Chapter 1. Conceptual origins

I begin in 1719 with a famous scene in eighteenth-century fiction, where Robinson Crusoe, burdened by his solitude on the island, devises a plan to secure a companion. The next time a group of Caribs lands on the shore to devour a prisoner, Crusoe decides, he will wait atop a hill, shoot them dead, and rescue the victim. Months go by without any landing, and the solitary vigil awakens scruples in Crusoe’s mind. He begins to question his detestation of cannibalism, wondering if eating human flesh is really that different than eating mutton or executing war prisoners. “How do I know,” he asks, “what God himself judges in this particular Case? It is certain these People either do not commit this as a crime; it is not against their own Consciences reproving, or their Light reproaching them.”[[1]](#footnote-1) In addition, they had done him no harm, and to fall upon them would be to act like the Spanish towards their Native American victims. “When I had consider’d this a little, it follow’d necessarily, that I was certainly in the Wrong in it, that these People were not Murtherers in the Sense that I had before condemn’d them, in my Thoughts.” They do eat their prisoners, but Crusoe concludes it is not his business to judge: “As to the Crimes they were guilty of towards one another, I had nothing to do with them; they were National, and I ought to leave them to the Justice of God, who is the Governour of Nations.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Such tolerant multiculturalism is not the dominant note with Daniel Defoe, who has appropriately been described as “a mercantilist and a gold bug, an apologist of trade, a philosopher of colonialism, and an imaginer of imperialism.”[[3]](#footnote-3) But as we read these passages, we find ourselves in the presence of a familiar way of thinking: Defoe is challenging readers to approach seemingly barbarous customs in a non-judgmental way, by putting on hold convictions that may not apply off the shores of England, all the way across the Atlantic. He speaks like a cultural relativist.

Readers of Montaigne would know that Defoe was drawing on well-established precedents. Relativism had been imposing itself on European awareness since at least the late sixteenth century, stirring up concern in occasional quarters. The polymath Charles Sorel, best known for the libertine novel *L’Histoire Comique de Francion* (1623), identified the danger in his ambitious multivolume *La Science Universelle* (1637).[[4]](#footnote-4) According to the skeptics, he writes, there can be no agreement with regard to sounds, flavors, sights, or any other qualities of physical objects. “Whatever seems hard to some will seem soft to others, and what seems dry or heavy or hot to people over here will be humid, light, or cold to people over there; and no one can be more assured of the truth than anybody else.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Whereas Defoe engaged with the variety of customs, Sorel considered instead the vagaries of sense perception, not only between human individuals but between humans and animals; in different ways, they were equally concerned with the impossibility of solving disagreement regarding the qualitative aspects of actions and things. Sorel’s purpose is to confound the skeptics, but his account of their position concisely spells out the conceptual contents of relativism: value judgments vary and no one can tell which judgment is right. This is not far from the way modern philosophers still define relativism. According to Michael Krausz, “relativism is characteristically defined as the dual thesis that (1) truth, goodness, or beauty are … relative to some frame of reference, and (2) no absolute standards to adjudicate between competing reference frames exist.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Krausz adds that not all forms of relativism need involve reference frames, but the definition is helpful in that it isolates two philosophical clauses that can help us identify relativism in its past iterations: the “diversity clause” (there are many different value judgments) and the “undecidability clause” (we have no criteria for determining which judgment is right).

Conceptually speaking, relativism is a combination between these two clauses, or theses. But it is a combination of theses in a genealogical sense as well. It emerges at the confluence of several developments in cultural and intellectual history, which constituted relativism’s conceptual origins. The key factors were diagnosed by a perceptive observer of his times, the Scottish minister, sometime spy, and eventual conspirator Robert Ferguson (c. 1637–1714), known as “the Plotter” for his involvement in a series of both Whig and Jacobite plots.[[7]](#footnote-7) In his early phase as a religious polemicist, Ferguson joined the chorus of voices sounding the alarm against Hobbes. He warned, in defense of rational dissent, that “*Hobbs* and some other wild, Atheistically disposed persons of late, have managed an opposition to all natural Laws: contending that all things are in themselves indifferent … and how that antecedently to the constitutions, appointments and custom’s of Societies, there is neither Vertue nor Vice, Turpitude nor Honesty, justice nor injustice.”[[8]](#footnote-8) For Ferguson, this is a scandalous revival of epicureanism, as it relies on “discharging God from the Government of the World. For if there be no Government, there is no law; and if no law there is neither moral Good nor Evil: As Good and Evil are relatives to law; so is law the relative of Government; and all these stand and fall together.”[[9]](#footnote-9) As examples, Ferguson offers a lengthy catalogue of aberrant practices legitimated by governments, such as theft in Sparta, prostitution among the Cyprians, and incest in Persia. Nor does he believe that humans alone can fill the gap left by God’s absence: the “great improvers of Reason” are never “at greater variance one with another, than about what is just and what is unjust. Each man determining as humour, education, lust, or profit swaye’s him.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Since reason is corrupted by sin, Ferguson concludes, we need Revelation: “The only sure, universal, perfect *System* of natural Law, is the Decalogue of *Moses.*”[[11]](#footnote-11) While good and evil “are relatives to law,” they remain objective as long as the law is God-given and unambiguous. Once God is out of the picture, we are left with the customs and constitutions of different societies, which sanction all sorts of moral crimes, or with the judgment of individuals, which are corrupted by self-interest, lust, or education.

Each of these contentions—about God, about customs, and about minds—would find increasingly vocal supporters between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. Taken together (and Ferguson is making precisely this point), they would imply that the laws governing human societies are not divine but historical; that because history varies by time and place, the value systems emerging in different cultures would also differ between themselves; and the resulting variation in notions of good and evil, right and wrong, or just and unjust would only be aggravated by the flightiness of human subjectivity. All that is left are artificial value systems relative to historical contingencies and individual idiosyncrasies, with no supervening standard to adjudicate between them.

These then are the three theses enabling the emergence of relativism in early modernity: the historicity, the diversity, and the subjectivity of values. The sections that follow sketch out the rise of each of them as well as their connection with relativistic thinking. But relativism also evolved dialectically in response to a background of religious, institutional, legal, and social forces, all of which contributed to pressure it into shape. This chapter’s final section, accordingly, turns to that broader background, which was characterized by widespread moral panic.

1. Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, ed. Thomas Keymer (Oxford: OUP, 2009), 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., 145. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Markman Ellis, “Defoe and Colonialism,” in Nicholas Seager and J.A. Downie (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Daniel Defoe* (Oxford: OUP, 2023), 524. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For surveys of the purposes and structure of the *Science Universelle*, see the essays by Isabelle Moreau and Martine Alet in Éric Van der Schueren (ed.), *Charles Sorel Polygraphe* (Lévis, Quebec: Les Presses de l’Université Laval, 2006), 77–92, 121–35.   [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “Ce qui semble dur aux uns, disent-ils, semble mol aux autres, & ce qui semble sec ou pesant ou chaud à ceux-cy, est humide, leger ou froid pour ceux-là, & il n’y en a aucun qui soit plus asseuré de la vérité que ses compagnons.” Charles Sorel, *Première Partie de la Science Universelle, contenant la science des choses corporelles … contre les erreurs de la Philosophie vulgaire* (Paris: Pierre Billaine, 1637), 313. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Michael Krausz, “Mapping Relativisms,” in Krausz (ed.), *Relativism: A Contemporary Anthology* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2010), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. On Ferguson’s multifarious career and political vision, see Melinda S. Zook, “Turncoats and Double Agents in Restoration and Revolutionary England: The Case of Robert Ferguson, the Plotter,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 42/3 (2009), 363–78. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Robert Ferguson, *A Sober Enquiry into the Nature, Measure, and Principle of Moral Virtue*, *its Distinction from Gospel-Holiness* (London: D. Newman, 1673), 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)