Information and Truth:

How Relativism Corrupts Public Discussion of Social and Economic Questions

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*Metaphysics . . . makes it possible to ground the concept of personal dignity in virtue of [humanity’s] spiritual nature. In a special way, the person constitutes a privileged locus for the encounter with being, and hence with metaphysical enquiry.*[[1]](#footnote-1)

-John Paul II

**Introduction**

Children provide interesting experiences for themselves and for those around them. Life with my children is no different. When my daughter was six years old I had one such curious occurrence. I had gotten up early and worked all morning. In the afternoon I went for a run in the 94 degree Texas heat, then immediately went out to edge the grass which my sons had mown earlier in the day. After showering I was exhausted, so in my T-shirt and shorts I lay down on the bedroom floor with the air-conditioner and ceiling fan running, and my six year old daughter playing nearby as I phased in and out of sleep and waking. Before going downstairs with my wife to prepare dinner, my daughter wanted to “snuggle,” so she climbed on my back, lay down, gave me a big hug and kiss, then sat up and began sounding out the words on the back of my shirt: “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. –Lord Acton, 1887.” It was one of my favorite days for little Abigail. When she finally sounded it out, I asked her to repeat it several times, and then I explained to her as simply as possible what it meant: since mere humans are not perfect, if we have too much power we mess things up, and if we have all power, we *really* make a mess of things. I told her only a perfect being could have all power and do right. Mere human power, by contrast, needs to be checked and balanced.

What does all this have to do with information, truth, and public discussion of social and economic questions? We shall get to that answer by the end of the essay, which addresses some of relativism’s origins, and how relativism (or disbelief in objective truth, or disbelief in what some refer to as “truth with a capital T”) corrupts public discussion of social and economic questions. The essay, then, does not argue for any particular answer regarding specific social and economic questions (for example, whether free or manipulated markets work better for human flourishing, whether robust government regulation is a good thing, or whether, say, churches or community groups should take particular stances on politics and economics). Rather, it attempts to address the more foundational question of how, in our basic information sharing, we can have meaningful or fruitful discussion of social or economic questions at all if we endorse relativism. It argues that ultimately belief in relativism corrupts such discussion. First, however, a definition or description is in order. The term “relativism” is, well, relative to the one using the term. It could mean any or all of the following: metaphysical, epistemological, moral, aesthetic, or even logical relativism. By “relative” I mean in this essay the notion of truth in general as relative (i.e. *epistemological* relativism), but especially and particularly truth with respect to claims about morality, goodness, or ethics (i.e. *moral* relativism). The preliminary question, of course, is to determine if relativism is, in fact, a significant force in the culture today, for if it is not then the other question – i.e. the one about how relativism corrupts discussion of social and economic questions – is somewhat moot.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**Postmodernism**

While the initial interest in “postmodernism” as a subject of study has come and gone, becoming at best paseé, large segments of both academia and popular culture still often claim to see truth as relative. Interestingly, relativism on the academic side can show up either as postmodernism or as logical positivism. On the academic postmodern side, for example, one political theorist more than once has stated that, contrary to Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, John Locke, Adam Smith, and even Karl Marx and others, theorists today no longer believe in “knowledge with a capital K” or “truth with a capital T.”[[3]](#footnote-3) She then proceeds to speak of Wittgenstein, Rawls, Foucault, Rorty, and others of what might be called – in spite of all their differences – “postmodernists.”

Postmodernism, as famously described by Jean Franҫios Lyotard in his book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, may be defined as “incredulity toward metanarratives.”[[4]](#footnote-4) This means unbelief in a grand, overarching story that purports to make sense of reality and of all other stories. On Lyotard’s (and postmodernism’s) view, there is not one correct understanding of reality, ethics, knowledge, truth, God, or anything else. While scholars hold no ultimate consensus about what postmodernism actually is, one author maintains that the point of agreement among them is that, postmodernism “marks the end of a single, universal worldview. The postmodern ethos resists unified, all-encompassing, and universally valid explanations. It replaces these with a respect for difference and a celebration of the local and particular at the expense of the universal.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Such a respect and celebration has led Harvard educated University of Denver Philosophy of Religion Professor Carl Raschke to conclude that even “evangelicals must embrace postmodernity.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

To further illustrate, a few years ago at a national, annual meeting of the Evangelical Philosophical Society I attended a discussion/debate between J. P. Moreland and John Franke. One of Moreland’s criticisms of Franke was Franke’s several points of self-referential incoherence (or self-refutation). Since Franke never answered the charge during the discussion, I asked him during the discussion time what he thought of Moreland’s charge and whether it bothered him. Franke simply replied, “not really.”[[7]](#footnote-7) At that point it occurred to me, pointing out self-refutation to a postmodernist will not encourage him to rethink his position, for *as a postmodernist* – even as a Christian postmodernist (if such a term is not oxymoronic) – he has jettisoned logic already. So pointing out inconsistency, as if he should adhere to logic, won’t do any good. The postmodernist is concerned more with “taste” than “reason.” As Nietzsche famously quipped in the *The Gay Science*, “What is now decisive against Christianity is our taste, no longer our reasons.”[[8]](#footnote-8) But if pointing out self-refutation to a postmodernist is not sufficient to encourage him to consider changing his position, what is the purpose of pointing it out at all? Answer: one never knows whether a person has entirely bought into the position or not; he might be on the fence, so to speak; or there might be others listening or reading who never have considered the point, and who *would* be convinced to question or reject postmodernism if they were aware of its self-referential incoherence. Perhaps surprisingly, however, postmodernism is not the only relativistic position on morality. The modern positivist is in no better shape.

**Positivism**

I once heard a conference speaker declare that postmodernism is dead. Was he correct? What did he mean? During the discussion time the speaker, when asked exactly what he meant, said it is not that there are no postmodernists still on the loose hocking their relativistic wares to students, colleagues, and pop culture. Rather, he maintained that the initial splash is over, and one will not sell many books with the word “postmodern” in the title. People do not care anymore about the movement, he said. And while the initial splash is over, he also rightly observed that the ripples have gone out and are still affecting the culture. It is not unlike Alvin Plantinga’s analysis of another movement, now almost a hundred years old, known as logical positivism. It was a short-lived, scientistic (i.e. science as the best or only way to knowledge) movement of the 1930s and 40s, which understood language as meaningful if and only if it is analytic or self-evident on one hand, or synthetic, empirically verifiable or potentially falsifiable on the other. That is, unless a claim is true or false by definition or able to be proven empirically, then the claim is meaningless. Positivism is another way, then, that relativism shows up on the academic side with respect to morality or ethics. Moral claims are not true or false, they are simply meaningless. So morality becomes relative to the individual or the culture/society. As has become well known in philosophical circles (although probably not as well known in political science circles), Plantinga and others have shown logical positivism to be self-refuting as well. That is, the logical positivist maxim – that a claim is meaningful only if it meets one of those two criteria – actually meets neither criterion itself. Or again, the claim that for a claim to be meaningful it must either be true of false by definition or empirically verifiable or falsifiable, is not itself true or false by definition and is not empirically verifiable or falsifiable. By its own lights, therefore, it is meaningless; it refutes itself. This leads Plantinga to declare that, “logical positivism has retreated into the obscurity it so richly deserves.”[[9]](#footnote-9) But, he says, “something like it lingers on,”[[10]](#footnote-10) and “there still persists . . . the widespread impression that reference to God is problematic.”[[11]](#footnote-11) I would argue that positivism still persists far and wide both in the media (particularly where “experts” are concerned) and especially in university departments of the hard and even social sciences. The point is that postmodernism *and* logical positivism both made respective big splashes, and interest in both (to mix metaphors) fizzled out relatively quickly, yet both remain dominant forces in the broader culture and in academia.

Are logical positivists of one sort or another really still around? Indeed they are. In one of his most recent books (not his *most* recent) theoretical physicist Steven Hawking declares that, while traditionally philosophy was the go-to discipline for answers to life’s ultimate questions, philosophy now “is dead. Philosophy has not kept up with modern developments in science, particularly physics. Scientists have become the bearers of the torch of discovery in our quest for knowledge.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Positivism is alive and well in the social sciences also. For example, in one research methods text book, chapter 1 is entitled “The Scientific Approach,” and the authors boldly maintain that “nothing is self-evident,” that “claims for truth must be demonstrated objectively. Scientists cannot rely on tradition, subjective beliefs, and cultural norms. . . . [E]ven the simplest claims call for objective verification.”[[13]](#footnote-13) They continue, “knowledge is based on experience. . . . [I]t must rely on our perceptions, experience, and observations. . . . [And] [p]erception . . . is achieved through our senses.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Finally, while it contradicts what they said earlier – that is, they just maintained that nothing is self-evident and that tradition is an unacceptable foundation – they go on to contend that social scientists are to follow “the *normative* framework of scientific methodology. Scientific norms set the standards to be followed in scientific research and analysis; they define the ‘rules of the game.’”[[15]](#footnote-15)

Another example of positivism’s prominent presence in the social sciences is found in Jeff Segal and Harold Spaeth’s book, *The Supreme Court and the Attitudinal Model Revisited*, where they attempt to show how they predict Supreme Court voting behavior. When speaking of social scientific research methodology, however (to undergird everything they do in the book), they assert, “Assessment of the operation of any theoretically grounded model requires highly reliable data,”[[16]](#footnote-16) and “requisite to a model’s explanatory ability is that it must be falsifiable or testable. That is, the model must be able to state a priori the potential conditions that, if observed, would refute the model.”[[17]](#footnote-17) As with the “methods” book quoted earlier, Segal and Spaeth fail to realize the contradiction in their idea. While it is true that a social scientific explanatory or predictive model’s results should comport with the empirical facts, there is an underlying model to their model: namely, scientism or positivism. These latter notions are models or methods in and of themselves, and yet there are, presumably, no conditions that, if observed, would cause these authors to give up their scientistic or positivist model. That is, they are committed to their scientistic model no matter what.

If I am correct about positivism’s ripples still being felt in academia – in both the hard and soft sciences – then relativism is still part of the picture today. But how so? When it comes to morality, hard and soft scientists tend to have no empirical basis for objective morality. They tend to hold to objective moral norms in actual practice, but on no scientific basis. For example, most scientists of either stripe (hard or soft) would maintain that murder is wrong, that kindness is a virtue, that scientists ought to be honest in their reporting, and that human flourishing is a good thing. To reiterate, however, by scientism or positivism’s own lights, moral claims ought to be construed as meaningless, so if one holds to such moral claims, then the claims are necessarily relativistic. Of course, *postmodern* academics do the same thing: that is, they hold to objective moral norms in actual practice (like the ones just mentioned; e.g. murder is wrong, kindness is a virtue, etc.), yet their classroom lectures or published works are replete with notions that moral claims cannot be objective or absolute, which they would say is because of the nature of language or the situatedness or perspective of the thinking subject.

**Popular Culture**

All of this academic moral relativism – whether scientistic/positivist or postmodernist – spills over into, or at least coincides with the popular culture, as does the contradiction between what people *say* they believe about morality’s subjective nature on one hand, and how they actually attempt to *live* (i.e. “do no harm to others” as an objective moral maxim) on the other hand. For example, in a nationwide Barna Group random telephone survey (with multiple callbacks) of over 1,000 adults and over 600 teenagers in the two months following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, while Americans informally seemed to denounce the terror attacks as an example of objective evil, the survey results told a different story about what people actually believed regarding moral truth claims. The survey showed 3 to 1 that adults believe moral truth is always relative to the person and his situation instead of absolute or unchanging, while among teenagers it was around 13 to 1 (that moral truth is always relative). Of the adults, 60% aged 36 and older embraced moral relativism, while 75% of those aged 18-35 were moral relativists. The survey also showed that the primary basis for moral decision-making among both adults (31%) and teens (38%) was whatever feels right or comfortable in a situation.[[18]](#footnote-18) Given all of this, however, I cannot imagine a large percentage of people saying it is morally acceptable to lock three girls in one’s basement for ten years, sexually abuse them, and murder the babies they conceive.[[19]](#footnote-19) Any sane person would rightly call that morally unacceptable. Apparently when people are surveyed in the abstract, they believe moral truth is subjective, but when confronted with real-life situations they quickly become moral objectivists.

**Historical and Philosophical Precursors**

So the notion that moral truth is relative is still alive and well in both academia and in popular culture, and such a view is not only prevalent among postmodernists (i.e. those who tend to believe *all* truth is relative), but also among proponents of the hard and soft sciences (i.e. those who believe empirical and analytic truth claims are absolute, but that moral claims are meaningless). But how did we get here? What are the historical, philosophical origins of relativism? Answers to such questions are varied and sometimes contradict one another. Some who answer the question actually consider it a good thing that we have become moral relativists, while others bemoan the fact, but most agree that it is the case, at least when it comes to our theories (over against what we actually practice), that we have. The answer, I think, is relatively simple: What happened? Modernity happened. With all of modernity’s practical benefits – a rebirth of interest in ancient documents; being not only literate, but specifically being able to read the ancients for oneself; the industrial and scientific revolutions; the use of money and credit (instead of a barter system) on a scale and for purposes hitherto unheard of; the expansion of economic security and entrepreneurship for more and more people; globalizing trade along with transportation, communication, and technological advances; a strong middle class – all of these practical benefits notwithstanding, modern philosophy became a problem in terms of its method, as well as where the whole philosophical enterprise started in terms of its categories.

John Paul II knew this as well as anyone. He knew well what I have argued up to this point (regarding postmodernism and scientism; see his *Fides et Ratio*), as well as the philosophical and theological problems that resulted from modernity’s theoretical starting point: “Abandoning the investigation of being, modern philosophical research has concentrated instead upon human knowing.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Or put another way: “While on the one hand philosophical thinking has succeeded in coming closer to the reality of human life and its forms of expression, it has also tended to pursue issues – existential, hermeneutical or linguistic – which ignore the radical question of the truth about personal existence, about being and about God.”[[21]](#footnote-21) In referencing philosophy here, John Paul II means, I think, modern and especially postmodern philosophy, as opposed to what I shall call a premodern approach to philosophy and theology. Regarding a premodern approach he rightly cites Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas as preeminent. Augustine, he says, produced “the first great synthesis of philosophy and theology. . .”[[22]](#footnote-22) That is, faith and reason worked concurrently. Saint Anselm, he says, saw reason not as a tool “to pass judgment on the contents of faith . . . [but] to find meaning, to discover explanations which might allow everyone to come to a certain understanding of the contents of faith.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Finally, John Paul II observed Aquinas’s “harmony” of faith and reason; that Aquinas had “no fear of reason, but seeks it out and has trust in it.”[[24]](#footnote-24) “In short,” says John Paul II, “what for Patristic and Medieval thought was in both theory and practice a profound unity, producing knowledge capable of reaching the highest forms of speculation, was destroyed by systems which espoused the cause of rational knowledge sundered from faith and meant to take the place of faith.”[[25]](#footnote-25) That is, premodernists saw faith as a bridge to knowledge; indeed, what we know by faith, we actually do know! So what happened? How did we get to the relativism of today? The modern philosophy of the 17th and 18th centuries, and the modern theology (whether itself given to things like existentialism or to scientism) which followed were what happened. John Paul II then cites what he calls “radical” views such as positivism, and finally nihilism (a form of relativism, and the notion that life is meaningless).

In sum, premodernity emphasized what we know to be real – i.e. metaphysics (or the nature of reality) – as foundational to other branches of philosophy. It was a method of trust – trust in authority, testimony, reason, our senses, and for believers trust in God and His Word. Premodernists’ understanding of reality informed their understanding of what and how they could know (epistemology) and the nature of both morality and beauty (ethics and aesthetics respectively). Finally, it was a rational or reasonable approach. That is, logic was important and not to be rejected. This overall description is broad and sweeping, but largely accurate. Modern philosophers like Descartes, however, wishing to take nothing for granted, questioned everything in an attempt to obtain what we now call Cartesian certainty. That is, instead of beginning with trust or faith in what we know to be real (i.e. metaphysics), modern thinkers began with a *method of doubt* in an attempt not to be duped (i.e. they started with epistemology). Later, theology did the same and ended up approaching its doctrines and creeds with methodological doubt as well, or with subjectivist, existentialist leanings, assuming not the divine origin of the biblical text, but focusing instead on its human authorship, looking for contradictions internally, or simply applying it to the human condition subjectively and existentially. Descartes convinced himself that he had adequately answered his own doubts, but subsequent thinkers were not convinced, leading people like Hume toward skepticism, and Kant toward his own contradictions, sometimes implying that nothing of what he called the noumenal world can be known, yet at other times implying some things we do know about this most important source of reality and knowledge. Later thinkers – i.e. romantics, existentialists, and postmodernists – were even less convinced that we could have objective knowledge of anything, including moral truth. So while premodernity and modernity shared an appreciation for logic as indispensable for philosophical and theological thought, modernists argued that we must know *how* we know in order to be said to know anything at all. That is, knowledge requires proof of some sort. Premodernists as a whole, however, either by faith or trust or simply *a priori*, claimed to know foundational truths without necessarily being able to prove them. It was a *faith seeking understanding*, but the quest began with faith nonetheless. In order to know anything, one must begin by believing something. And many premodernists would be comfortable saying many important notions can be *known* by faith.

So while premodernists and modernists share an appreciation for logic, they differ on how to start the philosophical or theological quest. Postmodernists and premodernists agree that faith is all-important, but for postmodernists faith cannot result in knowledge while for premodernists it can. In fact, postmodernists and modernists agree that in order to know anything one must be able to prove the thing known. Modernists think this is possible, while postmodernists do not. According to philosopher Doug Blount,

Modern and postmodern thinkers differ not on whether epistemology is more fundamental than metaphysics; they agree that it is. Rather, they differ on whether a satisfactory epistemology – one able to adjudicate disputes across communities of belief and thus serve as an objective arbiter of truth – can be found. On this point, modernists are optimistic, postmodernists pessimistic.[[26]](#footnote-26)

So each approach shares something with one of the others, but each also disagrees with the others at some point(s). For the purposes of this section of the essay (i.e. how did we get to this current, relativistic culture?) it suffices to note that premodernists begin with faith and trust in what they take to be real (i.e. metaphysics), modernists begin with doubt about how or what they can know (i.e. epistemology), some modernists end up arriving at what they take to be certainty, and finally postmodernists see this modern project and its quest for certainty as hopeless. There is no knowledge with a capital “K,” no truth with a capital “T.”

So for all practical purposes, and given their theoretical bases, both modernism and postmodernism end up endorsing (consciously or not) moral relativism, insofar as the former is humanistic and scientistic, and the latter is pluralistic and nihilistic. The modernist does not allow enough, and the postmodernist allows too much. And of course the former leads to the latter. That is, modernity’s quest for certainty leads to skepticism (when certainty cannot be found), in turn resulting in moral relativism and postmodernism. Or, modernity obtains a false sense of security with respect to certainty, thus leading to the self-referential incoherence mentioned earlier. The answer, it seems to me, is a premodern approach of faith seeking understanding; realizing that knowing anything requires believing something, but also that many such believings *constitute* instances of knowledge. That is, we can know things without knowing how we know them, so we begin with particular items of knowledge instead of a method for coming to know what we know. Moreland and Craig call this “particularism” as opposed to “methodism,” and it strikes me as the correct approach.[[27]](#footnote-27) The same can be true of moral knowledge in particular. That is, there are some moral truths we just know: kindness is a virtue, murder is wrong, scientists ought to be honest in their reporting, human flourishing is a good thing, etc. Some moral truths are simply “written on the heart,” as J. Budziszewski[[28]](#footnote-28) asserts. Such moral truths are known *a priori*.[[29]](#footnote-29)

**Four Results of Endorsing Relativism**

One more primary point (in four parts) and we are nearly finished. Earlier I referenced a study of Americans which showed a popular majority believing in moral relativism. I also showed that academic modernists and postmodernists alike tend – at least theoretically – to be moral relativists. (But as mentioned, when we hear of three girls being locked in a basement for ten years all tend to become moral objectivists.) Finally, even in talks on theoretical issues where conservatism is a more pronounced position, I have heard audience members vie for moral and epistemological relativism. But why does any of this matter? Why does it matter that many of those who are publicly discussing social and economic questions tend toward moral relativism? It matters because if they really believe in such things, then they are prone to some very serious problems – four in particular – which I outline below.

Relativism corrupts public discussion of social and economic questions. The first way it does so is that foundational “meta-” issues are rarely, if ever, discussed. For example, in public discussions of beginning and end of life issues, the notion of what it means to be a person or to be human – and whether such things are inherently valuable or not – is rarely mentioned. So if someone in the womb or suffering near the end of life is a person or is human, whether it is in fact murder to and such a life against its will is rarely discussed publicly. If moral relativism is taken for granted, then axiological meta-questions (or questions having to do with objective value) are either meaningless or unknowable. The same holds for economic questions. For example, individuals and communities in poverty (both domestic and abroad) need help, but moral relativists seem to shy away from moral discussions of private property, the rule of law, and the ethical questions associated with forcibly redistributing one person’s property to another; for these foundational, all-important issues tend to be thought of as too abstract and philosophical, things no mere human could ever know, and certainly things on which no mere policy-maker, professor, or journalist should ever comment.

This leads to the second way relativism corrupts public discussion of social and economic questions. That is, pragmatism becomes king. The old adage that “the end justifies the means” becomes how society actually lives. In the words of one politician at a press conference just one month after the infamous Sandy Hook shooting, “To repeat what I’ve said earlier – if there is a step we can take that will save even one child from what happened in Newtown, we should take that step.”[[30]](#footnote-30) In using the word “should” he is making a moral claim, but it is also merely pragmatic. It does not matter *how* we prevent future shootings; it only matters *that* we prevent them, no matter the method. The politician’s “starting point,” he said, “is not to worry about the politics; my starting point is to focus on what makes sense, what works; what should we be doing to make sure that our children are safe and that we’re reducing the incidents of gun violence.”[[31]](#footnote-31) To be fair, he did follow this comment by stating, “And I think we can do that in a sensible way that comports with the Second Amendment.”[[32]](#footnote-32) But this seemed more like an afterthought, while his overriding concern seemed pragmatic more than anything else. Doubtless quotations could be found to the same pragmatic effect from members of both political parties. But, if not for pragmatism, then for what should we strive? It is not that pragmatic means or ends are unimportant; but principles are also important.[[33]](#footnote-33) Pragmatism not principles, however, comes first in a relativistic culture. Or put another way, in a relativistic culture pragmatism is the *only* principle.

This leads to the third way moral relativism corrupts public discussion of social and economic questions. That is, if fundamental issues are rarely discussed, thus leading to mere pragmatism or outcomes as the ultimate goal, then skepticism and suspicion on the part of discussants, citizens, employees, employers, voters, politicians, businesspersons, journalists, etc. are the likely outcomes. Instead of faith and trust in both the good intentions *and* the inherently good foundational, moral principles held by one’s fellows, since moral relativism avoids or even disdains such objective foundations, one never knows what one’s fellows truly believe, or their ultimate goals, or what diabolical, covert actions they might take to achieve such goals.[[34]](#footnote-34) Basic faith and trust in one’s fellows is essential in a free society, but a society that largely ignores – or worse, scorns – objective morality, is a society whose individuals will be distrustful, suspicious, and skeptical of what those fellows might do when one’s back is turned.

Finally, when society ignores fundamentals or principles, when pragmatism begins to reign, and when skepticism and suspicion dominate relationships, then society ends up with the fourth way moral relativism corrupts public discussion of social and economic questions: namely, power becomes the ultimate goal, since one never knows what others might do. Power, rather than faithful collaboration toward a free and virtuous society, turns out to be the primary objective of individuals and groups. Power becomes the only supposed way to protect oneself from those who would do harm with no moral qualms. In the third volume of C. S. Lewis’s Space Trilogy, *That Hideous Strength*, Lewis reminds readers, “The sciences, good and innocent in themselves, had . . . begun to be subtly maneuvered in a certain direction. Despair of objective truth had been increasingly insinuated into the scientists; indifference to it, and a concentration upon power, had been the result.”[[35]](#footnote-35) In the story those involved in the plot to take over the world had no qualms about *anything*: “What should they find incredible, since they believed no longer in a rational universe? What should they regard as too obscene, since they held that all morality was a mere subjective by-product of the physical and economic situations of men?”[[36]](#footnote-36)

**Conclusion**

So moral relativism still thrives in contemporary culture, and as we share information through various media such relativism corrupts public discussion of social and economic questions by leading ultimately to raw power as the only goal. I began with a story about my daughter reading Lord Acton’s famous aphorism on the back of my t-shirt, and me explaining it to her. But if moral relativism is true, then any discussion I have with her about it is simply “play.” It does not get at anything or mean anything objectively. And neither it, nor any other phrase containing words like “corrupt,” “should,” “ought,” “better,” “best,” “dignity,” etc. are to be trusted or acted upon for any other purpose than the acquisition of power by the one uttering the phrase. To improve such an unfortunate predicament, moral and epistemological objectivists should devise compelling, attractive arguments against relativism (and live their lives in an appealing manner). Such arguments (and virtuous living), of course, will only convince so-called relativists if such persons have not yet *fully* embraced relativism. For if they have, then arguments carry no sway for them, since arguments depend on logic, and they see logic simply as one more tool of oppression.

1. John Paul II, *On the Relationship Between Faith and Reason (Fides et Ratio)* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1999), 122-123 (section 83). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Of course, even if relativism is *not* a significant force in the culture today, the question of how it corrupts discussion of social and economic questions is still relevant in terms of why we ought not to *begin* endorsing it. But as we shall see presently, relativism is, in fact, a significant cultural phenomenon. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Dr. Susan Hekman, graduate course lectures, Fall 2011 and Fall 2012, University of Texas Arlington. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Jean Franҫois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: 2002), xxiv. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The subtitle of one of his books. Carl Raschke, *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Unfortunately, I do not recall the exact year of the meeting. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 186; section 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford, 2000), 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid. 8, footnote 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Seven Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design* (New York: Bantam, 2012), 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Chava Frankfort-Nachmias and David Nachmias, *Research Methods in the Social Sciences*, 7th ed. (New York: Worth, 2008), 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid. 12. Emphasis in original. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Jeffrey A. Segal and Harold J. Spaeth, *The Supreme Court and the Attitudinal Model Revisited* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), xviii. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid. 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Barna Group website (Feb. 12, 2002). http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/67-americans-are-most-likely-to-base-truth-on-feelings. Accessed 11 June 2013. Other reasons ranked lower than these percentages and included things like: values from parents, principles taught in the Bible, and whatever would produce the most personally beneficial results. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See Donna Leinwand Leger’s *USA Today* article, “Ariel Castro faces 977 charges in Cleveland kidnappings.” http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/07/12/ariel-castro-charged-with-kidnapping-rape/2513199/ (July 13, 2013). Accessed 30 January 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. John Paul II, 10 (section 5). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid. 10-11 (section 5). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid. 60-61 (section 40). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid. 63 (section 42). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid. 65 (section 43). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid. 69 (section 45). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Douglas K. Blount, “Article II: God,” in Douglas K. Blount and Joseph D. Wooddell, eds., *The Baptist Faith and Message 2000: Critical Issues in America’s Largest Protestant Denomination* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 22 (note 1). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 98-102. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. J. Budziszewski, *Written on the Heart: The Case for Natural Law* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997). The title, of course, is taken from Romans 2:15. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Yet as Romans 1:18 asserts, they can also be suppressed to the point that the one suppressing them begins, in the words of Isaiah 5:20, to call good evil and evil good. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. President Barack Obama. Transcript from *Politico* website, http://www.politico.com/story/2013/01/obama-press-conference-transcript-jan-14-2013-86160\_Page3.html (January 14, 2013). Accessed 14 June 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. For example, the ten core principles outlined by an organization called the Acton Institute, which exists for the study of religion and liberty, are as follows: human dignity, the rule of law, economic freedom, and private property. Acton Institute website. http://www.acton.org/about/acton-institute-core-principles. Accessed 14 June 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. One need only look at Saul Alinsky for such subterfuge. Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals* (New York: Random House, 1971), 126ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. C. S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, London: Pan Books, 1972; 120; chapter 9, section V. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid. 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)