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Facing Relativism and the Challenge of Truth

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RELATIVISM AND TRUTH

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger's book, *Truth and Tolerance*, focuses on a widespread conflict that exists in today's world between two values that are, in the popular mind, no longer seen as complementary. This conflict is symptomatic of a deeper conflict between philosophy and politics. *Truth* belongs to the sphere of philosophy, while *tolerance* belongs to the sphere of politics. The former reveals what something is; the latter describes how people should behave toward each other in a civil society. However, so much importance is now attached to tolerance, that it has been separated from truth, which, in turn, has been relegated to the sphere of mere opinion. To state the matter quite simply: tolerance has been absolutized, while truth has been relativized.

Nonetheless, such a separation of tolerance from truth (or politics from philosophy) is *preposterous*, in the original meaning of the term. The Latin words *prae* (before) and *posterius* (after) relate to the absurd or "preposterous" practice of placing "before" that which should come "after," like putting the cart before the horse. Placing man first and God second is preposterous in the same way. But the preposterous maneuver, however, has a more sinister implication – it first eclipses what should be primary, and then banishes it in the direction of oblivion. Thus, placing man first and God second soon leads to atheism; placing politics first and philosophy second leads to agnosticism, or the elimination of philosophy.¹

The distinguished Thomistic philosopher, Etienne Gilson, has made the comment that one of the essential features of Aquinas' thinking was his ability to put things in their proper order. In philosophy this is critical, for, as Gilson explains, if an idea is out of order it is "lost, not in the usual sense that it is not to be found where you expected it to be, but in the much more radical sense that it is no longer to be found anywhere."² One of the more urgent problems in the modern world is the recovery of philosophy (and the pursuit of truth along with it) so that we understand how various realities relate to each other, whether they are God and man, philosophy and politics, the state and its citizens.

¹ Agnosticism literally means, "knowing nothing."

² Etienne Gilson, *Reason and Revelation* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938), 71.

The reason, according to Ratzinger, for the exaggerated importance given to tolerance and its promotion over truth, rests on the fact that we now live in a pluralistic world consisting of a wide diversity of values, customs, and religious beliefs. How, then, is it possible for people to live in harmony with each other and to be tolerant toward each other's differences? If truth is invoked, it would presumably have the insidious effect of making one group appear superior to another and consequently intolerant. The answer to this problem has been the adoption of *relativism* and its concomitant removal of a philosophy that is anchored in truth.

Ratzinger fully understands the dire consequences resulting from excising truth from politics and making relativism sovereign. "Relativism," he writes, "in certain aspects has become the real religion of modern man."³ It represents, he goes on to say, "The most profound difficulty of our day."⁴ These austere words cannot be taken lightly, for the Cardinal is a careful thinker and not given to exaggeration.

The experiment in trying to be tolerant in the absence of any regulatory truth has proven to be a failure. It has inevitably led to a decisive intolerance of the Catholic Church, for example, and not because she opposes tolerance, but because she refuses to accord it a higher status than truth. George Weigel has observed that Postmodern European high culture that can conceive only "your truth" and "my truth" but not "the truth," regards tolerance to be so much more important than truth that it must be "enforced by state power."⁵ In other words, the Church insists that all things be placed in their proper order. This is enough for the world to indict the Church for being "intolerant." Ratzinger asks the pertinent question, "What meaning does belief then have, what positive meaning does religion have, if it cannot be connected with truth?"⁶

A pagan philosopher answered this very question better than two millennia ago. Marcus Tullius Cicero, in the year 44 B.C., reasoned that religion without truth is merely superstition. "We should do ourselves and our countrymen a great deal of good," he wrote in his treatise, *On*

³ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions*, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 84.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵ George Weigel, "Europe's Two Culture Wars," *Commentary*, May 21, 2006, 8.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

Divination, “if we were to root superstition out entirely.” But the great statesman and philosopher, mindful of the human proclivity to throw the baby out with the bathwater, was quick to assert that he did “not want religion destroyed along with superstition.” He urged the abolition of superstition, but the retention of religion. We do not need superstition, he proposed, but we do need religion. The distinguishing factor, for Cicero, was natural science that revealed the truth of things. “That there is some eternal Being,” he wrote, “who stands out above the rest, and that the human race ought to serve and admire Him, is an admission that the beauty of the universe and the orderliness of the celestial bodies compels us to make. Therefore, just as religion, being associated with natural science, ought actually to be propagated, so every root of superstition ought to be weeded out.”⁷ Simply stated, Cicero enjoined his fellow countrymen to use truth as a way of distinguishing religion from what he deemed not worth tolerating, namely superstition.

The 20th century American philosopher Mortimer Adler reiterates Cicero’s position in his book, *Truth in Religion: The Plurality of Religions and the Unity of Truth*. He acknowledges that truth is needed to support religion as its preamble, but also points out that without truth there can be neither unity nor peace: “A great epoch in the history of mankind lies ahead of us in the millennium. It will not begin until there is a universal acknowledgement of the unity of truth in all areas of culture to which the standard of truth is applicable; for only then will all men be able to live together peacefully in a world of cultural community under one government. Only then will world civilization and world history begin.”⁸

In an earlier work, *Six Great Ideas*, Adler distinguishes between the ideas we judge by (truth, goodness and beauty) and the ideas we live by (liberty, equality and justice). The point is that we cannot enjoy liberty, equality, and justice (ideas that virtually everyone endorses enthusiastically) unless we know something about truth, goodness and beauty. For example, there can be no justice without truth. In the absence of truth, no verdict (*verum + dicere* = to tell the truth) can be delivered that separates the guilty from the innocent or justice from injustice. It is a profoundly sad irony that people today are willing to ignore the very

⁷ *On Divination*, 148-9.

⁸ Mortimer J. Adler, *Truth in Religion: The Plurality of Religions and the Unity of Truth*, 128.

means that are indispensable for producing what they most ardently desire. They shun truth and expect justice to flower in a barren desert.

Marcello Pera, a nonbeliever, describes the present situation in the West not as the tranquility that arises from mutual tolerance, but as a “prison-house of insincerity and hypocrisy known as political correctness.”⁹ People live in constant fear that any gesture or statement suggesting that one thing might be better than another is not only *not* tolerated, but is met with scorn, derision, and often severe reprisals. As Pera said, “The adjective ‘better’ is forbidden.”¹⁰

Philosophy, it should be emphasized, is not a luxury for the elite or an idle game indulged in at universities. Philosophy, because it is properly concerned with truth, goodness, beauty and other fundamental verities, is indispensable in providing the basis for civilization and all the benefits that flow from it, including unity, civility, justice, peace, art and science. By setting tolerance above truth, tolerance degenerates into intolerance, while truth is abandoned altogether. The result is akin to what Plato describes in the opening of the seventh chapter of his *Republic*: cave dwellers who are intolerant of education, mesmerized by shadows, and closed to the light of truth that could improve their lives. The rejection of truth does not make people tolerant. As the great Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain has stated, “The man who says ‘What is truth?’ as Pilate did, is not a tolerant man, but a betrayer of the human race.”¹¹

Tolerance can hardly be the first principle of human conduct, and it has never been the founding principle of any civilization. The Judeo-Christian God commands us to love, not to be tolerant. Tolerance is not a first step, nor is it pro-active; it is acquiescence, a capitulation to something of which one neither approves nor disapproves. It presupposes moral neutrality. It is a response, not an initiative, leaving

⁹ Pope Benedict XVI and Marcello Pera, *Without Roots: The West, Relativism, Christianity, Islam*, trans. Michael F. Moore (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 87. On page 33 Pera writes: “Relativism has wreaked havoc, and it continues to act as a mirror and an echo chamber for the dark mood that has fallen over the West. It has paralyzed the West, when it is already disoriented and at a standstill, rendered it defenseless when it is already reluctant to rise to the challenge.”

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹¹ Jacques Maritain, *On the Use of Philosophy: Three Essays* (New York: Atheneum, 1965), 24.

the question, “a response to *what?*” unanswered. When it is used as a first principle, it soon contradicts itself. The Spanish government, in the interest of expressing tolerance to married couples of the same sex who have adopted children, has replaced the “offensive” terms “father” and “mother” on birth certificates with “Progenitor A” and “Progenitor B.” What is initially tolerance toward same-sex couples soon becomes intolerance toward the very words “father” and “mother.” Similarly, the BBC ordered its writers to avoid the contentious terms “husband” and “wife.” Many North American universities have outlawed student pro-life groups in the interest of demonstrating their tolerance toward those who are “pro-choice.”

One cannot simultaneously tolerate contraries and contradictories. Opposition to same-sex marriage is not tolerated and is routinely denounced as “homophobic.” To cite but one salient example, in January 2006 the European Parliament passed a resolution condemning states that do not recognize same-sex marriages as “homophobic.” The implication here is that expressing a philosophical opinion on this matter is not only discriminatory, but also indicative of a psychological disorder. Relativism that is the underpinning of an out-of-control political correctness conveys the message that human beings are fundamentally incapable of grasping the truth of things, and that they would rather fight than think.

It is more than a bit ridiculous to ask a man who is about to be boiled in a pot and eaten, at a purely religious feast, why he does not maintain a relativistic view toward all religions. The mind, and even the heart, may entertain absurdities, but it is most unlikely that one would continue denying reality when his nervous system calls his instinct for self-preservation to attention.¹² A relativist cannot afford to get too close to reality.

Relativism is a default philosophy that emerges as a result of an unwillingness to put truth and tolerance in their proper order. But it is unworkable on a practical level and creates immense and unnecessary stumbling blocks in the path of education, democracy, and the implementation of the natural law. In fact, it contributes, significantly, to the Culture of Death.

¹² See G. K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1960), 231.

RELATIVISM AND EDUCATION

Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* is a sustained critique of higher education in the United States, specifically, the widespread relativism that effectively suppresses the proper openness needed to distinguish between right and wrong, true and false, good and evil. The author begins his book by declaring that "There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative."¹³ Such students, according to Bloom, assume that their belief in relativism is axiomatic and beyond questioning. They are, so to speak, not open to their own closedness. As a consequence, there is little if any thinking going on about their first principles. "These are things you don't think about,"¹⁴ laments the University of Chicago philosophy professor.

Relativism does away with the need to think. After all, if the mind cannot know truth, and all opinions warrant equal respect, why struggle to comprehend the incomprehensible? No rational justification is needed to defend any relativistic position. Like Ray Bradbury's 1953 novella, *Fahrenheit 451*, where firemen start fires instead of putting them out, universities now use relativism to prevent thinking rather than to encourage it.

The Pontifical Council for Culture has addressed this peculiar phenomenon of schools not teaching students how to think in a March 2006 study titled "The Christian Faith at the Dawn of the New Millennium and the Challenge of Unbelief and Religious Indifference." One of its main conclusions is "the urgency of learning to think, from school to university."¹⁵

It may appear surprising to some that the Catholic Church, known primarily for her foundation in faith, is taking up the role of teaching people how to think. Yet the phenomenon of not thinking, especially about crucial matters, is pandemic—both within and outside of the Church—and often goes unchallenged.

¹³ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon Schuster Inc.: 1987), 25.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Related read Luigi Giussani, *The Risk of Education* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2001) and Anthony T. Kronman, *Education's End* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

What, we might well ask, are those people who have not yet learned to think using as a substitute for thinking? In a word, they are *reacting*. They react affirmatively to the settled opinions of the day that they themselves have not settled in their own minds. They parrot ideas that are trendy, media-approved and politically correct. Not only that, but they bundle their collection of unexamined ideas and wrap them up in a package they claim to be a “philosophy.”

This “philosophy,” as we have noted, is relativism, one that cries out for an urgent re-examination. According to the tenets of this “philosophy,” truth either does not exist or is unattainable. As a result, since there is no reliable anchor that can ground opinions in reality, all opinions have equal merit. What is assumed to be the democratization of philosophy is really its destruction.

Relativists, despite their rejection of any sure connection with reality, are not averse to referring to what they believe to be reality in order to buttress their position. Einstein’s “Theory of Relativity” is often called upon to substantiate the notion that “everything is relative.” While we cannot expect people in general to understand the intricacies and complexities of Einstein’s theory, we can know enough about it to be confident that neither Einstein nor his celebrated theory is the least bit relativistic. As the great physicist himself said, in language that calls to mind Aristotle and Aquinas, “Belief in an external world independent of the perceiving subject is the basis of all natural science.”¹⁶ As far as his theory is concerned, let us consider the words of Benedictine Father Stanley Jaki: “Einstein’s theory of relativity is the most absolutist theory ever proposed in the history of science. In fact, the entire success of Einstein’s theory is that it is absolutist. According to it, the value of the speed of light is independent of any reference systems and therefore has a value which is absolutely valid.”¹⁷ Initially, Einstein thought of calling his theory the theory of invariance, because the speed of light, the “hitching-post” of the universe, is constant (or invariant). Time and motion are relative, but all that means for Einstein is that they are related to something that is not relative.

¹⁶ Albert Einstein, *The World as I See It* (New York: Covici-Friede, 1934), 60.

¹⁷ See Stanley L. Jaki, *The Absolute Beneath the Relative* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988), 1-22.

When philosophy was in its infancy, an imaginative thinker explained how the earth was sustained in space by postulating that it rested on the back of a tortoise. The question inevitably shifted to “what holds up the tortoise?” “Why, another tortoise,” someone answered. “And what holds up the second tortoise,” someone else asked. “Well,” said a pundit, “it’s tortoises all the way down!” Such a response is not philosophical but facetious. Philosophy is supposed to culminate in wisdom, not foolishness.

Relativists are fond of alluding to the timeless aphorism, *De gustibus non disputandum est* (Concerning taste, there must be no dispute). But they ignore the more important aphorism, *De veritate disputandum est* (Concerning truth, we must engage in dispute). Engaging in dispute is evidence of thinking. We must engage in dispute, that is, involving ourselves in trying to figure out what is true and what is not true, because of the simple fact that *the truth matters*. To avoid thinking, no matter how convenient and time saving that may be, is intellectually derelict and morally irresponsible.

Pope Benedict XVI has given some popular currency to the phrase, “the dictatorship of relativism.” The true relativist (if there could be one) would have nothing to dictate to anyone. He would be utterly deferential and completely respectful even of opinions that contradicted his own. The fact that relativists can aspire to the role of dictator is a good indication that it is impossible for anyone to purge himself entirely of his connections with reality. The ancient sophist, Pyrrho of Ellis, who had the reputation of not being sure of anything, was once observed fleeing from a rabid dog. Bystanders ridiculed his behavior which obviously repudiated his philosophy. Pyrrho’s meek response conveyed an inescapable truth: “It is difficult to get away entirely from nature.”

Something is relative when it corresponds to two fixed points. Between the reality of a woman and her son are the relationships of mother and child. The woman is the child’s mother, and he is her son. They are related to each other. Mortimer Adler, a Thomistic philosopher who entered the Church in his 90s, would have heartily endorsed the Pontifical Council for Culture’s commitment to helping people to learn how to think. For thinking rightly leads to truth, and truth is the only avenue to peace. In what is perhaps his best known work, *How to Read a Book*, Adler reiterates the time-honored point that the Liberal Arts are

truly liberating because they liberate the student *through* reason not *from* it. “The liberal who frees himself *from* reason,” he writes, “rather than *through* it, surrenders to the only other arbiter in human affairs – force, or what Mr. Chamberlain has called ‘the awful arbitrament of war.’”¹⁸ Adler’s recognition that relativism leads to the imposition of force is perfectly consistent with Pope Benedict’s oft-repeated reference to the dictatorship of relativism. If people are not moved voluntarily by reason and truth, they will be moved involuntarily by power and force.

RELATIVISM AND DEMOCRACY

The original title of Allan Bloom’s best-seller was not as catchy as “The Closing of the American Mind,” but it was no less accurate in capturing the book’s central thesis – “How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today’s Students.” Bloom understood that it is set in the eternal order of things for a good education to be both a foundation and a safeguard for good democracy. Moreover, a good education does not neglect the indispensable importance of truth and virtue. To the extent that we abolish the role of truth and virtue in education, we will suffer as a political entity.

Pope Benedict has reiterated the point that ethical relativism cannot be the basis for democracy, nor can it bring about tolerance and mutual respect.¹⁹ In the absence of virtuous people, he states, democracy yields to totalitarian interests. He views with no small amount of apprehension that “Relativism thus also appears as being the philosophical basis of democracy.”²⁰ Ethical relativism cannot possibly be the basis for a good democracy because it is inherently incapable of providing a blueprint for unity or an inspiration for decency. Nor can it provide a basis for either tolerance or mutual respect.

The noted Harvard sociologist, Gordon Allport, worked on his classic study, *The Nature of Prejudice*, during the aftermath of World War II. This was a period of high unemployment and widespread hunger throughout the civilized world that was further burdened by pervasive

¹⁸ Mortimer J. Adler, *How To Read A Book* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1940), 366-67.

¹⁹ Benedict XVI, “The Natural Law is the Basis of Democracy,” October 5, 2007 (Zenit.org).

²⁰ Pera and Ratzinger, *op. cit.*, 117.

cynicism and nervous insecurity. It was not a climate in which people were eager to embrace the democratic ideal. Rather, it was a time when people fell prey to demagogues who were only too eager to wrap them in a pseudo-protective blanket of totalitarianism.

In times of uncertainty, people often choose, not the moral ideal, but the quick solution to their immediate needs. “It was a stuporous error,” wrote Allport, a man not given to using words recklessly, “for the Western world to believe that democratic ideology, stemming from Judeo-Christian ethics and reinforced by political creeds of many nations, would itself gradually overspread the world.”²¹ “Democracy, we now realize,” Allport continued, somewhat mournfully, “places burdens upon the personality sometimes too great to bear.” Do we continue to realize what Allport thought people realized better than a half-century ago? And what does a person need in order to bear such heavy burdens? It is apparently something we have forgotten. In a word, for the Harvard sociologist, it is “virtue.” “The maturely democratic person,” he wrote, “must possess subtle virtues.”²²

Thomas Paine argued for cultivation of virtue at the time of the American Revolution. He advised his countrymen that, “When we are planning for posterity, we ought to remember that virtue is not hereditary.”²³ The democratic ideal has proven to be less exportable to countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and Iran, than arms, coffee, and computers, because it presupposes the cultivation of the many virtues that are needed to make democracy a practical reality. There is no point in exporting lamps to a nation that has no electricity.

A few years ago, in an address to the United Nations, Pope John Paul II reiterated that “democracy requires wisdom and virtue: it stands or falls with the truths it embodies and promotes.” On this occasion, however (October 8, 2002), the country that was forefront in the Holy Father’s mind was not a nation of the Middle East, but the United States itself. In this light, the problem of exporting democracy becomes even

²¹ Gordon W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1958), 477.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Common Sense: On the Origin and Design of Government in General with Concise Remarks on the English Constitution*, 1776

more difficult. The initial problem lies in a nation's lack of preparedness in receiving it; the second problem involves first advertising, and then trying to export, a tainted product. If United States is losing its affection for virtue, particularly the subtle virtues needed for democracy, such as selflessness, a desire for truth, a willingness to work, a keen sense of justice and fair play, respect for marriage and the family and reverence for God, it is losing hold of its own democratic ideal. And one cannot give what one does not have.

True democracy is surely a worthy attainment. We should never forget that countless souls have fought and died to keep it from perishing. But at the moment, we sorely underestimate how much it demands in the currency of moral virtue, and how easily it can dissipate when it is taken for granted. Jesuit Father John Courtney Murray remarked that "men [once] thought that democracy was inevitable; now they know that it is an achievement, always precarious."²⁴

Exporting democracy can succeed only to the degree that its recipients have cultivated enough virtue so that they can take on its burdens and work to see it prosper. The United States may have forgotten something of its own history. James Madison once declared, "To suppose that any form of government will secure liberty or happiness without any virtue in the people is a chimerical idea."²⁵ Democracy is a living thing, and as such, must be continuously nourished and vigorously exercised. In the realm of politics, the first concern of the United States should be its own democracy, and moral virtue is the lifeblood of that health.

RELATIVISM AND THE NATURAL LAW

In October 2007 Pope Benedict XVI told members of the International Theological Commission that natural law must be the foundation of democracy, so that those in power are not given the chance to determine what is good or evil. We human beings, of course, cannot "determine" what is good or evil in the strict sense of the term. Our lot is one of "discovery" rather than determination. There is an old Walt

²⁴ "The One Work of the Church," an address delivered at the Jesuit Philippine Bureau dinner, New York, City, December 1, 1949.

²⁵ A remark made at the Virginia Convention to ratify the United States Constitution, June 16, 1788.

Disney song from the movie *Lady and the Tramp* in which two animated cats pay respect to the rigorous continuity of the natural order of things: “We are Siamese if you please. We are Siamese if you don’t please.” Being a Siamese cat is a reality that is established independently of external opinion. Disney’s oriental felines are not relativists in any sense. They know who they are and really do not care what other people might think or say. The cats stubbornly “purr-sist,” if the reader will pardon the pun, in being who they are. They illustrate the maxim that the order of naming should always conform to the order of being.

There are certain goods that are as essential to democracy as being Siamese is to a Siamese cat. They include, as Pope Benedict enumerates, “human dignity, human life, the institution of the family and the equity of the social order.” These essentials, he says, have been clouded over so that “skepticism and ethical relativism” threaten to undermine the foundations of democracy and a just social order. The mistaken belief prevails that relativism offers tolerance.²⁶ The truth of the matter, however, is that relativism leaves people vulnerable to those in power who determine that something is whatever they want it to be. Thus, the human unborn are referred to as merely “tissue,” while people who are incapacitated are said to be in a “vegetative state.”

In appealing to the natural law, the pope is affirming a rich philosophical tradition. In stating that the natural law is “the norm written by the Creator in man’s heart,” he is not being theologically narrow, but philosophically broad. It is a tradition that embraces the thought of Cicero, the Stoics, the great moralists of antiquity, as well as the great dramatists. Antigone, the eponymous heroine of Sophocles’ play, appeals to her king to honor “the unchangeable unwritten code of Heaven.” Antigone remains, according to Jacques Maritain, “the eternal heroine of the natural law.”²⁷

The natural law can be ignored, disregarded, contradicted or misunderstood; but it cannot be either changed or broken. It is rooted in who we are as human beings, taking into consideration our natural inclinations to act in accordance with what contributes to our fulfillment

²⁶ Benedict XVI, *op. cit.*

²⁷ Jacques Maritain, *The Rights of Man and Natural Law* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1947), 60.

and happiness. Perhaps Jacques Maritain has expressed it most accurately and concisely when he speaks of “an order or a disposition which human reason can discern and according to which the human will must act in order to attune itself to the necessary ends of the human being. The unwritten law, or natural law, is nothing more than that.”²⁸

Saint Thomas Aquinas pointed out in the First Book of his *Summa Theologica* that there are two senses in which a thing is said to be natural. The first is a matter of necessity, such as the upward movement of fire.²⁹ The second is an inclination that, in order to fulfill its end, requires reason’s discovery and the will’s affirmation. Aquinas then states that matrimony and political life exemplify the natural law in this sense. Consequently, there is an important difference between the “laws of nature” that operate out of necessity, and the “natural law” that requires the use of reason and the assent of the will.

One might say that the entire historic drama of man lies in whether or not he will heed the natural law or vainly attempt to live by his own prerogatives. Benedict, therefore, is not overstating his point when he says, “The advance of individuals and of society along the path of true progress depends upon respect for natural moral law, in conformity with right reason, which is participation in the eternal reason of God.”³⁰ Benedict, pope and theologian, is, ironically, making an appeal that is more politically democratic than what passes for democracy in most of today’s polities. He is advising everyone that it is far better to live in accordance with our natural inclinations than to relativize real, natural values, and delegate to some the power to rule, not wisely, but as they wish. In stating this point, he reiterates the teaching of the Second Vatican Council: “The Catholic Church is by the will of Christ the teacher of truth. It is her duty to proclaim and teach with authority the truth which is Jesus Christ and, at the same time, to declare and confirm by her authority the principles of the good moral order which spring from nature itself.”³¹

²⁸ *Ibid*, 61.

²⁹ *Summa Theologica*, I, Q. 41, 1.

³⁰ Benedict, *op. cit.*

³¹ *Dignitatis Humanae* 14.

RELATIVISM AND THE CULTURE OF DEATH

In his encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae* (The Gospel of Life), Pope John Paul II asks how what he terms a “culture of death” came about. One contributing factor he mentions is “the profound crisis of culture, which generates skepticism in relation to the very foundations of knowledge and ethics.”³² Skepticism is the attitude of uncertainty that breeds relativism as its logical philosophical expression. Skepticism is the parent of relativism, the “bad seed,” one might say.

In *On the Way to Jesus Christ*, Cardinal Ratzinger once again bemoans “the relativizing of ethical values,”³³ but also points out how “taking unrestricted pleasure in life...leads straight to the culture of death.”³⁴ Skepticism and relativism are not friends of truth. When truth is removed from the equation, they welcome and give an established place to harmful ideas that contribute directly to the culture of death.

The strict relativist, as we have been pointing out, holds that no ideas are discernibly anchored in truth. A logical corollary of this tenet is that all ideas are equal. A radical egalitarianism of ideas, therefore, is a direct result of such epistemological relativism. One might say that all ideas are equal insofar as they are ideas. But it cannot be maintained that they are all equal insofar as they are equally commensurate with truth. Before the facts are known, all bets at the track are merely conjecture. But when the race is run and the results are in, conjecture is replaced by truth. A bettor would love nothing more than to get a copy of tomorrow’s newspaper to learn the winner in advance of the race. So too, a philosopher would love to learn how various ideas relate to truth. The winning idea is the idea that correlates with truth. In the dark, all guesses are equal. But in the light, knowledge is born, and guesses, like the darkness itself, are quickly dispelled.

A key is designed to open a lock. We know that the right key will unlock the door, while the wrong keys will not. We have no qualms about differentiating between the right key and the wrong key. And just

³² *Evangelium Vitae* 11.

³³ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *On the Way to Jesus Christ*, trans. Michael J. Moore (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002), 45.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 100.

as one key opens the lock while the others do not, some ideas reflect truth while others have no real relationship with it. Therefore, with respect to their degrees of commensurability with truth, some ideas are right, while others are wrong. Mortimer Adler's books, *Six Great Ideas* and *Ten Philosophical Mistakes*, illustrate this point. There are relatively few great ideas; the number of not-so-great ideas is inestimable.

Philosophy, of course, is inspired by a love of wisdom, and it belongs to wisdom to distinguish between ideas that are right and those that are wrong. When we speak of a bad idea, we add to a mere wrong idea the notion of negative practical repercussion. Thus, the notion that man is merely material is a bad idea since its implementation results in treating a being who, in truth, has spirituality and dignity, as if he were only a thing and therefore improperly, abusively, and unjustly. In order to deal with man properly, it is imperative to understand him in his truth. Relativistic humanism inevitably becomes false humanism. True humanism must be founded on the truth of man.

The following is an elaboration of four bad ideas. These ideas have been selected because of the significant role they have played in the establishment of the Culture of Death that permeates the contemporary world. The reality of truth, elusive to our grasp as it sometimes may be, invalidates any basis for relativism. Ideas are not equal. Moreover, as Richard Weaver has adequately and eloquently explained in his book, *Ideas Have Consequences*, there is a price to pay or a benefit to be reaped as a direct result of whatever ideas we put into practice. Marion Montgomery's work, *The Truth of Things: Liberal Arts and The Recovery of Reality*, reiterates and reinforces the same point.

In *Architects of the Culture of Death*,³⁵ Benjamin Wiker and I have presented a wide variety of thinkers, 23 in all, who have played a major role in building the present culture of death. Here, we will be concentrating more on the bricks than the builders, the ideas more than the ideologues, the bad ideas that are the offspring of a permissive relativism. They are, accordingly: 1) Will as Absolute 2) Society as Perfectible 3) Pleasure as Paramount and 4) Adversity as Unbearable.

³⁵ Donald DeMarco and Benjamin Wiker, *Architects of the Culture of Death* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004).

Will as Absolute

When will is made absolute, reason is made powerless. The world in which will reigns in the absence of reason is utterly terrifying, for there can be no rational defense against will unleashed.

The first philosopher to depict will in this terrifying manner was Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860). Throughout the history of philosophy, dating back to Plato and reinforced by the Judeo-Christian tradition, philosophers viewed reality as intelligible to human reason. In contrast, Schopenhauer believed that the core of reality is will, “a blind incessant impulse.”³⁶ “Will is the thing-in-itself, the inner content, the essence of the world.”³⁷ It is the “primordial being” (*Urwesen*), the “primordial source” of that which is (*Urquelle des Seinden*) the prime mover of all activity. It has no goal outside of itself and its gratuitous action. It is found everywhere: in the pull of gravitation, the crystallization of rocks, the movements of the stars and planets, the appetites of brute animals, and the volitions of man. This unwieldy and pervasive force, for Schopenhauer, manifests itself as nature. It is futile for an individual to fight against this force, since it has no regard for him and is bent on his ultimate destruction. Nature, the embodiment of will, is destined to destroy the very individuals it wills into existence.

Schopenhauer’s impact on modernity, especially in regard to dissociating reason from will, is inestimable. According to Thomas Mann, “Schopenhauer, as psychologist of the will, is the father of all modern psychology. From him the line runs, by way of the psychological radicalism of Nietzsche, straight to Freud and the men who built up the psychology of the unconscious and applied it to mental science.”³⁸ Karl Stern contends that, “one can trace a direct descent from the irredeemable non-reason of Schopenhauer’s ‘Will’ to that incomprehensible phase of madness in this century that nearly succeeded in destroying the world.”³⁹ Yet, the “madness” seems to continue unabated.

³⁶ Arthur Schopenhauer, “The World as Will and Idea,” in *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer*, ed. Irwin Edman (New York: Random House, 1928), 217.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *The Living Thought of Schopenhauer* (London: Cassell, 1939), 28.

³⁹ Karl Stern, *The Flight From Woman* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1965), 22.

For Nietzsche, who read Schopenhauer avidly, it becomes the will to power. For Freud, it lodges in the instinctive power of the libido. Wilhelm Reich locates it at the “irrational core of sexual desire.” Sartre finds it everywhere in nature and experiences it in the form of “nausea.” Madame de Beauvoir is sickened by the way it “suffocated women biologically” and makes them its easy prey. Elisabeth Badinter seeks to flee from its “oppressiveness” by escaping into an “absolutized Ego.” Schopenhauer is the Father of a legacy in modern philosophy known as “vitalistic irrationality.”⁴⁰ It is a legacy, Manichaean in essence, that reacts with horror at the presence of Nature, the irrational tool of a merciless will.

There is also a direct line from Schopenhauer to the attitude of will without reason that lies at the heart of the pro-choice movement. Judith Jarvis Thomson, whose “A Defense of Abortion”⁴¹ is the most widely reprinted essay, not only on the subject of abortion, but in all of contemporary philosophy, is a direct descendent of Schopenhauer. She likens pregnancy to an invasion of “people seeds,” a child growing to gigantic proportions at an extraordinary rate, or being hooked up against one’s will to the kidneys of a violinist. Philosopher John T. Wilcox sees Thomson’s terrifying notions of pregnancy as comparable with a concept of nature that is “demonic” and “malevolent.”⁴² For Wilcox, Thomson regards “nature as demonic, out to get you, violating your rights as you innocently go about your business.”⁴³

The notion of will as absolute has an equally disturbing corollary in the form of “freedom as absolute.” This latter notion characterizes the heart of Sartre’s philosophy and has had a decisive influence on many writers, including Simone de Beauvoir and Ayn Rand. For Sartre, man is so free that he is not even a man. Therefore, “existence precedes essence,” since any essence would constitute a limitation of his freedom. “There is no human nature,” he wrote, “since there is no God to conceive it.”⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Cornelio Fabro, *God in Exile: Modern Atheism*, trans. Arthur Gibson (New York: Newman Press, 1968), 872.

⁴¹ Judith Jarvis Thomson, “A Defense of Abortion,” in *The Rights and Wrongs of Abortion*, eds. M. Cohen et al. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), 3.

⁴² John Wilcox, “Nature As Demonic,” *The New Scholasticism*, Vol. LXIII, winter 1989, 475.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, trans. Philip Mairet (Brooklyn: Haskell House Publishers, 1977), 29.

Freedom without limitation, to be sure, is unrealistic. But when it is exercised as much as it can be, with this illusion in mind, it proves destructive.

Society As Perfectible

From time to time the belief spreads that a perfect society can be constructed, that imperfect man can be made perfect through imperfect means. The Spanish existentialist José Ortega y Gasset has stated that “an idea framed without any other object than that of perfecting it as an idea, however it may conflict with reality, is precisely what is called utopia.”

There are two immensely influential utopianist thinkers in the modern world who believed passionately that the state did not exist for man, but man existed for the state. These utopianists, Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Auguste Comte (1798-1857), were radically different in how they viewed the means that must be employed in order to realize their utopian dreams.

For Marx, violence is inevitable. “When our turn comes,” he wrote, “we shall not disguise our terrorism.”⁴⁵ Comte, a naïve sentimentalist, believed that he could exploit people’s feelings about love. “Love is my principle, Order is my basis, Progress is my aim,” he wrote.⁴⁶

Neither Marx nor Comte believed either in God or in the dignity of the individual person. For Marx, individuals are absorbed into a class. In *Das Kapital* he writes, “I speak of individuals insofar as they are personifications of special classes of relations and interests.” One special class, the “ruling class” was at war with another special class, the “working class.” Classes were homogeneous and engaged in a necessary dialectical struggle with adversarial classes. Class struggle, violence, and revolution were all necessary. As far as democracy is concerned, Marx held that “The democratic concept of man is false, because it is Christian.”⁴⁷

Comte, who detested traditional religions, sought a new religion of Positivism in which the “slaves of God” would be transformed into the

⁴⁵ Quoted in Robert Payne, *Marx* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968), 192.

⁴⁶ Auguste Comte, *Catéchisme positive*, (Paris: Garnier, 1890), 39.

⁴⁷ Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, 580 (1st edition).

“servants of humanity.” “Let there be no dissembling the fact,” Comte writes, “that today the servants of Humanity are ousting the servants of God.”⁴⁸ Comte worked indefatigably and at long length in designing his “social physics,” according to which his followers would submit blindly to him as their supreme dictator. He envisioned selfless souls who have no personal rights worshipping Humanity itself.

Neither Marx nor Comte grasped the unity of the human person. They saw him as merely fodder for the collective, bereft of soul, devoid of any individual significance. Since they believed the state was more important than the individual soul, they both employed, though through radically different techniques, a Procrustean methodology in the vain attempt to make imperfect man fit the mold of what they believed to be a perfect idea. The results, as history has shown, have been disastrous. Man cannot find happiness and fulfillment while he denies the unique and integrated character of his own personality.

Pleasure as Paramount

Wilhelm Reich (1897-1957) studied medicine at Vienna University. In 1922, Freud selected him to be a first assistant physician for his newly formed Psychoanalytic-Polyclinic. He was also an avid student of Marxism. In 1930, he left his native Vienna and went to Berlin where he became an active member of the German Communist Party.

His affections for Freud and Marx were not without critical reflection. He knew that Freud had no politics and that Marx had no psychology. He was also convinced that society was both sick and unjust. He wanted to provide a grand therapy that would not only cure individuals from their private afflictions, but also heal society from its own social pathologies. In order to do this, he felt it was necessary to combine Freudianism and Marxism into a single therapeutic so that he could free the individual from his repressions as well as society from its cultural inhibitions.

So it was that Reich became the world’s first Freudo-Marxist. Since he felt that by themselves, neither Freud nor Marx could provide the

⁴⁸ Auguste Comte, *Lettres inédites à C. de Blignières* (Paris: Vrin, 1932), 35-36.

comprehensive therapy that the world needed, he was ultimately ejected from both Freudian and Marxist circles. Yet Reich was enthralled by the grandeur and scope of his own revolution, one he accused the Freudians and Marxists as being too timid to launch. "There can be no doubt," he exclaimed, "the sexual revolution is underway, and no power in the world will stop it." The revolution that Reich envisioned was far more sweeping than that of any Marxist. His war against repression went further than that of any Freudian. His aim was to strip away all repression, all cultural and social masks, all forms of authority, so that a total revolution would be achieved in which the real human being would emerge, whole and clean.

To achieve this, all traces of what Freud called the "super-ego" had to be dissolved. In this regard, Reich saw "conscience" as the first "tyranny." With the dissolution of conscience, morality would also disappear, as well as any lingering voice of authority. With all this stripping away, what could possibly remain? For Reich, it was man's "primary biological impulses," the bedrock that lay at his "deep, natural core."

Jean-Jacques Rousseau maintained that the source of all evil is civilization. He rejected the Christian notion of original sin as "blasphemy." For Rousseau, man would find his beatitude in a primitive state of innocence. Rousseau had a deep influence, not only on the "flower-children" of the sixties, but also on Reich. But Reich went further. For him, original sin is fear of self. Yet the self, for Reich, is essentially the erotic impulse, an instinct that is far below the level of either personality or community. Man begins to "armor" himself against himself at the moment he begins to think. "I think, therefore, I am neurotic" became Reich's anti-intellectual, yet self-identifying, logo. He feared that the act of thinking would divide the individual, separating thought from body at the expense of his primal urges. Thinking, therefore, was a disease. The ideal character for Reich is the unafraid, unthinking individual who has "satisfied his strong libidinal needs at the risk of social ostracism."

Reich, who, in the attempt to make pleasure paramount had to exorcise thinking, ended up a caricature of a free man. He died in a federal penitentiary while serving a two-year sentence for defrauding the American public, and having been diagnosed by a prison psychiatrist as

paranoid. The man who tried to liberate people through an exclusive preoccupation with pleasure closed out his life incarcerated and suffering from delusions of persecution.

Adversity as Unbearable

Three contemporary figures have been in the forefront of promoting euthanasia. They are Peter Singer (1946 -), Derek Humphry (1930 -), and Jack Kevorkian (1928 -). Singer is the thinker, Humphry the publicist, and Kevorkian the executioner. Together, this triumvirate represents the three prongs of a movement that is dedicated to the notion that death is a rational choice when life gets to be troublesome.

In his book, *Rethinking Life and Death: The Collapse of Our Traditional Ethics*, Singer remarks that, “After ruling our thoughts and our decisions about life and death for nearly two thousand years, the traditional Western ethics has collapsed.”⁴⁹ The old and now defunct ethics is based on the “sanctity of life.” The new ethics that Singer proposes is based on “quality of life.” Whereas the “sanctity of life” carries with it the prohibition, “Thou Shall Not Kill,” the new, more flexible ethic states, “Thou Mayest Kill If You Think Your Life Has Become Too Bothersome.”

Championing this notion, journalist and publicist Humphry claims, “We are trying to overturn 2,000 years of Christian tradition.”⁵⁰ Putting these ideas into practice, Jack Kevorkian, AKA “Dr. Death,” by his own admission has assisted in the deaths of 130 human beings. The majority of his victims were not terminally ill. Some, in fact, were suffering from conditions no more life threatening than loneliness and low self-esteem. On November 27, 1998, before tens of millions of viewers who had tuned into CBS’s *60 Minutes*, Kevorkian injected 52 year-old Thomas Youk with potassium chloride, thereby ending his life. Kevorkian was subsequently charged and convicted of second-degree murder. He is now free after serving a lengthy prison sentence. For

⁴⁹ Peter Singer, *Rethinking Life and Death: The Collapse of Our Traditional Ethic* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995).

⁵⁰ Derek Humphry, *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 28, 1972.

assisting in these “mercy killings,” Humphry praised Kevorkian as a “brave and lonely pioneer.”⁵¹

Singer, Humphry, and Kevorkian have little to say about how people can face adversity without falling into despair. The dignity of the person means nothing. It is the “preferred state” of life that counts for everything. Thus, Singer can declare, matter-of-factly, “When the death of the disabled infant will lead to the birth of another infant with better prospects of a happy life, the total amount of happiness will be greater if the disabled infant is killed.”⁵² Granted, it is better to be happier than to be less happy. Yet this point hardly forms a basis for ending the life of a person who has less happiness than the hypothetically conceived greater happiness of his possible replacement. Ethics should center on the person, not the quantum of happiness a person may or may not enjoy. It is the subject who exists that has the right to life, and neither Singer nor anyone else who employs a “relative happiness calculator” should expropriate that right.

Just as the utopianists subordinate the individual to the state, the euthanasiasts subordinate the individual to a state of well-being. In both cases, it is the abstraction that rules. The truth of man as a person is that he is simultaneously an individual and a member of society, and capable of cultivating character that allows him to stand firm in the face of life’s difficulties.

CONCLUSION

Man is one being. He is a unification of body and soul, materiality and corporeality, reason and will. His life is a composite of individuality and communality, freedom and responsibility, pleasure and adversity.

When man is fractured and asked to function without the use of all his organic powers, he becomes deprived, wounded, and ultimately incapacitated. The building blocks for the culture of death are merely the shards of his personality. The house of cards they construct soon falls, as it inevitably must.

⁵¹ Rita Marker, *Deadly Compassion* (New York: William Morrow, 1993), 166.

⁵² Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 331.

George Weigel, in his definitive biography of John Paul II, *Witness to Hope*, appraises the Holy Father's papacy as "a one-act drama" involving "the tension between various false humanisms that degrade the humanity they claim to defend and exalt, and the true humanism to which the biblical vision of the human person is a powerful witness."⁵³

False humanisms are based on bad ideas, that is, ideas that truncate man, fractionalize him into less than he is. Man is more than the splinters of his existence, where each splinter is taken in isolation. *Will* must not be divorced from *reason*, *freedom* must not be uprooted from *responsibility*, *society* must not ignore the *individual person*, *pleasure* must not be dissociated from *conscience*, and *adversity* must be faced with *virtue*. Briefly, no reality can be separated from its concomitant truth.

Relativism, as we have tried to elucidate, represents the failure to come to terms with truth, particularly the truth of the human being as a person. It puts aside that which, by nature, is primary, namely, man as a seeker of truth and a builder of civilization. Likewise, it omits the blueprint and attempts to construct a house that cannot stand. The collapsing of this house leaves us with a culture of death.

The enveloping culture of death poses a daunting challenge for Christians. And yet, it is Christianity itself that holds the only solution to the current problem. Christopher Dawson offers us a needed ray of hope as he reminds us of our rich and redeeming heritage:

However secularized our modern civilization may become, this sacred tradition remains like a river in the desert, and a genuine religious education can still use it to irrigate the thirsty lands and to change the face of the world with the promise of new life. The great obstacle is the failure of Christians themselves to understand the depth of that tradition and the inexhaustible possibilities of new life that it contains.⁵⁴

⁵³ George Weigel, *Witness to Hope* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 334.

⁵⁴ Christopher Dawson, *Understanding Europe* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1952), 255.

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Faith is man's response to God, who reveals himself and gives himself to man, at the same time bringing man a superabundant light as he searches for the ultimate meaning of his life.

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—The Second Vatican Council (AA 29)

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