

# Moral Relativism and Moral Fanaticism

In high school, Ayn Rand convinced me that moral relativism was a grave social problem. Not in the weak sense that, “If everyone were moral relativists, there would be bad consequences,” but in the strong sense that, “Moral relativism has terrible consequences already.” Soon afterwards, I read Paul Johnson’s *Modern Times*, and he reinforced my Randian belief. In Johnson’s words:

*At the beginning of the 1920s the belief began to circulate, for the first time at a popular level, that there were no longer any absolutes: of time and space, of good and evil, of knowledge, above all of value. Mistakenly but perhaps inevitably, relativity became confused with relativism.*

Johnson then proceeds to interpret the world from the 1920s to the 1980s through the lens of moral relativism. Moral relativism leads to Marxism-Leninism, fascism, Nazism, and World War II, as well as the barbaric wars of “national liberation” and the subsequent petty tyrannies.

Over time, however, I’ve almost completely changed my mind. While I definitely think that moral relativism is *false*, I no longer think that moral relativism has grave geopolitical consequences. Instead, I say that the horrors that Johnson describes were heavily driven by what I call *moral fanaticism*. And the same goes for our contemporary political landscape. The vast majority of liberals and conservatives are much closer to moral fanaticism than moral relativism.

What exactly is moral fanaticism? Like moral relativism, moral fanaticism is a *meta-ethical* theory – a theory about moral facts and moral reasoning. Moral relativism says, roughly, that there are no moral facts, and moral “reasoning” is just thinly-veiled emoting. Moral fanaticism, in contrast, affirms that there *are* moral facts, but pretends that thinly-veiled emoting is ironclad moral reasoning. The predictable result is that moral fanatics hold bizarre moral views with immense confidence. They’re like people who use wrath to solve math problems.

Consider Nazism. Leonard Peikoff notwithstanding, moral relativism had near-zero influence on the Nazis. The Nazis didn’t think the truth of their moral position was a matter of opinion. They totally thought they were right. They believed that Aryans were the master race, and that as the master race they had the right to treat lesser people as slaves or vermin. That’s the kind of self-righteousness you need to murder millions. What made

them fanatics? The way they reached these conclusions. They didn't try to stay calm. They didn't test their moral positions against hypotheticals. They didn't invite intelligent people who disagreed to check their work. They didn't ponder Bayes' Rule, or study cognitive biases. Instead, they adopted the moral positions most compatible with their own power-hunger and hate.

Basically the same goes for Johnson's entire rogues gallery. Marxists-Leninists also totally thought they were right – and had the kind of self-righteousness you need to murder millions. And while their writing style was obviously very appealing to the highly-educated, their reasoning process was fanatical. In their writings, neither Marx nor Lenin try to stay calm. They make near-zero effort to find and respond to intelligent critics. They virtually never wonder if they're just plain wrong. Instead, they preach to the choir – with a subtext of fire and blood.

The anti-colonialist movement was obviously more varied. But almost none of the prominent proponents of “national liberation” seriously wondered if their struggle against foreign oppression would unleash homegrown tyranny. Questions like, “War is hell, so does it really make sense turn to violence to obtain independence?” were thought crimes. Yes, Nelson Mandela himself was such a moral fanatic – even according to his falsified autobiography which lies about his long-standing membership in the South African Communist Party.

The best case for my original position is that moral relativism *enables* moral fanaticism. In the words of Bertrand Russell: “The trouble with the world is that the stupid are cocksure and the intelligent full of doubt.” If reasonable people had the courage of their convictions, they would have proudly crushed Marxism-Leninism, Nazism, and other expressions of moral fanaticism before they became severe threats. If you search carefully, you can definitely find statements consistent with this story. Here's what the great historian Carlton Hayes had to say about the Soviet Union in 1924:

*Nevertheless, some order was emerging from the Russian chaos. The world had failed to overcome Bolshevist Russia, and Bolshevist Russia had failed to overcome the world. The Russian Revolution was left to work itself out as a great political and social experiment. Already it stood forth in history as a most significant outcome of the Great War, and it promised to command the attention and interest of the whole world for many years to come.*

In the end, however, these relativistic sentiments are throw-away comments. A few casual

words in a career. When push comes to shove, almost everyone treats their political views as undeniable. Take a look, for instance, at Hayes' *A Brief History of the Great War*. This book-length expression of absolute moral certitude in Wilson's crusade to make the world safe from democracy starts with the dedication:

*To those students of his who loyally left their books and proudly paid the supreme sacrifice in the cause of human solidarity against international anarchy the author inscribes this book.*

A true believer mentality infuses the entire book. None of the sordid history of the origins or aftermath of World War I even faze Hayes. (Though to his credit, Hayes later wrote a book-length critique of moral fanaticism called *Nationalism: A Religion*). And while he's obviously just one man, he's an archetype.

If moral fanaticism rules the world, though, why aren't violent conflicts much more common? Not because of moral relativism, but because of political pragmatism. Even most moral fanatics realize that trying to impose their dogmas on the entire world would end in disaster. For their own power-hungry selves. They combine absurd confidence in their own moral rectitude with reasonable doubts about their ability to bring a world of enemies to their knees. So life goes on.