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“Walking two Roads.”
Reflections on Relativism and Human Rights

Relativism, including its synonyms particularism and contextualism, lost popularity with Western thinkers in recent years. On one side of the political spectrum, Pope Benedict XVI condemned the “dictatorship of relativism”² as a fundamental evil of our time. On the other side, it is regarded, above all in the form of “cultural relativism,” as a politically-ideologically incorrect construct of thought. Nowadays, it is foremost the human rights issue which seems, as it were, to imperatively prescribe a universalistic perspective in political philosophy. Confronted with such mighty opposites, every other argumentation faces, from the beginning, considerable apologetic difficulties. In this context, it is worth noting that the word “culture,” almost indispensable for project applications about two decades ago (particularly in adjectival compounds such as “inter-cultural” or “trans-cultural”), is meanwhile rather avoided, because the term culture stands for difference: differences that universalists regard as irrelevant. Hence, any attempt to defend relativist views – defying a powerful *zeitgeist* – appears to be a forlorn endeavour from the outset³.

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² Gianni Viattimo, A “Dictatorship of Relativism”?: *Symposium in Response to Cardinal Ratzinger’s Last Homily: Introduction “Surtout Pas de Zèle”*, “Common Knowledge,” 2007, no. 13, pp. 214–218.

³ This article has been inspired by reading Marie-Luisa Frick’s article *Relativismus und Menschenrechte*, “Erwägen Wissen Ethik” 2013, no. 24, 2/2, pp. 159–172. The just quoted issue of the EWE journal contains many articles in response to Frick’s article, including an earlier version of this article in German.

I would like to dedicate the following musings on this “outmoded” topic to my friend and colleague Krzysztof Gawlikowski on the occasion of his 80th birthday, as a gesture of my appreciation for his important contribution to Sinology, and hope that my modest article will have at least some entertaining value for him.

For a cultural anthropologist like Clifford Geertz, the essence of man still lay in his cultural diversity. For Geertz, diversity was even the common factor (apart from existential problems such as eating, sleeping, sexual activity, etc.). In the meantime, however, because of the worldwide dominance of the Western model, “ideological diversity” has experienced an unprecedented “problematization”⁴. That this was not the case in the past may be illustrated only briefly by the example of Michel de Montaigne, a pioneer of modern thought in the 16th century, the inventor of the *Essays* as a literary form. In his essay *Of Cannibals*, which is still worth reading today, we are informed about then recently discovered peoples of the New World who were presented in Europe in a circus at the time:

I find that there is nothing barbarous and savage in this nation, by anything that I can gather, excepting, that everyone gives the title of barbarism to everything that is not in use in his own country. As, indeed, we have no other level of truth and reason than the example and idea of the opinions and customs of the place wherein we live: there is always the perfect religion, there the perfect government, there the most exact and accomplished usage of all things. They are savages, at the same rate that we say fruits are wild, which nature produces of herself and by her own ordinary progress; whereas, in truth, we ought rather to call those wild whose natures we have changed by our artifice and diverted from the common order⁵.

Montaigne’s reflections on the “level of truth and reason” by which we judge unfamiliar phenomena are no less relevant today than they were 450 years ago. Furthermore, Montaigne is known for his skeptical attitude (which goes back to Sextus Empiricus), according to which one should better abstain

4 M.L. Frick, p. 159f.

5 *Of Cannibals* (ch. XXX), *Essays of Michel de Montaigne*, trans. Charles Cotton, 1877, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3600/3600-h/3600-h.htm#link2HCH0030> [accessed: 21.03.2020].