What Relativism Isn't

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1. Introduction[1]

There is an enormous amount of confusion about what relativism is. In this paper I aim to take a step toward clarifying what it is by discussing some things that it is not—that is, by distinguishing it from some other views with which it is often confused or conflated, such as nihilism and scepticism. I do this primarily because I think that the question of the character of relativism is interesting in itself. A clearer characterization of relativism would also be important instrumentally, however, as before we can accurately assess relativism we must have a clear idea of what it is. The secondary aim of this paper, then, is to function as a prolegomenon to an assessment of relativism. The tertiary aim of the paper is to make a few observations about the view which most clearly stands opposed to relativism, the view which I will call 'objectivism.'[2] Because relativism is often confused with views like fallibilism and pluralism, objectivism often finds itself unjustly associated with views like infallibilism and political authoritarianism. (If this paper had a subtitle, it would be: 'And What Objectivism Isn't.') Although it is not the point of this paper to criticize relativism, I should make it clear that it began as a part of an anti-relativistic project, and, although anti-relativism is not necessarily objec-

[1] This paper is an expanded version of a chapter of my dissertation, *Relativism and the New Psychologisms*. I have benefited greatly from the comments of my dissertation committee, Mike Resnik, Jay Rosenberg, Bill Lycan, Keith Simmons, and Simon Blackburn. I have also benefited greatly from discussions of this paper with Gena McKinley, Paul Davies (not the physicist) and especially Phil Collins (the musician, but not the one you're thinking of).

[2] I use the term 'objectivism' rather loosely, to name views on which truth, justification, or whatever are objective matters. It is intended to stand opposed to relativism (among other views). Some people call such a view 'absolutism.' I eschew that term because it is already used to name a political system. Furthermore, as I will argue below, objectivism is often (incorrectly) associated with political authoritarianism, and so this might be an especially misleading choice of terminology here.

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tivism,[3] I should perhaps make it clear that I am more than a little sympathetic to the latter type of view.

I also want to point out that this paper is written in response to confusions about relativism which are in no way isolated to scholarly writing on the subject. Many of the confusions and conflations discussed here are (perhaps unsurprisingly) even more prevalent outside of philosophy in particular and academia in general. The confusions in question are deeply-rooted in the public discourse (such as it is) about relativism, and show up with great frequency, for instance, in the popular press and especially in students' classroom comments. The examples I cite in this paper, however, are all taken from more-or-less scholarly sources.

I should also point out early on that this is an odd paper, though I hope no odder than it has to be. The task at hand is to some extent a taxonomic one, and such a task is difficult when the characters of the views in question are controversial. So I offer the following arguments, distinctions, and classifications tentatively, as suggestions, though I believe that all are highly plausible, and that the resulting view of relativism and the map of the surrounding landscape has much to be said for it.

It is also important to understand that my goal here is to distinguish views which start life separate from each other, without concern for the fact that some of these views might be related in important ways. I am concerned to note, for instance, that relativism and nihilism are in important respects distinct; I am not concerned here with arguments which purport to show, e.g., that the former degenerates into the latter. Many such relationships allegedly exist among the views I consider, but so long as two views are not related by mutual entailment, their relationship can (and should) be ignored for some purposes. Before those more interesting philosophical tasks (of identifying relationships and assessing views) can be carried out, we need a clear initial view of the terrain.

On a closely related note, I should make it clear that I consider and characterize only the most straight-forward versions of the views I discuss (charitably, it could be said that I look at the paradigmatic versions of the views; uncharitably, that I look at simple-minded versions). Each of the views can be made more complicat-

[3] Barbara Hernnstein Smith, for instance, mistakenly believes that it is. She claims that one type of relativism is 'any more or less extensively theorized questioning ... of the key elements of traditional objectivist thought...' (Barbara Hernstein Smith *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 151). As I will show below, however, nihilism is an alternative to both relativism and objectivism.

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ed or subtle, sometimes the views can be hybridized, and so forth. In this paper, however, I am concerned only with the simplest versions of the views in question. I am merely concerned to say some things about how discussion of these views should begin, not how it might proceed or end.

One final prefatory remark: as I have said, most of this paper has to do with clarifying confusions about relativism (and objectivism) and its (their) relationship(s) to other views. Sometimes, however, it's not clear who is confused, nor about what. Sometimes it is the advocate of a given view who is confused about the view's status, sometimes it's the critic of a view, sometimes it's a neutral commentator, and sometimes it is not clear exactly who is confused, though it seems that that *someone* (me perhaps) is confused about *something*...

2. General Remarks, An Initial General Characterization of Relativism, and More General Remarks

One good way to begin this discussion of relativism might be to list the various wildly incompatible things that have been said about it. I will approach the problem differently, however, and try to characterize relativism in a way which is extremely *general*, appropriately *vague*, and as *uncontroversial* as possible. One good way to begin such an examination is with the *locus classicus*, and in this case that means Plato's discussion of Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*. Plato says that Socrates says that Protagoras says that:

> Man is the measure of all things, alike of the being of things that are, and of the not-being of things that are not.[4]

It's pretty clear that what this means isn't completely clear. Nevertheless, a reasonably small set of passably clear views have come to be associated with the Protagorean apothegm, and have come to be identified as types of relativism. Harvey Siegel describes one cluster of these views in an admirably clear and reasonably general fashion, as follows:

> For any knowledge-claim p, p can be evaluated (assessed, established, etc.) only according to (with reference to) one or another set of background principles and standards of evaluation s1...sn; and, given a different set (or sets) of background principles and

[4] Plato, *Theaetetus*, trans. F. M. Cornford, in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (eds) (Princeton University Press, 1985), 856.

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> standards s´1...s´n, there is no neutral (that is, neutral with respect to the two (or more) alternative sets of principles and standards) way of choosing between the two (or more) alternative sets in evaluating p with respect to truth or rational justification, p's truth and rational justifiability are relative to the standards used in evaluating p.[5]

Siegel may (or may not) be conflating a couple of types of relativism here, but he is describing a version of what I would call epistemological relativism. This immediately raises issues of classification, and and it is worthwhile to draw a few rough distinctions here. Relativisms can be categorized in at least two ways, the first of which is in terms of what is relativised. In addition to epistemological relativism, there is, for instance and of course, moral relativism in its various forms. Epistemological relativism (of the kind described above) and moral relativism are both kinds of what I'll call *justificatory relativism*, that is, relativism about justification or warrant. There are also non-justificatory versions of relativism, however, most prominent among them being *alethic relativism*, that is, relativism about truth. It is probably most common to interpret Protagoras as advancing alethic relativism rather than, *à la* Siegel, justificatory epistemological relativism. We might also, however, take him to be advocating another kind of non-justificatory relativism, namely (following Quine) *ontological relativism*, relativism about what there is. What Protagoras might have actually meant is a historical question beyond my area of expertise[6] but the most important thing for us here is not to search for the correct interpretation of Protagoras, but simply to note that there are different varieties of relativism.[7]

Relativisms can also differ with regard to what the relativized property is relativized *to*—individuals, cultures, languages, 'conceptual frameworks', and so forth. Interesting issues arise here, for instance about how to individuate cultures and languages, about the

[5] Harvey Siegel, *Relativism Refuted: A Critique of Contemporary Epistemological Relativism* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1987), 6.

[6] But for an interesting discussion of the issue see Francis M. Cornford, *Plato's Theory of Knowledge* (New York: Macmillan, 1985), 32–36.

[7] One prominent example of a type of relativism that I will not consider is *conceptual relativism*, that is, the kind of view discussed by e.g. Davidson ('On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,' *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984)). I ignore that view because I think that it is extremely different from the more ordinary types of relativism I consider here. Thus my account of relativism may be said to lack full generality. (On the other hand, conceptual relativism may just be a different kind of beast.)

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nature of conceptual frameworks, etc., but these issues will not concern me in this paper. Here I am more interested in, for instance, the difference between moral *relativism* (cultural, individualist, or whatever) and moral *nihilism* than I am in the difference between *cultural* moral relativism and *individualist* moral relativism.[8] Accordingly, I will focus on whatever variety of relativism seems to illustrate the relevant point in the best way. This will to some extent be determined by the quotation or theory at hand, and it leaves many interesting and important issues unexamined here, unfortunately.

At any rate, Siegel's characterization of relativism is good (among other respects) in that it captures the most general features of justificatory relativism, and can, *mutatis mutandis*, also provide us with a good general characterization of non-justificatory varieties of relativism. Let me suggest, however, another, even simpler characterization of justificatory relativism, as follows:

> (JR) A theory, T, of the justification of x's is a relativistic theory of justification only if, according to T, x's can only be justified relative to some y or y's.

And a corresponding minimal general characterization of alethic relativism:

> (AR) A theory, T, of the truth of x's is a relativistic theory of truth only if, according to T, x's can only be true relative to some y or y's.

Obviously neither of these characterizations explains what 'relative to' means, but that's a problem we can live with for the time being. Ultimately, the relativist will have to tell us what 'relative to' means in (AR) and (JR), but, as for right now, (AR) and (JR) are to func-

[8] Of course, problems arise here for the relativist no matter which way she goes. Relativisms in which the group is central must be able to say what constitutes a group in the relevant context, and why the considerations that allegedly drive us to such a relativism do not drive us farther down, to individualist relativism. Relativisms in which the individual is central must face the problems that arise from the fact that, on such theories, the individuals ground the very standards by which their actions (beliefs, etc.) are judged, and so error (and correctness) on such a view may be logically impossible. The individualist relativist must also face a problem analogous to that faced by the cultural relativist, as he must explain why the considerations which allegedly drive us to individualist relativism do not drive us to a relativism based on temporal stages of individuals, or individuals at a moment. I cannot explore these issues here, however, and so will assume, for the sake of argument, that both group-based and individual-based relativisms are (in some sense) options.

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tion only as extremely minimal characterizations of alethic and justificatory relativism. Certainly no account of relativism can be correct if it counts as relativistic theories which do not accord with some such minimal characterizations.[9]

Similarly, it is possible to characterize relativism about some property Φ, where Φ is normally taken to be non-relational, as the view that Φ, *is*, in fact, relational.[10] More precisely, if we consider some property or relation Φ commonly taken to be n-adic, relativism about Φ is sometimes said to be the view that Φ is in fact an n+1-adic relation; or, at the level of predicates, if a predicate F is normally taken to be n-place, relativism about F can be said to be the view that F is n+1-place. For example the predicate 'true' is clearly normally taken to be a 1-place predicate, while the relativist takes it to be 2-place. Thus, according to the relativist, 'p is true' is ill-formed, like 'x is bigger than'; e.g. 'p is true for S', however, like 'x is bigger than y', is supposed to be well-formed. This characterization is not without its virtues, and, though I do not think that it is complete, and though I will not try to defend it here, I think it can be of use in clarifying some portions of the following discussion, and so I will invoke it from time to time.

Note that many of the points that follow are about relativism generally, and many others are about justificatory relativism generally, or about many or most kinds of relativism. This makes the arguments slightly more difficult to follow at some points, as I often move rather abruptly from, say, epistemological examples to, say, moral ones. But this strategy provides us with a reasonably general (though partial) account of relativism, and so that's the strategy I'll employ.

3. Relativism and (Especially Cultural) Pluralism

One of the most common errors in discussions of relativism is the confusion of relativism with varieties of views that are best called *pluralism*. Taking the moral case as an example, let's identify *descriptive (moral) pluralism* as the view that has as its centrepiece *the diversity thesis*,[11] which I will formulate in the following (intentionally)

[9] Note that these minimal characterizations establish only necessary conditions for a theory's being relativistic. I do not believe that they establish sufficient conditions, though the arguments for that claim are beyond the scope of this paper.

[10] Thanks to Bill Lycan for mentioning this point to me seventy-five or eighty times.

[11] C. E. Harris, Jr. uses similar terminology in *Applying Moral Theories* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1992).

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vague way: *there exists a variety of deeply dissimilar (irreconcilable, incommensurable, whatever) moral views of the world*. This view is distinct from *normative (moral) pluralism*, the view that has as its centrepiece *the tolerance thesis: a relatively wide variety of beliefs and actions ought to be tolerated*. (We might also call the latter view *political pluralism*). But clearly such views are not varieties of relativism: they do not, for instance, assert that goodness is *relative* to anything.

Beginning philosophy students frequently confuse normative moral pluralism with relativism, or believe that the former entails the latter. For instance, when they are asked to defend their relativistic-sounding claims, they tend to assert, and sometimes even give arguments for, the tolerance thesis. I know of no instances of this confusion in scholarly literature, however.

Confusions of relativism with descriptive moral pluralism can, however, sometimes be found in the social sciences. To some extent, though, the problem may be a merely terminological one. In anthropology, the term 'cultural relativism' is used rather indiscriminately; primarily it seems to be applied, more than a little misleadingly, to descriptive pluralism of a variety of kinds (e.g. epistemological, but especially moral). Consider a claim made by A. L. Kroeber:[12]

> This anthropological principle [that each society should be evaluated on its own terms] leads, it is true, to a relativistic or pluralistic philosophy—a belief in many values rather than a single values system.[13]

That societies should be evaluated on its own terms sounds like it might (properly disambiguated) turn out to be a relativistic claim, but it is the second part of the quote that is puzzling. The confusion in question is illustrated by Kroeber's way of putting the point: the view in question is that there are 'many values rather than a single values system.' But that way of putting it is at least somewhat ambiguous between (a) a merely sociological claim, viz., that preferences and/or opinions about what is valuable differ from group to group, and (b) a philosophically interesting claim, to the effect that different and incompatible 'value systems' can both/all be *correct*. The former is pluralism, the latter sounds like relativism.

This kind of problem arises whenever relativism is characterized,

[12] This passage is quoted by Melville Herskovits (see below). Note that the confusion in question is suggested in his title (though I don't think that the title was Herskovits's).

[13] *Anthropology*, Scientific American, vol. 183, Sept. 1950, 87–94, quoted in Melville Herskovits, *Cultural Relativism: Perspectives in Cultural Pluralism* (New York: Random House, 1972), 87.

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as it often is, as the view that *standards of evaluation* (*or truth, or rightness, or whatever*) *are relative to a group* (*or individual, or framework, or whatever*). To say that *standards* of correctness are relative is to say something ambiguous between (a) people employ different measures of correctness, and (b) different measures are correct (really correct) for different people (groups, whatever). (b) is genuinely relativistic, while (a) is merely pluralistic—it simply asserts differences of opinion concerning attributions of correctness.

Confusion here is exacerbated by the fact that some philosophers and anthropologists have argued that differences of belief among social groups are relatively superficial, and that all groups agree on some very general things.[14] That is, some writers deny the diversity thesis. Confusions arise, among other reasons, because these anti-(descriptive) pluralists are sometimes (a) attacking pluralism as a way of undermining relativism, and/or (b) confused themselves about the distinction between pluralism and relativism, and/or (c) mistaken for anti-relativists by defenders of relativism.[15] But, whatever the cause of the confusion, it *is* a confusion, and we should endeavour to distinguish relativism from the various varieties of pluralism.

4. Relativism and Nihilism

4.1 General Considerations

Relativism is also often confused with a distinct view that is sometimes called *nihilism*. Alethic relativism, for instance, is the view that e.g. propositions are true only in relation to e.g. social groups.

[14] I didn't really give this line of argument much thought until I read Geertz ('Anti-Anti-Relativism' in *Relativism: Interpretation and Confrontation*, Michael Krausz (ed.) (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989)), whose discussion is moderately interesting, though his open contempt for those who question the diversity thesis is more than a bit off-putting. Among those he discusses are Mary Midgeley (*Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), especially pp. xiv–xv), Melford Spiro ('Culture and Human Nature', in *The Making of Psychological Anthropology*, G. Spindler (ed.) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), and Stephen Salkever ('Beyond Interpretation: Human Nature and the Slovenly Wilderness', in *Social Science as Moral Inquiry*, N. Haan, R. M. Bellah, P. Rabinow, and W. M. Sullivan (eds) (New York: Colombia University Press, 1983)).

[15] For examples of all three of these problems, see Herskovits ('Cultural Relativism and Cultural Values' and 'Further Comments on Cultural Relativism', both in Herskovits op. cit.) and Clifford Geertz 'Anti-Anti-Relativism', in Michael Krausz *Relativism: Interpretation and Confrontation* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1989).

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Alethic nihilism is the view that there is no such thing as truth, that no (e.g.) propositions are true *at all*—that truth is a *fiction*. Popper seems to confuse the two views when he writes that:

> Relativism is the position that everything can be [justifiably? truly?] asserted ... and therefore nothing [can be]. Truth is therefore a meaningless concept.[16]

The relativist holds that there is *a lot* of truth; the nihilist holds that there is none. Alethic nihilism might also be called alethic *eliminativism*. This distinction holds, *mutatis mutandis*, for the other forms of relativism and nihilism—justificatory epistemological relativism is distinct from justificatory epistemological nihilism, as is moral relativism from moral nihilism. I will discuss the latter distinction at length in the next section.

4.2 An Example: Nihilism and Cultural Moral Relativism

4.2.1

The cultural version of moral relativism provides us with a good example because it is so frequently confused or conflated with moral nihilism. Robert and Jon Soloman, for instance, mistakenly claim that 'The most ominous version of [moral] relativism is [moral] nihilism.'[17] Certain purported statements of moral relativism clearly illustrate the confusion at issue. For instance:

> (CMR) The morally right is that which is in accordance with (or correct according to, or sanctioned by) a culture's moral tradition/framework.

There are two possible interpretations of (CMR), though the first seems to me to be more natural than the second:

> (CMR1) There *is* in fact such a thing as moral correctness—some actions are morally correct, and some are morally incorrect. A morally correct action is an action which is in accordance with (or correct according to, or sanctioned by) a culture's moral tradition/framework.[18]

[16] Karl Popper, *In Search of a Better World* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 191.

[17] Robert Soloman and Jon Soloman *Up the University: Re-Creating Higher Education in America* (New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1993), 198.

[18] Even once we narrow our focus to *cultural* moral relativism, there are various ways to cash out that view. I think that the most straightforward way is this one, in terms of accordance with traditions. This point is debatable, however.

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> (CMR2) There is in fact *no such thing* as moral correctness. That which we take to be morally correct is in fact merely that which is in accordance with (or correct according to, or sanctioned by) a culture's moral traditions/frameworks.

(CMR1) expresses cultural moral relativism, while (CMR2) expresses cultural moral nihilism. We might say that in the former case moral traditions are elevated in stature, to a level at which they somehow determine what is morally correct, while in the latter case moral correctness is denigrated, deflated by being (purportedly) exposed as nothing more than, or at least nothing more justificatorily substantive than, entrenched moral beliefs—which are, by themselves, of course, justificatorily inert. In the first case, moral correctness remains substantially as we thought it was, but we discover something surprising about moral traditions or frameworks, while in the second case, moral traditions or frameworks remain much as we thought they were, and we discover something surprising about moral correctness. In the first case, tradition is (as it were) justificatorily *elevated*; in the second case, morality is justificatorily *denigrated*.

4.2.2

The confusion of relativism and nihilism can be illustrated by examining two passages, both frequently cited as examples of relativism, sometimes side by side. Consider, first, the following familiar passage from William Graham Sumner's *Folkways*:

> The 'right' way is the way which the ancestors used and which has been handed down. The tradition is its own warrant. It is not held subject to verification by experience. The notion of right is in the folkways. It is not outside of them, of independent origin, and brought to test them. In the folkways, whatever is, is right. This is because they are traditional, and therefore contain in themselves the authority of the ancestral ghosts. When we come to the folkways we are at the end of our analysis.[19]

First, note that Sumner himself may be a bit confused here, as he begins with a strong suggestion of nihilism, enclosing 'right' in 'scare quotes' (a real relativist ought, if anything, to *underline* 'right'!); remember, a *relativist* does not think that rightness is suspect or ghostly or second-class, or anything of the kind—just *relative*. We don't, of course, want to make too much of this kind of rel-

[19] William Graham *Folkways* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1906), 28.

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atively minor mistake, but note that a very similar mistake appears in the following definition of relativism by David Wong:

> Moral Relativism...often takes the form of a denial that any single moral code has universal validity, and an assertion that moral truth and justifiability, *if there are any such things*, are in some way relative to factors that are culturally and historically contingent.[20] [my emphasis]

But, that bit of nihilistic backsliding aside, most of Wong's characterization, like the remainder of Sumner's, *is* straightforwardly relativistic. The 'tradition', Sumner writes, is 'its own warrant', 'the notion of right is in the folkways'. After the initial infelicity, Sumner seems to be reasonably clear about the view he is defending. But contrast the Sumner passage with the following by Ruth Benedict, which is also often cited (sometimes along with Sumner[21]) as a paradigm of cultural moral relativism:

> We recognize that morality differs in every society, and is a convenient term for socially approved habits. Mankind has always preferred to say, 'It is morally good,' rather than 'It is habitual,' and the fact of this preference is matter enough for a critical science of ethics. But historically the two phrases are synonymous.[22]

But Benedict here clearly expresses moral nihilism, not moral relativism. 'It is morally good,' Benedict asserts, *just means* 'it is habitual'; and, as we know, there is no justification, moral or otherwise, to be got out of mere, unadorned habit.[23] What we *thought* were matters of ultimate importance have, on Benedict's view, turned out to be nothing more than matters of custom. And that is to say that moral justification is a fiction. And that is moral nihilism.

[20] 'Relativism,' in Peter Singer, *A Companion to Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 442.

[21] For instance by C. E. Harris, Jr., *Applying Moral Theories*, (Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1992) and by James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1986).

[22] Ruth Benedict, 'Anthropology and the Abnormal,' *The Journal of General Psychology* 10 (1934); Quoted in Harris, (1992), 21.

[23] One *might* deny this in an attempt to read Benedict as a relativist, but Benedict herself, at least, is clearly a nihilist (in this passage, anyway). Anyone who wants to claim that the relevant kind of justification *can* be got out of mere habit will, of course, have to provide a pretty snazzy theory. In the absence of such a theory, Benedict is nihilist anyway you look at it.

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4.3. An Epistemological Example

Similar confusions of relativism with nihilism are made by philosophers, and sometimes with regard to epistemology, rather than ethics. Consider James Maffie's statement of relativism:[24]

> The truth maker of our epistemic judgments is located in our decisions, conventions, language-games, modes of social life, or forms of life. Epistemological status is relative to community norms or group judgments and thus local, parochial, or provincial. Facts about evidence or knowledge are nothing more than facts about cultural judgments, norms, or practices. What we learn about through epistemological research is not metaphysically deeper than the purposes or rules governing our culture's way of doing things.[25]

But there is a clear slide here from 'The truth maker of our epistemic judgments is located in our ... conventions ... [etc.]' to 'Facts about evidence or knowledge are *nothing more than* facts about ... practices [etc.]...'[26] In the first case there are truth-makers for our epistemic judgments (that's non-nihilism), and in the second case there are not (that's nihilism).

5. Theoretical Egalitarianism

Consider the following three claims:

Karl Popper (this quote also appears above):

> Relativism is the position that everything can be [justifiably? truly?] asserted, or practically everything...[27]

Richard Rorty:

> 'Relativism' is the view that every belief on a certain topic, or perhaps about *any* topic, is as good as every other. No one holds

[24] Note that it's not clear whether Maffie himself is confused here, or whether he is just trying to give a kind of generic statement of more-or-less relativism, and building in the kind of mistake that generally goes along with such views. I think it's the latter, actually.

[25] James Maffie 'Realism, Relativism, And Naturalized Meta-Epistemology,' *Metaphilosophy*, vol. 24, nos. 1 & 2 (January/April 1993), 3.

[26] Note that Maffie is not endorsing such a view, but merely characterizing it; thus the slide may represent a conscious attempt to capture the ambiguity in most purported statements of relativism.

[27] Popper *In Search of a Better World*, (New York: Routledge, 1992), 191.

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> this view. Except for the occasional cooperative freshman, one cannot find anybody who says that two incompatible opinions on an important topic are equally good.[28]

The literary critic Mark Edmundson:

> Relativism is the view that any one idea is as good as any other, and apart from a precocious college freshman or two, no one in the entire world holds it.[29]

Before getting to the real point, I want to say something about Rorty's and Edmundson's advocacy here of what we could call 'The Myth Myth'—that is, the myth that relativism is a myth, that no one has ever held the view.[30] Barbara Herrnstein Smith (among others) utilizes a similar ploy, writing that relativism is '...a phantom heresy dreamt by anxious orthodoxy under siege or, in other words, a 'relativism' created by traditional objectivism itself.'[31] Since I aim in this paper to show that many of the positions which are called relativistic are, in fact, not, one might think that I would agree with Rorty and company on this point, but I do not. First, Rorty & co. have radically mis-characterized relativism. The view they describe

[28] *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 166–7.

[29] *Wild Orchids and Trotsky* (New York: Penguin, 1993), p. 9. Interestingly, Edmundson goes on to give a sketchy and general characterization of a view which sounds genuinely relativistic, while denying that it is relativism. The quote above continues: 'What [Dinesh] D'Souza incorrectly calls relativism is the idea, which is in fact sustained by many literary critics, myself included, that no standards of evaluation or judgment are eternal or exist on high. All that means is that when we argue about values, we do not appeal to god, [sic] or to some substitute for god; [sic] we are compelled to refer to other standards and other ideals. These tend to be communal, and secular rather than religious. D'Souza seems to feel that if you don't have transcendent values, you don't have any values at all.' Note that the last sentence here mistakenly addresses the issue of 'having values,' when what is really at issue in the relativism debate is *correctness*, that is, roughly, the *justification* of values. If what D'Souza believes is that values must be justified objectively or not at all ... well, then, he may be right.

[30] This is among the many similarities between relativism and logical psychologism. That is, it is often claimed that no one has ever really been a logical psychologician. (I discuss such claims in Chapter 1 of my dissertation, *Relativism and the New Psychologisms* (unpublished)). Interestingly, it was also one of the central dogmas of the often-relativistic (and now mostly-defunct) Political Correctness movement that 'PC' itself did not exist.

[31] *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 151.

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(that one view is as good as any other) we might call *theoretical egalitarianism*. Second, as anyone who has taught Introduction to Philosophy knows, *lots* of undergrads, and *not* just the occasional freshman, at least pay lip service to relativism (and, for that matter, theoretical egalitarianism, too). And as Edmundson himself goes on to point out, many of those freshmen's *instructors* (especially literary critics) are relativists as well.

But the important issue here is the mischaracterization of relativism, and the confusion of that view with theoretical egalitarianism. One way of being a theoretical egalitarian with regard to truth would be to be an alethic nihilist: all views are equally good because they are all bad (vacuous, false, whatever).[32] Theoretical egalitarianism is often said to be entailed by relativism,[33] (and nihilism to be entailed by theoretical egalitarianism) but, nevertheless, the views are distinct; there is a clear difference between *a view is good only relative to some perspective* and *no view is better than any other.*

6. Relativism *v.* Fallibilism (And: Objectivism *v.* Infallibilism, Dogmatism, Ethnocentrism, and a Variety of Other Vices...)

6.1

Here's another thing relativism isn't: fallibilism. Correspondingly, anti-relativism isn't (necessarily) foundationalism or any other variety of infallibilism. MR, for instance, is not a denial of the *certainty* of our moral knowledge, and epistemological relativism has absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with the fallibility of knowledge or epistemic justification. And, yet, the confusion of relativism with fallibilism, and especially of anti-relativism with infallibilism or even dogmatism, is extremely common. Consider, for instance, the following claims by Harold I. Brown, which are intended to form part of a limited defence of Protagoras against Plato's arguments in the *Theaetetus*:

> I submit that this argument [34] has no force against any consistent relativism, even the extreme relativism of Protagoras. Its apparent cogency derives from a tacit acceptance of the absolutist assumption that we are justified in making a knowledge claim

[32] Carl Wellman makes a similar point in 'The Ethical Implications of Cultural Relativity' *Journal of Philosophy* **60** (1963).

[33] E.g. by Plato (in the *Theaetetus*).

[34] I.e. Plato's first argument, to the effect that Protagoras is unable to reject positions contrary to his own.

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> only if it is based on an unquestionable foundation. Given this assumption, once we admit the possibility of knowledge claims contrary to but as well founded as our own, our own knowledge claims become illegitimate. But the acceptability of this thesis is the central issue in dispute between relativism and absolutism. The main thesis of relativist epistemology is that knowledge can be constructed on a fallible foundation. Relativism affirms my right to hold my own presuppositions in spite of their fallibility, to proceed on the basis of these presuppositions, and to reject competing sets of presuppositions as false.[35]

Harvey Siegel[36] notes Brown's confusion in this passage, though I would add that, in addition to the simple confusion of the two views, Brown seems to be conflating them as well. In the first quote above we do get a relatively straightforward contrast between foundationalist epistemology and 'relativism' that makes it clear that it is fallibilism, and not relativism, which is actually at issue. In the second quote, Brown begins by describing fallibilism, but ends with something that can reasonably be construed as genuine relativism. If Brown means to claim that we are entitled to hold certain beliefs *provisionally*, even given knowledge of their fallibility, and that we are, in certain cases, entitled *provisionally* to reject propositions incompatible with these beliefs, then he is advocating fallibilism. What he *says*, however, is that 'Relativism affirms my right to hold my own presuppositions ... to proceed on the basis of these presuppositions, and to reject competing sets of presuppositions as false.' Now, aside from the bit about fallibility elided here, we have what might reasonably be construed as a rather straightforward assertion of relativism. To say that I am warranted in keeping my presuppositions, and in rejecting the presuppositions of others as false *no matter what* does seem to be to advocate some version of relativism. (It is extremely interesting to note that, far from being a type of fallibilism, relativism, so described, is a kind of radical *infallibilism*!) The bit about the provisional nature of these beliefs seems like an afterthought. Perhaps what Brown is advocating is some kind of *fallibilistic relativism* (though it is not clear that such a view is coherent), but it is hard to tell.

Paul Feyerabend, in the extremely puzzling initial chapter of

[35] 'For a Modest Historicism' *The Monist* **60**, 540–555 (1977), 549–550; I first found this passage in Siegel *Relativism Refuted: A Critique of Contemporary Epistemological Relativism* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1987), 9, where Siegel makes the same point that I make here.

[36] *Relativism Refuted: A Critique of Contemporary Epistemological Relativism* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1987), 9–10.

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Farewell to Reason, repeatedly makes similar kinds of mistakes. He, for instance, identifies the following view as being somehow relativistic:

> ... for every statement (theory, point of view) that is believed to be true with good reasons *there may exist* arguments showing that either its opposite, or a weaker alternative is true.[37] [Emphasis in original.]

And, similarly:

> Finally, on the extreme 'left' of our spectrum we have the view ... that even our most basic assumptions, our most solid beliefs, and our most conclusive arguments can be changed—improved, or defused, or shown to be irrelevant—by a comparison with what at first looks like undiluted madness.[38]

But all Feyerabend is describing here are two (non-equivalent) versions of fallibilism. Even that about which we are most certain may turn out to be incorrect; and, incidentally, we might discover this by comparing those certainties to crazy-sounding things that other people believe. That's a view that is certainly not absurd. But (as should be clear by now) it isn't relativism.

6.2

Furthermore, relativists (or 'relativists') often identify themselves and their view as standing opposed to various versions of closed-mindedness, dogmatism, provincialism or ethnocentrism; correspondingly, they characterize objectivism and anti-relativism as inherently dogmatic or ethnocentric. Robert and Jon Soloman write, puzzlingly, that relativism does not

> ... entail giving up the notion of universal values. What relativism does require is an open ear and and open mind, a willingness to listen and learn as well as the need to discuss and argue and to stick up for what is right. Relativism is not an attack on values. It is an attack on dogmatism.[39]

Clifford Geertz makes similar claims in 'Anti-Anti-Relativism', asserting, for instance, that:

> What the relativists, so-called, want us to worry about is provincialism—the danger that our perceptions will be dulled, our intel-

[37] Feyerabend, Paul *Farewell to Reason* (New York: Verso, 1987), 74.
[38] Ibid., 22.
[39] *Up the University: Re-Creating Higher Education in America* (New York: Addison Wesley Publishing Company, 1993), 197.

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> lects constricted, and our sympathies narrowed by the over-learned and overvalued acceptances of our own society.[40]

A similar position seems to be advanced by Melville Herskovits:

> ['cultural relativism'] requires those who hold to it to alter responses that arise out of some of the strongest enculturative conditioning to which they have been exposed, the ethnocentrisms implicit in the particular value-systems of their society.[41]

Though I do not aim to criticize relativism here, a tiny sketch of a criticism will make it clearer why such a take on relativism is inaccurate. The idea that it is possible to transcend one's society, and to some extent at least break free of the bonds of one's 'enculturation' is, if anything, an *objectivistic* view. The view that I am forever locked into my provincial preconceptions is a view which is much more strongly allied with relativism.[42]

One problem here is merely terminological. Herskovits, at least, pretty clearly intends to argue for objectivism, although he *calls* it 'relativism'. Elsewhere he writes:

> As a method, relativism encompasses the principle of our science that, in studying a culture, one seeks to attain as great a degree of objectivity as possible...[43]

Herskovits's view is really that our views of the world tend to be distorted by our 'enculturation', and we ought to seek to overcome that, which we can do by studying other cultures in a dispassionate and scientific manner. A more thoroughly objectivistic view there never was.

A second problem here (especially on the part of Geertz) seems to be a failure to recognize a rather elementary distinction between (taking the example of *alethic* objectivism) (a) the view that *there are objective truths* and (b) the view that *there are objective truths, and we*

[40] Geertz 'Anti-Anti-Relativism', in Krausz, Michael, *Relativism: Interpretation and Confrontation* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 15.

[41] 'Tender and Tough-minded Anthropology' in Melville Herskovits, *Cultural Relativism: Perspectives in Cultural Pluralism* (New York: Random House, 1972), 37.

[42] Although, strictly speaking, the question of whether I can break out of my initial *Weltanschauung* is an epistemological question orthogonal to the relativism/objectivism dispute. It is the objectivist, however, who recognizes the necessity (and desirability) of this kind of transcendence.

[43] 'Cultural Relativism and Cultural Values,' in Melville Herskovits, *Cultural Relativism: Perspectives in Cultural Pluralism* (New York: Random House, 1972), 32.

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know (*or are certain about*) *what they are* (call such a view a(n aletheic) *success theory*), or, worse, between (a) or (b) and (c) the view that *the objective truths are whatever we believe them to be* (i.e., an extreme version of dogmatism). The failure to make such distinctions seems to be responsible not only for Geertz's confusions, but for many of Feyerabend's as well; consider, for instance, the latter's offering of the following *ad hominem* by way of a bit of *a priori* history:

> *The idea of objectivity* ... is older than science and independent of it. It arose whenever a nation or a tribe or a civilization identified its ways of life with the laws of the (physical and moral) universe.[44]

Rorty seems to be making the same mistake when he writes that:

> The position in question [roughly, relativism[45]] is criticized for not having done what philosophers are employed to do: explain why our framework, or culture, or interests, or language, or whatever, is at last on the right track—in touch with physical reality, or the moral law, or real numbers, or some other sort of object patiently waiting about to be copied.[46]

In each case we see the obviously incorrect and decidedly uncharitable suggestion that if we believe that *some propositions are objectively true*, then we *must* believe that *we know which propositions are the true ones*. But that is clearly not so.

6.3

But the relativists' charges against objectivism become shriller still. Feyerabend tells us that, in addition to being the ally of epistemic humility, relativism '...is quite fashionable today as a weapon against intellectual tyranny.'[47] The objectivist is not just smug, complacent, and provincial, but tyrannical as well! And worse, objectivist tyranny is not only of an *intellectual* sort:

> Relativism is a popular doctrine. Repelled by the presumption of those who think they know the truth and having witnessed the

[44] Feyerabend, *Farewell to Reason* (New York: Verso, 1987, 5.

[45] Rorty claims that the view in question here, although *called* relativism by its critics, is really the view that he calls 'pragmatism' (but which I will call *neo-pragmatism*), rather than relativism. But I think that the view he is discussing here really *is* a kind of relativism.

[46] Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 166–7.

[47] Feyerabend *Farewell to Reason*, p. 19. Note that though it is not obvious in this fragment that Feyerabend is endorsing this view, he does.

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> disasters created by attempts to enforce a uniform way of life many people now believe that what is true for one person, or one group, or one culture need not be true for another.[48]

Note, again, the pervasive confusion of objectivism with the success theory and dogmatism. Note also the unwarranted move from *S thinks that she knows the truth* to *S will try to impose her beliefs on others* (by force, no doubt). This error is particularly glaring given that it is common for objectivists to hold that one of the objectively correct moral principles is *it is wrong to force one's beliefs on others*.

Unsurprisingly, the objectivists' motives are not above suspicion, either:

> Philosophers define what it means to know and what is good for society. Many intellectuals favour this *authoritarian approach*. They may overflow with concern for their fellow human beings, they may speak of 'truth', 'reason', 'objectivity', even of 'liberty', but what they really want is the power to reshape the world in their own image.[49]

There are plenty of things that could be said here about excessive suspicion of one's fellow humans, but you know what they are. So I'll just pass over this passage in relative silence, noting only the obvious: that a sincere belief that truth is objective is quite different from pretending to believe this in order to control other people, and that, while the latter is alarmingly common, the existence of the former is (a) common enough, and (b) sufficient to falsify Feyerabend's unreasonably uncharitable accusations.

7. Relativism, Bias, and Our Epistemic Predicament

In support of his perplexing brand of (purported) relativism, Feyerabend offers the following quotation from Herodotus:

> If anyone, no matter who, were given the opportunity of choosing from amongst all the nations of the world the set of beliefs which he thought best, he would inevitably, after careful consideration of their relative merits, choose that of his own country. Everyone without exception believes his own native customs, and the religion he was brought up in, to be the best.[50]

[48] Ibid., 19.
[49] Ibid., 56.
[50] Herodotus, quoted in Feyerabend, *Farewell to Reason*, 43

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Geertz wants to make a similar point in the following, ending with a quotation from Montaigne:

> The relativist bent, or more accurately the relativist bent anthropology so often induces in those who have much traffic with its materials, is thus in some sense implicit in the field as such ... One cannot read too long about Nayar matriliny, Aztec sacrifice, the Hopi verb, or the convolutions of the hominid transition and not begin at least to consider the possibility that, to quote Montaigne again, 'each man calls barbarism whatever is not his own practice...for we have no other criterion of reason than the example and idea of the opinions and customs of the country we live in.'[51]

Feyerabend, Herodotus, Geertz, and Montaigne are pointing to an important phenomenon here, but (a) their claims are false, and (b) they are not relativistic. Even if it were true at one time that people had 'no other criterion of reason than the example and idea of the opinions and customs' of their own countries, that is clearly no longer the case. Although I, for instance, have lived my entire life in the United States, information about the opinions and customs of other places and times is easily available to me. No doubt the 'opinions' and so forth prevalent in twentiethth-century America have impressed themselves on me more *forcibly* than those of, say, fourth-century China, but that's just a difference in degree, and not in kind. Furthermore, we all know that there are certain persons, especially common in academia, who are more inclined to *reject* an opinion or value simply *because* it is currently widespread and/or characteristically American.

But far and away the most important point to be made here is that the Herodotian point, even if true, would not get us to *relativism*. Herodotus & co. are pointing to a different kind of problem. They are merely claiming that bias is pervasive (which is probably true) and insurmountable (which is probably false). But these things, even if true, would not mean that truth, justification, moral correctness or what have you are not objective matters, just that we can't attain them. At most it could get us *scepticism*, but by no means could it get us *relativism*. Which brings us to our next topic.

8. Relativism *v.* Scepticism

As with the confusion of relativism and pluralism, it is common for non-philosophers to confuse relativism and scepticism. Given that

[51] Geertz 'Anti-Anti-Relativism', 14.

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it also happens that people—some philosophers included—sometimes confuse scepticism and fallibilism, and that, as we have seen, some people confuse fallibilism and relativism, it should not be too surprising that some also confuse scepticism and relativism. I doubt, however, that this is the source of Popper's confusion of relativism, scepticism, and nihilism when he writes that:

> By relativism—or, if you like, scepticism—I mean here, briefly, the theory that the choice between competing theories is arbitrary; since either, there is no such thing as objective truth; or, if there is, no such thing as a theory which is true...[52]

But relativism is not scepticism, and relativism *per se* is not the view that theory choice is arbitrary—rather (according to relativism), theory choice for a given group (framework, tradition, whatever) is decidedly *non*-arbitrary. Though, because there is nothing, objectively speaking, to recommend one of these groups (frameworks, traditions, whatever) over any other, the problem of arbitrariness does clearly threaten. But, again, this is a *criticism* of relativism, not something which is definitive of the view. Note that in this passage Popper also confuses relativism with alethic nihilism (there is 'no such thing as a theory which is true').

The same confusion is afoot when David S. Noss and John B. Noss identify the view of the Daoist thinker Zhuang-zi as relativistic, though they themselves describe Zhuang-zi as believing merely that 'in a world of perfectly natural change absolute [i.e., objective] truth and absolute good are unknowable'[53]—that is, as a sceptic, not a relativist.

Even so clear a thinker on the subject of relativism as R. B. Brandt has apparently made a similar mistake. In *Ethical Theory*, in a chapter concerned with moral relativism, Brandt claims that Protagoras apparently believed the following two things: 'first, that moral principles cannot be shown to be valid for everybody; and second, that people ought to follow the conventions of their own group.'[54] Call the first claim (P1). Brandt takes this view and similar ones to be forms of ethical relativism. He identifies (P1) as

[52] *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. 2 (Princeton University Press, 1966), 369.

[53] Noss and Noss *A History of the World's Religions* 9th edn (New York: MacMillan, 1994), 294–5. Part of Zhuang-zi's (Chuang-Tzu's) view also has to do with different things being good for different creatures ('If a man sleeps in a damp place, he gets lumbago and dies. But how about an eel?'); but that's more like covert objectivism (see Section 8, below).

[54] Brandt, *Ethical Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1959), 271.

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Protagoras's most important claim, and sets out to sharpen it into an adequate statement of relativism. His suggested reformulation of the claim is: 'There are conflicting ethical opinions that are equally valid.' Call this claim (P2). But note that (P1) (moral principles cannot be shown to be valid for everybody) expresses a certain kind of *scepticism* rather than a kind of relativism—that is, scepticism about the possibility of *proving* universal validity of principles of moral correctness. Such a view does not entail that moral principles are *not* 'universally valid'[55] (roughly: objectivistic), rather, merely that they cannot be *shown* to be so. *Furthermore*, it does not entail that moral principles *are* valid in some relativistic way (nor, incidentally, that if they *were* relativistic, they would be knowable). The move from (P1) to (P2) is entirely unjustified, and, though Brandt is right in so far as (P2) is a better (though not ideal) statement of relativism than (P1) is, he is wrong to claim that (P2) can be a correct analysis of (P1).

9. Quasi-Relativism

I want to consider one final kind of non-relativism, which we might call 'quasi-relativism' or 'covert objectivism'. Some views bear a superficial resemblance to genuine relativism, but in fact, turn on objectivistic principles and claims. The anthropological theory known as *functionalism* is a type of covert objectivism. Functionalists believe, in the face of some rather impressive evidence to the contrary, that every practice of every social group is beneficial to that group, and that different practices are beneficial for different groups.[56] But the only differences here are contextual ones: beneficence is still taken to be a perfectly objective matter of survival and flourishing, and the functionalists' claim of perfect adaptation is itself, of course, supposed to be perfectly objective. When an objectivistic view is mistaken for a relativistic one, it is often because the view is context-sensitive in some such way.

Consider the following claim:

> (M) For any person S and any action, a, of S's, a is (morally) good iff a is in accordance with the traditions of the society to which S belongs.

[55] Ibid., 272.

[56] This is the sort of view one sometimes finds called relativism by anthropologists. The anthropological/sociological theory that every social practice has developed because it is useful to the group in question (this view is called 'functionalism') is a type of first-order 'relativism' combined with second-order objectivism. For a discussion of this view, see Edgerton *Sick Societies*.

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(M), I would argue, is not a relativistic principle. It is a purely objectivistic principle, holding for all persons and societies, though it entails that individuals living in societies with differing moral traditions will be obligated to do different specific things. It is context-sensitive, but it doesn't seem to be relativistic. A theory which has (M) as its central principle would be an unusual, but not what I'd call *revolutionary*, theory. (M) is an implausible (even bizarre) principle, but a principle that is in some sense on par with the categorical imperative and the principle of utility—it is supposed to hold for all people in all places at all times. The relativist allegedly seeks to reject all objective moral principles, to deny that there is any principle that binds all individuals; (M), however, apparently says that all individuals *are* in some sense under the same obligation: to do what accords with the traditions of their society. It is not at all clear that this is different in principle than, say, being obligated to do whatever will promote the general happiness. One of the central questions here concerns the characterization of obligations, in particular the generality of these characterizations. If there is always some level of generality at which two seemingly different sets of obligations are really instances of some more general set of obligations, then perhaps relativism (or 'relativism') will always turn out to be a kind of context-sensitive objectivism. The point here is rather vague, but, I think, important all the same: somehow this is not what relativism is supposed to be like. If we *do* determine that (M) is relativistic, moral relativism will have turned out to be far less radical, interesting, and important meta-theoretically than it was supposed to have been.

Although I think the points above are in some ways the more interesting and important ones, perhaps the clearest reason for claiming that (M) is not relativistic is that it does not actually *relativize* moral goodness; 'good' remains a 1-place predicate and goodness a non-relational property. On such a view, acting in accordance with tradition is good—really, non-relativistically good, not 'good for' some group or other, but good simpliciter. Such a view certainly cannot be relativistic on the criteria discussed in section 2, and this corroborates the conclusion of the previous paragraph.

Analogues of most of these points can be made with regard to justificatory epistemological and alethic relativism, though there are complications in each case, and considerations of space prevent me from considering them in this paper.

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10. Conclusion

There is more to be said here, but no more room to say it in. There are, however, other notable mis-characterizations of relativism which would deserve consideration in a longer essay.[57]

What questions remain unanswered? And to where does the above discussion point us? I think that the most immediately important remaining question is: Is there really anything left for relativism to *be*? I think that there *is* something left (though, almost incidentally, the remaining alternative seems to be implausible and probably incoherent). That is, I believe that it is possible to articulate a view which is clearly non-identical with any of the views considered above (fallibilism, nihilism, quasi-relativism, and the rest), and which pretty clearly captures the spirit of relativism, accords with the general characterizations of Section 2, etc. I don't have space to even give a decent sketch of the view here, but we *have* discovered a few important things that will help to determine the general features of such an account. Consider moral relativism again. Since relativism is not nihilism, moral relativism must hold that some actions really (*really*) *are* right (or wrong). Moral rectitude must, however, be relative to something (something like belief or tradition), of course. And, yet, as relativism is not covert objectivism, the normativity cannot be grounded in any transcendent, non-relativistic principle like (M). The most plausible candidate for a ground of the normativity, it seems, would be the very thing that it is supposedly relative to, viz., belief or culture. Thus—or so I argue elsewhere[58]—moral relativism (for instance) must be the view that moral normativity is somehow grounded in culture, or belief, or whatever it is supposed to be relative to. Of course now we need, among other things, an account of what 'grounded in' means, but that's a long story for a different paper—a paper on what relativism is. As for now, we must be satisfied simply to note what it isn't.

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[57] Joseph Margolis, for instance, advances the puzzling claim that alethic relativism has nothing to do with relativizing truth; rather, he claims, it is the view that we should reject *tertium non datur*, and, thus, accept that there are more than two truth values. He also advances the claim that relativism is the view that 'the world *is* flux,' that is, that the world has no permanent, unchanging structure. (*The Truth About Relativism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Oxford University Press), xii, and also in 'The Truth About Relativism' in Krausz, *Relativism: Interpretation and Confrontation.*) He seems to believe that these claims are equivalent. If our initial general characterizations of relativism are correct, then Margolis's characterization falls prey to the same general kinds of arguments that are brought to bear against the other views considered above.

[58] Tentatively titled 'What Relativism Is,' and as yet unpublished.

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