

ANSWERING RELATIVISTS & PLURALISTS¹

“The first effective strategy for countering relativism on its own grounds is negative: ‘Relativizing the relativizers.’ By this is meant *applying to skeptics the skepticism they apply to others, thus pushing them out toward the negative consequences of their own beliefs...*

“As Berger points out, the strategy rests on two assumptions. **The first is that relativism and skepticism entail a hidden double standard—*the relativism is inconsistent and incomplete.*** **All too often relativists relativize others but not themselves.** They relativize the past but not the present. They pour the acid of their relativism over all sorts of issues but jealously guard their own favorite ones.”²

In the film “*More Than a Minute*”, a Christian student named Quincy remarks to a classmate after a lecture by an atheistic professor who has asserted that there is no such thing as absolute truth, “***For a guy who doesn’t believe in absolute truth, he sure is dogmatic!***” Hugo Chavez of Venezuela was a classic example of this practice. Chavez boldly stated that for his country it was “*Socialism or Death!*” Yet the source of the enormous amount of money available to him at the time, which he used to influence the Caribbean and South America for socialism/communism, was, ironically, supplied to him by *capitalism*—the vast majority of it from his capitalistic selling of oil to a country he regularly excoriated: the United States of America!

“**The strategy’s second assumption is that consistency and clarity are linked.** The task of encountering relativism, Berger writes, is to ***‘see the relativity business to its very end.’*** **Press relativism to its consistent conclusion and the result is surprising.** Far from paralyzing thought, relativism is itself relativized, the debunker debunked, and what emerges is an almost pristine realization of the importance of truth.”³

“**Wasn’t this the assumption behind the prophet Elijah’s challenge to Israel in the ninth century B.C.** (I Kings 18:21ff)? If Baal, and not YHWH, was God, then follow Baal, he cried as he offered the prophets of Baal the first opportunity to verify their god. With the bulk of the people sitting uneasily on the fence between God and Baal, **Elijah knew that pious calls to return to God would have fallen on divided hearts and deaf ears.** **He had to mount the challenge on their grounds.**

“**For if YHWH is God, then Baal is not, *and the fastest way for the people to see it was to push them toward the false faith that was bound to be falsified by reality.*** The disproof came first and cleared the ground for the proof, for with the false falsified the true could be verified. ‘*The LORD—he is God! The LORD—he is God!*’ was the people’s conclusion with heartfelt conviction (I Kings 18:39).

“The same logic runs down through the centuries. Jesus said, ‘**By their *fruit* you will know them**’ (Mt. 7:20)—**not by their seed.** If you had spoken to the prodigal son the day he left home, would he have listened? If you spoke to him the day he hit the pigsty, would you have needed to? ‘**See where it leads to,**’ St. Augustine advised in dealing with falsehood. *Follow it out to ‘the absolute ruddy end,’* C.S. Lewis remarked with characteristic Englishness. **Push them to ‘the logic of their presuppositions,’** Francis Schaeffer used to say...

¹ Excerpted from my much larger paper, *Postmodernism Critiqued*. –Mike Edwards, Bible Baptist Church, Madison, Ohio, Sept. 2017.

² Os Guinness, *Time for Truth: Living Free in a World of Lies, Hype, & Spin* (Baker Books: Grand Rapids, MI, 2000), pp. 94-95

³ Ibid.

“**Examples of inconsistencies abound.** Marxist sociologists may be adept at spotting ‘exploitation’ in a kindergarten but have Mexican nannies and pay their teaching assistants poorly. Smart-aleck high school students may insist that ‘everything is relative’ yet will be the first to object if teachers grade their papers without any standards, such as ‘*I didn’t like your paper—it’s Tuesday.*’ Radical relativists may deny there are ‘objective facts’ but are strangely insistent on circulating highly detailed resumes... All these examples [are] relatively trivial contradictions... **But what counts is when the relativism matters to the relativist, when it becomes a question of life and not simply logic.** In such cases the strategy and the logic are the same. The relativists’ problem is not their clash with us but their contradiction with reality and therefore the cost to themselves...”

“The trouble for [atheistic philosopher] A.J. Ayer was that *his verification principle couldn’t verify itself—it was self-refuting.* **For to accept as truth only what can be tested by the senses is a principle that itself cannot be tested by the senses.** It too is non-sense. Ayer’s approach, he later admitted, was ‘a blind alley.’ Years later I enjoyed a conversation with him on the train between London and Oxford. Although retired and knighted as Professor Sir Alfred J. Ayer...was candid about the failure of his (own) principle: ‘*Any iconoclast who brandishes a debunker’s sword should be required to demonstrate it publicly on his own cherished beliefs.*’⁴

“**Again and again the lesson is simple: While no argument is unarguable, some thoughts can be thought but not lived.** So, we should never stop halfway in dealing with skepticism but follow ideas uncompromisingly to their conclusion. *When heads collide with the wall they will have reached the limits of their position and will be open to reconsider.* In this sense, reality is what we run into when we are wrong, for when we are right, we don’t run into it. ‘*There are times,*’ Vaclav Havel wrote, ‘*when we must sink to the bottom of our misery to understand truth, just as we must descend to the bottom of a well to see the stars in broad daylight.*’

“**The sobering fact... [is] that ideas have consequences...**Because the skeptics’ view is finally untrue, it is in their interest to discover it in good time. But even if we care so little that we say and do nothing, life itself will most likely push the skeptics out to face reality anyway, and the final outcome may be far less pleasant. **Put differently, all people at some point behave true to their beliefs. Sooner or later they will act on the assumptions they truly hold and reap the consequences.** We often say that people don’t ‘live up to their beliefs,’ but it would be more accurate to say that, in a crunch such as temptation, *they switch to other beliefs and live up to those instead.* We do live by our beliefs. The question is, which ones?

“**Now although someone’s beliefs and assumptions may not be true and do not describe reality, they will still drive their behavior.** So if someone doesn’t believe in truth, *count on him to lie.* If someone says there are no objective facts, *expect her to be careless with facts to further her own interests.* If someone explains everything by referring to evolution and the ‘*selfish gene,*’ be sure *that at some point he will be extremely selfish on behalf of the fitness of his own survival.* If someone describes newborn babies as ‘*replaceable*’ and of no more value than snails, you can bet she will become an advocate of ‘*involuntary euthanasia*’ (i.e. murder-*mwe*), and so on.

“**The principle holds true for nations [also], for ideas have consequences. Differences make a difference. Behavior follows beliefs as surely as thunder follows lightning.** What starts in the studies will end in the streets. When it comes to postmodernism, the stunning fact is that we do not have to predict its consequences—we have already seen the influence of its core ideas on history. Do we really imagine there can be no consequences a second time around?”⁵

⁴ *ibid*, pp. 95-96.

⁵ *ibid*, pp. 98-99