

FROM RELATIVISM TO THE RELATIVE

Gabriel Moran

Pope Benedict XVI's introduction to much of the world was a speech condemning what he called "the dictatorship of relativism." For anyone familiar with Joseph Ratzinger's writings since 1968, the phrase was a familiar reiteration of his central complaint about the contemporary world. "Relativism" for this Pope was the main thing wrong with the world and he saw it everywhere. The Pope is not alone in this judgment. A condemnation of relativism is standard fare for moral and religious spokespersons who long for the moral compass of a past stability. Not many people would be able to articulate what the abstruse word relativism means. However, people do have a sense that previous codes of morality no longer find acceptance and that no agreed upon new standards have replaced them.

There have always been criminals who violated society's rules. But the problem of the last half century has been that many intellectual leaders have declared that any statement of truth is good only for an individual or a particular group. It seems that the outlandish doctrine of a few French philosophers of the 1950s has become the standard operating procedure for much of the world. The fifteen-year-old who shrugs his shoulders and says "whatever," is growing up in a world where truth (or "truthiness") is a kind of joke. He is following the example of his elders. Dick Cheney's response to the fact that the great majority of people in the United States wanted the war to stop was to say: "So?" When Justice Antonin Scalia was asked is not torture of prisoners outlawed by the U.S. Constitution's prohibition of cruel and unusual punishment, he answered: "Torture is not punishment."

At a recent seminar, one of the speakers referred briefly to relativism. He made two points about it: a little bit of relativism has to be accepted but obviously every statement of truth cannot be relative. The speaker, a bright and knowledgeable person, surely knew his reference to relativism was not very coherent. But such is the difficulty that people have in coming to grips with a doctrine that seems unacceptable to anyone with a moral sensibility but at the same time is seems to be an obvious description of today's world.

Neither of the speaker's two points was helpful and the second – "obviously every statement of truth cannot be relative" – is where the big problem lies. What sometimes may seem most obvious may not in fact be true. All statements are relative and that is the alternative to relativism.

The first big problem with the term "relativism" is the same problem with all words ending in – "ism," that it situates the problem at an abstract level. If one starts arguing about a philosophical abstraction, called "relativism," the argument is really about who has the power to define abstract words. The problem with "relativism" is the ending – the "ism" part – not with "relative." The term relative is a description of the world, the fact that things stand in relation to one another.

When people attack relativism they usually assume that the alternative is some kind of "absolutism," something that is true at all times, in all places, for all people. A favorite claim is that the "ten commandments" are universally true. But the statements of these commands is tied up in an understanding of ambiguous language. Relativism, paradoxically is an absolutist claim.

It purports to give an all-encompassing answer to how the world is. While “relativism” is an absolute claim, “relative” is not; it is simply a statement of fact.

The worst disease one can have is when the name of the cure has been absorbed into the name of the disease. Thus, attempts to reform pyramidal bureaucracy by “decentralizing” power are destined to fail. Centralizing power is the cure not the disease. The problem is that one can “de-top” a pyramid but one cannot “decentralize” what does not have a center. The cure for a pyramid of power is to develop a center or many centers of power within communal units. This kind of reform does sometimes happen but it is always fragile in that it has no name. The cure cannot be called the centralizing of power so long as that is what the disease is called.

The cure for what is named relativism is the relative. When people resist relativism with absolutism they worsen the problem. The realistic alternative to “relativism” is to pay attention to the many relatives or relations in every statement of truth. Relativism is not relative enough; it stops with the recognition that every statement of truth is relative to one factor or another. The term relativism made its big splash in the late nineteenth century when anthropologists discovered that there were “cultures” that had codes of conduct very different from the world of western enlightenment. Who can judge which is right? The answer given was that no one can judge.

Thus was born “cultural relativism:” each culture has its own right and wrong; one culture is not superior to another. Instead of a shocking new development in human thought, this “cultural relativism” merely revealed the innocence and rigidity of western enlightenment. The trouble with cultural relativism is that it is not relative enough. It is related only to culture but not to age, gender, place, time, nationality and more. The problem is not that some “culture” in the South Pacific is different from “ours.” The problem is the assumption that “we” had already attained an absolute standard which was naively assumed to apply everywhere.

Every judgment is relative to innumerable factors not only “culture” but to the individual’s life and the lives of various groups. When a group is isolated, its judgments are likely to have quirky beliefs, some of which may be insightful and others off-the-wall. The cure for narrow, mistaken judgments is to relate them to a wider field of relations. Justice Scalia ridiculed judges for consulting the rest of the world; he thought that legal and moral truths are obvious if one consults the U.S. Constitution (and gives it his “originalist” interpretation).

Occasionally, one nation or one individual may have to resist a majority opinion. But, a minority view still has to be related to some body of truths. The U N’s Covenant on the Rights of the Child was ratified by 190 nations; only Somalia (that did not have a functioning government) and the United States refused to accept it. The U.S. should wonder if it has already arrived at the truth which everyone else is missing or whether further conversation might be useful. On one side the fear of conservatives that the United Nations was intruding on the family may or may not have had credibility. But the objection to the Covenant because it prohibited the execution of minors was an outrageous reason and the United States finally came to agree with that prohibition.

Truth can only be tested by the quality and quantity of its relations. Every statement in the English language is relative to every other statement in the language. Usually we are not aware of this basic guide to truth. When a statement fits comfortably with what we already believe to be true we do not usually reflect on how we are relating the statement to everything else we know. But sometimes we can only accept something as true if at the same time we have to reject a whole pattern of related beliefs that had previously been accepted as true.

We often become aware of a false statement if it conflicts with what we know simply by knowing English. If I say “it is snowing outside,” someone who does not understand English will find the statement nonsensical. A speaker of English will find the statement true or false by looking out the window – and assuming the connection of the sentence to all other English sentences. Most of the time we know the truth by this procedure and there is no doubt or ambiguity in the claim.

A statement within a limited range of application can be ambiguous and debatable even when the statement seems to be a simple statement of fact. For example, in Sydney, Australia, during a day in July it snowed. At least, that is what people said, especially children who delighted in building snowmen. The weather bureau insisted that there was no snow; it was sleet. Who was right? The weathermen were scientifically correct within their range of interest. The children with their snowmen were not wrong; their interest tolerated ambiguity in the meaning of “snow.”

The possible ambiguity in the word snow may seem trivial. But every argument about history or morality involves ambiguity of language. Every historian has to acknowledge that his or her interpretation remains ambiguous to some degree. History is always being revised which is not to say that there is no historical truth. Some judgments can be endlessly debated; other historical judgments approach the certainty of “it is snowing outside.” One historian of World War I was confronted by a critic who said that no historical judgment can claim to be true. The historian replied: I want to make certain that no one in the future can say that Belgium invaded Germany. How does he know that particular truth? Because it is the linchpin of a million other statements that cannot all be false.

Truth is relative to truth, that is, to all truth. The only absolute certainty would be the totality of all related truths. That absolute is not available and never will be available. But certainty can be increased by increasing the relativity of one’s beliefs. In a world of assumed absolutes, the relative is dismissed as merely relative; in a world without absolutes, the more relative a statement is, the more certain is its truthfulness. Opening communication between differing groups can lead to a widening and deepening of the relations that are the basis of truth. There are no statements that can be called moral absolutes but most of the world might be able to reach agreement that certain actions are intolerable violations of a human being. That includes killing and torture but also destruction of the physical environment.

Admittedly, the diversity of languages is a big problem. Does the English term “human rights” translate into all languages? Much of the world had seemed to be moving in the direction of agreeing about torture. Torture, like most words has some ambiguity; whether some actions should be included under the word is debatable. But other actions are such gross and systematic violations of human integrity that a sane person who understands English would call it torture.

The blatant and repeated violation of this agreement by the United States has truly shocked the world.

Other nations have committed worse crimes but the United States has directly attacked the fragile moral agreements on which a world society was being built. Donald Trump said in his usual bombastic way that he would revive waterboarding and worse. Trump along with Bush, Cheney, Scalia and their sidekicks have made it clear that in the mythical place called “America,” it is not necessary to relate one’s morality to other people’s morality and to agreements among nations.

Pace Pope Benedict XVI, what we have is a dictatorship of absolutism.