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On the Motivations for Relativism

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Critics of cognitive relativism generally attack it on one of three counts, arguing either that it is theoretically incoherent, not practically viable, or pernicious. They hold a relativistic conception of truth and rationality to be theoretically incoherent because it is self-refuting. They deny it is an outlook one can live and think by on the grounds that it undermines our notion of intellectual autonomy. And they argue that, like skepticism, relativism inevitably has a corrosive effect on our commitment to the unending yet noble quest to attain objective truth and realize better forms of life.

I believe that a properly formulated version of relativism (by which I mean cognitive relativism) can be defended against these charges. However, my concern in this paper is not to offer such a defence but to consider a different, though obviously related, issue. Let us assume that relativism is internally coherent, practically viable, and not necessarily pernicious. Even if this be granted, a further question remains: Why might someone be led to embrace relativism? What advantages can it claim to offer that cannot be found in non-relativistic accounts of truth and rationality? What can relativists say to non-relativists that might persuade the latter to adopt a relativistic way of thinking? In my opinion, this is one of the most difficult questions relativists must face. To see why this is so, however, we must first establish, albeit rather cursorily, what relativism is.

I believe cognitive relativism is best understood as consisting of two principal claims:

i) the truth value of any judgement is relative to some particular standpoint;

ii) no standpoint is metaphysically privileged over all others.

The first thesis rests on the idea that since we cannot ever compare our beliefs about the world with the way the world is in itself, we can only decide which of our judgements are true by seeing how well they satisfy certain epistemic norms. Different sets of epistemic norms constitute different standpoints, and truth can only be determined in relation to these standpoints. The second thesis makes a metaphysical claim. A metaphysically privileged standpoint is one that is superior to others according to neutral criteria--i.e. criteria that somehow transcend all particular standpoints and thus determine objectively the cognitive worthiness of different standpoints relative to each other. Sensible relativists will not try to *prove* that there is no such privileged standpoint any more than sensible atheists will try to prove the non-existence of God. But their skepticism regarding the existence of a supremely privileged standpoint may be viewed as a reasonable, pragmatic extension of the epistemological thesis that it is not possible to prove in a non-circular manner the superiority of one standpoint over any other.

As stated above, my concern here is with what relativists can say that might persuade non-relativists to adopt a relativistic point of view? It is not hard to see what makes this an awkward issue for relativism. If truth is relative, then non-relativist points of view can legitimately claim to be true relative to some standpoints. Moreover, relativism, as I have defined it, excludes the possibility of demonstrating the superiority of one standpoint over any other. So the usual reason that we give, on both mundane and

theoretical issues, as to why someone should come over to our own way of thinking--namely, that our point of view is true, the other point of view is false, and it is better to believe what is true--is not available to the relativist who wishes to proselytize.

Richard Rorty (who, notwithstanding his own self-description, I take to be a relativist) recognizes this very clearly. It is why he justifies and recommends his perspective almost entirely by appealing to its practical virtues (see Rorty, 1989). In my view, as I shall make clear shortly, the claims he makes regarding the practical advantages of a position such as his are not wrong, but their persuasive power is rather limited. I think he takes the right tack, though, in seeking to justify his position in pragmatic rather than theoretical terms. If we look at some of the chief reasons relativists might give as to why others should adopt their point of view, we will see that it is the more pragmatic considerations that carry most weight. The arguments examined here do not exhaust the possible motivations for adopting a relativist perspective; but they are, I think, the most important.

1) Relativism is the philosophical position that best coheres with other beliefs an individual holds.

Much of the criticism directed by relativists against non-relativists consists of arguments aiming to show that a relativistic understanding of truth and rationality is more consistent with other philosophical theses that the non-relativists have accepted. For example, they typically argue that if one recognizes the untenability of metaphysical realism, the impossibility of demonstrating the supremely privileged status of one's

standpoint, and the immanence of reason within forms of life, and if one rejects the 'myth of the given' in experience, the Cartesian ideal of an asocial, ahistorical knowing subject, and the idea of rationality completely purged of ideology, then one should, for consistency's sake embrace relativism. This is the line of criticism that Rorty presses on Hilary Putnam, calling on him to respond to the collapse of metaphysical realism by drinking the whole draught rather than stopping at some arbitrary and unstable point out of fear that what remains--the relativistic implications of this paradigm shift--is philosophical poison. Putnam and others like him respond by denying that the collapse of metaphysical realism and the paradigm shift associated with this entail relativism. According to Putnam, those who draw this overly hasty conclusion fail to recognize that our basic epistemic concepts--concepts like truth and justification--contain a transcendent element which resists any attempt to analyze them in purely relativistic terms. Just as traditional metaphysical realism makes too much of this transcendent component, relativists err by trying to ignore it. Thus from Putnam's standpoint, it is the relativists who are inconsistent since they attempt to exhaustively explicate concepts like truth and justification in relativistic terms while at the same time, in the act of articulating their position, presupposing that such concepts have a non-relativistic significance. (See Putnam, 1981)

Who takes the honours in this debate? In my view, the relativists have the stronger case since they are not, as Putnam seems to think, trying to *redefine* our basic epistemic concepts. They are not claiming that 'truth' or 'rational justification' mean something other than what the non-relativists say they mean. Their point is, rather, that given how we go about deciding what is true or rationally justified, we ought to adopt a

relativistic view of the *status* of such concepts. Moreover, attempts to treat these concepts in a non-relativistic way by those who, like Putnam, renounce metaphysical realism seem destined to collapse back towards one pole or the other. Putnam, for instance, has proposed that truth be regarded as an objective property which statements possess if they are rationally acceptable under ideal epistemic conditions (see Putnam, 1981). But if 'ideal' here means 'ideal according to us now, given our present norms of rational acceptability,' then his position is in fact a form of relativism. For it allows the same statement to be both objectively true and objectively false relative to different views of what constitutes ideal epistemic conditions--views which can vary between communities and change over time. If, on the other hand, 'ideal' means something other than this, then it seems he must be presupposing the possibility of a 'God's eye point of view' from which the objective quality of any cognitive situation might be apprehended. But in that case, his position collapses back into a form of metaphysical realism.

The claim that relativism best coheres with other theoretical commitments that contemporary philosophers very often have is thus plausible in itself and part of a legitimate argumentative strategy. Its persuasive power, however, is not great. The claim seems plausible to those who already lean towards relativism. But whether or not certain general trends in modern philosophy really do entail relativism is precisely what is at issue in much of the contemporary discussion in this area. The fact that thinkers are legion who accept the general paradigm shift while resisting the pull of relativism indicates that if there is any inconsistency in embracing one without the other it is far from obvious. Furthermore, relativists may not assume that their position represents the only coherent response to this paradigm shift. Indeed, since they accept the idea that

incompatible beliefs can be equally true relative to different standpoints, they, more than anyone, should be open to the possibility that there is more than one legitimate response to our present philosophical situation.

2) Relativism is the most reasonable response to the plurality of internally coherent standpoints and the lack of agreement as to which, if any, is superior.

Let us call the two claims (about plurality and lack of agreement) on which this argument rests the 'data of plurality.' Both claims could be challenged. After all, within particular, limited contexts--for instance, within a specialized branch of science--there is often general agreement as to which view is superior. But the relativistic notion of a standpoint is intended to be a broad concept, equivalent to the notion of a conceptual scheme or a theoretical framework, which includes within itself the norms of rational acceptability that are constitutive of it. And some conflicts of opinion--for example, that between Darwinians and creationists--involve a clash between opposing standpoints in which there is no agreement on how the conflicting views should be appraised. Some might still insist, however, that within the community that matters--namely, the intelligentsia of our society--there is much more agreement than the relativist supposes, particularly on the question of which norms of rational acceptability should be employed. After all, to stick with the same example, among the mainstream intelligentsia of technologically advanced countries, conformity to scripture is simply no longer a creditable standard by which to evaluate the likely truth of a statement. There are two objections to this argument. First, even among the intelligentsia there is real

disagreement over fundamental matters, including the norms of rational acceptability. This is evident, for instance, in the opposition between analytic and continental philosophy, where differences in preferred style reflect differences concerning the proper goals and methods of philosophical enquiry, which differences, in turn, issue in different standards for evaluating philosophical writing. Secondly, dismissing standpoints that are found only or largely outside a particular community--in this case, our own society's intelligentsia--is a dogmatic gesture that effectively bears witness to one of relativism's main points. Relativism is a thesis about the *status* of our epistemic norms. It rests on the idea that no standpoint can conclusively prove itself superior to all others. To dismiss all standpoints but one in a peremptory manner because they are not endorsed by most members of a certain community would seem to be the strategy of someone who accepts this idea, or at least is unable to argue against it.

Let us grant, then, that we are faced with a plurality of internally coherent standpoints and have no neutral way of deciding between them. What makes relativism the most reasonable response to this situation? Obviously, much depends here on what is meant by the term 'reasonable.' Since it is being used by the relativist, it cannot be intended in an absolute sense; it has to mean 'reasonable from a certain point of view.' And since it figures in an argument intended to persuade non-relativists, it must signify an appeal to norms of reasonableness that they accept (and which they, incidentally, may regard as having a non-relative validity). So much is clear. But it is still not obvious that relativism would, in that case, be the most reasonable response to the 'data of plurality' mentioned above. A religious believer, for instance, might accept that she cannot *prove*

any standpoint to be superior to all others, but may nevertheless have faith in the existence of such a standpoint.

What might a relativist say to one who claims that faith in the existence of a supremely privileged standpoint is a reasonable response to the data of plurality? The relativist could try to argue that all beliefs held on faith alone are *ipso facto* unreasonable. But this is not plausible; nor is it a line of argument with which a relativist should feel comfortable. Every system of beliefs contains beliefs that are held on faith in the sense of being accepted notwithstanding the absence of evidence or rational justification. Our belief that the future operation of nature's laws will resemble their past operation is a familiar example of a belief held in this manner. Such beliefs would be unreasonable (according to norms of reasonableness that prevail in our culture and which the relativist can be assumed to share) if they were utterly at odds with the rest of what we believe and carried no practical advantages. But given that they do cohere and could be considered advantageous, they may be judged reasonable. Of course, one could dispute the idea that faith in the possibility of an absolute standpoint carries any practical benefits (indeed, this is challenged by the final relativistic argument considered below). But one has to concede that the idea is not prima facie absurd.

Suppose, though, that the non-relativist does not wish to make the positing of a uniquely privileged standpoint an article of faith. Does the relativist's argument have more purchase in that case? The main reason for thinking it does is that to insist on the possibility of an absolute point of view in the face of the data of plurality could be viewed as a step towards dogmatism. But while such insistence *could* be dogmatically maintained, it does not have to be. It is clearly possible to accept the data of plurality,

countenance the idea of a uniquely privileged point of view, and yet, given the impossibility of being certain as to whether one has attained this point of view, advocate an initial attitude of respect toward alternative perspectives. This is the stance taken by Robert Kane in *Through the Moral Maze* (Kane, 1994). It is also, in general terms, the attitude of other anti-relativists like Putnam and Habermas, neither of whom would accept that their position is any way dogmatic (see Putnam, 1981, and Habermas, 1984). Relativism cannot, therefore, plausibly claim to have a monopoly on anti-dogmatic attitudes. Since this is the basis for holding that relativism is the most reasonable response to the data of plurality, we may conclude that this latter claim remains unjustified.

3) Relativism is the view that nowadays best coheres with and promotes liberal values such as tolerance, freedom, and democracy.

This is the main argument advanced by Rorty in defence of his relativistic version of pragmatism. According to Rorty, the universalist conception of reason and of human nature articulated by the Enlightenment may well have been historically necessary for bringing into being contemporary liberal culture, but these ideas are no longer either necessary or useful. In fact, he argues, they are beginning to act as fetters restricting further progress. Rorty sees the idea that liberal culture needs philosophical foundations as ultimately traceable to an ancient 'religious need to have human projects underwritten by a non-human authority' (Rorty, 1989). In modern times this need manifests itself most commonly in the form of scientism--an outlook which assumes that the scientific

method represents a well-defined cognitive procedure that guarantees the objective truth of science. In Rorty's view, however, this scientistic attitude is outmoded and no longer philosophically acceptable since historians of science have shown that the success of science cannot be explained by isolating something called 'the scientific method.'

In opposition to thinkers like Habermas, Rorty argues that liberal ideals are actually ill served by the attempt to provide them with philosophical foundations. Not only have all such attempts foundered; they invariably express an attitude which, instead of celebrating diversity and difference, is inclined to see progress as involving the homogenization of beliefs and practices. He suggests there is a tension between one of the main tenets of classical liberalism--the idea that individuals should be free to do whatever they please so long as what they do does not adversely affect others--and the project of justifying liberalism as the system that reason itself declares to be the best and most just. For to think of reason in this way is to incline towards the old idea that there is one right way of living and thinking for all rational beings.

One can certainly take issue with some of the specific claims Rorty makes in the course of offering this pragmatic defence of his general position. Nevertheless, I think there is something to the claim that a relativist conception of reason coheres better with liberal values than do non-relativist accounts. If this is the case, however, it is for the reason given by the next argument to be considered. That is, argument (3) above makes a general claim which is most plausibly supported by the following consideration.

4) Relativism encourages a pragmatic attitude towards rules and norms, recognizing them as having a contingent, conventional status, and therefore as being open to reflective criticism and modification according to our needs and interests.

This, too, is a claim Rorty makes in recommending his own philosophy as an improvement over what it is intended to replace. It is an argument that causes much perturbation since it challenges some long-standing and deeply held beliefs about the nature and status of the norms of rationality we employ. In particular, it calls into question the venerable assumption that certain norms of rationality are obligatory on us, as responsible epistemic subjects, because they reflect the way things are independently of our thoughts about them.

Relativism makes two claims that are incompatible with this view of reason. First, where different communities exhibit differing conceptions of rationality there is no justification for thinking of any one as metaphysically superior. Secondly, even if certain norms-- logical consistency, for example--happen to be universally accepted and employed in any community, human reason should still be viewed in a naturalistic way: that is, in the same way that we view such things as our erect posture, our prehensile hands, or our capacity for learning language. Characteristics such as these helped determine the particular course of human evolution and are necessary to our success as a species, to the development of complex forms of social interaction, and to the production of culture, political institutions, science, technology, the arts, and so forth. Rationality, like prehensility, can be valued for the practical benefits it confers. It can also be made the object of reflection, and within certain limits we can experiment with the norms of

rationality we employ, adopting and adapting them according to what seems to best serve our purposes. But no good purpose is served--at least not nowadays--by supposing that reason somehow reflects or puts us in touch with the true order of things as they are in themselves. On the contrary, conceiving of rationality in that way represents a form of dogmatism that may exclude valuable alternative perspectives and inhibit potentially fruitful experimentation in ideas, attitudes and life-styles.

According to Rorty, this relativistic view of reason carries certain pragmatic advantages over its rivals. Specifically, the advantage of seeing the standards of rational acceptability we employ as metaphysically unprivileged (Rorty's term for this is 'contingency') is that we will be more willing to modify them should either our purposes or our circumstances change. In fact, if we acknowledge their contingency we will readier to countenance experiments in ways of thinking, acting, and living through which we might discover modifications which help us better realize our present ends. For example, freeing ourselves from the idea that we must think a certain way because that is the way of truth allows us to take a fresh look at the value placed on a desideratum like logical consistency in the evaluation of, say, an ethical theory. Consistency is undoubtedly an important conventional constraint we impose on theories and the argumentation that supports them. But it is not the only constraint, and it need not be the most important. Arguably, an ethical theory which contains some inconsistencies but which also offers sound and workable practical guidance in relation to contemporary moral concerns should be preferred over a logically watertight theory which we find to be of limited practical significance. Consistency can still be a consideration in our overall evaluation of a theory; but the presence of an inconsistency could usefully be viewed

more like a fault which generates penalty points than as the argumentative equivalent of a third strike.

What conclusions may be drawn from our examination of the arguments relativists might put forward to show the superiority of relativism over its rivals? I have tried to indicate why the pragmatic arguments can claim some plausibility. However, two considerations significantly limit their persuasive power. First, they do not show relativism to be the *only* point of view to carry the practical advantages in question. Secondly, they do not show that these advantages necessarily outweigh other advantages which alternative positions might offer.

If all the alternatives to relativism could be shown to contain or imply an authoritarian insistence on the absolute superiority of one particular standpoint, then the argument that relativism is the outlook that best accords with liberal ideals could be granted. But I do not think this can be shown. Nor is there any obvious reason to rule out the possibility that non-relativist views could provide practical benefits to their adherents which relativism is unable to offer. To illustrate these points briefly, let us consider again the claim mentioned earlier that it is impossible to demonstrate in a non-circular manner the superiority of one standpoint over another. This is an idea which has become fairly widely accepted in modern philosophy. Yet one could endorse this thesis and consistently maintain that there is, or might be, a uniquely privileged standpoint. Its superiority might be recognized in a non-discursive way, for example, by intuition or revelation. Or perhaps it is such that although we can attain it, we can never be sure that

we have done so. Or it could be that, notwithstanding its unattainability, it is nonetheless intelligible as a hypothetical possibility. All these possibilities arise out of the fact that there is a logical distinction to be drawn between denying the *existence* of a supremely privileged standpoint and denying only that any standpoint can be *proved* to enjoy this status.

Moreover, pragmatically inclined relativists cannot simply dismiss the idea of an absolute standpoint that we can never actually identify or be certain of having attained as an empty concept, a free-spinning wheel in our conceptual scheme that can play no significant role in our thinking or in our lives. For the idea of an absolute standpoint can have practical significance as something like what Kant calls a 'regulative ideal.' If it is understood as the standpoint from which the objective truth of our beliefs, the objective rightness of our actions, and the objective worth of our lives could be determined, then one can plausibly argue that, at least for some people, presupposing the possibility of this standpoint makes a difference--and a difference for the better--to the way they think and they way they live (see Kane, 1994).

Is it possible to decide between these opposing views on the value of retaining a non-relativistic understanding of our fundamental moral and epistemic concepts? I do not think it is. I am inclined to think that this is one of those places, like those points which mark other basic divisions of philosophical opinion, where each person will feel compelled to endorse the view that accords with his or her fundamental intuitions and general philosophical orientation. The position one favours depends on one's initial philosophical leanings, and the attempt to justify these either quickly gives out or becomes manifestly circular. At this point, explanation is likely to prove more fruitful

than repeated attempts at rational justification.

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Notes

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