

# The New Criterion

## Features

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## Introduction: The dictatorship of relativism

by [Roger Kimball](#)

An introduction our symposium "The Dictatorship of Relativism: Who Will Stand Up for Western Values Now?"

*There are no facts, only interpretations.*

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*

*If relativism signifies contempt for fixed categories and [for] men who claim to be bearers of an external objective truth, then there is nothing more relativistic than fascist attitudes.*

—Benito Mussolini

*As a rule, only very learned and clever men deny what is obviously true. Common men have less brains, but more sense.*

—William T. Stace

It wasn't *that* long ago that a responsible educated person in the West was someone who entertained firm moral and political principles. When those principles were challenged, he would typically rise to defend them. The more serious the challenge, the more concerted the defense.

Today, as the Canadian writer William Gairdner reminds us in his little-noticed but excellent new study of relativism,<sup>[1]</sup> the equivalent educated person is likely to have a very different attitude towards whatever moral and political ideas—"principles" is no longer the right word—he lives by. When those ideas are challenged, deference to the challenger rather than defense of the principles is the order of the day. "While perhaps more broadly learned" than his less forgiving predecessor, such a person, Gairdner writes,

is more likely to think of him or herself as proudly distinguished by the *absence* of "rigid" opinions and moral values, to be someone "tolerant" and "open." Such a person will generally profess some variation of relativism, or "you do your thing and I'll do mine," as a personal philosophy. Many in this frame of mind privately consider themselves exemplars of an enlightened modern attitude that civilization has worked hard to attain, and if pushed, they would admit to feeling just a little superior to all those sorry souls of prior generations forced to bend under moral and religious constraints.

The institutionalization of this amalgam of attitudes—blasé tolerance shading into moral indifference underwritten by that giddy sense of self-righteousness and superiority—has precipitated what Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) called "the dictatorship of relativism." I understand that, for those enthralled by this dictatorship, the fact that an orthodox Catholic provided a rubric for the servitude is reason enough to dispute its relevance. But considered simply as a sociological datum, the triumph (if that is a less opprobrious word than "dictatorship") of relativism describes, in Anthony Trollope's phrase, "the way we live now"—"we" being the beneficiaries of that "enlightened modern attitude" that Gairdner described in the passage just quoted.

It was to explore the lineaments and limitations of modern relativism that *The New Criterion* collaborated with London's Social Affairs Unit in organizing a conference on the subject last autumn. The papers that follow explore various facets of the vertiginous moral and epistemological inheritance we sum up in the word "relativism." I hasten to acknowledge that this is well-trodden ground. One could go back at least to Aristotle's dissection of Protagoras's "man-is-the-measure-of-all-things" philosophy to find a warning flag about the species of intellectual incontinence concentrated in the doctrine of relativism. In our own day, the English historian Paul Johnson located the modernity of modern times in its embrace of relativism. In *Modern Times*, his magisterial procession through the political and moral history of the twentieth century, Johnson even announced the exact birthday of the era he set out to describe. The Modern World, Johnson wrote in his opening flourish, began on May 29, 1919. That was the day Einstein's theory of relativity was experimentally confirmed, thus shattering the complacent confidence of the Newtonian world

view.

Of course, the theory of relativity is not the same thing as relativism. Johnson acknowledges this. And yet ... As with the second law of thermodynamics (which popularized the term “entropy”) or Heisenberg’s “Uncertainty Principle,” the theory of relativity was a piece of science that cast a large metaphorical shadow. Was it misunderstood—even un-understood? It didn’t matter. Johnson was right that the popular appropriation of Einstein’s theory provided a good illustration of the “dual impact” of scientific innovators: Their theories change our understanding of the physical world, “but they also change our ideas. The second effect is often more radical than the first.”

The embrace of relativism was a harbinger, a symptom of a seismic shift in the way people view the world. People? Well, those educated people, anyway, of which Gairdner spoke. Of *them* we have a greater and greater supply. (I say “educated”; I mean “schooled”—a difference that makes all the difference.) More and more, however, relativism has assumed the role of civil religion in the West. There are, of course, pockets of resistance. There are even some indications that the confident spread of relativism may be faltering. But there can be little doubt that the values and assumptions of relativism, e.g. multiculturalism, have made great inroads, penetrating from elite to demotic culture. This is a fact that Madison Avenue has recognized and sought to capitalize on. I’ve written before about the popular campaign undertaken by HSBC bank. At many large airports these days, one cannot process down the gangway to one’s plane without confronting their clever, insinuating series of ads dedicated to encouraging travelers to congratulate themselves on their lack of principle. In recent months, the campaign opened a new beachhead on trains, buses, and other venues.

It’s a catchy, if semantically troubling, promotion. In the original series, each ad consists of two pairs of identical pictures boldly labeled with opposite one-word descriptors. For example, an image of a serious-looking young businessman in suit and tie bears the label “Leader” while next to it is an image of legs in ratty jeans and scuffed boots bearing the legend “Follower.” The same images are then repeated with the words reversed: the leader becomes the follower and vice versa. Other image-pairs come labelled “Good/Bad,” “Trendy/Traditional,” “Pain/Pleasure,” “Perfect/Imperfect,” etc. And in case you are slow on the uptake, the Aesop behind the ad includes a helpful moral: “If everyone thought the same, nothing would ever change,” for example, or “An open mind is the best way to look at the world,” or “Isn’t it better to be open to other people’s points of view?”

The question, of course, is meant to be rhetorical, what Latinists call a *nonne* question, i.e., one that expects the answer “Yes.” Indeed, the latest series of ads dispenses with the question mark and has moved from two to three alternatives. Thus we might see a cordon of power-generating windmills. Whether we think “Nature,” “Future,” or “Eyesore,” we are meant to agree with the declarative assertion: “Different values make the world a richer place.” (Do they? Doesn’t it depend on the values being promulgated?)

What HSBC proudly calls its “yourpointofview.com” campaign is doubtless a successful bit of huckstering. But it is also a wearisome bit of propaganda. Propaganda for what? There’s an irony here. The whole rhetorical machinery of the ads communicates the presumption that we are dealing with the spirit of bold openness and a healthy tolerance for diversity. The incidental beneficiary of that happy thought is HSBC. But the reality of the message is simply the biggest unexamined cliché of our time: that differences among people are simply so many “points of view” and therefore (note the logic) that discriminating among those points of view with an eye to favoring one over another is to be guilty of an intellectual incapacity that is at the same time a moral failing (narrowness, intolerance, elitism, ethnocentrism—the whole menu of politically incorrect vices).

It is often said that an anthropologist is someone who respects the distinctive values of every culture but his own. We in the West are all anthropologists now. It is curious, though, that proponents of relativism and multiculturalism should use ethnocentrism as a stick with which to beat the West. After all, both the idea and the critique of ethnocentrism are quintessentially Western. There has never in history been a society more open to other cultures than our own; nor has any tradition been more committed to self-criticism than the Western tradition: the figure of Socrates endlessly inviting self-scrutiny and rational explanation is a definitive image of the Western spirit. Moreover, “Western” science is not exclusively Western: it is science plain and simple. It was, to be sure, invented and developed in the West, but it is as true for the inhabitants of the Nile Valley as it is for the denizens of New York. That is why, outside the precincts of the humanities departments of Western universities, there is a mad dash to acquire Western science and technology. The deepest foolishness of multiculturalism shows itself in the puerile attacks it mounts on the cogency of scientific rationality, epitomized poignantly by the Afrocentrist who flips on his word processor to write books decrying the parochial nature of Western science and extolling the virtues of the “African way.”

In part, HSBC’s campaign is a certification of how far the assumptions of cultural relativism have penetrated. But what makes the ad campaign a significant emblem of the zeitgeist is the way it insinuates a consistent prejudice into its brief against prejudice. The smartly attired young chap and the slob in jeans are not so much equals as *competitors*. The moral burden of the campaign (as distinct from its aim of benefiting its client) is *not* to encourage us to think more carefully about what it means to be a leader or follower, to be good or bad, to be trendy or traditional, but rather to blur the distinction between those contraries altogether. The aim is to short-circuit, not refine, our powers of discrimination. And the goal of that disruption is always at the expense of one side of the equation. (Yet another irony: were the transvaluation implicit in the “point-of-view” campaign really to succeed, one of the first casualties would be competitive enterprises like HSBC.) The ostensible tenet of this catechism is that all cultures are equally valuable and, therefore, that preferring one culture, intellectual heritage, or moral and social order to another is to be guilty of ethnocentrism. It’s actually not quite as egalitarian as it looks, however, for you soon realize that the doctrine of cultural relativism is always a *weighted* relativism: Preferring Western culture or intellectual heritage is culpable in a way that preferring other traditions is not.

It is often said that relativism is the conviction that, when it comes to morals, there are no such things as absolute values and, when it comes to knowledge, there is no such thing as absolute truth. It is worth meditating on the use of the word “absolute” here. If there were a law against abusing innocent words, we would be justified in contacting OSHA about this unfair exploitation of “absolute.”

What a relativist really believes (or believes he believes) is that 1) there is no such thing as value and 2) there is no such thing as truth. The word “absolute” is merely an emollient, a verbal sedative intended to forestall unhappiness. What after all is the difference between saying “There is no such thing as absolute truth” and saying “There is no such thing as truth”? Take your time. Relativism is a Cole Porter view of the world: “The world has gone mad today/ And good’s bad today,/ And black’s white today... . Anything Goes.”

The first upsurge of relativism can seem like fun. It’s a Cole Porterish, jazz-age tipsiness: a moral and epistemological holiday from the stuffy concerns of ... well, of everything that has nailed things down and inhibited one. The hangover is not long in coming, however. At bottom, relativism is a religious problem. “God is dead,” Nietzsche proclaimed in the 1880s. What he observed was an emotional, not a historical fact. The unspoken allegiance to something transcending the vicissitudes of human desire had been (among the elites, anyway) shattered. “If there is no God,” Dostoyevsky said, “everything is permissible.” Meaning what? Paul Johnson’s long book is in part an illustration of and a commentary on those pronouncements of Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky. “Among the advanced races,” Johnson notes, “the decline and ultimately the collapse of the religious impulse would leave a huge vacuum. The history of modern times is in great part the history of how that vacuum has been filled.”

Relativism is the theme of *Modern Times*; the moral of which might be indexed thus: “Utopianism, dangers of. See Communism, ideology, professional politicians, socialism.” It is a sobering thought that Lenin (for example) was a committed humanitarian—Johnson speaks of his “burning humanitarianism, akin to the love of the saints for God.” Yes, and here’s the rub: “But his humanitarianism was a very abstract passion. It embraced humanity in general but he seems to have little love for, or even interest in, humanity in particular. He saw the people with whom he dealt, his comrades, not as individuals but as receptacles for his ideas.” The paterfamilias of this brand of sentimental humanitarian was Jean-Jacques Rousseau: “I think I know man,” Rousseau said mournfully toward the end of his life, “but as for men, I know them not.” (Nor did he know any of his five illegitimate children, all of whom he abandoned to the orphanage.) It’s a short step from Rousseau and his celebration of the emotion (as distinct from the reality) of virtue to Robespierre and his candid talk about “virtue and its emanation, terror.” Lenin was a utopian. Hitler was a utopian. Ditto Stalin, Pol Pot, and ... you can extend the list. All were adept practitioners of what Johnson calls the twentieth century’s “most radical vice: social engineering—the notion that human beings can be shovelled around like bags of cement.”

And this brings us to yet another irony: that relativism and tyranny, far from being in opposition, are in fact regular collaborators. This surprises many people, for it seems at first blush that relativism, by loosening the sway of dogma, should be the friend of liberty. In fact, as Mussolini saw clearly, in its “contempt for fixed categories” and “objective truth,” “there is nothing more relativistic” than fascism. And it is not only fascism that habitually makes use of relativism as a moral softening-up agent. Modern liberal democracies champion reason in the form of a commitment to science and technology, but there, too, relativism shows itself as the friend of various strains of dehumanization. As Gairdner notes,

wherever the materialist attitude of modern science is combined with relativism, we can predict that moral and political statements will soon emerge about the worthlessness of some forms of human life and how we ought to be eliminating certain classes of unworthy people such as “unwanted” children by abortion, or the very old, or Jews, or the infirm by outright genocide or euthanasia.

Why does relativism, which begins with a beckoning promise of liberation from “oppressive” moral constraints, so often end in the embrace of immoral constraints that are politically obnoxious? Part of the answer lies in the hypertrophy or perversion of relativism’s conceptual enablers—terms like “pluralism,” “diversity,” “tolerance,” and the like. They all name classic liberal virtues, but it turns out that their beneficence depends on their place in a constellation of fixed values. Absent that hierarchy, they rapidly degenerate into epithets in the armory of political suasion. They retain the aura of positive values, but in reality they are what Gairdner calls “value-dispersing terms that serve as an official warning to accept all behaviours of others without judgment and, most important, to keep all moral opinions private.” In this sense, the rise of relativism encourages an ideology of non-judgmentalism only as a prelude to ever more strident discriminations. “Where conditions permit,” Gairdner writes, the strong step in:

either to impose a new regime or, as in the Western democracies, where overt totalitarianism is still unthinkable, to further permeate ordinary life with the state’s quietly overbearing, regulating role. Relativism is the natural public philosophy of such regimes because it repudiates all natural moral or social binding power, replacing these with legal decrees and sanction of the state.

Tocqueville did not, I believe, use the term “relativism,” but he vividly delineated its political progeny in his description of democratic despotism.

Taken together, the essays that follow offer an anatomy of relativism and its conceptual cousins. Do they also offer an answer to the question that forms the second part of our conference title: “Who will stand up for Western values now?” In the sense that criticizing a problem is part of solving a problem, the answer is Yes. But in a deeper sense this is a question to which the answer

remains unknown. In his essay, Daniel Johnson, in opposing the relativist Jürgen Habermas to Pope Benedict XVI, offers one possible response. But—my final irony—it is worth noting that prominent in the inventory of “Western values” are various subversive agents. Lucretius, Hobbes, Hume, Nietzsche—these names are as central to the tradition of the West as any. But so—and this is the point to bear in mind—are such names as Aeschylus, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas (just to stick with the *A*'s). Part of the strength of the West has been its intellectual and moral capaciousness. Relativism pushes that capaciousness to absurdity. This, indeed, is a common temptation—one might even say a logical concomitant—of liberalism: to degenerate into its opposite by absolutizing its defining virtues. William Gairdner may be optimistic in thinking that the era of relativism is nearing an end—that “we are tired of that now.” But he is surely correct—it is a point made by several of the essays below—that “life without some foundation in reason and morality is in the end unbearable” and that “the recurring hunger for universals seems to be universal.” That is less a consolation than a call to action, but recognizing so was part of the point of our deliberations.

## Notes

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- *The Book of Absolutes: A Critique of Relativism and a Defense of Universals*, by William Gairdner; McGill-Queens University Press, 398 pages, \$39.95. [Go back to the text.](#)
- “The Dictatorship of Relativism: Who Will Stand Up for Western Values Now?,” a symposium organized jointly by *The New Criterion* and London’s Social Affairs Unit, took place on September 26, 2008 in Winchester, England. Participants were James W. Ceaser, Anthony Daniels, Christie Davies, Daniel Johnson, Roger Kimball, Herbert London, Andrew C. McCarthy, Kenneth Minogue, Michael Mosbacher, John O’Sullivan, James Piereson, David Pryce-Jones, Marc Sidwell, and David Yezzi. Discussion revolved around earlier versions of the essays printed in this special section. [Go back to the text.](#)

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