RELATIVISM: SOME REFLECTIONS

Andrew Pyle

'That's true-for-you, but not true-for-me.' Are there any truths for which this is, indeed, true?

(1) Preamble

There are many educated and intelligent people in the modern world who think – and say – that they are relativists. 'What is true for us,' they insist, 'may not be true for people living in a different time, or place, or culture.' Those of us educated in the discipline of analytic philosophy tend to regard relativism about truth as incoherent and unintelligible. But the people who say such things are not fools, and it would be arrogant in the extreme to simply dismiss what they say as utter nonsense. What I want to explore is what sort of doctrines or opinions (short of truth relativism, which I firmly believe to be incoherent) such people might have in mind.

(2) Why the notion of true-for-me makes no sense

Why do I insist that relativism about truth is incoherent and unintelligible? Perhaps I'd better persuade you of this before we proceed. I'll run very briefly through two quick arguments and one rather more sophisticated one.

Quick method 1: the reflexivity test (from Plato's *Protagoras*). Does the relativist believe only that relativism is true-for-him? If so, he must then accept that absolutism is true-for the absolutist. On the relativist's own principles, no one ever falls into error: what any person believes is true-for that person. So, since all beliefs are true-for the person who believes them, no two people *ever* have contradictory views about anything. But this could only make sense if each of us inhabited an entirely private universe, which exactly fits our beliefs (and changes every time we change our minds). But this is inconsistent with the very existence of a public language. So the first thing a genuine relativist should do is *shut up*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175600003122 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Quick method 2: the common sense test. About twenty years ago, in one of Uganda's frequent civil wars, there was a rebel leader, Alice La Quenya, a charismatic prostitute-turned-saint. She led her rag-tag army into battle after anointing their bodies with herbs and potions, persuading them that this made them invulnerable to bullets. After a few early successes, they came up against some well-armed troops.... and died. What is the relativist to say? Did they not believe strongly enough that they were invulnerable?

More sophisticated method (from Quine and Davidson). If someone in my presence utters a string of articulate sounds, I naturally construe it as language, i.e. as possessing meaning. But to understand the meaning of an utterance is to understand its truth-conditions, i.e. to grasp how things stand if the utterance is true. And this 'true' is true *simpliciter*, not true-for-me or true-for-you or true-for-us or true-for-them. In situations of so-called 'radical interpretation' I must assume that my interlocutors (the tribe whose language I am trying to translate) believe mostly *truths* (plus perhaps a few explicable falsehoods) about our shared environment. Without that assumption, I can't ascribe beliefs to them at all, or regard their utterances as meaningful. So the relativist's doctrine – that 'truth' must always be relativized to a speaker, understood as 'true-for-me' – implicitly denies the very possibility of language and meaning.

(3) What might the self-styled relativist mean?

In this section I want to outline some possible ways of construing the claims of the relativist to make them consistent with a plain (non-relativist) conception of truth. Here are some obvious possibilities:

3a. Replace monadic by dyadic predicates. Instead of saying 'aspirin cures headaches' you might say 'aspirin cures headaches in people of constitution type C' (but perhaps not in people of constitution type D). In medicine alone there are, of course, lots of such cases, where a closer look at the details

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175600003122 Published online by Cambridge University Press

reveals that a particular drug only has its desired effect on patients of a particular age or sex, or in a certain environment, or in combination with a certain diet and lifestyle. This type of example provided one of the sources of ancient relativism: it goes all the way back to Plato's *Protagoras*. The diet that would be recommended for a ballerina, Protagoras remarked, is not the same as what would be recommended for a professional wrestler. He went on to draw a close analogy with political constitutions: a form of government (e.g. direct democracy) that fits a small state may not suit a large one.

It is important to see that this has *no connection whatsoever* with relativism about truth. If the doctors are right, it is simply true (absolutely true, true simpliciter) that drug X will cure Peter but will not cure Paul. If Protagoras is right, it is true (true simpliciter) that direct democracy will work in Ancient Athens but not in the Persian Empire.

It is also important to see that Einstein's theory of relativity gives us simply one more example of this kind. Foolish people sometimes say that 'after Einstein, everything is relative', as if his special and general theories of relativity supported relativism, but that is nothing more than a shallow confusion based upon equivocation. We were always comfortable with position and velocity being relative terms, i.e. two-place predicates. It came as some surprise to discover that mass, which Newtonian physicists had taken to be an intrinsic property of a body, turns out also to be relational. But this has nothing whatsoever to do with truth-relativism. There are plain truths (true simpliciter) about the mass of a given body as measured in different reference-frames.

There are, clearly, many cases of this kind – where a close look at the circumstances requires us to replace a one-place predicate with a two-place predicate, or a two-place predicate by a three-place one, and so on. The world is often more complex than we had thought it. But cases like this have nothing whatsoever to do with relativism about truth.

3b. Replace relativism about truth with relativism about rationality. *If relativism about truth is obviously incoherent, the*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175600003122 Published online by Cambridge University Press

same cannot be said of relativism about rationality. If asked to justify one of my beliefs, I may cite several different types of support for it: direct individual experience, memory, authority of various kinds, coherence with other beliefs, inductive and deductive support of various kinds. We can agree that all of these factors count as giving support to a belief, but we might not agree on how they should be weighed against one another and how to deal with conflicts between them. Cultural relativism might creep in here: in a recent cross-cultural study of intuitions about knowledge, Stephen Stich has claimed that East Asians do place more reliance on authorities than Westerners. And when we move from everyday beliefs to scientific theories, similar problems emerge. In the *Postscript* to his famous *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn lists five criteria for evaluating scientific theories: accuracy, consistency (internal and external), scope, simplicity, and fruitfulness. We can acknowledge all five as genuine values constitutive of science, says Kuhn, without believing that, in actual cases of theory evaluation, they uniquely determine correct solutions. In the first place, the application of these values to actual situations may be problematic and controversial. And even if the application of a given value, e.g. simplicity, is agreed, its weighting vis-à-vis the other values will remain undetermined. How much simplicity are we prepared to give up in order to obtain a more accurate theory? If such questions have no determinate answers, scientific rationality is, Kuhn says, a difficult and delicate matter of achieving consensus through negotiation, not a matter of applying some universal set of algorithms.

So we can make a case for rationality-relativism both in everyday life and in science. It is important to see that this has nothing to do with truth-relativism. For each of our scientific values, we like to think there is some connection with truth. (This is easy to show for accuracy and consistency, *much harder* for fruitfulness and simplicity). We can therefore appreciate the epistemic *virtues* of people in other cultures. Suppose I find myself in a so-called 'primitive' culture, where a great deal of epistemic weight is given to tradition. I ask someone why he

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175600003122 Published online by Cambridge University Press

believes something that I consider false. He tells me that the elders have told him it is so, or that it is asserted in the oral history (myths and legends) of his people. I can't say that it is irrational to give epistemic weight to authorities – after all, a very high percentage of my own beliefs rest on authority. All I can say is that these people give *too much* weight to authority, and not enough to, say, critical reflection upon experience. But I don't pretend to have a definitive formula or recipe in mind. It may well be that our notion of rationality is *permissive* in this regard, i.e. that there is a whole spectrum of attitudes between excessively credulous and excessively sceptical of authority, within which no precise position is manifestly irrational. There is a peculiar legal notion of 'rational' meaning 'not obviously irrational' that might prove useful here.

I think the people who argue for cultural relativism often have rationality-relativism rather than truth-relativism in mind. They don't want to deny that we all share a common world, against which beliefs can be assessed as true or false. What they object to is the assumption of Westerners that their perspectives and beliefs are uniquely rational, which in turn involves condescension at best (or contempt at worst) towards the beliefs of others. But the absolutist about truth can be quite charitable in his ascriptions of rationality. I can regard a belief that I do not share as false but rational either because of (a) different experience but shared standards of rationality (they simply don't have access to some evidence that I do have access to) or (b) somewhat different norms of rationality (they attach, for example, more weight to authority than I do). In neither case need my attitude be one of condescension or contempt.

3c. Replace relativism by perspectivism. Perspectivism is the doctrine that reality doesn't come neatly parcelled up into kinds that fit our categories, and that there may be many very different ways of categorizing experience, none of which is absolutely wrong. This is a position quite distinct from relativism, more plausible in its own right, and not vulnerable to the objection of incoherence. A prominent advocate in the History

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175600003122 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of Philosophy is Nietzsche. Perspectivism is nicely illustrated by the old story of the five blind men and the elephant. Each man gets hold of a part of the whole, and gives a description based on their experience. Each man's description is partial, but not erroneous. Each could, in principle, come to accept the legitimacy of the others' descriptions. There aren't five different elephants present, just one common object of experience being described in different but consistent ways.

A common theme of the perspectivist is the existence of a multitude of different ways of categorizing the same group of objects. Asked to study the cars in a car park, for example, one might group the cars by price, colour, country of origin, age, engine capacity, etc. One could launch enquiries from any number of standpoints, with any number of questions in mind. The results of the various enquiries would all be perfectly consistent with one another, but would reflect the interests and concerns of the investigator as much as the properties of the objects studied.

This perspectivism is (more or less) the position of the later Thomas Kuhn. In his famous *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* he argued that Scientific Revolutions involve paradigm-shifts, in which the world itself changes. His critics accused him of absurd excesses of relativism and even idealism. In Kuhn's later papers, he refined his notion of world-changes. The same objects persist through our conceptual revolutions, he explained, and of course they persist with the properties that they objectively possess. But the existence of an unchanging set of objects doesn't uniquely determine a single correct categorization of those objects. We group objects into kinds in virtue of resemblance relations. But things can resemble one another in many different respects, and it's the paradigm (our background beliefs, assumptions, expectations, and concerns) that determines which of these respects we regard as crucial. So what happens in a Scientific Revolution is that a new set of resemblances come to seem crucial, and lead to a regrouping of an unchanged set of objects. Kuhn's favourite example is from the Copernican Revolution: take Earth, Moon, Sun, Jupiter, Venus, and Andromeda before and after the revolution.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175600003122 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Before the revolution, Earth is a unique object, the Sun and Moon belong with Jupiter and Venus in the group of planets, and Andromeda is a fixed star. After the revolution, the Sun goes with Andromeda, the Earth now joins Venus and Jupiter as a planet, and the Moon begins to look like an anomalous secondary planet.

Perspectivism is a perfectly defensible position, free from the obvious objections to relativism, and well worth discussion in its own right. I suspect that this is what self-styled relativists often have in mind when they advocate more 'cultural relativism', and that what they are attacking is not absolutism about truth but the dogmatic assumption of Westerners that our perspective is the uniquely correct one.

4. Relativism and Values

Many people think that, even if relativism about truth is incoherent, relativism about values makes perfectly good sense. I want in this section to do three things:

A. Expose some bad reasons (mere confusions) why people believe this.
B. See how far we can go in accommodating the relativists' intuitions by the same strategies we employed above (two-place predicates, rationality-relativism, and perspectivism).
C. Ask whether there might remain a residue of truth in value-relativism after all these strategies have been exhausted.

4A. Bad reasons for espousing value-relativism

Confusion between relational claims and relativism. If I say that a certain diet is good for the ballerina but bad for the wrestler, I am suggesting that the notion of a good (healthy) diet needs to be understood in terms of a relation between a diet and a subject (given their age, sex, occupation, etc.). Likewise, if I say that direct democracy works in Ancient Athens but not in Persia, I am claiming that the notion of a good (workable) constitution needs to be understood in terms of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175600003122 Published online by Cambridge University Press

a relation between a set of laws and institutions and a state (given its size, diversity, population, etc.) In neither case need this have anything to do with relativism. Indeed, in both cases, I tacitly appeal to some absolute values (health in the medical case, peace and prosperity in the political one) to support my judgment.

Confusion between codes and principles. Relativists about values often point to the differences in moral codes between societies, as if this obvious matter of observable sociological fact settled the issue in their favour. But this is just a muddle. Suppose I accept some absolute moral principles – for the sake of simplicity, let's make them utilitarian principles. Applying those absolute principles to different societies, I will inevitably arrive at different moral codes. Suppose I ask whether extramarital sex is wrong (a) in Victorian Britain and (b) in modern Britain. In the former case, I can realise (e.g. by reading the classic novels of the period) that such sexual relations often led to pregnancy, and that the unmarried mother and her child faced a life of misery, disgrace, and ruin. These were the plain historical facts of the case, and provide the ground for my moral judgment that such sexual relations were wrong. Applying exactly the same utilitarian principles to modern Britain, I find that sex need not lead to unwanted pregnancies, and that, even in those cases where it does, the disadvantages facing unmarried mothers and illegitimate children are very much slighter now than in Victorian times. So, applying exactly the same unchanging principles, I conclude that moral codes *should* be different in the two societies. This has nothing whatsoever to do with moral relativism.

Confusion between Relativism and Toleration. This crops up again and again in discussions of relativism, but it's a complete muddle. The relativist seeks to portray himself as tolerant and open-minded, as contrasted with the arrogant dogmatism of the absolutist. But this is doubly or triply confused. The absolutist believes that there is an absolute right and wrong, not that he or she possesses any unique or

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175600003122 Published online by Cambridge University Press

privileged access to it. I can make an absolute judgment and admit the possibility of error. And the supposed link to toleration turns out to be entirely illusory. If the relativist thinks it follows from moral relativism that each person ought to live in accordance with the norms of their own society, they fall into confusion. Any advice or instruction on how someone ought to live is an absolute judgment. I can say 'Society S1 has norm N1' and 'Society S2 has norm N2', and 'I am in Society S1' without concluding that I ought to endorse N1 and reject N2. In choosing to live in accordance with the norms of my society I am doing more than acknowledging the sociological fact that those are the norms: I am endorsing them as right or proper or appropriate. And that is a non-relative judgment. Even if we allowed the relativist this fallacious move, the supposed link to toleration would then disappear. If I have to endorse and act on the norms of the society I find myself in, then if I find myself in Germany in the 1930s I must persecute Jews, and if I find myself in modern Somalia I must approve of the mutilation of young girls. (Those people who consider themselves both feminists and relativists always have trouble with this one.)

4b. Accommodating the Relativists' Intuitions

The three strategies we employed earlier when discussing relativism about facts are all clearly re-applicable in the case of values.

Relational judgments. In judging a code of morality, or a system of government, we clearly need to know something about the society we are seeking to legislate for. To suppose that one moral code, or one (type of) constitution is universally applicable is not absolutism but stupidity. (Think of the Americans and their hope for democracy in Iraq). There may of course be absolute values, but they may be realized in different ways in different circumstances. A moral code must serve human flourishing; a system of government must serve peace and stability. This in turn may require legitimation and some sort of popular consent (perhaps tacit), but precisely how this consent is expressed may be widely variable.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175600003122 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Rationality-relativism. Even given absolute values, there may be legitimate and reasonable differences regarding how they are to be achieved, or how one good (e.g. civil liberty) is to be weighed against another (e.g. security). People of intelligence and goodwill can have opposed – but perfectly reasonable – opinions either about how some agreed good is to be achieved, or about how different agreed goods are to be weighed.

Perspectivism. This, I suspect, is going to be almost universal in moral and political debate. Our moral judgments standardly turn on our ways of perceiving and describing the situations we find ourselves in. And, just as in the factual case (arguably, even more so) there may be several distinct (but not inconsistent) ways of describing or characterizing a situation. To take an obvious example, suppose I am a Kantian and I am discussing the morality of prostitution. One could derive, from Kantian principles, arguments for a strongly conservative view (it violates the categorical imperative) or for a strongly liberal view (it's a freely entered into, non-coercive relationship). What will turn out to be crucial may actually be one's conceptualization of the mind-body relationship. Can a person regard his or her own body as an external possession, or is such alienation deeply pathological? Persuasion – in sermons, political campaigning, moralizing, etc. – is basically a strenuous attempt to get the audience to see a given situation in a certain light, from a certain point of view, i.e. as falling under a certain description and hence under an agreed principle. There can be no doubt that a great deal of moralizing activity can be dealt with in this way, without full-blooded moral relativism.

So we have these three strategies available to us to try to accommodate the intuitions that drive the value-relativist, while stopping short of value-relativism itself. We must now conclude by addressing the two following questions:

Q1. Do these strategies exhaust all the cases?
Q2. Is value-relativism actually incoherent (in the way that truth-relativism is)?

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175600003122 Published online by Cambridge University Press

If the answer to Q2 is 'yes', the answer to Q1 had better be 'yes'. If the answer to Q2 is 'no', there may be more sense to value-relativism than to truth-relativism, and we might expect to find actual cases that can't be dealt with by our three familiar strategies.

4c Is there real Value Relativism?

All truths must be consistent with one another – that is a fundamental and inviolable logical constraint governing our notion of truth, and ruling out truth-relativism. Is there a comparable axiom for values? Many people have thought so. Plato, for example, argued for a necessary unity of the virtues, that one couldn't possess (full) courage without justice and temperance. Others have denied this Platonic thesis, thinking it psychologically implausible and contrary to everyday experience.

In fact, the Platonic theory of the unity of the virtues isn't quite our concern here. Our question isn't whether it is possible to *possess* one virtue without possessing the others; it is whether it is possible to *approve* (attach value to) one virtue, while rejecting (refusing to attach value to) another. To get a real case of value-relativism, we need to ensure that it isn't just yet another case of different weightings. Such cases are, I presume, common and philosophically unproblematic. One culture may attach great value to physical courage and less to fairness and justice; another culture may reverse those evaluations. So long as both cultures accept both values as genuine values, we have only a case of different weightings of some agreed (non-relative) goods.

So are there *bona fide* cases of value relativism? Such a case would require the following:

- Society S1 places positive value on trait T1; society S2 places zero (or even negative) value on T1.
- These values are conceived as intrinsic rather than instrumental. (If they were conceived as instrumental, there would be no problem and we would have a

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175600003122 Published online by Cambridge University Press

relativity of codes that was perfectly consistent with the postulation of absolute values).

- There is no remote prospect of a decision procedure, a way of showing (perhaps by reference to facts about human nature and human flourishing) that one society is right and the other wrong.

Two possible cases of *bona fide* value relativism?

(1) Pride versus Humility in the transition from pagan antiquity to Christianity. If you read Aristotle or the Stoics, a mark of the virtuous man is a certain self-satisfaction, a proper pride in his own virtues and accomplishments. Contrast this with, say, Augustine in his *Confessions*. Can we appeal (without begging the question) to a notion of human excellence to settle the dispute about whether pride is a virtue or a vice? Could we hope for consensus between pagan and Christian if we did a bit more fine-tuning? Could reference to context resolve the issue and allow us to agree that pride is sometimes good (in some contexts) and sometimes bad (in a different set of contexts)? Or might we be left with a sense that no such shifts and qualifications allow us to escape from the radical opposition between pagan and Christian ideals?

(2) The contemplative versus the active life, in the transition from the medieval to the modern world. Medieval accounts of man postulated a hierarchy of types of human life with the contemplative (scholarly and monastic) life at the top. These lives, we are told, realize our highest powers (intellectual activity, contemplation of God). But around 1600, in the works of Bacon and others, this hierarchy is challenged and the active life placed above the contemplative. By the time you reach Hume, the so-called 'monkish virtues' are not merely downgraded but dismissed with contempt as serving no useful purpose. Once again, we seem to be faced here with conflicting ideals that cannot readily be reconciled, and no prospect of finding a neutral stance from which to make a judgment.

Cases like these *might* be resolved without any concessions to genuine value relativism. There *might* be a way of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175600003122 Published online by Cambridge University Press

insisting (a) that absolute value attaches to all these various aspects of human excellence, and (b) that the appearance of relativism results only from different weightings of an agreed set of goods, or from a failure to adequately contextualize the virtues in question. But at least at first sight it doesn't look that way. There might well be moral dilemmas we can't resolve by an Aristotelian appeal to the good life because it's precisely the nature of the good life for humans that is in question. And there might well be cases in which a given characteristic (e.g. humility) is given a positive intrinsic value in one system and a zero or negative intrinsic value in another.

At least *prima facie*, then, it is conceivable that the structure of Value may be different from the structure of Truth. All truths must be consistent with one another: that is simply an absolute requirement of the concept of truth itself. Go back to the story of the five blind men and the elephant. The sighted man takes a step or two back, and sees that each of them has access to some part of the truth. But I can see no comparable absolute requirement that all goods must be co-endorsable. For truths, we tacitly appeal to a God's eye point of view, the 'absolute conception of reality' (Bernard Williams), or the 'end of rational enquiry' (C.S.Peirce). For values, there may be no such ideal we can coherently appeal to. If so, real (irresolvable) value relativism can't be definitely ruled out.

I am confident that most of the prosaic, everyday, assertions of moral relativism are based on the confusions already identified. Also that the vast majority of the more sensible and measured assertions of would-be moral relativists can be handled by one or other of the three strategies outlined above (i.e. recourse to dyadic or triadic predicates, rationality-relativism, and perspectivism). But I know no philosophical argument that can rule out the possibility of genuine and irresolvable moral relativism. If there are fissures in the structure of Value (as there cannot be in the structure of Truth) then moral relativism cannot be refuted by philosophical argument.

Andrew Pyle is Reader in Early Modern Philosophy at the University of Bristol.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175600003122 Published online by Cambridge University Press