

Of truth, tolerance and tyranny

Phil Miles

Across the desert of truth to the river of dreams

It had happened again! The forces of intolerance had lined themselves up against everything good and noble, and so the future of a civilization hung in the balance. Cold, unfeeling logic—in the person of an alien with an axe to grind—was all set to eradicate an extra-terrestrial society's entire heritage of art and culture. Apparently this guy believed that society would run a lot more efficiently in the absence of the quixotic world of emotion—better to do things on a sound *rational* basis. Once all that touchy-feely stuff had been wiped from the archives, he could set about building a more efficient and cost-effective society, even if that sometimes meant forcing people to do things against their will.

I hardly need to tell you how this all ended, and how a civilization was saved from tyranny by the triumph of tolerance. After all, the same story-line is being constantly repeated wherever we turn. This



time it was a late-night sci-fi episode on TV, but similar versions can be found in movies, books, cartoons or Billy Joel songs¹—not to mention more scholarly sources. It is everywhere around us!

What exactly is this story? Basically it is about two worlds in conflict. On the one hand we have *tyranny*, which—according to this scenario—is built on intolerance, and consists of constrictive attitudes to life, hierarchical social structures or even outright political oppression. At the heart of all

¹ The title of this section comes from the song 'The river of dreams'; on Billy Joel's album *River of Dreams* released 1993.

8 | tyranny, in turn, is a particular attitude to *truth*. This is one which sees it as an absolute, unopen to reinterpretation or compromise—as something, indeed, which can even be forced upon others. On the other hand, we have *tolerance*. This is the world of the undogmatic acceptance of difference, of emotional sensitivity, of the arts and cultural diversity. The critical commitment here is to a non-dogmatic understanding of truth—one which sees it in appropriately contextual and flexible terms. These two worlds, these two ways of seeing, are battling for supremacy in the life of the individual and of society as a whole.

Clearly, this is an important story, of even mythic proportions. It tells us who we are as heirs of the Enlightenment, as keepers of the dream of Western civilization. And so it is repeated incessantly on the wooden drums and around the campfires of our culture.

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But is this myth true, even in the broadest sense of that word? Does it teach useful things about the shape of the world we live in? Does it offer helpful perspectives on how we should live our own lives, or order social relationships in the real world?

Even to ask such a question would seem presumptuous in light of the status

which this story has achieved (i.e. unsailable religious dogma). Nonetheless, my contention in this article is that the answer is, in fact, “No”. The world is not as it is portrayed in this story. The reality of the situation is just the *opposite* of what we have been led to believe. Put simply, tyranny is not the inevitable outcome of an absolutist view of truth but is, rather, the direct product of *relativism*. Likewise, tolerance arises not from relativism but from the very thing which our society anathematizes—the belief in absolutes.

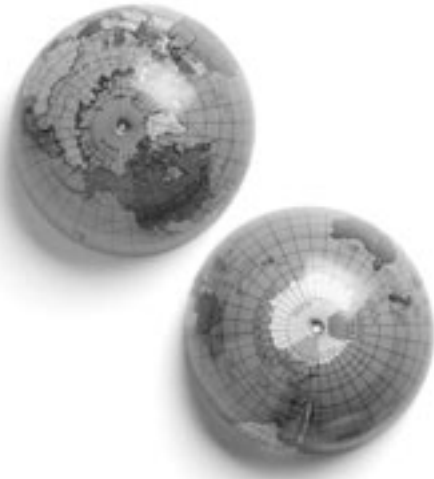
Even to believers in absolute truth this claim may seem rather extreme. Christians, for instance, have tended to accept the basic terms of the argument about tolerance as laid down by our culture, and have then tried to find some reasonable position within that framework. Thus there are those who assert that the gospel is primarily about acceptance and tolerance—and that the ‘strands of evidence’ in it which entail a commitment to absolutes can be disregarded accordingly. On the other hand, there are many who don’t feel able to ignore the claims of absolute truth, and thus believe they must resign themselves to being out of step with modern society’s commitment to tolerance.

But what if the terms of the debate over tolerance are themselves open to debate? Surely this possibility needs to be considered. In this article, I wish to maintain that the whole story of the battle between tyranny and tolerance has been set up on false premises. This problem is due, in large part, to inadequacies in the whole Enlightenment programme.

One of the distinctives of Enlightenment thinking has been the division of the world into two basic categories by which we classify our experience. These form two watertight compartments, two aspects of reality that stand in sharp contrast to one another. Philosopher Francis Schaeffer refers to these as the 'lower' and 'upper' storeys.² The lower storey is the area of absolutes; of objectivity and logical thought, of science and truth. The upper storey, correspondingly, is the world of non-absolutes; of subjectivity and emotion, of the arts and culture. The details of the contents have changed over the centuries—as has the assessment of which category is preferable over the other—but the basic belief is still all-pervasive that things in one category do not relate directly to those in the other.

Of course, if tyranny is classified in the lower storey and relativism in the upper, then at a fundamental metaphysical level they simply cannot impinge upon one other. They are logically discrete. On the other hand, if tyranny and objective truth are both denizens of the lower storey then we are well on our way to finding the cause of tyranny in the world.

But if the world is fundamentally different from what the Enlightenment has led us to believe, then all sorts of other possibilities must be considered. In this article I cannot deal with these issues in any depth, but the



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possibility that various Enlightenment assumptions are incorrect is fundamental to what I will be saying about truth, tolerance and tyranny. At the very least, if we can entertain the possibility that the world might be structured in ways other than the Enlightenment has proposed, then we will be able to look at the actual evidence in new and more fertile ways.

We will begin our discussion by looking at the shape of Japanese society. We will then move slowly through some Western cultures, examining firstly European Fascism, then contemporary American life, and lastly the situation in Australia today.

² See, for instance, Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, first published Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1968, Section Two, Chapter Two, 'Modern mysticism: despair beyond despair'.

10 **In the beginning was the sword**

Westerners have a hard time trying to make sense of Japan. It just won't seem to come into focus. On the one hand there is the world of exquisite brush paintings, haiku poetry and geishas stepping daintily



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beneath clouds of cherry blossom. On the other hand there is the world of business and politics, of powerful corporations, ruthless economic practices and endless political machinations. To the Western mind, these two worlds just shouldn't be together. They represent two opposing aspects of reality which we must choose between, not expect to find in peaceful co-existence. Because they *do* exist so closely together in Japan, the culture is inevitably labelled an 'enigma', 'mysterious' or 'inscrutable'.

The problem, however, lies not with Japan, but with Enlightenment ways of understanding the world. If we carefully examine life in Japan, we will find that these two aspects of its experience simply form two sides of the same coin. They are mutually related in a number of significant ways and, furthermore, have co-existed in Japan for centuries.

The same can be said for the specific issues of relativism and tyranny (which are

not unrelated to the more visible aspects of Japanese culture). As Westerners, we may not expect these two realities to be deeply interrelated, but the reality of Japanese society is that they are.

Modern Japan may not be a country we immediately associate with tyranny, yet Japanese society is in fact extremely tyrannical. It gives little recognition to individual freedom. One reason we may not notice its tyrannical nature is that there is no single dictator in charge. This does not mean, however, that power relationships work along anything other than tyrannical lines. Tyranny can exist in a number of forms, and we need to be aware of what they are.

In Japan, tyranny manifests itself in at least a couple of ways. In the first place, there is that of general social pressure. Even

without specific sanctions from above, there can be incredible pressure generated by society at large to do what is expected, on the threat of ostracism from a particular group or even society as a whole. Strong social pressure is a basic fact of life in Japan, and all Japanese are keenly aware of it. There is little freedom to do as one wishes in many areas of life, and even the most trivial details can be predetermined by social expectations.

Secondly, there are the formal power arrangements by which the society functions. In Japan, power is mainly in the hands of what is called the 'iron triangle'—the triad of elected government, big business and the bureaucracy. Of these three, there is no one group which is in the ascendancy—though, if anything, elected government is the weakest. This enormous power, furthermore, is wielded in an oppressive manner. Again, there is no need to picture this in terms of dictators and jack-boots. Things are done a lot more subtly in Japan, but the salient fact is that those who hold power use it to control the lives of those beneath them. There is no strong tradition, for instance, of elected officials being 'servants' of the people. Rather, the people are seen as existing to serve the state. The same is true within the company or whatever group to which you may belong. This necessity to conform your actions to the expectations of those above you in the system is a reality which pervades all aspects of life for Japanese people.

Japan is, furthermore, a land where relativism prevails. It is a society where 'truth' and 'morality' are understood only

in relative terms. There are no words in common usage for moral 'right' and 'wrong', as we understand those concepts in the West. What is 'right' all depends on

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the situation in which you find yourself, and that is purely a matter of social expectation or your position in the power structure. Japanese, therefore, are very adept at assessing what is required in a situation and acting accordingly. This is often misinterpreted by Westerners as duplicity, but it is simply the way life must be lived where all is relative. Truth itself becomes merely a



12 | social construct. If everybody believes something to be true, or if the powers that be say that it is, then for the practical purposes of daily life, it *is* true. As the Japanese say, it's safe to cross against a red light if everyone does it together.

A belief in absolute truth gives you some objective grounds on which to assess what is happening in society, and to enlist others in creating whatever changes are morally required.

How, then, are these two realities related in Japan? How can it subscribe to relativism, which to Western thinking is almost synonymous with tolerance, and yet be so tyrannical in its social and political makeup? Space doesn't permit an adequate analysis, but a few salient points can be made.

In the first place, the Japanese experience shows how relativism *permits* the rise of tyranny. It creates intellectual conditions in which tyranny can arise and prosper. Specifically, without any objectively true moral standards prior to, or outside of, a particular social arrangement, there can be no basis on which to critique even the unfettered exercise of political power.

For one thing, even if you yourself feel there is something morally objectionable to what is going on, relativism makes it impossible to move much beyond that point. This is because it is impossible to



present a case in the public arena to which others are bound to listen, least of all those wielding power. What is 'true for you', in other words, has no public significance whatsoever. A belief in absolute truth gives you some objective grounds on which to assess what is happening in society, and to enlist others in creating whatever changes are morally required. If all truth is relative, then you have no formal basis on which to do this.

But why would you think that some aspect of society was morally wrong in the first place? Such a conclusion demands a premise which holds true independent of the contingencies of any one social arrangement, but that is the very thing relativism *cannot* provide. Thus, if you are a member of a society with a long tradition of relativism, it may be hard to even

project your thinking beyond the *status quo* in the first place. Of course you may not *like* what you are experiencing, but relativism doesn't give you the intellectual tools necessary to think beyond that point. If anything, it will tell you that the fault must lie with *you* for failing to adapt to the situation in which you find yourself. In the end, what 'is' is 'right', and the citizens of such a society can no more offer a cogent moral critique of their experiences than pull themselves up by their own bootlaces.

All of this may be difficult for Westerners to get their minds around, but it quite aptly describes the Japanese experience. Japan is a society which functions on the basis of the exercise of political and economic power unfettered by any moral considerations. At times it can be extremely oppressive of the individual, and yet its people cannot and do not offer any critique of it from a strictly moral point of view. Relativism simply does not speak that language. What moral sense there is, is inevitably couched in terms of the responsibility of the individual to conform to the demands of the group. Thus the group itself takes on the role of point of reference for all decision making.

Karel van Wolferen has written on this issue:

To sum up what is most crucial in Japanese political culture: the Japanese have never been encouraged to think that the force of an idea could measure up to the physical forces of a government. The key

to understanding Japanese power relations is that they are unregulated by transcendental concepts. The public has no intellectual means to a consistent judgement of the political aspects of life. The weaker, ideologically inspired political groups or individuals have no leverage of any kind over the *status quo* other than the little material pressure they are sometimes able to muster. In short, Japanese political practice is a matter of 'might is right' disguised by assurances and tokens of 'benevolence'.³

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Granted that relativism may in some way provide fertile soil in which tyranny can grow, do we need to concede that things will *necessarily* move in that direction? Weeds will grow in any garden, but if we are vigilant we can surely keep them at bay. Certainly, those in the West who believe in the fundamental goodness of

3 Karel van Wolferen, *The Enigma of Japanese Power: People and Politics in a Stateless Nation*, Charles E. Tuttle Company, Rutland, Vermont and Tokyo, 1993 (first Tuttle edition), p. 320. Much of what I say in this section is indebted to this very important book. It will repay careful reading by anyone interested in the issues covered in this article.

14 | man would expect it to shine through despite the temptations to tyranny which relativism might conceivably involve. An examination of the Japanese situation, however, indicates that such a hope is unfounded. Whatever your views on the goodness of human nature, the fact is that in the context of relativism, society cannot function at all without some degree of tyranny. In other words, relativism not only *permits* tyranny, it *requires* it. This can be seen at both the social and political levels, which we will now consider in turn.

meaning of monetary transactions, ownership of property, and the role of the individual in society. Without some form of unifying point of reference, even such everyday social transactions become fraught with difficulty.

Where all is relative, however, what will happen to normal social relationships? Clearly, they are in danger of becoming so fluid as to be impossibly difficult. If there is no predictable pattern to what the members of a society believe or value, then social relationships beyond those with immediate family or close friends become next to impossible. Under the circumstances, civil society will collapse, unless some other unifying factor can be found.

One answer to this problem is to focus on the standardization of external behaviour. No matter what people may *think* on all kinds of issues, as long as they *act* in predictable ways, society can function. In other words, you may believe as you wish about almost anything, as long as this doesn't interfere with the way you act in public. The content of this behaviour, of course, is not up to the individual to determine—that would only take us back to the original problem. Rather, it must be set by society as a whole. This can only mean a serious restriction of personal freedom, because life must become enormously regimented in order for society to run smoothly.

This dislocation of thought and practice may seem quite foreign to Westerners used to a culture built on biblical absolutes, but it is a natural outworking of relativism. Thus in Japan, issues of behaviour take precedence over questions of belief. In fact,

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In the first place, if we turn to everyday social interactions, we can see what a threat relativism is to the smooth functioning of society. Human society, by its very nature, cannot exist in a state of chaos. For one thing, it needs some form of unifying point around which daily human interactions can be integrated. Where there is a commitment to absolute truth—and at least some consensus as to what that truth actually is—then everyday relationships can be carried out on the basis of the predictability which that provides. Even going down to the shop to buy an ice-cream is an extremely complex affair which can involve a whole range of beliefs about the



for the average person, the issue of how you act in public is one which takes precedence over almost every other aspect of life. Children are brought up to adjust their behaviour to surrounding expectations—“What would the neighbours think?” being the basic educational dictum. Adults spend their lives trying to both assess what is expected in particular situations, and adjust their behaviour accordingly.

Not that it is simply left up to individual effort. There are all manner of informal pressures to ensure that everyone acts predictably. For one thing, Japan is a land of endless instructions. Everything from what shoes to wear to work, to how to behave at a funeral, has been thought out for you in advance and is then explained in ample detail. The rules themselves, of course, may be fairly arbitrary (what else could you expect if there is no absolute truth?), but conformity to them is an absolute. Refusal to conform is not treated lightly, as it is a threat

to the well-ordered functioning of society.

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What you *believe* in all this is largely irrelevant. As long as you maintain the formal rituals of the group, you can pretty well believe what you like. This sounds like a recipe for intellectual freedom, but in such a context it actually becomes extremely difficult to believe much about anything—which is one reason Japanese exchange students have trouble saying what they would like to do with their host families! Quite naturally, Japanese society places little emphasis on the life of the mind. The entire education system itself is more about teaching the young to conform to the group, than equipping them with intellectual skills. What is taught does tend to promote an overwhelming conformity of belief and outlook, but the ‘genius’ of the system is its ability to create members of society who don’t sense any vital connection between thought and life. In the end, the predominant emphasis of life in Japan is on the unceasing and detailed conformity of the individual to the expectations of society.

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One thing that needs to be noted in that regard is that Western intellectuals seem to have little awareness of these realities. Discussions of the social possibilities of relativism often seem built on the belief that this brave new world will be led by the

16 | intellectuals themselves. One often gets the distinct impression that the society they envisage is a sort of ‘university campus writ large’, where all the values of a liberal education will be enshrined in society as a whole. The Japanese experience, however, indicates that this is but a pipe-dream. Once you enter the realm of relativism, the role of the



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intellectual becomes redundant. In the West, where there has been a traditional commitment to absolutes of truth and morality, the intellectual world has been valued accordingly. Issues of belief have been understood to be prior to practice, and thus indispensable to the formation of a well-ordered society. Once you move into relativism, however, the very meaning of intellectual endeavour is called into question. Practice becomes prior to belief. Thus throughout Japanese history the power of the sword has been consistently seen as greater than the power of the pen.

We have thus seen how, at an informal level, relativism leads to great restriction on the freedom of the individual. We need now to consider the effect of relativism on the formal structures of society. Here again we see that relativism not only permits tyranny, but requires it.

Take, for instance, the issue of settling disputes. How does a society resolve disputes between its members in the absence of, say, absolute standards of justice? How do you determine who is in the right and who needs to be punished? Even if we imagine a society made up of the most well-intentioned people, there must inevitably be some need of government intervention in regard to disputes between them—such as over ownership of property or fault in the case of accident. If civil society is not going to simply slip into chaos, then the state must find some way of dealing with these disputes.

The gist of the matter is that in the absence of objective standards the only real alternative is to make the state *itself* an absolute. In that context the ultimate crime is to cause social disharmony—of which disputes between individuals form

one instance. It thus follows that it is the dispute itself which needs to be punished as a disturbance of social harmony, rather than 'justice' being meted out to both parties. Both parties may need to be punished for their involvement in a dispute, regardless of what Westerners would consider the justice of the result. Of course, a lot may depend on the relative position of the parties in the structure of society. Those with important positions will be treated more leniently. Those with the least power or influence will be treated the most severely. To do otherwise would be to cast a slur on society itself, in which 'absolute' value rests. Those with the most importance in society *must* be treated with the most honour, if social order is to be maintained.



It goes without saying that all of this must be extremely restrictive of the freedom of the average member of society. The state itself has become the absolute, and in practical terms it is able to be extremely intrusive in the life of the individual.

Again, this way of doing things may not be congenial to Western ways of thinking, but it is how things actually work in modern Japan. Western concepts of justice have had their impact, but often they end up being no more than window dressing. Relativism remains the key ideological commitment of Japanese society, and its patterns of life are shaped accordingly. Thus, individuals involved in disputes may be treated in ways that Westerners would consider quite unjust. For instance, if you are hit by a car while using a pedestrian crossing, you may well be held partly to blame for this upset to social order, and treated accordingly (though it all depends on who you are or who you know, who the other party is and so on).

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As I have indicated, the end result of this state of affairs is a restriction of personal freedom, especially for those at the bottom of society. False arrest and punishment are far from uncommon in Japan (usually involving 'confessions' gained

18 | under duress). The logic of this is that the fact that someone gets punished for a crime sends an important signal to society at large. Whether that someone was actually the guilty party or not is a lesser issue. Another factor is that if an arrested person turned out to be innocent, this would reflect badly on the police force and the government as a whole. Such a turn of events could only be a threat to social order, and so if you are arrested in Japan you are almost certain to be found guilty.



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themselves think it but a small price to pay to avoid falling into utter social chaos.

Even if you don't get entangled in some run-in with the police or the courts, your freedom will be severely limited by the *fear* of doing so. Most Japanese live lives thoroughly imbued with the desire to 'not get involved', and this can be very restrictive of freedom of action and association. But without any recognition of absolutes beyond the state, it is hard to see how things could be any different. In other words, relativism *requires* fairly arbitrary coercion by the state in order to maintain social harmony. The lives of individuals may become severely circumscribed by this process, but the Japanese

Much more could be said, but I trust my main point is starting to become clear. The experience of Japan indicates how relativism in truth and morality can be intimately associated with the exercise of tyrannical power and the oppression of the individual. Relativism not only creates intellectual conditions in which it is extremely difficult to guard against the rise of tyranny, it also creates social conditions which *require* some form of tyranny. This may be at the level of informal social relationships, or in the way the state is run from above. Clearly, then, it is over-optimistic for Western intellectuals to hope that a philosophy of relativism is going to

usher in a world of liberty and tolerance.

Whatever might be said about the Japanese context, though, it *is* a different culture, and perhaps there are factors in our own history which would render us immune from some of the realities of Japanese life. To explore the issue more adequately, therefore, we need to move a little closer to home—to Fascist Europe.

Il Duce ha sempre ragione

European Fascism was a Romantic movement, a movement born aloft on the wings of art and song, and ultimately dedicated to the triumph of the human spirit over all that entangles it and binds it to the world of the everyday.

A number of reactions to the above statement are possible. You may have found it distasteful because it seems to be speaking positively of a movement which led to the death of millions. Alternatively, you might conclude that I have no idea what I'm talking about—driven mad, perhaps, by too much study. Or perhaps you feel it's no doubt meant as some kind of strange joke. Whatever your reaction, however, it is unlikely that you gave this statement your immediate unqualified assent. Yet, strange as it may seem, what I have written is actually, historically true.

What is going on here? If there's one thing modern people know, it's that Fascism stands for brutality and oppression, not art and beauty. To call someone a Fascist today is *not* to accuse them of being a patron of the arts! Fascism was (and is) simply an attitude of mechanical

brutishness, bent on the destruction of all the finer aspects of human life—and even of life itself.

On the other hand, to say that something is 'Romantic' is surely, by definition, to say that it is good. It is common knowledge in the modern world that everything to do with the 'higher' aspects of human life is to be applauded. To describe the barbarity of Fascist Europe as 'Romantic', therefore, sounds at least self-contradictory, if not somewhat morally improper.

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If we want to understand Fascism, better to look for its roots in the intolerant 'lower storey' of absolutes and dogmatism. Take, for example, the work of Alice Miller. In regard to the roots of Nazism she writes that Germans:

had been raised to be obedient, had grown up in an atmosphere of duty and Christian virtues; they had to learn at a very early age to repress their hatred and their needs. And now along came a man who did not question the underpinnings of this bourgeois morality... someone who... put the obedience that had been instilled in them to good use, who never confronted them with searching questions or inner crises,

but instead provided them with a universal means for finally being able to live out in a thoroughly acceptable and legal way the hatred they had been repressing all their lives.⁴

The fact of the matter is that Fascism was both a Romantic movement and also extremely tyrannical.

In other words, the problems of Fascism began with certain child-rearing practices based on 'bourgeois morality' (read 'a belief in absolutes') derived from Christianity.

But are these attitudes adequate, or do they simply represent the prejudices of modern Enlightenment thought? The fact of the matter is that Fascism was both a Romantic movement and also extremely tyrannical. Furthermore, these two realities are in *no way contradictory*. The problem lies not with my original statement, but with the inadequacies of modern Enlightenment thought.

In order to untangle this knot we need to look carefully at Fascism as an historical phenomenon. We will thus first of all look at its ideological roots, and then touch briefly on its tyrannical character. Lastly we

4 Alice Miller, *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-Rearing and the Roots of Violence*, tr. Hildegarde Hannum and Hunter Hannum, Noonday Press, New York, 1983, p. 187. (Quoted in Dana Mack, *The Assault on Parenthood: How Our Culture Undermines the Family*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1997, pp. 40-41.)

will consider how these two realities are to be reconciled. It will soon become clear that we are up against issues very similar to those we encountered in our discussion of Japan. Specifically, we are again looking at a situation where tyranny occurs as the natural concomitant of relativism.

Fascism was a 'Romantic' movement in the sense that its ideological roots lay in the many Romantic movements which developed in Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These often began in fairly elite circles but eventually came to influence many aspects of European life and culture. Fundamental to these movements, including Fascism, was the rejection of rationalism and traditional conceptions of truth and morality. In particular, traditional Christian dogma was rejected as stultifying to the higher ethical impulses of mankind. In its place there developed an approach to life and morality that was at once



mystical, emotional and idealistic.

This rejection of absolutes naturally led to the development of movements which were both extremely eclectic and highly vague about their central commitments—a fact which unfortunately makes any analysis of Fascism itself less than straightforward. For one thing, the Fascist movement owed much to a wide variety of ideologies, including Ariosophy,⁵ Futurism, the occult, philosophical idealism, and German *Völkisch*⁶ thought. It was likewise a many-faceted movement itself, with important differences of emphasis existing from country to country. Attempts to summarize the essential content of Fascism are, therefore, invariably long and detailed with numerous notes of exceptions to the norm.

Nonetheless, its overall character as a Romantic movement is clear. Generally speaking, it was characterized by an emphasis on vitalistic ideas concerned with breaking the bonds of the past and moving forward to an heroic future, both individually and as a community. Thus it particularly concerned itself with the whole emotive aspect of human experience. For instance, there was a great emphasis placed on the arts in Fascist thought. Hitler himself had an artistic background and is quoted as saying

5 A mystical version of Aryan Supremacy philosophy.

6 *Völkisch* thought was a stream in German intellectual life which looked to the common people and rural life for inspiration and moral values. It tended toward a sort of nature mysticism. Ironically, it's probably fair to say that the main legacy we have from that movement is the Volkswagen—originally Hitler's car for the common man.

'art is the only truly enduring investment of human labour'. Throughout the development of Fascism, therefore, he and others made great use of all the arts in order to achieve the ends of the movement. The end goal was no less than the creation of a 'new man' and a new social reality.

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What we are looking at here, of course, is *relativism*. Fascism, in common with previous Romantic movements, rejected traditional ideas of truth and morality, which pictured man as bound by external, objective standards. It began, instead, with the concept of 'Man as the measure of all things' and combined that with a sense of moral guidance based not on standards of rationality, but on various cultural and expressive norms. Thus, Fascism was very much in the 'upper storey' as far as Enlightenment categories are concerned.

Having outlined the character of Fascism as a Romantic movement, we next need to touch on its tyrannical nature. It is unnecessary to go into detail about this topic because the horrific events which occurred under Fascism are still very

22 | much part of our culture's memory. We have all been exposed to numerous movies, books and television programmes which document the horrors of Fascism in general, and German National Socialism in particular. Indeed it has almost reached the point where the two words 'Fascism' and 'tyranny' are synonymous.

One fact which needs to be noted, however, is that the tyrannical nature of the Fascist experience was by no means limited to the excesses of the concentration camps. There was, in fact, a widespread restriction of personal freedom experienced by all those living under Fascism, including the German people themselves. This may not sound very significant in comparison to the events of the holocaust, but it is nonetheless a reality which we need to bear in mind in assessing the movement as a whole.



in different cultural forms.

The first issue, of course, is that if you reject an objective understanding of truth and morality, you put yourself in the position of being unable to offer any convincing critique of what goes on in society. Simply put, if there are no absolute moral boundaries then anyone can go out and do what they like. If you combine that relativism with concepts of the creative human struggle to forge new realities, then you are not very far from the terrors of the holocaust.

Not very far, but not there yet. The rejection of moral absolutes certainly might lead you into some form of moral chaos, where some might feel free to commit all manner of 'immoral' acts, and which a strong leader could use to impose tyrannical rule on a society. In other words relativism can *permit* tyranny. For that reason alone we need to be wary of it, but it is not the whole story. What we are

Simply put, if there are no absolute moral boundaries then anyone can go out and do what they like.

The next question is, of course, the critical one. How can we reconcile these two realities? How can a commitment to Romantic ideals co-exist with the tyranny which existed under Fascism? Counter-intuitive as this may all seem, however, our discussion of modern Japan has already given us some clues to an answer. In fact, if we look carefully at European Fascism we will see the same basic issues arising, albeit

looking at with Fascism is something bigger. We are looking at the fact that relativism *requires* tyranny. As we have already noted, no society can function without some form of fixed point around which to integrate itself. If it has rejected moral absolutes in favour of relativism, then some new point of integration *must* be found. If we are to understand Fascism and the tyranny to which it led, then we need to grapple adequately with this fact.

The obvious candidate for this role is *society itself*; not so much understood as an entity made up of individuals (which would simply return us to the original problem), but society as something ontologically prior to the people within it. In this way it can become the integrating point of reference for all human conduct. After all, any society exists prior to the birth of particular individuals into it, and it is not hard to see it as logically and morally prior to their needs or desires. This is, in fact, the view of the state which Fascism espoused. Thus one popular Nazi slogan was *Gemeinnutz geht vor Eigennutz*

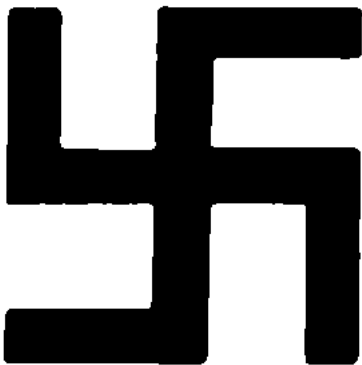
(the common good before the individual good). Of course, such a statement may be given fairly innocent interpretations, but what it meant in the context of

Once the state becomes ultimate, all sorts of other issues fall into place.

Fascism was that the individual exists for the good of the state, not *vice versa*. Thus we see how the tyranny of the state over the individual can begin.

Once the state becomes ultimate, all sorts of other issues fall into place. Naturally, the ultimate duty of all its members is to live and die for the good of the state, whatever their own personal desires or ethical convictions. Thus, personal behaviour must be judged simply by the extent to which it promotes the needs of the state. In particular, obedience to its laws and the directives of its official representatives becomes of paramount importance. In such a context, “I was only following orders” is not just a weak attempt to excuse immoral behaviour. Rather, it is a statement which reveals the inner logic of a particular moral universe—a system of belief and practice where morality is not absolute but relative to the needs of human society and its structure of authority.

This is not dissimilar to the Japanese experience, but unlike Japan, Fascist ideas were often conveyed using concepts of ‘truth’, which still remained part of the cultural vocabulary of wartime Europe. Thus



24 | we encounter such significant formulations as *Il Duce ha sempre ragione* (Mussolini is always right). Here we have the traditional vocabulary of truth being used to express a totally radical idea. This slogan is not saying that Mussolini as an individual isn't prone to error. Rather, it is indicating that Mussolini as the embodiment of the state is not to be questioned, indeed logically speaking *cannot* be questioned. There is after all, no reality beyond the state by which its leader can be called to account.



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Fascism is, of course, famous for its cult of the leader, and our understanding of the tyrannical nature of Fascism often tends to focus on the person of Hitler or Mussolini. It is the role of the dictator in Fascism as the *embodiment of the state*, however, which deserves our attention. The Fascist leader, despite great personal power, could never function successfully in a totally arbitrary way. As the symbol of the state he had to function within the bounds laid down by that ideology. There is a common tendency to blame the events of the Fascist period on a few powerful leaders, but due consideration must also be given to the social ideology which gave them that power in the first place.

Having established the 'moral' responsibility of members of society to conform to the needs of the state, however, there is also the need to ensure that they actually *do* this. Without some consistency of behaviour it will still be difficult for the state to function properly. Thus obedience can't be simply left up to the good graces of the individual. It becomes part of the prerogatives of the state to *ensure* obedience. Here also we can see the oppressive nature of life in a society which has rejected objective values. In the absence of some objective moral basis of appeal to the individual, there are really only two other options—brute force or emotional manipulation, neither of which require recourse to concepts of truth or morality.

The use of brute force is something we would naturally label as a clear example of tyranny, and such repression was a common aspect of Fascist society before and during

the war years. The other approach, however, is more subtle—but not any less tyrannical for all that. One of the more distinctive aspects of the Fascist regimes was their use of propaganda and all manner of emotional persuasion in order to bring the individual into line with the needs of the state. This usage was a direct outworking of the Romantic presuppositions of Fascist ideology. Fascism itself was, after all, a rejection of a rationalism in favour of idealism and the primacy of the emotions. Correspondingly, Fascist propaganda rejected communicating ‘facts’ in favour of moving the emotions of the populace in order to create an atmosphere of willing and un-self-critical obedience to the demands of the state.

By now I trust it is becoming clear how relativism leads to tyranny, how Romanticism leads eventually to the terrors of the holocaust. It is not so much that in a moral vacuum everyone does what is right in their own eyes. Rather it is that in the absence of absolutes, society itself must take on that role, if people are to live and work together in an orderly fashion. Once the state has been made absolute, all individual needs and desires become subservient to its requirements. Morality, such as it is, becomes totally subsumed to the needs of the state. For those living in such a context, that can mean the devaluation of human life and the growing oppression of the individual. If you are deemed the enemy of the state, there can be no mercy. Thus when the state is ultimate, any amount of repression, military aggression, or even human

slaughter becomes possible—indeed may be ‘morally’ imperative within the terms of an ethic which has turned its back on objective values.

The key issue for our discussion in this article is the consistent modern failure to recognize Fascism as an Enlightenment movement.

Before leaving the topic of Fascism we need to return to the issue of its current analysis. What we have seen so far shows there is a yawning chasm between the realities of Fascism as an historical movement and what people today *think* it stood for. The key issue for our discussion in this article is the consistent modern failure to recognise Fascism as an Enlightenment movement.

One approach is simply to deny that there was any underlying rationale to what occurred in, say, war-time Germany. This is the approach which blames the events on a few evil people who had some sort of mysterious power to bend others to their will. Of course, if we want to ensure that such awful tyranny never occurs again, we must guard against that kind of person ever again taking charge in society. Needless to say, such an interpretation is totally out of touch with the realities of how Fascism developed and how society functioned under it. Indeed, it fails to see that *no* society can function long

26 | simply according to the power of a strong leader. Thus to blame Hitler for all that occurred under Nazism is to miss the significance of philosophical commitments current at the time, and the way these shaped the attitudes and behaviour of *all* within that society.⁷



To blame Hitler for all that occurred under Nazism is to miss the significance of philosophical commitments current at the time, and the way these shaped the attitudes and behaviour of all within that society.

Fascism ever again rearing its ugly head is to guard against the cultural influence of Christianity, or any other ideology committed to absolute truth and morality.

The fact of the matter, however, is that Fascism was very much a child of the Enlightenment. Specifically, it represented a commitment to the ‘upper storey’. As Stanley G. Payne has written in this regard:

Many commentators on Fascism, of course, do realize the importance of ideological commitments. Even serious discussions, however, often fail to recognize just what these were in the case of European Fascism. One popular approach, as seen with Alice Miller, is to blame everything on Christianity—its commitment to absolutes in general and its anti-semitism in particular. *Ipsa facto*, the way to avoid

Fascist ideas have often been said to stem from opposition to the Enlightenment or the “ideas of 1789”, when in fact they were a direct by-product of aspects of the Enlightenment, derived specifically from the modern, secular, Promethean concepts of the eighteenth century. The essential divergence of Fascist ideas from certain aspects of modern culture lay more precisely in the Fascist rejection of rationalism, materialism, and egalitarianism—replaced by philosophical vitalism and idealism and the

7 A recent offering is a newspaper article entitled ironically ‘Remembering the Blitzkrieg arms us for future’ (sic), in which we read “No, Hitler was a destroyer of nations, a genocidal murderer, an evil monstrosity seething behind a mask of human flesh”. (Jack Anderson and Jan Moller; *Mainichi Daily News*, 1 May 2000, p 2.) This is neither remembering, nor arming ourselves, for the future.

metaphysics of the will, all of which are intrinsically modern.⁸

The need to divest ourselves of any sense of cultural responsibility for Fascism has no doubt had a profound impact on the West's reflection on this area of its history. Yet if we are to be wise in the present we must be honest about what has gone on in the past—not just the bare events, but the ideology which made them possible. This is especially true in light of the fact that Western interest has once again swung

⁸ Stanley G. Payne, *A History of Fascism, 1914-1945*, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, Wisconsin, 1995, p 8.

away from the scientific rationalism of the 'lower storey' to the irrationalism of the upper. Our survey of both modern Japan and European Fascism should warn us not to take these developments lightly. We need now to consider those, and turn firstly to the United States and developments there since the "swinging sixties". ☒

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He continues this article in the next issue of *katgoria*.