

Cultural Relativism and the Death of Reason

By Jim Nelson Black

The game plan of deconstructionists in the universities for the past forty years has been to eradicate the past and indoctrinate the youth of this nation with a new view of society and a radical political ideology. According to their theories, there are no absolutes, no sources of ultimate truth and meaning, and all “values” are of equal importance. By this view, the principles of Mao Zedong or Saddam Hussein are just as valuable as those of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. Students learn about the writings of Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, and J. K. Rowling instead of Mark Twain and William Shakespeare. And they know a great deal more about Beavis & Butthead and Homer Simpson than Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms.

Thanks to the shoddy education they’ve received through twelve years of public education, most students have no means and no desire to challenge bad ideas—they have no grasp of history and no ideas of their own. They’ve been taught to respect “diversity” and “multiculturalism,” and they’ve been taught that their heritage of freedom gives them all sorts of rights but few responsibilities. There are no causes they’re willing to fight for; no great and noble truths they would die for. Millions of young Americans have been stripped of their past and very possibly their future as well.

As students are infused with revolutionary ideologies, they lose esteem for their American heritage, for the values of Western civilization, and for the virtues and the beliefs that made this nation unique. And because they have no sense of history, they become easy prey for radical ideologies and practically any political doctrine being pushed by their liberal teachers and professors. The prevailing orthodoxies of these so-called “cultural elites” have become the models for behavior and belief, and the emptiness in the souls of young people today is just one indication of the damage that has already been done.

The collapse of educational standards is one more expression of a society turned in upon itself—a nation at risk. Professor Charles Sykes, in his important book *A Nation of Victims*, has suggested that the meaning of “right and wrong” has been redefined by secular society. In order to remove the restraints of Christianity and traditional moral values, educators have turned to the principles of “behaviorism” and “modern psychology” which hold that behavior is simply the result of conditioning. Bad behavior is not sin, but merely “non-productive behavior.” Crime is the result of “poor socialization.” And to overcome such problems, we no longer need churches but more “therapy.”

The rise of the “therapeutic culture” in America, says Professor Sykes, amounts to the ascendancy of a substitute faith—a faith whose roots are in the false theology of Humanism. “Filling the vacuum created by the decline of institutional faith and the collapse of the moral order it has provoked,” Sykes observes, “psychoanalysis has assumed many of the functions traditionally performed by religion, and has done so by translating many of the theological and existential issues of human life into therapeutic terms.”[1]

The degeneration of philosophy and science into relativism is just one more indication of the moral poverty of American society. It is evidence that we have become corrupt. In one of his most perceptive statements, Russell Kirk says, “Without Authority vested somewhere, without regular moral principles that may be consulted confidently, Justice cannot long endure anywhere. Yet modern liberalism and democracy are contemptuous of the whole concept of moral authority; if not checked in their assaults upon habitual reverence and prescriptive morality, the liberals and democrats will destroy Justice not only for their enemies, but for themselves.”[2] In their fierce determination to deny their own guilt, and to deny any possibility that a divine Judge may be a witness against them, the modern scholar denies all moral authority.

Relative Disaster

President Theodore Roosevelt once said, “Americanism means the virtues of courage, honor, justice, truth, sincerity, and hardihood—the virtues that made America. The things that will destroy America are prosperity-at-any-price, peace-at-any-price, safety-first instead of duty-first, the love of soft living and the get-rich-quick theory of life.” At that time, at least, people still understood the value of their cultural heritage.

These were the values of a disciplined, dedicated, and caring people. While Americans of that earlier time were reasonably tolerant of individual differences, they were not blind to careless, stupid, and irresponsible behavior. Justice meant swift and certain judgment, not moral blindness. But, sadly, we have come a long way since the muscular Americanism and intestinal fortitude of Teddy Roosevelt and the rough riders.

But make no mistake: When relativity becomes the prevailing orthodoxy of a culture, the character of the people will wither and die. Both the individual and the nation as a whole will be reduced to selfishness and expediency. Pragmatism becomes the new law of life, and moral discretion will have no power to restrain evil. Albert Einstein, the father of the science of relativity, was shocked by the tendency of intellectuals and social pundits to confuse his mathematical models with moral behavior. He saw this as a deadly mistake, and he said so.

Einstein understood many things about the nature of matter, space, and time, but the great scientist said repeatedly that ethical behavior depends on the existence of an inner moral strength which is fixed and permanent. Good and evil are never relative; right and wrong are never arbitrary. “The real problem,” he said, “is in the hearts and minds of men. It is not a problem of physics but of ethics. It is easier to denature plutonium than to denature the evil spirit of man.” The Prophet Jeremiah said, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked. Who can know it?” The father of relativity knew that to be true.

Many people will recall the controversial remarks a few years ago by Ted Turner, the founder and Chairman of CNN and the Turner Broadcasting Network, when he offered to pay a million dollars to anyone who could come up with a realistic moral code to replace the unrealistic and worn out Ten Commandments. That's a lot of money, but apparently nobody was able to come up with a replacement. Today's liberal ideologues are selling their goods from an empty wagon; yet, with no values of their own, they're determined to eradicate the ideas and beliefs that have contributed to the moral vitality of Western civilization for the past two thousand years.

And that is a large part of our problem today. For six thousand years mankind has had a practical, reliable, proven, and authorized set of rules from the hand of God himself. But man, in his pride and arrogance, refuses to acknowledge or live by them. But without the support of those ancient values and the principles of Scripture, we have no other moral foundation. Young people today are convinced that Einstein proved that *everything* is relative. Einstein never said anything about moral or cultural values in his studies of physics. He said only that time and space are relative, under certain circumstances, at the outer limits of physics theory. He spent the last years of his life trying to tell people that his ideas applied only to science, not to ethics or morals. He was horrified by the atomic bomb, and he would certainly be opposed to what today's liberals have done with his ideas about physics.

The Neoclassical Spirit

There's no denying that the influence of thinkers such as Einstein, Freud, Nietzsche, Marx, and Darwin on today's educational and political theorists has been profound. But even deeper in the ideology of these liberals are the ideas of the scientists and philosophers of the European Enlightenment. Rousseau, Descartes, and Voltaire may be the legitimate fathers of the revolutionary spirit that first appeared in the French Revolution of 1789, then in the Russian Revolution of 1917, and more recently in the radical movements of the sixties and seventies.

Behind these philosophers was a group of English writers of the previous century, including John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, and David Hume. These men, in turn, owed a debt to the early scientists such as Newton, Galileo, and Copernicus, who demonstrated that nature operates by logical and predictable principles, and that everything physical can be described and defined in intimate detail, not through theology or philosophy, but by physics and mathematics.

The chain of intellectual inquiry which developed during the Neoclassical age led to the "new learning," which encouraged men of letters to question everything—life and death, man and nature, God and science. Instead of the secure and finite world described by conventional theology, where men had lived by the mercy of a patient Heavenly Father, the new thinkers began to see themselves as creatures of Nature. They were inhabitants of a vast and orderly universe whose boundaries were infinite and whose processes were not mysterious or religious but mathematical and precise. When they came to believe that all of life is a process of "cause and effect," it would be only a short jump to the notion that no other force or agent was required. At best, God had been misrepresented; at worst, perhaps he never existed at all.

In general, seventeenth century philosophers did not leap to that conclusion, but it is impossible for us to understand how earthshaking such concepts must have seemed to the men and women of that day. Though they had made incredible advances, the science of that age was still partial and incomplete; and theology and philosophy had practically no means of responding to the challenges posed by the "new thinking." It would take years—more than a century, in fact—for the complex emotional and spiritual issues they raised to be resolved by the Church. The implications of these changes were shattering to traditional beliefs. Divine revelation suddenly had less appeal, and empiricism (meaning hard-nosed, practical research which Locke had described as "cold philosophy") was perceived as the only reliable source of truth.

In France, René Descartes proposed a new philosophy based on the principles of Galileo and Copernicus, and he developed a series of tests of knowledge based on what he called the “skeptical hypotheses.” He used this analytical method to challenge his own sense of perception and experience, and he came, he said, to one irreducible truth: the phenomenon of thought. This led to the statement, *Cogito ergo sum*, or “I think, therefore I am.” For two centuries, this simplistic axiom offered confirmation for the elegance of rational thought. Today, however, it may be best regarded as an indication of the change of focus from the eternal to the internal.

Consider the changes that were taking place in the minds of men during this remarkable era. If everything visible and invisible could be explained by “natural philosophy” and the “new science,” and as the consequence of causes set into motion by Nature itself, then what did this say about supernatural explanations, and about the non-scientific events of the Bible? John Locke, among others, attempted to unite the findings of the new science with the Christian tradition, but his methodology inevitably led to profound religious skepticism.

The Cult of Unreason

Locke began to look to classical models of the Greeks and Romans as the basis for a logical synthesis of science and faith. Reason alone was to be his guide, but he had not discarded faith entirely. There were some, such as Hume, who were prepared to challenge the truth of the Bible, but the atheist perspective was not yet a fully conceived hypothesis. This would not be the age to assault openly the tenets of Christianity or to deny Scripture. That would be reserved to the men of the following century.

The immediate consequence of these new ideas was much more mundane; for the discoveries of science seemed to say that everything real could be described by empirical evidence, by mathematical principles, or by some kind of physical equation. Carried to its logical conclusion, the new thinking would totally discredit the higher functions of insight, intuition, and inspiration. This would, however, become a major hindrance for art and poetry, and it would ultimately give Reason priority over Imagination in all things.

But there was a side effect which even the reformers had not anticipated. The attempt to escape from the dangers of fanaticism and unreason through pure science would eventually become a new kind of fanaticism and a new threat to civilized debate—the “Cult of Reason”—which would dominate not only the Enlightenment but well beyond. John Locke’s famous treatise, the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, published in 1690, contains the famous statement, “Let us suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas; how comes this to be furnished? ... whence has it all the materials of reason and knowledge? To this I answer, in a word, from experience.”

Locke’s argument suggests that the mind at birth is a blank slate, a *tabula rasa*, upon which the experiences of a lifetime are written. The character of the experiences determines the character of the person. This view suggests that environment is more important than heredity in the development of thought and ideas. Locke also claimed that the only reality is that which can be perceived by the senses, and anything that cannot be detected by sight, taste, touch, smell, or hearing, is of no concern to science.

The flowering of the Neoclassical spirit among scientists, philosophers, and poets of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries represented a deliberate attempt to follow the models of the great classical thinkers—to imitate the styles and methods of the Greeks and Romans. However, in the process of theorizing the ideals of reason, education, and enlightenment, their positions became assertive and doctrinaire. And the Cult of Reason soon devolved into a cult of unreason.

What Rousseau demonstrated in practically all his writings was an immature emotionalism which discarded traditional standards and values in favor of complete liberation and self-determination. His writings appealed to the spirit of rebellion, putting natural freedom ahead of

austere virtue. The “high old Roman virtue,” which had survived the fall of Rome, implied self-sacrifice, endurance, and submission to a higher good. For Rousseau, however, this was a perverse and unnatural demand. The dominant passion of the human spirit, he believed, was self-interest, and he taught that only repression could cause men to give up this natural impulse.

But even Rousseau realized that unmitigated self-interest could be hostile to the common good, so in concurrence with English writers such as Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill (who popularized the notion of “the greatest happiness for the greatest number”), Rousseau proposed that “*enlightened* self-interest” was the ideal to be sought after. “And this,” says Allan Bloom, “is the best key to the meaning of enlightenment.”[3]

The Source of Truth

At the heart of this age-old battle of ideas is a basic disagreement over the source of truth. And nowhere is this fact more visible than in the doctrinaire positions of the education establishment in this country. Those who subscribe to the liberal agenda will see the idea of moral or spiritual restraints as a needless hindrance to their political interests. But the lesson of history is that no society can exist without them. Without a foundational code of morality, law has no meaning. And without spiritual convictions, the code of responsible citizenship has no force.

So to what do we attribute the crisis of cultural authority in America today? Is the battle over “diversity,” “multiculturalism,” and “political correctness” just one more manifestation of the centuries-old dispute over the source of truth? The American educator and former Commissioner of Education Francis Keppel once observed that, “Education is too important to be left solely to the educators,” and that’s a wise maxim. What happens in the classroom will shape the character and the values of the next generation, and we can be certain that our nation’s hopes for the future can only grow dimmer as the quality of education deteriorates another notch with each successive generation. As long as educators who have sworn allegiance to the liberal social agenda determine the standards, you can be certain we are losing the struggle for America’s survival.

My own position is that the classrooms of America have become the focal point of the warfare between the sacred and the profane. The struggle for the hearts and minds of the next generation must be seen as a guerrilla war between two rival forms of authority. The most dangerous aspect of this struggle is not that the quality of education is weak: millions of people who have gone on to great careers and advanced degrees came from poor educational backgrounds. The danger is that the young people of this nation are being morally strip-searched and intellectually abused by the keepers of the keys in our schools and universities. And the most lasting danger is that the best and the brightest are being indoctrinated with alien ideologies which are destructive to America’s traditional values and our heritage of faith.

It’s not just that our children’s knowledge of science or history or art is inferior, but that their souls are being laid bare and they are being steeped in destructive humanistic concepts which leave them in moral and spiritual chaos. Under these conditions, their bodies grow weak, their minds are sterilized. They are being ground down to a level of less than mediocre performance, and their right to excel, to rise to their own level of achievement, and to hold time-tested beliefs is being blocked at every turn. I will not say that this is happening in every school all at once. Surely there must be some schools that stand for truth, that pay tribute to our heritage of virtue and morality. But the trend is overwhelmingly in the opposite direction.

History makes it only too clear that the caliber of education in one generation will determine the prospects for the next. It has been said that the values taught in the public schools today will become the laws legislated by Congress tomorrow. And this, I believe, is why it is vitally important that men and women of conviction must first acknowledge the scope and complexity of the challenges before us and then react with all due haste.

There is no more vital arena for engagement than the education of our children. Unless you have no interest in the laws that will be legislated in this nation in coming decades, then you and I are obligated to take up moral and spiritual arms to resist the fraud that passes for education in the universities and schools of this nation. History confirms that we cannot afford to fail in this task. To ignore the decay, and to neglect what former Education Secretary William Bennett has called the spiritual *acedia* (or sloth) that infects public and higher education today, *will* lead to the death of this nation.

- 1 Charles J. Sykes. *A Nation of Victims: The Decay of the American Character*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992. 49.
- 2 Russell Kirk. *The Roots of American Order*. Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, 1992. 462.
- 3 Allan Bloom. *Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987. 165.

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