



The Death of Truth

Greg Koukl

Allan Bloom, author of the landmark critique of American education *The Closing of the American Mind*, starts his analysis this way: 'There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative. If this belief is put to the test, one can count on the students' reaction: they will be uncomprehending. That anyone should regard the proposition as not self-evident astonishes them, as though he were calling into question $2 + 2 = 4$.' [1]

What Professor Bloom observes is not a trend but a revolution. Like most revolutions, it did not start with a rifle shot or a cannon but with an idea that was whispered in many different environments and diverse situations. This revolution started in academia and eventually engulfed the common person. Its growth has been so subtle and thorough that it is now a core belief-not just of the college elite, but also of the rank and file, white collar and blue collar alike.

What Is Truth?

Since the sixties we have been in the throes of this quiet but desperate revolution of thought - the death of truth. We don't mean 'truth' in the sense of something being my personal opinion. Rather we refer to the death of what the late Dr. Francis Schaeffer called 'true truth,' the extinction of the idea that any particular thing can be known for sure.

Today we've lost the confidence that statements of fact can ever be anything more than just opinions; we no longer know that anything is certain beyond our subjective preferences. The word truth now

means 'true for me' and nothing more. We have entered an era of dogmatic scepticism.

Ideas that are whispered are seldom analyzed well, for they simply don't draw enough attention. By means of repetition and passive acceptance over time, they take on the force of common wisdom, a 'truth' that everyone knows but no one has stopped to examine, a kind of intellectual urban legend.

Once ideas like these take root, they are difficult to dislodge. Attempts to do so result in Bloom's 'uncomprehending' stares. [2] The ideas become so much a part of our emerging intellectual constitution that we are increasingly incapable of critical self-reflection. Even if we did, we have little conviction that such analysis would do any good anyway. As Kelly Monroe remarked in her book *Finding God at Harvard*, 'Students feel safer as doubters than as believers, and as perpetual seekers rather than eventual finders.' [3]

When truth dies, all of its subspecies, such as ethics, perish with it. If truth can't be known, then the concept of moral truth becomes incoherent. Ethics become relative, right and wrong matters of individual opinion. This may seem a moral liberty, but it ultimately rings hollow. 'The freedom of our day,' lamented a graduate in a Harvard commencement address, 'is the freedom to devote ourselves to any values we please, on the mere condition that we do not believe them to be true.' [4]

The death of truth in our society has created a moral decay in which 'every debate ends with the barroom question "says who?" ' [5] When we abandon the idea that one set of laws applies to every human being, all that remains is subjective, personal opinion.

Pleasure as Ethics

When morality is reduced to personal tastes, people exchange the moral question, 'What is good?' for the pleasure question, 'What feels good?' They assert their desires and then attempt to rationalize their choices with moral language. In this case, the tail wags the dog. Instead of morality constraining pleasures ('I want to do that, but I really shouldn't'), the pleasures

define morality ('I want to do that, and I'm going to find a way to rationalize it'). This effort at ethical decision making is really nothing more than thinly veiled self-interest-pleasure as ethics.

When self-interest rules, it has a profound impact on behaviour, especially affecting how we treat other human beings. The notions of human respect and dignity depend on the existence of moral truth. Without it, there is no obligation of self-sacrifice on behalf of others. Instead, we can discard people when they become trouble-some or expensive, or simply when they cramp our lifestyles.

What follows is a true story about a newborn child we'll call Baby Garcia. This event took place in a major hospital in the Los Angeles area. I pass on the exact details as Jennifer, the nurse involved, related them to me:

One night a nurse on my shift came up to me and said, 'Jennifer, you need to see the Garcia baby' There was something suspicious about the way she said it, though. *I see babies born every hour*, I thought.

She led me to a utility room the nurses used for their breaks. Women were smoking and drinking coffee, their feet up on the stainless steel counter. There, lying on the metal, was the naked body of a newborn baby.

'What is this baby doing here on this counter?' I asked timidly. 'That's a preemie born at nineteen weeks,' she said. 'We don't do anything to save them unless they're twenty weeks.'

I noticed that his chest was fluttering rapidly. I picked him up for a closer look. 'This baby is still alive!' I exclaimed. I thought they hadn't noticed.

Then I learned the horrible truth. The nurses knew, and it didn't matter. They had presented the baby to its mother as a dead, premature child. Then they took him away and tossed him on the cold, steel counter in the lunch room until he died. His skin was blotchy white, and his mouth was gaping open as he tried to breathe.

I did the one thing I could think of. I held him in his last moments so he'd at least have some warmth and love when he died.

Just then one of the nurses-a large, harsh woman-burst into the room. 'Jennifer, what are you doing with that baby?' she yelled. 'He's still alive...'

'He's still alive because you're holding him,' she said. Grabbing him by the back with one hand, she snatched him from me, opened one of the

stainless steel cabinets, and pulled out a specimen container with formaldehyde in it. She tossed the baby in and snapped the lid on. It was over in an instant.

To them, this child wasn't human. In seven more days he would have qualified, but at nineteen weeks he was just trash. [6]

If there is no truth, nothing has transcendent value, including human beings. The death of morality reduces people to the status of mere creatures. When persons are viewed as things, they begin to be treated as things.

Anything Goes

The death of morality also produces an 'anything goes' mentality. Sexual norms not only become more liberal, they expand without boundaries because no boundaries exist. Ann Landers recorded the following letter from one of her 'morally liberated' readers:

Dear Ann:

I am a man in my early 60s, divorced and retired. My sister is in her late 50s and widowed. We go to bed together twice a week. This has been going on since her husband died 8 years ago. Actually, when we were teenagers, we fooled around a lot, but never had intercourse. This is not a love match, but it is sex, and good sex at that.

We both enjoy these escapades, and they always produce a good night's sleep. No one knows about this, and no one is getting hurt, or do you think we are fooling ourselves?

-No NAME, NO CITY, PLEASE Dear No Name:

Sick, sick, sick. If I had your address I would send you a 'get well' card. [7]

Even more sobering is how America responded when art went on trial in a Cincinnati courthouse. At issue was an exhibit in the Contemporary Art Center of the work of Robert Mapplethorpe, a talented photographer who had distinguished himself with, among other things, still-life photography of flowers. The photographs on display included the following: a picture of a ten-year-old girl sitting in a chair with her knees up and genitals exposed; a photograph of a man who was naked except for cowboy boots, bent over with a bull-whip in his anus; and a shot of one man expelling a stream of urine into the mouth of another.

The museum was charged with

exhibiting pornography. During the trial, a curator of another museum who testified on behalf of the Mapplethorpe exhibit was asked if the urination picture was art. 'Yes,' she said.

'Is it fine art?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'Because of the composition and the lighting.'

Each photograph was acquitted of the charge of pornography and judged as fine art, after which social commentator and radio talkshow host Dennis Prager observed, 'Ladies and gentlemen, if some of the leading artists in a civilization see a man urinating in another man's mouth and see composition and lighting and do not see their civilization being pissed upon, we are in trouble.' [8]

And we are in trouble. A security camera in Britain records two young boys calmly leading a toddler away and later bludgeoning him to death. A mother in South Carolina fastens her own two children snugly into their safety belts and then sinks the car in the river so she can restore a romantic interest with a man who doesn't want her kids. [9] The leader of a national animal rights organization states that animals are the moral equivalent of humans. [10] An upper-middle-class college couple in New Jersey deliver a child in a motel room, bash in its head, and then drop it in a dumpster. The American College of Emergency Physicians estimates that seventy thousand elderly Americans were abandoned by family members in one year, a practice called 'granny dumping.' [11] And the list goes on.

We are not trying to pander to the sensational with these illustrations. These events aren't out of the ordinary; they can be seen almost daily in our living rooms on the evening news.

Ours is a generation that has institutionalized moral relativism. We've cut our eye-teeth on the philosophy that life's most sublime goal is to be happy and that virtually any means justifies this self-serving end. No longer will we allow a hint of moral censure on sexual practices that were regarded as perverse only a generation before. We consider bullwhips in the butt and urination in the face fine art, abortion a constitutional right, infanticide a reasonable alternative to caring for a child with a troublesome birth defect, lesbian and

homosexual families normal, and drug use a national pastime.

'It is possible,' Prager observes, 'that some societies have declined as rapidly as has America since the 1960s, but I am not aware of any.' [12]

Traitors in Our Midst

This is not a 'morality' we simply tolerate; we champion it. We take pride in our tolerance, yet tolerate no one who doesn't share our moral open-mindedness. 'Who are you to pass judgment?' we ask. 'Where do you get off condemning a nurse for what she does with a foetus that was dying anyway? Or for criticizing the sexual preferences of siblings? Or for challenging another's view of art?'

This stinking stew of ethical nothingness is the sad legacy of the sixties. Yet when our own moral philosophy turns us into victims when our personal liberty is interrupted by random acts of anarchy - suddenly something like moral consciousness tries to lift its head.

Take the Los Angeles riots of 1992, for example. As the buildings burned we watched with horror. Shops were plundered not by hooded looters but by families made up of mom, dad, and the kids - moral mutants on the shopping spree of their lives, giggling and laughing with impunity while stuffing their spoils into shopping carts and oversized trash bags.

We shouldn't have been surprised. During the L.A. riots these families did exactly what they had been taught. Nobody wanted to 'impose' their morality on anyone else, so they learned that values are relative and that morality is a matter of personal preference. Make your own rules, define your own reality, seek your own truth. In the spring of '92, thousands of people did just what we told them to do, and civilization burned.

If we reject truth, why should we be surprised at the moral turbulence that follows? As C. S. Lewis said, 'We laugh at honor and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful.' [13]

This is the chaotic and confusing world of moral relativism, a world made more confusing because

moral relativism isn't even moral. It doesn't qualify as a genuine moral view, as we will learn in the next chapter

Notes

1. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 25.
2. When Chuck Colson gave an address at Harvard titled 'Why It's Impossible to Teach Ethics at Harvard Business School,' this was precisely the response he received. As mentioned in a radio interview with James Dobson, Focus On the Family. The tape aired by Focus on the Family is Chuck Colson, 'The Problem of Ethics: Why Good People Do Bad Things,' an address to the Harvard Business School; copyright 1991, Prison Fellowship, PO. Box 17500, Washington, D.C. 20041.
3. Kelly Monroe, ed., *Finding God at Harvard* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 15. 4. *Ibid.*, 17.
5. Recorded in *The Presbyterian Layman*, July-August 1996, 8.
6. As told to Gregory Koukl by Jennifer Personius, November 1988.
7. *Los Angeles Times*, 22 August 1992, E4.
8. Dennis Prager, 'Multiculturalism and the War Against Western Values' (audiotape), 7 October 1991, available through Ultimate Issues, 800-225-8584.
9. Stephanie Saul, *New York Newsday*, 20 July 1995, A17.
10. Ingrid Newkirk, national director of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), quoted in 'To Market, To Market,' *L.A. Times Magazine*, 22 March 1992.
11. *New York Times*, 26 March 1992 and 29 March 1992; *Time*, 6 April 1992; referenced in *World News Digest*, 13 April 1992.
12. Dennis Prager, 'Just Another Two Days in the Decline of America,' *The Prager Perspective*, 1 January 1997, 1.
13. C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Collier Macmillan, 1955), 35.

This is a sample chapter from the book *Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air* by Greg Koukl and Francis J. Beckwith available in the UK from STL through Wesley Owen bookshops.