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## RELATIVISM AND CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

My starting point will be what I take to be a fairly common tenet in anthropological research and method, the slogan that "all cultures have a right to be understood according to their own premises." I do not intend to offer any criticism of this slogan or of anthropological research procedures in general. There is indeed a sound basis for proceeding according to this slogan, my main object of critique will be a certain understanding or interpretation of it: the idea that respect for and tolerance towards other cultures or indeed individuals with other opinions and beliefs can only be based on a thoroughgoing cultural relativism. I shall try to show that on the contrary relativism, even if it is not necessarily inconsistent, will lead to a breakdown in cross-cultural communication. So my main object is to argue a thesis which has become widespread among critics of relativism: relativists are flying a false flag, their stand-point is not only fallacious but detrimental to unhindered communication and free dialogue. If I stalk any prey in particular, it is other philosophers, anthropologists will come up for criticism only incidentally,

as far as they appeal to relativism as a philosophical creed.

I shall start out with an examination of the topic of relativism with regard to descriptive sentences (cognitive relativism) and then move on to add a few comments on relativism with regard to normative sentences (moral relativism). I find this division of the main subject necessary, since these two cases as I shall argue are by no means parallel and no rejection of cognitive relativism entails any definite stand-point towards moral relativism. But first a brief commentary on anthropological practice.

### **Power and Understanding**

Anthropologists practice, and rightly so, a professional restraint, not to say abstinence towards any kind of criticism of their objects, up to now mainly non-western cultures.

My point is not to criticise such restraint, but to deny that the necessity to practice it is grounded in any fundamental structure concerning the possibilities of dialogue. More

precisely it should not be grounded in any acceptance of philosophical or philosophically defended cultural relativism.

As Jarvie (1975) has pointed out, cultural relativism was a philosophical theory long before anthropology arose as an academic discipline (it does of course stretch back to the Sophists). The very shock of cultural diversity, experienced again and again through the ages, may seem sufficient to explain any tendency to deny the existence of universal cognitive or moral standards. But the view that relativism is the stronghold of liberalism and of anti-anthropocentrism seems a point of view closely related to modern anthropology. Jarvie quotes a telling example of this tendency, three principles submitted by the American Anthropological Association to the UN Commission of Human Rights. Within the framework of stipulating some overriding human rights it is here argued not only that respect for individuals depends on respect for their cultures and that cultures cannot be "qualitatively evaluated" but also that:

"Standards and values are relative to the culture from which they derive so that any attempt to formulate postulates that grow out of the beliefs or moral codes of one culture only to that extent detract from the applicability of any Declaration of Human Rights to mankind as a whole." (Quoted by Jarvie, 1975:352)

This contradiction between a liberalism based on universal rights and one based on a thoroughgoing cultural relativism can of course only be solved by recourse to some principles which happen to be shared by all cultures, an approach which, if successful, would rob cultural relativism of its very *raison d'être*.

If my arguments in the next section are successful, the attempt to introduce cultural relativism as the philosophical foundation for dialogue and tolerance are self-defeating. One may also point out that one of the most profound models of dialogue in the history of philosophy, the Platonic one, certainly implies a "no holds barred" inquiry into the most fundamental presuppositions of the participants. (But this may of course be considered

only one more example of the ethnocentrism of the philosophical tradition.)

The rationale for professional restraint must therefore be sought not in any presupposed structural feature of dialogue and communication, but in the historical situation of anthropology.

One may point to the ambivalent function of anthropology in the history of the meeting of modern and pre-modern civilisations. It has at the same time functioned as a storehouse for theories which legitimated control and oppression, and as a means of debunking the same theories. To put the same point on a more abstract level, anthropology exists in a field dominated by a fundamental asymmetry. We know something about them they do not know about us. Even if pre-modern societies always have mobilised their resources to cope with the oppression of westernised cultures and societies, there is no such thing as pre-modern science, and thus no pre-modern science of us (the knowledge they may have about us is not organised in the same way as our knowledge about them).

This is of course not to be taken as any stricture upon the research activity of individual anthropologists. And of course many cultures today live in a double world of modernity and pre-modernity and learn to cope (hopefully also with the help of anthropologists) in modern ways with their conflict with the modern societies. But without accepting Foucault's all-out condemnation of knowledge as more or less disguised and suppressed expressions of power and control, one may still suggest that anthropology operates in a field where relations of knowledge imply relations of power, quite independent of any individual inspirations or interests of the individual in the field.

It is this fundamental asymmetry between subject and object in the research process which necessitates the professional restraint towards criticism of other cultures, a necessity which I think, is never felt as obligatory in the same way by sociologists and social philosophers trying to cope with our own society. Here we are among our own, we feel

entitled to give them (that is, ourselves) merry hell.

So we should keep to Gellner's (1974) distinction, which I now adopt entirely for my own purposes, between social and epistemological tolerance (the opposite of which is of course not intolerance but critique). These are in no ways parallel phenomena. Social tolerance does not entail relativist epistemological tolerance, as I shall go on to argue. But even the practice of critique and unrestricted dialogue has social presuppositions and just these conditions, and to some extent of course the traditional topics of critical debates are exactly what we find wanting in the asymmetrical relations between modern and pre-modern and not-yet modern societies.

It is the nature of these relations at this precise point of world history which necessitates not relativism but a certain orchestration of these relations. Come what Bakhtin dubbed "The World Symposion" and such restrictions may be dropped.

### **Cognitive Relativism**

In this section I shall consider the case of cognitive relativism. The thesis I shall defend is that even if a full-fledged cognitive relativism, as we find it in the so-called "strong thesis" in the sociology of knowledge, is not strictly speaking inconsistent, it is incompatible with the ideas of dialogue and understanding.

First I should like to point out that of course not all kinds of relativism are objectionable. Cross-cultural, and even intra-cultural (with respect to class, gender or even generations) divergencies on a probably infinite number of levels and with respect to an infinite amount of topics are well documented and create no philosophical problems. Perhaps only relativism with regard to those topics the theoretical relativist clings to, should be considered in any way problematic from a philosophical point of view. The appreciation of cheese may presuppose a certain upbringing. The claim not to like any cheese what-

soever may be taken to indicate some form of social extravagance, but certainly raises no epistemological problems.

In their Introduction Hollis and Lukes (1982: 9) focus on relativism of truth as the "crucial further step" (further than perceptual relativism) towards a total relativism, the last being relativism of reasons. I find it difficult to accept the succession of the last two steps in this ladder. Certainly two communities may have divergent criteria for evaluating reasons for accepting a belief, for example the preciseness of the quantification of the data involved, but still have the same criteria for the truth of the belief. But I find it correct that relativism of truth is one step further than perceptual relativism, even if one may find that such relativism per se should put an end to all further evaluation and comparison of belief. But this depends entirely upon what is taken to constitute such a relativism. Obviously mere theory-dependence is not enough. On the other hand, if perceptual relativism is taken to mean that two cultures, or whatever it may be, do not organize objects in three-dimensional space in the same way, the situation seems rather opaque. If "we" have no way of understanding "their" way of referring to objects we could hardly make sense of their language. This probably means we could not identify it as a language, and then there would be nothing to be relativist about. The relativist could not claim to know (even in a relativist way) that we were faced with a case of perceptual relativism.

So I shall concentrate my discussion on the problem of relativism of truth. The concept of relativism involves the concept of a certain relation, relative to . Again the right-hand place in this relation may be filled with diverse entities without the emergence of any pernicious relativism. In the anthropological as well as in the philosophical literature one will mainly find references to relativity to cultures and to languages. I shall follow this usage, but I should like to point out that I do not want to argue the identity of culture and language, or to make any implications whatsoever concerning their relationship.

If we agree upon truth as relative to culture or language as our starting point, it is tempting to suggest two different lines of argument, one anthropological and one more strictly philosophical, which might lead to a final refutation of relativism.

First one may claim that the very idea of seeing the relationship between modern and pre-modern societies, that is societies with and without science, as a relationship between competing frames of reference to evaluate truth claims, is fundamentally mistaken. The idea of a socialized procedure for the systematic corroboration of such claims, what we know as science, is, one might argue, a fundamentally modern idea. One may further claim that the emergence of such a framework is as much a result of historical contingency as is the emergence of the modern market economy, but at the same time that the truth claims developed inside this peculiar institution science may have universal validity. To consider magic and science as rivals on the same field, different kinds of rationality employed in evaluating truth-claims, as modern relativists do, is thus in itself the projection of a modern rationality upon the pre-modern societies. It is the relativist who plays the role of the ethnocentrist. In making this distinction between pre-modern and modern cultures we do not evaluate types of culture, no culture is more true than any other, this would be a meaningless distinction. We only point to the institution "science" as a characteristic mark of the latter type of society. This is the way taken by Habermas in his discussion of the subject (cf. Habermas, 1981: vol I chap 1,2. esp. 92). One may link Habermas' analysis, even if I find his concept of rationality superior, to the one expounded by Robin Horton who argues that pre-scientific and scientific mentalities and cultures are but two different versions of the same rationality, produced by different social settings (cf. Horton, 1970 and Horton, 1982).

Secondly one may follow Davidson's critique of the fundamental presupposition of relativism as a philosophical theory of knowledge, i. e. that it makes sense at all to speak

of a number of presumably incompatible standard which truth claims are relative to. This of course robs the debate of any subject matter what so ever (Davidson, 1974)

Davidson's arguments may be found rather remote and abstract by working anthropologists and historians of science, the tribes finding themselves drawn to relativism. I find Habermas' and Horton's line of argument promising, but they may of course be considered more a kind of simple denial than a counter-argument to relativism. I shall therefore, in spite of Davidson, go on to play the game as it is usually done in these debates and launch what I hope is a more immanent critical argument to relativism, which also purports to rob it of its supposed liberal and pluralist features.

I shall do this by first considering the anti-relativism of Hollis, and then the rather reluctant defense of relativism offered by Hesse before I reach my own main argument.

In his book *Models of Man* Hollis (1977: 156) construes a debate between three (obviously British) sociologists called Hook, Line and Sinker. Hook's field is the sociology of sociology, Line is a sociologist who believes that free and rational agents form the basis of society and thus of sociology, Sinker is a structural functionalist who believes in causal explanations of all actions and beliefs. Hook who first agrees with Sinker, starts out trying to give a structural, causal explanation of the beliefs of Line. Hollis' point is that Hook in giving a structuralist explanation of Line's belief in the existence of rational agents, necessarily must contradict these very beliefs. Line and Sinker cannot both be right. So, if Hook moves on to vindicate Sinker's beliefs in causal-structural explanations of all beliefs, he must necessarily give good reasons for holding them. Otherwise he could not claim that Line was simply wrong in disbelieving such explanations. But in order to say that Line was simply wrong, he had to claim that Sinker was simply right, and not so only due to some procedures accepted by the Sociologists' Guild.

If we adapt this discussion to the topic of

relativism the point is of course that relativists cannot consistently claim that their position is true. But there is something fishy in Hollis' argument. He obviously presupposes a dichotomy between the languages of causal explanations and languages which employ the predicates "true" and "false" and "right" and "wrong". Or in other words, there is no place for the word "true" in relativism. So to a relativist the words "relativism is true" must be contradictory. But this is to presuppose that the predicate "true" can only be understood in the absolute, non-relative sense, whereas the relativist still has the option of using the predicate "true" in the sense of "true" relative to....".

This is exactly the thesis the proponents of the strong thesis, Barry Barnes and David Bloor will try to argue:

"The relativist like everyone else, is under the necessity to sort out beliefs, accepting some and rejecting others. He will naturally have preferences and these will typically coincide with those of others in his locality. The words "true" and "false" provide the idiom in which these evaluations are expressed, and the words "rational" and "irrational" will have the same function

The crucial point is that the relativist accepts that his own preferences are as context-bound as those of tribes T1 and T2. Similarly he accepts that none of the justifications of his preferences can be formulated in absolute or context-independent terms." (Barnes and Bloor, 1982: 27.)

The relativist's language includes the same predicates as the non-relativists, with the admonition that they should be understood in the way indicated above. As Mary Hesse points out in connection with Barnes' and Bloor's strong thesis this procedure is self-referential but at least formally consistent. In connection with a version of Hollis' argument, she argues:

This easy self-refutation is fallacious, for it depends on an equivocation in the cognitive terminology for "knowledge", "truth", and "grounds". If a redefinition of cognitive terminology as relative to a local culture is presupposed in asserting P, Then P must also

be judged according to this redefinition. That is, it is fallacious to ask for "grounds" for P in some absolute sense: If P is asserted, it is asserted relative to the truth criteria of a local culture, and if that culture is one in which the strong thesis is accepted, then P is true relative to that culture. This shift is the essence of the strong thesis: knowledge is now taken to be what is accepted as such in our culture." (Hesse, 1980 :42)

Now Hesse sees that there is no argument to establish the strong thesis, instead she recommends to treat it as a hypothesis and to see

"whether its consequences are consistent with what we wish to affirm about knowledge, and whether it does not in the end provide a more adequate and plausible account than the various rationalist procedures we have found questionable. (l.c.)

She goes on to argue that if we stumbled upon another group whose criteria seemed to be like ours this would be no argument for any "absolute" criteria, only that some criteria are relative to two cultures, not to one. I should like to claim that if our aim is the understanding of and if possible rational debate with other cultures or schools of thought, this is not the case.

Suppose we stumbled upon a belief system, Sa, which has other criteria of truth than the relativist system Sr and consider them absolute. The relativist is to make a report in her own language of the criteria of truth in the other system. She is perfectly able to distinguish between true and false reports of the opinions concerning criteria of truth in the other language, Sa, relative of course to her own language, Sr. So the sentence "It is true that p" uttered in Sa (and judged there to be true according to what the speakers of Sa take to be absolutist criteria) must be rendered as: "It is true that p" is true in Sa" in Sr, since in Sr any reports of truth claims are to be relativised to a language. Now the relativist will claim that this is a true report (a correct translation of Sa into Sr) of what was said in Sa. This must then if the relativist is to be consistent, come out in Sr as: "It is true that p" is true in Sa" is true in Sr".

But obviously this is hardly to report what the other part said, it is a report about them transformed according to the strait-jacket made necessary to render relativism formally consistent.

Let us consider a similar example. Let C1 be a scientific culture adhering to a systematic relativism and C2 a culture which claims that sentences may at least be possible candidates for the title of universally valid propositions. The divergent standpoints and the translation of the stand-point of C2 into C1'sese must then be rendered in the following way:

- 1) (C1) All truths are relative to one culture.
- 2) (C1) "All truths are relative to one culture" is true in C1
- 3) (C2) There are universal truths.
- 4) (C1) "There are universal truths" are true in C2.

which entails

- 5) (C1) "There are universal truths" is true in C2" is true in C1.

So the relativists have bought their consistency dearly, perhaps excessively so. They have rendered themselves unable to report what other parts in the discussion want to say. For, in the example above the representative of C2 of course didn't want to utter 5) but 3) The representatives of C2 may turn out to be wrong in holding this theory of truth. But that is not the point. It is that the relativists in order to remain consistent, have to systematically render all positions, their own and those of their opponents, in such a way that a debate between two independently stated opinions becomes impossible.

Grammatically speaking, the reports of a relativist and a rationalist on a third culture may seem identical. But, to use the terminology of speech-act theory, they carry out tasks which are pragmatically quite different. The rationalist's report places the opinion of the third culture at least virtually within the realm of public debate. The relativist's report is really only a claim to have achieved a correct translation.

And to be forced into the position of having to reformulate reports of what individu-

als in other cultures mean as reports relative to one's own culture, is hardly a way to further cross-cultural communication and understanding. So either the relativists must admit that the rider "relative to..." means nothing, or admit to systematically deforming the debate. (I suspect that they tacitly presuppose the first.)

If we restrict the debate on relativism to the debate between scientific cultures, I believe that my argument is of practical importance. As mentioned, I find the assimilation of the pre-modern — modernity gap to this debate somewhat forced. But if we choose to see the situation this way, as the relativists do, the consequences will be as indicated.

If I may venture to air some forebodings in connection with my own argument, I hope that I have not given the impression of considering factual consensus or agreement the *sine qua non* of debate. My objection to relativism is not that it hinders agreement but that it hinders debate, let the results be what they may. To argue against relativism does not imply that one may not look with great equanimity upon perennial dispute — and still scratch where it does itch.

### Moral Relativism

Moral relativism is perhaps the main source of cultural relativism. Even in this field I shall stick to my main strategy: there is a professional or indeed universal human duty to abstain from unnecessary judgements on other peoples' ethos. This is not to be taken as a stricture upon the contemporary attempts by Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas to develop a universalist philosophy of morals in the tradition of Kant. It is only a warning against any politically naive and moralistically short-sighted application of such a philosophy.

And even in this context reticence should not be defended on the basis of a philosophical kind of moral relativism. But the two cases of cognitive and moral relativism are not

parallel. I see more merit in the case of moral than in the case of cognitive relativism, or let me rather put it this way: historical evolution, the appearance and disappearance of cultures, peoples and nations have tended to create a vast reservoir of topics which are really morally speaking adiaphora. They have ceased to exist as problems, and here I should tend to accept to add for us. (I think this observation is dovetailing well with my reluctance to regard the pre-modern — modernity gap as a contrast between divergent styles of rationality.)

So my starting point will be one of the more prominent adversaries of a neo-Kantian ethics, Bernard Williams. In his paper “The Truth in Relativism” (1981: 132—143) he discusses the conditions for moral relativism to emerge as a problem at all.

There must be two systems, S1 and S2, which are related to each other in such a way as to be comparable, but at the same time give fairly clear cut yes/no answers to questions related to norms and conduct. There has to be what Williams calls “a locus of exclusivity” (135). The question of identifying the same ethical problem or even the same kind of action is of course a tricky one, involving the theory-ladenness of observation reports of conduct in different languages. But all we really need here is to notice that the two systems give such answers to question of conduct that there can be no life-style common to both systems. Bigamy in one system is not the same phenomenon as a polygamous marriage in another, the first system forbids another custom than the one permitted by the second system, but one can hardly live out a style of life according to both systems at the same time. In such situations we have a “system based conflict”(137).

Now the encounters between two such systems (if they do encounter each other at all, this is of course a contingent matter of world history) can be either real or notional confrontations (138). In the first case one system is a real option for one or more members of the other. There is a question of “going over”. In the case of notional confronta-

tions the one system does not constitute a real options in relation to the other. The notion of a real option is, as Williams points out, necessarily rather vague. It has to be a “social notion”. For a system to be a real option to a group it must be possible 1) to live according to this system without going mad or nearly mad and thus 2) to consider the transition to the other system in the light of a rational comparison. This of course makes the reality of an option a matter of degree.

The bearing of all this on the matter of moral relativism may by now seem fairly obvious. Moral relativism is the correct attitude to purely notional system confrontations, but inapplicable to real ones. Or rather, when we consider an option a real one, we have already rejected relativism.

“Relativism, with regard to a certain type of S, is the view that for one whose S stands in a purely notional confrontation with with such an S, questions of appraisals of it, do not genuinely arise. This form of relativism unlike most others, is coherent” (Williams 1981: 142).

Since we are able to consider another form of life superior to our own and at least consider a conversion, we are obviously able to make a comparison between them, which is not relative to our own original system. But as Williams also points out if may be possible, or it may have been possible for others to consider systems we consider as non-real options, as real or even live within them in the first place. So we are left neither with relativism nor with a perennial model for the right life which can be applied in all situations.

To flesh out Williams’ treatment a little I should like to point to the fact that the motives for a conversion may spring from fundamental moral dilemmas inherent in our own system. (Williams does perhaps tend to place unnecessary stress upon the the idea of the inner coherence of systems of ethical belief). The fact that we often treat our profound dilemmas in exactly this way is to me a clear indication that relativism is not our natural form of moral discourse.

Another source of moral dilemmas is the question of what constitutes a real option. The problem is not primarily that this is a question of degree even to persons within the same S, nor that real options lose this status. It is rather that what no one at a certain point of time would have considered a real option may become one. We may be fairly certain that a certain system of the past cannot be re-enacted. No one can become a samurai, but who would believe in 1900 that in 1935 there would be people who somehow actually believed that in some sense they were Teutonic knights? (But maybe they were mad?) The concept of modelling one's life on a former system instead of directly re-living or reenacting it, gives the area of real options a disturbing extension.

I find Williams' analysis flawed in one respect, but not seriously so. On his account the decision whether we are faced with a real option or not seems to precede any moral evaluation of our original system in the light of the other incompatible but possible styles of life. But certainly our ethical intuitions will be brought into play earlier. We may decide that a certain system is no real option to us, mainly because we find it morally reprehensible even if it is possible to have a clear view of what a sane life according to that code would be.

With this reservation I find Williams' analysis persuasive. No real insight in our dilemmas, nor any kind of opening up of a dialogue are won by practicing a thoroughgoing ethical relativism. The dilemmas we encountered in connection with cognitive relativism pop up again. Let us take a comparable set of examples. (Of course, the dilemma outlined below will not arise necessarily for all relativist. One may imagine a type of relativism which simply considers itself the correct morality and quits all debates. But here I'm concerned with the relativist in her modern, well-meaning and liberal disguise.)

If all moral codes are relative to a culture and cannot be the subject of any external evaluation, what right do we have to criticise:

- 1) The Aztecs because they sacrificed prisoners to their gods
- 2) Pre-modern culture because they will keep to their pastoral economy
- 3) Pre-modern cultures because they practice female circumcision
- 4) Aristotle for being a sexist and an ethnocentrist
- 5) 17th century priests for burning witches
- 6) The anthropologists of for example the Victorian age because they did not try to understand other cultures according to their own premises

I think it would be fair to say, considering these examples that we would say "yes, we have" with increasing emphasis. The Aztecs are no option to us, to practice sacrifice now would be something totally different. (We should of course imagine those scenes with horror and disgust). When we get to Aristotle the case is different. Here we are involved, of course much of Attic culture is beyond our reach, but enough of it is tied up with our culture to give us the right to criticise. 3) is of course the difficult point for practicing anthropologists. If we answer yes it must be because we here feel the existence of cross-cultural bonds of solidarity. There are forms of social practices no human being would voluntarily submit to. This is another indication that we do more naturally regard other cultures as inherently antagonistic, than as closed entities as the relativist must do. 2) is of course the odd man out, a pastoral economy is no option to us, but our attitudes to such cultures and to enforced modernisation, involve us in moral dilemmas. With 6) we are of course back to the classical questions of *quis custodiet custodes* and tolerance towards the intolerant.

So there is such a thing as a meaningful moral relativism. But it is no part of moral discourse. On the contrary, it marks the borderline of such a discourse.



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