

INTELLECTUAL HISTORY OF THE MODERN AGE

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## Introduction

There is no more contentious and perennial issue in the history of Western thought—and perhaps not it alone—than the vexed relationship between the genesis of an idea or value in a specific context, and its claim to validity beyond it.<sup>1</sup> Can ideas or values transcend their spatial and temporal origins, earning abiding respect for their intrinsic merit, or do they necessarily reflect them in ways that belie their universal pretensions? Are discrete contexts, however they are defined, so incommensurable and unique that the intact passage of ideas from one to the other is inevitably impeded? Can ideas survive their voyages away from home in ways that enable meaningful trans-cultural comparison? Are historical epochs so radically different that no standards of progress or development (or regression and decay) can grant the present the right to weigh the merits of past ideas or values by criteria that transcend the moment of their promulgation? Are we inevitably compelled to judge based on the standards of our own cultural standpoint, contrary to the familiar French proverb *Tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner*. In short, to borrow the elegant metaphor of the American intellectual historian John Diggins, is it possible to extract the oyster entirely from the pearl that excreted it?<sup>2</sup>

These questions have, in fact, been around for a very long time. At least since the invention of writing, the possibility of surviving the place and moment of enunciation has enabled the claim of what is enunciated to transcend its origins. But as soon as isolated cultural systems, unreflectively secure in their assumptions, were challenged from without by contact with competing systems or undermined from within by heterodox doubts, absolute claims of truth or unbending standards of moral virtue were haunted by the specter of contextual relativity. Although anticipated in even the most apparently self-assured of premodern cultures—the Hebrew Bible, for example, records an often awkward and contentious if nonetheless inspiring struggle to ground universal claims in the contingent narrative of a particular people<sup>3</sup>—such