

Perspective Digest

Volume 11
Issue 1 *Winter*

Article 5

2006

Turning the Tables

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Recommended Citation

Guinness, Os (2006) "Turning the Tables," *Perspective Digest*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pd/vol11/iss1/5>

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TURNING THE TABLES

**No human being lives outside the reality
common to us all.**

“Ah, hang the world!” The large, somewhat sullen undergraduate could take no more. He slammed his fist on the table and rudely broke into the professor’s speech.

“Let’s give it a bad name first and then hang it,” the professor went on unruffled, not realizing the mood had changed. “A puppy with hydrophobia would probably struggle for life while we killed it, but if we were kind we should kill it. So an omniscient god would put us out of our pain. He would strike us dead.”

“Why doesn’t he strike us dead?” the student asked.

“He is dead himself,” said the philosopher; “that is where he is really enviable.”

The eminent warden of the col-

lege continued, “To anyone who thinks, the pleasures of life, trivial and soon tasteless, are bribes to bring us into a torture chamber.” He was in full flood now, with all the jaded brilliance of an academic on a well-worn theme.

“We all see that for any thinking man mere extinction is the . . . What are you doing? . . . Are you mad? . . . Put that thing down!”

Dr. Emerson Eames, distinguished professor of philosophy and warden of Brakespeare College, Cambridge, found himself looking down the cold, small, black barrel of a cocked revolver in the hands of one of his brightest students, Innocent Smith.

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"I'll help you out of your hole, old man," said Smith with rough tenderness. "I'll put the puppy out of his pain."

"Do you mean to kill me?" the professor cried, retreating to the window.

"It's not a thing I'd do for everyone," Smith said with emotion. "But you and I seemed to have got so intimate tonight, somehow. I know all your troubles now, and the only cure, old chap.

"It'll soon be over, you know," Smith continued. And as the warden made a run for the window and leapt out awkwardly onto the flying buttress below, he followed him like a benefactor with a deeply compassionate look, the revolver in his hand like a gift.

Both men were surprised to see the first streaks of dawn. Their time together had begun nearly 24 hours earlier at Dr. Eames's morning lecture. After a day packed with undergraduate affairs, it had resumed late at night in the warden's rooms. Dr. Eames, it was known, was always in for his friends and favorite students at any hour of the night.

"I came to see you at this unearthly hour," Smith had said as they started their ruminations, "because I am coming to the conclusion that existence is really too rotten. I know all the arguments of the thinkers who think otherwise, bishops and agnostics and those sort of

people. And knowing you were the greatest living authority on the pessimistic thinkers—"

"All thinkers," Eames had said, "are pessimistic thinkers." And with a weary cynicism he had kept up this depressing conversation for several hours until something in Innocent Smith had snapped.

Now, with the dawn breaking and Eames's legs hanging over the buttress and the buttress hanging over the void below, the mood changed again.

"The puppy struggles," Smith said with pity; "the poor little puppy struggles. How fortunate it is that I am wiser and kinder than he."

"Smith," said the philosopher, "I shall go mad!"

"And so look at things from the right angle," Smith sighed. "Ah, but madness is only a palliative at best, a drug. The only cure is an operation—an operation that is always successful. Death."

As he spoke, the sun rose, turning the sky from pigeon gray to pink. Bells rang, birds sang, the roofs of the ancient town were lit with fire, and the sun rose farther with a glory too deep for the skies to hold. Suddenly the unhappy man on the last morning of his life could bear it no longer.

"Let me come off this place. I can't bear it."

"I rather doubt it will bear you," Smith said, referring to the delicate

stonework; “but before you break your neck, or I blow out your brains . . . I want the metaphysical point cleared up. Do I understand that you want to get back to life?”

“I’d give anything to get back,” replied the unhappy professor.

“Give anything!” cried Smith; “then blast your impudence, give us a song!” Which the startled professor was prodded to do, a hymn of gratitude for existence. Satisfied, Smith fired two barrels over his head and let him climb to the ground.

“I must ask your indulgence,” Smith said brokenly when they were together again. “I must ask you to realize that I have just had an escape from death.”

“You have had an escape from death?” the professor said with irritation.

“Oh, don’t you understand, don’t you understand?” Smith cried. “I had to do it, Eames. I had to prove you wrong or die. When a man’s young, he nearly always has someone whom he thinks the top watermark of the mind of man. . . . Well, you were that to me. . . . Don’t you see that I had to prove you didn’t really mean it. Or else drown myself in the canal.”

Smith continued, “The thing I saw shining in your eyes when you dangled from that buttress was enjoyment at life and not ‘the Will to Live.’ What you knew when you sat on that damned gargoyle was that

the world, when all is said and done, is a wonderful and beautiful place. I know it, because I knew it at the same minute.”

Ready to hand himself in and face being sent down from Cambridge, Innocent Smith finished with one last meditation.

“I mean to keep the remaining shots for people in the shameful state you and I were in last night—I wish we could even plead drunkenness. I mean to keep those bullets for pessimists—pills for pale people. And in this way, I want to make this world like a wonderful surprise—to float as idly as the thistledown and come as silently as the sunrise; not to be expected any more than the thunderbolt, not to be recalled any more than the dying breeze. . . . I am going to hold a pistol to the head of the Modern Man. But I shall not use it to kill him. Only to bring him to life.”

* * *

Shortened and slightly retold, this inimitable passage is from G. K. Chesterton’s *Manalive*. Fabulous and fantastic, Chesterton’s writing itself floats “as idly as the thistledown.” And like his jesting Innocent Smith, he too holds his pistol to the head of Modern Man—and also to the head of Postmodern Man and Woman—not to kill them but to bring them to life. And the story, of course, is not

In 1892 Gilbert Keith Chesterton was an 18-year-old student at the Slade School of Art in London. Far from the stiff-upper-lip primness of the caricature of Victorianism, the end-of-the-century world of art was swirling with decadence, cynicism, and pessimism. Chesterton himself was also drawn to the macabre and the occult. In other words, his world was remarkably similar to our postmodern one.

simply a flight of Chesterton's imagination but the fruit of his own life.

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But however much such pessimism and cynicism was the rage and however drawn to it he felt, one thing held Chesterton back: what he described later as a "thin thread of thanks," a sort of "mystical minimum of gratitude." Bursting with gratitude for the gift of life, he was waking up to wonder as he set out to search for a philosophy that would allow him to be realistic and yet "enjoy enjoyment" too.

In the course of his search, Ches-

terton not only came to faith; he came to faith by becoming an arch-skeptic about skepticism, a radical disbeliever in the fashionable disbelief. He found the skeptics and cynics not skeptical and cynical enough. Far from stopping short of tough questioning, the faith Chesterton came to was the other side of such questioning—and all the stronger for having gone through it.

Cold Comfort

Chesterton's journey in life and his story in *Manalive* highlight an effective response to skeptics and those who insist on a radical relativism that is impervious to traditional claims to truth. Curiously, his approach is exactly the opposite of what most people try to do.

Advocates of traditional views of truth often respond to relativists in the same way as English or American tourists traveling in France who speak their English more slowly and loudly. Similarly, proponents of tra-

Radical relativists may deny that there are objective facts but are strangely insistent on circulating highly detailed résumés.

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ditional views commonly underscore the objectivity of truth in ever more earnest and labored ways. And then, when they fail to carry their point, they mask their frustration by issuing dire warnings of the consequences of disagreeing with them. The result is mutual incomprehension and a stalemate.

Peter Berger, however, has put forward two ways to counter radical relativism. The first effective strategy for countering relativism on its own grounds is negative: “Relativizing the relativizers.” By this is meant applying to skeptics the skepticism they apply to others, thus pushing them out toward the negative consequences of their own beliefs. Chesterton’s professor has one attitude toward life and death in his comfortable college rooms but quite another when hanging grimly to the buttress while staring down the barrel of a gun. When turned on him, his philosophy of life is cold comfort.

As Berger points out, the strategy rests on two assumptions. The first is

that relativism and skepticism entail a hidden double standard—the relativism is inconsistent and incomplete. All too often, relativists relativize others but not themselves. They relativize the past but not the present. They pour the acid of their relativism over all sorts of issues but jealously guard their own favorite ones. A recent study of classical education in the universities points to this attribute when it defines the present-day American academic as “a well-fed, elite, institutionalized thinker of the late 20th century, who crafts ideas for his peers, with the assurance that the consequences of those solutions should not and will not necessarily apply to himself.”

The strategy’s second assumption is that consistency and clarity are linked. The task of encountering relativism, Berger writes, is to “see the relativity business to its very end.” Press relativism to its consistent conclusion and the result is surprising. Far from paralyzing thought, relativism is itself relativized, the de-

bunker debunked, and what emerges is an almost pristine realization of the importance of truth.

Wasn't this the assumption behind the prophet Elijah's challenge to Israel in the ninth century B.C.? If Baal, and not *yhwh*, was God, then follow Baal, he cried as he offered the prophets of Baal the first opportunity to verify their god. With the bulk of the people sitting uneasily on the fence between God and Baal, Elijah knew that pious calls to return to God would have fallen on divided hearts and deaf ears. He had to mount the challenge on their grounds.

For if *yhwh* is God, then Baal is not, and the fastest way for the people to see it was to push them toward the false faith that was bound to be falsified by reality. The disproof came first and cleared the ground for the proof, for with the false falsified the true could be verified. "The Lord—he is God! The Lord—he is God!" was the people's conclusion with heartfelt conviction.

The same logic runs down through the centuries. Jesus said, "By their fruits you will know them"—not by their seed. If you had spoken to the prodigal son the day he left home, would he have listened? If you spoke to him the day he hit the pigsty, would he have needed to? "See where it leads to," St. Augustine advised in dealing with falsehood. Follow it out to "the absolute ruddy

end," C. S. Lewis remarked with characteristic Englishness. Push them to "the logic of their presuppositions," Francis Schaeffer used to say.

Examples of inconsistencies abound. Marxist sociologists may be adept at spotting exploitation in a kindergarten but have Mexican nannies and pay their teaching assistants poorly. Smart-aleck high school students may insist that "everything is relative" yet will be the first to object if teachers grade their papers without any standards, such as "I didn't like your paper—it's Tuesday." Radical relativists may deny that there are objective facts but are strangely insistent on circulating highly detailed résumés. Postmodernist professors may claim that authors are without privilege in determining how their texts are interpreted, but woe betide the reviewer who misinterprets their latest contribution to scholarship and human knowledge. And so on.

All these examples betray relatively trivial contradictions that are more suitable for humor than persuasive debate. But what counts is when the relativism matters to the relativist, when it becomes a question of life and not simply logic. In such cases, the strategy and the logic are the same. The relativists' problem is not their clash with us but their contradiction with reality and therefore the cost to themselves.

When I studied philosophy as an

undergraduate in the 1960s, an Arctic chill was still hanging in the air that froze any serious appreciation of religion. The source had been the philosophy of A. J. Ayer, who asserted that only that which could be tested by the five senses could be verified as true. Theology was therefore “non-sense,” or as it was famously said, “The word g-o-d is less meaningful than the word d-o-g.”

The trouble for A. J. Ayer was that his verification principle couldn't verify itself—it was self-refuting. To accept as truth only what can be tested by the senses is a principle that itself cannot be tested by the senses. It too is non-sense. Ayer's approach, he later admitted, was “a blind alley.”

Again and again the lesson is simple: While no argument is unarguable, some thoughts can be thought but not lived. So we should never stop halfway in dealing with skepticism but follow ideas uncompromisingly to their conclusion. When heads collide with the wall, they will have reached the limits of their position and will be open to reconsider. In this sense, reality is what we run into when we are wrong, for when we are right, we don't run into it. “There are times,” Václav Havel wrote, “when we must sink to the bottom of our misery to understand truth, just as we must descend to the bottom of a well to see the stars in broad daylight.”

Crisis and Opportunity

The strategy of “relativizing the relativizers” has both a sobering and encouraging side. The sobering side arises from the fact that ideas have consequences. The tactic can easily be reduced to a game—and a heartless one—but this obscures its real mercy: Because the skeptics' view is finally untrue, it is in their interest to discover it in good time. But even if we care so little that we say and do nothing, life itself will most likely push the skeptics out to face reality anyway, and the final outcome may be far less pleasant.

Put differently, all people at some point behave true to their beliefs. Sooner or later they will act on the assumptions they truly hold and reap the consequences. We often say that people don't “live up to their beliefs,” but it would be more accurate to say that, in a crunch such as temptation, they switch to other beliefs and live up to those instead. We do live by our beliefs. The question is, which ones?

Now although someone's beliefs and assumptions may not be true and do not describe reality, they will still drive their behavior. So if someone doesn't believe in truth, count on him to lie. If someone says there are no objective facts, expect her to be careless with facts to further her own interests. If someone explains everything by referring to evolution and the “selfish gene,” be sure that at some

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point he will be extremely selfish on behalf of the fitness of his own survival. If someone describes newborn babies as "replaceable" and of no more value than snails, you can bet that she will become an advocate of "involuntary euthanasia" (in other words, murder), and so on.

The principle also holds true for nations, for ideas have consequences. Differences make a difference. Behavior follows beliefs as surely as thunder follows lightning. What starts in the studies will end in the streets. When it comes to postmodernism, the stunning fact is that we do not have to predict its consequences—we have already seen the influence of its core ideas on history. Do we really imagine there can be no consequences a second time around?

Not far from his death in 1951, French writer Andre Gide reflected on the influence of intellectuals on the moral and cultural weakness of France in the first half of the 20th century. He dismissed the scape-

goating of writers and the smearing of whole eras and schools. He emphatically rejected the fascists' charge that the intellectuals had "discouraged and devitalized" French youth. But still, he acknowledged that his generation of artists had introduced a power-worshiping vitality and barbarism to France.

Yet the crisis, at its very worst, is the opportunity. The darkest night is just before dawn. In terms of distance, the prodigal's pigsty is the farthest point from home; in terms of time, the pigsty is the shortest distance to the father's house. That is one reason people of faith are not overcome by crises. As Chesterton wrote in *Orthodoxy*, "If any frightened curate still says that it will be awful if the darkness of free thought should spread, we can only answer him in the high and powerful words of Mr. Belloc, 'Do not, I beseech you, be troubled about the increase of forces already in dissolution. You have mistaken the hour of the night: It is already morning.'"

A Fresh-Thinking Smart-Bomb

Peter Berger's first strategy for countering relativism—relativizing the relativizers—is unashamedly negative. This in itself leaves some people uncomfortable, and an added problem occurs when people use the approach in a purely logical way. In searching for any and all contradictions, they end up being tiresomely fussy and unconvincing.

In contrast, the real task is to be prophetic, not pedantic; to search for contradictions that matter—and matter not to us but to the people we are engaging. In other words, the goal is to look for the contradictions between logic and life, to search for the tension between the relativism or skepticism of their philosophy and the “treasure of their heart.” Only the latter will become a smart-bomb to detonate fresh thinking.

Because of the negative nature of the first strategy, many people are more drawn to the second tactic for countering relativism on its own grounds, which is entirely positive: “Pointing out the signals of transcendence.” By this is meant the strategy of drawing attention to the contradiction and yearnings within people's beliefs that point beyond those beliefs toward entirely different possibilities.

Whereas “relativizing the relativizers” is negative because it highlights the negative consequences of false assumptions, “pointing out the

signals of transcendence” is positive because it points toward the positive conclusions of true aspirations, unnoticed before. In the comfort of his room, Dr. Emerson Eames is mired in his gloom, but when confronting the starkness of death in the beauty of dawn, an enjoyment of life begins to shine in his eyes. This first contradicts his put-the-puppy-out-of-its-misery pessimism. Then instinctively, intuitively, irrepressibly, and undeniably, his gratitude to be alive punctures his pessimism and points beyond it to the possibility of higher meaning in life. Gratitude quite literally became Eames's pointer toward salvation, just as it did for his creator in real life.

Berger defines signals of transcendence as “phenomena that are to be found within the domain of our ‘natural’ reality but that appear to point beyond that reality.” His discussion of them in *A Rumor of Angels* includes some signals that are positive—for example, order, humor, and hope—and some that are negative—for example, his “argument from damnation.”

The best-known example of a positive “signal” in real life is C. S. Lewis's “surprised by joy”—experiences that prodded him toward being a “lapsed atheist” and set him off on a search for meaning. But Berger's argument from damnation is particularly powerful and common, as in the poet W. H. Auden's

experience that stopped him in his tracks and turned him around to start his journey toward faith.

In 1939 Auden emigrated to the United States. In November, two months after the outbreak of World War II, he went to a cinema in the Yorkville district of Manhattan. The area was largely German-speaking and the film he saw was a Nazi account of their conquest of Poland. When Poles appeared on the screen, he was startled to hear people in the audience shout, "Kill them! Kill them!"

Auden was stunned. Amid all the changes of heart and mind he had passed through in his life, one thing had remained consistent: He believed in the essential goodness of humanity. Now suddenly, in a flash, he realized two things with the force of an epiphany. On the one hand, he knew beyond any argument that "human nature was not and never could be good"—the reaction of the audience was "a denial of every humanistic value." On the other hand, he realized that if he was to say such things were absolutely evil, he had to have some absolute standard by which he could judge them.

Here, Auden realized, was the fatal flaw of his liberalism: "The whole trend of liberal thought has been to undermine faith in the absolute." Or as he remarked to a friend, "The English intellectuals who now cry to Heaven against the evil incarnated in Hitler have no Heaven to cry to." Spurred by this contradiction-cum-yearning, Auden left the cinema on a quest to renew his "faith in the absolute" and began the journey that led him to faith in Christ.

No human being lives outside the reality common to us all. Whatever people may say the world is or who they are, it is what it is and they are who they are. No argument is unarguable, but there are thoughts that can be thought but not lived. When all is said and done, reality always has the last word. The truth will always out. Standing up to falsehood, lies, and crazy ideas is never an easy task, but it is far easier than the hardest task of all, becoming people of truth ourselves. □

Reprinted, by permission, from Os Guinness, *Time for Truth: Living Free in a World of Lies, Hype, and Spin* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2002).

