

## **Relativism, Truth and Implicit Commitments<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

One version of the familiar charge that cognitive relativism is self-refuting is that relativists fall into a performative contradiction whenever they assert or argue for their view. I defend relativism against this criticism by examining the way the relativist's actions might be thought to imply a commitment to some belief that is incompatible with relativism. I argue that an action implies a commitment to a certain belief only if the action would make no sense--that is, would be performed for no reason--in the absence of that belief. Critics of relativism must therefore show that when relativists advance their views their actions are senseless unless they are committed to a non-relativistic conception of truth. But so long as the intentions of relativists are properly understood their actions can make perfectly good sense without any such commitment.

Cognitive relativism asserts the relativity of both truth and the norms of rationality which we employ in deciding what is true. The standard objection to this position is that it is self-refuting. Speaking generally, there are four ways in which this might be so.

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1) What the relativist asserts--the *thesis* of relativism--entails either (a) its contrary; or (b) some other contradiction.

2) The *act of asserting* the relativist thesis involves the relativist in a performative contradiction.

3) The *act of arguing* for relativism involves the relativist in a performative contradiction.

4) The *act of trying to persuade* others (by any means whatsoever) to accept relativism involves the relativist in a performative contradiction.

Clearly, to assess any of these claims we need to know more exactly what the relativist thesis is. But any attempt to specify what the relativist asserts immediately runs up against a problem: the philosophical literature on relativism is replete with definitions and characterizations of relativism, few of which are equivalent. I present here a small sample. Relativism is variously described as the view that:

-- “no point of view is more justified or right than any other”<sup>2</sup>

-- “reason is whatever the norms of the local culture believe it to be”<sup>3</sup>

“the choice between competing theories is arbitrary, since there is no such thing as objective truth”<sup>4</sup>

-- “there is no reason for supposing that bivalent and many-valued truth-values cannot be systematically used together (with due care) without risking conceptual disaster”<sup>5</sup>

-- “there is no substantive overarching framework in which radically different and alternative schemes are commensurable”<sup>6</sup>

-- “there is nothing to be said about either truth or rationality apart from descriptions of the familiar procedures of justification which a given society--ours--uses in one or another area of enquiry.”<sup>7</sup>

-- “there is no unique truth, no unique objective reality.”<sup>8</sup>

Some of these definitions are obviously tendentious, defining relativism according to what is taken to be its absurd implications. But even if one puts these aside, the number and diversity of characterizations of relativism still poses a problem. To make things manageable, I therefore propose to confine my attention to just two.

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<sup>2</sup> Hilary Putnam, *Reason Truth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1981), 119.

<sup>3</sup> Hilary Putnam, *Realism and Reason: Philosophical Papers, Volume 3* (Cambridge, 1983), 235.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, Vol. II (London, 1963), 369f.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Margolis, *The Truth About Relativism* (Oxford, 1991), 7.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Philadelphia, 1985), 11-12.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth: Philosophical Papers, Volume 1* (Cambridge, 1991), 23.

<sup>8</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Relativism and the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, 1985), 84.

*Definition A:* Relativism is the view that fundamental epistemic concepts such as truth and rationality should only be defined “naturalistically” by describing the epistemic norms that operate in some particular community.

*Definition B:* Relativism consists of two theses:

- (i) The truth value of any judgement is relative to some particular standpoint.
- (ii) No standpoint is metaphysically privileged over all others.

The decision to focus on just these two versions of relativism is not arbitrary. Definition A expresses the view that many of relativism’s most serious critics have identified with relativism per se. It is this view that Hilary Putnam has repeatedly attacked and against which Jürgen Habermas polemicizes in *The Theory of Communicative Action* and *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. It is not, in my opinion, the best definition of relativism; but it is understandable why critics of relativism should make it their target. Many of those thinkers whose work is commonly characterized (usually by others rather than by themselves) as relativistic seem inclined to “naturalize reason.” This tendency is apparent, for example, in the thought of Kuhn, Winch, Foucault, and Rorty. It is thus undeniably associated with relativism as a matter of historical fact. But it does not, in my opinion, belong to what I would call the doctrinal kernel of relativism. This is expressed by Definition B.

In what follows I will argue that while A is indeed self-refuting in at least one of the senses given above, B is not.

### **The argument against naturalistic definitions of epistemic concepts**

In his well-known article, “Why reason can’t be naturalized”, Putnam argues that it is “contingently self-refuting” for a participant in a liberal culture such as our own to *argue* for the thesis that truth and rationality can be exhaustively defined by a description of the epistemic norms that happen to prevail in a given community.<sup>9</sup> To see why this is so, let us consider the difference between our epistemic norms and the rules of a game.

Institutionalized games like soccer or chess are played according to fixed rules which provide a rigid framework for play. This framework can be altered, but not from within the game itself. It could be that the offside rule in soccer should be modified or abolished in order to make soccer more enjoyable to watch, or that that the rule in chess which permits pawns to advance two squares on their first move should be scrapped in order to ensure greater equality between white and black. But such changes can only be made by an authority and according to a procedure external to the games themselves. To attempt rule changes on the field would be to “move the goalposts”; it would risk undermining the delicate balance which the existing rules are intended to maintain and which is essential if the game is to be interesting to players and spectators.<sup>10</sup>

The pursuit of truth, however, is different. Here, too, there are rules in effect: for example, the requirement that theories be internally consistent, or that empirical claims be supported with evidence. These are epistemic norms: criteria for evaluating claims which are accepted and employed by virtually everyone in our culture who is engaged in

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<sup>9</sup> Hilary Putnam, “Why reason can’t be naturalized,” *Realism and Reason*, 229-247.

<sup>10</sup> In children’s games, of course, the rules are sometimes changed during play to ensure that the players continue to enjoy the game. But such games are not fully institutionalized. In games that are fully

research. But these norms have not been established once and for all by some authority that stands above the research the way FIFA stands above international soccer; nor, however deep our commitment to them, do they have the kind of status that such rules would have. Arguably, in the theocratic middle ages, the Catholic church acted as an external authority of this sort in Western Europe. Today, there are still some non-liberal societies in which a political or religious authority insists by law, force, or “administrative means” that researchers respect certain norms (such as the need for any claim to conform with a particular text or ideology). In our own scientific culture, however, there are no epistemic norms that are completely immune from the possibility of criticism, at least in principle. Thus, the principle that every event is causally determined used to be basic to the scientific outlook, but it was challenged by quantum physics. And, in theory, the same goes for all other principles, up to and including the laws of logic. Quine’s metaphor of a web of belief, in which particular beliefs can be more or less central to our belief system but in which no belief is free from the possibility of criticism or revision, captures this aspect of the “modern” outlook very well.<sup>11</sup>

The key point here is that the challenge to existing epistemic norms is *continuous* with the research activity that led to it. Nothing is sacrosanct. No modern scientific or critical train of thought can be halted with the objection that a certain claim is sacrilegious or heretical.<sup>12</sup> This is a part of our Enlightenment heritage that we cannot

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institutionalized, the rigidity of the rules is actually maintained beyond individual games. Normally, rules are fixed for all teams that participate in a competition for the duration of that competition.

<sup>11</sup> See W. V Quine and J. S. Ullian, *The Web of Belief* (New York, 1970).

<sup>12</sup> A good illustration of the difference between a “closed” and an “open” attitude toward epistemic norms can be found in Chaim Potok’s novel *The Promise* (New York, 1969). David Mather’s Talmudic studies lead him to challenge the principle that the text of the Talmud has suffered no corruption. The Rabbis at his son Reuven’s Yeshiva insist that Talmudic interpretation must proceed on the assumption that the text is perfect as it stands. They force Reuven to accept this assumption, at least in his work at the Yeshiva, by threatening not to ordain him (i.e. by “administrative means”). The conflict in approaches

shake off (except by what would appear, from a critical vantage point, to be an act of intellectual suicide). Even the idea that reason is the ultimate epistemic authority can be and has been challenged by Nietzsche and others influenced by him. So to argue for a naturalistic or closed conception of reason, at least in our liberal culture, is to participate in an enterprise in which it is presupposed (as a condition of participation) that reason cannot be defined in that way.

It might be objected that in arguing against a purely naturalistic conception of reason, Putnam himself presupposes a naturalistic point of view. After all, his argument has the form: you cannot define rationality by simply equating it with a certain set of epistemic norms that happen, as a matter of fact, to be characteristic of our culture because, *as a matter of fact*, the conception of rationality that prevails in our culture (and is therefore presupposed in all philosophical debate, including debate about the nature of rationality) has a critical, transcendent, normative dimension which makes it an inherently open concept, one that cannot be captured by a mere description of the prevailing norms. This is true. But it is not clear how this observation constitutes an objection to the argument? Putnam allows for the possibility of a “closed” conception of rationality: for example, the kind that might prevail in a strict theocracy. His point, though, is first, that *our* idea of rationality is not like that (which is why he describes the attempt to deny this as *contingently* self refuting in a liberal culture); and second, that even those among us who try to define reason naturalistically do not think we should accept their claims simply because they happen to satisfy certain contingently dominant criteria of rational acceptability. They cannot help but claim for their assertions and arguments a degree of

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symbolizes the conflict between traditional and modern outlooks. But the “openness” of the Mather’s approach is only relative: they themselves would not question other assumptions, such as the assumption

respect beyond that due to them simply on account of the fact that they satisfy certain norms. Implicitly, they also claim that the norms according to which we evaluate their claims are worthy of respect. And the only reason for according them this respect is that we and they subscribe to them in a critical rather than dogmatic manner, always prepared, in principle at least, to adjust them if doing so would seem to better serve our purposes.

Putnam's main line of argument against relativism corresponds to objection (3) above.<sup>13</sup> A variation on it, which he also advances, is that the act of engaging in argument only makes sense given a non-relativistic notion of truth. Habermas endorses both of these arguments, but also makes the stronger claim that the thesis of relativism cannot even be *asserted* without the speaker falling into a performative contradiction. For the thesis contradicts a view of truth to which every speaker is already implicitly committed just by virtue of engaging in communicative action. (This argument corresponds to objection 2 above.) Both arguments employ the notion of implicit commitment; and both characterize this commitment by reference to a cognitive ideal. Putnam explicates the non-relativistic notion of truth to which we are all unavoidably committed in terms of what it would be rational to believe under ideal epistemic conditions.<sup>14</sup> Habermas defines

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that the Torah is divinely inspired.

<sup>13</sup> See Putnam, "Why reason can't be naturalized." We might note here noted that although Putnam clearly believes that Richard Rorty is vulnerable to this kind of criticism, Rorty himself would claim that his form of pragmatism commits him wholeheartedly to the open-ended nature of all enquiry and precludes any account of truth or rationality--including a naturalistic account--which might be viewed as essentialist. Arguably, Foucault and Kuhn could defend themselves in the same way. Insofar as Putnam accuses these thinkers of trying to *define the essence of truth or rationality naturalistically*, they would say, with some justification, that he is misrepresenting their views. But his key point is really that they all hold that there is nothing meaningful or interesting to be said about rationality over and above a description of the norms that have hegemony within a given community. And this reduction of reason to its "immanent" features ignores its critical or "transcendent" function--an aspect of reason which the reduction in question presupposes in spite of itself.

<sup>14</sup> This is the view Putnam defends in *Reason, Truth, and History*. Since then he has modified his position, preferring to characterize truth as what it is reasonable for a person to believe under sufficiently good epistemic conditions. I do not think, though, that this change makes much difference here.

truth as what would be consensually agreed upon by participants in an ideal speech situation.

Of these arguments I find the first, which blocks any attempt in a liberal culture such as our own to “naturalize” reason, the most convincing. Even if the other arguments are problematic (as I think they are), this argument decisively refutes the type of relativism captured by Definition A. I do not believe, however, that relativism should be identified with this doctrine. Like the eschewing of value judgements about the beliefs and practices of alien cultures, this tendency toward a naturalistic view of reason has certainly been associated with relativism in its modern form. But although the connection is historically understandable, it is philosophically accidental. What is essential to relativism, in my view, is expressed by Definition B.

### **The doctrinal kernel of relativism**

If what we have said so far be granted, the question before us becomes: Is the kind of relativism expressed by Definition B self-refuting in any of the ways described above?

According to this definition, relativism asserts two theses:

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

(ii) no standpoint is metaphysically privileged over any other.

Obviously, before proceeding further, some elucidation of these claims is in order. The first claim is not one that classical metaphysical realists would endorse. They would acknowledge that the truth value of any judgement has to be *assessed* in relation to some particular standpoint: for example, the standpoint of contemporary science, of Reason, or of God. But they would deny that the truth value of the judgement is *itself* relative to any

particular standpoint. A statement is made true by the fact that its truth conditions obtain and false by the fact that they fail to obtain. The *reasonableness of our judgement* regarding whether or not they obtain may be relative to our other beliefs and the epistemic norms we employ; but whether our judgements *are* true or false--whether or not their truth conditions obtain--is not relative to anything.

Cognitive relativism, however, closes this distinction between questions about how we decide what is true and questions about whether or not our statements are in fact true. According to the relativist, the distinction is unproblematic in everyday discourse, including the discourse of science. But at the metaphysical level it is untenable since it presupposes the intelligibility of the idea that we might--at least in principle--compare our general picture of the world, our conceptual scheme, with the way things are independent of our experience of them. To make such a comparison would require us to adopt a standpoint that transcends any particular, limited, human all too human perspective. Since this is not possible, the relativist argues, the entire family of philosophical concepts that are tied to the idea of a transcendent standpoint must be rejected as vacuous or redefined in non-realist terms. These include the concept of truth and the concept of a fact. When used in a general philosophical account of our cognitive situation these concepts do not enjoy the innocence they have in their everyday usage. The term "truth", for instance, is unproblematic as used in everyday discourse; but when it is lifted out of this context by the metaphysical realist to describe a relation which extends beyond possible experience, its meaning drains out of it. Thus, at the philosophical level, the question "Which of our beliefs accurately describe the way the world is independently of our experience of it?" cannot be answered. It should therefore

be displaced by the question: “How do we decide which statements should be regarded as accurate descriptions of the world?” The conclusion to be drawn from this was stated boldly and succinctly by William James: "The reasons why we call things true is the reason why they *are* true."<sup>15</sup>

Obviously, then, thesis (i) above is incompatible with metaphysical realism. But it is also obvious that this is not the aspect of relativism that critics like Putnam and Habermas can be criticizing since they, too, reject metaphysical realism on the same grounds. The argument against metaphysical realism is part of the staple diet not just of the relativist but also of the non-realist. Putnam, of course, has always identified himself as some sort of realist. But for a long time now, his “realism” has only been affirmed from within a broader, non-realistic framework:

We can and should insist that some facts are there to be discovered and not legislated by us. But this is something to be said when one has adopted a way of speaking, a language, a ‘conceptual scheme’. To talk of ‘facts’ without specifying the language to be used is to talk of nothing; the word ‘fact’ no more has its use fixed by Reality Itself than does the word ‘exist’ or the word ‘object’.<sup>16</sup>

Habermas toes a similar line. He insists that “all languages offer the possibility of distinguishing between what is true and what we hold to be true.”<sup>17</sup> But he categorically rejects “the objectivist fallacy according to which we could take up the extramundane standpoint of a subject removed from the world [and] help ourselves to an ideal language

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<sup>15</sup> William James, *Pragmatism*, Indianapolis: Hackett (1981), 33.

<sup>16</sup> Hilary Putnam, *The Many Faces of Realism* (La Salle, 1987), 36.

<sup>17</sup> Jürgen Habermas, “The Unity of Reason in the Diversity of Its Voices”, in *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays*, trans. William Mark Hohengarten (Cambridge, MA, 1992), 138.

that is context-free . . .”<sup>18</sup> These critics of relativism cannot therefore be arguing that thesis (i) above--the claim that the truth value of any judgement is relative to some particular standpoint--is at odds with the notion of truth that is said to be presupposed in communicative action or enquiry. It must therefore be thesis (ii)--the claim that no standpoint is metaphysically privileged over any other--that they take to conflict with this notion of truth.<sup>19</sup>

What does it mean to say that “no standpoint is metaphysically privileged over any other”? The idea of a metaphysically privileged standpoint can be understood in more than one way. Orthodox realists take it to be the standpoint from which things can be apprehended as they are in themselves, independently of our experience of them. In an ethical context, it is often conceived as the standpoint that all moral agents (usually taken to be coextensive with all rational beings) are under an obligation to adopt. Philosophy which presupposes the truth of a monotheistic religion is likely to identify it with the point of view of God. Each of these views is usually (though it does not have to be) combined with the idea that the uniquely privileged standpoint is the standpoint of reason, or the one that reason, properly employed, would arrive at. This idea goes back at least as far as Socrates and achieved self-conscious expression, as well as general acceptance, with the Enlightenment. It remains the prevalent view today. It is largely because we are, whether we like it or not, heirs of the Enlightenment that modern discussions about whether there are universally binding principles or whether there is a

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>19</sup> Here my reasoning is, of course, to some extent *ad hominem*. I have not tried to defend relativism against the kind of objections that a metaphysical realist might put forward. This is because I am concerned here with one particular kind of argument, and with how it has been used by non-realists like Putnam and Habermas to distance themselves from a relativism whose gravitational pull they undoubtedly feel.

uniquely privileged standpoint tend to automatically take the form of discussions about the nature, scope, and status of reason.

Relativists cannot prove there is no supremely privileged standpoint any more than atheists can prove the non-existence of God. But their skepticism regarding its existence may be viewed as a reasonable extension of the thesis that it is not possible conclusively to prove the superiority of one standpoint over any other. This latter thesis makes an epistemological claim. It does not logically entail the stronger, metaphysical claim that there is no uniquely privileged standpoint. One could acknowledge the impossibility of proving any standpoint to be ideal, absolute, or uniquely privileged while holding onto the idea that such a standpoint exists, perhaps even that it is attainable.<sup>20</sup> However, just as relativists tends to presuppose some form of non-realism, so they also typically incline towards a pragmatically grounded skepticism regarding the value--even the meaningfulness--of a concept like that of an absolute standpoint, the use of which cannot be experientially justified. Their attitude is similar to that expressed by Nietzsche towards the philosopher's concept of "the true world":

The true world--unattainable, indemonstrable? At any rate, unattained. And being unattained, also *unknown*. Consequently, not consoling, redeeming, or obligating: how could something unknown obligate us? . . .

The "true" world--an idea which is no longer good for anything, not even obligating--an idea which has become useless and superfluous--  
*consequently*, a refuted idea: let us abolish it!<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> I am indebted to Robert Kane for this distinction between denying the *existence* of a privileged standpoint and denying only that any standpoint can be *proved* to be privileged.

<sup>21</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Walter Kaufmann in *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York, 1954), 485.

The impossibility of any standpoint proving itself superior to all others may not *logically* entail the proposition that there is no uniquely privileged perspective, but to those already inclined towards relativism, skepticism on this matter follows as an existential consequence.

The reasoning behind what we may call the "unprovability thesis" is fairly familiar. A conclusive proof of the superiority of one standpoint over another would have to proceed in a non-circular, non-question-begging manner. But in order for any argumentative proof to work as a method of persuasion, the party to whom it is addressed must accept the premises along with the relevant rules of inference.<sup>22</sup> Where fundamental matters such as the relative merits of different theoretical frameworks are at issue, the most important premises will be affirmations of value. These values are the criteria of superiority to which appeal must be made. If another person accepts these values I may be able to convince them to adopt the same standpoint as myself. What I cannot do, however, is prove to someone who does not accept my criteria of superiority that the standpoint I favour is better than their own.

The values in question may be of the most general sort, such as truth, justice, beauty, or happiness, or they may be more specific criteria which are taken as guides to these more general ends; for instance, compatibility with scripture, logical consistency, or creative originality. Moreover, there is more than one way in which one standpoint might be considered better than another. The sort of superiority in question could be epistemic, moral, aesthetic, or asserted on the basis of other considerations such as its

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<sup>22</sup> The person being addressed must also, of course, accept the rules that define valid argumentation. That these cannot themselves be established by means of an argument is the point Lewis Carroll's "What the tortoise said to Achilles," *Mind* 4 (1895): 278-80.

conduciveness to people's survival, happiness or self-interest.<sup>23</sup> Relativism can, however, remain neutral between the various criteria of superiority, although a relativist is as entitled as anyone else to opt for some criteria over others. The general argument against the idea that one standpoint could be conclusively proved superior to another holds regardless of the type of superiority in question.

One could cite numerous examples of conflicts of opinion too fundamental to be settled by an agreed upon procedure on the basis of tenets and norms accepted by both sides. The opposition between science and some forms of religious belief, or between defenders of slavery and abolitionists are two familiar cases. But an essentially similar difficulty can be encountered in much less dramatic conflicts of opinion, as, for instance, between representatives of different schools in the arts, the social sciences, and sometimes even the natural sciences. This point was made familiar by Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*., where he described the opposition between conflicting paradigms within natural science in the following terms:

Like the choice between competing political institutions, that between competing paradigms proves to be a choice between incompatible modes of community life. Because it has that character, the choice is not and cannot be determined merely by the evaluative procedures characteristic of normal science, for these depend in part on a particular paradigm, and that paradigm is at issue. When paradigms enter, as they must, into a

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<sup>23</sup> Philosophers have traditionally tended to focus on the first two kinds of superiority, preferring standpoints which are either more likely to result in true beliefs or more likely to make those who adopt them morally better people. But it is certainly not self-evident that these considerations should necessarily be given the most weight. Pragmatism offers one powerful challenge to this tradition; Nietzsche provides another.

debate about paradigm choice, their role is necessarily circular. Each group uses its own paradigm to argue in that paradigm's defence.

The resulting circularity does not, of course, make the argument wrong or ineffectual. The man who premises a paradigm when arguing in its defence can nonetheless provide a clear exhibit of what scientific practice will be like for those who adopt the new view of nature. That exhibit can be immensely persuasive, often compellingly so. Yet, whatever its force, the status of the circular argument is only that of persuasion. It cannot be made logically or even probabilistically compelling for those who refuse to step into the circle. The premises and values shared by the two parties to a debate over paradigms are not sufficiently extensive for that. As in political revolutions, so in paradigm choice--there is no standard higher than the assent of the relevant community.<sup>24</sup>

What Kuhn says here with respect to natural science may, of course, be generalized, and not just to conflicts in other areas of theoretical activity but more widely to all conflicts between "incompatible modes of community life." This is precisely what Richard Rorty does in *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*. Discussing the question of how liberal values might be justified, he writes:

. . . a circular justification of our practices, a justification which makes one feature of our culture look good by citing still another, or comparing our culture invidiously with others by reference to our own standards, is the only sort of justification we are going to get.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed.(Chicago, 1970), 94.

<sup>25</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (Cambridge, 1989), 57.

Defenders of non-relativistic views have usually tried to meet this sort of argument in one of two ways. The first strategy is to argue that there are certain principles that every human being must accept simply in virtue of being a rational agent. This is the approach characteristic of Enlightenment rationalism. It continues to be upheld in ethics by thinkers such as Alan Gewirth,<sup>26</sup> in the theory of knowledge by Popperians and others who are inclined to view science as embodying the quintessence of rational thinking,<sup>27</sup> and in a systematic way by philosophers like Habermas. But such claims are an ineffective response to relativism. Relativists can point out that the conception of rationality invoked will in fact be some particular conception which cannot, without circularity, be proved superior to rival conceptions. It will probably, for instance, put a very high premium on the virtue of consistency (either between beliefs or between actions and beliefs). But how can the rationalist hope to persuade one who does not value consistency to the same extent? More fundamentally, how can the rationalist argument hope to persuade someone who is not already committed to making rationality the primary consideration when deciding what to believe and how to act?

To some, no doubt, the relativist's refusal to grant special status even to the basic rules of consistency constitutes a *reductio ad absurdum* of relativism. But if understood properly, the relativist's position here is defensible--and consistent. The issue is not: Should we respect the requirement that we try to make our statements logically consistent? Relativists, who normally operate within the same broad intellectual community as their critics, normally do respect this rule, and utilize it in defending their own views and criticizing other positions. The issue is: What is the *status* of such rules?

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<sup>26</sup> See Alan Gewirth, *Reason and Morality* (Chicago, 1978).

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, I. C. Jarvie, *Rationality and Relativism* (London, 1984).

The classical, rationalistic view is that we should ensure that our thinking conforms to principles such as the law of non-contradiction for a simple reason. Statements are true when they correspond to reality; reality cannot contain contradictions; therefore any set of statements that harbour a contradiction cannot be entirely true. The relativist's view is, once again, that this way of thinking is unobjectionable at the everyday level, but inappropriate at the level of metaphysical reflection. The laws of logic are certainly constitutive of a general point of view that relativists and their critics share. And if we think of that standpoint through Quine's metaphor of a "web of belief", the laws of logic are, as Quine says, at the centre of the web; the consequences of revising them would be far reaching indeed. But they are not inscribed in reality itself. Nor do they constitute, in whole or part, the timeless essence of rationality itself. They are merely principles whose practical value to us has been so well confirmed by experience that we are almost incapable of conceiving how it would be to allow our thinking to venture outside the constraints they impose. In this sense, they do indeed enjoy a privileged status. They are *historically* privileged. But they are not special in some deeper sense. Thus to violate them is analogous to breaking a law; it is not analogous to sinning in some deeper sense.

A second strategy which critics of relativism sometimes adopt in response to the "unprovability thesis" is to admit that no argument can compel others to accept our fundamental values, but to denounce those who do not accept them as irrational fanatics or scoundrels.<sup>28</sup> However, this is not so much an argumentative response as an expression of frustration; in effect it concedes the point at issue, which is that even the standpoint we identify as being that of reason cannot be *proved* superior to alternative standpoints.

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<sup>28</sup> For examples of this strategy see Jean Paul Sartre, *Existentialism as a Humanism* (London, 1987), and R. M. Hare, *Freedom and Reason* (Oxford, 1963).

The basic argument underlying the relativist's denial that any standpoint enjoys a metaphysically privileged status can be summed up, then, as follows. Since all proofs must proceed from some particular standpoint, it is not possible to prove the absolute superiority of any standpoint. For if the starting point of the proof belongs to a different standpoint from that which one wishes to validate, then the proof can never get off the ground; and if the starting point belongs to the standpoint in question, then the proof will be circular. Given the impossibility of any such proof, claims that a particular standpoint is in point of fact metaphysically privileged ring hollow. The concept is as dubious as the metaphysical realist's concept of truth.

### **Honing the question**

Although, as I indicated earlier, there are differences in the specific arguments against relativism advanced by Putnam and Habermas, they clearly have the same general form. Both thinkers argue that relativism is self-refuting because it a necessary condition of our engaging in any rational enterprise (which, at least for Habermas, includes even simple acts of communication) that we implicitly commit ourselves to a non-relativistic view of truth and rationality. What that means, if we accept the definition of relativism proposed, is that we are all implicitly committed to denying at least one of the two central theses elucidated above. We saw, however, that the first of these claims-- that the truth value of any judgement is relative to some particular standpoint--would also be endorsed by most non-realists. And since Putnam and Habermas are both, at bottom, non-realists, it cannot be this element of relativism that they reject. It must, therefore, be the second thesis--that no standpoint is metaphysically privileged over any other--which they believe leads the

relativist into self-referential incoherence. Let us now consider why Putnam and Habermas reject this thesis, and why they think that any attempt to assert it or argue for it leads the relativist into self-refutation.

Both philosophers, as we remarked earlier, attempt to prevent the slide from non-realism to relativism by positing a cognitive ideal. The kind of cognitive ideal invoked by Habermas--and perhaps also by Putnam--can be described as a unique standpoint from which all disputes about what it is rational to believe may be resolved. This is not a "God's eye point of view" on the nature of independent reality and the relation between it and our beliefs, since that ideal only makes sense given some form of metaphysical realism (which both thinkers reject). But the ideal speech situation, or Putnam's ideal epistemic conditions, represent the non-realist's best alternative to a God's eye point of view. Truth is what it is rational to believe under ideal conditions and where no non-rational influences such as abnormal perception, money, or fear affect one's judgement. Both thinkers further hold that the system of beliefs one would endorse in this case will be internally consistent; to this extent, at least, they imply that under ideal conditions there will be a convergence of beliefs (although Putnam is very slippery on this point).<sup>29</sup> In this sense, they appear sympathetic to the traditional idea that Truth is One.

Is a commitment to some such notion of truth incompatible with the view that no standpoint is metaphysically privileged over any other? I would say that it is. For even though the ideal standpoint is defined in very general terms, it is nevertheless a

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<sup>29</sup> Putnam allows for the possibility of radically different yet equally valid models of reality. But even after his rejection of metaphysical realism he continued to maintain that these models must be "equivalent": i.e. isomorphic, and hence intertranslatable, descriptions of the same underlying structures. See, for instance, his article "Equivalence," *Realism and Reason*, 26-45. See also his discussion of 'conceptual relativity' in *Renewing Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA, 1992), 115-123. In other writings, however, he appears to countenance at least the possibility that equally valid alternative models could be radically incompatible.

standpoint that supposedly enjoys a uniquely privileged status. And it is not simply that we arbitrarily prefer it to all other standpoints; it is the standpoint from which alone the objective truth of our beliefs can be determined.<sup>30</sup>

Our question thus becomes: When we engage in rational enquiry and communication, do we really make an implicit commitment to the idea that what we say is true from a privileged standpoint of this sort? For the sake of clarity, we can distinguish two distinct questions here.

- a) In ordinary discourse, are we committed to the truth of what we say?
- b) In ordinary discourse, are we committed to a non-relativistic conception of truth?

Habermas argues forcefully that the answer to the first question is yes. The justification he provides has the form of a transcendental argument (although Habermas does not like this term). The major premise asserts that a commitment to the truth of what we are saying is a necessary condition of the possibility of communication. I am inclined to think that Habermas here, as elsewhere, tries to prove more than he can. One can argue that there are some instances of successful communication in which a commitment to truth is not presupposed: for example, in the case of haggling. Nevertheless, as a sound generalization rather than a universal principle, Habermas's claim is hard to deny. Moreover, in ordinary philosophical discussion a commitment to the truth of what we say does seem to be invariably presupposed. Philosophers--including relativists--who cheerfully deny this will have difficulty holding on to their audience. Regarding (a), therefore, relativists, too, should answer yes.

Our focus must therefore be on (b). Both Putnam and Habermas support giving an affirmative answer to (b) by showing that we are implicitly committed to a certain

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<sup>30</sup> The notion of "objective truth" is, of course, here understood in a non-realist sense.

cognitive ideal. In my view, however, neither thinker thereby refutes relativism. One reason for this is that there are problems with the particular assumptions on which they rest their separate arguments. In Putnam's case, the problem is that the ideal he invokes ultimately turns out to be defined relativistically. In Habermas's case, the problem is that he fails to prove that the commitment he describes is necessary. Since these criticisms have already been made by others I will only sketch them briefly before advancing different, more general objections which apply equally to both philosophers and which challenge their argumentative strategy.

### **Why we are not all necessarily committed to a non-relativistic view of truth**

Habermas, as we have seen, defines truth as what would eventually be affirmed by all parties in an ideal speech situation. He accepts that the ideal situation is virtually never realized in practice; but the concept can still function as a regulative ideal. In fact, he claims, this ideal is implicitly posited by every language user, at least insofar as they are genuinely attempting to communicate with other language users: "Our first sentence," he says, "expresses unequivocally the intention of universal and unconstrained consensus."<sup>31</sup> It is not entirely clear how Habermas believes he can justify this bold claim, or whether he would still assert it so confidently. But his general argument seems to be that an implicit understanding of and commitment to the normative principles that constitute the ideal speech situation are necessary conditions of communicative competence.

[I]n order to participate in normal discourse the speaker must have at his disposal, in addition to his linguistic competence, basic qualifications of speech and symbolic interaction (role-behaviour) which we may call

communicative competence. Thus communicative competence means the mastery of an ideal speech situation.”<sup>32</sup>

For Habermas, then, the concept of truth is to be explicated by reference to the ideal speech situation; and this explication is non-relativistic because the ideal speech situation represents a privileged standpoint. As a regulative ideal, it expresses a concept of rationality--what Habermas calls “communicative rationality”--to which all of us, as language users, owe allegiance. It thus can claim universal validity, and hence a uniquely privileged status. This is why Habermas feels entitled to claim, further, that the standpoint of communicative rationality provides the only adequate basis for social theory, and that its articulation and conscious adoption--which is a distinguishing feature of modernity--represents objective progress over earlier conceptions of rationality.

The main objection to this argument is that it just does not seem to be true that every act of communication implicitly posits the values embedded in the ideal speech situation. People can and do use language in what Habermas calls a purely “strategic” manner, with a view not to reaching understanding and agreement but with a view to securing some particular self-interested goal. Now Habermas concedes that “not every linguistically mediated interaction is an example of action oriented to reaching understanding.”<sup>33</sup> But he nonetheless insists that “the use of language with an orientation to reaching understanding is the *original mode* of language use, upon which . . . the instrumental use of language [is] parasitic.”<sup>34</sup> He makes the same claim elsewhere when he describes

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<sup>31</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Boston, 1970), 314.

<sup>32</sup> Jürgen Habermas, “Towards a Theory of Communicative Competence,” *Inquiry*, 13, (Winter 1970): 366-7.

<sup>33</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 1* (Boston, 1984), 288.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 288.

reaching understanding as "the inherent telos of human speech" and designates strategic speech as "derivative."

These are very difficult claims to justify, and I do not think Habermas is able to justify them.<sup>35</sup> What can he say to skeptics or cynics who simply deny they have any commitment to his communicative values? He could, of course, claim that they thereby forfeit their entitlement to be viewed as rational agents. And no doubt this would be the reaction of all of us who "operate within the horizons of a modern understanding of the world" and so share his liberal, modernist outlook. But this response does not close the debate: it only radicalizes it. For Habermas must still show why everyone *ought* to share the conception of rationality it presupposes, and accord it the respect he believes it deserves. Charles Taylor makes this point effectively:

[According to Habermas] we should endeavor to replace non-rational mechanisms of action coordination by rational forms of reaching understanding. Yet this demand is also confronted by the question why I should strive for this. Let us accept that such a norm is structurally based in the situation of human speech . . . and that rational understanding is the appropriate manner of overcoming disturbances in the mutuality of a 'We' . . . I nevertheless have other aims, other interests. Why then should I prefer rational understanding? Why should precisely this aim occupy a special position? Attempts at justification such as are derived from the structure of the situation of speech by a discursive ethics do not suffice in

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<sup>35</sup> In *The Theory of Communicative Action* Habermas tries to support this view of language by arguing that the strategic use of language is dependent on the meaning of what one says being understood. But even if this be granted, it still does not follow that those using language strategically must *themselves* make the normative commitments that their listeners assume are being made.

the case of such radical questions. . . If . . . I attempt to assert my own interests irrespective of all the objections other participants to the conversation raise, then I certainly violate the logic of the discourse. But why should I not do this? Why should I not attempt to reach my desired goal at the cost of being slightly inconsistent?<sup>36</sup>

Habermas's account of communicative rationality may well articulate some of the most fundamental assumptions underlying the outlook characteristic of modernity; and this outlook could make claim to being *historically privileged*, at least during the present era. But relativists could concede this without thereby themselves subscribing to these assumptions (which include a non relativistic view of truth and rationality) and thus falling into a performative contradiction.

Putnam's insistence that we are all implicitly committed to a non-relativistic view of truth runs aground in a somewhat different way. Like Habermas, he rejects the traditional realist view of truth. Truth, on his account, is "idealized rational acceptability", or as he prefers to say now, rational acceptability under sufficiently good epistemic conditions.<sup>37</sup> That is, what all true statements have in common is the objective property of being worthy of belief by any rational person under ideal (or adequate) epistemic conditions. It is not clear, though, how this conception of truth is non-relativistic. An obvious question is: according to what criteria are the epistemic conditions judged to be ideal or adequate)? If they are judged good enough simply by our own present epistemic norms, then the notion of truth they underpin seems to be a

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<sup>36</sup> Charles Taylor, "Language and Society," in Axel Honneth and Hans Joas eds., *Communicative Action: Essays on Jürgen Habermas's The Theory of Communicative Action* (Cambridge, 1991), 30-1.

<sup>37</sup> For Putnam's own account of why he moved away from talking about "ideal" epistemic conditions, see Hilary Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face* (Cambridge, MA, 1990), vii-ix.

relativistic notion after all. If, on the other hand, the quality of the epistemic conditions is to be determined by standards that have greater authority, then Putnam seems to be sliding back towards some form of metaphysical realism. He would seem to be suggesting that our present norms of rationality can be judged better or worse by comparison to some ideal set of norms--an idea that ought to be as objectionable to him as the metaphysical realist's view of truth.<sup>38</sup>

Putnam would perhaps respond to this criticism by saying that while we certainly do judge the adequacy of our epistemic situation by our present epistemic norms, we nevertheless must commit ourselves to the objective truth of our judgements regarding how well these norms are satisfied in a given situation. But this does not resolve the dilemma. As was pointed out earlier, relativists can and should acknowledge that in most ordinary circumstances we are committed to the truth of what we say. The issue, though, is whether we are necessarily committed to a non-relativistic conception of truth. And with respect to this question, our judgements about whether certain epistemic conditions are satisfied, or about the worth of the epistemic norms we employ, are no more significant than any other judgement. The fact that we are committed to their truth does not mean that we cannot seriously or coherently believe that truth is relative "all the way down." And unless Putnam is able to explain how and at what point the notion of truth

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<sup>38</sup> Richard Rorty criticizes Putnam along these lines in "Solidarity or Objectivity?," *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, 21-34. See also his "Putnam and the Relativist Menace", *Journal of Philosophy* XC, no. 9 (1993): 443-461. In *Representation and Reality* (Cambridge, MA, 1988) Putnam clarifies--and modifies--his position. He there describes the relevant epistemic situation not as "ideal" but as simply that of a "sufficiently well placed speaker." (p. 115) He acknowledges that "[t]here is no algorithm for determining whether a given epistemic position is better or worse for making an arbitrary judgement" (ibid.); and he insists that our beliefs about what statements are true and our beliefs about what constitute sufficiently good epistemic conditions are thoroughly interconnected. These claims are generally compatible with the position laid out in *Reason, Truth, and History*. But they still do not explain how Putnam thinks he is able to support the idea that there is "a true conception of rationality", which is the view he seems to ally himself with at the end of that work. (See *Reason Truth and History*, 216.)

he invokes or the epistemic norms which underpin it go beyond what merely appears ideal from our present standpoint, it is hard to see how his position can really challenge relativism.

### **A problem with the appeal to implicit commitments**

The doubts just expressed about the attempts by Putnam and Habermas to prevent the slide from non-realism to relativism through an appeal to a non-relative cognitive ideal relate to problems specific to their particular philosophies. I now wish to bring forward difficulties that arise for anyone who seeks to refute relativism as they do by arguing that what relativists espouse is at odds with their implicit commitments and pre-philosophical attitudes. In this section I will focus on the grounds for ascribing an implicit commitment to anyone; in the following section I will raise questions about the relevance of our commonsensical, pre-philosophical attitudes.

The objections to relativism advanced by Putnam and Habermas belong to a venerable argumentative tradition going back to Plato's attack on Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*. The conclusion they are intended to support is that relativism is self-refuting. Now, there is more than one way in which a doctrine can be self-refuting. One common form of self-referential incoherence arises where the doctrine itself (or its linguistic expression) constitutes a counter-example to the thesis it asserts, as is often said to be the case with the verificationist theory of meaning. The objection to relativism we are considering, however, is that it is self-refuting because anyone who asserts it or argues for it falls into a performative contradiction: their activity is at odds with the content of their claim.

Strictly speaking, however, an action cannot contradict a statement; only another statement can do that. I can, of course, be hypocritical, asserting a normative principle and then failing to abide by it. But this conflict does not have the form of a contradiction; it cannot be represented by the formula “p and not p” since actions and statements belong to different orders. A performative contradiction thus arises only when I assert one thing and act in a manner which implies that I believe the contrary.

Our normal procedure for determining whether or not someone holds a certain belief is simply to ask them if they do. Most of the time this is sufficient. Things get trickier, though, if I claim that someone is implicitly committed to a certain belief and they deny it. This, of course, is the situation that obtains between the relativists and their critics. Clearly, some account is needed here of how one shows that a person really does have an implicit commitment even though they insist they do not.<sup>39</sup>

There are two reasons for holding that someone is implicitly committed to the truth of a certain statement even when they will not acknowledge this. The first reason is that they explicitly endorse some other claim or claims which logically entail the statement in question. For example, if they believe that no-one should ever steal, then they are, on logical grounds, implicitly committed to the view that they should not steal. Whether or not a statement really is entailed by some other statements can, of course be a highly controversial matter. But the form of this kind of philosophical criticism is relatively unproblematic. The second reason for ascribing an implicit commitment to someone is that they perform some *action* which implies such a commitment. This is the form of the

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<sup>39</sup> There is, of course, a vast literature on the philosophical problems associated with ascriptions of beliefs, intentions, desires, and the like, both to other people and to ourselves. But my concern here and in the rest of this section is not with the ascription of beliefs and intentions as such; it is with what a particular argument against relativism must assume, and how relativists can challenge that assumption.

argument against relativism we are concerned with here. It is more problematic since it is not immediately apparent exactly how an action implies a commitment to the truth of some claim, or how this connection is to be established. I here propose to offer a brief account of this connection which casts light on the logical character of the argument against relativism we are considering and shows why it is unsuccessful.

How can an action imply a belief?<sup>40</sup> The two are linked through intentions. Actions, by definition, are guided by intentions. An action which lacks an intention is not an action at all; it is a mere event. An action can be related to more than one intention; for example, the intention behind my opening the refrigerator could be identified as getting some milk, providing myself with some breakfast, or assuaging my hunger. And much of the time we are not conscious, or at least not fully conscious, of our intentions. When I type the letter “h”, for example, my intention could be described as recording the letter “h” in my computer’s memory, completing the word “much”, writing out a sentence with the word “much” in it, bringing this article nearer completion, or defending relativism against its critics. But at least the first three of these may never be intentions I am actually conscious of having.

How do we decide what intentions, conscious or non-conscious, lie behind an action? Most of the time we make reasonable inferences based on our general understanding of human nature. If there is doubt then, as with beliefs, the simplest procedure is to ask the agent. Of course, there will be times when we have reason to doubt their response; we may suspect them of lying, or we may believe that they have aims of which they are not conscious. But these caveats need not concern us here since the critique of relativism we are considering does not assume that relativists are in bad faith in either of these ways.

We can assume, then, that the relativist's intentions in asserting and arguing for relativism are whatever the relativist says they are.

Actions imply beliefs because every intention necessarily rests on or is accompanied by a belief or set of beliefs. For example, my holding a glass under a tap and turning the tap on is guided by my intention of obtaining a drink of water to quench my thirst. This intention rests on a set of beliefs which include the following: that water will come out of the tap when it is turned, that it will flow downwards from the tap, that the cup will hold the water that falls into it, that the water will not be scalding hot, and that the water will not poison me. At the time of my action, I may not be conscious of any of these beliefs. But if asked I would certainly affirm each one, and it is therefore entirely reasonable to ascribe to me an implicit commitment to what each one asserts. A problem arises, however, if you say that my action commits me to a certain belief and I deny holding that belief. The onus is then on you to show the connection between my action and the particular belief in question. It is one thing to make the general claim that all actions involve beliefs; it is another thing to provide a way of determining whether a particular action implies a particular belief. Yet this is what those who charge the relativist with falling into a performative contradiction must do.

I suggest the following somewhat crude principle as a means of establishing the desired connection between an action and a belief: An action rests on or implies a particular belief if the action *makes no sense* unless the agent would affirm that belief. By "makes no sense" I mean that unless the agent subscribes to the belief in question, the action would appear to be performed for no reason. Thus, if I hold a cup under a tap and turn the tap on with the intention of obtaining a drink of water, you will certainly ascribe

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<sup>40</sup> I use the term "belief" here and elsewhere to mean a commitment to the truth of some statement.

to me the belief that the water will flow downwards from the tap. If, however, I deny holding this belief, then you will naturally ask me why I put the cup where I did. If I say I do this for no particular reason then I am convicted out of my own mouth of acting without a reason. If I explain my action in some other way, saying, for instance, that for all I know the water could squirt out of the tap in any direction, that putting the cup somewhere in the vicinity of the tap increases the likelihood of catching some water in the cup, and that it is less effort to hold the cup lower down than higher up, then I am not acting without a reason; but you would justifiably declare the reason I give to be preposterous--clear evidence of ignorance and stupidity.

To clarify how this way of establishing what beliefs an action commits an agent to can underpin the charge that a philosophical position is self-refuting, let us see how it applies to that most punch drunk of straw men, the solipsist. Ontological solipsism is the view that the entire world, including other people, is contained within my self, a projection out of my subjectivity. If we ever were to encounter someone engaged in arguing for this view or defending it against criticism, an obvious question to ask would be: Why is he arguing for his view? What intention lies behind his action? Speaking generally, there would seem to be only two likely responses. Either (a) the solipsist wishes to relate his insight to others and persuade them of its truth; or (b) his aim is simply to satisfy some personal need (for example, giving himself pleasure, or being original). (a) only makes sense if he believes in the independent existence of other people. The action of arguing for solipsism to persuade others of its truth thus implies a commitment to a belief which contradicts the solipsist's main thesis. So if this is his intention the solipsist is guilty of a performative contradiction. Self-referential

incoherence can be avoided if the solipsist acknowledges having only the goal of satisfying some personal need. But if this is his goal we have no obligation to engage with him (which is not the same as saying that we could have no reason for considering seriously some of his ideas). As Habermas forcefully argues, such things as sincerity, a commitment to the truth of what we say, and an orientation toward agreement reached by consensus, are presupposed in our conception of rational discussion.<sup>41</sup> Once the solipsist concedes that he does not even recognize our existence as rational, autonomous thinkers, and that he has no goal other than personal satisfaction, he excludes himself from the community of those engaged in such discussion.<sup>42</sup>

Turning now to relativism, let us see what results a similar line of interrogation turns up. The relativist defends the view that the truth value of any judgement is relative to some particular, non-privileged standpoint. Her critics claim that this thesis contradicts another thesis to which the relativist has an implicit commitment: namely, the thesis that at least some judgements are true in a non-relativistic sense. The relativist denies having any such commitment. Her critics reply that it is implied by the action of asserting and defending a philosophical position. The relativist challenges her critics to show how this is so, and the critics proceed along the lines suggested above.

What intention lies behind the relativist's act of asserting relativism? As with the solipsist, there is only one answer that is really acceptable to the philosophical community: that she wishes to relate what she takes to be a truth. Clearly, if "truth" here is used in a non-relativistic sense then the intention would rest on a belief that contradicts

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<sup>41</sup> Habermas, of course, believes that these "validity claims" are not just constitutive of particular communities such as the one to which contemporary philosophers belong, but underlie all forms of genuine communication, a stronger claim which he has difficulty justifying. See below.

the relativist thesis and she would be guilty of a performative contradiction. To avoid this the relativist must say that she only takes the view she espouses to be true in a relativistic sense: in other words, it is only true relative to some particular, non-privileged standpoint.

Now the critics of relativism will undoubtedly object to this move, insisting that we are all necessarily committed to the non-relativistic truth of our assertions. But at this point the ball is firmly in the anti-relativist's court. As we argued above, the only way to make good the claim that someone holds a belief when they deny holding it is either to show how it is logically tied to other beliefs they hold, or to show that their actions make no sense unless they affirm the belief in question. But there are no obvious grounds for saying that the relativist's affirmation of relativism is unintelligible unless she holds her claims to be non-relativistically true. Certainly, it might be said that the relativist is implicitly committed to a different view of the nature and task of philosophy than has been generally held by philosophers in the classical tradition. And this may be another reason why some people find relativism unappealing. But this hardly makes relativism self-refuting. Hegel held that the goal of philosophy is knowledge of the Absolute. Yet those who think philosophy should pursue more modest goals are surely still entitled to be considered philosophers.

The solipsist, as we saw, was able to avoid performative contradiction only by sacrificing his entitlement to have his participation in philosophical discourse taken seriously. The critics of relativism might argue that at this point the relativist pays the same price. If she only believes in the merely relative truth of what she says, why bother

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<sup>42</sup> In my opinion, analogous argumentative strategies can be effectively employed against total nihilism (the view that nothing has any value) and determinism.

discussing the issue further with her? But this attitude would not be justified here. The relativist believes that what she asserts is true only from a certain standpoint, defined primarily in terms of its constitutive epistemic norms. But this is a standpoint which is likely to be very similar to that adopted by the critic. Both relativist and critic will probably count among their cardinal criteria of rational acceptability such things as consistency, coherence with experience, practical fruitfulness, and metaphysical economy. Their disagreement is largely over the *status* they think should be accorded to those beliefs they choose to affirm.

All the same, the critic might respond, even if it makes sense for the relativist to express her views, what intention could underlie the action of *arguing* for them? Why does it matter to the relativist that others be of the same persuasion? Isn't arguing for a doctrine an action that only makes sense given a belief in the non-relativistic truth of that doctrine?

The question of what motivates the relativist to adopt and defend relativism is an interesting question, and one that is too large to be dealt with properly here. However, it is enough to point out that the relativist could have several intentions, all of which are intelligible without presupposing a non-relativistic outlook. She could, for instance, simply be trying to defend herself against accusations of incoherence or irrationality. This enterprise does not presuppose that relativism is the only coherent philosophical position, or that it is uniquely better than all other philosophical positions, just as a demonstration of the viability of a certain chess opening need not attempt to do more than show its critics that it is in fact sound. Alternatively, the relativist could be seeking to show that relativism is a view that is entailed by, and so coheres best with, other

doctrines to which its critics subscribe. This is the form of some of Rorty's arguments against Putnam. Such an intention obviously presupposes the view that, all things being equal, it is better to have beliefs that are consistent rather than inconsistent. But this is a belief the relativist presumably shares with the critic (although the consistent relativist will, of course, hold the claim to be true only in a relativistic sense). So the critic is obliged to take the argument seriously. Or again, the relativist may be actively seeking to proselytize for practical reasons. She may for instance, like Rorty, believe that liberal ideals are better served by a relativistic outlook which encourages us to take a pragmatic rather than dogmatic attitude towards existing norms and values, recognizing them as having a contingent, conventional status, and therefore as being open to reflective criticism and modification according to our needs and interests.

The upshot of this section can be simply stated. Those who argue that the relativist falls into a performative contradiction must show exactly how the action of asserting or arguing for the relativist thesis implies a commitment to a belief which contradicts that thesis. To do this requires them to show that the relativist's action would make no sense without such a commitment. But the action does make sense so long as the relativist's intentions are properly understood.

### **A problem with the appeal to pre-philosophical attitudes**

There is a further problem with the argumentative strategy commonly employed by Putnam, Habermas, and others who seek to show that relativism is self-refuting while themselves subscribing to a non-realist metaphysics. This problem has to do with the status they assign to our pre-philosophical attitudes and intuitions. On the one hand they

appeal to these attitudes in order to support their claim that we are all--relativists included--implicitly committed to a non-relativistic conception of truth. Putnam, for instance, places great weight on the fact that “it is a central feature of our picture of truth” that “truth and acceptability to the majority of one’s cultural peers are independent properties.”<sup>43</sup> Habermas argues that a commitment to universal norms of rationality is built into the structure of communicative action. Yet on the other hand, they concede that the common realist conception of truth as simple correspondence to reality, although unobjectionable in everyday life, is philosophically untenable. But if our naive, pre-philosophical realism can be criticized as philosophically suspect or inadequate, why can’t our alleged commitment to a non-relativistic view of truth and rationality also be placed under suspicion? Or, conversely, if this latter commitment is worthy of every philosopher’s respect, why shouldn’t the same be said for the naive realism of common sense?

Neither Putnam nor Habermas offer any justification for their selectivity regarding our pre-philosophical commitments.<sup>44</sup> Yet their strategy requires that they be able to formulate principles which enable us to decide which of our implicit commitments are worthy of respect and which are not. Presumably, they would claim that commitment to a realist notion of truth may be part of common sense, but it is not a necessary part of rationality nor a necessary condition of communication; commitment to a non-relativistic

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<sup>43</sup> Putnam, *Representation and Reality*, 133.

<sup>44</sup> Putnam sometimes addresses the question of why our pre-philosophical attitudes are worthy of respect. For instance, in “Does the Disquotational Theory of Truth Solve All Philosophical Problems?” Putnam defends some form of realism--though not metaphysical realism--on the grounds that “it is undeniable as a fact about the lives we actually lead, that our ordinary linguistic practice . . . . is deeply informed by a ‘realist’ picture.” Such a picture, he adds, has “enormous human weight”, and should for this reason be respected. Hilary Putnam, *Words and Life* (Cambridge, MA, 1994), 276-7. But these sentiments hardly provide a basis for distinguishing between philosophically respectable and philosophically dubious

notion of truth, on the other hand, is. In other words, it is just a contingent fact with no significant philosophical implications that in everyday discourse we presuppose a realist view of truth; but our supposed commitment to a non-relativistic view of truth is not just a contingent fact which could easily be imagined otherwise; it is inextricably tied to our conception of ourselves as beings who use language to engage in rational enterprises. Claims such as these, however, do not really support the argument against relativism; they merely articulate the very assumptions that relativism calls into question. For the argument to be at all persuasive, the critics still have to show why our alleged pre-philosophical commitments are worthy of philosophical respect. Let me elaborate further on this point.

Putnam repeatedly asserts that it is part of what he calls “our picture of truth” that truth is independent of majority opinion. I agree. But what follows from this observation? Couldn’t this “picture” be in some respects misguided, misleading, outdated, no longer credible, or no longer useful? Is it not possible that it contains philosophical incoherencies? Prior to the seventeenth century, Western society’s “picture” of nature was thoroughly teleological. Does that mean that when Hobbes and Descartes argued against using the concept of final cause in the scientific study of nature they were somehow contradicting themselves? Obviously not. They were simply challenging a traditional view. Moreover, they could perfectly well allow teleological descriptions of natural phenomena to stand unchallenged in non-scientific discourse; their claim was only that the notion of final cause had no place in a genuinely scientific

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“pictures”. By the same argument, the still prevalent Cartesian view of the mind as an immaterial substance would equally be entitled to respect.

account of things.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, a relativist can acknowledge that most of the time we all operate with a crude realist notion of truth. This notion serves our quotidian purposes perfectly well; but as it is philosophically untenable, an acceptable philosophical explication of the concept of truth has to be non-realistic--even relativistic. Certainly, there is a tension between our everyday and our philosophical perspectives; but why should that be viewed as a problem? There is a tension between our ordinary conception of space and time and the way these are understood within relativity theory, but that is no reason to suppose either that Einsteinian physics is misguided or that our ordinary way of thinking is not the point of view best suited to deal with ordinary situations. Both the everyday and the specialist perspectives can be respected as long as they accept their territorial limits. Disputes inevitably arise, however, when philosophers try to use our ordinary understanding as an argument for holding (or rejecting) some philosophical account of truth, (which is what Putnam seems to do) or when they inappropriately try to carry relativistic views of truth into mundane affairs (a failing of much so-called postmodernist theorizing).

### **Exactly what implicit commitments do we make when we engage in rational discussion?**

We have been considering the question: Is it a necessary condition of engaging in any rational enterprise that we implicitly commit ourselves to a non-relativistic view of truth and reason? So far I have argued first, that neither Putnam nor Habermas provide an

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<sup>45</sup> A more radical view, which nevertheless remains compatible with the position I am defending, is that revolutionary thinkers like Descartes, Hobbes, or Darwin often cannot avoid contradictions when they challenge the received conceptual schemes. The contradictions disappear as language evolves in response to their insights.

adequate positive account of what this commitment involves; second, that the activity of asserting or arguing for relativism can be intelligible and coherent without this commitment; and third, that even if some such implicit commitment was present in everyday discourse, that would not necessarily refute relativism as a philosophical position. I now wish to argue that while our participation in rational discourse does indeed involve our making implicit commitments, these do not extend quite as far as the critics of relativism suggest but extend only to something more modest which, when articulated, can be seen to be compatible with relativism as I defined it earlier.

To begin with, let me say that I agree with Putnam and Habermas that all rational discussion is value-laden. It may be explicitly evaluative, involving terms such as “good”, “right”, “better” or their contraries; or the norms and values that underpin what is said may be in the background, only needing to be articulated when a disagreement requires that the conversation raise itself to the level of what Habermas calls “discourse.” But so far as the argument about cognitive relativism is concerned, there is no essential difference between descriptive and normative claims. The latter are simply claims in which the evaluative elements lie nearer the surface. Their manifestly evaluative character does not mean that one cannot legitimately ascribe to them degrees of rational acceptability or a determinate truth value. Further, I concede that there is something right about the thesis that when we engage in rational discussion--which includes philosophical debates about the merits of relativism--we usually do commit ourselves to the objective truth (in some sense) of our assertions. (And those we address understand this to be one of the “validity claims” (to use Habermas’s term) being raised: if they did not, they could not really understand what we were saying.) So, for example, when I affirm the

superiority of liberal democracy to authoritarianism, or of contemporary medical practices to those of the fifteenth century, I clearly do not consider myself to be merely offering opinions that, like expressions of taste, have only subjective validity. Our problem, then, is to determine more precisely the kind of “objective truth” we usually claim for our assertions.

The essence of objectivity in epistemic matters is to recognize constraints that are independent of one’s particular preferences or desires. It is thus tempting to say that the notion of objective truth which informs all rational conversation can be adequately captured simply by the idea of our statements being judged true according to criteria widely accepted within our community and which we ourselves share. Such a conception of truth would be objective in the sense that it rests on public standards of justification, thereby preventing the undesirable slide from relativism into Protagorean subjectivism. There is a problem, however, with construing the notion of objective truth in this way. For when I make an assertion I am committed to the truth of what I assert in a stronger sense than it allows. This becomes evident if we consider the case of people who do not accept the epistemic norms that prevail in their community, and who argue for the truth of their beliefs according to different norms: for example, a scientist living in a fundamentalist religious culture who argues for the theory of evolution in spite of its incompatibility with what is written in the bible; or a certain kind of self-styled radical in a liberal culture who argues that the truth of political judgements is a function of the class to which those who make them belong. Such people are presumably committed to the objective truth of their assertions yet do not necessarily believe that this truth can be established according to the epistemic norms prevailing in their community. Our

recognition of such possibilities indicates that even in contexts where the prevailing norms *are* accepted, the kind of objective truth people implicitly claim for the statements they make goes beyond mere conformity to existing standards of justification.<sup>46</sup>

Should we say, then, that the kind of objective truth we implicitly claim our assertions possess should be construed in terms of their conformity to the epistemic norms we believe *ought* to prevail within the relevant community? This option overcomes the objection just considered: that commitment to the objective truth of one's assertions is compatible with a rejection of the epistemic norms actually prevailing in one's community. And it does meet some of the requirements we demand of a conception of truth. The public nature of the norms referred to ensures that it is objective, at least in some minimal sense. The distinction between being right and thinking one is right can be maintained since it is possible for a person to judge that a statement conforms to certain norms and yet be mistaken. Moreover, the irreducibly normative nature of the commitment we have to the truth of what we assert is recognized. When I take sides in a dispute, say between the Darwinian theory of evolution and the biblical account of how human beings came to exist in their present form (understood here as rival explanations), I am not offering a detached analysis of the relation between statements and standards of warranted acceptability. I am implicitly affirming the superiority of one set of standards over another.

The problem with this way of representing our commitment to the truth of what we assert is that it commits us to a form of dogmatism that most reasonable people would

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<sup>46</sup> This is the view of truth (as equivalent to rational acceptability to the majority of one's peers) that Putnam believes Rorty to hold. (See, for instance, Putnam, *Words and Life*, 331. In my opinion, however, this is an oversimplification of Rorty's position. For Rorty's response to Putnam, see his "Putnam and the Relativist Menace."

resist. To hold that one and only one set of epistemic norms ought to prevail over all others entertained by people in the community would rule out the possibility that there may be more than one legitimate epistemic standpoint. The idea that there can only be one such standpoint has been defended by thinkers from the time of Parmenides to the present, and it still has many defenders. But it has been effectively criticized by many contemporary philosophers, and must be considered, at the very least, highly controversial.<sup>47</sup>

A very interesting and convincing illustration of why we should not insist that there is just one set of norms for deciding what it is rational to believe is given by David Wong in his essay ‘Three Types of Incommensurability.’<sup>48</sup> Wong argues that one could accept that the epistemic norms characteristic of modern Western science are superior to those found in traditional Chinese thought in the sense that they lead to a more accurate and technically exploitable model of nature, yet still rationally prefer the standpoint of traditional Chinese thought. For traditional Chinese thought, which does not make a sharp distinction between what is true and what it is good for a person to believe, and which stresses the importance of being attuned to the natural world (as opposed to merely knowing truths about it) may be the standpoint that is most conducive to achieving a relationship with nature that is both intellectually and emotionally satisfying. Such a preference may be viewed as rational unless there is some reason to suppose that it is not rational to value attunement with the natural world to that extent.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Nietzsche and James were early and influential advocates of pluralism. Well known contemporary attacks on the idea that there is just one legitimate standpoint from which to appraise our beliefs include Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis, 1978), and Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method* (London, 1975).

<sup>48</sup> David Wong, “Three Kinds of Incommensurability,” in Michael Krausz ed., *Relativism: Interpretation and Confrontation* (Notre Dame, 1989), 140-158.

<sup>49</sup> See also, Robert C. Solomon, "Existentialism, Emotions, and the Cultural Limits of Rationality,"

What really matters for our purposes here, however, is not whether the idea that one set of norms should prevail over all others is philosophically defensible, but whether we are committed to some such idea when we engage one another in rational discussion. I think it is evident that we are not. As Wong emphasizes, however, saying there is no unequivocally best set of norms and values does not commit one to the view that all such “styles of thinking” are equally good. For I can consistently hold that no standpoint is metaphysically privileged over all others and yet be willing to judge the relative merits of different standpoints according to how well they satisfy the norms and values I choose to affirm. Passing such judgements would only be incompatible with relativism if I maintained that the particular set of norms and values on which I base my judgements constitute a metaphysically privileged standpoint. But nothing compels me to hold this view. I can affirm the superiority of the scientific standpoint over that of a Christian fundamentalist on the grounds that working with scientific criteria of rational acceptability gives us greater control over our environment. This, in turn, may be valued as something that both constitutes and promotes human well-being. But at no point need I assume or imply that the norms and values to which I appeal have any sanction apart from other norms and values which belong to the same system of beliefs. Thus, I can employ them and affirm them while recognizing that their status is, to use Rorty’s term, irreducibly “contingent.”

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*Philosophy East and West* 42, no. 4 (October 1992), 597-619. Focusing directly on the relation between rationality and the emotions, this essay explores ways in which our judgements about what is rational are formed within a framework provided by our emotional attitudes and experiences, the meaning of which is relative to the cultural context in which they occur. For Solomon, "To say that rationality is relative is only to say there are different ways of conceiving of and finding meaning in the world, different ways of structuring society and different ways of leading a happy meaningful life." (p. 619)

What, then, are we committed to regarding the norms by which we deem a statement true when we assert that statement? The answer, I believe, is that we implicitly claim neither more nor less than that these norms are at least as good as any other. Let me explain what I mean here by means of an example.

If I assert that human beings evolved from simpler organisms, I imply that this claim is objectively true. At the pre-philosophical level this means that the claim corresponds to the facts. If asked to cash out in philosophical terms the grounds on which I assert the claim to be true, I would say that it satisfies certain standards of rational justification.<sup>50</sup> This latter belief is also one I hold to be true in the same way and is a belief that could be mistaken. The notion of objective truth involved is still a relativistic notion since the beliefs in question are adjudged true only relative to the standpoint constituted by the standards of justification. But my attitude to these standards is not impartial or detached. I implicitly affirm them to *be at least as good as any other set of norms currently available*. I can admit that what I assert will be judged false according to the norms constitutive of some other standpoint: for instance, that of Christian fundamentalism. But it does not make sense for me to admit this and at the same concede that this other standpoint is superior to my own. I will, in fact, almost certainly maintain that epistemic norms and values I employ are better than most others. This normative judgement about the merits of different standpoints (and the norms constitutive of them) is one I also hold to be objectively true in the same sense as that given above, although any attempt to justify this claim will inevitably be self-serving and circular. Thus, I may argue that the

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<sup>50</sup> Once again, I am not ignoring the commonplace distinction between a statement's being true and it being one that we are justified in believing. At the level of everyday experience we all acknowledge the possibility that a belief could be rationally justified yet false, or true yet not one we would be justified in

fundamentalists' insistence that their beliefs be consistent with a literal reading of the bible is a mistake on the grounds that conformity with scripture is not a reliable or even appropriate criterion to use when trying to appraise our beliefs about natural phenomena. But this argument will clearly not impress someone already committed to the view that the literal truth of the bible is guaranteed by its divine authorship. In this case, I do not consider the fundamentalist's standpoint to be as worthy of respect as my own. But I do not have to insist that the standpoint I adopt is superior to all others, or that my assertions are true in the sense that they would be judged true from a uniquely privileged standpoint. All I need claim for my position to be rationally intelligible is that the standards and values I employ are at least as good as any other set of norms available to me. This position is, of course, quite compatible with the recognition that the norms I employ might be improved.

A useful exemplar of this attitude towards one's own assertions and the epistemic norms underlying them is provided by literary criticism. No sensible literary critic thinks that all interpretations of a text are equally valid. The practice of literary criticism (using the term "practice" in MacIntyre's sense) is only possible given that its practitioners recognize certain constraints--rules of the game, so to speak. For example, interpretations must be compatible with the text; they must be positively supported by textual or extra-textual considerations; they must not be hopelessly anachronistic. Obviously, though, such constraints, which are almost universally recognized, do not yield just one acceptable interpretation; many readings of a text can meet the minimal criteria of acceptability. However, within this range of minimally acceptable

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affirming. But as was argued earlier, there comes a point in the philosophical account of truth at which this distinction can no longer be maintained.

interpretations one can still view some as superior to others. Yet this clearly does not imply that there is a uniquely privileged interpretation, one that stands out as better than all others. And sensible literary critics, being open-minded, will acknowledge the merits of diverse readings of a text; they will not insist that their approach be preferred over all others.<sup>51</sup>

Of course, critics of relativism will undoubtedly be suspicious of the way I am using the word “good” when I say that we are only committed to the view that the norms we employ are at least as good as any others available. Good in whose eyes? is the obvious question. Isn’t this the point, they will say, where the relativist has to smuggle in a non-relative concept without which the attempt to persuade others of the rationality of any view can have no purchase. But the obvious question has an obvious answer. The norms in question are judged to be at least as good as any other according to the relativist’s own lights. To be sure, someone who shares none of my fundamental assumptions and values will be unimpressed by my arguments. Happily, however, almost all those who believe theoretical discussion to be worthwhile share enough common ground to make it worthwhile. The critics of relativism hold that this common ground provides some sort of metaphysical ground for rational discourse. The relativist view is that no ground other than common ground is necessary. Common ground is enough. And as J. L. Austin remarked, “Enough is enough, enough isn’t everything.”

The claim that my present standpoint is at least as good as any other available to me is, of course, a value judgement; but that is as it must be if we are to avoid the pitfall of trying to construe our commitment to the truth of what we assert in a way that fails to

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<sup>51</sup> In *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, MA, 1985) Alexander Nehamas explicates Nietzsche’s anti-dogmatic attitude to his own philosophical assertions along similar lines, emphasizing the similarities

recognize the normative element in this commitment. It is not as clear cut as the view that we are committed to believing in the superiority of the norms we employ over all others; but the price of that simplicity is a form of dogmatic prescriptivism which cannot plausibly be read into the structure of all discourse. Expressions like “as good as any other” and “worthy of respect” are admittedly not very precise, but I do not think the kind of commitment under consideration lends itself to a more exact description. This account of what we implicitly claim for the standpoint from which we offer and support our views may also seem rather tame; but I see no justification for making it stronger. For while there are undoubtedly those who believe either in the absolute superiority of their own present standpoint or in the idea of a uniquely privileged standpoint toward which we should work, I see no grounds for reading such beliefs into the universal form of all cognitive discourse.

## **Conclusion**

I have argued that when we make assertions in the course of engaging in rational discussion we implicitly claim that what we say is objectively true in the sense that it conforms to certain epistemic norms; and we also implicitly claim these norms are at least as good as any other set of norms. Since these claims are compatible with what I have called the doctrinal kernel of relativism, there is no reason to suppose that this kind of relativism is self-refuting. Of course, we may, if we wish, explicitly claim more than this for the epistemic norms we choose to employ. But what is at issue here is whether more of us is required by the very nature of rational discourse. Philosophers like Putnam and Habermas argue that it is. But their attempts to support this idea are open to serious

objections; and in defending it they run the risk of forcing on everyone who wishes to participate in such discourse a form of dogmatism that both conflicts with the way many people actually regard their own assertions and runs contrary to the spirit of tolerance informing their own philosophies.

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