

LINE ON LIFE

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A Spectrum of Ethics *

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Over the centuries, two worldviews have evolved. Essentially, they form opposite poles in a spectrum of Judeo-Christian ethics. All of us have incorporated these worldviews — and the value systems they endorse — in our daily living, perhaps unknowingly. What are these worldviews? How do they effect our lives?



On one end, orthodox Jewish, official Catholic and fundamentalist Protestant beliefs express the **fixed** or **absolutist** worldview. Liberal Jewish, Protestant and Catholic theologians share beliefs at the other pole — the **process** or **relativist** worldview, sometimes mistakenly labeled as "*Humanist*." (Although similar to the relativist worldview, humanism is more secular. The humanistic view divorces itself from the divine or supernatural. Humanists emphasize the situation, our interactions and the consequences for all concerned.)

As might be expected from their names, the absolutist view sees the world as *static* and *unchanging*, while the relativist view sees it as *dynamic* and *changing*. In turn, this leads to other differences.

Absolutists believe the world and humans were created perfect and finished at the beginning. In contrast, relativists view both as gradually evolving. Relativists see the world and humans in the process of achieving their full potential.

Absolutists trace evil to the original sin committed by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. On the other hand, relativists view evil as a natural part of the life process — not due to some "*original sin*." Absolutists believe that God punishes evil, while relativists see human laws and nature providing some of the punishment.

Absolutists tend to have a **hierarchical structure** of authority — usually governed by men who perpetuate the absolutist view. With relativists, the structure is more **egalitarian** — men and women in the clergy share religious authority with the lay members.

Absolutists accept sacred texts and teaching in literal terms, because they believe their religious institution possesses all the truth. To them, there is only one true religion. In contrast, relativists view revelation as a gradual process obtained via the sacred texts, but also through communion with nature, other persons and the basis of all being. In other words, they believe that many paths lead to the truth.

In absolutist terms, "*purpose of life*" — at least in Christian terms — involves finding redemption and salvation from sin, transcending the body and its emotions, conquering death and reaching the life "*hereafter*." In the relativist view, the purpose of life emphasizes **becoming** — reaching your fullest potential. It stresses living a more ethical and creative life instead of redeeming sin and seeking the life hereafter.

The conflict between these two extremes can be seen clearly in the area of **sexuality**. To absolutists, sexuality emphasizes genital acts. Full of animal passion and genital lust, sexuality must be controlled. In contrast, relativists stress people and their relationships rather than genital activity. They see sexuality as a natural and positive life force that includes both sensual and spiritual aspects.

For absolutists, sex exists for reproduction. Sexual activity is only acceptable in heterosexual marriages. On the other hand, relativists see sex in broader terms. Sex does not need to be confined to reproduction within marriage. Sexuality can also be used for pleasure, love for others and the celebration of life.

In this context, it is easy to understand why relativists can accept same-sex relationships. Because relativists view God's purpose for sex as a celebration of life, they consider masturbation, oral sex, contraception and same-sex relationships as positive acts. At the other end of the spectrum, absolutists see the same acts as thwarting God's purpose for sex — they are forbidden.

Even with **gender roles** — the expected behavior for each sex — there are differences. Absolutists rigidly define gender roles in relationships — men are supposed to be more active and superior. As you may expect, relativists stress more flexible and egalitarian gender roles.

These two theological worldviews represent the two extremes of a broad spectrum, with relatively few individuals or religious groups at either extreme. Most of us are somewhere in the middle. We may agree with some aspects of each worldview, while disagreeing with other points. As we mature, we may move back and forth along the spectrum. However, most of us will favor one worldview over the other. Our major values will be determined accordingly.

In the United States, we are struggling with our values concerning sexuality — sex education, abortion, masturbation and homosexuality. Our individual worldview determines which values we advocate. Knowing this, we can see the futility of trying to convince others — who hold different values — that we are "*right*." If we truly prize our democracy, we can respect these individuals and their views — even though we may disagree with them. Unfortunately, people at both extremes of the ethical spectrum typically fail to show this respect for others.

* Adapted from Robert Francoeur's *Becoming a Sexual Person*, Macmillan Publishing, 1991, pages 54-61.