

MORAL DISAGREEMENT IN A CULTURE OF CERTAINTY



Howard Lesnick

In this essay, Howard Lesnick addresses a common and disturbing feature of our contemporary culture of political argument: namely, the use of triumphalist or dismissive characterizations to avoid responding to arguments on the merits—characterizations that in their own way work as manifestations of what Simone Weil calls the “empire of force.” As Lesnick says, three such terms, themselves somewhat related, are in common use: liberal, secularist, and relativist, each of which is a word that can be used to close a conversation, working as an epithet that justifies a refusal to respond on the merits. (One might say, for example, “I do not have to attend or respond to what you say because you are a liberal.” The reader can probably think of other examples.) Lesnick’s main concern here is with the last of these terms. He asks in particular how one who is not a relativist can intelligibly and forcibly respond to claims that he is.

Much is at stake here, including the question whether we live in a world in which we can hope or expect that arguments will be responded to in their own terms, rather than dismissed with an inaccurate and conclusory characterization. At stake is also the quality of our own thought and expression, and in particular whether we can learn to carry on conversation in ways that respect our own (and others’) uncertainties as well as our (and their) convictions.

Lesnick begins with a quotation from A Man for All Seasons that suggests how deeply the question runs: into our own sense of belief and conviction, indeed into our own sense of what it means to make up one’s mind, to have a view of one’s own, in the first place.

The Duke of Norfolk: All right—we’re at war with the Pope!

The Pope’s a Prince, isn’t he?

Sir Thomas More: He is.

Norfolk: And a bad one?

More: Bad enough. But the theory is that he's also the Vicar of God, the descendant of St. Peter, our only link with Christ.

Norfolk (Sneering): A tenuous link.

More: Oh, tenuous indeed.

Norfolk: Does this make sense? You'll forfeit all you've got—which includes the respect of your country—for a theory?

More (Hotly): The Apostolic Succession of the Pope is—
(*Stops; interested*) Why, it's a theory, yes; you can't see it; can't touch it; it's a theory. But what matters to me is not whether it's true or not but that I believe it to be true, or rather, not that I *believe* it, but that *I* believe it.

—ROBERT BOLT, *A Man for All Seasons*

Nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief

except another belief.

—DONALD DAVIDSON

The unholy trinity of much public discourse today is liberalism, secularism, and relativism. Like a (very small) deck of cards, they are often thought to support one another, to engender one another, at times even to stand in for one another semantically. Whether as three or as one, they are widely viewed as the root cause of much of our social malaise. Let me start with expressions of the evils of the first two isms, chosen almost at random.

Liberalism . . . seems unable to arrest the barbarism of modern culture; indeed, contemporary liberalism is implicated in many of the most corrosive moral and intellectual trends of our time.¹

The general climate of society . . . shows a radical loss of the sense of the transcendent, a devaluation of the religious dimension of human experience, and a great disregard for spiritual values. As a consequence of this general social impoverishment caused by secularism, life both personal and social is more and more guided by practical atheism, which leaves unchecked the worst human tendencies and thus delivers people to the other great vices of these societies: individualism, utilitarianism, hedonism, materialism, and consumerism.²

I find sadly apt the description of our culture as “corrosive,” in some ways even “barbaric,” and as widely characterized by “individualism, utilitarianism, hedonism, materialism, and consumerism.” I also deeply deplore

the “radical loss of the sense of the transcendent” in contemporary society. I find seriously problematic, however, the tendentious attribution of such social evils to the influence of relativism, liberalism, and secularism, especially because this claim obscures the fact that the political outlook of many of the severest critics of liberalism and secularism often legitimates that very catalogue of social ills. To me, the terms *liberalism* and *secularism* are too protean for words, and I will not here address their responsibility for prevalent social evils. I offer instead a critique of anti-relativism.

ANTI-RELATIVISM

Let me start by saying that my aim is not to defend something called “relativism.” Indeed, it is only because I reject relativism, as I do, that I can contend that the widespread use of the charge of relativism to allow one to avoid engaging with claims to a different “knowledge” of the truth regarding a moral issue is not simply annoying but wrongful—a form of rhetorical immorality, if you will. The wrong is compounded when, as too often is the case, the charge sweeps all whose moral sensibilities differ into the same derisively labeled trash pail. My aversion is strengthened by the belief that the attempt to defend a position on anti-relativist grounds is not infrequently bound up with a repellent indifference to the human suffering the position casually overlooks or seeks to justify. In this I am following Clifford Geertz, who (so far as I am aware) coined the term *anti-anti-relativism*. With him, my effort is “to counter a view rather than to defend the view it claims to be counter to.”³

The anti-relativist might object at the outset that I am misconceiving his claim, which is not a specific moral position—a single ethical assertion, such as, divorce is a wrongful act (whether always or only in specified circumstances)—but the view that what might be termed a “culture of relativism” in contemporary society creates a generalized aura of lassitude about the truth of many moral scruples, such that people come to take a “live and let live” attitude toward a whole range of conduct previously thought freighted with (negative) moral significance. That fog dispelled, the immorality of such conduct once again will appear plain.

The claim so articulated simply assumes the correctness of the panoply of “moral scruples” that previously reigned unchallenged. The critique attacked here as relativist is in fact often based not on lassitude but on