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## WHAT'S WRONG WITH RELATIVISM?

The title of this paper sounds — and is also meant to be — provocative. There is something wrong with relativism! It is not easy, however, to give a precise formulation of this thesis. Therefore, in the course of my argument, I have to qualify the scope and content of my claim. Starting from morality, where I find a moderate relativist position plausible, I proceed to discuss the poverty of strong forms of cognitive relativism.

### 225 Varieties of Relativism

Relativism is in fact a bundle of different doctrines. Their interrelations depend on philosophical background assumptions. Some forms of relativism may be right, some wrong.<sup>1</sup>

The two main types of relativism are (in a broad sense) *cognitive* and *moral*. Here is a classified list of some “cognitive” categories which might be taken to be “relative” in some respect:

#### Ontological

- objects
- facts
- world

- reality
- semantical
- truth
- meaning
- epistemological
- perception
- belief
- rationality.

A corresponding list of “moral” categories may include at least

- customs
- values
- ethics
- law
- politics
- religion.

On the other hand, there is a great variety of factors which some category might be taken to be *relative to*:

- persons
- groups
- cultures
- environments
- languages
- conceptual frameworks
- theories
- paradigms

- points of view
- forms of life
- gender
- social class
- social practices
- social interests
- values.

Relativity to individual persons has been called “protogoreanism”; relativity to cultures is “cultural relativism”; relativity to languages or conceptual/theoretical frameworks is usually called “conceptual relativism”, “framework relativism”, or “incommensurabilism”; relativity to viewpoints is “perspectivism”; and relativity to social factors is “social relativism”.

If a relativist thesis claims that ‘x is relative to y’, we have proposed fifteen choices for both x and y. Without any attempt at being complete in our classification, we have thus found already  $15 \times 15 = 225$  types of relativism. Many of them are familiar: reality and truth are relative to persons (Schiller’s “humanism”), facts are relative to languages (Putnam’s “internal realism”), perceptions are relative to theories (“theory-ladenness of observations”), meanings are relative to conceptual frameworks (“meaning variance”), beliefs are relative to gender (a version of feminism), ethics is relative to social class (Marxism), values and rationality are relative to cultures, etc.

### Moral Relativity vs. Relativism

Let us start our discussion in the domain of morality, where I think a plausible defense of a modest form of relativism can be given. This provides a useful contrast to cases where I am inclined to reject relativism. It also allows us to sharpen our notion of relativism.

Human beings have supported, at different times and places, different customs, moral codes, legal orders, political systems, and religious doctrines. Diversity and variation is a basic *fact* about human culture and social life. In particular, it was the fact of the

*relativity of morality* that enlightened the pioneers of social anthropology, such as Edward Westermarck, who started to study “the origin and development of moral ideas”.<sup>2</sup>

The relativity or diversity of morality is thus a fact that is open to empirical investigation — both from historical and contemporary perspectives. It is also the task of science to give an *explanation* of this fact. Such explanations usually have the form of statistical arguments, which link the moral views M supported by a person, group, or culture x with some conditions C about the needs, interests, character, family background, education, or social position of.<sup>3</sup> The diversity of moral ideas is thus explained by variations of biological, psychological, or social factors.<sup>4</sup>

If relativity is a fact which can be socially explained, are we thereby committed to *moral relativism*?<sup>5</sup> It is important to understand why the answer to this question is no.

Despite the relativity of moral views, a *moral realist* may still claim that moral values exist in some objective sense. A Platonist version of realism locates values in the transcendent realm of ideas; an immanent realist treats them as non-natural properties of human acts; “naturalists” reduce morality to some natural properties definable in descriptive (physical or mental) vocabulary. It would follow from realism that absolute moral judgments of the form

- a* is good
- (1) *a* is right
- a* is holy

have truth values (when *a* is some object, act, or state of affairs). Hence, if two systems of moral views contradict each other, both of them cannot be right.

Moral realism is often combined with epistemic absolutism, which claims that one of the moral systems can be known to be true, and the others are known to be mistaken. But, to account for the fact of diversity, a moral realist may also be a fallibilist, who thinks that the choice of the right moral ideas always remains uncertain for us.<sup>6</sup>

A particularly interesting form of absolut-

ism accepts that all moral views are socially determined, but claims that one of the perspectives is the right one. The strategy of some Marxist philosophers to overcome ethical relativity was to urge that the morality of the “most progressive class” (i.e., the working class) is the right one, since it is in the direction of the presumed objective laws of history.<sup>7</sup> This view may be regarded as a secular version of the religious doctrine that an act is good if it works in the direction of God's will.

Thus, to defend relativism, it is not sufficient to appeal to the fact of moral diversity within human cultures. Relativism is not a factual claim about the historical evolution and diffusion of moral views, but a philosophical thesis about their truth and justification.

### Against Moral Absolutism

In attacking moral realism, a relativist has to dissociate his position also from the stronger rebuttals of moral absolutism: moral *nihilism*, which denies the existence of moral values, and moral *scepticism*, which denies all knowledge about moral values.

Nihilism and scepticism are negative doctrines. Relativism is, instead, a positive thesis, which accepts that moral views may be true and justified in some *relativized* sense.<sup>8</sup>

But how could the thesis of relativism be formulated? Let us approach this problem by starting from the philosophical problems concerning moral realism.

Different versions of moral realism either rely on questionable metaphysical assumptions (such as Platonic ideas, God's will, or the telos of history) or commit what G.E. Moore called the naturalist fallacy.<sup>9</sup> In brief, moral realism is wrong, since there simply is no independently existing “moral reality” to which moral judgments could be in the relation of correspondence. Hence, there are no objective grounds for thinking that absolute moral judgments of the form (1) have truth values.<sup>10</sup>

Moral realism fails to appreciate the fact that morality is man-made — a historically

developing social construction. According to what may aptly be called *moral constructivism*, moral values as social artefacts belong to Popper's World 3.<sup>11</sup> This also helps us understand why a moral system has binding or coercive force (in Durkheim's sense) within the community where it has been constituted and accepted.

If moral facts are part of the “fabric” of World 3, it is possible to make true or false statements about morality relative to some socially constructed system of moral ideas. Instead of absolute statements (1), we have *relativized* statements of the form

- In system S, a is good
- (2) In system S, a is right
- In system S, a is holy,

where S is identified by its content or by its acceptance in some community. For example,

In Christian ethics, respect for your parents is good.

(3) In the moral code accepted in Finland, stealing is wrong.

In the Islamic religion, Mecca is a holy city.

Statements of the form (3) have truth values, and can be the results of descriptive and interpretative social and cultural sciences.<sup>12</sup>

The relativization of value statements (2) agrees with our earlier remarks on the fact of moral relativity. There are, and have been, moral views such that

- In system S<sub>1</sub>, a is good
- (4)
- In system S<sub>2</sub>, a is bad.

Another way of expressing this relativity is to use predicates of *relative goodness*:

- a is good-for-x
- (5)
- a is right-for-x,

where x is a member of a community supporting a moral system S.<sup>13</sup> For example,

- Respect for parents is good-for-Christians
- (6)
- Stealing is legally-forbidden-for-the-Finns

are just other ways of formulating the claims (3).

Relativism as a philosophical thesis has to add something to the fact of relativity. I shall call *modest relativism* the claim that relativization is an essential or uneliminable aspect of moral judgments: (4) and (5) cannot be reformulated without reference to system S or auditory x.

Modest relativism does not entail *radical relativism* which claims that all moral systems are equally good or equally well justified. This is a highly questionable doctrine for several reasons. Attempts at formulating it usually stumble with the problem of incoherence: theses like "it is a basic human right that everyone may decide his or her own morality" or "as rights are always relative to a society it is wrong for people in one society to interfere with the values of another society" are internally inconsistent.<sup>14</sup>

Unlike radical relativism, modest relativism is compatible with the idea of moral progress. Moral systems can be evaluated and compared in terms of higher-order principles (such as consistency and universalizability) which are explicated in philosophical ethics. Personal and collective experiences, and critical conversation of the humanity, have taught us to give better and better articulations of the conditions of good human life. These lessons are codified in such agreements as the Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations.<sup>15</sup>

The idea that moral knowledge can be improved by the critical discussion of the free citizens of democratic nations has led to the suggestion that moral *objectivism* could be defended without presupposing moral realism. Thus, Habermas (1983) defines the truth (or rightness) of normative statements by the ideal consensus reached in a discourse free from domination and undemocratic asymmetries. Putnam (1990) criticizes moral relativism by arguing that the basic insights of American pragmatism, viz. the consensus theory of truth and fallibilism, apply equally well to science and ethics.

It seems to me, however, that this line of argument again leads only to relativized mor-

al judgments, conditional on some more basic value assumptions. In particular, the discourse ethics of Habermas presupposes the principles of equality and democracy — and thus it at best gives relative statements of the form (2), where the system S is defined to be the basic moral beliefs of the ideal democratic community.

Against the consensus theory of moral truth, it is also possible to raise Quine's famous queries about Peirce: why should we think that moral beliefs converge to some ideal limit, and why should such a limit be unique?

It thus seems clear that the appeal to moral objectivity does not overcome modest relativism — even though it helps in refuting radical relativism. The fundamental reason for this conclusion is the failure of moral realism: as morality is a social construction, progressively constituted by the consensus of the humanity, there is no independent or "external" criterion for saying that the consensus, reached actually in a finite time or ideally in the limit, is the "true" or "right" one.

### Lessons for Cognitive Relativism

What lessons for cognitive relativism can we derive from our discussion of moral relativism?

The first thing to observe is that cognitive relativism cannot be established merely by appealing to well-known facts about the *relativity* of human beliefs. Individual and cultural variety of beliefs is a constant feature of our history: men have held conflicting belief systems, such that

- According to belief system  $B_1$ , it is the case that p  
 (7)  
 According to belief system  $B_2$ , it is the case that —p.

But this only amounts to the existence of agents  $x_1$  and  $x_2$  such that

- $x_1$  believes that  $p$   
 (8)  
 $x_2$  believes that  $\neg p$ .

Such doxastic diversity does not imply any radical form of relativism, which would claim that all belief systems are equally good.<sup>16</sup>

Cognitive disagreement is by no means unusual within science: the history of science shows that even the most warranted beliefs have varied at different times. This can be rationally explained by the fact that different scientific communities have adopted different methodological practices and standards.<sup>17</sup> Thus not only beliefs (cf. (7)), but also assertions (i.e., what are taken to be justified beliefs) are relative:

- According to standards of justification  $J_1$ ,  
 it is assertable that  $p$   
 (9)  
 According to standards of justification  $J_2$ ,  
 it is assertable that  $\neg p$ .

But even this does not imply radical relativism, since it is possible to rationally and critically evaluate standards of justification within science, epistemology, and the philosophy of science.<sup>18</sup>

The second point is that even the explanation of doxastic diversity fails to establish relativism. The so-called “strong” and “empirical” programmes of the sociology of knowledge have attempted to show by case studies that the beliefs of scientists can be explained in terms of social factors.<sup>19</sup> But an argument that social conditions  $C$  tend to produce beliefs  $B$  leaves open the decisive questions whether the beliefs  $B$  were justified and true.

Similarly, the programme of social epistemology — which analyzes the sensitivity of knowledge production to the social structures within the scientific community and society at large — may give results of type (9), but does not exclude the possibility of the epistemic evaluation of standards  $J$ .<sup>20</sup>

There is a stronger form of social externalism which starts from the idea that theory choice in science is always “underdetermined” by evidence or “rational” factors, and

concludes that the remaining gap has to be filled by social factors. In the limit, represented by Collins (1981), the influence of nature in the formation of scientific knowledge is taken to be “small or non-existent”. But this position should not be called relativism any more, since it denies the concept of cognitive justification — and therefore collapses into cognitive *scepticism*.

Thirdly, as Plato already observed, radical forms of cognitive relativism face the serious problem of incoherence.<sup>21</sup> Suppose a relativist makes the claim

(R) All beliefs are relative.

Then is R itself a relative or absolute claim? In the former case, we start an infinite regress; in the latter case, relativism is given up.

Fourthly, attempts to formulate cognitive relativism by means of the concept of *relative truth* do not look promising.<sup>22</sup> The claim

(10)  $p$  is true-for- $x$

should mean something more than

(11)  $x$  believes that  $p$ ,

for otherwise we come back to the “innocent” relativity of beliefs (8). Moreover, the analysis of (10) is question begging, if it relies on the concept of absolute truth.<sup>23</sup>

### Against Modest Cognitive Relativism

In the case of morality, we defended a modest form of relativism: value statements are incomplete unless they contain a reference to a system of moral ideas. A similar modest relativism applies to *assertions*: a claim that a belief is justified is always relative to some standards of justification (cf. (9)). Moreover, we have no good grounds for claiming that we already possess some ideal or perfect system of standards. This does not lead to radical relativism, however, since scientific methods and methodologies can be evaluated by their epistemological soundness and by the success of the research programmes based upon them — and thereby the standards of scientific justification have in fact improved with the progress of science.

Modest relativism of assertions does not

imply a corresponding relativism about *truth* and *reality*. A *scientific realist* accepts the ontological thesis that nature is prior and independent of our thinking or consciousness. On this basis, it is possible to formulate a correspondence theory of truth, where truth is a relation between a statement and reality — and this relation holds independently of human beliefs. This means that claims of the form (7) can be de-relativized (unlike claims of type (2)):

(12) It is the case that p,

or simply

(13) p,

is a statement which has a truth value independently of any relativization to belief systems.<sup>24</sup> It also follows that the concept of scientific *progress* can be defined in a "realist" and non-relative way as approach towards the truth.<sup>25</sup>

These conclusions of scientific realism have been challenged by the "social constructivists", who claim that reality itself is a social construction, i.e., theoretical entities are created in the course of inquiry through the negotiation and consensus of local laboratory communities.<sup>26</sup> Such constructivism would lead at least to modest relativism, since it makes nature a World 3 entity. I have elsewhere argued against this view.<sup>27</sup> As we have seen above, social constructivism is a plausible account for the creation of moral facts. But the thesis that theoretical entities (electrons, quarks, hormones, etc.) are man-made seems to confuse the construction of entities with the invention and acceptance of hypothetical theories about nature.

Another trend in science studies is to assume anti-realism about nature and realism about society.<sup>28</sup> I find it extremely implausible to think that our beliefs about nature would be more robust or real than nature itself — to me it sounds like an echo of Hegelian idealism.

Anti-realism about nature is sometimes adopted as a methodological, rather than ontological, principle: in studying scientific beliefs, you should bracket nature and its possible influence, and concentrate on the social determinants of belief.<sup>29</sup> This principle

would deprive us from the most important idea of current causal theories of knowledge: the justification of a belief crucially depends on our causal interaction with the object of the belief.<sup>30</sup> For example, in evaluating the controversy between Galileo and the astronomers of the Church, it is of utmost importance to know whether Galileo's telescope allowed him to be in causal interaction with Jupiter's moons. A methodology which brackets this question can only lead to badly misleading historiography of science.

## Conclusion

Modest cognitive realism is defensible for assertions or claims about justified beliefs, but wrong for the concepts of truth and reality. Hence, relativism gives no serious challenge to scientific realism.

For strong forms of cognitive relativism, no one seems to have a coherent formulation. So what is wrong with radical relativism is that it fails to exist. Or, if you like, perhaps we can say that non-existence is the best virtue of radical relativism.

## NOTES

1. For good discussion of relativism, see Meiland and Krausz (1982), Hollis and Lukes (1982), Margolis (1986), Haack (1987), Siegel (1987), and Laudan (1990). See also Niiniluoto (1991).
2. See Stroup (1982).
3. Cf. Brandt (1959), Chs. 5—6.
4. This social determination need not imply social determinism: a tendency of conditions C to bring about views M leaves room for personal judgments, arguments, and decisions. A socially embodied tradition is not always reproduced and accepted, but sometimes given up individually and collectively.
5. For discussions of moral relativism, see Brandt (1959), Mackie (1977), Harman (1977), Williams (1985).
6. Cf. Mackie (1977), p. 36.
7. See Redlow et al. (1971).
8. See Meiland and Krausz (1982), p. 2.
9. See Moore (1929).
10. The situation is the same in religion, I believe. Gods do not exist, but were created by men as idealized pictures of themselves. Therefore — excluding descriptive statements about the history, psychology, and sociology of religion — genuinely religious judgments about Gods and their attributes are not true.

11. See Niiniluoto (1984), Ch. 9; (1985). Cf. Harman (1977).
12. In the philosophy of law, statements of the type (2) are usually called norm propositions. For the applicability of the correspondence theory of truth to norm propositions, see Niiniluoto (1985).
13. Statements of the form (5) can also be understood as true-or-false assertions about instrumental values: *a* is good-for-*x* if *a* satisfies the needs of *x* or *a* is an effective means for the purpose *x* (e.g., Milk is good-for-the-babies, Tractors are good-for-farming). Some "naturalized" theories attempt to reduce all value statements to instrumental values, and thereby accept nihilism about intrinsic values.
14. See Bernard Williams in Meiland and Krausz (1982), p. 171.
15. Social facts as results of agreement are discussed by Gilbert (1989).
16. See Feyerabend (1987), p. 76. Cf. Haack (1987).
17. This leads to what Doppelt (1983) calls "moderate relativism of rationality". Cf. Niiniluoto (1991).
18. Cf. Laudan's (1984) "reticulation" model for the mutual evaluation of theories, methods, and values in science. Goldman (1983) shows how scientific standards can be appraised by their ability to produce true results.
19. See Bloor (1976) and Collins (1981).
20. See Fuller (1988).
21. See Siegel (1987). However, see Kusch (1990) for interesting arguments against Siegel. 22. See Swoyer (1982).
23. Similar problems arise with perspectivism, which makes truth relative to viewpoints. The relativization of statements of the form 'It is the case that *p* from viewpoint *v*' can be avoided by the reformulation 'The world is such that it appears-*p*-from-viewpoint-*v*'. Cf. Niiniluoto (1991).
24. See Niiniluoto (1984, 1991) for attempts to argue why the relativity of truth to languages is compatible with scientific realism, and how a realist can reply to the problem of incommensurability.
25. For a more precise formulation, see Niiniluoto (1984, 1991).
26. See Latour and Woolgar (1979).
27. See Niiniluoto (1991).
28. See Fuller (1989), p. 3.
29. This seems to be the view of Collins.
30. See Goldman (1986).

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