

# Solid Ground



*A Foundation for Building Ambassadors*

## Arguments that Commit Suicide

***Some ideas have the tendency to self-destruct when given the opportunity. Your job is simply to point it out, and then watch the view quietly commit suicide.***

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While in the process of cultivating sensible faith, we sometimes realize that defending against an opponent takes no work on our part at all. Sometimes the easiest way to deal with an opposing view is not to feed him more information, but to use a tactic that reveals a flaw in his thinking. One of the most effective approaches is what I call the "suicide" tactic.

Someone once said that if you give a man enough rope, he'll hang himself. The suicide tactic makes capital of the tendency of many arguments to self-destruct when given the opportunity. Such ideas get caught in the noose of their own cleverness and quickly expire.

These are commonly known as self-refuting views, that is, ideas that defeat themselves. Views that commit suicide are often obvious. The statement "My brother is an only child" is one such example. Another was found printed on a philosophy student's t-shirt. The front sported the caption, "The statement on the back of this shirt is false." The back read, "The statement on the front of this shirt is true."

### **If It's True, It's False**

A self-refuting view is necessarily false. It's not even possible for it to be true. If it's false it's false, but if it seems true at first glance, it still proves itself to be false. Here's why.

Philosopher J.P. Moreland points out that every statement is about something. For example, the sentence "Dogs have fleas" is about dogs. Sometimes statements include themselves in what they refer to. The statement "All English sentences are short" is about all English sentences, including itself. When a statement fails to satisfy its own criteria of validity, it is self-refuting. It can't possibly be true.

For example, the sentence "I cannot speak a word in English" is self-refuting when spoken in English. The claim that there are no sentences more than five words in length is also necessarily false (count the words).

In the same way, views that commit suicide already have within them the seeds of their own destruction. They express contradictory, and therefore self-defeating, concepts. Your job is simply to point it out, then watch the view quietly commit suicide. If you're alert, it can be done almost effortlessly, as Charlie Brown demonstrates in this exchange with Sally:

Sally: "'No!' That's my new philosophy. I don't care what anyone says, the answer is 'No!'."

Charlie Brown: "That's your new philosophy, huh?"

Sally: "Yes! I mean, 'No!'...[Despairing] You've ruined my new philosophy."

This happens all the time. During a radio broadcast, I took exception with the theology of some televangelists. I was immediately challenged by a caller who said, "You shouldn't be correcting Christian teachers publicly on the radio." I answered, "Then why are you calling to correct me publicly on my radio show?"

Others, convinced that arguing is prohibited by Scripture, proceed to argue tenaciously that I am being disobedient to biblical commands by taking contrary positions with my callers.

Some reject the whole task of apologetics because reason is never adequate to discover truth. They then painstakingly list the reasons they think their opinion is true.

Here are some other conspicuous examples I've encountered over the years.

"There is no truth." (Is that a true statement?)

"There are no absolutes." (Are you absolutely sure?)

"No one can know any truth about religion." (And how, precisely, did you come to know that truth about religion?)

"Science is the only sure method of finding truth." (Oh? What scientific experiment taught you that truth?)

Here are some other straightforward examples of self-refuting statements. How would you reveal their flaws?

"You can't know anything for sure."

"Talking about God is meaningless."

"You can only know truth through experience."

"I don't think we should push anyone's values."

Though these are obvious examples of self-refuting statements, sometimes the flaws are more subtle.

### **Moral Relativism Self-Destructs**

Whenever someone says, "You shouldn't force your morality on me," always ask, "Why not?" Usually the response is going to be an example of her forcing her morality on you. To make sense out of the objection, she'll have to state a moral rule while denying any moral rules exist. Such attempts reduce to, "You're wrong for saying people are wrong," or more bluntly, "You shouldn't judge, you narrow-minded bigot."

Such statements are often appeals for tolerance. One shouldn't try to change another's beliefs. But this is not an improvement. The exhortation itself is an attempt to persuade you to change your "intolerant" beliefs.

As a case in point, I was having a friendly conversation with a non-Christian when the subject of homosexuality came up. He immediately took offense at my "judgmental" view.

"You see, that's the problem with Christians," he said. "They're always judging other people's morals." He was momentarily struck dumb when I pointed out that this was an interesting moral judgment of his own. Backpedaling, he regrouped and tried a different angle.

"Okay," he conceded after some chin-scratching. "I guess it's all right to judge, as long as you don't try to force your morality on others." He thought this would solve his problem. He was wrong.

"Is that your morality?" I asked. He nodded. "Then why are you forcing it on me?" He was back to square one.

After a couple of more false starts he threw up his hands in despair. "It's not fair. I can't find a way to say it that will work." He thought I was playing word tricks on him.

I had to chuckle. "You can't find a way because there is no way. Your statement is contradictory; it can't be true."

Moral relativists always get caught in this bind. It's as if he said, "There are no moral rules; here's one."

The only way to be a consistent relativist is to say, "I feel that's wrong, but my judgment is only my personal opinion and has nothing to do with you. Please disregard my comments."

C.S. Lewis observes:

Whenever you find a man who says he does not believe in a real Right and Wrong, you will find the same man going back on this a moment later. He may break his promise to you, but if you try breaking one to him he will be complaining "It's not fair" before you can say Jack Robinson. A nation may say treaties do not matter; but then, next minute, they spoil their case by saying that the particular treaty they want to break was an unfair one. But if ...there is no such thing as Right and Wrong...what is the difference between a fair treaty and an unfair one?

A person can wax eloquent with you in a discussion on moral relativism but will complain when somebody cuts in front of him in line. He'll object to the unfair treatment he gets at work and denounce injustice in the legal system. He'll criticize crooked politicians who betray the public trust and condemn intolerant fundamentalists who force their moral views on others. Yet each of these objections is meaningless, a victim of self-destruction.

### **Is Truth True?**

In a debate on postmodernism I participated in at Chapman University, I defended what seemed to be a very modest claim: Objective truth can be known. My opponent, Dr. Marv Meyer, was forced to argue against the proposition, effectively stating he knew truth couldn't be known.

The debate reminded me of a construction worker who complained one day about the air quality in Los Angeles. "This smog is killing me," he said. "I need a break. I'm going out back to have a smoke." His comment entailed a contradiction. He said one thing was objectionable, and then blithely proceeded to do the very thing he objected to, sensing no conflict between the two.

Dr. Meyer's claim was much the same. First, he claimed that knowledge was a certain way. Second, he claimed he knew it to be so. All the while he argued all such claims are false. My work was done before I even started.

In my final remarks, I told the audience I happily agreed with a number of things my opponent had said. They proved my case.

"When you are asked to vote tonight on this debate," I said, "many of you will vote for Marv, that is to say, he convinced you that his perspective was true and mine was false. If that happens, then I have surely succeeded. I will gladly take every vote for Marv as a vote for the resolve: Objective truth can be known."

The "Christian" version of postmodernism fares no better. Some Christian thinkers flirt with relativism, baptizing it with religious language. "There are two kinds of truth," they say, "God's Truth and man's truth. God's Truth is absolute and can only be known by Him. We can only know man's truth, which is limited and relative to our personal perspectives."

My question is: Which kind of truth is reflected in that statement? If it's God's Truth, how did they come to know what only God can know? If it's merely man's fallible perspective, then why should I trust such a sweeping generalization about the issue of absolute truth?

### **Religious "Suicide"**

The notion of religious pluralism, that all religions are equally true, is also self-refuting.

If all religions are true, then Christianity is true. But part of the truth of Christianity is that other religions are false. Either Christianity is correct and others are false, or some other view is true and Christianity is false. Either way, all religions can't be true.

A common objection to the notion of biblical inspiration goes something like this. The Bible was only written by men. It's a book filled with human ideas, and all human ideas are flawed. Therefore, the Bible is flawed.

If all human ideas are flawed, however, then the idea that all human ideas are flawed is also a flawed idea, forcing the contradiction. The objection self-destructs.

C.S. Lewis cites a related example. In response to the Freudian and Marxist claim that all thoughts are tainted (either psychologically or ideologically) at their source, Lewis writes:

If they say that all thoughts are thus tainted, then, of course, we must remind them that Freudianism and Marxism are as much systems of thought as Christian theology or philosophical idealism. The Freudian and the Marxian are in the same boat with all the rest of us, and cannot criticize us from the outside. They have sawn off the branch they are sitting on. If, on the other hand, they say that the taint need not invalidate their thinking, then neither need it invalidate ours. In which case they have saved their own branch, but also saved ours along with it.

Hinduism as a religious view also seems compromised by contradictory notions. It claims that reality as we know it is an illusion, *maya*. We're each part of the illusion and have no true individual identity.

Here's my question. If I am part of the illusion, how could I know it? How could I possess true knowledge that I don't exist, or have any knowledge at all if I'm not real? Do the individuals in a dream know they're mere phantoms? Does Charlie Brown know he's a cartoon character?

The Hindu concept that the world is an illusion contradicts the idea that I can have the knowledge that I'm only an illusion, rendering Hinduism self-refuting.

The most common escape route from this problem is the Eastern claim that the law of contradiction is a Western notion and doesn't apply in Eastern thought, like Hinduism. Contradictory notions are equally true in their thinking. But this ploy is no less self-destructive. If

contradictory notions are equally true in Eastern religion, then the opposite view, that contradictions do matter, must also apply.

### **Freedom, Rationality, and Knowledge**

Some hold that everything in life is determined by prior physical conditions and there is no freedom of the will. This would also be the case if there is no soul. If there is no first-person center of our existence that exercises free will, then all of our "choices" are merely inevitable results of blind physical forces.

Here's the problem. Without freedom, there can be no rationality. No one would be able to choose his beliefs based on reasons but would hold his beliefs because he'd been predetermined to do so.

That's why it's odd when someone tries to argue for determinism. His conviction could not be based on reasons, the merits of the view itself, but on prior conditions that caused his belief. He'd be "determined" to believe in determinism, while others would be "determined" to disagree.

Therefore, if there is no free will, no one could ever know it. Every one of our thoughts, dispositions, and opinions would have been predetermined instead of chosen based on good reasons.

There are others who limit the area of knowledge to those things that can be empirically tested. To them, all knowledge is based on observation. But is this a truth they have observed? Further, have they observed all knowledge in order to know what all knowledge is like?

Alvin Plantinga of the University of Notre Dame calls this suicidal tendency the "philosophical tar baby." If you get close enough to use the idea on someone else, he says, you're likely to get stuck fast to it yourself.

### **You Are What You Eat?**

I once saw a sign in a restaurant that read, "You are what you eat." I pointed out to the waitress that if we are what we eat, then we couldn't be something until we've eaten something. But we can't eat something until we are something. So we must be something before we eat something. Therefore, it's not true that we are what we eat.

The waitress looked at me and said, "You'll have to talk to the manager."

Always be alert for arguments with suicidal tendencies. Ask the question, "Does that position carry with it the seeds of its own destruction?" Don't feel like you have to do all the work refuting a bad argument. Keep your eyes open and stay alert. When you discover an opponent's view is self-refuting, ask a question that exploits the problem. Then let him sink his own ship.

Standing firm in Him,

Gregory Koukl  
President, Stand to Reason