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RELATIVISM, TODAY AND YESTERDAY

Barbara Herrnstein Smith

In view of the occasion, the genre of discourse in which they appear, and the speaker’s role at the time, one need not see anything intellectually significant—informative, weighty, or unusual—in Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger’s statements regarding relativism in his homily to the conclave meeting to elect the new pope.¹ Embedded in a homily—which is to say, a sermon—and delivered at a solemn and momentous religious convocation (“*in quest’ora di grande responsabilità*”) to a body of fellow high prelates by the chief defender of its orthodoxies, his remarks operate singly and together in the way one might expect: that is, as a ritual reaffirmation of just those orthodoxies. If there is anything notable in the homily for observers at large (those seeking signs, for example, of how Vatican winds are blowing or how much its windows may yet be opened; or those caught up with contemporary intellectual trends and hopeful of securing elevated—and, to be sure, powerful—company in certain favored views), it is the explicitness, strictness, and comprehensiveness with which the homily censures questioning,

1. Joseph Ratzinger, homily for the mass “Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice,” April 18, 2005, official English translation, as given in the Appendix to this symposium. Citations here in English are from this translation unless oth-

erwise indicated. Citations in Italian are from the original text, available at www.vatican.va/gpII/documents/homily-pro-eligendo-pontifice_20050418_it.html.

dissent, and nonconformism with regard to the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church.

While Ratzinger's recent statements about relativism are of limited general significance for the reasons indicated, they may nevertheless prove useful to the intellectual community at large as an impetus to reflection on comparable invocations and denunciations in contemporary secular discourse. At the same time, aspects of those statements, including the functions they seem designed to serve for their most immediate or relevant audiences, may be illuminated when considered in connection with a broader historical review of such invocations and denunciations. The present essay, which begins with a reflection on the contemporary secular scene and concludes with a focused consideration of the homily, is a contribution to that double project.²

I

If *relativism* means anything at all, it means a great many things. It is certainly not, though often treated as such, a one-line "claim" or "thesis": for example, "man is the measure of all things," "nothing is absolutely right or wrong," "all opinions are equally valid," and so forth.³ Nor is it, I think, a permanent feature of a fixed logical landscape, a single perilous chasm into which incautious thinkers from Protagoras's time to our own have "slid" unawares or "fallen" catastrophically. Indeed, it may be that relativism, at least in our own era, is nothing at all—a phantom position, a set of tenets without palpable adherents, an urban legend without certifiable occurrence but fearful report of which is circulated continuously. Of course, even a phantom position may be consequential. No matter how protean or elusive relativism may be as a doctrine, it has evident power as a charge or anxiety, even in otherwise dissident quarters and even among those otherwise known for conceptual daring. It is this phenomenon that I mean to explore here: not relativism per se, if such exists, but the curious operations of its contemporary invocation and something of how they developed.

2. Parts of this essay are adapted from Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Scandalous Knowledge: Science, Truth and the Human* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005; Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 18–45.

3. I cite here some familiar past identifications and current usages. As is clear, they are not synonymous or mutually entailed. At the end of the nineteenth century, "relativism" could be understood as "[the doctrine that] nothing exists except in relation" (*The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, 1971, s.v. "relativism"). In 2001, it could be identified blithely and without example or citation as "the doctrine that all views are equally good" (Robert

Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981], 21). For the multiplicity of meanings operating in contemporary academic philosophy, see Rom Harré and Michael Krausz, *Varieties of Relativism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996). Harré and Krausz identify, define, distinguish, and assess a dozen or more such varieties, e.g., "moral relativism," "epistemic relativism," and "ontological relativism," each with its "anti-objectivist," "anti-universalist," and "anti-absolutist" variants, and each of those with its "strong" and "weak" or "moderate" and "extreme" versions.

As indicated by my title, the historical angle will be significant. "Today" alludes both to invocations of relativism in contemporary intellectual discourse and to Cardinal Ratzinger's reading of passages in Paul's letter to the Ephesians as anticipating certain features of our own era. Thus, in one translation of the homily, a key passage reads: "Relativism . . . looks like the only attitude acceptable by today's standards."⁴ This "today" is presumably in contrast to some earlier era, for example before the Reformation or the Enlightenment, or perhaps to an ideal nontemporal era when a certain spiritual condition would prevail ("having a clear faith based on the Creed of the Church") in contrast to what the homily represents as the vertigo of relativism. In any case, while "today" alludes here to the contemporary intellectual scene, the "yesterday" of my title is meant to evoke a previous era of relativistic thought. Of course, given the range of current understandings of the term, it could be maintained that relativism is a perennial doctrine: that is, one could claim as relativists all those from Heraclitus onward who have challenged prevailing ideas of immutability, unity, universality, or objectivity—and/or all who have proposed alternative ideas of flux, multiplicity, particularity, or contingency. But what I mean here by "yesterday" is a specific period not too far in the past.

Considerable recent work in intellectual history suggests that, from the end of the nineteenth century, and increasingly to the eve of World War II, a notable feature of theory in virtually every field of study was a more or less radical questioning of traditional objectivist, absolutist, and universalist concepts and a related effort to develop viable alternative (nonobjectivist, nonabsolutist, non-universalist) models and accounts.⁵ Major representative figures involved in such activities, both critical and productive, include Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Dewey in philosophy; Ernst Mach, Einstein, and Niels Bohr in physics; Karl Mannheim in social theory; Franz Boas in anthropology; and Edward Sapir in linguistics. If *relativism* is understood most generally and nonprejudicially as the sort of radical questioning and related theoretical production represented by the work of such figures, then we may observe that, in the period we now call modernist, relativism appears to have been a significant strand in much respectable intellectual

4. See "Cardinal Ratzinger's Homily," available at www.oecumene.radiovaticana.org/EN1/Articolo.asp?c=33987. The official translation of this passage, discussed below, reads: "Relativism . . . seems the only attitude that can cope with modern times."

5. See, e.g., Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Thomas Vargish and Delo E. Mook, *Inside Modernism: Relativity Theory, Cubism, Narrative* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999); Robert Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophi-*

cal Problem: On the Dissatisfactions of European High Culture, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999); J. W. Barrow, *The Crisis of Reason: European Thought, 1848–1914* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000); Michael Friedman, *A Parting of the Ways: Carnap, Cassirer, and Heidegger* (Chicago: Open Court, 2000); Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001), esp. 337–408; and Christopher Herbert, *Victorian Relativity: Radical Thought and Scientific Discovery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

discourse. Stated thus, the observation may not be contentious. However, the point is worth stressing, in view, first, of the current routine attachment of the ostensible period marker “postmodern” to ideas also characterized as “relativist” and, second, the tendency of that double label—“postmodern relativism”—to function as the sign of a novel and distinctly contemporary, as well as especially profound, intellectual or moral peril.

The historical angle will concern us again later. First, however, to begin to explore how such invocations of “postmodern relativism” operate currently, we may consider a few journalistic examples. A review in the *New York Times*, published in 2001, discusses two books concerned with the trial of scholar Deborah Lipstadt in a libel suit brought against her as author of a work titled *Denying the Holocaust*.⁶ One of the books under review is by British historian Richard Evans, Lipstadt’s key witness at the trial and himself the author of an earlier work described by the reviewer, Geoffrey Wheatcroft, as “an attack on postmodernism and deconstructionism in the name of the traditional historical virtue of objectivity.”⁷ The other book is by the American journalist D. D. Guttenplan, whose account of the trial Wheatcroft praises but whose “ventures into theory” he describes as “less happy.” The evidence of this infelicity is Guttenplan’s rejection of the idea, put forward by Evans, of a link between Holocaust denials and “an intellectual climate in which ‘scholars have increasingly denied that texts have any fixed meaning.’”⁸ Wheatcroft remarks:

But surely Evans’s point is well taken precisely in this context. Once we allow the postmodernist notions that historical data are relative, that all truth is subjective and that one man’s narrative is as good as another’s, then Holocaust denial indeed becomes hard to deal with.⁹

Two features of this passage are especially worth noting. One is the utter invisibility of any nameable, citable, quotable proponents of that cascade of “postmodernist notions.” The other is the hodgepodge quality of the notions themselves, which range from sophomoric slogans to important ideas currently at issue and by no means self-evidently absurd. Who among the figures commonly associated, properly or improperly, with postmodern theory maintains that all truth is subjective or that one man’s narrative is as good as another’s? Michel Foucault? Jacques Derrida? Jean-François Lyotard? Richard Rorty? Hay-

6. Deborah E. Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* (New York: Free Press, 1993). The suit was brought by a British Nazi-apologist, the historian David Irving, who lost the case roundly.

7. Geoffrey Wheatcroft, “Bearing False Witness,” *New York Times Book Review*, May 13, 2001, 12–13; Richard Evans, *In Defense of History* (New York: Norton, 1999).

8. Wheatcroft, “Bearing False Witness,” 13, quoting Evans, *Defense of History*.

9. Wheatcroft, “Bearing False Witness,” 13.

den White? Stanley Fish? Actually, of course, none of these. Similarly, is it quite clear that texts *do* have fixed meanings and that historical data are *not* relative to anything—for example, to the perspectives from which they are viewed or to the idioms available for reporting them? The parading of such dependably—if not always relevantly or inherently—scandalizing ideas and the absence of specific citations (authors, texts, passages) for any of them are standard features of the contemporary invocation/denunciation of “postmodern relativism.”

The idea of an atmospheric linkage between Holocaust denial and relativistic postmodern theory—floated by Evans and endorsed by Wheatcroft—is central to Lipstadt’s own book, subtitled “The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory.” Explaining her conviction that “part of the success” of current denials of the Holocaust “can be traced to an intellectual climate that has made its mark on the scholarly world during the past two decades,” she continues:¹⁰

Because deconstructionism argued that experience was relative and nothing is fixed, it created an atmosphere of permissiveness toward questioning the meaning of historical events and made it hard for its proponents to assert that there was anything “off limits” for this skeptical approach. . . . No fact, no event, and no aspect of history has any fixed meaning or content. Any truth can be retold. Any fact can be recast.¹¹

In a related passage, she writes: “This relativistic approach to the truth has permeated the arena of popular culture, where there is an increased fascination with, and acceptance of, the irrational”—an observation illustrated by belief in alien abduction.¹²

Lipstadt’s conception of the operations of causality in intellectual history, both general and specific (what causes/caused what, how conditions for the emergence of certain ideas or claims arise/arose), is exceedingly vague and otherwise dubious. No less dubious is her representation of skepticism as an inherently worrisome “approach.” It is certainly not the arguments of deconstruction (such as they may be) or any consequent “atmosphere” of academic permissiveness (to the extent that such exists) that inspire apologists for Nazism to deny the systematic extermination of Jews in German-controlled areas of Europe. Nor is it deconstruction or academic permissiveness that makes such denials credible among

10. Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust*, 17–18. This malign climate is exemplified again by the idea, evidently absurd for Lipstadt as for Evans and Wheatcroft, that “texts have no fixed meaning,” illustrated with brief statements by Richard Rorty and Stanley Fish. Lipstadt gives Novick, *Noble Dream*, as her source but abbreviates Novick’s duly extensive citations and omits his duly clarifying contextualizations (see Novick, *Noble Dream*, 540).

11. Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust*, 18–19.

12. Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust*, 17–19.

ill-educated segments of the population. Indeed, it could be argued that, if it *is* “deconstructionism” or relativism that leads historians and other members of the intellectual community to regard every received fact, truth, and belief without exception as open to question, then we should be grateful that *something* in the atmosphere encourages critical reflection when so much else in it encourages dogmatism and self-righteousness. This is not to say that it is dogmatic to maintain that the events we call the Holocaust occurred. But it is certainly a recipe for dogmatism to maintain, as Lipstadt does here, that the “meaning and content” of those events should be “off limits” to redescription or reinterpretation. That particular events may be recast from deliberately malign perspectives is a risk that attends a communal ethos of openness to critical reflection and revision. But the risk of communal self-stultification created by the muzzling of skepticism—or by its attempted quarantine as a contagious moral ill—could be seen as greater and graver by far.

Cardinal Ratzinger’s homily is especially relevant to the foregoing observations. One understands why a high priest, concerned for the continued authority of his church and for the undiminished force of its ontological, epistemological, and moral teachings for its members (and this being the Catholic Church, potentially and essentially for everyone), might want to stress that its doctrines were definitive (“*definitivo*”)—not open to questioning, reconsideration, or reinterpretation. Of course, such a priest would be especially so concerned if some of those doctrines were currently the object of some disgruntlement (or worse). One can also understand why, to reinforce that emphasis inspirationally, he might invoke, as looming on the horizon, the dictatorship of a relativism identified as skepticism toward orthodox ideas (“not recogniz[ing] anything as definitive”) and an entertaining of heterodox ideas (“letting oneself be tossed and ‘swept along by every wind of teaching’”). Indeed, that is pretty much what Ratzinger does in the homily, presumably for just such reasons and in regard to just such currently contested doctrines. The question we might consider among ourselves is whether—given comparable invocations and specter-raising by members of the intellectual community disturbed by current challenges to one or another traditional teaching (the objectivity of historical data, the fixed meaning of texts, and so forth)—such strict controls on skepticism, criticism, and revision should be sought in regard to secular views.

A few more examples may indicate the pertinence of the question. Elsewhere in her book, Lipstadt describes relativism as a deeply improper claim of equivalence, similarity, continuity, or comparability between things that are clearly and unquestionably (or that is the crucial presumption in such cases) unequal, different, distinct, and incomparable. Thus, referring to works by revisionist German historians who compare and stress similarities between the Holocaust and other massive state-sponsored slaughters, Lipstadt maintains that the “relativist”

historians in question “lessen dramatic differences,” “obscure crucial contrasts,” and produce “immoral equivalences.”¹³ It is proper, of course, for Lipstadt and other scholars to expose the limits of such comparisons, especially where their evident motive and effect is to minimize specific crimes or to exculpate specific agents or policies. But to denounce as “immoral” the observation of similarities (contextual, procedural, and so forth) between some specific event and all other events is to claim for the former an absolute uniqueness that not only attests to the impossibility of historical thought in that regard for oneself (understandable in the case of survivors and their families) but would bar such thought in that regard for everyone else.¹⁴

The association of relativism with morally improper comparisons recurs also in a newspaper column that appeared shortly after 9/11 under the arresting headline, “Attacks on U.S. Challenge Postmodern True Believers.” According to the columnist, Edward Rothstein, the murderous attacks on American targets exposed the hollowness of “postmodernist”—and here also “postcolonialist”—relativism. He explains:

[P]ostmodernists challenge assertions that truth and ethical judgment have any objective validity. Postcolonial theorists . . . [suggest] that the seemingly universalist principles of the West are ideological constructs . . . [and] that one culture, particularly the West, cannot reliably condemn another, that a form of relativism must rule.¹⁵

But, Rothstein continues, “this destruction seems to cry out for a transcendent ethical perspective.” “[E]ven mild relativism” that “focuses on the symmetries between violations” is “troubling”; for what are “essential now” are “the differences . . . between democracies and absolutist societies” and also between “different types of armed conflict”—by which he presumably means something like inherently unjustified “terrorism” as distinct from plainly “just wars” of defense.

Rothstein evidently sees no relation between what he denounces as the “ethically perverse” idea of symmetry—which, he claims, requires a “guilty passivity” in the face of manifest wrong—and what he calls for as a “transcendent ethical perspective.”¹⁶ But symmetry—that is, an observable correspondence

13. Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust*, 215.

14. One recalls the readiness of popes and imams to denounce the impiety or blasphemy of historical or comparative accounts of sacred events or figures, such as the Crucifixion or the Prophet. There seems to be a similar sense of taboo in effect here. Indeed, we seem to be witnessing, in Lipstadt’s book and elsewhere, a process of sacralization in regard to the Holocaust.

15. Edward Rothstein, “Attacks on U.S. Challenge Postmodern True Believers,” *New York Times*, September 22, 2001.

16. Rothstein, “Attacks on U.S.”

between elements of otherwise different or opposed things and, accordingly, their equitable or proportional treatment—is closely related to common ideas of fairness and could be seen as a crucial aspect of justice.¹⁷ Rothstein also sees no connection between the “unqualified condemnations” he regards as necessary in this case and the “absolutism” that, in his view, characterizes societies so different from democracies that only a postmodern relativist could think of considering the two symmetrically. In the days immediately following 9/11, a number of regional specialists and other academic commentators urged consideration of the less obvious conditions plausibly involved in motivating the attacks, including what they saw as the relevant culpabilities of U.S. policies in the Middle East. All these public commentators, however, condemned the attacks *per se*. What Rothstein appears to mean by “unqualified condemnation,” then, is a refusal to accept any consideration as bearing on the judgment of certain matters and a refusal to acknowledge the desirability of any reflection on them. Here as elsewhere, a denunciation of relativism amounts to a demand for dogmatism—for predetermined judgment armored against new thought.

II

For an instructive perspective on contemporary denunciations of “postmodern relativism” and some of the issues that they raise, I turn now to the historical part of these remarks. We may begin with a look at the work of two exemplary relativists of the modernist era (the “yesterday” of my title). One is the American intellectual historian Carl Becker; the other is the Polish microbiologist and historian-sociologist of science Ludwik Fleck. The relevant works of both appeared in the 1930s.

Becker, a cosmopolitan Midwesterner widely celebrated for his study *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers*, was elected president of the American Historical Association in 1931. In his presidential address of that year, titled “Everyman His Own Historian,” he elaborated the idea that the activities of the professional historian were not fundamentally different from the sorts of trace collecting, trace interpreting, and narrative construction performed by laypeople in regard to personal, family, and local histories. For Becker, this continuity of formal and informal historiography implied, among other things, that, contrary to the positivism then dominating the profession, historians should not take the work of natural scientists as their model of intellectual activity.

17. For discussion of the relation, see Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Belief and Resistance: Dynamics of Contemporary Intellectual Controversy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 7–8.

In the same years that Becker was chiding his fellow historians for their misplaced identification with scientists, Fleck—himself a practicing biologist—was arguing that science is fundamentally continuous with everyday knowledge construction. In his major work, *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*, Fleck challenged the prevailing idea that there were specific features of genuinely scientific knowledge (systematic testing, empirical verifiability, practical applicability, and so forth) that marked it off clearly both from primitive belief and from the errors of the less scientifically enlightened past. In the course of his analysis and critique of such views, which he censured as historically shortsighted and intellectually confining, he observed:

Whatever is known has always seemed systematic, proven, applicable, and evident to the knower. Every alien system of knowledge has likewise seemed contradictory, unproven, inapplicable, fanciful, or mystical. May not the time have come to assume a less egocentric, more general point of view?¹⁸

Fleck’s name for such an empirically broad-based, non-self-flattering study of knowledge was “comparative epistemology.” His elaboration and illustration of it in *Genesis and Development* figured crucially in Kuhnian and post-Kuhnian sociology and history of science.¹⁹ For a number of current mainstream philosophers, Fleck’s work is the very model of “extreme” epistemic relativism.²⁰

Fleck argues that the emergence and specific features of what we experience as “fact,” “truth,” or “reality” are made possible, but also severely constrained, by the systems of ideas, assumptions, and related perceptual and classificatory dispositions (or, in his phrase, “thought styles”) that prevail in the particular epistemic communities (disciplines, schools of thought, political parties, religious sects, and so forth) that he termed “thought collectives.” Tracing a significant tradition in the social study of knowledge from Comte to Durkheim, Fleck criticizes, extends, and radicalizes the thought of these already quite innovative theorists. Thus, commenting on the views of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl—who drew a contrast between scientific concepts (which, he claimed, “solely express objective features and conditions of beings and phenomena”) and the concepts or “mentality of primitive societies” (which allegedly do not express “a feeling for, or knowledge of, what physically is possible or impossible”)—Fleck writes:²¹

18. Ludwik Fleck, *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*, ed. Thaddeus J. Trenn and Robert K. Merton, trans. Fred Bradley and Trenn (1935; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 23.

20. See Harré and Krausz, *Varieties of Relativism*, 75, 100, 112–13.

21. Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, quoted in Fleck, *Genesis*, 48.

19. For details of Fleck’s influence and for further discussion of his views, see Smith, *Scandalous Knowledge*, 48–84.

We must object in principle that nobody has either a feeling for or knowledge of what physically is possible or impossible. What we feel to be an impossibility is merely an incongruence with our habitual thought style. . . . “Experience as such” . . . is chimerical. . . . Present experiences are linked with past ones, thereby changing the conditions of future ones. So every being gains “experience” in the sense that he adjusts his way of reacting during his lifetime.²²

Accordingly, as Fleck stresses, the scientist’s perceptions of the physical world are no more objective than those of anyone else, since, like anyone else’s, they are shaped by a particular experiential history in a particular social-epistemic community.

It is unlikely that either Fleck or Becker knew the other’s writings, but their intellectual affinities are evident. These include a shared interest in and extensive familiarity with the broader intellectual and cultural worlds in which they lived and worked. Fleck, a microbiologist by profession and medical historian by avocation, read widely in early-twentieth-century anthropology, sociology, and psychology, and was well acquainted with the philosophy of science of his time, including the work of the Vienna Circle.²³ Becker, comparably, was both a highly respected specialist in his field and immensely literate.²⁴ Becker and Fleck were both also explicitly self-reflexive.²⁵ Thus Becker writes at the conclusion of “Everyman His own Historian”:

I do not present this view of history as one that is stable and must prevail. Whatever validity it may claim, it is certain, on its own premises, to be supplanted. . . . However accurately we may determine the “facts” of history, the facts themselves and our interpretations of them, and our interpretation of our own interpretations, will be seen in a different perspective . . . as mankind moves into the unknown future. Regarded

22. Fleck, *Genesis*, 48.

23. See the bibliography in Fleck, *Genesis*, 169–191. On the intellectual contexts of Fleck’s thought, see Robert S. Cohen and Thomas Schnelle, eds., *Cognition and Fact: Materials on Ludwik Fleck* (Dordrecht, Netherlands: D. Reidel, 1986), 3–38, 161–266.

24. See Richard Nelson, “Carl Becker Revisited: Irony and Progress in History,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 48.2 (April 1987): 307–23.

25. The self-reflexivity is notable in view of the recurrent charge that, in (allegedly, implicitly) affirming their own views as (absolutely, objectively) true, relativists, constructivists, and skeptics are self-refuting. For discussion of the commonly misfired charge, see Barbara Herrnstein Smith, “Unloading the Self-Refutation Charge,” *Common*

Knowledge 2.2 (Fall 1993): 81–95, incorporated in revised form in Smith, *Belief and Resistance*, 73–04. See also Smith, “Reply to an Analytic Philosopher,” *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 101.1 (Winter 2002): 229–42. This latter piece is part of an exchange with Paul A. Boghossian (see Boghossian, “Constructivist and Relativist Conceptions of Knowledge in Contemporary [Anti-] Epistemology: A Reply to Barbara Herrnstein Smith,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101.1 [Winter 2002]: 213–27), whose recent book *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) is a rehearsal of such charges and a display of the other dubious weaponry of antirelativism described below. Where Ratzinger sees church doctrine as providing a sure stay against the views or attitudes so characterized, Boghossian sees “philosophy,” represented as a set of orthotropic devices and orthodoxies.

historically, as a process of becoming, man and his world can obviously only be understood tentatively, since it is by definition something still in the making, something as yet unfinished.²⁶

Similarly, Fleck stresses the need for historical assessments of all scientific claims, including those of one’s own era. Referring to the teachings of eighteenth-century medical pathology (for example, the “humor” theory of illness), he writes:

It is perfectly natural that these precepts should be subject to continual change. . . . It is altogether unwise to proclaim any such stylized viewpoint, acknowledged and used to advantage by an entire thought collective, as “truth or error.” Certain views advanced knowledge and gave satisfaction. These were overtaken not because they were wrong but because thought develops. Nor will our opinions last forever, because there is probably no end to the . . . development of knowledge just as there is probably no limit to the development of other biological forms.²⁷

If, as Fleck and Becker maintain, scientific and historical knowledge are continuously developing, then, clearly, any statement of scientific/historical fact, truth, or error requires at least implicit historical and cultural specification or, in effect, relativizing (for example: “‘factually true’ in relation to understandings available at that/this time,” or “‘erroneous’ from their/our perspective”; and so forth). Such a view, as Fleck indicates, is “less egotistic” than the sorts of presentist historiography and “self-flattering” epistemology that they both rejected. These early-twentieth-century relativists seem, then, to provide signal counterexamples to Ratzinger’s apparent identification of relativism with egotism (“whose ultimate goal [or standard of judgment] is one’s own ego”). A qualification must, however, be noted. While constructivist epistemology and/or perspectivist historiography might be swept into the range of Ratzinger’s general denunciation, he is probably not concerned in the homily with the specific intellectual moves of secular thinkers like Fleck or Becker—with their self-historicizing and self-relativizing, or with their framing of all human knowledge as unfinished and continuously developing. One might, however, juxtapose the moves and views of these intellectual relativists to those made and expressed in the homily, where the knowledge (represented as more than human) embodied in church doctrine is sought specifically as “enduring fruit.” The fundamental difference of epistemic values is worth noting: on the one hand, a not unhappy description of the products of human thought as continuously developing and changing, and, on the other

26. Carl Becker, *Everyman His Own Historian: Essays on History and Politics* (New York: F. S. Crofts, 1935), 255.

27. Fleck, *Genesis*, 64; trans. modified.

hand, the glorification of a knowledge understood as immutable—permanently fixed and frozen.

A primary aim of early-twentieth-century relativism was precisely to question any view that knowledge was unchanging. In an essay titled “What Is Historiography?” Becker observes that a properly historical understanding of “history” itself would regard it not as “a balance sheet of verifiable historical knowledge,” but rather see that its “main theme” is threefold:

[first,] the gradual expansion of [the] time and space world . . . [second,] the items, whether true or false, which acquired knowledge and accepted beliefs enabled men (and not historians only) to find within it, and [third,] the influence of this pattern of true or imagined events upon the development of human thought and conduct. . . . Nor would he [the historian] be more interested in true than in false ideas about the past. . . .²⁸

The observation that false ideas require the attention of historians no less than true ones has an affinity with a key methodological plank—the well-known “symmetry principle”—articulated fifty years later in the Edinburgh-based “strong programme” in the sociology of scientific knowledge.²⁹ Similarly, Becker’s notion that our “time and space world” is extended as a “pattern of true or imagined events” that we “find”—or, as we would say now, “construct”—through “acquired knowledge and accepted beliefs” is attuned to the constructivist views of knowledge formulated by Fleck and other social theorists at the time and subsequently developed by important historians and sociologists of science, learning theorists, and a few dissident philosophers.³⁰

These historical connections are noteworthy because it is just such constructivist (or “interactionist” or “pragmatist”) accounts of knowledge, truth, reality, and objectivity that operate today as major rivals to the traditional realist, rationalist, representationalist views that still dominate formal epistemology and mainstream philosophy of science—and, accordingly, it is just such alternative or

28. Carl Becker, “What Is Historiography?” *American Historical Review* 44.1 (October 1938): 26. With respect to the “time and space world,” Becker is referring back to a statement made earlier in this essay: “When we think of anything, we think of it in relation to other things located in space and occurring in time, that is to say, in a time and space world, a time and space frame of reference.”

29. See esp. David Bloor, *Knowledge and Social Imagery*, (1976; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 3–23. The commitment to symmetry in the work of contemporary historians and sociologists of science—that is, to the treatment of all beliefs, true or false, scientific or non-scientific, as requiring causal explanation and as explicable

in comparable ways—is the object of extensive misunderstanding, misrepresentation, and condemnation by traditionalist philosophers of science and their followers. For these commentators, as for Rothstein and Lipstadt (as discussed above), such efforts at evenhandedness amount to a deeply improper flattening of crucial differences and thus to an intellectually, morally, and/or politically objectionable relativism.

30. For citations and discussion, see Smith, *Scandalous Knowledge*, 3–8. The dissident philosophers referred to here include Paul Feyerabend, Nelson Goodman, and Richard Rorty.

rival accounts that elicit some of the most strenuous contemporary expressions of outrage at "postmodern relativism." One example, this from E. O. Wilson, may serve to represent such expressions (often, as in this case, quite ignorant of their presumed objects):

The philosophical postmodernists, a rebel crew milling beneath the black flag of anarchy, challenge the very foundations of science and traditional philosophy. . . . In the most extravagant version of this constructivism, there is no "real" reality, no objective truths external to mental activity, only prevailing versions disseminated by ruling social groups. . . . In the past, social scientists have embraced Marxism-Leninism. Today some promote versions of postmodern relativism that question the very idea of objective knowledge itself.³¹

Of course, "the very idea of objective knowledge itself" has been questioned since the beginning of Western thought (for example, in Plato's *Theaetetus*). Here as elsewhere, the denunciation of what is characterized as "postmodern relativism" involves the suppression of a good bit of intellectual history.

III

If there is nothing especially new about the views now characterized as "postmodern relativism," there is even less new about the modes and occasions of their denunciation. By the 1920s and 1930s, relativistic currents in many fields of thought were strong enough to create alarm in the philosophical community and to elicit efforts at formal rebuttal. One of the most sustained antirealist efforts of the period is Maurice Mandelbaum's *The Problem of Historical Knowledge: An Answer to Relativism*. Mandelbaum's argument is, first, that the claim of objectivity by scientists and historians is crucial to their authority and, second, that the claim can withstand the skepticism of critics and theorists when avowed conscientiously and attended by various self-effacing methods.³² Here as later, the "refutation" of relativism consists largely of a rehearsal and reaffirmation of the conventional ideas at issue, and the defense of those ideas consists largely of a rehearsal of the reasons conventionally given in support of them.

To a practicing historian such as Becker, it was obvious that what one finds in the archives and how one reports and assesses those findings will be affected by one's purposes, concerns, and perspectives. (A comparison of virtually any two

31. E. O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (New York: Knopf, 1998), 40, 182. For other examples and discussion, see Smith, *Scandalous Knowledge*, 42 n. 36, 108–29.

32. Maurice Mandelbaum, *The Problem of Historical Knowledge: An Answer to Relativism* (1938; New York: Harper and Row, 1967). The advocates of relativism specifically cited and thus answered by Mandelbaum are Wilhelm Dilthey, Benedetto Croce, and Karl Mannheim.

histories of the Reformation, especially if one is by a Protestant and the other by a Catholic, would illustrate the point vividly.) Expression of such a view, however, was commonly interpreted as an assertion of the bias of all professional historians and therefore a slander on their dignity. Also, by a familiar logic, such views were thought to imply that all accounts of a historical event are equally valid and thus (by the logic in play) equally worthless. These overheated interpretations and gratuitous inferences recur in virtually the same terms in late-twentieth-century responses to the supposed assaults by “postmodernists” on truth, reason, and, in Evans’s words, “the traditional historical virtue of objectivity.”³³ What is meant by such assaults are efforts by scholars and theorists in fields such as historiography, literary studies, and the sociology of knowledge to indicate the historicity of such terms as *fact*, *truth*, and *objective* and to explore their ideological and institutional operations. The extent of the duplication, from earlier denunciations of relativism to current ones, can be startling and/or (depending on one’s point of view) amusing. For example, in an especially grim antirelativist tract of the period, titled “The Insurgence against Reason,” American philosopher Morris Cohen maintained that the “[present] decline of respect for truth in public . . . affairs is not devoid of all significant connection” to “the systematic scorn heaped by modernistic [*sic*] philosophies on the old ideal of the pursuit of truth for its own sake.”³⁴ (And this was 1925!) Then as now, challenges to received views were labeled “irrationalist” and linked to other egregious, if not always well understood, contemporary disturbances such as “Bolshevism” and relativity theory. Then as now, worrisome correlates or consequences of such challenges were discerned in popular culture and belief (one recalls Lipstadt’s association of “deconstructionism” with belief in alien abduction); though, in the modernist period, those correlates and consequences were seen also in the “deformations” of avant-garde art, music, and literature: Einstein and Lenin, Woolf and Stravinsky, Joyce and Picasso—pre-postmodern relativists all.

Regarded retrospectively, the early-twentieth-century critiques of objectivist, absolutist, universalist assumptions in historiography and epistemology, along with the elaboration of alternative concepts, models, and accounts in those and

33. For comparable responses by contemporary historians, see Gertrude Himmelfarb, *On Looking into the Abyss: Untimely Thoughts on Culture and Society* (New York: Knopf, 1994); Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: Norton, 1994); Felipe Fernández-Armesto, *Truth: A History and a Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1997); and, as cited above, Evans, *Defense of History*. For comparable responses by contemporary philosophers, see Paul A. Boghossian, “What the Sokal Hoax Ought to Teach Us,” in *A House Built on Sand: Exposing Postmodernist Myths about Science*, ed. Noretta Koertge (New York: Oxford Univer-

sity Press, 1998), 23–31; Thomas Nagel, “The Sleep of Reason,” *New Republic*, October 12, 1998, 32–8. For comparable responses by contemporary scientists, see Smith, *Scandalous Knowledge*, 127 n. 14, 128 n. 17.

34. The article appeared in the *Journal of Philosophy* (cited in Novick, *Noble Dream*, 165). For a contemporary counterpart, see Paul R. Gross, Norman Levitt, and Martin W. Lewis, eds., *The Flight from Science and Reason* (New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1996).

related fields, were exceptionally fertile intellectually. Indeed, some of the most significant developments of later-twentieth-century thought, including the new historiography of the *Annales* school, constructivist epistemology, post-Kuhnian history and sociology of science, and poststructuralist language theory, could be seen as extensions and refinements of those early critiques and alternative relativist accounts. This claim becomes stronger, though ironically so, if we note that two other important movements in twentieth-century thought, namely, analytic philosophy and Frankfurt School Critical Theory, operated to a considerable extent as conservative reactions to those developments and that the central aims and issues of contemporary academic philosophy have been shaped accordingly. Thus, much mainstream philosophical activity over the past thirty or forty years has consisted of efforts either to shore up the objectivist-universalist views still at issue or to discredit the alternative views still being elaborated. And, of course, vice versa. That is, a good bit of the energy of theoretical radicalism over the same period has consisted of rebutting purported exposures of logical absurdity, answering charges of moral quietism or political complicity, or attempting to escape the fray by artful navigations.

The subsequent fortunes of modernist/relativist views have been quite variable, reflecting, among other things, shifting intellectual moods in the academy and elsewhere that have themselves been responsive to broader social and political events marking this past, very eventful century. Especially significant are the European and North American experience of World War II; the effects of the hyperreactive McCarthy era in the United States; the amalgam of political activities, popular beliefs, and cultural representations that made up the Cold War; the global eruption of various radical social movements (anticolonialist, civil rights and Black Power, feminist, antiwar, counterculture, and so forth); and, throughout the century, dramatic technological developments and widespread demographic shifts. The effects of such events, trends, and developments on later-twentieth-century intellectual life are too complex and complexly mediated to be traced here, but we might recall briefly some of the most relevant moods and movements.

Although the interwar period from the 1920s to the late 1930s was marked by a confident positivism in the natural sciences and a related scientism in much academic philosophy, there was, in other quarters of the academy as in the earlier years of the century, a continued radical questioning of positivist, realist, and universalist views. With Boas and his students, including Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict, cultural relativism became a respectable if never wholly dominant view in anthropology. In economic theory and political science, there was an increased emphasis on the irreducibility and partiality of subjective perspectives, with invocations of non-Euclidean geometry and relativity theory in physics as pertinent to the understanding of social phenomena. In linguistics, a number of

influential theorists, among them Sapir and Alfred Korzybski, explored the cultural variability and ideological power of the operations of language. In American philosophy, there were of course the pragmatists, notably, in this period, John Dewey; and, in historiography, Charles Beard as well as Carl Becker continued to challenge the positivist ideals and objectivist claims of their fellow historians. Commenting on the affinities among some of these movements in this period, Peter Novick writes:

Pragmatism's crusade against the worship of facts, its skepticism about claims of objectivity, its consistent reluctance to accept a hard and fast fact-value distinction, its emphasis on change and flux, on the human and social elements in knowledge, and stress on the practical consequences of knowledge—all these were at the center of the relativist sensibility.³⁵

The postwar years from 1945 through the 1950s were a period of anxious social conservatism in the United States and, in the academic and intellectual world, a time of pulling back from radical theory, especially from historicist and relativist directions. Thus, in linguistics, the anthropological approaches of Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf contended with increasingly aggressive turns (and returns) to universalist and rationalist accounts, a development that reached an apogee of sorts in the late 1950s with the arrival and rapid, widespread embrace of Chomsky's transformational-generative linguistics. In literary studies, the old positivist historical philology and I. A. Richards's proto-reception-theory were both upstaged by an intensely formalist, explicitly antihistoricist New Criticism. (W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., promoting what he called "objective criticism" in 1946, deplored Richards's *Principles of Criticism* [1929] for committing the so-called Affective Fallacy: "a confusion between the poem and its *results*" that is "a special case of epistemological skepticism . . . and ends in impressionism and relativism.")³⁶ Among professional historians, there was a renewed (war- and propaganda-chastened) commitment to the idea and ideals of objectivity and, in departments of philosophy, a withdrawal from the capacious concerns and diverse approaches of the 1930s and 1940s (aesthetics, ethics, philosophy of education, political theory, phenomenology, existentialism, and even some empirical, activist, and popular ventures in politics and education) into the more confined pursuits and technical, formal, logicist methods that became known as analytic philosophy.³⁷

35. Novick, *Noble Dream*, 153. See also Menand, *Metaphysical Club*, 351–75.

36. W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., *The Verbal Icon* (1946; Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954), 21. The counterpart "Intentional Fallacy" was "a confusion between the poem

and its origins" that "ends in biography and relativism" (21).

37. See John McCumber, *Time in the Ditch: American Philosophy and the McCarthy Era* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press), 2001. McCumber locates the shift

For many academics, especially younger ones, the mood shifted significantly again in the late 1960s and 1970s, which saw an irruption of social and political radicalism in Europe and the United States and, with it, a self-conscious “revolutionizing” of theory in a number of fields. In epistemology and the history and philosophy of science, this radicalism was exemplified most visibly by Kuhn’s *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1963), the self-declared relativisms of Paul Feyerabend’s *Against Method* (1975) and Nelson Goodman’s *Ways of World-making* (1978), and Richard Rorty’s antifoundationalist treatise *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1980). These were paralleled in language theory, literary and cultural studies, and historiography by the appearance or importation of, first, structuralism and semiotics, followed soon after by Derridean deconstruction, poststructuralism, Foucauldian New Historicism, and the studies that popularized, with its myriad meanings, the term *postmodern*.³⁸ Conservative responses to each of these developments were not lacking from the philosophical community, among the most influential of which were the presumptive demolition of Kuhn by Israel Scheffler; the presumptive disposal of Kuhn, Feyerabend, and Whorf by Donald Davidson; the rebuffs of postmodernism by Jürgen Habermas; and the work of a number of other denouncers and alleged devastators of relativism in a widely cited volume, *Rationality and Relativism*, published in 1982.³⁹

The past twenty-five years have witnessed a number of major disintegrations, migrations, and realignments—and, with them, more or less violent local antagonisms—in the social and political sphere and, comparably and relatedly in the intellectual and academic worlds, a situation of increasing ideological multiplicity, heterogeneity, shift, clash, and conflict. Thus, we have the emergence of the multicultural university, cultural studies, identity politics, and the associated “culture wars”; revisionist history and historiography, both left-wing and right-wing, and the associated “history wars”; post-Kuhnian science studies, constructivist-pragmatist epistemology, and the associated “science wars”; and, finally, the continued playing out of poststructuralist thought in the humanities and social sciences, and the associated “theory wars.” In all these not-altogether-academic

squarely in the political anxieties of the McCarthy era, specifically as a reaction to the persecution of academic philosophers with legibly left-wing views by the House of Representatives’ Committee on Un-American Activities and the desertion of those thus persecuted by their departments and universities. The account is compelling but neglects other plausibly related factors, among them the intellectual interest and glamour of British philosophy for many American philosophers and the hypertrophic operation of certain values and ideals (e.g., abstractness and formal rigor) in the discipline more generally.

38. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, was published in an English translation in 1984; Fred-

ric Jameson’s influential essay, “Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” first appeared in the same year.

39. Israel Scheffler, *Science and Subjectivity* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967); Donald Davidson, “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (1974; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 183–98; Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes, eds., *Rationality and Relativism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982). For a spirited rejoinder to this spate of reactions, see Clifford Geertz, “Anti-Anti-Relativism,” *American Anthropologist*, n.s. 86.2 (June 1984): 263–78.

conflicts, the charge, fear, or denunciation of relativism has operated with egregious frequency, if not always obvious relevance.

Two features of the contemporary intellectual scene may be stressed here. One is the institutional copresence of, on the one hand, scholars who entered their disciplines during the 1950s and early 1960s and remain committed to the projects and methods that prevailed at that time (and also persuaded by the traditional justifications for each) and, on the other hand, scholars trained in, comfortable with, and seeking to pursue the sorts of approaches (“continental,” poststructuralist, New Historicist, feminist, postcolonialist, and so forth) that emerged in the succeeding decades. Indeed, most of the “wars” mentioned above resolve into de facto generational struggles, even if not always between literally younger and older scholars. The other feature is the demand created by these conflicts for munitions- and arms-suppliers, which has led in turn to the emergence of a large-scale antirelativism industry, with branch factories in virtually every field of study. Thus we have had, over the past twenty years, a string of academic publications with titles such as *Looking into the Abyss*, *The Flight from Science and Reason*, *Against Relativism*, *Reclaiming the Truth*, *The Truth about Truth*, and *The Truth about Postmodernism*; the ongoing labor of relativism-refutation by old and new generations of academic philosophers; and the invocation and rehearsal of the presumptive triumphs of all these by students and colleagues, fans and followers, citers and re-citers. Although Ratzinger’s homily cannot be put squarely among these projects or publications, it is certainly related to them and has struck many readers as, for better or worse, a “timely” intervention. The nature of that relation and validity of that impression are the subjects of my closing remarks.

IV

Three views, dispositions, or states of mind (“*atteggiamenti*”) are explicitly identified or associated with *relativismo* in the homily: (1) “not recogniz[ing] anything as definitive,” (2) “letting oneself be tossed and ‘swept along by every wind of teaching,’” and (3) “[having as an] ultimate goal [or standard of judgment (*misura*)] one’s own ego and desires.” These characterizations are quite general and appear open to a range of secular references and appropriations. Indeed, it is clear from responses to the homily in the public media that Ratzinger’s characterizations have been widely understood as authorizing current secular denunciations of relativism wherever they occur and in reference to whatever view or disposition the term is thought to designate. In the homily, however, these characterizations operate singly and together to a more specific end: namely, to promote an unqualified and unquestioning acceptance by Catholics of the certainty, necessity, and sufficiency of church doctrine, as well as of the authority of the episcopate to pronounce, interpret, and enforce it. In the terms of the homily—which, clearly,

are not the terms of secular intellectual assessment—it is just such unqualified and unquestioning acceptance of authority that constitutes “maturity,” being an “adult in faith.” Citing a passage in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, Ratzinger admonishes:

We must not remain children in faith, in the condition of minors. And what does it mean to be children in faith? St. Paul answers: it means being “tossed here and there, carried about by every wind of doctrine.”

The pointed addition, “This description is very timely!” invites application to “today”—not so much, however, to what may currently be called *relativism* by secular writers but, more narrowly, to the present situation of Catholics in regard to church doctrine. It is in regard to just that doctrine that relativism “seems,” as Ratzinger puts it sardonically, “the only attitude that can cope with modern times.” Given how *relativismo* is defined in the homily, it may well be the only attitude that can.

In the passages of interest to us here, the homily serves its functions by its own explicit and elaborated contradistinction to *relativismo*. One central function is the inspirational reaffirmation of the defining faith: hence “a clear faith based on the Creed of the Church” is counterposed to *relativismo* (“letting oneself be tossed . . . by every wind of doctrine”). A second function, the special concern of Ratzinger in his role as defender of the faith—he was the prefect (until the death of John Paul II) of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith—is the reaffirmation of the absoluteness of church authority in regard to official doctrine: hence the counterposition of a *relativismo* “that does not recognize anything as definitive” to a recognition of church doctrine as, precisely, *definitivo*. A third function, this one more particular to the immediate occasion, is a reaffirmation of the authority of the high priesthood in determining, deciding, and choosing (including in their choice of a new pope): hence “a dictatorship of relativism . . . whose ultimate goal (*ultima misura*) consists solely of one’s own ego and desires” is counterposed to the submission of Catholics (whose goal is different: “*un’altra misura*”) to the authority of the church, which is grounded in the will of God as identified and articulated by the high priesthood—here, the conclave of cardinals itself.

In contrasting due Christian submission to church authority with a “dictatorship of relativism,” Ratzinger may also be alluding to the increasing dominance and appeal, in many intellectual circles, of certain more or less specific views identified in secular discourse as relativism. And, as some have read him, he may be suggesting that certain more or less specific movements associated with such views—pragmatism, poststructuralism, constructivism, and so forth—are among the “new sects” that “[make] come true” Paul’s saying “about human

deception and the trickery that strives to entice people into error.” If so, however, Ratzinger’s concern with such views and movements is only with the extent to which they embody and/or encourage the sorts of dispositions—questioning, criticizing, and revising—that are represented in the homily as manifestations of “infancy in faith.”

The specific Christian or Catholic referent of each characterization of *relativismo* in the homily is indicated by amplification, exemplification, and/or scriptural citation. A review of each in its context will make these points clear and reinforce the general conclusion suggested above.

In its first characterization (“not recogniz[ing] anything as definitive”), relativism is identified with what is commonly called skepticism. That doctrine is, of course, not new. Important forms of it were contemporary with Paul’s ministry and were also, presumably, among the “winds of doctrine” of which he writes in Ephesians. Such an attitude is especially objectionable to those who are concerned to have certain things—revelations, teachings, definitions, instructions, interpretations, and so forth—accepted as definitive, which is to say, terminally authoritative.

The second characterization, “letting oneself be tossed and ‘swept along by every wind of teaching’,” identifies relativism with something like pluralistic heterodoxy, represented as intellectual indiscriminateness, helplessness, and passivity. Afloat in the ocean of “modern times,” evidently without stabilizing or navigational resources of its own, “the small boat of thought of many Christians” is “tossed about” by multiple doctrines, which are represented as winds—insubstantial and transient, if temporarily powerful. Ratzinger goes on to specify a number of those doctrines, now represented as successive, mutually contentious “extremes”—“waves” between which that small boat is “thrown”:

from Marxism to liberalism, even to libertinism; from collectivism to radical individualism; from atheism to a vague religious mysticism; from agnosticism to syncretism, and so forth.

The passage suggests, surprisingly for some of us, that “libertinism” is an extreme development of “liberalism” and, no less oddly, that “atheism”—surely an ancient and, for many people, enduring frame of mind—is an ephemeral doctrine. There also are some curious omissions—for example, fascism, which, no less than “Marxism,” is among the strong doctrinal winds that “in recent decades” have blown about “many Christians.” Most significantly, perhaps, the passage does not include the name of any specific faith or spiritual/ontological doctrine—for example, Islam, Buddhism, Unitarianism, or pantheism, though these and many other such winds are currently blowing. Perhaps none appears because mention of any such by name would invite more readily a question that arises for many Catholics in any case: what makes Roman Catholicism unique among the winds

and waves of doctrine? Answers to that question, some of them quite venerable, can no doubt be supplied: for example, that the Catholic message is to be understood not as one doctrine among others but as truth itself—not a wind like these but, precisely, a rudder, sail, compass, and anchor. Another answer is that, unlike these other doctrines, Christianity is not insubstantial and transient, but a mighty testament and ministry, now two thousand years old. Replies to such answers can, of course, also be supplied: for example, that some doctrines are even older, and that several seem to have provided the requisite stability and navigational resources to their many followers. But, of course, answers to such replies can also be given, as can replies to those answers—round and round, “up and down,” vertiginously. The cure for intellectual-spiritual seasickness may be to anchor one’s “small boat of thought” in port, to acknowledge a single doctrine as exclusively and permanently *definitivo*, to cease attempting voyages of thought. That, at least, is what the homily enjoins.

The third characterization of *relativismo*, as a doctrine or state of mind “whose ultimate goal consists solely of one’s own ego and desires” (“*che lascia come ultima misura solo il proprio io e sue voglie*”), has seemed to some commentators to be a denunciation of contemporary moral/sexual decadence and its presumed moral-relativistic justification (“anything goes”). But relativism is not readily (or conventionally) identified with either egotism or hedonism per se, if that is what this awkward sounding passage means. A more pertinent interpretation, however, is suggested by the immediately ensuing passage:

However, we have a different goal (*un'altra misura*): the Son of God, the true man. He is the measure (*misura*) of true humanism.

The official English translation obscures what appears to be an allusion here to the familiar teaching of Protagoras, archetypal relativist: “Man is the measure of all things, that they are and how they are.” Accordingly, relativism should be understood here not as egotism or hedonism but as subjectivism or perspectivism: that is, the idea (as the Protagorean doctrine is often interpreted) that our knowledge or judgment of things depends on and is relative to our human/individual constitution and perspective. The passage quoted just above would then be understood as follows: we (Christians) are different; we have another standard; for us, it is not “man”—the individual subject or, as in secular humanism, humankind—that is the measure of all things, but the Son of God, “true man” and “measure of true humanism.” And, as expanded a bit later in the homily: we (apostles) have another standard or criterion (“*un'altra misura*”), a touchstone that permits us “to judge true from false and deceit from truth.” In determining or deciding, we have not only our own ego and its will (“*solo il proprio io e sue voglie*”) to judge by (“*come ultima misura*”), but our knowledge of God’s will.

The immediately succeeding chain of linked citations, readings, and amplifications serves the third major function of the homily, which is to reaffirm and reground the authority of the church—“apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers”—to judge, choose, and declare:

An “adult” faith [citing Eph 4:14] is not a faith that follows the trends of fashion and the latest novelty; a mature adult faith is deeply rooted in friendship with Christ. It is this friendship that opens us up to all that is good and gives us a criterion by which to distinguish the true from the false, and deceit from truth.

A crucial link in the chain is a dual definition of “friendship” as, first, a relationship in which “there are no secrets,” and, second, as “the communion of wills”—being united in what is willed and not willed (“*idem velle — idem nolle*”). The Apostles, named “friends” by Jesus, learn God’s will from him: as friend, he keeps no secrets from them. And, by a communion of wills, their wills are united with God’s in what they choose and reject, decide for and decide against. What the Apostles and their descendants—the present episcopate, the conclave of cardinals, the Vatican—determine and deliver as church doctrine is therefore to be understood as intrinsically identical with God’s will: it is true as distinct from false; it is truth as distinct from error, human trickery, or deceit. Appealing to “what the Lord says to us in his own words,” the homily reaffirms the church’s authority to determine what is definitive. Thus, the church authorizes itself by what it authorizes as authoritative.

Contemporary traditionalist intellectuals, along with vigilant moralists and perennial philosophical denouncers and refuters of relativism, may take satisfaction in finding their dismay or outrage at various secular developments echoed in the highest of places. But some caution on their part is probably in order. For, here as elsewhere, while the relativism denounced is elusive, protean, and open to many interpretations, the orthodoxy thereby affirmed and defended is distinct and particular. To endorse the statements regarding *relativismo* in the homily is not only to affirm the Roman Catholic faith but to accept as definitive the specific teachings embodied in Vatican edicts and encyclicals, including current ones that Ratzinger himself has affirmed, articulated, endorsed, and enforced: teachings that enjoin church (and, in many places, state) policies that, in the name of the Son of God, love, truth, goodness, and friendship, maintain the traditional privileges of the powerful, reinforce the prejudices of the ignorant, and confine, demean, and devastate millions of human beings around the globe.⁴⁰

40. These include the prohibition of contraceptive devices under all circumstances as contrary to God’s “plan for humanity,” the essential “impermissibility” of altering the subordination of “the woman” to “the man”

in church or family, and the definition of homosexuality as an “objectively disordered” inclination toward “intrinsic moral evil.” For the formulation or affirmation of doctrines on women and homosexuality by Ratzinger in his

Accepting all of that is a tall order, and many who accept the Roman Catholic faith find it more than can be met—not, they would protest, because they are mere “children in faith,” but because doing so would be contrary to, precisely, their lifelong faith-instructed understandings of the obligations of love, truth, goodness, and friendship. Some supplement church doctrines with other views; some fail to conform—or resist requiring others to conform—to one or another of them under certain circumstances; and some challenge and seek to change those doctrines in the light of experience, knowledge, and a faith-instructed sense of their obligations to their fellow human beings. It is such sailings forth of “the small boat of Christian thought” that are described in the homily as “building a dictatorship of relativism.” We who are outside that church may wish those voyagers well in their ventures and hope for their success in establishing that antiregime.

role as prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, see: Catholics for a Free Choice, *Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger’s Preparation for the Papacy: How “the Vatican’s Enforcer” Ran the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (1979–2005)* (Washington, DC: April 2006), 8–12, 16–17, www.catholicsforchoice.org/topics/reform/documents/2006movingforwardbylookingback

.pdf. For Ratzinger’s statement, as Pope Benedict XVI, to the bishops of Africa on the use of condoms to prevent HIV/AIDS, see *BBC News*, “Pope Rejects Condoms for Africa,” June 10, 2005, news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/europe/4081276.stm.