

C.S. LEWIS INSTITUTE - BASIC APOLOGETICS COURSE Small Group Participant Guide

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“This is a journey of faith and reason — learning to know why we believe, defend truth, and share Christ with grace.”

SET 3 - Session 4 – Relativism

Introduction (from CSLI)

Relativism is rampant in western culture. About two-thirds of people in the USA believe that there are no absolutes. About half of “born again” believers agree and only one-tenth of those under 20 years old believe in absolutes. This lecture makes the case against relativism, drawing on some of the leaders of the opposition; Sartre, Wittgenstein, Russell, Derrida, and Rorty, who do a great service by showing us the logical conclusion of their views. There is also a critique of the attempt to create an ethic without God by Kant, John Rawls, and others.

Lecture Synopsis

Synopsis: Lecture IV – Relativism: *Can You Have Ethics Without God?*

Lecture 4 addresses the contemporary charge, advanced especially by the “new atheists” (e.g., Harris, Dawkins, Hitchens), that religion is intrinsically evil and should be abolished. The lecturer argues that while religious hypocrisy and historical abuses must be honestly acknowledged, the sweeping claim that religion itself is evil fails to account for Christianity’s profound moral contributions—such as abolition movements, hospitals, universities, human rights, and the grounding of human dignity in the image of God.

A key distinction is made between sinners and hypocrites: all Christians are sinners in need of repentance, but not all are hypocrites. Jesus Himself was the strongest critic of religious hypocrisy, demonstrating that Christianity contains internal moral resources for self-correction.

The lecture then shifts to its central philosophical argument: without God, there is no objective basis for good and evil. Drawing on thinkers such as Sartre, Camus, Russell, Derrida, and especially atheist legal scholar Arthur Leff, the speaker argues that moral systems grounded only in individual preference (“says me”) or cultural consensus (“says us”) ultimately collapse under the “grand says who?” challenge. One cannot derive moral obligation (“ought”) from mere facts (“is”). Without a transcendent, unchallengeable moral lawgiver—an “unjudged Judge”—ethics reduce to personal feeling, social contracts, or majority power.

The Christian worldview, by contrast, grounds dignity, morality, and meaning in an infinite reference point: God. If objective good and evil truly exist—and our moral experience strongly suggests they do—then God provides the only sufficient foundation. Thus, the accusation that religion is evil ironically presupposes the very objective moral standard that atheism cannot justify.

The lecture concludes that abolishing religion would not eliminate moral conflict but could instead erode the very moral framework that sustains civilization.

Ten Life Applications

1. Anchor Your Morality in God’s Character

Application: Build your understanding of right and wrong on God’s unchanging nature rather than shifting cultural opinion.

Example: When workplace policies or social trends pressure you to compromise biblical convictions, you evaluate them through Scripture rather than popular consensus.

Exercise: Identify one moral belief you hold. Trace it back to a specific attribute of God (e.g., justice, holiness, love) and write a short paragraph explaining that connection.

2. Recognize the Limits of “Says Me”

Application: Resist the temptation to treat personal preference as moral authority.

Example: Instead of saying, “That’s just my truth,” you ask whether your belief corresponds to objective reality grounded in God.

Exercise: The next time you make a strong moral statement, pause and ask, “On what basis do I believe this is truly right or wrong?”

3. Respond Thoughtfully to the Charge that Religion Is Evil

Application: Be prepared to answer accusations against Christianity with both honesty and clarity.

Example: When someone cites the Crusades or church scandals, you acknowledge real failures while pointing to Christ’s teachings and transformative historical impact.

Exercise: Prepare a two-minute explanation that distinguishes between Christ’s teachings and human misuse of religion.

4. Value Human Dignity as Image-Bearers

Application: Treat every person as inherently valuable because they are made in the image of God.

Example: You extend patience and respect to someone difficult because their worth does not depend on their behavior.

Exercise: Choose one challenging relationship and intentionally act toward that person this week in a way that affirms their God-given dignity.

5. Examine Cultural Assumptions

Application: Test cultural moral claims rather than absorbing them uncritically.

Example: When media portrays a behavior as “normal,” you ask whether it aligns with God’s revealed standards.

Exercise: Write down one popular cultural message about morality. Compare it with Scripture and note the differences.

6. Understand the “Grand Says Who?” Question

Application: Recognize that moral disagreements ultimately require an authority beyond human opinion.

Example: In a discussion about justice, you gently ask, “What makes that standard binding for everyone?”

Exercise: Practice asking clarifying questions in a conversation about ethics rather than immediately debating conclusions.

7. Live as a Fixed Point in a Shifting Culture

Application: Model stability and integrity in a morally fluid environment.

Example: While others redefine truth according to feelings, you consistently demonstrate honesty and faithfulness.

Exercise: Identify one area where cultural standards fluctuate. Commit to a clear, biblically grounded practice in that area.

8. Avoid Reducing Morality to Majority Rule

Application: Remember that truth is not determined by popularity.

Example: Even if most coworkers cut ethical corners, you choose integrity because right and wrong are not decided by vote.

Exercise: Reflect on a time when you felt pressure to conform. Journal how a stronger awareness of God’s authority could have strengthened your resolve.

9. Cultivate Intellectual Confidence in Your Faith

Application: Strengthen your understanding of why Christianity provides a coherent basis for meaning and morality.

Example: Instead of feeling intimidated by philosophical objections, you study foundational arguments for objective truth.

Exercise: Read one short article or watch one lecture this week on moral objectivity and summarize the key insight in your own words.

10. Live with Eternal Perspective

Application: Let your origin in God and destiny beyond this life shape your daily decisions.

Example: When tempted to despair over cultural decline, you remember that your life is part of God’s larger eternal story.

Exercise: Meditate on a passage about eternal life (e.g., John 17:3 or 2 Corinthians 4:16–18). Write how an eternal perspective changes one present concern.

STUDY QUESTIONS (from CSLI)

1 | **What is the difference between a sinner and a hypocrite?**

2 | **Who is the greatest critic of hypocrisy (religious or otherwise) of all time?**

3 | **What are the consequences of denying fixed points for meaning, dignity, and morality?**

4 | **What do leading atheists say about the consequences of their views for meaning or morality?**

5 | **Do atheists have a basis for affirming human dignity? How can we assert the worth of humans?**

6 | **Why will the “cultural move” never work?**

7	Why do the options come down to SEZ ME, SEZ US, or SEZ God?
BUILDING FAITH CONVERSATIONS	
1	How do the “new atheists” attempt to argue that religion is the primary cause of violence, and what examples do they commonly cite to support their claim?
2	In what ways does the lecturer argue that Christianity has historically contributed to the development of Western ideas such as human rights, education, and freedom?
3	What does Jean-Paul Sartre mean when he says that “no finite point has meaning without an infinite reference point,” and how does this relate to moral objectivity?
4	How does the concept of emotivism reduce moral statements to personal feelings, and what problems arise from this view?
5	Why is the inability to derive “ought” from “is” such a significant challenge for secular moral systems?
6	What is Arthur Leff’s “grand says who?” challenge, and why does he conclude that only a transcendent moral authority can ultimately answer it?

7	How does the lecture contrast the Christian understanding of human origin and destiny with the materialist view of “cosmic slime to cosmic dust”?
8	Why does the lecturer argue that majority rule (“might makes right”) cannot establish intrinsic moral truth?
9	How might the study linking religion and psychological well-being challenge the claim that religion is a form of mental imbalance?
10	What are the potential cultural consequences, according to the lecture, if traditional religion declines—would reason necessarily increase, or might other forms of superstition arise?

Links to Lectures and Notes: <https://srmatthews.com/tsg>



SAMPLE ARGUMENTS FROM THIS LECTURE

1. The Moral Argument: Relativism Cannot Ground Objective Evil

Context

The “new atheists” argue that religion is evil and responsible for violence. Yet the lecture presses a deeper question: on what basis can an atheist call anything objectively evil?

Claim

If moral relativism is true, then moral judgments reduce to personal preference (“says me”) or cultural consensus (“says us”), and objective evil does not exist.

Case

The lecture explains that without a transcendent “infinite reference point,” moral claims collapse into emotivism—statements about feelings rather than facts. One cannot derive an “ought” from an “is.” As atheist legal scholar Arthur Leff argued, every ethical system

without God ultimately faces the “grand says who?” challenge. If morality is rooted only in human will, it can always be questioned by a higher human will. Thus, no action can be intrinsically evil—only disliked.

Challenge

If relativism is correct, then condemning genocide, slavery, or terrorism as truly evil becomes philosophically indefensible. At best, we can say, “Our society disapproves.” But this removes moral outrage’s objective force.

Conclusion

Because we recognize some acts as objectively evil, relativism fails. Objective morality requires a transcendent moral lawgiver—God.

2. The Dignity Argument: Relativism Cannot Sustain Human Worth**Context**

The lecture contrasts Christian anthropology with materialistic naturalism.

Claim

Relativism, grounded in atheistic materialism, provides no sufficient basis for intrinsic human dignity.

Case

If humans are merely the accidental product of time and chance—“cosmic slime to cosmic dust”—then human value is no greater than that of any other biological organism. Some atheistic thinkers (e.g., Sartre, Skinner) acknowledged this tension, admitting that dignity and freedom lack objective grounding in a purely material universe. By contrast, Christianity grounds dignity in the *imago Dei*: humans are made in the image of God and possess eternal significance.

Challenge

If dignity is socially constructed, then it can also be socially revoked. Majority opinion—or power—determines worth.

Conclusion

Relativism cannot secure unalienable human rights. Only a theistic worldview provides a coherent foundation for enduring human dignity.

3. The Cultural Stability Argument: Relativism Leads to Moral Instability**Context**

Many assume that abandoning religion would usher in an age of rational progress.

Claim

Relativism does not create moral clarity; it destabilizes ethical foundations and invites confusion or superstition.

Case

The lecture notes that when moral standards are detached from a transcendent source, ethics become subject to majority will or shifting consensus (“might makes right”). Studies cited suggest that decline in traditional religion does not necessarily produce rational secularism, but often results in alternative superstitions. Historically, Christian belief provided the roots for concepts such as human rights, education, and reform movements. Remove the root, and eventually the fruit withers.

Challenge

If society rests only on consensus, what happens when consensus changes?

Conclusion

Relativism cannot sustain long-term moral coherence. A transcendent moral anchor is necessary for cultural stability and genuine reform.

Note: C.S. Lewis Institute provides this course at no charge. They are supported by faithful friends who give of their time, expertise, prayers, and finances to further the work of the institute. You can partner with CSLI through this link: <https://www.cslewisinstitute.org/give/>

Set 3 - Lecture 4

(0:17 - 0:54) Alright, we're glad to come here together today to address the topic of relativism and I want to address in this talk specifically the atheist charge that religion is evil. I'm going to deal with some aspects of what they say here and especially look at the idea that without the existence of God, without God's existence, we don't really have a clear understanding at all or really any understanding of objective good or objective evil. So that's the purpose of what we'll look at this morning.

(0:55 - 1:31) Let's start out with a word of prayer and offer this time to the Lord. Thank you for this time where we can come together and go deeper into this issue of truth, where to put on the belt of truth, it says in scripture, to sustain us and yet this idea of truth has been undermined in many ways within the culture and I pray that you might give us clarity in this time. I pray that the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts might be acceptable to you, oh Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Well this issue of truth has been thrown up in many ways within the culture. You find as this idea of truth is eroded, many people think truth is just about the whole issue of feeling and we'll look at that as we go on later on. We also have charges that not only is the issue of truth and error, good and evil, up for grabs, but the new atheists in particular, Harris, Hitchens and Dawkins, even go a step further than has normally happened to say that far from there being no evil or good without God, that religion is as a matter of fact evil. That's a radical new charge and that it would be better if religion were abolished. I want to touch on that charge, I won't try to address it fully in this time but at least talk a little bit about what they're saying and then talk about the central way that you can go to the court to answer that objection, that religion is evil.

(2:47 - 3:20) Essentially the atheists have been trying to capitalize on 9-11 and the terrorist attacks and in many ways try to paint all religion with the same brush, that you have these terrorists that in the name of religion are able to do great violence. They point back to Christianity with the crusades; the inquisition and the witch trials as also having committed great crimes or atrocities. It will point to Hindus that do violence towards Muslims and Christians.

(3:21 - 4:15) If you read their books, you read, say, Sam Harris' book, *The End of Faith*, it's a long litany in the beginning of horrific stories that religious people, atrocities that religious people have committed. Same sort of thing in Hitchens' book, *God is Not Great*, again there are many graphic details about what people in the name of religion have done and trying to paint all of religion with the same brush and thus they argue that it's all of a piece, that religion is evil somehow intrinsically and thus must be eliminated. It would be better if there were no religion and if they're atheists, then we can, in one of their mottos that they put up on buses recently, that we need to do good for goodness sake, not for God's sake.

(4:15 - 4:42) Somehow we can preserve the good and actually better defend the good from an atheist point of view than from a religious point of view. It's a radical new objection. I'm going to come back and particularly address this idea that atheism has a standard or a basis for the good in just a minute, but perhaps we can just look at their argument for a second. Maybe it's along the lines of the postmodern argument that sometimes you hear and this would be that religion is by its very nature totalitarian, that's what a lot of postmodern people say, that it's totalizing, it tends to impose its values upon people and totalitarianism is evil, therefore religion is evil. Perhaps that's the line along which they're arguing. In any case, here's what Sam Harris says, that religion is the most potent source of human conflict.

(5:18 - 5:51) Dawkins says most if not all the violent enmities in the world today are due to the divisive force of religion. They argue paradoxically that any good in religion is not due to religious belief but due to humanism, which is rather an appalling, striking thing to say. They also argue any evil of atheism is not due to atheism but due to religion, which is another bizarre kind of contention and that's what they try to argue in their books. I'm not going to try to take on those contentions fully. I have done it in a previous series on answering today's atheists that are available on the CS Lewis Institute website. It's talk two on religion is evil where I deal with some of these contentions in more depth.

(6:09 - 6:43) But let me just point out first that it's important that we be able as believers to recognize and address the idea that the church is full of hypocrites because in many ways it's the number one objection to faith that people have, that the church is full of hypocrites. In some sense, it's important to acknowledge that. G.K. Chesterton argued that the best argument against Christianity is Christians, but he also said that the best argument for Christianity is Christians. And often when people make that charge that Christianity is full of hypocrites or the church is full of hypocrites, that's what I say. I use the quote, I'll say, Chesterton said, the best argument against Christianity is Christians, and they'll immediately shake their head and agree, but then I'll follow up, but the best argument for Christianity is Christians. So you can sit back and pause and think of that just because it's true in some cases doesn't mean it's true in all.

(7:13 - 7:33) Another thing that you can say to this charge that the church is full of hypocrites goes along these lines, that there's a profound difference between being a sinner and being a hypocrite. All hypocrites are sinners, but not all sinners are hypocrites. Let me talk about that for a second.

(7:33 - 7:48) First of all, all hypocrites are sinners. What is a hypocrite? It's someone who claims that they're doing good, but they're actually knowingly doing that which is evil. There's a difference between a hypocrite and a sinner. A sinner admits that they fall short and is sorry and repents for it. Now it's not so much that people within the church are the good people and the people outside of the bad people, although sometimes, unfortunately, that's the impression that's given. The people in the church, according to scripture, are those who fall short or sinners who need to repent. We're not intrinsically any better than anybody else. We've hopefully come to acknowledge our sin and repented of it and come to believe in Christ and now have the spirit indwelling us so that we can strive to overcome the sin that's within us. But in any case, it's not that we're somehow intrinsically better than other people.

(8:43 - 9:00) People outside are those people who are also sinners but sometimes don't know it and won't admit it and haven't come to Jesus for the cure for that particular problem. So there's a difference between a hypocrite and a sinner. Not everybody in the church is a hypocrite. There are some hypocrites. But everybody in the church is a sinner. But just being a sinner doesn't necessarily mean that you're a hypocrite. So that's an important distinction that you can make if you have the time or opportunity. Another level that you can go to, and again, these are things that you could just keep in the back of your mind to use where appropriate, that who's the greatest critic of hypocrisy ever? In fact, where does this charge of hypocrisy and it being wrong come from? I would suggest it comes from one particular person, and who is that? Jesus. Jesus is the greatest critic of hypocrisy on record.

(9:46 - 10:13) Look for instance, in just one case, at Matthew chapter 23. In that chapter, you have seven different times that Jesus says to scribes and Pharisees, the religious leaders of his day, not just the people that were characteristically the tax collectors and the prostitutes and that sort of thing, but to the religious leaders of Jesus' day. He says, woe to you, the prophetic word of judgment, woe to you, you scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites. And at seven different times, he goes through and specifically talks about different forms of hypocrisy that they have committed. He talks about them as dens of vipers, whitewashed tombs, pretty strong words to say to the religious leaders of Jesus' day. So Jesus was not at all afraid of pointing out hypocrisy in general, and especially religious hypocrisy within the church. I think in many cases, you might be able to say to people, depending on the case that they're dealing with, where there have been noted falls of, say, religious leaders or ministers who have fallen into gross sin, you might be able to say Jesus would be on your side in

condemning this kind of hypocrisy. In many ways, you're echoing what Jesus has said in making this charge of hypocrisy. So that's an important thing to understand, that it's Jesus that popularized this critique and that in many cases, Jesus would agree with the critiques that nonbelievers are making about the church. And maybe he would, if he were here in person in the flesh, he'd be making them himself. Another question, though, that's important, and again, you don't have to use all of these, you could just use one, is the question, is Jesus a hypocrite? That's probably more to the point. Is Jesus who he said he is? Does he pretend to be something that he's not? If he claimed to be God, is he God or not? And there's a classic argument that we may look at later in this series, where he's either a legend, a lunatic, a liar, or lord.

(11:59 - 12:22) Or to put it another way, that Jesus, if he's not God, he's not good, is another way to put it in a nutshell. Because he claimed to be God, and if he wasn't God, if he didn't have the kind of authority that he claims to have within the Gospels, then he's not at all someone to follow. So that's the question that needs to be sooner or later examined.

(12:22 - 12:42) When you deal with this issue of hypocrisy. So just some thoughts about how you can respond to this, and I think it's important to acknowledge where religious people, and Christians in specific, have done very bad things. That not only sinful things, but sometimes hypocritical things as well. Again, I'm not going to deal with some of the different things that the Church has done in terms of the Crusades, Inquisition, and the Salem Witch Trials, some other things that they bring up. You can find that on that other website. Or even to look at atheist crimes and the way that they try to defend it.

(13:01 - 13:41) Just to let you know that there are, though, a number of different places where you can find the argument made that the foundations of what is good, particularly in Western society, come particularly out of Christianity. There's a whole bunch of books along this line. One of them is a book called, What's Christianity Ever Done for Us? Another one, Vishal Mangawati, who's from India, has come over here to the U.S. and done a video series, an audio series, Must the Sun Set on the West? He's also written another book, Vishal Mangawati, M-A-N-G-A-L-W-A-D-I. Has written another book, Truth and Transformation, that's just out. And has another book that come out called, The Soul of Western Civilization. And in these books, he's arguing that the foundations of Western culture and what has been really good about our society are really profoundly rooted in the Bible, particularly the idea of dignity, rooted in the idea that people are made in the image of God, the idea of freedom, the idea of many other ideas within our culture have the roots specifically within the Bible.

(14:19 - 14:43) There's another author, Rodney Stark, who's written several books arguing these kinds of things. So that there's an abundance of testimony on the roots, not only the religious roots, but the specifically Christian roots of our society. And if you were to undermine or pull the rug out from under those roots, much in that society will be eroded. Maybe not right away, because the memory of those values is still there. But over time, those values will topple. If you take away the root, you'll lose, after a while, the fruit.

(14:59 - 15:22) Some other thoughts, just about some of the good things that people that are Christians have done. Just a very quick superficial note. For instance, there's abolition of foot binding in China, work done by particularly Christian missionaries, a horrific practice that left women's feet disfigured. Or the abolition of sati, the burning of the widow on the husband's funeral pyre, was also something that believers strongly fought against. The origin of the women's movement, the feminist movement in the U.S., started in a Wesleyan church in New York. The abolition of slavery was particularly through Wilberforce and people around him in England and in America. Started with the Quakers and then others got on board with it, but there were specifically Christians that led to the abolition of slavery, both in England and in the United States. Today, we have people fighting on this whole issue of slavery. Gary Haugen, in International Justice Mission, he says that there's more slavery today than in 400 years in Wilberforce's time. More just general slavery, and specifically sexual slavery as well, as part of that. And it's very tragic. There's a whole lot yet to be done. The idea of slavery has not been abolished just because we've abolished it in America and in England, generally speaking.

There's a whole lot of slavery. And even sometimes in America, we have people that are slaves, sexual slaves, in a hidden way.

(16:36 - 16:57) And I know prosecutors that are going after them from the Justice Department, so I know specifics of things that are going on there. The beginning of hospitals and the importance of healthcare was something that was a Christian institution. Education, all the way back, was something that was greatly valued. And the importance of reason and investigating all aspects of culture, because all truth is God's truth.

Augustine used to argue, learn everything you can about anything you can, because all truth is God's truth. Every specific truth will take you back to the God of truth. So the education has been highly valued. The great universities have been founded by believers because they valued investigation, valued knowledge, and valued the whole human person, including reason and feeling and conscience and the will as well. So the whole roots of education, you look at the major universities that are part of America today, say Harvard and Yale and Princeton, all had their roots within a Christian background.

(17:45 - 18:15) If you look at Oxford and Cambridge, look at profoundly their Christian heritage that's been present from the beginning. So Christianity has valued and encouraged education in a profound way. The idea of human dignity and human rights being rooted in the image of God, it's far from clear on what other basis you can assert human rights and give it justification other than people are made in the image of God.

(18:16 - 18:38) It's a question we could pursue a lot and a lot more in a deeper way. But there's often a charge by the new atheists that religion is somehow a mild dementia. It's somehow a kind of insanity that people that are religious are imbalanced in one way or another.

(18:38 - 19:00) We talked about that earlier where in this series where religion comes from memes or it's some kind of virus or a thought contagion, the kind of lunacy that's part of it. Contrary to that, I just wanted to mention one study. It's by Harold Koenig, K-O-E-N-I-G, and Harvey Cohen. The Link Between Religion and Health. Psychoneuroimmunology in the Faith Factor. It's Oxford University Press, 2001.

(19:11 - 19:28) Just to give you one illustration of a study that surveys the relation between religion and health. In that book, they survey 100 evidence-based studies. 79 of these reported at least one positive correlation between religious involvement and well-being. 13 of the studies found no meaningful association between religion and well-being. Seven found mixed or complex association. Only one found negative association between religion and well-being.

(19:41 - 20:08) So if you look at these psychological studies, it's hardly a basis to say that somehow religion leads to psychological imbalance necessarily. So that's an interesting note that you can pursue further if you wish. There are studies out there, and I've heard numerous others talked about by Armand Nicolai, who's a psychiatrist from Harvard, as well as others that have written extensively on this subject.

(20:09 - 20:38) The real problem, though, that I wanted to focus on in this time, rather than dealing with the convoluted arguments that the new atheists use, is to go really to the root of it. To put forward the question, if religion is evil, how do you know anything is evil if you're an atheist? That's the root question that many people have raised and responded to the new atheists. So that's what I want to look at for the rest of our time here.

(20:39 - 21:09) That there's a real consequence for denying God's existence, and we'll talk about it right now, is a fixed point. Let me just point out, some of the great leaders of this civilization have pointed out, including atheists, that you can't have a basis for meaning, dignity, and morals without God. Jean-Paul Sartre, who was an atheist existentialist, despaired about the meaning of life without God.

(21:10 - 21:25) He titled one of his books, Nausea, facing the difficulty of life without God. He said, hell is other people. Sartre also said, no finite point in this world has any meaning without an infinite reference point. Again, no finite point in this world has any meaning apart from an infinite reference point. Essentially, what Sartre says is that if we judge things with regard to the here and now, with regard to the down here, without this infinite reference point, if no finite point has any meaning, and finite points would be like people, our lives, moral values, truth or error, that kind of thing, but people's dignity, these kinds of questions. If no finite point

in this world has any meaning without an infinite reference point, and according to Sartre, there is no infinite reference point, then life is meaningless.

(22:05 - 23:03) Which is essentially what Sartre and other atheists have said, and I'll give you some more quotes about that in a minute. The only other alternative that you might make is, you could say, life is either meaningless, as some of the philosophers, and if you've ever read people from the theater of the absurd, Ionesco and Genet and Beckett, also made these kinds of claims in the plays or the literature that they've written, that life without God is absurd, like *Waiting for Godot* is a famous play that puts it forward very graphically and unforgettably. But you have the choice that either, if no finite point in this world is meaningful without this infinite reference point, that life is either meaningless, or what most people have chosen is not to go with the idea of meaninglessness, but have chosen to construct meaning and dignity and morals on the basis of their own essentially arbitrary personal preference.

(23:03 - 23:15) That's the other alternative. You either say life is meaningless, or you can say, I'm just gonna make up my own meaning. I'm just gonna say people have dignity, that's what the humanist does. I'm gonna say that there are morals and make it up in my own way, individually or according to getting together a group of people in the culture and voting about it. We're gonna come back to these things in just a minute. But that's the other alternative.

(23:30 - 23:58) To make up your own meaning according to your own essentially arbitrary personal preference. Essentially arbitrary, meaning there's no higher way that you can judge it. You make it up according to your feeling, but your feeling is shaped by your culture, and someone else's feeling, like in another culture, is shaped by their culture, so who's the judge? That's essentially the postmodern kind of argument, but many previous atheists have also understood that idea.

(23:58 - 24:23) It really reduces ethics to personal preference or to emotion. Sometimes it's called emotivism, because it's essentially an ethical statement from a relativist point of view. If you've given up the understanding of God, the ethical statements are reduced to taking my emotional temperature, so that when I say good, that means I feel something positive about it.

(24:23 - 24:37) When I say bad, it just means I feel something negative about it. But it's essentially reduced to my feelings about something. But we can't judge another person's feeling or another society's feelings about things, because it's essentially arbitrary. We can't justify it in any kind of ultimate sense without this infinite reference point. And that's an utterly crucial thing for us to understand. If you understand this idea, I know it's a little bit abstract and a little bit difficult, but if you can understand this statement, you'll understand the ethical dilemma of our time. It comes down to this no finite point is meaningful without the infinite reference point. Another famous philosophical founder, Sartre, the founder of existentialism, Wittgenstein, was a founder of logical positivism that's had its fruit today in the postmodern perspective. He said in the philosophical review 1965, the sense of the world must come from outside the world.

(25:26 - 25:37) The sense of the world must come from outside the world. That's similar to this infinite reference point. The sense of the world must come from outside the world. He said if there really was a book of ethics, that really was a book of ethics, it would destroy all the other books in the world because it would give you real power and a vantage point by which you could see things, really make sense of the world, give you glasses to see it clearly, so to speak. But he didn't, I understand, give serious consideration to the Bible as such a book, but he realized the value of such a book, if it were to be. Albert Camus, a fellow existentialist and atheist, along with Sartre, said the only really serious philosophical question in light of atheism is whether or not to commit suicide.

(26:20 - 26:47) And the only really serious philosophical question is whether or not to commit suicide. Bertrand Russell, another famous atheist, who lived from 1872 to 1970, said that atheists must build their lives on the basis of unyielding despair. In many ways, that was the philosopher that shaped C.S. Lewis and some of the environment of his times when he was an atheist.

(26:49 - 27:16) Jacques Derrida, who's one of the founders of postmodernism, said that one of the central contentions that he's trying to put forward is that he wants to reject what he calls the transcendent signifier, again, very much something that gives us this fixed basis for meaning. He's against, he says, what he calls logocentrism. By logocentrism, he means meaning or purpose. And the only way he suggests that you can know meaning or purpose is to have a transcendent signifier, this infinite reference point, this sense to the world that comes from outside the world is the only basis on which we can know meaning. And I suggest also dignity and morals are all involved along with that. So here are some of the leading shapers of our philosophical thought, and they all acknowledge these kinds of things.

(27:46 - 28:05) This is something similar to what Pascal argued in his writing. He says, those who lead disorderly lives tell those who are normal that it is they who deviate from nature and think that they're following nature themselves. Just as those who are on board ship think that the people on shore are moving away. Language is the same everywhere. We need a fixed point to judge it. When everyone is moving towards depravity, no one seems to be moving. But if someone stops, he shows up the others who are rushing on by acting as a fixed point. So again, this is this idea of the infinite reference point or some fixed point that's outside the change and flux of this world. Everything in this world is changing.

(28:34 - 29:05) That's why we can't get a sufficient vantage point in this world to be able to make these ultimate judgments. Another shaper of our society, Richard Rorty, who's a fellow postmodern thinker. In his book *Trotsky and Wild Orchids*, his essay on Trotsky and Wild Orchids, it's an autobiographical essay, says that there's no neutral ground to which a philosophical Nazi and I can repair to argue out our difference.

(29:06 - 29:49) In other words, we might have profound feelings here in America or personally or maybe our community that Nazism is wrong, but the status of that is that it comes out of our emotion and our way of thinking culturally. There's no way that we can, in some kind of objective way, get up above this flux of things though and really judge the Nazi to be evil. They have their own cultural understanding of things, their own preferences, and who are we to judge in the end? Even though we might firmly be convinced and use the language of good and evil, the status of that is essentially it's our cultural standards and our feelings that end up determining what's right or wrong.

(29:50 - 30:16) And this is the kind of game that's played a lot within the culture. Now, with regard to human dignity, from an atheist point of view or according to the new atheists, our lives or human people are not somehow or another intrinsically more dignified than any other life form in the universe. In fact, some have said a rat is a dog is a pig is a boy.

(30:17 - 30:54) It's essentially all on the same level, that our lives are somehow thrown up by time and chance when we pop out of the cosmic slime by evolution. And if that's the case, our origin is intrinsically zero, no more than the rocks and chemicals out of which we came. And our destiny is somehow back to the rocks and chemicals, so might use biblical language from dust to dust, so that our origin is not intrinsically more significant than the materials out of which we came.

(30:54 - 31:09) So what is the basis for dignity? I would say that it's intrinsically on this basis zero. And occasionally atheists are willing to come forward and say that. Like Jean-Paul Sartre said, mankind is a useless passion.

(31:11 - 31:24) A useless passion. B.F. Skinner, the determinist philosopher, said that we need to go beyond such ideas as freedom and dignity. And that's the name of one of his books, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*.

(31:25 - 31:39) Because there is no intrinsic freedom. We're all essentially determined materialistically by our genes or by the environment, whatever. The idea of freedom is illusory according to the materialist point of view.

(31:39 - 31:49) And we need to go beyond such ideas as dignity. Because there is no intrinsic basis for human dignity. And there are others that make this kind of observation.

(31:49 - 32:04) Well a humanist is an atheist that essentially says that our origin is intrinsically worth zero. We come out of the cosmic slime by evolution. Our destiny is back to those rocks and chemicals.

(32:04 - 32:11) There is no life after death. And yet mankind is a big plus. There is human dignity.

(32:12 - 32:23) And they would assert human dignity without a belief in God. But where does that come from? I think essentially it's asserted because they know that. I believe because they have a conscience.

(32:24 - 32:36) Because they're made in the image of God, they do know that humans have dignity. But I would suggest atheists have no basis to say so really. They're saying that which they know to be true and it resonates with other people.

(32:37 - 32:51) But there's no basis in atheism to justify the understanding of human dignity. On the other hand, the believer in Christ could say our origin is a great big plus. And the plus is here, the living God.

(32:52 - 32:58) God has great worth. He's worthy to be worshipped. That's where our origin comes from.

(32:59 - 33:17) Our destiny is eternal life. C.S. Lewis said, not only that you've never met an ordinary person, but you've never met a mere mortal. That the people you're sitting next to right now are going to live forever, either under salvation or under judgment.

(33:18 - 33:33) He says, nations, cultures, arts, civilizations, what are they? They are to our life as the life of a gnat. So the longest civilization might be 1,000, 2,000 years. The longest political reign might be for a number of years.

(33:33 - 33:56) The longest presidency, say in the United States, would be four years or eight years. But what is that to our life as the life of a gnat? So there's a tremendous value, particularly in Western culture, because of the Christian heritage of individual life. In many other cultures that don't have this foundation, individuals are expendable for the good of the community.

(33:57 - 34:11) It's more viewed in a communitarian way than an individual rights framework. So that the Christian would come back and say, people are made in the image of God. And therefore, they have a great worth and value.

(34:12 - 34:47) Essentially, the atheist says, in this first line, that life is a merely unnecessary chance interruption in the midst of cosmic death. On the other hand, the believer in Christ says that death here is just a very temporary interruption in the midst of cosmic life. See how radically different these world views are, by contrast? It's amazing in terms of its difference with regard to human dignity.

(34:48 - 35:07) And in the area of morals, Dostoevsky had one of his characters say, if there is no God, everything is permitted. And it's hard to resist that, if you look at it from even several different angles, philosophically. I think that in the end, you only have three options.

(35:07 - 35:23) You have the option that is says me, or says us, or says God. When you deal with this issue of ethics, one way you can go is to say says me. And that's often what you hear in this culture.

(35:24 - 35:40) That whatever is true for you, or good for you, is good for you. And whatever is true for me, is true for me. But who's to judge? Who's good? Like who's justice, and who's morality, shall we pick? Sooner or later, it's just your feeling versus my feeling.

(35:42 - 35:55) And who am I to say that because I'm right, because it's my feeling. So says me, then becomes the statement. Everyone, in a sense, is a gauntlet that can create their own ethic according to what they feel.

(35:56 - 36:08) And then who is to impose some external standard upon them and say that it's right. That's where many people are. A second way you can go is say, says us.

(36:10 - 36:29) That we somehow get together a group of us within the culture. And when this group comes together and decides that something's right for them as a group, then it's right. Not because it's somehow judged by this infinite reference point or objectively right, but just because they've come to decide that it's right.

(36:29 - 37:04) And then if you get enough people, they can put forward laws or put forward candidates, get enough people to vote, and then they can shape the laws in their own way. So it's essentially that might makes right, that the majority ends up determining what's right or wrong for that particular society, or what values that they think are good for the society to have. Richard Dawkins in his book, *The God Delusion*, says that we could put together what's called the social contract.

(37:06 - 37:16) That we could decide what's good for society. And then the greatest number of people get to determine what's good for society. We could shape it according to various ideas.

(37:16 - 37:31) For instance, Kant, Immanuel Kant, the philosopher had what he called the categorical imperative. Which is to will that which you would make a universal rule. A second related idea, he said, is treat people as ends, not means.

(37:31 - 37:48) And so these are things that he put forward as principles that we could, once accepted, we could use to shape a society. And so Dawkins, for instance, puts that forward, as many others have done. There's a guy, John Rawls, who has a book, The Theory of Justice.

(37:48 - 38:04) He taught for a number of years up at Harvard. And he basically argued that something like that, that we can get people in society to somehow or another get behind a veil of ignorance. To try as much as possible to do away with our own bias coming from our own group.

(38:05 - 38:41) And try to think about that which is fair for the society itself. And in that way, we could construct an ethic without God. However, I think that each one of these issues don't, each one of these ways of approaching things fall victim to what I would call the grand says who, that sooner or later they have no basis to justify the decisions that the majority makes about what's good for the society.

(38:42 - 39:03) In fact, Dawkins, in the end, in The God Delusion, admits that if you want an objective intrinsic good or evil, you have to go to theism or Christianity in order to have it. But you can kind of try to construct this idea of an ethic without God based upon cultural standards. Well, I want to spend some time here trying to address that.

(39:04 - 39:17) C.S. Lewis says that the reason why you can't do that is intrinsic and philosophical. Now this is a little bit tricky and difficult, so you may have to think about it a little bit later on. But I'll put it forward for you for your consideration.

(39:18 - 39:28) And the reason it will never work and can never work is because of this principle. Because you can't get ought from is. You can't get ought from is.

(39:31 - 39:52) Here's what he says. From propositions about fact alone, no practical conclusion can ever be drawn. This will preserve society, that kind of statement, this will preserve society, cannot lead to do this, to the imperative do this, except by the mediation of this idea, society ought to be preserved.

(39:53 - 40:19) The statement, this will cost you your life, cannot lead directly to do not do this, the ethical imperative. It can only lead to it through a felt desire or an acknowledged duty of self-preservation. The innovator, or in this case, the relativist, the one that's trying to construct an ethic without God, is trying to get a conclusion in the imperative mood, out of premises in the indicative mood.

(40:20 - 40:35) And though he continues trying to all eternity, he cannot succeed, for such a thing is impossible. And I, I would argue that it is impossible. I'm just putting it forward to you, but it's a basic, an intrinsic basis why this thing can and will never work.

(40:36 - 41:03) You can't get the imperative from the indicative. You can't get do this from the fact that society will be preserved by putting forward these laws, you can't get ought from is. You could, for instance, say that you could, for instance, say that we could outlaw murder, and that would preserve society.

(41:04 - 41:18) So that, that seems to be understandable. So we could make up laws that you shouldn't murder. But is murder intrinsically evil? Well, not in this basis, only because the majority says so.

(41:18 - 41:42) And the question is, what do you say to those people who say society ought not to be preserved, like a terrorist who wants to destroy the society? What can you say? Can you say that the terrorist acts are evil? Not really. Not, you can say from the point of view of my feeling, or point of view of the majority will, but not somehow that it's intrinsically evil. All you can say in the end is says us.

(41:44 - 41:56) We in the majority say that murder is wrong, and destroying, trying to destroy society is wrong. So if you try to destroy society, if you try to murder, we'll put you in jail. Might makes right.

(41:56 - 42:23) The majority decides what's wrong, and we have the might and power of the law on our side, and we will punish anybody who tries to resist what the majority has to say. If the majority somehow inexplicably started to argue that murder was right, it would be right, because there's no inalienable life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. No inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

(42:23 - 42:33) It's essentially alienable. It's determined by the will of the majority in the particular society. That's the problem.

(42:34 - 43:05) And another way to put this is perhaps a little bit less philosophical, but still it's going to be fairly high level, so hold on. The reason that this cultural move will not work is what one author, interestingly, an atheist author, Arthur Leff, calls the grand says who. Arthur Leff, L-E-F-F, was an atheist, and he gave a speech that became an article in the Duke Law Journal in 1979 called Unspeakable Ethics, Unnatural Law.

(43:06 - 43:24) And this essay's been picked up as something of a classic in legal studies because he defined very well the difficulty, in fact, impossibility of coming up with an ethic without God. It's interesting to come from an atheist who makes this kind of argument. Here's what he says at the beginning of the essay.

(43:25 - 43:40) He says, I want to believe, and so do you, in a complete, transcendent, and imminent set of propositions about right and wrong. Findable rules that authoritatively, unambiguously, direct us how to live righteously. I also want to believe, and so do you, in no such thing.

(43:41 - 44:03) But rather that we're wholly free, not only to choose for ourselves what we ought to do, but to decide for ourselves individually and as a species what we ought to be. What we want, heaven help us, is simultaneously to be perfectly ruled and perfectly free. That is, at the same time, to discover the right and the good and to create it.

(44:04 - 44:26) He says a little bit later, my plan for this article then is as follows. I shall try to prove to your satisfaction that there cannot be any normative system ultimately based on anything except human will. And in essence, he wants to provide the answer to the grand says who.

(44:26 - 44:55) And there are these three answers, says me, says us, and says God. He says that we, in order to find any kind of normative proposition or any kind of moral judgment, to say that anything's really good or really evil, you must find a moral standard or a normative proposition, he says, that's unchallengeable. When, he said, would it be wrong to violate the command, thou shalt not commit adultery.

(44:56 - 46:02) In other words, who has the power to say that in a way that's unchallengeable? Or to put it another way, when would it be impermissible to use the schoolyard or a barroom trump card, says who? In a discussion, you'll put forward a moral value, and the person says, who are you to impose your values upon me? He says, when would it be inappropriate to use this challenge, says who? The only time, he says, where it would be inappropriate is if you had an evaluator above being evaluated, one who could say thou shalt not commit adultery, but somehow has the power to make that, it's unchallengeable. This evaluator must be, he says, the unjudged judge, the unruled legislator, the premise maker who rests on no premises, the uncreated creator of values. Now, what would you call such a thing if it existed? You would call it Him, with a capital H. A God-grounded system, he says, coming from an atheist again, has no analogs.

(46:03 - 46:19) If God does not exist, no one can take his place. He says, anything that took his place would be him. What statement can withstand the cosmic, says who? He says, there's no circumstances, there's no one like the Lord.

(46:20 - 46:59) If he does not exist, there's no metaphoric equivalent, no person, no combination of people, like the cultural move, no document, however, hallowed by time, like the Constitution, no process, no premise, nothing is equivalent to an actual God in this central function, is the unexaminable examiner of good and evil. The so-called death of God turns out not to have just been his funeral, but it also seems to have affected the total elimination of any coherent or even more than momentarily convincing ethical or legal system. There are only two responses to this.

(46:59 - 47:13) If this moral values are not in God, then the moral values are in us. One of us, some of us, or all of us, but in us. You got those two choices.

(47:13 - 47:28) And the response would be, for the atheist, we're free of God. Or the other response is, God, we're free. Each person becomes, as I mentioned, a godlet.

(47:28 - 47:58) But who decides between them, either the persons or groups that become a godlet, who decides between them if there's a conflict? What are the rules that govern, so to speak, inter-divinity transactions? But you can't defend the rules on the basis of the godlet preference. You can't say that I'm my own godlet, and therefore I'm right, or this group is their own godlet, therefore they're right. Now, there's no intrinsic basis on which you can do that.

(47:59 - 48:40) But might there be a way out? For instance, could we count the noses, or the quantity or the quality of these ethical boxes that people put themselves in? Like, we could do it with respect to quantity, but just the fact that a million, or five million, or ten million people think something's right doesn't necessarily make it intrinsically right, doesn't make anything intrinsically right or wrong. Or we could choose to go with the quality of standards by which we judge. But on what standard, then, can we judge what's good or bad, or better or best? This second route, the qualitative route, is the way that most people have taken.

(48:41 - 49:11) They realize that the quantitative is not good enough. So many people come up with what they call the considered view, or the serious and reflective view, or what I mentioned earlier, Rawls' Veil of Ignorance. But who says who's more considered, or who's more serious and reflective? Or who is properly doing away with their bias? This basic belief as to whether you've achieved that goal, in each of these cases, must be considered good by someone.

(49:12 - 49:41) And you can always challenge it by the grand says who, either to the individual or to the group. Essentially, what Arthur Leff says, is there's no such thing as an unchallengeable evaluative system. There's no way to prove one ethical system superior to any other, unless, at some point, an evaluator is asserted to have a final, a final, uncontradictable, unexampleable word.

(49:42 - 49:57) The choice of that unjudged judge, whoever's given that role, is itself, strictly speaking, arbitrary. Unless, of course, he admits, if God says. For instance, there's some books that he mentions that try to do this.

(49:57 - 50:10) One author, Robert Nozick, has a book, Anarchy, State, and Utopia. And he puts forward, this is the fundamental principle of his ethic. Individuals have rights, and there are things no person or no group may do to them. So you could probably get a lot of people to come around that idea. Individuals have rights, and there are things no person or group may do to them without violating their rights. So you gain a considerable following, maybe millions of people to come around that particular idea.

(50:28 - 50:56) But the question is, if challenged with a grand says who, what makes that principle right? Just because you get a lot of people around, it doesn't necessarily mean it's intrinsically right, or the opposite is wrong. Who decides, too, when people with equal rights differ about what's to be done? Or another author, Richard Posner, that Leff uses as an illustration. He puts forward the principle in his book, no person may dominate another.

(50:57 - 51:15) Now that's a good principle. You get a lot of people to organize around that particular group of people that believe in that kind of thing. But as Leff points out, when two people make a deal with each other, that's a good thing about who's to be dominated and then not.

(51:15 - 51:51) But what if one person says no deal? What are you to say to them? The only final answer in the end to that question is, says who? Who's to say? Who's to make up the rules? Who's to even make a rule that seems reasonable to a large group of people? And essentially, what Leff says in his final quote at the end of the article, again, remember this is an atheist, says, all I can say is this. It looks as if we're all we have. Given what we know about ourselves and each other, this is an extraordinarily unappetizing prospect.

(51:52 - 52:13) Neither reason nor love nor even terror seems to work to make us good. Worse than that, there's no reason why anything should. Only if ethics were unspeakable by us, not just created by our own words or feelings, could law be unnatural, somehow outside of nature, and therefore unchallengeable.

(52:14 - 52:21) As things stand now, everything is up for grabs. Napping babies is bad. Starving the poor is wicked.

(52:22 - 52:33) Buying and selling each other is depraved. Those who stood up and died resisting Hitler, Stalin, Amin, Pol Pot, and General Custer too, have earned salvation. Those who acquiesce deserve to be damned.

(52:34 - 52:45) There is in the world such a thing as evil. All together now, says who? God help us. That's where this atheist ends up.

(52:46 - 53:00) What I argue in the end in my book, True Truth, is this. It's sort of the final chapter before the summary conclusion. Unless God exists, there's no objective evil or good.

(53:01 - 53:15) There is objective evil and good. Therefore, God exists. You can turn that around and say not only does the atheist not able to make that claim, but in a way it's an argument for God's existence.

(53:16 - 53:46) You can read the book, True Truth, to see that argument made. One final concluding remark is that if religion were to be abolished, as the new atheists wish, would that make the world better? G.K.

Chesterton has made the statement, when man ceases to believe in God, he doesn't believe in nothing, he believes in anything. For instance, there was a study by Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge of 1,500 students at the University of Washington in 1979.

(53:47 - 54:09) And they found that people that don't believe in God are much more likely to accept the newest superstition. It reveals that born-again are much less likely than other students to accept radical cults and pseudoscientific beliefs. And that it reveals that groups with no religious affiliations are receptive to these unscientific notions. On three of the seven items, in fact, those with no religion are the most favorable towards occultism. Those who hope, he says, or what they say, those who hope that a decline in traditional religion would inaugurate a new age of reason ought to think again. Apparently, when Christianity loses its grip on a large number of people, deviant religious alternatives arise and get hold of some of the unchurched.

(54:36 - 55:07) They say, persons with no religious affiliation are often among the first to toy with novel or exotic supernatural notions, and are not the secular rationalists we might think them to be. Therefore, a further decline in the influence of conventional religion may not inaugurate a scientific age of reason, but might instead open the floodgates for a bizarre new age of superstition. This was in a book on, in a magazine written to atheists or skeptics.

(55:08 - 55:19) So it was a very profound observation. Well, we'll stop at this point, and the next lecture will be on C.S. Lewis' Abolition of Man.