

THE CORPORATE MEDIA

ETHICAL RELATIVISM & UNETHICAL ABSOLUTISM

BY J.C. DUFFIELD

When our corporate masters are caught in the act of polluting the public mind in the Mainstream Media, Public Relations rushes in to justify the ordure of the day on the grounds that the mass media are only in the nonjudgmental business of entertaining the public and so only democratically reflect the tastes of the sovereign consumer, who, in America at least, enjoys the inalienable freedom to withhold those Dollar Votes that make capitalism the best of all possible economic systems. The argument is usually clinched with the crowd pleasing observation that those foolish enough to dispute public taste are at best misguided do-gooders and at worst unpatriotic elitists preaching political correctness. The inexhaustible spectacle of human degradation does not miss a beat, and we all go home and watch it on TV; vaguely feeling perhaps that our intellectual pockets have been picked once again.

As indeed they have. The polite silence of academic departments of the humanistic disciplines notwithstanding, our philosophical tradition offers much by way of disabusing ourselves of the fallaciousness that animates the vignette just rehearsed. We must first recognize that the PR defense amounts to the protestation that the Mainstream Media have no standards of their own — moral, aesthetic, scientific or otherwise; or, which comes to the same thing, that the consuming desires of the public are the supreme arbiters of right and wrong in all that is purveyed to the public. That such a protestation of *amorality* passes as a defense against the charge of retailing immorality is itself a measure of contemporary degradation; the point of philosophical interest, however, lies in the claim that morality (or immorality) is constituted solely by the desires of the moral agent, whether private citizen or public corporation.

This is the classic standpoint of Ethical Relativism, which promotes "feelings" to the first rank; a view that popularly holds that there's nothing Good (or Bad) but thinking it's so make it so, Beauty is only in the eye of the beholder, there are no Truths, just Stories, and so on.

Philosophy has long known the fatal flaw in the exaltation of feelings: When we make feelings our ethical criterion, we have no criterion, for a criterion is precisely a rule or standard that may overrule (or confirm) the feeling of the moment, however compelling. That slavery *felt* right to so many good monotheists in the last century did not make it right; that the earth *feels* like solid ground does not make geocentrism true.

The person who thinks that Beauty is only in the eye of the beholder is not a person who will show up at the theater, let alone compose a drama, learn to act, build an auditorium, etc. — that is to say, the person who sees the Beautiful (or True, or Good) as nothing more than a mote in *his* eye is not a person who has anything worthwhile to offer to the rest of us. But criteria, ethical or otherwise, promise just such standards of worth; and "to the rest of us" demarcates human criteria as essentially *social*. (It's a *human* thing: We ought to understand...)

The Ethical Relativist's claim of justification by feelings palpably begs the question of any criterion, for it can be sensibly asked of such a claim: "Yes but what makes *your* feelings the *right* ones for all concerned?"

In spite of evident difficulties, Ethical Relativism has never enjoyed a broader currency than in today's acquisitive society, and not only as a PR pitch or even as a generic expression of egoism. In the shape of "utility" (or "marginal utility") theory, the Ethical Relativist appraisal of humanity provides the conceptual heart of the professional economic doctrine that is palmed off as bedrock *science* in the university curriculum. We are all little-contained calculi of pleasure and pain, satisfaction and dissatisfaction, runs the refrain; which adds the modest assurance that our wants are even *infinite*.

Alas, poor nature provides only limited resources to satisfy our insatiability, which dismal disparity constitutes, eternally, The Economic Problem. *Q.E.D.* The good news for the "haves" is that economic "value" (the measure of satisfaction) is thus rendered as potentially infinite as the insatiability imputed to *homo economicus*, so rendering profitability (a function of economic value) as eternal as infinity itself.

It then comes as no surprise that while Professor A declares the profit system the best of all possible expressions of Human Nature, down the hall Professor B is solemnly announcing "the end of history" on the occasion of the recent victory (by default) of aforesaid system. The bad news for the "Have-nots" is that the Rat Race, as it is affectionately known, is also rendered eternal: Since "we" can never get enough, "our" best efforts will never be good enough. In this vein Professor A can be heard intoning — no matter what the year — that this year's level of "productivity" is insufficient and that the necessity to "stay competitive" requires incessant technological innovation along with endless reorganization, regulatory reform, more math



and science education, cutbacks, downsizing, givebacks, and the like. The cyclical change in euphemisms only declares the underlying permanence of economic insecurity, revealing the hapless consumer as anything but sovereign.

The opposite but complementary extreme to Ethical Relativism, no less defective, is represented by Ethical Absolutism, which proclaims that the criterion of morality subsists independently of the human moral agency subject to that criterion. The grain of truth in Ethical Absolutism is that, as we have seen, any ethical (or otherwise) criterion worthy of the name must stand above any particular person, just as the rule of law demands that law stand above the whims of any particular individual, however important. But the Ethical Absolutist heaps his grain of truth into absolute falsehood by the further claim that the ethical (or otherwise) criterion must hold true irrespective of humanity in general, whether regarded historically or conceptually.

The Ethical Absolutist flatters himself to the effect that *he* is privy to some supra-human source of guidance, to which the commonality of humanity must submit or be damned. Indeed the most familiar and pervasive form of Ethical Absolutism in the land of the free and home of the brave is none other than the Judeo/Christian "command ethic" which piously holds that the criterion of good and evil is infallibly determined by the unfathomable dictates of an alien supernatural creator-god.

While the Ethical Absolutist is fond of casting the moral problematic into an exclusive dilemma — such that, as Plato argued in the *Euthyphro* centuries before Christianity, one must *either* be an Ethical Relativist *or else* an Ethical Absolutist — humanistic philosophy has long pointed out that the dilemma alleged is false in light of the circumstance that, taken to their logical limits, Ethical Absolutism and Ethical Relativism turn out to coincide exactly. That is to say, the failure of the divine "command ethic" to afford a *rational* ethical criterion is as complete as the failure of the profane my-x-right-or-wrong Ethical Relativist on the same score: The creator-god, said to be all powerful as well as good, or morally obligatory; for, to *state* such a Reason Why would require that the allegedly Supreme Being defer to a rationality *higher* than his mere Word, or command.

Thus both Ethical Relativism and Ethical Absolutism boil down to the identical do-it-because-I-say-so illogic of immoral tyranny, denying all rational justification. Thus it is no accident that in *Genesis 2:17* the creator-god expressly prohibited to man any *knowledge* of good and evil — a prohibition that *ipso facto* "even" the all-powerful deity was powerless to explain, lest man learn that which was prohibited — and instead relied upon (and still relies upon) the thuggish threat of individual annihilation; leaving us with fear of the Lord as the beginning of wisdom, as poor Job discovered. Similarly, the heathen Ethical Absolutist Plato, in the *Crito*, the *Republic* and elsewhere, reduced ethics for the multitude to blind obedience on the master/servant model, with Plato and kindred intellectual aristocrats issuing the commands in point.

The coincidence of Ethical Relativism and Ethical Absolutism is a demonstration that unfortunately does not limit itself to the arcana of philosophical dialectic. In contemporary America the religion of money and the money of religion have attained their historical zenith in a system of world domination that brooks no obstacle, human or environmental. Money is free speech, eminent jurists assure us, and it is left to the impolite to observe that this can be true only in a land where the dollar is almighty, a land where it just so happens that the few are freer than the many.

We hear regularly of the peccadilloes of our holy men, but nothing that would reveal that the real business of religion is the mortgaging of personal insecurity, guaranteed toward the purchase of post-mortem real estate (lots in heaven); offering the believer a pay-now-go-later plan where, conveniently, the complaint department is likewise post-mortem (*i.e.*, forever closed). Observing the corruption of the democracy invented in Athens, the ancient Greeks coined the term "sophistry" to characterize dishonest argumentation for hire to the highest bidder. The Greeks could only marvel at the complete and incorporated victory of Public Relations, the modern cure for the common truth, which has institutionalized sophistry as the dominant idiom of business, politics and religion.

Where money is freedom, plutocracy is the soul of democracy and the PR man is its priest. The Ethical Relativism peddled by PR is, by its own freely advertised terms of sale, belied by the unethical absolutism of the command of the "bottom line" of private aggrandizement. But like any "codependent" of a victorious pathology, we find our common truths unsaid, and We The People look in vain to our professional intellectuals, who mouth PR clichés about the Free Marketplace of Ideas while proving by their don't-rock-the-boat servility that what we have is but a Company Store trading in the usual lies that bind, a Theme Park whose theme is business as usual. ("The learned pate ducks to the golden fool," as Shakespeare put it.) Thus the tree of knowledge of the good and evil that molds us is as effectively foreclosed today as it was for our mythical forebears in the Garden of Eden.

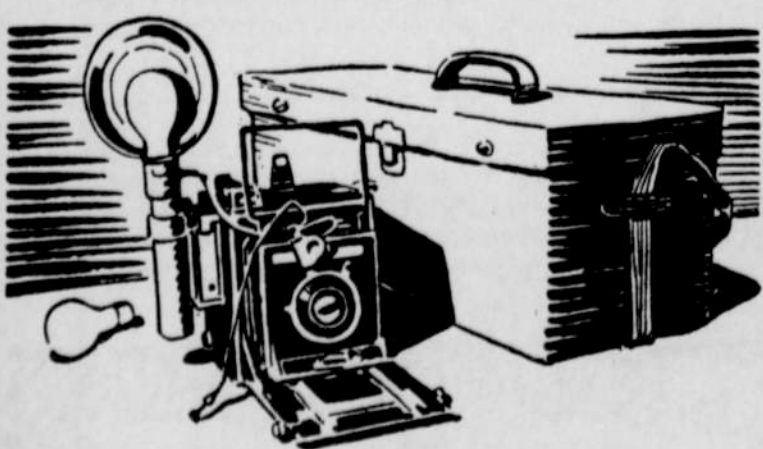
The Ethical Relativism of the mass media is relative only to the absolute degradation, moral and intellectual, of the mass. Because this degradation is an absolute demand of our corporate way of life, we should not wonder that nothing better is commonly supplied.

J.C. Duffield is a "tallish, middleaged gent, slim with a gray mustache" who is "an adjunct professor of philosophy and logic from Boise and Kansas City now appreciating walks on the beach in Ocean Park (Wash) with the wife and a new travel trailer in tow."

3 speculations

1. A sparrow unsettles the apple branch.
Burst blossoms' petals fall in avalanche.
Shall the entire tree feel a catastrophe?
2. Maybe fate is gone out of date where all the play of joy and fear and rage is acted on a stage directed by DNA: modern day prelude for some other mythology if you'd uncover a where-with-all to see.
3. When this child saw the stars through a misty sky and smiled... I ache for exemplars that can mystify.

~MIKE McCAULEY



THE COMPLEAT PHOTOGRAPHER
475 14TH ST., ASTORIA & 303 S. HOLLADAY, SEASIDE
325-0759 736-3686



1089 Marine Drive • Astoria, Oregon 97103
(503) 325-2961 Bicycle Sales & Service