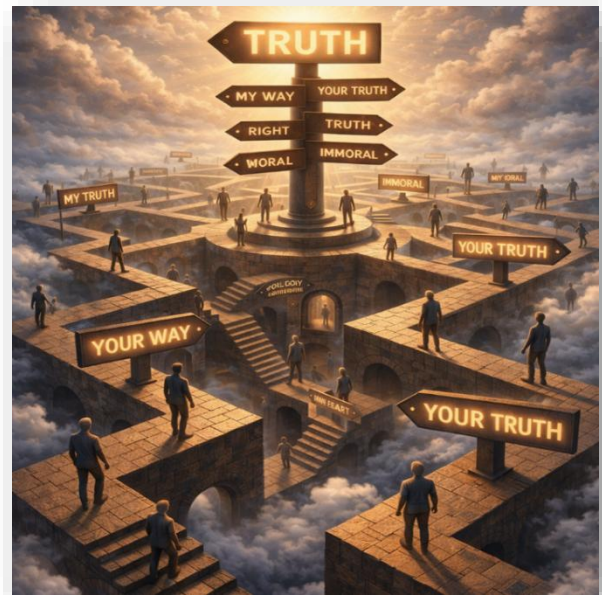
Police also found a gun, silencer, and mask that Tisch says were "consistent" with the weapon authorities believe was used in the shooting. Tisch says one fake ID matched the ID the shooter used to check into a hostel.<sup>2</sup>

This case not only prompted a thorough legal investigation but also a surprising social media reaction. While many in the public demanded criminal justice for the brazen, cold-blooded killing of this CEO, husband, and father of two children, thousands of others responded through social media with shouts of "justice served" against the medical insurance giant because of their personal experiences with high medical costs and denied medical claims.

This story presents a moral dilemma. Was this act of killing clearly wrong and illegal? Yes, if you consider the existing laws in the state of New York. Yet many people questioned the severity of the crime as they supported the killer's "revenge" and "justified retribution" for the perceived systemic problems that exist within the health care system. This is a modern-day example of moral relativism.

### **What is Moral Relativism?**

Pause for a moment and ask yourself, what comes to mind when you hear the term "moral relativism"? Let's take a moment to dissect this term to gain a better understanding. Simply stated, morality is a standard for determining right from wrong, while relativism in this context is the idea that truth and morality are not always absolute but depend on perspective, context, or culture.



Morality can also be described as a set of principles or rules that define what is considered right or wrong, good or bad, and proper or improper behavior for individuals and groups. These rules can be used by our society as the foundation for living civilly by establishing standards for actions and character, which can be applied to our civil laws, social behavior, and cultural norms. Therefore, it can be stated that *moral relativism* is the idea that moral judgments or ethical standards are not universal or fixed, but rather dependent on cultural context, individual perspective, or societal norms.

Take a moment to carefully examine the following table, "*Comparisons of Moral Relativism Versus Moral Absolutism*," and observe how the moral relativism worldview consistently places a heightened degree of control in human hands across every property of its framework. Moral relativists have completely replaced God's laws of absolute morality with a morality based on human opinions and cultural desires.

### Comparisons of Moral Relativism Versus Moral Absolutism<sup>3</sup>

Category	Moral Relativism	Moral Absolutism
<b>Core Idea</b>	Morality is shaped by cultural or individual perspectives.	Morality is objective and universally binding.
<b>Source of Truth</b>	Social conventions, cultural practices, or personal choice.	Rooted in God's nature, natural law, or objective reason.
<b>View of Right &amp; Wrong</b>	No universal moral truths; moral claims are context dependent.	Universal moral truths exist independent of human opinion.
<b>Consistency Across Cultures</b>	Different cultures can have equally valid moral systems.	Moral truth transcends cultural differences.
<b>Authority</b>	Society or individual autonomy determines morality.	Divine command, natural law, or moral realism.
<b>Flexibility</b>	Morality evolves with societal change.	Moral truths are fixed, though understanding may deepen.
<b>Judging Other Cultures</b>	Moral judgments across cultures are discouraged.	Practices can be judged by universal standards.
<b>View of Moral Disagreements</b>	Disagreements reflect differing perspectives, not objective error.	Disagreements imply that at least one side is mistaken.
<b>Accountability</b>	Primarily social or personal consequences.	Ultimate accountability to God or moral law.
<b>Human Nature</b>	Humans construct moral systems.	Humans discover or are accountable to moral truth.
<b>Theological Alignment</b>	Often conflicts with historic Christian teaching.	Aligns with classical Christian doctrine of God's unchanging nature.
<b>Illustrative Statement</b>	"Morality is a human construct shaped by culture."	"Moral truth reflects an unchanging standard grounded in God."

#### When Did This Belief First Originate?

Although the phrase "*moral relativism*" was not commonly used among early philosophers, the concept certainly existed and was taught by many Greek philosophers like Protagoras (c. 490-420 BC), who was quoted as saying, "Man is the measure of all things: of the things that are, that they are; of the things that are not, that they are not." Protagoras attempted to promote that the truth, and by extension moral truth, is relative to each person's perception.<sup>4</sup> In other words, Protagoras professed that every man had his own yardstick to measure what was true for himself. Protagoras proclaimed that human beings, not God, nature, or reason, are the final standard of truth.

#### What is Wrong with Relative Morality?

So how does moral relativism manifest itself in our world today? There are many examples I can cite where our society's unity has eroded through the influence of moral relativism. When we carefully examine our culture, we can quickly see that moral relativism is widespread in our contemporary culture. In our entertainment and media, we see antiheroes on the theater screens that blur the lines of right and

wrong through their words and actions. Some storylines portray their lead characters as being "true to yourself" instead of doing what is right legally or ethically. In advertisements we often hear the phrases "You deserve it" or "Take control of your life" as a justification for purchasing or doing things that might be morally questionable.

In our business industry, which is a profit-driven market, many companies justify unmoral or unethical practices in their workplace for the sake of increasing profits and impressing their stockholders. In our political arena, politicians frequently sway from position to position based on the changes in public polls and the political moods of the day. Even within the church, there is a growing tendency to adopt theological views that resonate with what feels right to a congregation, sometimes at the expense of following what is true, in order to fit personal expectations and lifestyles. In many universities across the country, our students are taught to be tolerant of other students' positions and advocate a worldview that "what is true for you may not be true for me." Religious moral concepts are often dismissed as just another set of morals that are relative.

Among our youth who question the morality of their parents, they often feel there's a need to 'fine-tune' their own morality to adapt to the changing times in our modern culture. As an example, one individual that expresses his relativistic views in a way that resonates with many young people in our society today is Francisco Mejia Uribe. He is a blog writer who, in his article titled "A Pragmatic Defense of Moral Relativism," writes, "If you are a moral objectivist and you really walk the talk, then variation in moral belief is unacceptable.

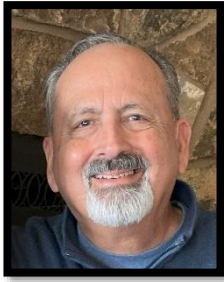
This is precisely why perfectly fine fellows like the Pope or our grandmas, despite having faultless moral principles, sometimes act in ways we relativists would oppose. Sadly, for the Pope and for Grandma, the world has changed. Their relatively uniform and self-contained moral universe does not exist anymore. As such, from a purely pragmatic perspective, clinging to objectivism is a sign of simply not understanding a set of new existential conditions."<sup>5</sup> Did you catch Uribe's statement: "Their relatively uniform and self-contained moral universe does not exist anymore"? In a few words, Uribe sweeps aside the worldview of objective morality in favor of a new form of morality that changes

with our modern culture. I believe this relativistic view of morality—where moral standards are seen as neither universal nor absolute and therefore not binding on all people—has become deeply ingrained in the thinking of both younger and older generations today.

Moral relativism has permeated our society to the point that it has become the normal and accepted way of viewing, thinking, and acting. As Christians who have long upheld the absolute truths of Scripture, how should we understand modern relativism and its damaging influence on both our society and our church—and, more importantly, how should we respond to it? In the next and final article, we will explore the views of contemporary Christian theologians who speak about moral relativism and examine Jesus' teaching on morality in order to establish a firm foundation for navigating our modern culture.

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Robert (Bob) A. Mimiaga holds a B.S. in Mathematics and Computer Science from California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, and an M.A. in Biblical and Theological Studies from Talbot School of Theology at Biola University. His career included software design, engineering management, and consulting for various aerospace companies, as well as serving as an Associate Pastor at New Hope Church in Bend, Oregon. He currently resides in Bend with his wife, Joan.



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***Library: Moral Relativism***

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<sup>1</sup> Rachel Treisman. 2024. KPBS, National News. December 4th.  
[https://www.kpbs.org/news/national/2024/12/04/who-is-brian-thompson-the-unitedhealthcare-ceo-gunned-down-in-new-york?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.kpbs.org/news/national/2024/12/04/who-is-brian-thompson-the-unitedhealthcare-ceo-gunned-down-in-new-york?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

<sup>2</sup> Howard Thompson, Melissa Turtinen and Nick Longworth, 2024, FOX29, Crime & Public Safety, December 10.  
<https://www.fox29.com/news/unitedhealthcare-ceo-shooting-arrest-charged-dec-9-2024>

<sup>3</sup> Table entries derived from one or more of these references:

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C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2001).

Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Contemporary Issues and Options*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Connolly, Patrick J., 2014, Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Monthly Archives: Oct 2014, <https://iep.utm.edu>

<sup>5</sup> Uribe, Francisco Mejia, 2011, Medium.com, A Pragmatic Defense of Moral Relativism, April 18. <https://medium.com/postmodern-perspective/a-pragmatic-defense-of-moral-relativism-12012233059f>