

AT ISSUE

The Many and the One

Fifty-eight tourists slain by religious fanatics in the ancient precincts of Egypt's Luxor: in face of such enormities, it may seem absurd to say that the world is besotted by relativism. Yet even the fanaticism that drives fundamentalists to kill and die for their one and only truth betrays an anguished awareness of the world's many and conflicting truths.

Our relativistic muddle has consequences for every aspect of daily life, from the political to the personal, but the problem is at bottom, and in origin, philosophical: what do we know, and how do we know it? To that question, one answer now commands widest assent: all knowledge is ultimately subjective, individually or socially constructed, an expression of power or will. This view—variously called subjectivism, relativism, perspectivism, or even postmodernism—has become the orthodoxy of the contemporary world, embraced by many and tacitly acknowledged by others, even by those who resist it.

Among the advance guard of that orthodoxy, it is now fashionable to say that even science is a subjective construct. Some scholars of a multiculturalist bent argue, for instance, that science is grounded in cultural and national particularities, so there can be “Indian” or “Chinese” sciences as well as “Western” or “European” science, each different in its procedures and emphases but all equally valid. Similarly, one school of hyper-feminists maintains that modern Western science is suffused with a patriarchal bias, evident in its sexist vocabulary and aggressive procedures. The antidote, according to these critics, is a kinder, gentler “feminized” science.

Some might say that science is only receiving its due. After all, it was science—with its elegant method and manifold technological offerings—that destroyed the traditional certitudes in the process of making the world modern. The skeptical stew in which we all steep is science's making. So why shouldn't

science be in it, too?

But such gloating does little to remedy an increasingly precarious condition, nowhere more evident than in our institutions of higher learning. Reports on the relativist muddle abound, but none capture the situation better than do two articles in a recent issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. One tells of a class of 20 students at a small West Coast college who were asked to read Shirley Jackson's short story “The Lottery.” After lengthy discussion, the instructor was shocked to learn that not a single student would “go out on a limb and condemn” the ritual human sacrifice depicted in the story. An exceptional case? Hardly. The other *Chronicle* account is even more unsettling. According to its author, a philosophy professor at a distinguished East Coast college, the students in his courses were “unable morally to condemn [the Holocaust], or indeed to make any moral judgment whatever.”

These two cases are not aberrations. They are symptomatic of a doctrinaire relativism that forecloses any serious discussion of absolutes or universals. This “absolutophobia,” as the author of the second article calls it, leads to a kind of moral idiocy, and as he rightly asks, “Isn't it our responsibility as teachers to show, by directly confronting the confusions underlying absolutophobia, that students need not be inflexible dogmatists in order to have a moral ground on which to stand?”

Yet, even if they wanted to, where might teachers turn to find such a ground? That is the philosophical conundrum. There are, of course, those truths derived from revealed religions, perhaps the soundest source of moral universals. But outside religious institutions and the various communities of believers, the appeal to such truths is problematic. Moreover, their grounding in particular traditions merely confirms the postmodern claim that such “universals” are *only* the relative goods of specific communities and worldviews.

Our contemporary skeptics have also de-



constructed the humanistic traditions, “exposing” them as products of specific cultures, peoples, and power configurations—and therefore, of course, lacking any claim to universal truth. By such reasoning, it follows that liberal ideals of human rights and justice neither can nor should be applied to the citizens of, say, Cambodia or Ghana or any other non-Western nation.

The late and greatly missed thinker Isaiah Berlin, Oxford’s sage of modern liberal thought, struggled heroically against such fatuous relativism. While deeply respectful of cultural and national differences, he insisted that beliefs and practices be evaluated across cultural divides according to universal logical and moral categories. Wily fox that he was, however, he was reluctant to name the source of such categories, for fear that he would become one of the totalizing system builders, or hedgehogs, whose ideas have had such devastating consequences in our century.

Berlin’s coyness on the source of universals is attractive to all who fear monolithic systems. It is also realistic in its recognition that certain moral goods, however universal we claim them to be, may sometimes come into conflict: equality and liberty, for example, frequently do.

Yet, for all its virtues, such coyness may now be too costly. Without any common ground from which to build and evaluate human institutions and cultures, the liberal project—in the oldest and broadest sense of the word—may be fated to triviality, its claim to universalism dismissed as a sham.

It is to the end of locating such a foundation that biologist E. O. Wilson has written *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*, a work that seeks to show how our understanding of the world (including ourselves) is tied to our human nature, specifically as that nature has evolved through the interplay of genes and cultures.

This is a controversial idea (as the debate in this issue shows), but Wilson is no stranger to controversy. As one of the pioneers of sociobiology, he was viciously attacked for his innovative evolutionary approach to exploring the interactions between human biology and human cultures. Just as his sociobiology challenged the dominant tenor of postwar social science, which emphasized cultural relativism at the expense of biological universals, so Wilson’s notion of consilience—a “jumping together” of the knowl-

edges—will almost certainly upset epistemological relativists.

The charge of reductionism has frequently been leveled against Wilson, and it will be again. He accepts the label, even as he explains why consilience overcomes many of the flaws of earlier reductionist efforts. But his best arguments will not satisfy those who claim that he seeks to impose a biological monopoly on knowledge and truth.

The charge is overstated. Yet Wilson does leave himself vulnerable by suggesting that science is the royal road to truth. That use of “truth” is far too cavalier and, at the very least, obscures his more achievable goal: nothing more, and nothing less, than a common understanding, a shareable knowledge, derived from the natural and physical sciences but applicable to all forms of knowledge, including the arts and religion. Such a common understanding does not trump the truths embodied in works of art or eternalized in religious creeds. Nor does consilient knowledge propose moral ends or absolutes. But it can provide criteria for evaluating the behaviors that are produced by various political, cultural, and religious traditions.

Consider just one example. An evolutionary understanding of our genetic natures suggests a powerful innate disposition toward trust, mutuality, cooperation, altruism. Can we not judge different cultures by, among other things, how well or how poorly they cultivate such a disposition?

That, in any case, is Wilson’s faith. And if it is false, it is also the faith that this nation’s founders embraced. Despite their differences, religious and political, they cleaved to a common basis of understanding, derived from Enlightenment science and philosophy, and that foundation continues to underwrite our most enduring institutions and practices.

No one can deny that science has often misunderstood the limits of its explanatory power, succumbing to a hubristic claim to the Truth. But hubris can be corrected without destroying the underlying confidence in the possibility of a common knowledge—or at least so one hopes. For without a common understanding, a common knowledge, prospects for coexistence among the world’s many contending truths grow precariously faint.

—Jay Tolson