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## 5. Relativism

Many different ideas have been given the name ‘relativism’, and the term has been used to pillory all sorts of views (sometimes for good reasons, sometimes for bad ones). It is mere posturing to say that you are for or against “relativism” unless you say what you mean by the term. Here I want mainly to discuss (and to criticize) a view I have encountered among students in philosophy courses, who say things like this: "What anyone believes is true for that person. What you believe is true for you, what I believe is true for me." We can call the view expressed in such statements ‘relativism’ because it denies that there is any such thing as “absolute” truth, holds that all truth is *relative* to the person who believes it.

### 1. Protagorean relativism

Though relativism is strangely attractive to some beginners in philosophy, there are virtually no relativists among significant figures in the history of philosophy. The principal exception to this last claim is Protagoras of Abdera (c. 485-410 B.C.), a Greek philosopher who apparently put forward a version of relativism in a treatise entitled *Truth*. Protagoras traveled to many city-states, taught many influential people, and became very wealthy. He was possibly the most successful of the teachers in fifth century Greece who were known as ‘sophists’. None of Protagoras' writings have come down to us, but his views are reported by others, chiefly by Plato in the dialogues *Protagoras* and *Theaetetus*.

According to Protagoras, “The human being is the measure of all things, of those that are, that they are, and of those that are not, that they are not.”<sup>1</sup> By this Protagoras apparently meant that each individual person is the measure of how things are to that person: things are or are not (to me) according as they appear to me to be or not be. Protagoras was thinking of cases like this: To me the wind feels cold, while to you the wind feels warm. About this case Protagoras wants to say the following: The wind isn’t (absolutely or in itself) either cold or warm; “cold” and “warm” are merely subjective states or feelings. To me the wind feels (or is) cold, and to you it feels (or is) warm, and beyond this there is no fact of the matter concerning the temperature of the wind.<sup>2</sup>

Protagoras’ relativism may have been a response to some of the metaphysical assertions made by his contemporaries, such as Parmenides of Elea. Parmenides’ view was: What is, is; what is not, is not. What falls under the senses, however, is always changing, always different from what went before and will come after, and comes before us only by seeming this way or that way to us. What truly is cannot become or change, cannot be different from anything it is not, and cannot be perceived by the senses. The only reality is Being or the One. What merely appears is nothing at all. If the mere seeming of sense perception falls short of total Being, it can have no reality whatever.

Against this, Protagoras understandably wanted to defend the reality of sense perception, and say that there is such a thing as the way something appears. According to Plato’s account, however, Protagoras wanted to extend his defense of appearance to the point of saying that appearances are completely real, as real as it gets. He also wanted to extend ‘appearances’ beyond perceptual feelings to other kinds of seemings, such as beliefs. If I believe that the world is a certain way, then that’s how the world seems to me, and so that’s how the world *is* (to me). If you have a different belief, then that’s how the world appears, and therefore how it *is*, to you.

From this Protagoras concluded that error and false belief are absolutely impossible.<sup>3</sup> For a belief says only how things seem to someone, and how they seem to anyone is always how they *are* (for that person). In fact this view, is not so far from Parmenides' own view, which emphasized reality to the extent of denying appearance altogether. Protagoras, by contrast, inflates the "appearance" side of the appearance/reality distinction to the point where it completely excludes the "reality" side. So he too is denying there is any room for a difference between appearance and reality.

Let's try to imagine a world of which Protagoras' relativism would give us a correct account. Suppose a world composed entirely of independent sets of private sensations or experiences (such as my feeling of cold, which is present only to me and not to you, and your feeling of warmth, which is present to you and not to me). I have access only to my private experiences, you have access only to yours, and neither of us has access to anything we might share in common – to a public or "objective" world, containing things like material objects. To get Protagoras's view, however, we must suppose not only that my experiences are there only for me, but also that I can't be mistaken about any of them. And in order to exclude the possibility of any sort of error, we have to suppose, finally, that in this world people can formulate judgments only about things with which they are acquainted, so that I couldn't make any erroneous judgments about someone else's experiences. But in the world we're imagining now, there isn't anything about which two people could either agree or disagree. Each of us is shut up in our own private microcosm; my seemings don't even exist in your little world, and yours don't exist in mine. There couldn't be any error or falsehood, because the only things a person can make judgments about are exactly as that person thinks they are. In that sense each person's beliefs in that world are (necessarily and infallibly) *true*, but they are true only *for* that person since no one else could possibly have access to that truth.

But for this very reason, it could equally be argued that in such a world there would be no place at all for the idea of "truth". Truth applies only to judgments about a shared world, which can be either as someone believes it is or otherwise than it is believed to be. For the possibility of saying or believing something true goes hand in hand with the possibility of saying or believing something false; in a world where there is no possibility of ever calling a belief or assertion "false", there would also be no use for the word "true". In such a world, however, there would also be no use for the word "belief". For beliefs aim at truth, and to believe that *p* is exactly the same thing as believing that *p* is *true*. If I can't apply "true" to my thoughts or speech acts, then none of my thoughts could count as a *belief*. And since to assert that *p* is no different from asserting that *p* is true, nothing anyone says in that world could even count as an *assertion*.

We don't think we live in a world of that kind. We take ourselves to have beliefs and make assertions, and we think our world contains public objects for beliefs and assertions to be about. We even think of our "private" sensations as public objects in the sense that other people can have beliefs about them that can be true or false. If you say that the wind feels warm to you, I might believe you are lying to me, or even that you are lying to *yourself*. This could not happen in a Protagorean world. In fact, even our ability to *imagine* a Protagorean world shows that *for us* this world is not Protagorean at all. For although we have been thinking of that world as one in which people's private experiences would not be public objects *in that world*, we have nevertheless been taking it for granted that the judgments we have been making about their experiences are shared and public between *us*.

## **2. Is relativism self-refuting?**

What this suggests is that Protagoras' view isn't true in our world. But perhaps relativism couldn't be true in *any* world.

That is what Plato thought. He argued that Protagoras' relativism is *necessarily* false, because it *refutes itself*.<sup>4</sup>

The problem arises as soon as Protagoras tries either to *assert* relativism or *believe* it. If Protagoras asserts relativism, then he asserts that relativism is *true*, and that those (such as Plato) who deny relativism say and believe something false. But relativism denies that anyone can say or believe anything false. Hence to be consistent Protagoras must concede that the denier of relativism says and believes something true. Consequently, relativism is committed to saying that its own denial is true, and in this way it refutes itself.

Protagoras might try to escape the problem by saying that relativism is true *for* the relativist, while the denial of relativism is true *for* the non-relativist. He might even try to say that when *he* asserts a proposition, he isn't asserting that the proposition is (absolutely) *true* (since the notion of absolute truth is just what a relativist wants to get rid of) but only that it is *true for him*. But what is "true for" supposed to mean here?

Suppose you and I disagree about something. I think there was once life on Mars and you think there never was. In such a case, we do say things like this: "For me it is true that there was life on Mars, but for you it is true that there never was." What this means is: *In my opinion*, it is (absolutely, objectively) true that life once existed on Mars, while *in your opinion* it is (absolutely, objectively) true that life never existed on Mars.

Or again, we say things like this: "For me, it is true that dot-com investments in the 1990s were disastrous, while for you it is true that they were profitable." This might refer to our respective opinions about dot-com investments in the 1990s: whether we think that they were good or a bad investments for people in general; but it might also mean that it is (absolutely, objectively) true that I lost my shirt investing in dot-com companies in the 1990s, while you made big bucks investing in such companies. None of these uses of "true for" succeed in getting rid of the notion of (absolute, objective) truth; on the contrary, when we

spell out what they mean, we see that this notion is indispensable to explaining what they mean.

When pressed, relativists usually say that *p* is "true for me" if I believe that *p*. But this answer is no help, because believing that *p* is once again no different from believing that *p* is (absolutely) true. If relativists say that this isn't what *they* mean when *they* assert a proposition or say they believe it, then they are apparently using the terms "assert" and "believe" in some new and mysterious sense. Until they explain the meanings these words have for them, we can't be sure what (if anything) they are really saying when their mouths make noises that sound (to us) like *assertions* of relativism. Understanding their words in the usual sense, if you try to assert or believe that there is no (absolute) truth, it has to follow that you can't believe anything at all (not even relativism), and so nothing can be true even *for you* (not even relativism). Relativism is self-refuting simply because it has no way of using or making sense of the expression "true for me" without relying implicitly on the notion "(absolutely) true," the very notion relativism wants to reject.<sup>5</sup>

If their own assertions of relativism are to make sense, relativists must allow at least one proposition to be absolutely true, namely relativism itself. Suppose we let the relativist make relativism itself an exception (the sole exception) to its own claim that all truth is relative. The relativist now says that relativism is true absolutely, and all beliefs *except* relativism and its denial are true only relatively (true for those who believe them). This retreat seems to save relativism from direct self-refutation, but it looks extremely ad hoc. Before it looked as if the relativist's idea was that there is something wrong with the *very idea* of absolute truth; but now the relativist can no longer say that. And once we're allowed to use the notion of absolute truth in asserting relativism, then it's natural to wonder why there couldn't be any other absolute truths except relativism. And of course if there are any others, then relativism itself is absolutely false, since it denies that there is any absolute truth (except itself).

Even with this retreat, relativism becomes just as self-refuting as it was before as soon as the relativist tries to apply the notion of relative truth to what anyone *believes*. For it is still true that to believe that *p* is to believe *p* is true (absolutely). Thus in order to assert that anything is true *for* someone, the relativist has to say that something else besides relativism is true absolutely. For instance, if the relativist holds that “*p* is true for Socrates” means “Socrates believes that *p*”, then in order to assert that *p* is true for Socrates, the relativist has to assert that it is *true* (absolutely) that Socrates believes that *p*. But then “Socrates believes that *p*” is an absolute truth other than relativism, which entails that relativism is absolutely false.

### **3. Ideas not to be confused with relativism**

People who think they are relativists are often trying to express one (or more) ideas different from relativism and not threatened with self-refutation. Here are four such ideas:

*I. Skepticism: All beliefs are uncertain; no belief is justified.* Relativism looks something like skepticism in that they both put all beliefs in the same boat.<sup>6</sup> Further, people are often attracted to relativism by the feeling that others are too confident in the absolute truth of what they believe, and skepticism is the view that no one is ever entitled to such confidence. But skepticism is not the same as relativism, and is even in a way its diametrical opposite. Relativism says that whatever anybody believes must be true (for that person), so that no belief can ever be mistaken, unjustified or even uncertain. Skepticism does not deny that some beliefs are (absolutely) true, it denies only that we can ever be sure which beliefs these are. Skepticism is quite an extreme position, and probably false; but it is not threatened with self-refutation, as relativism is. For it is perfectly self-consistent to say that you hold beliefs that are uncertain, or even unjustified.

(Religious people sometimes say such things about beliefs they hold on faith.) A consistent skeptic must hold that skepticism itself is uncertain, but there is no self-refutation involved in doing that.

If a relativist catches you audaciously suggesting that there is such a thing as (absolute) truth, then you are bound to be asked the rhetorical question: “But who is to decide what the truth is?” Apparently the relativist thinks that if you hold that there is an absolute, objective truth, then you have to believe there is some authority whose word on that truth must not be questioned. The rhetorical question appears to be meant as a challenge to your presumed right to set yourself up as such an authority. It is supposed to make you either abandon the whole idea of absolute truth or else reveal yourself for the arrogant dogmatist you are. But the possibility of skepticism shows very graphically that this is a false dilemma. Skeptics don’t deny that there is an absolute truth, but they are as far from dogmatism as it is possible to be, since they deny absolutely that anyone (least of all themselves) could ever be in a position to say with certainty what the truth is. Even if you aren’t a skeptic, you can believe there is an (absolute) truth without thinking that anyone counts as an infallible authority about what it is.

Even though skepticism is the exact opposite of relativism, I sometimes suspect that people have arrived at relativism by going through skepticism. First they became aware that there is widespread disagreement on fundamental philosophical issues, which fostered in them a commendable (though perhaps exaggerated) sense of intellectual modesty. This led them (perhaps rashly) to the extreme skeptical conclusion that nobody knows anything at all about anything and that all opinions are equally doubtful. But that conclusion panicked them, so they began looking around for a way in which people can be certain about something even in the face of this universal uncertainty. As a quick way out, they hit on this compromise: If everyone just stops trying to claim *absolute* truth for what they believe, then in return we can let each person’s beliefs count as “true for

them”. But this attempt at a negotiated settlement is bound to fail, because it is nothing but an attempt to combine two mutually contradictory assertions, namely: “All beliefs are utterly doubtful” and “All beliefs are unquestionably certain”. If the point of relativism is to try to combine these two assertions, then it is easy to see why it has to be self-refuting.

### *II. Different people can be justified in holding different beliefs.*

In the eighteenth century, chemists such as Georg Ernst Stahl and Joseph Priestley held that when something burns, it loses a substance called “phlogiston”. Later, after the researches of Antoine Lavoisier, chemists came to reject the phlogiston theory in favor of the theory that combustion involves not the loss of something, but the gain of something, namely, oxygen.<sup>7</sup> Before Lavoisier, the most informed chemists in the world all believed the phlogiston theory; very likely they were *justified* in doing so: perhaps evidence for the phlogiston theory was so strong that they would have been unreasonable if they had not believed it. But Lavoisier acquired new evidence, which justifies rejecting the phlogiston theory and believing the oxidation theory instead.

There is nothing relativistic in claiming that Stahl and Priestley were justified in believing the phlogiston theory while Lavoisier was justified in rejecting it. That is not at all the same as claiming that the phlogiston theory was “true for Stahl, but not true for Lavoisier.” It is one thing for a person to be justified in holding a belief, and a very different thing for the belief to be true. If you and I hold mutually incompatible beliefs, then what at least one of us believes must be false; but it could still be true that my belief is justified on the evidence I have and your belief is justified on the evidence you have. In a case like this the obvious thing to do is to communicate with one another as we inquire, sharing evidence until (hopefully) we eventually come to agreement on (what we hope is) the truth. But we shouldn’t deceive ourselves into thinking that this is a simple or easy process, or that the attempt to reach agreement will always be successful. Priestley was a good scientist, and he knew of Lavoisier’s results, but he died still believing in the phlogiston

theory, even after most chemists considered it discredited. The fact that intelligent people often can’t reach agreement does not show that there is no true or false, no right or wrong.

*III. People sometimes hold conflicting beliefs without any of them being wholly mistaken because they each see different aspects of the same reality.* Suppose you are climbing a mountain from the south and I am climbing the same mountain from the north. The north side of the mountain is covered with evergreen trees; the south side is barren and rocky. On the basis of what I see around me, I judge that the whole mountain is covered with forest; on the basis of what you see, you judge that the whole mountain is barren rock. Here each of us holds a true belief about the part of the mountain we see, but a false belief about the mountain as a whole. Different religions have sometimes been depicted as different paths up the same mountain (whose summit is God, salvation or religious truth); each describes a different path to the summit, and describes it accurately, but there is more to the mountain (the religious life) than any of them realizes; so every religion is in error when it denies the experience of other religions.

The claim here is *not* that any religion is “true *for*” its believers. It is rather that every religion contains some of the (objective, absolute) truth by correctly representing the side of God or religious truth the religion genuinely experiences. But this also implies that each religion is limited and fallible, containing some falsehood to the extent that it regards itself as complete and in exclusive possession of the truth. The point of the picture might be that each religious tradition deserves respect because it has part of the truth; but it implies equally that the adherents of each religion should be wary of its blind spots and open to the elements of truth in other religions that are missing in their own. This last point, however, is one that a relativist can’t make, and must even deny. For since relativists are committed to saying that every person’s beliefs are *wholly* true (for that person), relativism rules out the possibility that anyone’s beliefs are open

to correction or completion by considering some other viewpoint.

*IV. Fallibilism: We might always be mistaken in what we believe.* René Descartes thought that we can be infallible in some of our assertions: for example, that when you attend to your own thinking, your assertion “I think, therefore I exist” could not possibly be mistaken.<sup>8</sup> This denies fallibilism, since Descartes holds that some of our beliefs that could not be mistaken. But Descartes thought that many of his own beliefs had turned out to be erroneous and many beliefs we need for everyday life are always going to be somewhat uncertain. He held that we can achieve infallibility only about a few things, and then only if we follow the right philosophical method very cautiously and carefully. Other philosophers, however, such as Charles Sanders Peirce, have disagreed with Descartes, maintaining that we are always going to be fallible in everything we believe (the term “fallibilism” was Peirce’s invention).<sup>9</sup> Some relativists seem directly to equate relativism with fallibilism. When you deny relativism (or assert that there is such a thing as absolute truth), they can interpret this only as a denial of fallibilism. But this is a confusion. When you assert that  $p$ , you take the risk that you will have to take the assertion back if it is shown to be wrong; at the same time you assert that  $p$ , you commit yourself to the claim that you aren’t in fact mistaken in your assertion that  $p$ , and you risk having to take that back too. But in asserting that  $p$  you *aren’t* thereby committing yourself to saying that your assertion that  $p$  is infallible and couldn’t possibly be proven wrong in the future. If  $p$  turns out to be false, you don’t have any claim of infallibility to take back because you neither made nor implied such a claim when you asserted that  $p$ . Not only is fallibilism perfectly consistent with holding beliefs about what is (absolutely) true, but fallibilism itself makes sense only if you are prepared to make some assertions about what is absolutely true, since unless you do this there is nothing at all for you to be fallible about.

Actually, it is the *relativists* who are committed to denying fallibilism. For according to them, they can’t be fallible in any of their claims that something is absolutely true (since they make no such claims); nor can they have false beliefs about anything they believe to be relatively true, since relativism says that whatever I believe is true (for me). Therefore, relativists are committed to being total infallibilists – infallibilists not merely about a special class of their beliefs (as Descartes is), but infallibilists about absolutely all their beliefs.

#### 4. Ethical relativism

In §2 we tried (unsuccessfully) to save relativism from self-refutation by exempting relativism itself from the claim that all truth is relative. We might have better luck if we try admitting that most beliefs (especially scientific or purely factual beliefs) are true or false absolutely, but holding that relativism is nevertheless correct for some limited class of beliefs. Since relativists are often interested in applying their view chiefly to ethical issues, we might try *ethical relativism*. It says: There is no absolute truth about ethics, but only relative truth. What I believe is morally right (or wrong) is right (or wrong) for me, and what you believe is right is right for you. If I think abortion is wrong, then it is true for me that abortion is wrong; if you think abortion is OK, then it is true for you that abortion is OK.

A natural question is: Why pick on ethical beliefs in this way? The answers most often given are these two:

- A. People never agree on ethical questions.
- B. There is no way of knowing any absolute truth about ethics.

Critics of ethical relativism often point out that there is more agreement on ethical questions than (A) admits: for instance, when you take account of the differing circumstances and factual beliefs of different cultures, it is not so hard to account for their differing ethical customs and opinions on the basis of a common

set of fundamental ethical principles. There is also a very practical reason for assuming that eventual agreement on ethical questions is possible: namely, that if people are to treat one another with mutual respect and seek rational agreement on disputed questions, they have to proceed on the provisional assumption that the agreement they seek is at least possible. The critics also claim that (B) is a wild exaggeration: For some ethical truths seem virtually impossible for anyone to doubt. Who, outside the artificial atmosphere of a philosophical discussion, could seriously claim to doubt that it would be wrong to torture a child to death before its parents' eyes just for the fun of it?

But let us grant both (A) and (B), at least for the sake of argument. The problem for ethical relativism is that they don't entail ethical relativism. Further, ethical relativism isn't the only (or even the best) way of accounting for them. (B) seems to assert ethical *skepticism*, which would provide a natural explanation for (A) as well, since if no one knows anything about a subject, then that explains why people have widely differing opinions about it.

When we limit relativism to ethical beliefs, relativism itself no longer has to count as only relatively true, so it looks as if it has been rescued from the threat of self-refutation. But the rescue will be successful only if:

- (i) Ethical relativism itself is not an ethical belief; and
- (ii) Ethical relativism does not share with ethical beliefs the features which make them only relatively and not absolutely true.

But both (i) and (ii) are doubtful, or at least very difficult for ethical relativists to hold consistently with their relativism. The relativist's main reason for thinking that ethical beliefs can't be absolutely true is that they are endlessly controversial. Ethical relativism shares this feature with ethical beliefs: people don't agree about ethical relativism either. Moreover, ethical relativists

often want to treat ethical relativism as if it were an ethical belief, or as if it implied certain ethical beliefs. For instance, they think ethical relativism implies that we should be tolerant of people with ethical beliefs different from our own (however, see § 6 below.) If either (i) or (ii) is false, then ethical relativism must regard itself as only relatively true, and so it would be self-refuting after all. So if ethical relativism is to avoid self-refutation, ethical relativists cannot treat ethical relativism as if it were itself a substantive ethical view (supporting tolerance, for instance). And as long as ethical relativism remains as controversial as many ethical views are, they have to explain why we should regard it as any more true than these views.

Even if these objections are waived, ethical relativism still inherits some of the serious problems of unqualified relativism. Ethical relativists still haven't explained what (if anything) they mean by "true for me". Since an ethical relativist doesn't believe that it's *true* (absolutely) that killing is wrong, then the ethical relativist doesn't *believe* that killing is wrong, and so it can't be *true for* the ethical relativist that killing is wrong. Thus ethical relativists can't consistently have any ethical beliefs of their own.

Once again we may learn something if we look at some other views which might be confused with ethical relativism even though they are quite distinct from (and even incompatible with) it:

*I. Ethical Skepticism: No ethical belief is certain, all ethical beliefs are unjustified.* As before, ethical skepticism is the diametrical opposite of ethical relativism, and as before, ethical skepticism is more defensible than ethical relativism. Even so, unqualified ethical skepticism seems exaggerated, to put it mildly. We need only think again of our belief, which no sane person could seriously doubt, that it would be wrong to torture children before their parents' eyes just for the fun of it.

*II. Ethical nihilism: All ethical statements are false.* Ethical statements predicate moral properties ("right," "wrong," "good," "evil," "just," "unjust") of people or actions or social institutions,

etc.; but (according to the ethical nihilist) the world does not contain any of these properties; the belief in them is an error or a superstition, like believing in gods or black magic or the bad luck which will happen if you spill the salt. As Nietzsche puts it: “There are altogether no moral facts. Moral judgments agree with religious ones in believing in realities which are no realities. Morality is merely an interpretation of certain phenomena – more precisely, a misinterpretation.”<sup>10</sup> Ethical nihilism and ethical relativism both deny that any ethical beliefs are absolutely true, but ethical nihilism doesn't sugar-coat this denial by adding the mysterious qualification that ethical beliefs are all nevertheless “true for” the person who holds them. Ethical nihilism does have one *problem* in common with ethical relativism: Since you can't believe that *p* unless you believe *p* is *true*, if you are either an ethical relativist or an ethical nihilist, then you are committed to having no ethical beliefs at all, not even beliefs like the one about torturing children cited in the previous paragraph.

*III. Emotivism: Ethical statements do not make assertions at all, but instead express emotions or attitudes.* According to the emotivist, ethical statements do not really assert anything that could be true or false. Instead, they express emotions of approval or disapproval, rather like exclamations of joy or distaste.<sup>11</sup> On this view, to say “Kindness is good” is like saying: “Hooray for kindness!” To say “Cruelty is bad” is like saying: “Cruelty – Yuck!” Imperatives, like exclamations, aren't true or false. So “prescriptivism”, a variant of emotivism, holds that ethical statements are not assertions but imperatives: “Killing is wrong” means something like: “Don't kill!”<sup>12</sup> Emotivism has to be different from ethical relativism because ethical relativism says that all ethical beliefs are true (for someone), while emotivism says that no one really has any ethical beliefs at all! Like ethical relativists and ethical nihilists, emotivists can't have any ethical beliefs, but this doesn't bother them because they have ethical sentiments or attitudes instead. For example, emotivists can't *believe* anything about the wrongness of torturing children, but

they can have very strong negative *feelings* about such practices and they can try to get others to share their feelings. Emotivists try to reinterpret (what look like) ethical assertions as really disguised expressions of emotion and commands or exhortations to share emotions. On the basis of such reinterpretations they then claim that their view has the advantage that it rids us of the confused and difficult task of justifying moral beliefs but otherwise makes no difference to normative ethics. Accordingly, emotivists subscribe to normative ethical theories such as utilitarianism and Kantianism just as they would if they thought these theories involved beliefs about ethical truth.<sup>13</sup> Emotivism is probably the most defensible of the views being considered here; it is still defended by some philosophers, though it is no longer nearly as popular among them as it was in the early to middle twentieth century.

*IV. Cultural relativism: Different cultures have different ethical standards and the standards by which the conduct of any individual should be measured are the mores of the community to which that individual belongs.*<sup>14</sup>

## **5. Cultural relativism**

Cultural relativism, taken in this sense, deserves a separate discussion all to itself. For it is not really a form of relativism at all in the sense we have been using that term. If taken as merely a collectivized form of ethical relativism, then it inherits all the other problems of ethical relativism. But as just stated, cultural relativism does not deny that ethical beliefs are true. It is a view about which ones are true and why.

Those who subscribe to cultural relativism about ethics are often trying to make a point that is both correct and important. Ethics or morality itself can, in a certain sense, be seen as a social or cultural phenomenon. The ethical beliefs by which most people guide their lives and measure themselves tend to come in systems that are conjoined with cultural practices and acquired



by individuals as part of their socialization. Systems of ethical belief differ from culture to culture in significant ways that anthropologists may study with profit. When we deal with people in or from cultures different from our own, not only prudence but also moral decency requires that we attend to these differences and consider them with care and sensitivity in light of the respect we owe the members of other cultures simply as human beings. If that were what 'cultural relativism' or 'ethical relativism' meant, then it would be an (objectively, absolutely) true doctrine relating to the sociology and anthropology of moral beliefs, and to some of the practical implications of those studies. It also would have nothing to do with the 'relativism' discussed in the preceding pages.

But sometimes the people who rightly insist on the truths just stated think those truths have the substantive normative implication that whatever any culture believes is right is right for members of that culture. This is the position I have just named 'cultural relativism'. In effect, cultural relativism holds that there is a single, absolute, objectively right answer to any moral question about the rightness or wrongness of a given action: If you want to know whether an action is right or wrong, simply find out what the agent's culture believes about it. If they think it is right, then it is right; if they think it is wrong then it is wrong.<sup>15</sup>

Anybody who holds that there are (absolute) ethical truths must admit that the rightness or wrongness of an act is relative to the circumstances in which it is performed. Because people's circumstances differ, what is (absolutely, objectively) right for one person, might be different from what is (absolutely, objectively) right for another. For instance, even the most extreme moral absolutist might very well hold that it is right for Joe to have sex with Joe's wife but wrong for Sam to have sex with Joe's wife. Such cases of "right for you, wrong for me" obviously do not support any form of ethical relativism. Cultural relativism, as we are now considering it, could be understood in a similar way, as simply a special view about how moral right

and wrong vary with the agent's circumstances. It holds that (absolute, objective) moral rightness and wrongness depend on the prevailing culture's beliefs about a given action. If you want to know the objectively right answer to the question whether a given act is right or wrong, just find out what the agent's culture believes on that question: their belief determines what is objectively true.<sup>16</sup>

Accordingly, a moral judgment such as "Joe's killing Sam was wrong" would be like the judgment "It is raining" in that both have implicit reference to a context determining their objective truth. "It is raining" always means that it is raining at a certain time and place (e.g. in Fresno at 6 pm on September 12, 2002). "Joe's killing Sam was wrong" means that Joe's killing of Sam was wrong in a certain culture at a certain time (e.g. in white Anglo-Saxon Protestant Eastern seaboard American culture early in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, where acts like Joe's act of killing are widely disapproved). Cultural relativism then holds that what a culture believes about an act determines the truth about its objective rightness or wrongness in something like the way that spatio-temporal location determines the truth about the weather conditions obtaining then and there.

*Cultural relativism and the affirmation of cultural diversity.* Much of the appeal of cultural relativism has come from the perception that different cultures have different moral standards and moral practices from ours, but nevertheless get along at least as well with their standards and practices as we do with ours. This perception is often conjoined with the idea that it is wrong for Western culture to be intolerant of other cultures and impose its ways on them. But this last idea does not imply cultural relativism, and is probably even inconsistent with it. Perhaps the intended connection between cultural relativism and cultural tolerance is based on an argument of the following kind:

1. We shouldn't blame, or interfere with, actions that are objectively right.

2. The actions generally approved in other cultures are objectively right just because they are generally approved there. (Cultural relativism)

3. Therefore, we should not blame or interfere with the actions of people in other cultures when they are generally approved in those cultures.

But can a cultural relativist consistently put forward such an argument? Cultural relativists often charge that among the ethical beliefs of Western culture is *Western Supremacy*:

*Western Supremacy*: Western values should be imposed on other cultures, and members of Western culture should blame and interfere with the actions of people in other cultures whenever these actions violate Western values.

If the cultural relativists are right that Western Supremacy is a belief of Western culture, then what cultural relativism tells us as members of Western culture is that it is absolutely, objectively right for us to impose our ways on others and objectively right for us to blame and interfere with the actions of people in other cultures whenever our values condemn them. That means that cultural relativism supports not (3) but its contradictory.

Further, what account can a cultural relativist consistently give of the ethical principle stated in (1)? If the principle is supposed to have absolute or trans-cultural validity, how can this be consistent with cultural relativism? If the principle is valid merely because it is one of our culture's ethical beliefs, then it deserves no priority over Western Supremacy. And then it looks as if (1) and Western Supremacy taken together imply the falsity of (2) (that is, of cultural relativism). In that case, cultural relativism is self-refuting for us Westerners (and, indeed, for the members of any culture whose ethical beliefs happen to be incompatible with cultural relativism). It follows from this that cultural relativism is totally incapable of combating any form of culturally entrenched imperialism, racism or ethnocentrism. For whenever we find these ugly things built into a culture's beliefs,

cultural relativism is committed to endorsing them; and if cultural relativism is interpreted in such a way as to conflict with these beliefs, then it becomes self-refuting in that culture.

In practice, cultural relativism is sometimes used as a pretext for following whatever ethical beliefs one finds convenient. For instance, a Western-based multinational corporation operating in other parts of the world comes from a culture that believes that it is all right to seek the highest profit you can within the law; cultural relativism therefore says they may do that (even if it means disrupting the traditions of that culture). But cultural relativism also says that they need not blame or interfere with practices within that culture which might be considered wrong in their own culture: practices such as police-state terror directed against workers who protest the brutally low wage scales and miserable working conditions through which the corporations reap their profits. So interpreted, cultural relativism allows these corporations to do whatever they like.

The above results suggest that cultural relativism doesn't do justice to the actual views of those who really want to promote cross-cultural tolerance or oppose Western imperialism. It looks like those views really consist in holding to certain (absolute, objective, trans-cultural) ethical principles about how the members of different cultures should act toward each other, such as that people should be open-minded and tolerant to all human beings, always treating them with dignity and respect. Perhaps the anti-imperialists are embarrassed to avow such principles because they obviously come from the modern, Western Enlightenment tradition, and avowing them will immediately expose you to the dreaded charge of ethnocentrism. By contrast, cultural relativism's principled stance of absolute cross-cultural neutrality seems to buy us immunity from this charge. But of course cultural relativism is a modern Western idea every bit as much as Enlightenment moral principles are; the only difference is that, as we have seen, cultural relativism is actually *hostile* to cross-cultural tolerance and mutual respect, whereas certain other Western Enlightenment principles do favor them.

Very likely we end up in this paradoxical position because we start from the correct perception that everyone's standpoint is limited by their cultural perspective, and then (directly contradicting this insight) we try immediately to occupy a sublimely neutral standpoint which is above all such limitations. We would be wiser to align ourselves with some standpoint situated within a definite culture which, despite its inevitable limitations, at least makes an effort to be critical of itself and tolerant of other cultural standpoints. We are reluctant to take this wise course because we know that it is hard to identify such a standpoint; we realize that the biases from which we start will doubtless lead us into mistakes, probably culpable ones; and we are aware that by this route we can never hope altogether to escape the accusation of ethnocentrism, but will just have to learn to live with it (as part of our human condition).

We find cultural relativism far more appealing because its empty gestures enable us to announce our good intentions and repudiate our cultural biases in the abstract, with a mere wave of the hand. It enables us to absolve ourselves all of our cultural limitations in general without ever having to overcome any of them in particular (as we have seen, it even provides an endorsement for them, when that is needed). But perhaps what we have really wanted all along is a license to behave like brutal, arrogant imperialists while at the same time thinking of ourselves as tolerant, humane cosmopolitans who have transcended all their cultural prejudices. This makes it unsurprising that cultural relativism has had widespread appeal among the more sophisticated members of Western imperialist culture.

*Difficulties in accepting cultural relativism.* Even if it lived up to its billing, cultural relativism would still be extremely implausible. It commits you to the objective rightness (in the context of the culture in question) of all the moral beliefs and practices which have ever existed. Slavery was objectively right in ancient Greece and Rome, and even in our own country not so long ago. Human sacrifices were objectively right for the Aztecs; so was the Indian custom of *suttee*, requiring a widow to burn

herself to death on her husband's funeral pyre; and also the *pogrom* – the periodic indiscriminate slaughter of Jews – which has long been part of the folkways of Christian peoples in Europe. Also objectively right is the genital mutilation of women, which is still practiced in a variety of cultures. Cultural relativists sometimes refuse to back down even when presented with the most outrageous and grisly cases; but I can't help thinking that if they hadn't been backed into this position by the stance they hastily chose in a philosophical discussion, these same people would be the first to condemn these practices as strongly as anyone.

The moral problems cultural relativism is trying to address are certainly real ones. In some cases it is simply not obvious what we should do (or even think) when confronted by practices of another culture that offend our moral sense and contradict our deepest convictions. Some things that people do to one another in different cultures are quite evidently the results of wretched superstitions and the brutally unjust distributions of power and authority that are traditional in those societies. On the other hand, we can often see that in other cultures certain actions have a different meaning, and we are quite aware that we lack the capacity to understand and evaluate the practices of alien societies. If we do nothing in the face of evident moral evil, we completely forfeit our integrity; but if we act on the basis of convictions held from our admittedly incomplete perspective, then we run the risk of arrogantly setting ourselves up as infallible moral judges of people who may know more than we do about what is being judged. If traditional cultures in other parts of the world are changing so that they become more like modern Western culture in ways we approve, should we applaud and support this process as the victory of moral progress, or should we deplore, regret and oppose these changes because they amount to the violent extinction of that culture's priceless heritage? What is objectionable about cultural relativism is that it pretends to have found a simple, general, tidy and unambiguous

answer to questions where any answer of that description is almost certainly wrong.

*Difficulties in applying cultural relativism.* Another problem with cultural relativism is that the general criterion of right and wrong which it proposes is actually very unhelpful because it is inherently unclear and impossible to apply in the real world. Cultural relativism tells us that the rightness of an act depends on what the agent's culture believes about it. But most societies today are a complex network of cultures and subcultures, sometimes having widely divergent moral beliefs about controversial issues. For a given person in a given situation, how are we supposed to decide which culture or subculture the person belongs to? How many different cultures, for instance, are represented among the students in this course? How many of us can be entirely sure what culture we ourselves belong to? Can people set up a new culture whenever they want to? How few people would it take to do this?

In most cultures (our own, for instance), many ethical questions are the subject of endless disagreement and debate (this, after all, was what got ethical relativism started in the first place). How are we to determine what the ethical beliefs of the prevailing culture are? Does this require an overwhelming consensus among the culture's members, or is it a matter of simple majority vote? Or does cultural relativism imply that the most old-fashioned and ethnically traditional moral opinion is always the right one? Wherever there is any intra-cultural disagreement at all, the effect of cultural relativism will be to support the dominant view within the culture and to de-legitimize all dissenting views without giving them so much as a hearing. Cultural relativism implies that on any moral question within a culture an opinion is always necessarily wrong whenever it goes against traditional beliefs in the culture which are still very widely held. That means not only that those individuals who raise moral questions about accepted practices are always in the wrong, but also that any movement for moral reform within a culture, even if it eventually succeeds, must have been in the

wrong at the time it got started, and therefore that it must always be absolutely wrong to try to reform any culture's accepted moral beliefs and practices.

Cultural relativism seems to give plausible answers to ethical questions only in a culture (utterly unlike our own) that is homogeneous, unreflective, unchangeable and free of serious moral disagreements. Ironically, the very social complexities, mutabilities and controversies that make relativism attractive also render it useless, unclear and implausible as an account of ethical truth.

## **6. The appeal of relativism**

*Relativism and dogmatism.* Why does relativism appeal to people? People are often attracted to relativism because they think it expresses and supports attitudes of open-mindedness and tolerance, and that the rejection of relativism commits you to arrogant dogmatism and narrow-mindedness. Since the opposite of “relative” is “absolute,” the opposite of “relativism” seems to be “absolutism”, a word that usually connotes “authoritarianism” or “dogmatism”. Besides, dogmatism and intolerance always seem to be based on the idea that I am right and the other is wrong about something. But if everyone’s belief is equally true (because “true for them”), then there never could be any occasion to think that I am any more (or less) right than anyone else about anything. Consequently, it seems to follow that there could never be any possible reason for treating anyone with hostility or disrespect if they hold a belief different from mine.

If you want to avoid a bad thing, however, it isn’t always a good idea to fly to the opposite extreme, since that might turn out to be just as bad. If “absolutism” is bad and “relativism” is its opposite, it still doesn’t follow that relativism will be good. However, it is not clear that relativism really is the opposite thing from authoritarianism, dogmatism, closed-mindedness and

intolerance. In fact, it may even be just another version of the same thing.

Relativism never declares any belief absolutely true or false; this may make us think that it is open-minded. But to be open-minded is to be disposed to think that you are fallible, that you could be mistaken in what you believe (so that what you now think is absolutely true might on closer examination turn out to be absolutely false). This is a thought a relativist can never have, because relativists are convinced that at any time all their beliefs are necessarily true (for them). You show open-mindedness by leaving open the possibility of changing your beliefs (coming to disagree with what you used to believe) when you are given good reasons to. But relativists can never have any reason for changing their beliefs, since relativism says that at every point their beliefs are already true (for them). Of course relativism doesn't give anyone a reason for *not* changing their beliefs, since if I just happen to change my beliefs, then relativism says that my new belief is just as true (for me) as, but no truer (for me) than, my old belief was. In short, relativism implies that the right attitude toward our beliefs is always one of total self-complacency.

Relativism is anti-authoritarian only in the sense that it takes away any reason you might have for considering the opinions and arguments of others in forming your beliefs (for instance, the opinion of someone better informed than you are). For relativism says that your beliefs are all true (for you) no matter what anyone else may say or think. Relativism thus undercuts any reason anyone might have for being critical about their own beliefs. As we have already noted, relativism implies that you are always *infallible* in whatever you believe. The closed-minded arrogance of this view is not diminished by saying, in effect, that everyone else is infallible too. This merely adds to my own dogmatism the provision that it is all right for everyone else to be just as dogmatic as I am.

Tolerance is the willingness to let others be different from us, especially to let them disagree with us, even if they are wrong. Relativism cuts down on the *need* to be tolerant, since it denies that anyone is ever wrong. But this doesn't make the relativist tolerant for exactly the same reason that successfully fleeing from every danger doesn't make you courageous. It is as if relativists can't even conceive of actually *tolerating* those they think are in the wrong, and the closest thing to tolerance that they are capable of imagining is the principled refusal ever to admit that anyone could ever be wrong about anything. But relativism does not altogether eliminate the need for tolerance because people can be intolerant not only of those whose beliefs they think are wrong, but also of those who differ from them in other ways (in skin color, customs and folkways, or emotional sensibilities) even when the difference involves no disagreement in beliefs. And when the need for tolerance does arise, relativism provides no reason at all for being tolerant rather than intolerant. If I believe it is wrong to hate people who differ from me, relativism tells me that that belief is true (for me); but equally, if I believe in persecuting others, then relativism tells me that this belief is also true (for me). In short, relativism is just exactly as likely to encourage intolerance as it is to encourage tolerance. But this is precisely what we should have expected. In saying that every belief is true for the person who holds it, relativism is absolutely neutral between all pairs of opposed beliefs. But that entails directly that relativism is absolutely neutral between the belief in tolerance and the belief in intolerance. What this shows is simply that tolerance is not the same thing as neutrality. Tolerance requires some positive convictions about why, when and to what extent we should let people believe and do what we take to be wrong. Relativism can never support or even admit any convictions of this kind, because it can't even admit that anything is ever wrong.

*Relativism and conservatism.* Religious or political conservatives or traditionalists often attack "relativism". When they are accused of maintaining their views dogmatically or intolerantly,

they sometimes reply that all they are doing is maintaining that there is such a thing as “the truth”, and that it is right to stand by *the truth*. Or when some view of theirs is challenged, they sometimes engage in the rhetorical move of asserting that their dogmatically held opinion is *true* (as if this would be sufficient to justify the dogmatic and intolerant manner in which they hold it). The right reply to them is simply to point out that it is one thing to believe that there is truth and quite a different thing to believe that you are in sole and certain possession of it. They also often need to be told that if their beliefs were true, that would not automatically justify forcing them down other people’s throats. But their bad habits do probably encourage the idea that it is inherently conservative to believe in “truth” and that “relativism” is the right name for any view that is open-minded, tolerant, liberal and progressive.

What the traditionalists are usually opposing is not relativism in the sense we have been discussing here. Their target is more often the following views:

1. Traditionally accepted moral principles may not be correct; this is at least something about which intelligent people may disagree.
2. Which moral rules and principles are correct is subject to change with time and circumstances.
3. Moral principles apply differently to different circumstances, so that what is right for one person in one situation can be wrong for another person in a different situation.
4. There are sometimes justified exceptions to even a moral rule that is correct in general.
5. Even if an accepted moral principle is correct, we should sometimes be tolerant of people who disagree with it and refuse to follow it.

Each of these views might be described as “relativist” in the sense that it asserts that moral rules and principles should be

considered “relative” to something (in (1) and (2), relative to the grounds or evidence for them, which may not, or may no longer, be sufficient, in (3), (4) and (5), relative to the conditions of their application, which may justify flexibility in applying them. But these forms of “relativity” do not imply “relativism” in the sense we have been discussing, and are even inconsistent with it. For all of (1)-(5) presuppose that there is truth in moral matters, since they challenge traditional ideas about which principles are objectively correct, how certain we can be about this, whether moral truth can change, and how flexible we should be in adapting moral principles to different situations. Those who want to defend views such as (1)-(5) should not let traditionalists get away with suggesting that they are vulnerable to the charges of incoherence and self-refutation that can be brought against relativism.

Relativism itself is a very conservative position. In ancient Greece, Protagoras was well known for advocating very conventional views about how to live and what is right and wrong. Cultural relativism, as we have seen, tends to lend uncritical support to dominant cultural views and practices. Those who want to question or criticize traditional creeds and values at least have to admit that they might be wrong. But since relativism holds that everyone’s belief is already true (for them), it implies that there is never really any need for anyone to change their views about anything. You don’t have to attack the very notion of objective truth in order to challenge traditional ideas about what it is, where it is to be found, or whose views have to be taken into account in looking for it. On the contrary, it is only by presupposing that there is such a truth that you can legitimize challenges to mistaken ideas about what it is and how it should be sought. In fact, since absolute truth is not truth for anyone in particular, this implies that everyone’s standpoint needs to be taken into account in searching for it.

*Relativism, humbug, hype and spin.* Here is a somewhat speculative hypothesis about why relativism appeals to some people in our culture. Much of what we are exposed to in mass

culture is what Max Black used to call “humbug”.<sup>17</sup> Humbug is when I say something to you that isn’t true, where I know it isn’t true, I know you know it isn’t true, and I know you know I know it isn’t true, but I know that if you hear it enough, it will probably influence your behavior (typically, in my interests). “Hype” is a special kind of humbug: it makes wildly exaggerated claims for something: no one believes them, but the hype-artist foresees that people will end up acting as though they believed them, if only just a little. “Spin” is a transparently self-serving interpretation of the world, such as the contrasting versions of events narrated by openly self-advertised representatives of political parties, or by the ostensibly “right-wing” and “left-wing” debaters on those television shows in which important issues of the day are reduced to half-serious shouting matches for the amusement of the audience. Nobody expects the spin artist to be objective or fair or even credible – indeed, he or she would not be doing the job if what is said could be taken at face value. Most political rhetoric and nearly all advertising is “spin” and “humbug”, a lot of it is also “hype”. Nobody believes them, or even takes them seriously. But the politicians who spend their donors’ money are the ones who get elected and the products that are hyped on TV are the ones that sell.

To be humbugged is to be exposed to something that seems at first at least to pretend to be truth, but which you know from the start is less than truth. You reject it as truth, but then gradually come to accept it as less than truth, but also as not quite nothing either. Humbug therefore works partly by dulling your appetite for truth, getting you used to filling your mind with what you know is less than truth, with what is self-consciously phony, a glitzy but of course unconvincing imitation of truth. Humbug does not function on the level of reality but on the level of subjectivity (the perceptions of the recipient and the interests of the hype- or humbug-artist). Pleasing fictions work well as humbug. We know that the hero of the story is not a real person but we get emotionally involved with the story anyway, and we even end up cheering the hero and wanting to be like him (so

that we wear the clothes he wears, buy the car he drives, we live in reality some sad imitation of his glamorous fictional life). We don’t take the fiction seriously as reality, but in chasing after it we expend real energy and often spend serious money.

The psychological result of constant bombardment by spin, hype and humbug may help us to understand what relativists might mean by “true for me”: humbug is something other than and less than truth, something designed to dull my appetite for truth, something I don’t believe (yet eventually sort of believe), a substitute for truth that functions effectively not because of its relation to reality but because of its relation to our subjective susceptibilities (to being deceived and manipulated at least partly with our own knowledge and consent). Humbug puts itself forward as a sort of truth (which will affect my behavior as if I believed it, even though I really don’t).

This is one way in which the confused and self-contradictory notion of “true for me” might acquire a semblance of intelligibility. Relativism might express the consciousness of someone whose whole cognitive environment, so to speak, has been taken over by humbug. Nothing anybody believes is really believed, nothing anybody asserts is meant seriously, so nobody would be so crude as to say that it was “true”. Nobody would care about the truth even if it came up and hit them in the face. Such a person would have come to regard being humbugged as the normal state. This person thinks of really believing something (holding it to be true, period) as abnormal, a relic of a more innocent age in which people didn’t yet realize that everything is humbug. This also explains why relativists often think of themselves as sophisticated compared to people who haven’t gotten over the idea of ‘absolute truth’. Relativism might even seem to be a way of protecting yourself against being deceived by humbug, since it makes it explicit that no assertion is to be taken at face value and nothing anybody ever says is really to be believed.

But of course people who humbug others do seriously hold some beliefs, even if they don't express them: They seriously believe that if the others are humbugged often enough, they will behave in ways that serve the humbugger's interests at the expense of the humbuggee's interests. And it is only because the humbuggees seriously believe this too that they have any reason to protect themselves against humbug by not taking it seriously. So however prevalent humbug might become, it never really abolishes genuine belief or assertion, or renders the notion of (absolute) truth obsolete. In fact, it is a self-defeating strategy to try to protect yourself from humbug by not taking it seriously. For humbug is by its nature something that is not seriously believed, and it manipulates you despite – sometimes, even because – you do not seriously believe it. Therefore, however prevalent hype and humbug may become in our cognitive environment, we can't ultimately avoid challenging them directly and unsophisticatedly by just recognizing them for what they are and declaring bluntly that they are false. Admittedly, this is not "cool". But it is the nature of humbug that it manipulates those who are cool even more successfully than it does those who are uncool, since being cool means slouching into the acceptance of the very notions that let humbug work on you. The only way really to oppose humbug is by being *uncool*, chopping logic and just insisting squarishly on the obvious if boring fact that there is after all a distinction between telling the truth and telling lies.

*Relativism as an intellectual defense mechanism.* Relativism says that whatever you believe is true for you irrespective of anyone else. In effect, relativism marginalizes everybody's standpoint except your own. In relation to humbug, relativism tries to protect me from being manipulated by being cool, blocking the beliefs others are trying to implant in me against my knowledge and will by cutting me off from any pretense at serious communication with them. In relation to what I do seriously believe, however, relativism also cuts me off from serious

communication with others and thereby serves as a self-protective mechanism in another way.

When I begin the study of philosophy, I may suddenly discover powerful arguments and theories I never considered before which challenge the opinions I have always taken for granted. This can be very disturbing, and make me feel intimidated and insecure. Relativism comes to the rescue by protecting my opinions (making them all "true for me"). Because relativism is absolutely neutral between all particular opinions, it enables me to remain above the fray, taking the high ground away from those who, by lobbying for their particular version of the absolute truth, make it all too obvious that they have an axe to grind. As a relativist I never have to bother with the frustrating details of any philosophical dispute because relativism explains to me ahead of time not only why the dispute will never get resolved, but also why this is perfectly all right. I can agree that inquiry, reasoning and argument are fine (if someone happens to feel like paying attention to them), but I can rest assured that they need never seriously threaten my own beliefs (which remain true for me however the arguments come out). In this way relativism will encourage the one kind of tolerance for which I have the most desperate need: tolerance toward my own intellectual cowardice, laziness and incompetence. And when it protects me against all those whose powerful arguments might threaten my comfortable little world of convictions, relativism also makes me think I am tolerant toward others, since it releases me from the need to experience their alternative views as a threat to mine, and hence from the need to resist their arguments or to argue back: I can just live and let live. Both the appeal of relativism and its claim to tolerance would then be found in the way it immunizes my dogmatically held opinions against any facts or reasonings that might possibly call them into question.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Plato, *Theaetetus*, tr. J. McDowell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973) 152A. Relativist views were also put forward in an anonymous document, called the *Dissoi logoi* (or “double accounts”) which was composed at about the same time. See Jonathan Barnes, *The Pre-Socratic Philosophers* (London: Routledge, 1979), pp. 516-535.

<sup>2</sup> Plato, *Theaetetus* 152B.

<sup>3</sup> Plato, *Theaetetus* 160C.

<sup>4</sup> Plato, *Theaetetus* 161C-162A.

<sup>5</sup> There are “antirealist” theories of truth that deny that the truth of a thought or assertion is correspondence with the real world and hold instead that it consists in meeting some criterion or passing some test of verifiability. See Michael Dummett, *Truth and Other Enigmas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978). Such theories are not usually intended to be relativistic, but they would be if we suppose that there could be different and competing criteria or tests of verifiability, since the identification of truth with a criterion or test would then entail that there are a plurality of truths. One could say that when an assertion meets one certain criterion for truth but fails to meet another, then it is true *for* those who accept the first criterion but not true *for* those who accept the second. But this would be misleading, since on an antirealist theory of truth, what each criterion is a criterion for is being identified with passing that criterion itself, and so different criteria could not really be criteria for the same thing (“truth”), nor (for the same reason) could they really be *competing* criteria. But what this really shows is that as soon as an antirealist theory of truth admits a plurality of criteria, what it calls truth ceases to behave the way the notion of truth is supposed to behave on *either* a realist *or* an antirealist theory of truth. Hence this is not going to provide any intelligible account of the relativist notion of “true for” either. On this point, see Chris Swoyer, “True For,” in Michael Krausz and Jack Meiland (eds.) *Relativism, Cognitive and Moral* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), pp. 84-108. The fact that we might be tempted to take antirealist theories of truth in this direction really illustrates the point that wherever there is a criterion or test for verifiability, it is always conceivable that there should be other, competing criteria or tests for the same thing (“truth”). And what that shows, in turn, is that antirealist theories of truth are fundamentally mistaken in simply *identifying* truth with any proposed criterion or test for truth. In general, it belongs to the nature of criteria or tests for something’s being X that its really *being* X is logically distinct from its meeting any particular criterion for being X. This holds for any property X that is not simply conventionally defined by some criterion (as being “one meter long” might be conventionally defined by being the same length as the standard meter stick in Paris). But few properties are like this. For instance, someone might consider having won the Most Valuable Award in the American League for 2001 as the correct criterion for having been the most valuable player in the American League that year; but someone else might consider the sportswriters to have made a mistake, and think that some other criterion (such as the player’s statistical performance in batting average, runs batted in or game-winning hits) would be a better criterion for saying that someone was the most valuable player. Truth is like this case rather than being like the case of the standard meter, in that different metaphysical or epistemological or semantic theories may offer different and competing criteria for truth. Such a situation makes sense only if we realize that a proposition’s being true is something logically distinct from its meeting any particular criterion (even the criterion we think is the right one).

<sup>6</sup> Thus Barry Barnes and David Bloor want to identify “relativism” with the view that “all beliefs are on a par with one another with respect to the causes of their creditability. It is not that all beliefs are equally true or equally false, but that regardless of truth and falsity the fact of their credibility is to be seen as equally problematic.” “Relativism, Rationalism and the Sociology of Knowledge,” in Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes (eds.) *Rationality and Relativism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), p. 23). Whether or not one finds their position plausible (I must admit I regard it as extremely implausible), the thesis Barnes and Bloor call “relativism” is not what we are discussing under that name, and is not self-refuting in the ways we have described.

<sup>7</sup> See Henry Guerlac, *Lavoisier: The Crucial Year* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966).

<sup>8</sup> Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, tr. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980), pp. 17 and 61.

<sup>9</sup> See C.S. Peirce, “The Scientific Attitude and Fallibilism,” *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, edited by J. Buchler (New York: Dover, 1955), pp. 42-59.

<sup>10</sup> Walter Kaufmann (ed.), *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Viking Press, 1968), p. 501.

<sup>11</sup> See C.L. Stevenson, *Ethics and Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944) and A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York: Dover, 1946), pp. 102-115.

<sup>12</sup> See R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952).

<sup>13</sup> But can they really preserve everything about normative ethics that they want to? See Nicholas Sturgeon, “What Difference Does It Make if Moral Realism Is True?” *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 24 (1986).

<sup>14</sup> For some defences, criticisms and other discussions of ethical relativism, see Edward Westermarck, *Ethical Relativity* (New York: Humanities Press, 1960); Richard B. Brandt, *Ethical Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1959), pp. 98-105, 285-286; David Wong, *Moral Relativity* (Berkeley: University of California, 1985); and Richard Miller, *Moral Differences* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1992).

<sup>15</sup> Anthropologists who consider themselves cultural relativists are not always consistent at this point. William Graham Sumner, for example, sometimes seems to be giving a cultural relativist account of moral rightness in the sense just provided. But at other times he seems to think that what makes an action right is its that it is well adapted to life in the given set of circumstances, and he takes cultural norms to be a generally reliable guide to this. See William Graham Sumner, “Folkways,” in John Ladd (ed.) *Ethical Relativism* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1973), pp. 23-39. Similar ambiguities are detectable in Melville Herskovits, “Cultural Relativism and Cultural Values,” *ibid.*, pp. 58-78. The latter sort of account of rightness, depending on adaptedness to life, would not really be culturally relativistic at all. For it would provide instead an absolute, not culturally relative, criterion for rightness (whose precise meaning would depend on how one conceived of the ends of life and what behavior is well adapted to them under a given set of circumstances). The ideas touted as cultural relativism would come in only with the additional (contingent, empirical, and perhaps controversial) thesis that prevailing cultural norms are always reliable guides to which behavior is well adapted to life.

<sup>16</sup> This assumes what David Lyons has called “agent relativism” (see David Lyons, “Ethical Relativism and the Problem of Incoherence,” in Krausz and Meiland (eds.) *Relativism: Cognitive and Ethical*, pp. 209-225. Alternatively, one could propose a very different doctrine -- “appraiser relativism” which says that an act is right (or wrong) if the

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appraiser (the person judging the act, or perhaps the appraiser's culture) considers it right (or wrong). If we allow, as relativists often want to insist, that there are different judgments among different appraisers (or different cultures), then appraiser relativism would immediately yield inconsistent judgments about an actions rightness or wrongness. A relativist might want to express these by speaking of the act being "right for me" and "wrong for you" or even of different ethical judgments being "true for" different appraisers. As Lyons is quick to point out, this would only lead us back into the quagmire of incoherence we found in relativism earlier in this paper. It is not unusual for culturally relativistic anthropologists at this point to fall into saying that when someone says an action is right, all they mean is that the act satisfies their own culture's standards of rightness (see Lyons, pp. 221, 223, 225, cites both Sumner and Ruth Benedict as examples of this move). However, this is quite clearly not all that most people mean by calling an act 'right', since they believe that because it meets certain standards, the act also deserves some sort of approval which they know it would not get from someone who knew it met those standards but did not endorse the standards. The error of these anthropologists is quite analogous to that of antirealist theorists of truth (see note 6 above), when they identify the truth of an assertion with its meeting certain criteria or tests of verifiability. In both cases, the point to insist on, once again, is that (unless we are talking about qualities defined merely by an arbitrary convention), actually being X is always logically distinct from meeting some criterion or standard for being X. And the sense in which moral standards might constitute "social conventions" is not such a sense, since no one thinks that these standards are conventional in the purely arbitrary way that the standard meter in Paris is conventional.

<sup>17</sup> Max Black, *The Prevalence of Humbug and Other Essays* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983). The American word for 'humbug' is 'bullshit'. See Harry Frankfurt, "On Bullshit", *The Importance of What We Care About*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988.