Condemnation Without Absolutes
By Stanley Fish

CHICAGO—During the interval between the terrorist attacks and the United States response, a reporter called to ask me if the events of Sept. 11 meant the end of postmodernist relativism. It seemed bizarre that events so serious would be linked causally with a rarefied form of academic talk. But in the days that followed, a growing number of commentators played serious variations on the same theme: that the ideas foisted upon us by postmodern intellectuals have weakened the country’s resolve. The problem, according to the critics, is that since postmodernists deny the possibility of describing matters of fact objectively, they leave us with no firm basis for either condemning the terrorist attacks or fighting back.

Not so. Postmodernism maintains only that there can be no independent standard for determining which of many rival interpretations of an event is the true one. The only thing postmodern thought argues against is the hope of justifying our response to the attacks in universal terms that would be persuasive to everyone, including our enemies. Invoking the abstract notions of justice and truth to support our cause wouldn’t be effective anyway because our adversaries lay claim to the same language. (No one declares himself to be an apostle of injustice.)

Instead, we can and should invoke the particular lived values that unite us and inform the institutions we cherish and wish to defend.

At times like these, the nation rightly falls back on the record of aspiration and accomplishment that makes up our collective understanding of what we live for. That understanding is sufficient, and far from undermining its sufficiency, postmodern thought tells us that we have grounds enough for action and justified condemnation in the democratic ideals we embrace, without grasping for the empty rhetoric of universal absolutes to which all subscribe but which all define differently.

But of course it’s not really postmodernism that people are bothered by. It’s the idea that our adversaries have emerged not from some primordial darkness, but from a history that has equipped them with reasons and motives and even with a perverted version of some virtues. Bill Maher, Dinesh D’Souza and Susan Sontag have gotten into trouble by pointing out that "cowardly" is not the word to describe men who sacrifice themselves for a cause they believe in.

Ms. Sontag grants them courage, which she is careful to say is a "morally neutral" term, a quality someone can display in the performance of a bad act. (Milton’s Satan is the best literary example.) You don’t condone that act because you describe it accurately. In fact, you put yourself in a better position to respond to it by taking its true measure. Making the enemy smaller than he is blinds us to the danger he presents and gives him the advantage that comes along with having been underestimated.
That is why what Edward Said has called "false universals" should be rejected: they stand in the way of useful thinking. How many times have we heard these new mantras: "We have seen the face of evil"; "these are irrational madmen"; "we are at war against international terrorism." Each is at once inaccurate and unhelpful. We have not seen the face of evil; we have seen the face of an enemy who comes at us with a full roster of grievances, goals and strategies. If we reduce that enemy to "evil," we conjure up a shape-shifting demon, a wild-card moral anarchist beyond our comprehension and therefore beyond the reach of any counterstrategies.

The same reduction occurs when we imagine the enemy as "irrational." Irrational actors are by definition without rhyme or reason, and there's no point in reasoning about them on the way to fighting them. The better course is to think of these men as bearers of a rationality we reject because its goal is our destruction. If we take the trouble to understand that rationality, we might have a better chance of figuring out what its adherents will do next and preventing it.

And "international terrorism" does not adequately describe what we are up against. Terrorism is the name of a style of warfare in service of a cause. It is the cause, and the passions informing it, that confront us. Focusing on something called international terrorism -- detached from any specific purposeful agenda -- only confuses matters. This should have been evident when President Vladimir Putin of Russia insisted that any war against international terrorism must have as one of its objectives victory against the rebels in Chechnya.

When Reuters decided to be careful about using the word "terrorism" because, according to its news director, one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter, Martin Kaplan, associate dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California, castigated what he saw as one more instance of cultural relativism. But Reuters is simply recognizing how unhelpful the word is, because it prevents us from making distinctions that would allow us to get a better picture of where we are and what we might do. If you think of yourself as the target of terrorism with a capital T, your opponent is everywhere and nowhere. But if you think of yourself as the target of a terrorist who comes from somewhere, even if he operates internationally, you can at least try to anticipate his future assaults.

Is this the end of relativism? If by relativism one means a cast of mind that renders you unable to prefer your own convictions to those of your adversary, then relativism could hardly end because it never began. Our convictions are by definition preferred; that's what makes them our convictions. Relativizing them is neither an option nor a danger.

But if by relativism one means the practice of putting yourself in your adversary's shoes, not in order to wear them as your own but in order to have some understanding (far short of approval) of why someone else might want to wear them, then relativism will not and should not end, because it is simply another name for serious thought.
Relativism about morality has come to play an increasingly important role in contemporary culture. To many thoughtful people, and especially to those who are unwilling to derive their morality from a religion, it appears unavoidable. Where would absolute facts about right and wrong come from, they reason, if there is no supreme being to decree them? We should reject moral absolutes, even as we keep our moral convictions, allowing that there can be right and wrong relative to this or that moral code, but no right and wrong per se. (See, for example, Stanley Fish’s 2001 op-ed, “Condemnation Without Absolutes.”)[1]

Is it plausible to respond to the rejection of absolute moral facts with a relativistic view of morality? Why should our response not be a more extreme, nihilistic one, according to which we stop using normative terms like “right” and “wrong” altogether, be it in their absolutist or relativist guises?

Relativism is not always a coherent way of responding to the rejection of a certain class of facts. When we decided that there were no such things as witches, we didn’t become relativists about witches. Rather, we just gave up witch talk altogether, except by way of characterizing the attitudes of people (such as those in Salem) who mistakenly believed that the world contained witches, or by way of characterizing what it is that children find it fun to pretend to be on Halloween. We became what we may call “eliminativists” about witches.

On the other hand, when Einstein taught us, in his Special Theory of Relativity, that there was no such thing as the absolute simultaneity of two events, the recommended outcome was that we become relativists about simultaneity, allowing that there is such a thing as “simultaneity relative to a (spatio-temporal) frame of reference,” but not simultaneity as such.

What’s the difference between the witch case and the simultaneity case? Why did the latter rejection lead to relativism, but the former to eliminativism?

In the simultaneity case, Einstein showed that while the world does not contain simultaneity as such, it does contain its relativistic cousin — simultaneity relative to a frame of reference — a property that plays something like the same sort of role as classical simultaneity did in our theory of the world.

By contrast, in the witch case, once we give up on witches, there is no relativistic cousin that plays anything like the role that witches were supposed to play. The property, that two events may have, of “being simultaneous relative to frame of reference F” is recognizably a kind of simultaneity. But the property of “being a witch according to a belief system T” is not a kind of witch, but a kind of content (the content of belief system T): it’s a way of characterizing what belief system T says, not a way of characterizing the world.
Now, the question is whether the moral case is more like that of simultaneity or more like that of witches? When we reject absolute moral facts is moral relativism the correct outcome or is it moral eliminativism (nihilism)?

The answer, as we have seen, depends on whether there are relativistic cousins of “right” and “wrong” that can play something like the same role that absolute “right” and “wrong” play.

It is hard to see what those could be.

What’s essential to “right” and “wrong” is that they are normative terms, terms that are used to say how things ought to be, in contrast with how things actually are. But what relativistic cousin of “right” and “wrong” could play anything like such a normative role?

Most moral relativists say that moral right and wrong are to be relativized to a community’s “moral code.” According to some such codes, eating beef is permissible; according to others, it is an abomination and must never be allowed. The relativist proposal is that we must never talk simply about what’s right or wrong, but only about what’s “right or wrong relative to a particular moral code.”

The trouble is that while “Eating beef is wrong” is clearly a normative statement, “Eating beef is wrong relative to the moral code of the Hindus” is just a descriptive remark that carries no normative import whatsoever. It’s just a way of characterizing what is claimed by a particular moral code, that of the Hindus. We can see this from the fact that anyone, regardless of their
views about eating beef, can agree that eating beef is wrong relative to the moral code of the Hindus.

So, it looks as though the moral case is more like the witch case than the simultaneity case: there are no relativistic cousins of “right” and “wrong.” Denial of moral absolutism leads not to relativism, but to nihilism.[2]

There is no half-way house called “moral relativism,” in which we continue to use normative vocabulary with the stipulation that it is to be understood as relativized to particular moral codes. If there are no absolute facts about morality, “right” and “wrong” would have to join “witch” in the dustbin of failed concepts.

The argument is significant because it shows that we should not rush to give up on absolute moral facts, mysterious as they can sometimes seem, for the world might seem even more mysterious without any normative vocabulary whatsoever.

One might be suspicious of my argument against moral relativism. Aren’t we familiar with some normative domains — such as that of etiquette — about which we are all relativists? Surely, no one in their right minds would think that there is some absolute fact of the matter about whether we ought to slurp our noodles while eating.

If we are dining at Buckingham Palace, we ought not to slurp, since our hosts would consider it offensive, and we ought not, other things being equal, offend our hosts. On the other hand, if we are dining in Xian, China, we ought to slurp, since in Xian slurping is considered to be a sign that we are enjoying our meal, and our hosts would consider it offensive if we didn’t slurp, and we ought not, other things being equal, offend our hosts.

But if relativism is coherent in the case of etiquette why couldn’t we claim that morality is relative in the same way?

The reason is that our relativism about etiquette does not actually dispense with all absolute moral facts. Rather, we are relativists about etiquette in the sense that, with respect to a restricted range of issues (such as table manners and greetings), we take the correct absolute norm to be “we ought not, other things being equal, offend our hosts.”

This norm is absolute and applies to everyone and at all times. Its relativistic flavor comes from the fact that, with respect to that limited range of behaviors (table manners and greetings, but not, say, the abuse of children for fun), it advocates varying one’s behavior with local convention.

In other words, the relativism of etiquette depends on the existence of absolute moral norms. Since etiquette does not dispense with absolute moral facts, one cannot hope to use it as a model for moral relativism.
Suppose we take this point on board, though, and admit that there have to be some absolute moral facts. Why couldn’t they all be like the facts involved in etiquette? Why couldn’t they all say that, with respect to any morally relevant question, what we ought to do depends on what the local conventions are?

The trouble with this approach is that once we have admitted that there are some absolute moral facts, it is hard to see why we shouldn’t think that there are many — as many as common sense and ordinary reasoning appear to warrant. Having given up on the purity of a thoroughgoing anti-absolutism, we would now be in the business of trying to figure out what absolute moral facts there are. To do that, we would need to employ our usual mix of argument, intuition and experience. And what argument, intuition and experience tell us is that whether we should slurp our noodles depends on what the local conventions are, but whether we should abuse children for fun does not.

A would-be relativist about morality needs to decide whether his view grants the existence of some absolute moral facts, or whether it is to be a pure relativism, free of any commitment to absolutes. The latter position, I have argued, is mere nihilism; whereas the former leads us straight out of relativism and back into the quest for the moral absolutes.

None of this is to deny that there are hard cases, where it is not easy to see what the correct answer to a moral question is. It is merely to emphasize that there appears to be no good alternative to thinking that, when we are in a muddle about what the answer to a hard moral question is, we are in a muddle about what the absolutely correct answer is.

FOOTNOTES:

[1] Pinning a precise philosophical position on someone, especially a non-philosopher, is always tricky, because people tend to give non-equivalent formulations of what they take to be the same view. Fish, for example, after saying that his view is that “there can be no independent standards for determining which of many rival interpretations of an event is the true one,” which sounds appropriately relativistic, ends up claiming that all he means to defend is “the practice of putting yourself in your adversary’s shoes, not in order to wear them as your own but in order to have some understanding (far short of approval) of why someone else might want to wear them.” The latter, though, is just the recommendation of empathetic understanding and is, of course, both good counsel and perfectly consistent with the endorsement of moral absolutes.

Another view with which moral relativism is sometimes conflated is the view that the right thing to do can depend on the circumstances. There is no question that the right thing to do can depend on the circumstances, even on an absolutist view. Whether you should help someone in need can depend on what your circumstances are, what their circumstances are, and so forth. What makes a view relativistic is its holding that the right thing to do depends not just on the circumstances, but on what the person (or his community) takes to be the right thing to do, on their moral code.
In this column, I am only concerned with those who wish to deny that there are any absolute moral truths in this sense. If that is not your view, then you are not the target of this particular discussion.

[2] Some philosophers may think that they can evade this problem by casting the relativism in terms of a relativized truth predicate rather than a relativized moral predicate. But as I have explained elsewhere, the problem of the loss of normative content recurs in that setting.

Does Philosophy Matter?
By STANLEY FISH
AUGUST 1, 2011

In a recent essay about moral relativism in The Times’s philosophy series The Stone, Paul Boghossian cites a 2001 op-ed of mine as an example of the contradictions relativists fall into. At one moment, he says, I declare the unavailability of “independent standards” for deciding between rival accounts of a matter, and in the next moment I am offering counsel that is “perfectly consistent with the endorsement of moral absolutes.” I don’t regard that as a contradiction, and I would say that to think of it as one is to fail to distinguish between relativism as a philosophical position — respectable, if controversial — and relativism as a way of life, something no one recommends and no one practices.

Boghossian defines relativism (and I’ll go along with his definition for the purposes of this column) as the denial of moral absolutes. But the definition is insufficiently nuanced because there are (at least) two ways of denying moral absolutes. You can say “I don’t believe there are any” or you can say “I believe there are moral absolutes, but (a) there are too many candidates for membership in that category and (b) there is no device, mechanical test, algorithm or knock-down argument for determining which candidates are the true ones.”

The person (and I am one) who takes this second position denies nothing except the possibility (short of force or torture and they don’t count) of securing universal assent. You might say that he or she is a moral absolutist but an epistemological relativist — someone who doesn’t think that there is a trump-card that, when played, will bring your interlocutor over to your side, but does think that there are any number of cards (propositions, appeals, examples, etc.) that might, in particular circumstances and given the history and interests of those in the conversation, produce a change of mind.

But does any of this matter outside the esoteric arena of philosophical disputation? Let’s suppose that either of two acts of persuasion has occurred in that arena: a former moral absolutist is now a relativist of some kind, or a former relativist is now a confirmed believer in moral absolutes. What exactly will have changed when one set of philosophical views has been swapped for another? Almost nothing. To be sure you will now give different answers than you once would have when you are asked about moral facts, objective truths, irrefutable evidence and so on; but when you are engaged in trying to decide what is the right thing to do in a
particular situation, none of the answers you might give to these deep questions will have any bearing on your decision. You won’t say, “Because I believe in moral absolutes, I’ll take this new job or divorce my husband or vote for the Democrat.” Nor will you say, “Because I deny moral absolutes I have no basis for deciding since any decision I make is as good or bad as any other.” What you will say, if only to yourself, is “Given what is at stake, and the likely outcomes of taking this or that action, I think I’ll do this.” Neither “I believe in moral absolutes” nor “I don’t” will be a reason in the course of ordinary, non-philosophical, deliberation.

Now it could be said (and some philosophers will say it) that the person who deliberates without self-conscious recourse to deep philosophical views is nevertheless relying on or resting in such views even though he is not aware of doing so. To say this is to assert that doing philosophy is an activity that underlies our thinking at every point, and to imply that if we want to think clearly about anything we should either become philosophers or sit at the feet of philosophers. But philosophy is not the name of, or the site of, thought generally; it is a special, insular form of thought and its propositions have weight and value only in the precincts of its game. Points are awarded in that game to the player who has the best argument going (“best” is a disciplinary judgment) for moral relativism or its opposite or some other position considered “major.” When it’s not the game of philosophy that is being played, but some other — energy policy, trade policy, debt reduction, military strategy, domestic life — grand philosophical theses like “there are no moral absolutes” or “yes there are” will at best be rhetorical flourishes; they will not be genuine currency or do any decisive work. Believing or disbelieving in moral absolutes is a philosophical position, not a recipe for living.

The ability to make judgments of right and wrong does not depend on your belief about morality in general; all that is required is common sense.

In short, the conclusions reached in philosophical disquisitions do not travel. They do not travel into contexts that are not explicitly philosophical (as seminars, academic journals, and conferences are), and they do not even make their way into the non-philosophical lives of those who hold them. The fact that you might give one set of answers rather than another to standard philosophical questions will say nothing about how you will behave when something other than a point of philosophy is in dispute. When Boghossian declares that “Denial of moral absolutism leads not to relativism, but to nihilism,” he could mean one of two things: Either (1) if you deny the existence of moral absolutes, you are committed, as a matter of philosophical logic, to nihilism, or (2) if you deny the existence of moral absolutes, you will behave nihilistically. If he means the first, he is claiming a consequence within the parameters of philosophical debate, and nothing more. If he means the second, he is committing what I call the theory mistake, the mistake of thinking that your philosophical convictions (if you have them; most people don’t) translate directly or even indirectly into the way you will act when you are not in a seminar.

It seems that Boghossian means to say only the first and thus to limit the scope and significance of what he argues to the context of his professional discipline. But he veers toward the second when he remarks that those who “give up on absolute moral facts” will produce a world “without any normative vocabulary.” This would be true, however, only if someone who holds to a
philosophical position that gives up on moral absolutes loses the right to say that something is
right or wrong. But the ability to make judgments of right and wrong does not depend on your
holding a particular belief about morality in general; all that is required are the common sense,
on-the-wing criteria you bring to bear (without deep reflection) on everyday situations of
choice and decision. There is no additional requirement that you root your decision in a high
philosophical abstraction to which you are positively committed.

Boghossian seems to institute that requirement in his last sentence: “[W]hen we are in a muddle
about what the answer to a hard moral question is, we are in a muddle about what the
absolutely correct answer is.” Why “absolutely”? Isn’t “correct” good enough? (Of course
without “absolutely” the assertion is circular; you wouldn’t be looking for the incorrect answer.)
“Absolutely” is there to insist that the answer you arrive at and consider correct must be backed
up by the conviction that it is underwritten by the structure of Truth and by the universe. This is
a demand that makes sense if you are doing philosophy, but if you are doing anything else, it is
a demand you can safely, and without contradiction, ignore.

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**Does Philosophy Matter? – It Would Appear So.**

**A Reply to Stanley Fish**

Paul Boghossian

In a piece provocatively entitled “Does Philosophy Matter?” Stanley Fish sets out to respond to
proceeds as follows. First, Fish changes the topic: instead of talking about the thesis I was
discussing, he defines another thesis that, he claims, implausibly, also deserves to be called
“moral relativism.” This thesis, he implies, is both more interesting and more defensible than the
one I was criticizing. Second, he argues that neither his thesis nor mine could make any
difference to “real life,” because philosophical conclusions don’t travel outside the seminar room.

His argument limps at both stages. Fish’s ‘relativism’ is neither relativism, nor interesting in its
own right. And his claim that no philosophical or meta-ethical thesis can matter in real life is
clearly false.¹

Fish says that he will go along with defining “moral relativism” as the “denial of moral absolutes.”
But he says that

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¹ Fish’s article begins with an error about what I said about his 2001 op-ed, “Condemnation without Absolutes.”

... Paul Boghossian cites a 2001 op-ed of mine as an example of the contradictions relativists fall into. At one moment, he says, I declare the
unavailability of “independent standards” for deciding between rival accounts of a matter, and in the next moment I am offering counsel
[empathetic understanding] that is “perfectly consistent with the endorsement of moral absolutes.”

The slide from the one view to the other is not cited by me as an example of the sort of incoherence that relativists fall into, but rather as an example of
the sloppiness to which people not trained in philosophy are sometimes prone, giving non-equivalent formulations of what they take to be the same
view. As I explained in a footnote, Fish begins his op-ed by formulating a view that looks relativistic, but ends up claiming that all that it amounts to is
the recommendation that we seek empathetic understanding of our opponents, a recommendation that is both good counsel and completely
consistent with the acceptance of moral absolutes. As we shall see, an inability to tell the difference between two philosophical positions continues to
plague Fish’s thinking.
the definition is insufficiently nuanced because there are (at least) two ways of denying moral absolutes. You can say “I don’t believe there are any” or you can say “I believe there are moral absolutes but (a) there are too many candidates for membership in that category and (b) there is no device, mechanical test, algorithm or knock-down argument for determining which candidates are the true ones.”

The person (and I am one) who takes this second position denies nothing except the possibility (short of force and torture and they don’t count) of securing universal assent. You might say that he or she is a moral absolutist but an epistemological relativist – someone who doesn’t think there is a trump-card that, when played, will bring your interlocutor over to your side, but does that think that there are any number of cards...that might, in particular circumstances and given the history and interests of those in the conversation, produce a change of mind.

It is odd for Fish to think that one way for a person to “deny moral absolutes” is for him to affirm a sentence that begins with: “I believe there are moral absolutes...” Furthermore, to say, “I believe there are moral absolutes, but no mechanical or infallible ways of determining what they are,” could at best be called a form of moral skepticism not moral relativism. It’s a view about our capacity to know what the absolute moral facts are, not a view about their very existence. But it is the existence of such facts that relativists are concerned to deny.

Indeed, Fish’s thesis couldn’t even be considered a good formulation of moral skepticism, since skepticism requires doubting that moral knowledge is achievable. But it is consistent with claiming that moral knowledge is achievable to maintain that it can’t be achieved mechanically, algorithmically or with the sort of demonstrative force that is guaranteed to persuade all of one’s opponents. (Compare: it is consistent with thinking that knowledge of evolution is achievable to maintain that it can’t be achieved mechanically, algorithmically or with the sort of demonstrative force that is guaranteed to persuade all creationists.)

What Fish is calling “moral relativism,” then, is the claim that, while there are moral absolutes, and while we can know what they are, we cannot claim to know what they are in some mechanical or algorithmic way; nor can we claim that our knowledge is so indubitable that it can be counted upon to sway all of one’s opponents.

Two things I hope are clear. First, this could not possibly be the thesis that animates most relativists, and which I was concerned to discuss. That thesis is motivated by the reflection that it is mysterious how absolute facts about morality could be built into the impersonal fabric of the universe. That mystery would clearly still be with us even if we were relativists in Fish’s sense.

Second, Fish’s brand of “moral relativism” is an extremely bland thesis that no one would want to deny. As we can see from the ongoing dispute between evolutionists and creationists, trump cards that can settle disputes decisively don’t exist in the natural sciences. Indeed, given the long history of controversy about the axioms of mathematics and set theory, and the inference
rules of logic, such trump cards don’t exist even in the mathematical or logical sciences. Who, then, could reasonably expect them in the realm of morality? (And no, I wouldn’t call this bland view “epistemological relativism.” A much more interesting view goes by that name.)

Having argued that this bland thesis is all he means to defend by calling himself a moral relativist, Fish proceeds to claim that whether one is a relativist in this sense can make no difference to “real life.” And he claims this because he subscribes to the very general view that no philosophical conclusion travels outside the seminar room:

philosophy is not the name of, or the site of thought, generally; it is a special insular form of thought and its propositions have weight and value only in the precincts of its game.

In short, the conclusions reached in philosophical disquisitions do not travel....The fact that you might give one set of answers rather than another to standard philosophical questions will say nothing about how you will behave when something other than a point of philosophy is in dispute.

To think otherwise, says Fish, is to commit “the theory mistake, the mistake of thinking that your philosophical convictions (if you have them; most people don’t) translate directly or even indirectly into the way you will act when you are not in a seminar.” And he says that I “veer towards” making that mistake when I remark that someone who gives up on absolute moral facts will produce a world “without any normative vocabulary.”

What Fish is alluding to here is my claim that there is an entailment from “there are only relative facts about morality” to “there is nothing for moral vocabulary to be about.” He doesn’t dispute the validity of the entailment. He thinks that if one made that claim in a philosophy seminar room it would be correct. But he says it doesn’t follow that an ordinary person will behave nihilistically – that is, eschew all use of normative vocabulary – just because he believes that entailment to hold in the seminar room. (Note that, at this point, Fish must have decided to go along with my definition of moral relativism rather than his, because there is clearly no entailment from “there is no algorithmic trump card in morality” to “there is nothing for normative vocabulary to be about.”)

Now, I hope it’s clear that neither Fish nor I are in the business of making empirical claims about what people will actually do. Prediction of actual behavior is a matter best left to sociologists and psychologists.

When I say that there is an entailment from relativism to nihilism, I’m not making a claim about what someone who is a relativist will believe or do. I am only making a claim about what it would be consistent for him to believe or do. I am claiming that it would be inconsistent for someone to continue to make moral evaluations, if he also maintains that they can only be valid relative to particular moral codes.
In response to this, I can imagine someone trying to dispute the entailment. What I can’t understand is what Fish does, which is to concede the entailment, but claim that it doesn’t matter.

It’s possible that Fish was misled here by his concentration on his own bland version of moral relativism, the “no algorithmic trump cards thesis.” For, although that version is not empty of all practical implications, its blandness prevents it from assuming any great significance.

But if we switch to considering the thesis that most people mean by “moral relativism,” namely, that there are only relative, but no absolute, facts about morality, then it is very clear that there will be no way to insulate it from practical concerns. In his comment #93 on Fish’s piece, David Velleman puts the point well:

Fish’s examples of “real life” are not the ones to which relativism would matter. Consider instead how we (Westerners) deal with cultures that practice female genital mutilation. We could say, “Well, what’s right for us isn’t necessarily right for them, and it’s meaningless to ask which of us is ‘really’ right.” Or we could say, “If we’re right (as we think) then they must be wrong, and we should try to convince them.” Or we can say, “Both of us are right in the context of our own cultures, but some cultures are superior to others.” And so on. In the first case, we don’t even try to talk to them. In the second case, we try to engage them in moral argument. In the third case, we expose them to our way of life and count on them to change. These are real-life alternatives, and in today’s world, the choice among them matters a great deal.

It is rationally inconceivable that one’s meta-ethical attitudes about moral correctness and truth won’t influence one’s first-order views about how to deal with cultures that practice female genital mutilation. Indeed, it is precisely because they were expected to have such influence – because they were expected to foster greater tolerance for those with whom one might disagree – that people were attracted to moral relativism in the first place.