

## **Relativism: An Allegorical Elucidation**

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Of all philosophical doctrines relativism surely gets the worst press. It is routinely described by its critics as “foolish”, “simple-minded”, “sophomoric”, or “obviously self-refuting.” It has been blamed for everything from rising crime to falling rates of literacy. And the received view among a large part of the philosophical establishment is that it was decisively refuted by Plato almost two and half thousand years ago. Not that that has discouraged contemporary critics from putting additional stakes through its heart. In recent times many illustrious Champions of Reason, including Karl Popper, Hilary Putnam, Jürgen Habermas, Donald Davidson, and Ernest Gellner, have all sought to slay once and for all what Richard Rorty has labeled “the relativist menace.” But this fact in itself should give us pause. For as Alasdair MacIntyre says:

Nothing is perhaps a surer sign that a doctrine embodies some not-to-be-neglected truth than that in the course of the history of philosophy it should have been refuted again and again. Genuinely refutable doctrines only need to be refuted once.<sup>1</sup>

The two main species of relativism are usually described as “moral relativism”, which asserts the relativity of moral values, and “cognitive relativism” which asserts the relativity of truth. My concern here is entirely with the latter. It holds that the truth of any statement is relative to--i.e. can only be determined from--a particular standpoint

(a.k.a. “perspective”, “theoretical framework” or “conceptual scheme”). It further holds that no standpoint is uniquely privileged over all others. In other words, metaphysically speaking, all standpoints are on the same level; none can be conclusively proved superior to any other.

A standpoint or theoretical framework can be defined primarily in terms of its characteristic “epistemic norms”--the rules which people use to decide what it is reasonable for them to believe. Thus, the fundamentalist Christian occupies a standpoint according to which only statements that are compatible with what is said in the bible can be true. Compatibility with the bible is one of the epistemic norms constitutive of this standpoint. The Azande described by the anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard judged the truth of many statements by seeing how they agreed with the findings of a poison oracle. Agreement with the poison oracle was one of their cardinal epistemic norms. Contemporary scientists, by contrast, assess new scientific claims primarily by seeing how well they cohere with established scientific theory and trustworthy observations.

According to cognitive relativism, then, we decide what statements are true by deciding what it is reasonable to believe; and we decide what it is reasonable to believe by employing a certain set of epistemic norms. But these norms ultimately have the status of social conventions. No set of norms, not even those of contemporary science, can claim to be The Criteria of Rationality Itself which, if followed properly, will unerringly lead us to The Truth the way the lights on the runway guide the aircraft to its desired destination.

My purpose here is not to defend this view by critically examining any of the arguments for or against it. I wish only to illuminate the kind of reasoning which might

lead someone to adopt it and thereby show that this reasoning, far from being “sophomoric” really is worthy of serious consideration. I propose to do this by means of a philosophical allegory which is intended to clarify the way in which the relativist understands the relations between belief, truth, and rationality.

Imagine two communities who bake bread according to different recipes. The first group (who we will call the Weet) , when they adhere strictly to their recipe, almost always produce what they consider to be excellent bread. Occasionally there are unaccountable failures, but most of the time the recipe works very well. In their view, bread should be tasty, well-risen, not susceptible to early staleness or mould, so nutritious as to be capable of being the year round staple for an entire community, and capable of being produced in large quantities with relatively little labour. They hold their recipe in high regard just because it seems to be the key to producing bread of this kind. When bread is produced which meet all these desiderata, they describe it as "perfect." The other group (the Chaph) make bread in a different way, and what they produce is, from the Weet point of view, obviously not perfect. What they pull from their oven is a tough, unrisen brick which tastes like charred cardboard and has about as much nutritional value. Moreover, because the Chaph insist on grinding and kneading by hand, their recipe does not lend itself to mass production. The inferiority of the Chaph's bread is explained by the Weet, naturally enough, as due to the inferiority of their recipe. Some of the Chaph occasionally get to see the Weet bread making process and to taste the result. Often, those that do are quickly converted to the idea that the Weet recipe is much the better of the two. Sometimes, though, one of the Chaph may observe the Weet

process, sample the product, acknowledge its many good qualities, and yet continue making bread the Chaph way. Asked why, they answer that while the Weet recipe undoubtedly has much to commend it, they are unwilling to give up certain aspects of traditional Chaph bread making which they value: such things as the expenditure of physical effort, the actual contact between one's hands and the dough, and the personal involvement in the process which means that each loaf produced is almost entirely the work of a single individual and possesses an individual character.

The Weet regard the Chaph recipe as clearly inferior to their own. While the bread it produces sustains its makers well enough under normal circumstances, it provides much less protection against hazards such as disease or short term crop failures, and falls short on almost every other count too. Even the Weet philosophers tend to agree with each other on this matter. They disagree, however, on the status of this comparative appraisal. Some say that the superiority of the Weet recipe is simply an objective fact, impossible to dispute. But others argue that the recipe's claim to superiority rests on certain assumptions about what counts as good bread. If one accepts these assumptions--as most people do--one will naturally take the bread itself to be proof of the superiority of the recipe that produces it. But reasonable people can challenge these assumptions; indeed, they are questioned by some of those wedded to traditional Chaph ways and values. In that case, argue the philosophers of this second school, all one can do to persuade such people is offer them some Weet bread to taste, take them on tours of the Weet bakeries and storage facilities, and let them see the health and happiness of those nourished on Weet bread. But this is an empirical rather than a logical

demonstration, and those it is intended to convert have the right to remain unconvinced without forfeiting their claim to reasonableness.

This difference of opinion among the Weet philosophers relates to another disagreement on a more fundamental matter: namely, the nature and meaning of the statement that Weet bread is "perfect." The first school maintain that what this means is that bread produced exactly according to the Weet recipe satisfies some condition which is independent of anyone's actual tastes and values. They say that while bread may be *identified* as perfect by reference to the recipe that produced it and on the basis of its satisfying certain desiderata (taste, texture, nutritional value, etc.), what one *means* when one says it is perfect goes beyond this. What actually makes perfect bread perfect, they say, is its being a term in a certain relation. The precise nature of this relation is not completely clear, but the general idea is that "perfect" bread in some sense matches, resembles, conforms to or corresponds to an existent ideal. Following the Weet recipe exactly may not absolutely guarantee that one's bread is perfect in this sense, but it greatly increases the probability of its being so. And the fact that the bread produced satisfies the Weet criteria for excellence in bread can be taken as evidence that the bread does indeed resemble the ideal.

Philosophers of the second school take a different view. They acknowledge that in common parlance when one says that bread is "perfect" one usually means or implies that it resembles an existent ideal. But, they say, so what? No philosophically significant conclusions follow from that. In fact, from a philosophical perspective there seems to be neither justification nor point in claiming that perfect bread stands in some relation to an existent ideal. How could anyone justify such claims without some sort of privileged

access to the ideal in question? All that one is really justified in saying about perfect bread, they argue, is that it is made according to a certain recipe and satisfies certain desiderata. So why insist on trying to say more? These philosophers allow that the term "perfect" has an unobjectionable use in everyday speech where it serves a useful function as a kind of shorthand; but they deny that the term or its common usage has any deep philosophical significance. It is, as one of them puts it, just an "empty compliment" one pays to bread which has been made according to the Weet recipe and which brings all the benefits one expects from bread.

Accordingly, the second school doesn't grant any special status to the Weet recipe. It is, they say, just a set of instructions which it has so far proved beneficial to follow. Conceivably, the recipe could still be improved so as to produce bread which is better according to their present criteria. Perhaps these criteria, which express certain values, could alter. Perhaps the circumstances of Weet existence could change so as to be better served by a different kind of bread. These are all possibilities to which one should be open and which it would be foolish to discount. The problem, though, is that in calling a loaf of bread "perfect," without condition or qualification, one implies that none of these are possible. And this is a significant drawback to the view that the very idea of perfect bread necessarily involves something more than the idea of bread which is made in accordance with a certain recipe and which possesses certain desirable qualities.

The purpose of this allegory, as I said earlier, is to illuminate the nature of and motivations for a relativistic conception of truth and rationality. In the analogy, the Weet represent a scientifically advanced culture while the Chaph resemble what

anthropologists used to call a "primitive" society. Bread stands for beliefs; the notion of perfection plays the role of truth. The recipes represent the norms of rationality by which the two communities decide what to believe. The characteristic features of the bread produced are analogous to the practical advantages or disadvantages that accompany the holding of certain views. The philosophers of the first school are the equivalent of rationalistic realists who believe that there is one true picture of the world which we can arrive at by using our reason in the right way. Those of the second school are the counterpart of relativists.<sup>2</sup> Of course, the analogy is not perfect (in any sense!); one obvious disanalogy, for instance, lies in the fact that reason, unlike a recipe, has a reflexive capability and function. But I believe it can serve to provide an idea of what a relativistic account of rationality involves, why many might be attracted to such an account, and the general direction of what I believe are the most plausible arguments that relativists can offer to justify their preference for relativism over alternative positions.

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<sup>1</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, "Relativism, Power, and Philosophy", *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, Newark, Delaware: APA (1985), p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> One could, if one chose, extend the analogy to cover more complex positions. Hilary Putnam, for instance, resembles a Weet philosopher who recognizes that "perfect" cannot be explicated in terms of correspondence to some ideal since to justify any claim about a loaf's perfection would require one to adopt a "God's eye point of view" from which a comparison could be made between actual bread and the ideal. But, unhappy with the relativist position, he argues that "perfect" should be understood as meaning something like "made according to an ideal recipe." Jürgen Habermas is like one who argues that the Weet

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recipe is demonstrably superior to the Chaph recipe since any bread making process involves an implicit commitment to producing bread which has certain qualities; and since Weet bread exhibits these qualities to a greater extent than Chaph bread, the Chaph have to acknowledge that even on their own terms the Weet recipe is better than their own. (To which Habermas' critics could respond by pointing out that it is perfectly possible to make bread with other intentions, such as the intention to poison whoever eats it.)