

The Perils of Relativism

When Pope Benedict warned about “the Dictatorship of Relativism,” he meant it. Literally.

This was hammered home not long ago when I was speaking to a group of students about the issue of same sex marriage. I prefaced the discussion with a description of relativism saying that this non-philosophy was now the mainstream, default setting in our society. “The way you can tell that relativism is mainstream,” I said, “is that there is no such thing as rational debate. In the absence of objective truth, there can be no debate, for a debate is dependent on the assumption that there is something to debate. A debate can only take place if there is such a thing as truth to be debated, and without that basic assumption, one person’s opinion on a matter must be as valid as the next person’s. In the absence of objective truth, the only way to make a decision is utilitarianism or sentimentality.”

So I posed a question to three of the students: “Jane, if you have an opinion, and Jerry, you have an opinion, and Jade, you have an opinion, and your opinions differ, and the only thing you agree on is that there is no such thing as truth, and the three of you completely disagree... who will prevail?”

Jane shrugged. Jade said, “Whoever is the loudest.” Jerry said, “Whoever is the strongest.” All three correctly assessed the situation. In the face of relativism the response of the society in general reflects the three answers. First, there is indifference. Second, there is emotional anger. Third, there is force. Co-incidentally, the conversation took place the same evening that the city of Baltimore was erupting into absurd and horrifying violence, and that urban violence is a reflection of the inner state of mind and heart of a society without objective truth. In Baltimore that evening those who were indifferent stood by in horror as the loudest prevailed,

soon to be outgunned by those who were strongest.

The cause of this indifference, rage, and ultimate violence is the lack of any objective truth; but lest we become too intellectual in our analysis we should make it clear that by "objective truth," we do not simply mean verbal propositions that we believe to be factual. By "objective truth" we mean more than a philosophical treatise, a theological creed, or a political constitution. Instead, by "objective truth" we mean a cohesive and integrated system of thought which makes sense of every aspect of reality. This cohesive system of thought even makes room for that which is unpredictable and inexplicable by allowing for certain uncertainties. Finally, this "objective truth" is not only a statement of truth propositions and a cohesive system of analysis and integration, but it is also a model for life, a code of behavior, a chart for relationships, and a blueprint for community co-existence. In other words, for this truth to be true it must wear working clothes. It does so not only to prove its practicality, but also to prove its durability. The truth must work and keep working. It must be alive and active and real.

This cohesive, integrated system of thought which we regard to be true is what has been destroyed by the poison of relativism, and the result of relativism can only be dictatorship. The strong must prevail. Nietzsche was right in a way he did not foresee. Nihilism will produce the übermensch not because it should, but because it must. It must because there is no other alternative to the nihilism of relativism than the triumph of the superman. If all is relative who wins the argument? The strongest.

The most terrifying aspect to this truth is that the indifferent will cry out for the domination of the superman. Most dictatorships are welcomed for what they offer. In the lack of objective truth and objective morality what the strongman says is true and what the strongman does is good.

Suddenly out of the quicksand of relativism salvation comes. A light shines in the darkness. If the dictator cannot bring meaning out of the mindlessness, at least he can bring order out of the chaos. If he cannot bring beauty out of the beastliness, at least he can promise security in the midst of terror. If he cannot bring morality out of the morass at least he can impose law on the lawless.

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