Relativism

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Introduction

The many faces of relativism

This book was written out of the conviction that the cluster of views falling under the heading of 'relativism', despite many problematic features, captures important insights. As a member of three distinct cultural and linguistic groupings (Armenian-Iranian-Irish) and as I attempt to negotiate their at times conflicting social and ethical outlooks, I remain convinced of the fact of diversity and the significance of intellectual and political efforts to comprehend and accommodate it. The idea of relativism arises out of an acknowledgement of the existence of deep differences in attitudes and beliefs. In the wake of political ideologies with global and universal aspirations, relativism has come to occupy a prominent place in the intellectual ethos of our time. It has become a constant theme in the theoretical orientation of various fields—including the social sciences, literary theory and cultural studies—and is often treated as a credo by undergraduate students in humanities. At its most basic, relativism is the view that cognitive, moral or aesthetic norms and values are dependent on the social or conceptual systems that underpin them, and consequently a neutral standpoint for evaluating them is not available to us. This simple definition, however, ultimately proves unsatisfactory since the single label 'relativism' has been used for a great variety of doctrines and positions. In analytic philosophical circles relativism is either dismissed readily as an incoherent position or is identified with irrationalism and cognitive anarchy. For instance, Popper argues:

> One of the more disturbing aspects of the intellectual life of our time is the way in which irrationalism is so widely advocated, and the way in which irrationalist doctrines are taken for granted. One of the components of modern irrationalism is relativism (the doctrine that truth is relative to our intellectual background).
>
> (Popper 1994:33)

Such a dismissive attitude has not had much impact on the popularity of the doctrine outside the confines of analytic philosophical circles. Philosophical arguments against relativism have failed partly because its opponents have ignored the variety of doctrines coming under that title, and partly for the lack of due attention to the reasons that have made it into an attractive philosophical position for many thinkers over the past two thousand years. In addition, opponents of relativism have a tendency to conflate the arguments against the various strands of relativism and consequently miss their target. This book attempts to understand the allure of relativism by looking at the family of doctrines that fall under its general heading, and to critically evaluate some key versions of it.

WHAT IS RELATIVISM?

Relativism is frequently defined negatively, in terms of the doctrines it denies, as well as positively, in terms of what it affirms (see, for instance, Harré and Krausz 1996:24). Defined negatively, relativism amounts to the denial of a cluster of interconnected philosophical positions that are traditionally contrasted with it; in this sense negative relativism is 'anti-anti-relativism'[1] for it provides legitimacy for relativism by denying:

(a) the thesis of universalism or the position that there could and should be universal agreement on matters of truth, goodness, beauty, meaningfulness, etc.;
(b) the thesis of objectivism or the position that cognitive, ethical and aesthetic values such as truth, goodness and beauty are mind-independent, 'capable of being presented from a point of view that is independent of the point of view of any human being in particular and of human kind in general' (see ibid.);
(c) the thesis of absolutism or the view that truth, goodness, beauty, etc. are timeless, unchanging and immutable;
(d) monism or the view that, in any given area or on any given topic, there can be no more than one correct opinion, judgement, or norm. Relativism is compatible with local but not universal monism, for a relativist may accept that in any given culture or society there can be no more than one correct view on any topic but deny that one single correct norm or belief can apply cross-culturally.[2]

A number of philosophers who, despite their protestations, are frequently accused of being relativists—Hilary Putnam, Nelson Goodman, Richard Rorty, and maybe even Jacques Derrida—can be seen as negative relativists in so far as they tend to deny a–d, but do not accept straightforward attempts to relativise epistemic and moral values to social or historical contexts.[3]

It is more difficult to define the positive claim of relativism. We can begin by distinguishing between relative and non-relative (or absolute) properties. A property is non-relative if its ascription depends only on the subject to which it is being attributed. For instance, 'three-dimensional' is a non-relative property because whether an object can be rightly described as possessing three dimensions depends only on the spatial features of the object under consideration. A property is relative, on the other hand, if its correct ascription depends on additional background factors. Robert Nozick gives the example of the probability of a statement or an event as an instance of something relative—the probability of a statement varies with different evidence and is not detachable from the evidence available (Nozick 2001:17). Some properties can be construed both in absolute and relative terms—poverty is a case in point. Absolute poverty is usually defined in terms of not possessing or being able to obtain the bare necessities of life. Poverty is seen as a relative property when its ascription involves a comparison to the standards of life prevailing in a society or a given historic period. (Someone with a monthly income equivalent to €300 would be considered poor in Ireland but not in Chad.) Relativised properties often only implicitly involve a reference to background factors (such as social or cultural background); however, we cannot determine whether the property in question is present or not if these non-explicit

background factors are not specified.[4] The background factors to be brought into consideration may be construed in two distinct ways. We can, at least in principle, distinguish between (a) relativisation to the circumstances or the contexts in which an ascription or an evaluation takes place (agent or speaker relativism) and (b) relativisation to the context or background of the objects of ascription or evaluation. For instance, in moral philosophy the truth of a statement such as 'slavery is wrong' may be relativised to the society in which the sentence is uttered or to the society about which the sentence is uttered.[5] In cases where the speaker and object of evaluation belong to the same society (e.g., Aristotle speaking about slavery in ancient Greece) the judgement 'slavery is wrong' will receive the same valuation whichever mode of relativisation we adopt. In cases where the evaluator belongs to a different society or background than the object of evaluation, today's Ireland for instance, there will be a discrepancy between the outcomes of the evaluations.

Relative properties should be distinguished from what I call 'relational properties'. Relational properties, such as being colder or taller, are dyadic properties predicated in contexts where two or more subjects are being compared, contrasted or otherwise connected. The difference between relative and relational properties can be expressed in terms of the distinction between one-place and many-place (meaning two or more) predicates. One-place predicates have only one subject place, as in 'John is tall'. Two-term predicates, such as 'John is taller than George', involve two, not necessarily distinct, subject terms. Similarly for three-place relational predicates, such as 'between', and many place predicates (e.g., 'tallest' among the ten boys in his class). Relative properties have the appearance of being monadic properties. They can be, and often are, expressed by one-place predicates, but they are elliptical for two- or many-place predicates. For instance, 'John is poor', where 'poor' is used as a relative predicate, has the grammatical form of a one-place predicate, but is elliptical for 'John is poor in relation to (i.e., in comparison with) other members of his society'. Relativists propose that predicates such as 'is true', 'is right', 'is rational' have the apparent logical form of one-place predicates, but that a correct analysis or understanding of them would show that they are in fact elliptical for two-place predicates such as 'is true relative to', 'is right according to', etc. In general then, according to the relativist, a statement of the form A is P', within a given domain (e.g., science, ethics, metaphysics), is elliptical for the statement 'A is P in relation to C', where A stands for an assertion, belief, judgement or action, P stands for (normative) predicates such as 'is true', 'is beautiful, 'is right', 'is rational' 'is logical', 'is known', etc., and C stands for a specific culture, framework, language, belief-system, etc.[6] The framework or culture may be that of the person engaged in evaluation or the culture to which the object of evaluation belongs. The relativity clause 'in relation to C' is often not stated explicitly but is thought to be inherent in the statement of 'A is P'. Relational properties can also be relativised. For example, the relational (dyadic) judgement 'child-abuse is a more heinous crime than murder', according to a relativist, is elliptical for 'child-abuse is a more heinous crime than murder according to the standards of culture C'. In this sense, relative predicates cut across the distinction between relational and non-relational (monadic) predicates.

It is also commonplace to distinguish between the class of judgements whose truth and falsity depend on their context (time, place, location, setting, etc.), e.g., 'I have been sitting here since this morning', and those whose truth and falsity obtains independently

of context and indexical attributes, e.g., Maria Baghramian was sitting at the desk, in room D503, Department of Philosophy, University College Dublin, 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. on Friday, 13 October 2002. Relativists argue that, contrary to common assumption, all judgements are context-dependent. For instance, a statement or a judgement such as 'murder is wrong' cannot be deemed true or false *(tout court),* rather, it should be understood as 'murder is wrong according to…', or 'in the context of the cultural, historical, social norms of culture x murder is wrong'. The relativist, in effect, is claiming that she is uncovering the correct logical form of a class of statements that have been misunderstood and misapplied by non-relativists.

The relativist claim, then, is that the presence or absence of properties such as truth, rationality, goodness, etc., and the correct ascription of predicates such as 'is true', 'is rational', 'is ethical', etc., depend not only on the objects to which the ascription is being made but also on factors such as social and cultural norms, cognitive frameworks, historical epochs, etc.[7] Furthermore, it is assumed that it is impossible to rank judgements of truth or falsity, etc. or to privilege one over another, for all cultures, historical epochs or cognitive frameworks that give rise to such judgements have equal standing. As Robert Nozick puts it, 'relativism is egalitarian' (Nozick 2001:19).

VARIETIES OF RELATIVISM

Relativism takes many shapes and forms and their conflation has made an intricate problem even more difficult. One difficulty facing discussions of relativism is the absence of a consensus on how to classify its various forms. A plethora of issues common to relativisms of different hues makes the task of classification quite difficult. A useful way of approaching the issue is by posing the dual questions:

What is being relativised? Or what are the objects of relativisation?

and

What is the object of relativisation being relativised to? Or what is the context of relativisation?

Susan Haack (1996:5), in attempting to answer these questions, has proposed an identikit picture of various types of relativism, which has been used by other writers on the subject (see, for instance, O'Grady 2002). According to Haack:

(1) Meaning is relative to (a) language.
(2) Reference is relative to (b) conceptual schemes.
(3) Truth is relative to (c) theory.
(4) Metaphysical commitment is relative to (d) scientific paradigm.
(5) Ontology is relative to (e) version, depiction, description.
(6) Reality is relative to (f) culture.
(7) Epistemic values are relative to (g) community.
(8) Moral values are relative to (h) individuals.

(9) Aesthetic values are relative to (i) historical periods.

Haack's identikit tends to over-complicate the task of classification, and yet does not fully capture the various permutations of the relativistic claims. To take a few examples, moral and epistemic values, as well as truth, as we shall see, are often relativised to cultures, communities and individuals; frequently no clear distinction is drawn between language, theory and conceptual schemes (see, for instance, the discussion of Quine in chapter 7); the distinction between reality, ontology, and metaphysical commitment is unclear, and even if a case can be made for distinguishing between them, the distinction is not observed by those engaged in debates on these issues.

The following is a more economical way of classifying different types of relativism: Depending on whether cognitive, moral or aesthetic norms are being considered we can distinguish between the broad categories of cognitive, moral and aesthetic relativism. Cognitive relativism is the view that what is true or false, rational or irrational, valid or invalid can vary from one society, culture or historical epoch to another and that we have no trans-cultural or ahistorical method or standard for adjudicating between the conflicting cognitive norms and practices. Within the broad category of cognitive relativism we can make finer-grained distinctions between: relativism about truth (or alethic relativism); relativism about rationality, norms of reasoning and justification; relativism about knowledge-claims (or what in this book I call 'epistemic relativism'); and relativism about ontology or theories of what there is (or conceptual relativism). Relativism about truth and relativism about logic are the strongest forms of cognitive relativism and, as we shall see, they can entail both epistemic relativism and relativism about rationality. However, it is possible to defend a relativistic position regarding rationality and knowledge without espousing either of these stronger claims.

Moral relativists claim that the truth or falsity, the appropriateness or inappropriateness of an ethical belief, is relative to its socio-historical background and that moral beliefs cannot be assessed independently of their social framework. They point to the existence of diverse moral systems and maintain that moral values are grounded on societal conventions, historical conditions, metaphysical beliefs, etc., which vary from one society or social grouping to another, and argue that there are no neutral standards available to adjudicate between these competing claims. Aesthetic relativism rehearses the arguments put forward by the moral relativists, with the difference that it is values such as beauty, originality, creativity (in other words, aesthetic rather than moral values) that are relativised.

The question of what the cognitive, moral and aesthetic values are being relativised to carves up relativism in a slightly different way and allows us to distinguish between subjective relativism (or subjectivism[8]), social (cultural and historical) relativism, and conceptual relativism. Subjectivists or subjective relativists maintain that the truth and falsity of judgements, the right and wrong of actions, and the acceptability of ethical and aesthetic evaluations, are all in a nontrivial sense dependent on the beliefs and opinions of individual thinkers and actors—they are expressions of the private psychological states of agents.

Social relativism is the claim that the truth and falsity of beliefs, the justification for knowledge-claims and the right or wrong of actions, depend on and are relative to prevailing social and cultural conditions. According to this type of relativism, we are in a position to distinguish between true and false beliefs and right and wrong actions and

judgements, but only within the parameters of socially given norms and conventions. Cultural relativism, inspired by the work of social anthropologists who conducted fieldwork among tribal people, is one of the most influential forms of social relativism where it is argued that there can be no such thing as a culturally neutral criterion for adjudicating between conflicting claims arising from different cultural contexts. Historicism, another subspecies of social relativism, is the view that all thought, knowledge and evaluation are constrained by their historical conditions and bear the imprints of their time and place. Historicism in its more extreme form is distinguishable from cultural relativism only in its emphasis on the diachronic rather than the synchronic dimensions of the determinants of thought and action.[9]

Conceptual relativism relativises ontology, or our theory of what there is, to conceptual schemes, scientific paradigms, world versions, categorial schemes or frameworks. Conceptual relativists argue that the world does not present itself to us ready-made or ready-carved, rather we supply the different ways of categorising and conceptualising it. Our knowledge of the world is mediated through a language, a theory or scheme and there is a plurality of such mediatory schemes. Conceptual relativism, when appropriately specified, can entail cognitive relativism, for it could be argued that acts of cognition are shaped, if not determined, by the conceptual scheme or framework within which they take place. Conceptual relativism would be coextensive with cultural relativism if it were further assumed that conceptual frameworks are products of specific cultures. However, frequently the arguments adduced in favour of conceptual relativism are based on a priori reasoning about the relationship between the mind and the world rather than empirical observations about cultural and linguistic diversity. Moreover, many conceptual relativists, such as Hilary Putnam and Nelson Goodman, emphatically disassociate themselves from cultural relativism.

The classification I am suggesting can be presented in the following table.

	Objects		*Contexts*
α	Cognitive norms: truth, rationality, logic, epistemic standards (cognitive relativism, epistemic relativism)	I	Individuals (subjectivism)
β	Moral values (moral relativism)	II	Historical epochs (historicism)
γ	Aesthetic values (aesthetic relativism)	III	Cultures, social groupings (cultural relativism, social relativism)
δ	Knowledge claims, worldviews,[10] ontologies, systems of belief (cognitive, conceptual, and epistemic relativism)	IV	Conceptual schemes: languages, theories, frameworks (conceptual relativism)

The important point to note is that each of α–δ may be relativised to either I, II, III or IV.[11] We can now see how Haack's identikit fits into this scheme; focusing on Haack's list a–i allows us to distinguish broadly between subjectivism (h) social (cultural and historical) relativism (f, g, i) and conceptual relativism (a–e). On the other hand, 1–9 fit into the categories of cognitive relativism (3–7), conceptual relativism (1, 2, 4, 5, 6), moral relativism (8) and aesthetic relativism (9).[12]

More detailed distinctions can be made between different types of relativism by focusing on the scope rather than the content of relativistic claims. Philosophers have distinguished between restricted (first-order) and total (second-order) relativism (e.g., Putnam, 1981; Hankinson, 1995). First-order relativism is the claim that specific judgements, for instance moral, cognitive and aesthetic judgements, are relative to social and cultural norms. Second-order or total relativism claims that all judgements—including this one—are relative. In addition to making the distinctions introduced above, I shall differentiate between strong and moderate (or restricted) relativism. Strong relativism is the claim that *all* cognitive and moral values (epistemic, aesthetic or ethical norms) are relative to a cultural/historical/individual outlook. Moderate (or restricted) relativism allows for the existence of some universal (non-relative) truths and norms either by restricting the relativistic claim to specific domains, e.g., the domain of ethical or aesthetic, or by conceding that even within a given domain, such as the ethical, there are some very general universal truths. The term 'relativism' has been qualified in numerous other ways and has been used in a variety of contexts. In the course of this book we will come across some of them.

Relativism should be distinguished from pluralism. Pluralism, as discussed in this book, is the claim that for many questions in the domains of metaphysics, aesthetics, ethics, and even science, there could be more than one appropriate or correct answer. The pluralist, like the relativist, rejects absolutism and monism but does not accept the relativists' claim that issues of truth, right and wrong, etc., can be arbitrated only relative to and in the context of their cultural or conceptual background. For the pluralists, in many domains and situations, there can be more than one correct *context-independent* evaluation and description.

WHY RELATIVISM?

A variety of not always compatible philosophical considerations and intellectual currents motivate the arguments for different types of relativism. This further complicates debates on the subject. Some of the main philosophical impulses motivating relativism are:

Context-dependence

Many of our judgements and assertions are expressed through sentences and expressions that refer to events that happen at a particular time and place and to particular persons. Such sentences seem to be true only at the time, place or context of their utterance. This is particularly true of sentences containing indexical expressions such as 'I', 'here', 'now', etc., whose reference varies with their context of utterance. For instance, the sentence 'It's raining here now' is true at the time of writing this sentence but may be false when uttered at a different time or place. This feature of our judgements has led some to argue that the truth of all our judgements depends on, and in this sense is relative to, their time, place and context. This argument for relativism as it stands is not convincing. The context of utterances containing indexical expressions such as 'this', 'here', 'now', 'I', etc. can be made explicit in such a way that their truth or falsity would arise from specifiable events occurring at a particular time, place or context. For instance,

in ‘It’s raining here now’ ‘here’ and ‘now’ refer to Dublin and 12 September at 5:45 local time, 2002. And the sentence ‘It’s raining in Dublin on 12 September at 5:45 local time, 2002’ is either true or false depending on the weather conditions in Dublin on that day.

Arguments for the context-dependence of human beliefs and judgements take other, philosophically more interesting, forms. For instance, it is often argued that all our judgements and beliefs are context-sensitive in that they always take place within a social and cultural framework and a background of both personal and collective assumptions, interests and values, and if not wholly determined, they are at least influenced by them. Beliefs are also situational, i.e., they are formed and held under specific physical and material conditions. Therefore, it is argued, evaluations of judgements should include a reference to their context and background conditions. But then such evaluations themselves would be influenced by their specific historical, cultural and psychological conditions, and hence no neutral ground for surveying beliefs and judgements is available.

Mind-dependence

Philosophers, opposing the realist claim that we can have knowledge of how things are in reality, have argued that all our judgements and beliefs, including those about the physical world, are irredeemably mind-dependent. A God’s-eye view or a view from nowhere is not available to us. The suggestion is that ‘It simply does not make sense to think of reality as it is in itself, apart from human judgements’ (Miller 2002:14). Such anti-realism should not be equated with relativism; however, as we shall see (in chapters 4 and 7 in particular), the arguments for mind-dependence and opposition to realism are often the starting point for various relativistic stands.

Perspectivalism

All reports of our experiences and judgements are made from a perspective or a point of view. We cannot get out of our skin, so to speak, or our language, culture and socio-historical conditions to survey reality, as it is, from a neutral standpoint. Perspectivalism goes beyond the mere context-dependence of our judgements in that even a seemingly context-independent judgement—for instance, ‘there are nine planets in the solar system’—is a statement made from a human perspective and is informed by human perceptions and conceptions. Perspectivalism also implies that judgements are selective and constrained by the position we occupy in time and space as well as our interests and background knowledge. Relativism ensues if it is also assumed, explicitly or implicitly, that the different perspectives are non-convergent, and that what is true or right from one perspective may not be so from a different one, and that consequently, different perspectives may render incompatible judgements. The truth of such judgements, then, is relative to the perspective or point of view we adopt.

Considerations arising from the perspectival nature of human judgements also apply to arguments for conceptual relativism. It is argued that we are not in a position to decide which, if any, of the various conceptual perspectives available is correct or superior, since such a judgement would presuppose that there is something outside all perspectives to which they could be compared, or by the standards of which they could be judged. And

since, per hypothesis, all thinking and judging is done from within a conceptual perspective, there can be no such neutral vantage point available to the would-be surveyor of the various schemes. We shall examine this view in detail in chapters 7, 8 and 10.

Philosophical Manichaeism

Arguments for relativism often assume the truth of various philosophical dichotomies—in particular the dichotomies of subjective vs. objective, the mind vs. the world, and the factual vs. the evaluative. Modern philosophy, from Descartes to Kant to the Logical Positivists, has bequeathed a number of dualisms which, despite their absolutist overtones, have contributed greatly to the development of relativistic tendencies in contemporary thought. For instance, the fact-value dichotomy has cleared the way for moral relativism; the distinction between the subjective and the objective has resulted in subjectivism and subjective relativism (see chapters 4 and 9); and the postulation of a strong divide between the mind and the world has led to conceptual relativism (chapters 7 and 10). I suggest that one way to bypass some pernicious forms of relativism is to overcome the philosophical Manichaeism inspiring them.

Underdetermination of empirical theory by data

The thesis of underdetermination states that more than one theory can successfully explain a given body of data, hence our selection of any one theory among a range of possibly incompatible theories will not be determined purely by the available evidence. The thesis plays a crucial role in W.V.O.Quine's ontological relativity (see chapter 7); it has also been instrumental in the development of relativistic views in science (see chapter 6) and has been used to defend both relativism and pluralism in ethics.

In addition to the above philosophical considerations, a number of intellectual currents have provided a ready ground for the development of relativistic views over the last century:

The collapse of old certainties

The disappearance of old certainties in the religious, political and scientific arenas has been instrumental in the popularity of relativism in recent times. The collapse of a religiously motivated cosmology, which fixed the position of individual human beings within a larger and immutable framework and provided firm foundations for their ethical outlook, helped to create a climate that was conducive to relativistic views. In science, the discovery of the possibility of non-Euclidean geometries, followed by developments of the early twentieth century, particularly Einstein's theory of relativity and the discoveries in quantum physics, eroded the confidence once placed in what was considered unassailable. The disillusionment with utopian political ideologies that espoused global aspirations, and the dismay experienced at the intractability of ethical and political problems also added to the attraction of relativism. As there seems to be neither a decision procedure for solving ideological conflicts nor a neutral ground to adjudicate between incompatible moral viewpoints, the only alternatives appear to be

either to impose our worldview on others or to grant each person or culture full and incorrigible authority over the truth and justification of her beliefs and convictions.

Cultural diversity

Increasing awareness of the extent of the diversity of beliefs, practices and customs of different cultures and historical epochs has had a decisive impact on our ethical thinking. Reports by anthropologists about remote peoples have led to the suggestion that all normative judgements, whether cognitive or ethical, may have only a limited or local authority. Opponents of relativism, on the other hand, argue that the extent and scope of diversity between different cultures and individuals are often exaggerated. Beyond the apparent dissimilarities, they argue, there are many core similarities which unify all human cultures and systems of beliefs.

The prominence of social-scientific explanations

The nineteenth century saw the advent of the social sciences in their modern form. A variety of thinkers, e.g., Karl Marx, Max Weber and Wilhelm Dilthey, introduced the idea that genuine understanding of human beliefs and actions would inevitably include a reference to their social and economic background and historical context and that such contexts often determine the content of beliefs. Their ideas gained further prominence through the work of social anthropologists (e.g., Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead), sociologists (e.g., Émile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons) and hermeneutic philosophers (e.g., Hans-Georg Gadamer), who in turn were central to the development of a relativistic orientation in twentieth-century thought.

The imperative of tolerance

The most common justifications offered on behalf of relativism have an ethical dimension. The social and political profile of those most sympathetic towards relativism often comprises those who feel marginalised, excluded or alienated from the dominant political (and intellectual) powers—the young, racial minorities, feminists, the political left, etc. Relativism is not only egalitarian but also liberating. It not only acknowledges our equal role and voice in constructing ‘reality’, ‘facts’, ‘truths’ and ‘rights and wrongs’, but it also liberates us from the shackles of the dominant paradigm. For many, relativism is a doctrine of tolerance and open-mindedness. Those sympathetic towards relativism argue that Western ethnocentrism and the intellectual legacy of the Enlightenment prevent us from appreciating or even seeing the uniqueness of different cultures and modes of thought and respecting the legitimacy of their epistemic and ethical claims. Allan Bloom, one of the most vocal opponents of relativism in recent years, has argued that:

> Openness—and the relativism that makes it the only plausible stance in the face of various claims to truth and various ways of life and kinds of human beings—is [treated as] the great insight of our times…

> The study of history and of culture [according to this view] teaches that all the world was mad in the past; men always thought they were right, and that led to wars, persecutions, slavery, xenophobia, racism, and chauvinism. The point is not to correct the mistakes and really be right; rather it is not to think you are right at all.
>
> (Bloom 1987:25–6)

Bloom pours scorn over the relativistic ethos of American universities but fails to appreciate the strength of the intellectual currents that have given rise to this ethos.

THE STRUCTURE

The books falls into two parts. Part I (chapters 1–3) provides a historical examination of the idea of relativism in its many forms, from ancient Greece to the present. Part II critically examines a variety of relativistic doctrines in different domains.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary,* the first use of the term 'relativism' can be traced to J.Grote's *Exploratio Philosophica* (1865):

> The notion of the mask over the face of nature is…*what I have called 'relativism'*. If 'the face of nature' is reality, then the mask over it, which is what theory gives us, is so much deception, and that is what relativism really comes to.
>
> (Grote 1865:I.xi:229; emphasis added)

Grote in this passage seems to be discussing a version of what, in this book, I call 'conceptual relativism' (see chapter 7). However, the idea of relativism has a much longer and quite complicated history. I examine the history of relativism by discussing not only some of the main claims made on its behalf, but also key philosophical theories which have influenced the development of various forms of relativism.

Chapter 1. The beginnings: relativism in classical philosophy. The earliest documented source of relativism in the Western intellectual tradition is Plato's account of the Sophist philosopher Protagoras and his famous dictum, 'Man is the measure of all things' (Plato 1997g: *Theaet.* 152a1–3). Plato's charge of self-refutation against Protagoras has become the model for frequent attempts to show that relativism is incoherent. I discuss some possible interpretations of the Protagorean doctrine and assess Plato's criticisms. Aristotle also argued that relativism is an unintelligible doctrine as it contravenes the law of non-contradiction—which is presupposed by all thought. Subsequently, relativism was subsumed under scepticism by the Pyrrhonian sceptics who gave a new life to Protagoras' doctrine. I examine these developments in turn.

Chapter 2. Relativism in modern philosophy traces the development of a variety of philosophical positions linked to relativism over the past three centuries. The disparate strands of contemporary relativism, I argue, have their sources in various philosophical currents of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. We begin with Michel de Montaigne, who was greatly influenced by Pyrrhonian scepticism, and is the precursor of both relativism and scepticism in modern thought. The chapter also examines the influences of

the French Enlightenment, Kant's introduction of the distinction between conceptual schemes and sensory content, the romanticism and anti-rationalism of the Counter-Enlightenment, the post-Hegelian historicism of Engels and Dilthey, and Nietzsche's perspectivism, on the development of relativistic views.

Chapter 3. Contemporary sources of relativism. A variety of contemporary intellectual currents has contributed to the resurgence of interest in relativism. The theoretical and empirical observations of social anthropologists on the diversity of cultural practices have led directly to cultural relativism. Ludwig Wittgenstein's ideas on the role of language and forms of life in shaping thought and action have been used, by philosophers and anthropologists alike, to draw relativistic conclusions about rationality and logic. The intellectual climate created by the writings of postmodernist philosophers and literary theorists has fostered relativism and has had a decisive impact on its popularity.

Part II (chapters 4–9) is devoted to a critical discussion of a variety of relativistic positions.

Chapter 4. Relativism about truth. Relativism about truth (alethic relativism) is the claim that the truth of an assertion is relative to the beliefs, attitudes and other psychological idiosyncrasies of individuals or, more generally, to their social and cultural background. Relativism about truth is central to many relativistic positions since the arguments for various subdivisions of cognitive relativism, and even ethical relativism, can be recast as a question about the truth of judgements in those particular domains. Since Plato it has been frequently argued that relativism about truth is incoherent because of the dubious status of the claim that 'truth is relative'; for if 'truth is relative' is itself true unconditionally, then there is at least one truth, which is not relative, and hence relativism is not true. The chapter examines the force of this famous argument. The self-refutation argument, often seen as the most decisive argument against relativism, is directed at the most extreme form of alethic relativism. Several philosophers have argued in favour of more restricted forms of relativism about truth. One such view has been proposed by Richard Rorty, who problematises traditional accounts of truth. In the final part of the chapter, I examine his influential views on truth and find them unconvincing.

Chapter 5. Relativism and rationality. The relativist about rationality argues that various societies or cultures have different standards of rationality and that we are not in a position to choose between them; the search for universal standards of rationality is futile, she argues, because rationality consists of conforming to the prevalent cognitive norms and different societies may subscribe to different norms. Rationality can be seen as the requirement of having good reasons and justifications for one's beliefs and actions. Adherence to universal rules of logic has often been seen as a prerequisite of rationality. However, it has been argued that laws of logic are defined by and hence are relative to their social context. In this chapter, I examine and reject relativism about logic. But this rejection does not completely rule out moderate forms of relativism about rationality. Stephen Stich has argued that empirical studies support the view that human beings in their day-to-day reasoning do not adhere to standard norms of rationality. Alasdair MacIntyre, on the other hand, argues that norms of rationality are, to a large extent, products of specific cultural and historic conditions. I examine these views in turn.

Chapter 6. Epistemic relativism. Philosophers of science Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend have emphasised the role of different modes of reasoning at various historical periods in shaping our conceptions of scientific knowledge. According to them, scientific

theories belonging to different paradigms are incommensurable, and the co-evaluation of different cognitive frameworks (and even cultures and ways of life) is impossible. I shall argue that the connection between incommensurability and relativism is more complex than the partici-pants in the debate about relativism in science have led us to believe. In doing so, I distinguish between different forms of incommensurability and suggest ways of overcoming them.

Feminist philosophers have questioned the very notion of objectivity that underpins the ideal of science, and the possibility of giving a universal account of knowledge without taking into account the specific social and political contexts which give rise to them. Their questioning of the theory and practice of science has, at times, assumed a relativistic tone. I shall argue that the legitimate concerns of feminist epistemologists need not lead to relativism.

Chapter 7. Conceptual relativism. The roots of conceptual relativism rest with Kant's distinction between the data of our sense experiences and the principles of organisation or categories we use to organise them. Once the distinction between a conceptual scheme and its content was introduced, it became easy to accept that there may be more than one system or scheme of organisation, and the idea of conceptual relativism was born. In this chapter I discuss the views of some prominent defenders of different strands of conceptual relativism—a group of philosophers I call Harvard relativists. Harvard relativism can be traced back to the pragmatist philosophers, William James and C.I.Lewis in particular. The most influential version of this view was proposed by W.V.O.Quine, according to whom to be able to talk about the world and cope with our stream of sensory experiences, we must impose upon them a conceptual or linguistic scheme or theory. However, it is possible to envisage a plurality of conceptual or theoretical frameworks all of which explain and predict our experiences of the world equally well. Quine's so-called 'ontological relativity' influenced his colleagues, Nelson Goodman and Hilary Putnam, who have proposed very sophisticated forms of conceptual relativism. This chapter critically assesses their contributions to this topic.

Chapter 8. Relativism, interpretation and charity examines some of the recent influential criticisms levelled against various forms of relativism. Critics of relativism question the intelligibility of the claim that one and the same statement may be true for one linguistic community and false for another. A correct understanding of the beliefs and other propositional attitudes of a person, they argue, leads to the conclusion that speakers of other languages, members of other cultures, must have beliefs and cognitive practices very similar to ours. Arguments for relativism often rely on the premise that there are fundamental cultural and conceptual differences between human beings. If this assumption is incoherent or untenable, then so is relativism. In this chapter I examine the arguments offered by Quine, Donald Davidson and Richard Grandy against, respectively, relativism about logic, truth and rationality. In the process I also examine, in some detail, Davidson's arguments against the key presupposition of conceptual relativism—the dualism of scheme and content—and find them wanting.

Chapter 9. Moral relativism. Moral or ethical relativism is probably the most popular relativistic doctrine. It is the claim that there exist diverse and incompatible answers to questions on ethics, and that there is no overarching criterion for deciding between the various replies. Ethical relativism can be embraced independently of cognitive relativism. Many ethical relativists argue that convergence between different worldviews and

theoretical frameworks is possible in the natural sciences but not in the realm of ethics. According to this view, moral precepts and judgements are not part of the natural furniture of the universe; they are man-made and would not exist independently of human actions, beliefs and customs; hence, there exists a fundamental difference between scientific investigations and moral enquiry. In addressing these issues, I critically discuss naïve moral relativism, normative moral relativism, metaethical claims arising from naturalism (Mackie and Gilbert Harman) and the limits of commensurability (Bernard Williams). In conclusion, I defend a form of pluralism (inspired by Isaiah Berlin) that rejects the absolutist conceptions of moral value without accepting the relativist conclusion that moral evaluations are the expressions of social and cultural conventions.

Chapter 10. Conclusion: relativism, pluralism and diversity. In discussing issues relating to epistemic, conceptual and moral relativism I propose a form of pluralism that may satisfy some of the intellectual concerns that give rise to the various strands of relativism, without plunging us into the anarchy of 'anything goes' or the intellectual paralysis that comes with the inability to reject or condemn any worldview as false or wrong. In the concluding section I use the metaphor of map making to accommodate pluralism without succumbing to relativism. Pluralism, as construed in this book, allows for diversity and multiplicity of 'right' worldviews, belief-systems, ethical orientations and cognitive frameworks, but is curtailed by the imperatives of our shared physical world and biology. Our conceptions of the world are varied and diverse, I maintain, and yet they are answerable to the natural world. There are many, and at times incompatible, right conceptions, but their rightness, although context-sensitive, is not in any sense relative.