

**Majors Seminar
Rovane
Spring 2010**

The topic of this Majors Seminar is Relativism – how to formulate it, and how to evaluate arguments for and against it.

The central text for the course will be a book manuscript on the subject that I am now completing, supplements with background readings in semantics, philosophy of science, metaphysics and moral philosophy.

Below please find the introduction to the book, followed by a brief account of the topics to be covered in it chapter by chapter.

Introduction

When philosophers argue against a metaphysical doctrine they do not usually rest with the mere claim that it is false, but claim as well that it is incoherent. In the case of relativism they often go even further, and charge that it cannot so much as be formulated to begin with. It should not be entirely surprising, therefore, that many contemporary defenders of relativism are not primarily concerned to defend its *truth*, but only to clarify what the doctrine consists in. What is surprising, though, is how little consensus there is among them about how the doctrine should be formulated, and what the fundamental dividing issue is between relativists and their opponents.

In Part One of this book I shall develop and defend a somewhat novel formulation of the doctrine of relativism, for which I claim the following virtues: first, it avoids the charge of incoherence that is so often levied against the doctrine; second, it captures one central intuition about what the doctrine consists in that drives a number of different accounts of it; third, it allows us to identify a clear dividing issue between relativists and their opponents that is worth taking seriously. Parts Two and Three go on to evaluate arguments for and against relativism once it is formulated along the lines I propose, in the domains of facts and morals, respectively. The concluding chapter explores the extent to which it is possible to *live* relativism and what it would mean to do so.

In the remainder of these introductory remarks I'll survey some of the intuitions that govern our collective philosophical thinking about relativism, in order to set the stage for the arguments to come.

Many contemporary philosophers who work in semantics associate the doctrine of relativism with the idea that truth is relative to context. Although these semantic relativists clearly have nomenclature on their side, not all contemporary relativists agree that relativism ought to be formulated in terms of this idea. Some propose instead to formulate the doctrine in terms of a quite different idea, which is that some disagreements can never be resolved. Such irresolvable disagreements are generally thought to be

possible only in the domain of values and not in the domain of facts and, indeed, it is primarily in the domain of values that this particular intuition about relativism predominates, with the result that if any theory in morals, politics or aesthetics should fail to rule out the possibility of irresolvable disagreement, it is generally regarded as threatening relativistic consequences. One of the raging disputes in contemporary discussions of relativism concerns the extent to which both of these intuitions can be retained together – that relativism involves relative truth and that it arises with irresolvable disagreement.

There is a third intuition about relativism that has garnered a much more impressive consensus, which is that relativists dispense with the particular forms of objectivity that we associate with realism, most especially scientific realism. This intuition about relativism has an extremely long history that arguably extends back to Protagoras, whose claim that truth is opinion is widely regarded as the first serious articulation of the relativists' position. However, to the contemporary ear – or at any rate, to my ear – the Protagorean claim sounds more like nihilism than like relativism. If truth is opinion then there is no such thing as error, and if there is no such thing as error then there is no such thing as correctness either – in short, no such thing as truth at all. A closer and more important historical source of this third intuition about relativism is Kant. He did not argue that truth is opinion. But he did argue that we cannot make sense of truth within a realist metaphysics that portrays the objects of knowledge as radically mind-independent. As he put it, we cannot know things as they are in themselves but only as they appear to us given the particular forms of our sensibility and understanding. Rather than succumb to a skeptical conclusion that sees these subjective conditions on our knowledge as essentially distorting, he proposed a Copernican revolution that would cease to define knowledge in terms of objects but would instead define objects in terms of knowledge. The result was a new metaphysical position called transcendental idealism, according to which the world is the *known* world and, as such, subjectively conditioned. It would be going too far to suggest that Kant intended his transcendental idealist move to be a first step on the path to relativism. All the same, that is where it led, for it follows from transcendental idealism that if there were different kinds of subjects, with different forms of subjectivity, then they would quite literally know different worlds. Many of the accounts of relativism that emerged in the twentieth century are variations on this neo-Kantian theme, that the world is not entirely mind-independent and that there are, therefore, as many worlds as there are kinds of minds. I have in mind the accounts that arose in connection with logical positivism, cultural anthropology, philosophy of science and pragmatism. Thus, Carnap held that our beliefs cannot admit of objective confirmation or disconfirmation by experience except in the context of a particular linguistic framework that supplies a vocabulary and a logic in which to frame empirical claims; and it lies within our power to devise many such linguistic frameworks, each affording its own particular form of empirical objectivity. In similar fashion, early cultural anthropologists who flirted with relativism held that inhabitants of different cultures who speak different languages are thereby put in touch with different forms of reality. Kuhn famously held that scientists who work within different scientific paradigms inhabit different worlds. Richard Rorty took a similar view of all rational activity, which he saw as conditioned by social practices, broadly construed. Not only

did twentieth century relativists argue that there is a plurality of different subjective conditions on which reality might be said to depend, but also, there is no objective basis on which to say that any one of them is more or less valid than another. This contrasts with a realist metaphysical vision on which any claim must answer to the mind-independent facts in order to be true, and this is so no matter what subjective conditions might hold when someone makes the claim. That is the form of objectivity that relativists are typically thought to challenge.

This third intuition about relativism, then, is a point of convergence between the contemporary debates about relativism and its precursors in the last century. When we think about relativism in this way, we presume that the first step in any argument for relativism must be a rejection of the realist thesis that reality is radically mind-independent, and the second step will be to argue for a plurality of conditions on which reality (or realities) might depend. Insofar as it is now thought that relativism is more plausible in the domain of value than in the domain of fact, it is because such a challenge to realism is thought to be more plausible there.

However, there are also important points of divergence between the twentieth century debates about relativism and the current ones. The former did not generally share the other two intuitions that now predominate – that is, relativism was not generally portrayed as involving the idea that truth is relative, nor as involving the idea that some disagreements can never be resolved. Intuition centered on another idea altogether, which is that there are *alternatives*. That is why Donald Davidson's famous argument against relativism targeted what he called "alternative conceptual schemes". In his view, all of the various subjective conditions I just alluded to above that figured in twentieth century accounts of relativism – linguistic frameworks, cultures, scientific paradigms, social practices – are all supposed to provide such alternative conceptual schemes. But as he himself complained, it isn't entirely clear what this idea of alternativeness really comes to. It was often associated with another idea which also wasn't entirely clear, namely, *incommensurability*. The intuition that relativism arises with incommensurable alternativeness no longer holds such a central place in our thinking about relativism as it once did.

I shall approach the task of formulating the doctrine of relativism by first examining the three intuitions that inform the current debates -- concerning relative truth, disagreement, and the presumed opposition between relativism and realism. We shall see that there are serious difficulties that stand in the way of arriving at a formulation along these lines that is both coherent and also manages to capture anything that intuitively deserves to be called "relativism". We'll also see that a solution to these difficulties is afforded by a return to the older idea of alternativeness that predominated – however unclearly and ineffectively – in the twentieth century debates. We'll also see that when we try to make sense of alternativeness, we end up with a formulation that requires us to revise our understanding of what really *should* be at stake in debates about relativism. What is most fundamentally at stake is the *oneness* of the world, or as I shall call it, *unimundialism*. In other words, insofar as the relativist is committed to alternativeness, the relativist is denying that there is only one world and affirming a *multimundial* view instead. We'll

see that this dividing issue between relativists and their opponents is at once a logical issue, a metaphysical issue and also a practical issue.

When we formulate the doctrine of relativism as multimundialism, it turns out that we must give up all three of the other intuitions that now predominate in discussions of relativism: it does not involve the idea that truth is relative, nor that there can be irresolvable disagreements, nor even that relativism stands opposed to realism. In connection with this last point, we shall see that scientific realism in particular does not suffice to rule out relativism in the domain of facts, but may actually invite it. Davidson's argument is, by contrast with more standard realist arguments, much more effective against the relativist. However, this is so only in the domain of facts, for there are significant obstacles that stand in the way of carrying Davidson's argumentative strategy over to the domain of value. On balance, we'll see that there are much stronger reasons for taking relativism seriously in the domain of morals than in the domain of facts. But contrary to the prevailing received view about prospects for moral relativism, the reasons for taking it seriously have nothing to do with a failure of moral realism, or with a failure of moral objectivity more broadly construed. They have to do rather with the situatedness and locality of moral truth.

Chapter One: Relative Truth, Anti-Realism and Disagreement

Relative truth doesn't necessarily imply relativism (Indexicals and Space-Time)

Why anti-realism is thought to generate relativism: irresolvable disagreement

Problem: if both parties to a disagreement are right, that violates non-contradiction

Two ways to remove disagreement: Relativize truth or disambiguate terms

Do we lose relativism if we lose the appearance of disagreement?

The deeper point: there is no point in registering disagreement anyway

This is a symptom of what I call "normative insularity": some truth-value-bearers fail to stand in logical relations

Chapter Two: Unimundialism vs. Multimundialism

Proposal: Relativism doesn't require disagreement but alternatives

Alternatives are truths that cannot be embraced together

There is a dilemma for alternativeness: any pair of truth-value-bearers is either inconsistent or consistent; if they are inconsistent they can't both be true; if they are consistent they can be embraced together

If relativism arises with disagreement, the first horn is mistaken but there is a violation of non-contradiction

If there is normative insularity, however, there is a third possibility that the dilemma overlooks: some truth-value-bearers are neither inconsistent nor consistent

The real dividing issue: do logical relations run everywhere, among all truth-value bearers

If they do, there is single and complete body of truths (=one world)

If they do not, there are many incomplete bodies of truths (=many worlds)

The practical meaning of unimundialism and multimundialism

Methodological problem: each side can successfully beg the question
Solution: neither side can shift the burden of proof

Chapter Three: Relativism and Science

Carnap: scientific objectivity requires empirical confirmation; empirical confirmation can take place only within a linguistic framework, there are no objective bases to choose between frameworks but only evaluative (including aesthetic and pragmatic) considerations; linguistic frameworks are normatively insulated

Kuhn: Scientific paradigms are normatively insulated due to holism (it is unclear whether they should be countered as alternatives – are they all true, or is it merely the case that they we have no rational basis for choosing between them?)

Feyerabend: We can still try to find decisive experiments

Scientific realism reasserts itself: the convergence and success of scientific theories is evidence that we are tracking mind-independent reality

Mind-independence is not the same thing as Oneness (the unimundial idea that logical relations run everywhere)

What relativism really rules out is not the View from Nowhere but the View from Everywhere

Chomsky: extending the mind-independence idea to mind itself

Minds are limited and different from each other, and have epistemic access to different things

Casts doubt on whether there can be a View from Everywhere

Why this concession to relativism in the domain of facts has no practical import

Chapter Four: Relativism and Holism I: Facts

Quine vs. Carnap: Holism

Why Holism might be thought to generate relativism

How Davidson brought holism to bear against relativism (third dogma of empiricism)

Davidson's misconception of issue of relativism: not scheme-content distinction but ubiquity of logical relations

What is shared between Davidson's vision of meaning and the more naturalistic vision of the scientific vision: knowing other minds requires believing what they believe

Chapter Five: Harman's Defense of Moral Relativism

Self-interest as a basis for moral bargaining

Relativity of moral obligation to moral agreement

No multimundial conclusion: moral agreements are not normatively insulated

Chapter Six: Prospects for Rationalist Moral Theory

Harman took Egoism for granted in his attempt to argue for moral relativism and, in doing so, he took for granted that Egoism is dictated by rationality

However, Kantians and Utilitarians see their core moral values as dictated by rationality – universalizability and the greatest aggregate good, respectively

Why all three of these major moral theories is partly right: the values of self-interest, universalizability and the greatest good are all values that we arrive at by reflecting on the nature and form of practical reason (its perspectival character, its generality, and its employment of a thin notion of good in order to rank and weigh disparate goods on a single scale)

Why each of these theories expects to rule out relativism: each puts forward a single moral value to which all other moral values must relate

How each of these theories misconstrues what it means for a moral value to have an a priori basis in reason: it commands categorically

Why this cannot be: Kantian, Utilitarian and Egoistic moral values all have an a priori basis in reason; they all provide conflicting instructions about what to do; therefore, none can command categorically

Chapter Seven: Relativism and Holism II: Values

Some moral values have an a priori basis in reason alone

Other moral values have an empirical basis in human nature

Still other values have an empirical basis in history, culture and other social conditions

How social conditions might generate local holisms

How this precludes the Davidsonian strategy against relativism in the domain of value

The moral irrelevance of a view from everywhere in the moral domain

Chapter Eight: Is it Possible to Live Relativism?

The multimundial stance is not liberal toleration

The multimundial stance is not subjectivist: moral values may be local and yet objective

Why the multimundial stance seems morally unattractive

Constraints on moral proselytizing: moral values may not be transportable and translatable; we can have no reason to spread our values unless we have the power to produce the conditions in which they have objective significance

Higher order moral luck