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### Relativism, Pluralism, and Skepticism (Philosophical Perspective): Cultural Concerns

Few terms in our critical language are as ambiguous as pluralism and relativism. Under diverse definitions, their relationship could be said to range all the way from twins to deadly enemies. Both have been accused by some monists as furthering rank skepticism or nihilism. Meanwhile, defenders have vigorously denied that either term necessarily entails utter skepticism, or Pyrrhonism, or what Bernard Williams has called vulgar relativism. This article pursues pluralism as the best escape route from naive dogmatism and naive (hyperskeptical) relativism. (For a useful, though somewhat superficial, history of skepticism, especially in the Renaissance, see Popkin 1979.)

Almost every serious critic would agree that some extreme forms of either term can lapse into the kind of skepticism or nihilism that threatens genuine intellectual inquiry or achievement. Genuine inquiry is doomed if no claim to ‘truth’ has any validity except for the claimer, and no one thus has any real reason to listen to the arguments of anyone else. Fortunately, more and more postmodernists, some of whom for a while edged towards such utter skepticism, have attended to diverse cogent attacks on the ‘vulgar’ or ‘total’ forms of doubt. They have acknowledged that all arguments for total nihilism are paradoxically self-destructive; no one can offer a coherent defense of utter skepticism without violating that defense by claiming to offer, unskeptically, this one coherent defense. What is more, the would-be utter skeptics usually reveal many other deep commitments that contradict their skeptical claims. Meanwhile, many have argued that the term relativism need not be identified with nihilism (Pepper 1942, Williams 1972, Shweder 1989, Goodman 1978, Rorty 1989, Krausz 1989).

Cultural relativism—‘though truths exist, they are always relative to some cultural placement’—has been

much more successful in resisting attacks from defenders of hard truth of various stripes. Its defenders have ranged over a vast diversity of arguments. Some have moved dangerously close to utter skepticism by implying, but never stating, that whatever any given culture claims is true must be true, even if it entails mass genocide or the ritual torture and murder of the innocent. At the opposite extreme, some have labeled our ‘scientific,’ ‘rational,’ ‘antisuperstitious,’ ‘intellectual’ culture as inherently, self-evidently superior to all the naive, primitive, ‘believers’ in claims that violate scientific convictions. As Shweder describes the way too many rationalists, including professed cultural relativists, have viewed the world:

Nature is mindless, objective, and visible. It is empty of such unseen, unobservable, meta-physical things as god, sin, obligation, value, morality, and so on. If such things exist at all, they exist only as reality-positives in the mind. And if they exist only in the mind, they are not objective and thus ought not be (sic) allowed to be constraining. If human beings feel constrained by such things, it is only because, not yet realizing their essential nature (self-determination), they do not distinguish between truth and poetry, confusing, quite irrationally, external reality with what exists nowhere else but in their minds (Shweder 1989, p. 121).

Even when we follow Shweder and rightly reject such extremes and decide that truths do exist, though in multiple forms, we are still faced with the complex problem of how to deal with that multiplicity. For cultural pluralists who refuse to dodge the problem, the best possible method is to search for common ground that underlies surface differences. (Sometimes they—we—stumble upon another route, after the probing: ‘By studying my opponent carefully I have learned that I was wrong and he/she was right; now my pluralism includes memory of my previous error.’) When for example we discover that every culture, including the most rationalistic versions of our own, exhibits some form of embrace of an unprovable ‘transcendent’ ‘world’ or ‘reality’ or God, we no longer have good reason to consider religious commitments absurd: they are shared by all cultures. Again to quote Shweder 1989:

In that (our) post-Nietzschean world God is not dead; only positivism and monotheism are dead. Polytheism is alive and well. Its doctrine is the relativistic idea of multiple objective worlds [including the world of scientific rationalists], and its commandment is participation in the never-ending process of overcoming partial views (pp. 132–3).

#### 1. Plurality of Thought-modes

Once we embrace that form of cultural pluralism, value-terms like ‘dead’ and ‘partial’ turn our problem in the direction of philosophical inquiry: how to deal with plurality not just of culture systems but of

thought systems, including value judgments. Even those 'rationalist' philosophers who are totally anti-relativist, antiskeptical, exhibit a plurality of conflicting thought-modes. Too many have faced that conflict with either passionate commitment to 'the one true system' (such as the positivism that most of us, including most professional philosophers, by now question) or the philosophical skepticism that Richard Rorty and Stanley Fish and many others have at times edged toward (even while claiming not to).

What has been too often ignored by those who justifiably attack the first of these paths, dogmatic monism, is the problem of how we are to deal with that plurality of 'contexts' or 'belief systems,' or 'structures of thought' or 'thought-modes' to which all of our assertions are 'related.' Every thinker has to admit that all thinking takes place in a conceptual context in which all assertions are interrelated, interdependent for their full understanding; even claims to factuality have different meanings in different thought-modes. Yet only careless extremists can deny that some 'contexts' are better than others: truer, or 'fuller,' or less vulnerable to refutation.

The pluralistic problem can thus be summarized like this: a devoted, honest Nazi who asserts that the commitment to the one superior race with its superior values justifies genocide, employing as evidence some 'facts' about past misbehavior of Jews and amazing achievements of Aryans like Beethoven, is asserting facts that though in one sense are context relevant, cannot be claimed by an anti-Nazi to be just plain nonfactual. But how, then, can one assert, as we all would, that the entire context of such Nazi thinking is just plain wrong, without falling into dogmatic assertions that are finally totally dependent on an equally unprovable cultural context? How finally do we avoid a form of relativism that grants the Nazis equal intellectual status?

## *2. Truth Exists—in Multiple Forms*

The only possible answer is to develop some form of 'systems pluralism' that allows for distinctions among a plurality of defensible systems and a plurality of inferior, less defensible systems. While there is a genuine plurality of 'truths,' genuine truths that are of equal validity and systems that are universally true in the sense of being irrefutable, no one of them is universally true in the sense of being easily either translatable to other 'systems' or immune to seeming refutation from other 'truths.' But that collection of irrefutable context-systems or thought-modes does not mean that other systems or modes cannot be shown to be inferior. The Nazi illustration reveals that one particular belief system can be finally rejected, first because it will be condemned by every other major mode of thought, and second because its disastrous consequences are revealed by history, as they finally

were to Heidegger when he faced the consequences of his early Fascist thinking.

The history of philosophy, like the history of various cultural relativisms, can be seen as an implicit demonstration both that genuine truth exists, in a variety of defensible forms, and that the diverse forms are never easily intertranslated in intelligible form. Indeed, in most versions, 'believers' believe that they can, in using their own version of truth, refute the other versions (see Russell 1948, as an example of careless refutation of all modes but his own).

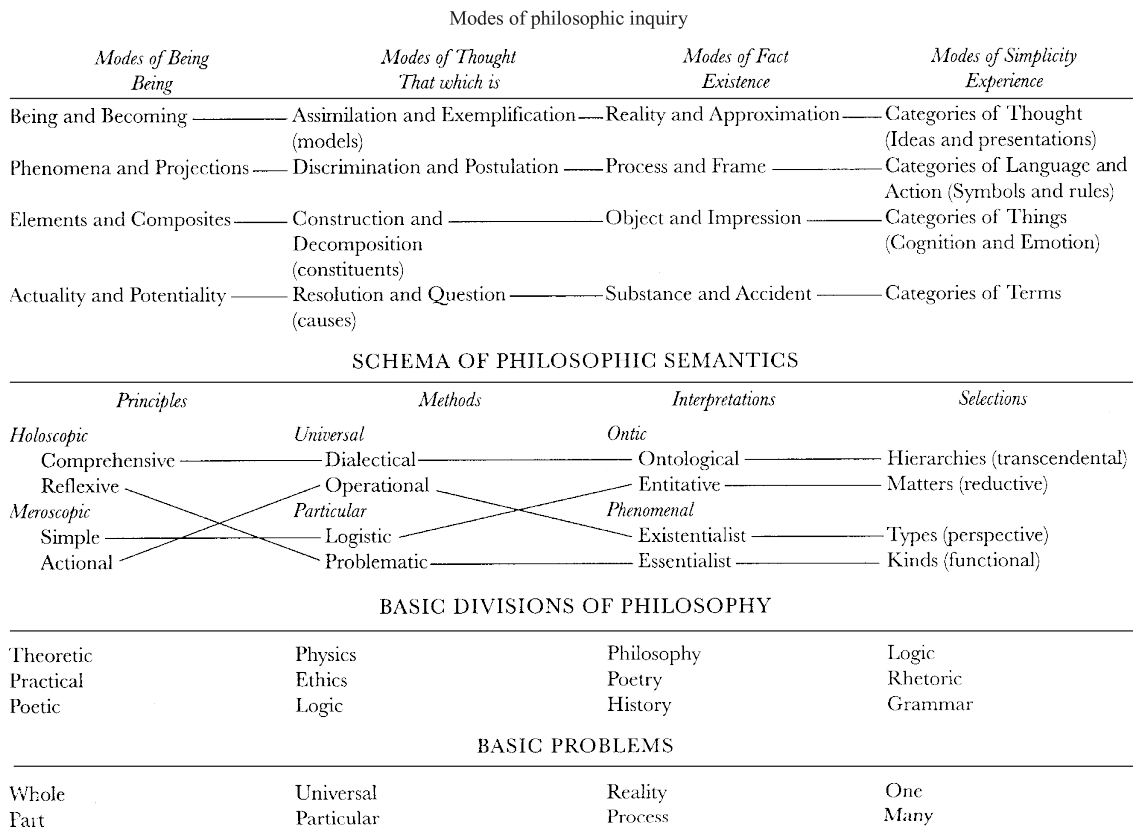
The clearest support for a plurality of legitimate thought-modes (along with a larger plurality of illegitimate ones) is found in the ways in which the major, great, surviving philosophies conflict, at least on the surface, and yet reveal immense capacity both to seem to refute other systems and to genuinely resist refutation from the others. In a short discussion, it will be impossible to demonstrate this case fully (for extended treatment, see Booth 1979, Garver and Buchanan 2000, Booth 2000, McKeon 1951).

## *3. McKeon, the Greatest Pluralist*

To me by far the most penetrating of the many efforts to face plurality is that of the much-neglected Richard McKeon. As McKeon probed major thinkers throughout history, he more and more aggressively asserted that there are a small number of absolutely irrefutable (yet seemingly conflicting) thought modes, while there are many totally refutable modes and many other half-defensible but truncated modes. Having pursued every major thinker to the depths, he developed the notion of what his best defender, Walter Watson, has called 'reciprocal priority'—what might be called 'reciprocal irrefutability' (see Watson 1993, the best single introduction to reciprocal seeming refutation and actual nonrefutation; it is based on the lifetime work of Richard McKeon).

McKeon's classification of defensible modes became increasingly complex throughout his life, and it cannot be summarized here, as is evident in his final, most complicated chart, which was not published until after his death (see Fig. 1).

Such complexities may well obscure the validity of his basic project, which was to reveal how first-class philosophers, irrefutable philosophers, have approached multiple truths with valid thought-modes that differ in many conflicting ways, especially in four major matters: (a) what is the proper subject matter, or definition of subject matter ('Modes of fact') of what we should think about; (b) what 'unprovable' first principles, or notions of the 'modes of being,' should one proceed from, taken as unquestionable; (c) what methods are the proper methods ('modes of thinking') for solving all problems; and (d) what is the point of it all, what are the true goals of human thinking. In my view his philosophical multiplicities could well serve as



**Figure 1**

McKeon's final classification of defensible modes (Printed posthumously in *Selected Writings of Richard McKeon*, Vol 1, 1998, p. 218, University of Chicago Press)

a rescuer of those who fear that cultural relativism will inherently destroy such terms as truth or objectivity or reality.

### 3.1 Definition of the Subject Matter: 'Things,' 'Thoughts,' 'Words,' 'Actions'

**3.1.1 Things.** The most famous of the classical philosophers agreed that what we should pursue is reality, 'what really is,' substance, being, actuality: whether air, water, fire, atoms, or ideas. Plato always operates with a strong conviction that there are some general truths, or principles, or ideas awaiting our clumsy efforts to discover them. His definition of the subject matter (the world, the universe, the nature of things, the One) is always implicitly a world in which Truth, Goodness, and Beauty are interrelated, harmonizable: a One that can, in theory, finally harmonize it all, even though no one thinker can capture it. Many modern cosmologists begin with a surprisingly simi-

lar pursuit of a supreme truth that is 'really there'—nature and its laws: this or that final theory will explain it all. For all of these, we should begin with some picture of the real, and then move from it to whatever questions arise about the rest of life.

**3.1.2 Thoughts.** Again and again, as McKeon traces brilliantly, philosophers have concluded that you cannot really begin there, with Being, struggling with ontological questions, because the picture of real reality always depends on how we think about it, and that leads to a take-over by one or another form of epistemology. Follow Kant and begin your thinking by thinking about thought, not about things or substance.

**3.1.3 Words.** That shift from subject matter to mind has again and again broken down as philosophers concluded that how we think depends on the

language we think with, so we should begin not with thought but with language. Especially in the twentieth century, more and more thinkers took their beginnings in language. For just about everybody thought had to begin with language. So-called analytical philosophy took over, as it had done for some 'skeptics' and 'relativists' throughout the ages, for a while, and later the deconstructionists produced a seeming revolution by claiming that language itself has no real substance.

*3.1.4 Actions.* Finally, the linguistic revolution has repeatedly been revolted against, by those who see action as the proper subject, the place to begin. Pragmatism in various forms has been seen as the true subject of true thinkers; inevitably they work back up from language to questions about abstract reality, ontology, epistemology, and linguistic analysis, but they always place action—with success and failure of action—at the top of the definition of subject.

### *3.2 Principles about 'Reality'*

*3.2.1 Comprehensive whole.* Many philosophers, like Plato and some modern cosmologists, put as top priority a conception that there is some whole, some totality, some supreme collection or unity of all truths. Reality consists of that comprehensive unity or totality.

*3.2.2 Multiple problems produced by the incomprehensible whole.* Others like Aristotle while still in one sense pursuing the whole, see the philosopher's basic principle as to 'pursue truth about this or that particular aspect, or problem,' concentrating on solving the problems. Many such pluralists see no hoped-for 'top' but a collection of diverse subjects and problems; there may be a 'one' uniting them, but for us the world is multiple, created by and consisting of many causes and possible solutions.

*3.2.3 Least, parts: 'atoms,' 'sensations,' etc.* In contrast, philosophers like David Hume and many modern scientists put as the 'top' of their reality a kind of bottom: elements or particles or epistemological certainties from which they can reason upward to larger truths. Like some particle physicists, they hope to discover, by probing the depths, truths never even dreamed of by those who pursue the 'heights,' and those truths—whether about our most minute sensations or the most minute physical particles, will be totally irrefutable from the other perspectives.

*3.2.4 Operational, pragmatic problems: truth is what works.* Finally, philosophers who, like Cicero and other rhetoricians, put as top priority the successful operation of the practical world, beginning with questions of just what our pragmatic goals are, can build from their pursuit truths about life that may conflict irrefutably with many of the truths that the other three pursuers have proclaimed.

To say all this does not mean that the four choices of first principles will not reveal, down the line, agreed-upon truths. Many of the undeniable truths that each mode uncovers will be considered undeniable by each of the others. For example, it is always wrong, in principle, in all of the defensible systems, to violate the moral principles that you think your system has revealed, and many of them overlap those revealed in other systems. It is always wrong, in all systems, to deliberately, dishonestly, fabricate evidence to support your system. And there are many other overlapping moral principles, such as the relation of Cicero's 'Civility' to Aristotle's 'Ethics' and Plato's 'goodness' and Hume's moral standards, and the moral commands issued by John Stuart Mill's utilitarianism.

### *3.3 Methods*

Major thinkers have always disagreed about just what methods are effective in yielding proof. Depending in part on their first principles and their definitions of the subject matter, they have ranged from the absolutely deductive synthesizers to the absolutely inductive analysers, with some pragmatists and linguists urging some middle ground of cooperative thinking and testing, not induction or deduction but what could be called co-duction. Plato always falls back on dialectic, even when exploring rhetoric and logic. Aristotle insists on a plurality of methods to meet a plurality of subjects and problems. Consider the contrast between that and the method of Hume, or of other thinkers who begin with the assumption that the true method of inquiry is to work analytically with the indivisible parts of the universe, not some ideological whole, and then to reason analytically 'upward' from those elementary parts. Whether or not such methods lead ultimately to this or that ontology or metaphysics, it is the right way to work.

Thus, without troubling too much about whether one will ultimately find a total view of everything, analytical reductionists know that they are dealing with reality, tough hard reality of the multiple parts. The more defensible among them generally have accorded a place for diverse methods, but some partial or flawed thought-modes have tried to reduce it all to one grand method, as modern scientists too often reduce everything to empirical demonstration of only one of Aristotle's four causes: the efficient, or mechanistic, or 'horizontal' bump-and-grind reality.



### 3.4 Goals

The diversity of goals is to a large degree implicit in all these other varieties. The goal of thought is to improve truth, for the sake of truth. No, the goal of thought is to improve conditions in the world, for the sake of what Plato called goodness. No, the goal of thought is to pursue beauty, proper kinds of eros, religious ecstasy, some transcendent escape from shitty reality, salvation.

For the monist or dogmatist, the goal is to demonstrate that there is only one right view of principles, subject choice, methods, and goals. For the pluralist who rejects vulgar relativism or skepticism, the goal is both to pursue some one or another of the major, irrefutable modes or, even better, to pursue what is the common ground among the defensible modes, thus demonstrating their defensibility.

The suggestion, in this cursory summary of just one brand of philosophical pluralism, is that all thinkers in all subjects—philosophical, religious, anthropological, political, literary—could reduce pointless debates about truth and objectivity if they thought harder about just which definitions, principles, methods, and goals they are depending on.

## 4. The Plurality of Pluralisms

One unavoidable problem for anyone who chooses the pluralist route is the immense complexity of modes and the rivalry of pluralisms in dealing with the modes. The rivalries often lead many of us pluralists to retreat, as we sometimes observed McKeon doing, to some version of 3.2.4, a loose-jointed ‘operationalist,’ ‘rhetorical,’ or ‘practical’ (pragmatic) corner of the chart, with an emphasis on how to improve the world by improving thought about it. But even as we do so we have to recognize that other thinkers, in contrasting modes, will be discovering truths that we ignore.

We thus end with a plurality of pluralisms, some more defensible than others, just as cultural relativists end with a plurality, some more defensible than others. All of the pluralisms are ‘relativistic,’ in the sense that within each system every claim, even a claim of fact, is relatable and to some degree dependent on the total thought-mode. Conclusions within a given mode are testable within that mode, and will often even prove to be testable and acceptable within other modes. But no one system is totally refutable by any other system, even when all other systems agree that one system is flawed.

Thus, serious explorers of the issues ‘relevant’ here have two main choices, whenever they find that no one controversy seems resolvable: retreat to the study of some one cultural system or thought-mode, ignoring the others, or pursue the mission of finding common ground among the conflicting systems. Only this second choice can avoid dogmatism, on the one hand,

and on the other skepticism, reductionism, and nihilism, both directions producing absurd destruction of meaningful inquiry.

See also: Cultural Psychology; Cultural Relativism, Anthropology of; Pluralism; Pluralism and Toleration; Relativism: Cognitive; Relativism: Philosophical Aspects; Value Pluralism; Wisdom, Psychology of

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