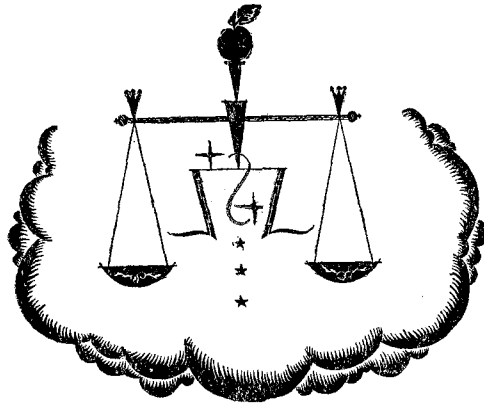


How High Is Up?

The Fallacy of Absolute Standards



by **HENRY HAZLITT**

I

MR. JAMES TRUSLOW ADAMS, for whom I have a high admiration, both as a man and as a writer, has become very angry with me. In a recent article in *THE FORUM* (October, 1931) he accuses me of attempting to mislead Youth, of urging it to forsake the accumulated wisdom of the ages, the tried and the true, and to lose itself "in a confusion of relativities and debauched tastes." He even hints very strongly that I am a "rabid relativist anti-Humanist," and such a creature, I gather from his tone, is obnoxious to all right-thinking men.

And yet, as it unhappily falls out, in spite of Mr. Adams's eloquence I must persist in my course. Not only must I remain a relativist, but, with the cynical instinct of every sinner to pretend that others are no better than he is, I suspect Mr. Adams himself to be, in his secret heart, a relativist too. He cannot help himself. We are nearly all relativists now, however much we may differ in the degrees of our relativism. The intellectual climate of the times makes us so. Wherever we turn, in philosophy, in physics, in æsthetics, in ethics, absolutism is in disrepute. Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel have been in their graves these many years; and from the sickroom of the Absolute come from time to time unmistakable bulletins that it too is dying.

Absolutism began to wane in the realm of thought shortly after it began to wane in the realm of action. Absolute monarchs were

curbed or deposed because they had abused their power, and the Absolute was discredited in philosophy because there, too, it was attempting too much. One need go no further than the article in the *Encyclopædia Britannica* to see how overworked the conception has been. "Theists identify the Absolute with God; pantheists, with the Universe; Schopenhauer and Wundt, with Will; Bergson, with a Life-Force characterized by creative evolution; Fechner and Lipps, with Consciousness; Bradley, with Experience; Joel, with the Potentiality of all that is real; Lotze and Royce, with self-conscious Personality; Alexander, presumably with the Space-time matrix of all reality. Hegel . . . with the Universal Spirit. . . ." Evidently one man's Absolute is another man's poison; and nowhere has chaos or, if you will, relativity, reigned more supreme than in the struggle of rival absolutes. In physics, the notion of absolute certainty has been giving way everywhere before the concept of probability, and instead of an absolute space and an absolute time, we are taught to think of a space-time continuum that must be conceived and measured strictly according to the position of the observer. In æsthetics and ethics — but let us consider these in turn.

In a recent article called "Standards (Loud Cheers)," which appeared in *The Nation*, I ventured to point out that virtually all the critics who are most insistent on the need for

"Standards" in literary and art criticism habitually use the word in a vaguely emotive and honorific, and not in any strictly indicative sense. It is obvious, I remarked, that the charge that a given critic or group of critics has no standards is never true: "A critic's standards may be low, they may shift with every book he writes about or even in the course of a single review, but standards, in the sense of implied comparisons, he must have."

Now obviously I was here not *approving* of the practice of shifting one's standards in the course of a single review, or of shifting them with every book one writes about, although Mr. Adams, to judge from his comment on my article in his own essay on "Standards" in the October FORUM, apparently assumes that I was. To be sure, I may have left myself open to misunderstanding by going on to describe the actual standards that the average professional New York play reviewer actually applies in his daily reviews, and remarking that such standards were on the whole "sensible," but I meant no more than that his standards were, for the most part, *appropriate for his purposes*. Mr. Adams quoted this passage and proceeded to assault it, but unfortunately he broke off the quotation in the middle of the final sentence, not mentioning an important qualifying phrase until much later; and still more unfortunately, he omitted entirely to quote what was, in its relation to this question, the most important sentence in my article: "The standards that we apply to any dramatic or literary work, in short, must be relative to the pretensions of that work and to the purpose of our criticism."

It should not require much argument to establish the truth of this generalization. It merely describes the habitual practice of sensible men. If I should ask Mr. Adams what he thought of some recent biography that some mutual friend of ours had written, he would not reply: "It is not a great work, and cannot compare with Boswell's Johnson." He would not even put such a judgment into a review. Such a reservation would be *understood*; Mr. Adams's standard — explicit or implied — would not be Boswell, but probably some normal level of recent achievement. If his standard were different from that, he would probably be at some pains to tell me explicitly what his standard was.

And this applies not merely to literary

criticism, but to all the criticisms we make in daily life. If I asked Mr. Adams what he thought of his next door neighbor, he would not begin comparing his merits or defects with those of Albert Einstein or Mahatma Gandhi. His implied standard, I am sure, would be some *level of probable expectation*. And this was all I meant to say about standards of literary criticism. The first question to be asked of them is whether they are *appropriate*. We judge cotton as cotton and wool as wool, and we usually do not trouble to condemn the first unless it attempts to pass as the second.

II

IN ARGUING for appropriate standards I am of course arguing for relative standards, but I am not, as Mr. Adams seems to assume throughout his article, arguing for low standards. A daily play reviewer is writing for an audience of playgoers, the majority of whom may go to the theater anywhere from once or twice a week to once a month; and when he fails explicitly to tell us in any given review just what standard he is applying, the standard that most of his readers — consciously or unconsciously — assume him to be using, and the implicit standard that, quite sensibly, he probably is using, is the average quality of the plays that have been running in New York for the past few seasons. He feels that a play merits his approval, and perhaps even his enthusiasm, if it is considerably above that average. He is to be condemned only if he implies, or explicitly states, that the play has a higher order of merit than it actually has — if he hints, for example, that it is a play for the centuries when it is obvious that it will be forgotten in five years.

But he would be equally to be condemned, and would merely set himself down as an insufferably pompous ass, if he either explicitly or implicitly judged every current play by the standards of Shakespeare's or Goethe's plays, or even of Ibsen's or Shaw's. For his readers (as long as he retained any) would find themselves confronted each day merely with various degrees of ill-natured disapproval. The reviewer's judgment might be perfectly sound; each play in turn might be just as bad as he said it was, *judged by the standard he had chosen to adopt*. But the standards would be inappropriate.

This is not to argue, certainly, that there are not occasions when even the highest standards are appropriate. The New York dramatic critics were both permitted and obliged to raise their usual standards when confronted with a play like Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*. A writer engaged in current book reviewing will raise his standards automatically when he sits down to compose, let us say, a critical history of American literature. A contemporary mind like Einstein's can be judged only by comparison with the very greatest minds of the past.

Now Mr. Adams's ideas on this subject are to me astonishing. Not only does he fail to recognize that the same standard cannot be appropriate for every purpose, but he seems to imagine that he himself applies absolute standards in his own judgments. Yet no one but a Platonist, it seems to me, could really believe in absolute standards in literature, and I feel rather confident that Mr. Adams is not a Platonist. Emerson was one — at moments — and hence has managed to give us a rather clear idea of what such an absolute standard would mean. "Santa Croce and the Dome of St. Peter's," he once wrote, "are lame copies after a divine model." Had he applied this line of thought to literature he would have said, I suppose, that the *Oedipus Rex* and *Hamlet* are merely lame copies of the perfect tragedy laid up in heaven, and he would have been obliged to add that the best bedroom farce written up to his time was only a lame copy of the perfect bedroom farce stored in the same celestial property room. These, it seems to me, would be really absolute standards.

Emerson, indeed, once did call for such an absolute criticism — for a comparison of the particular work of art, not with inferior art, nor even with superior art, but with supreme art — art that excels the best that has ever been produced. But I am afraid that in practice he seldom had the courage even to attempt to apply this absolute standard. For as every work he judged would have fallen short of it, then even his approval (to apply a remark Thomas Hardy once made about Leslie Stephen) would have been merely disapproval minimized. It may be added, further, that the attempt to apply such an absolute standard would call for enormous presumption on the part of the critic. He would be required to as-

sume that he knew what "perfection," if realized, would really look like. Yet even to glimpse perfection would be half to have the power to achieve it.

Now while Mr. Adams is urging us to apply to literary criticism what he calls absolute standards, it is obvious from his article that the specific standard he is actually urging us to apply is quite relative. This standard is apparently much higher than the average level of current literary achievement, but much lower than the level achieved by Æschylus and Shakespeare. I am sorry I cannot say anything more specific about it, but that is because Mr. Adams is himself content to leave his notion of it extremely vague and undefined. And this is not because of any disingenuousness, but because he entertains the astonishing notion that "good" and "bad" are absolute terms. It should be patent enough that "good" and "bad," like "long" and "short," "heavy" and "light," "far" and "near," "early" and "late," "expensive" and "cheap," are adjectives that have only a relative application, and that they always assume some implicit comparison.

When we say that Cyrano de Bergerac had a long nose, what we mean is merely that he had a *longer* nose than the great majority of other men. But clearly what is long for a nose would be short for a face; what is heavy for a book would be light for a bomb; what is far for a walk is near for an automobile drive; what is expensive for a motor car would be cheap for a house. The meaning of all these adjectives, in brief, is relative to some average or norm, some level of expectation, and this norm changes with each object that the adjective happens to describe. A good dinner obviously implies a different level of goodness than a good symphony.

When I spoke of standards as "implied comparisons," Mr. Adams seemed to find the notion so astonishing that he italicized the phrase in quoting it. But the only thing astonishing to me is that anyone should regard a standard as anything else. The chief function of a standard, always and everywhere, is obviously to facilitate comparisons. This is plain enough when applied to the gold standard, which Mr. Adams so frequently mentions. The gold standard merely tells us how the value of a given commodity compares with the value of gold; it

makes exact comparisons between the values of different commodities possible by reducing them to a common denominator. But the value of gold itself is no more absolute than is any other value. A price, in fact, always tells us the relation between two values — that of the commodity priced and that of the gold in which it is stated, and the value of gold may fluctuate like the value of anything else. In this sense the gold standard is doubly relative. But standards of weight and length — the pound, the yard — are also merely arbitrary units, like the amount of gold in the dollar, to express and facilitate comparisons. These standards are absolute only in the sense — if we disregard some of the subtleties of the new physics — that they are always the same; but they are still arbitrary, and they exist principally to express relations. It is significant that the concept of absoluteness finds virtually no use in modern science except to express the idea of complete nothingness, as when it speaks of an absolute vacuum, or a temperature of absolute zero.

Now Mr. Adams obviously fears that if we should get rid of absolutism in aesthetics and ethics and substitute the concept of relativity, it would mean chaos. But it would really mean nothing more than a recognition of the actual complexity of the facts. It would substitute a critical and sophisticated view for a rather naïve view. To see that standards are relative is neither to reject nor to debase them. But, Mr. Adams protests, if the critic shifts his standards in discussing different things, how can we possibly know what standards he is applying at any given time? How are we to know, he asks, what the critic's "little bit of relativity" is? "How much simpler," he remarks, "instead of having to provide us with his personal yardstick each time, to employ words in 'standard' English meanings!" But I never suggested that the critic apply a *personal* standard; I suggested merely that in each case he apply an *appropriate* one.

And how, Mr. Adams may ask again, are we to tell what standard he is applying? Well how, for that matter, do we know what Mr. Adams means when he says that we should use words in "standard" English meanings? Webster's *New International Dictionary* records that the noun "standard" itself is used in nineteen different main senses, not to speak of differ-

ences of meaning within each of these senses. Yet we do not expect a writer, every time he uses a word, to say that he is using it in precisely such-and-such a sense. The sense in which he is using it is usually perfectly clear from the context. And so is the particular standard that the critic is applying.

III

NOW SIMILAR considerations hold to a large extent in the field of ethics also. There too absolutism is rapidly vanishing. Our grandfathers and their grandfathers before them believed that they had an absolute code in the Ten Commandments, but the modern mind finds it impossible to respect a moral code that makes outright stealing no worse than merely coveting, that apparently considers the act of murder no worse than the act of allowing one's maidservant to work on the Sabbath, and that — judging from the emphasis with which it is set forth, and the frightful punishments indicated for disobedience — regards the worst crime of all that of worshiping other gods (the existence of which is not denied) before the Lord God Jehovah, who by his own admission is jealous, pettish, and despicably vengeful.

And the modern mind finds it nearly as impossible to believe in the type of absolutism represented by Kant's categorical imperatives, by the vicious doctrine, for example, that it is always wrong to lie. This would not only make most politeness a crime; it would make it sinful even to give the wrong directions to a man with a revolver in his hand who wanted to murder your sister. But at least, it may be said, the modern mind believes in an absolute rule against murder. This is so, however, only because murder, by definition, usually means *unjustifiable* homicide. But no one who believes in war, even for self-defense, or in capital punishment, or that it is right for a policeman to fire at an armed bandit, believes in any absolute sense even in the Sixth Commandment.

What does the modern mind believe? It believes, I think, that in general those acts are right which tend to promote human welfare, and that those acts are wrong which tend to add to the sum of human misery. But this means that its moral standards are relative standards; they have meaning only in relation to individual or social well-being. It was easier for our forefathers, who imagined that moral rules were

handed to us on a tablet from heaven, and that a given act was right or wrong regardless of its consequences or its effect on human happiness, to adopt absolute ethical standards. They knew what it meant to be "perfectly" moral; one merely refrained absolutely from "sin."

It is significant that nine of the ten commandments are injunctions to refrain, and that the single positive demand is that we honor our parents, something not difficult for most of us to do. But there is nothing said of amiability, urbanity, graciousness, tolerance, helpfulness, charity, industry, courage. And though it would be a mistake to say that our forefathers did not include these among the virtues, the tendency was always to subordinate such positive virtues to the negative virtues. Thus it was possible to keep alive a sort of absolutism in ethics. A woman could be absolutely "pure," that is, absolutely chaste. To be sure, she might also have been absolutely good for nothing, but that was not considered vitally important morally. If she was "pure," she might lack all the amiable and altruistic virtues and still be called a "good" woman; if she was not "pure," none of these other virtues could save her from being called a "bad" woman. But in the modern view, when a man's virtues tend to be judged from his value to the community, instead of from his refraining from certain specified acts, the concept of "absolute goodness" is no longer definable; it is always a *relative* or comparative goodness that we have to do with.

To regard "good" and "bad," then, as absolute terms, as Mr. Adams apparently does, is a relic of medieval thinking. The medieval metaphysicians looked upon "Good" and "Evil" as absolutes, inherent in Nature, and hence they puzzled their brains about the problem of Evil. That problem was, of course, partly a theological one: Why should an omnipotent and beneficent Creator have put Evil into the world? But the problem has disappeared for two reasons: first, because most intellectuals no longer believe in an omnipotent and beneficent Creator, and secondly because, even if they did, they have come to see that Good and Evil are not absolute qualities in the universe, but exist only in relation to Man. We call that Good which tends to promote *human* welfare, and that Evil which tends to thwart it. If the tapeworm disease is an evil,

it is so only in the opinion of man, not in the opinion of the tapeworm.

Mr. Adams not only believes there are "absolute" values, but he believes that we know what they are by "intuition." Now "intuition" is one of the most slippery, one of the most question-begging, one of the most obscurant words in the language. "Analysis," it says, "shall not enter here." Mr. Adams is confident that it is "intuition" that enables us to see that Lincoln was a very noble man and Aaron Burr a very unworthy one. Such a comment is astonishing from a professional historian, who ought to know more than the rest of us about the vagaries of historic reputation. The "intuition" of Lincoln's greatness was denied in the millions of men who voted against him for President, to nearly everyone in the South during the Civil War, and even to a great contemporary like Emerson, who called him a "clown," and regarded Daniel Webster as a much greater man. Nor did the Greeks, certainly, when they made Socrates drink the hemlock, have any "intuition" that he was their wisest and noblest man. The Jews lacked not merely any "intuition" of the divinity, but even the human nobility, of Jesus.

No, our present judgments of the figures of the past are obviously not the result of any moral "intuition," but of historical criticism and traditional opinion. When Mr. Adams goes on to express the even more amazing notion that our *aesthetic* judgments are also given us by "intuition," one can only rub one's eyes. This is to brush aside the enormous rôle of training and education, and to state that a subway conductor's judgment of a Van Gogh is as good as Clive Bell's or Roger Fry's.

No, I am afraid that Mr. Adams, though he denies it, is a "standards (loud cheers)" man — and so, in the realm of ethical thinking, is Sir Arthur Eddington, whom he quotes in support. When they talk of absolute standards they are using the phrase primarily in an emotive and honorific sense, and not with a clear and definite reference. In philosophy, in physics, in literary and art criticism, in ethics, the spirit of absolutism is dead. There are still, of course, and there will doubtless continue to be for a while, able and distinguished men who will rise now and then to say a few reverent words in its favor. But we should remember that these are funeral orations.

Wild Bill Murray

Presidential Possibilities — VII



by **ARCHIBALD C. EDWARDS**

A HOT midday in early summer. Dust hangs depressingly in the wide, sunburned streets of the prairie town. A few farmers in colorless denim sit on the stoops of vacant store buildings, talking, ramming home a fresh quid of tobacco with the thumb of the knife hand, or whittling little sticks of white pine. When a car rattles up the street, their eyes blink out from under their broad hats at it with but slightly less apathy than the sleepy eyes of the teams at the hitching posts.

A strange Ford clatters down to a stop. A

jolly little man at the wheel mops his brow. The tall man beside him pops a piece of cheese into his mouth, snaps his jackknife shut and shoves it into his trousers, flicks off the cracker crumbs.

"How's crops?" he shouts toward the sidewalk.

"Burnt up!" Woes are easily told.

The tall man has a group around his car in no time. Men up the street tuck away a fresh quid and pocket their knives. A group becomes a crowd, with small boys and women. The tall