

# Relativism and Reflexivity

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## Abstract

This paper develops a version of the self-refutation argument against relativism in the teeth of the prevailing response by relativists: that this argument begs the question against them. It is maintained that although weaker varieties of relativism are not self-refuting, strong varieties are faced by this argument with a choice between making themselves *absolute* (one thing is absolutely true – relativism); or *reflexive* (relativism is ‘true for’ the relativist). These positions are in direct conflict. The commonest response, Reflexive Relativism, is shown to be vulnerable to an iterated version of the self-refutation argument. As a result, Reflexive Relativism possesses only the appearance of content, being either incoherent, or a regressively disguised version of Absolute Relativism. Concluding remarks on Absolute Relativism acknowledge this to be a bare, formal possibility, but claim that in fact it must represent one of a range of weaker varieties of relativism that alone remain tenable.

**Keywords:** relativism; reflexive; absolutism; true-for; transcendental argument

## I

This paper develops a version of the self-refutation argument against relativism in the teeth of the most widespread response by relativists: that this argument begs the question against them. A failure to take seriously this response – in its various forms – has led to the conviction, among relativists, that these self-refutation arguments have not engaged with their position. The (substantially undefended) belief among numbers of absolutists that these responses by the relativists are sophistic has led to both sides tending to argue past each other.

To avoid charges of question-begging, or otherwise arguing past the claims of the relativists, the argument needs considerable care in setting up – which task occupies much of the first half of the paper. The aim is to have a conclusive defence of the self-refutation argument against the most prevalent, strong, relativist responses to it. It is not any aim of this paper to have a refutation of all forms of relativism, and I explicitly detail ways in which relativism can, as a position, be weakened to the point where it is not vulnerable to these arguments.

## II

‘Relativism’ covers a variety of different views. One class of these views will shortly be distinguished as no target of these arguments; but the diversity which remains in those that are may be either a diversity in the things that are held to be relative (*what is relative* – truth, ethics, meaning, rationality, etc.) or a diversity in what these things are held to be *relative to* (cultures, individuals, epochs, etc.) – with a few cases ambiguous between these (e.g. concepts).

Two features connect these different relativisms, and thus may go some way towards justifying a claim to be arguing against relativism as such. One is the structural similarity underlying these superficially distinct positions – a similarity revealed both by the argument-type that has, after Plato, historically been employed against them, and in their range of responses to this argument-type: of which more shortly. The other unifying feature is a general adherence to an identifiable relativist ethic. Similarly, an ethic seems to unify the opponents of relativism. Combined, this probably accounts for the vehemence of the relativism/absolutism debates.

Relativists of all varieties are united by the ethic that one should do justice to the uniqueness of individuals and cultures (generally, ‘perspectives’) – that one should recognize the value of these particular viewpoints on their own terms, and not ride roughshod over them with one’s own values. Relativism of any variety requires that one should resist cultural, and other, imperialisms in whichever area; that one should not invalidate as worthless any genuinely held perspective. Most fundamentally, relativism makes the occupant(s) of a perspective the ultimate arbiter(s) and interpreter(s) of its normative categories: meaning, truth, knowledge, and so on.

Conversely, absolutists of all varieties are united by an ethic that one should recognize the sovereignty of truth, of objectivity, of things being the way they are independently of any view of them – to see us all as being present in the one world, thus in some way subject-to and equal-before the same fundamental normative categories of truth, meaning, knowledge. And of the need to resist the special pleading and intellectual dishonesty which they will see as consequent upon any attempt to deny these evident truths.

Now, the ethic behind relativism is not one which all absolutists would wish to resist. One might see oneself as being able to subscribe to absolutism without having to subscribe to any cultural (or other) imperialism, or being committed to the possibility of an armchair social science.

For this reason, distinguish from the start what may be called ‘first-order’, or ‘empirical’ relativism in any area from what may be called ‘metaphysical’ or ‘transcendental’ relativism: the latter alone is the target of this paper. When a social scientist claims of some category of thought, or

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language, or other item she is investigating that it is relative to this or that culture, and puts forward data to support this position, it is no business of the philosopher as such to dispute her claim. There is as much or as little empirical variability in colour concepts, ethical systems, perception, scientific practices, and so on, as our best social science tells us there is. The question of metaphysical relativism – relativism as such – is whether *everything* could be relative, to include the activities of these social scientists, the status of their findings, and any other reflexive, higher-order, justificatory claims besides. This is a point as apt to be misunderstood by relativism's defenders as by its opponents:

All arguments for relativism . . . depend on the observation that there are as a matter of fact many languages, many theories for every phenomenon.

(Harré and Krausz, 1996: p. 7)

Doubtless this is a 'matter of fact', but therein lies the problem for 'all arguments for relativism' which move from such empirical evidence of variability to metaphysical ('transcendental') relativism. The 'facts' (evidence) on which any such claim to variability rests cannot themselves coherently be undermined – a point some relativists seem to concede:

cultural relativity [our 'empirical relativism'] concerns only *first order* factual questions about the beliefs, feelings, interests, conceptual distinctions of some human society or aggregate; but it never as such addresses *second order* or legitimative questions.

(Margolis, 1991: p. 14)

The point isolated here is in fact a synoptic version of the type of argument-structure alluded to earlier. The stock objection to relativism, as first developed by Plato against Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*, involves applying relativism to itself, in order to undermine itself. In Plato's day such argument-types were known as *peritrope* (reversal) arguments; today such argument-types are known as transcendental arguments. As given, this is an *evidential* transcendental argument: to get the evidence (or other warrant) that their relativism is correct, it is necessary for the linguist or sociologist or other investigator to occupy a position that permits of evidence-gathering, assimilation and proof. But their own position, relativism, requires that these activities should provide them with no rational or evidential authority that transcends their own perspective; no window into alien perspectives, by hypothesis unintelligible from their own, then to claim that the evidence as to the nature of such perspectives vindicates their views.

Although epistemic issues – the challenge to supply evidence – can make the argument more vivid, the structure of the objection to transcendental relativism is the same regardless of what is claimed to be relative.<sup>1</sup> This paper will be concerned with constitutive rather than evidential transcendental arguments against relativism. As applied to truth, one schematic form of these is as follows.

- 1 Dilemma: Relativism is either true absolutely or it is not true absolutely.
- 2 If true absolutely, then something is, and relativism (which denies this) is false.
- 3 If not true absolutely, then it will be ‘false for’ some non-relativists. But it holds the judgements of each person/perspective/etc. to be true, so it holds to be true that it is false. **So**, Relativism is false.

This simplified version of the argument is useful, in that it flags three options which are available to the relativists. To resist its conclusion they may claim this to be a false dilemma, or they may accept either horn. Here Whorf appears tempted by the first horn of the dilemma, represented by the second premise above:

The person most nearly free . . . would be a linguist familiar with very many widely different linguistic systems.

(Whorf, 1956: p. 214)

Such a response to this kind of argument leads to a position that may be called an *absolute relativism*: only one thing is absolute – that nothing [else] is. Swoyer, however, in common with most relativists who consider the challenge of this kind of argument, prefers the other horn of the dilemma, represented by the third premise:

when viewed in this light . . . [relativism] does give us an answer to the question: In whose framework is it true . . .? The answer is, of course, our own.

(Swoyer, 1982: p. 101)

This other type of response to this kind of argument leads to a position that may in contrast be called a *reflexive relativism*: all things are relative – including relativism.

To discuss these options, more will now need to be said about what kind of relativism is being talked about, and how it may be talked about. This period of ‘setting up’ is rather involved, but it is necessary for what follows.

## III

*Why the Argument is a General One*

We began by noting two sources behind the apparent diversity in relativist positions: what is held to be relative (truth, meaning, etc.), and what any such thing is held to be relative to. There are reasons, though, why this diversity is unlikely to restrict the applicability and importance of our argument much:

*Perspectives, and 'Relative To'*

A proliferation in 'relative to' can, for metaphysical (as opposed to empirical) purposes, be regarded as largely terminological – apart from a significant distinction between subjectivism and sociocentric relativism, which will be returned to. At the level of abstraction this argument is concerned with, it matters not whether the talk is of *Weltanschauungs*, paradigms, languages, conceptual schemes, *Zeitgeists*, cultures, interpretations, forms of life, individual belief-sets or any of a number terms with similar uses. Each such expression will henceforth be grouped under an umbrella term, a *perspective*. This is meant to be no more than a dummy, to be substituted by the relativist's own preferred term of art in the argument.

*Moving Targets, and 'What is Relative'*

The interest here is in the structural problems relativism may have with transcendental arguments. These structural problems may be brought out for relativism as a thesis about truth, or meaning, or knowledge, or some other major normative category; but if one attacks the claim that truth, say, is relative, one will not want to be met by a response that requires relativism to be considered as a thesis about some other thing – meaning, say. For were one to have started with a transcendental argument against relativism about meaning, there would have been just the same danger of a response (by that relativist or another) requiring relativism to be considered as a thesis about truth. So, here Hacker defends conceptual relativism against the well-known transcendental argument of Davidson (1986). He holds constant the notion of truth, has concepts (his *bearers* of truth) as the thing that is relative, and has these as *relative to* conceptual schemes.

It is not truth that is relative to conceptual schemes, but – pleonastically – concepts. Differences between conceptual schemes result not in relative truth but in incommensurable truth – which is, I take it, what Kuhn, among others, was driving at.

(Hacker, 1996: p. 303)

Meaning (of the truth-bearers – the concepts) is what is held to be relative; truth as such is not.

Here, though, Hales, no less a relativist, responds to another transcendental argument (by Newton-Smith – whom he quotes) to make a closely similar claim of straw-manning against his opponent, save that Hales is led to the opposite position. Hales says:

This analysis also yields a simple and compelling refutation of an objection levelled by Newton-Smith. He writes that '[One] might say . . . that it is propositions . . . that vary in truth value [across perspectives]. But this is to take the short road to incoherence. For propositions are individuated in terms of truth conditions. It is just incoherent to suppose that the same proposition could be true in  $\Phi$  and false in  $\Psi$ .'

[Hales responds] This is plainly wrong. It is no more incoherent to relativise the truth of propositions to perspectives given a perspectivist semantics than it is to relativise the truth of propositions to possible worlds given a possible worlds semantics, or to relativise truth to languages given an array of languages.

(Hales, 1997: p. 39, quoting Newton-Smith, 1982: pp. 107–8)

So, contrary to Hacker's Kuhn, Hales requires us to hold constant our bearers of truth – their meaning (for Hales, 'propositions', for Hacker's Kuhn, 'concepts'). Hales argues that truth itself, of the same-meaning truth-bearer (proposition) is what is relative.

To avoid Davidson's arguments, Hacker opposes attributing to the relativist the claim that the same bearer of truth (concept) has different truth-values across what it is relative-to (a conceptual scheme). But Hales, to avoid Newton-Smith's arguments, insists that we *must* attribute to the relativist the claim that the same bearer of truth (proposition) has different truth-values across what it is relative-to (a perspective). Each is responding to a transcendental argument. Each can legitimately claim to be defending relativism. Taken together, though, they conspire to permit relativism to present a moving target<sup>2</sup>.

To avoid our having to take issue with a moving target, in what follows one major justificatory notion (truth) will serve as the classic case of what is held to be relative. The target of the argument will be the claim that truth is relative to perspectives, where a 'perspective', as noted above, is a placeholder for a term it is up to the relativist in question to substitute. And, with Hales, the meaning of a bearer of truth will be held constant across perspectives, to ask if the relativist about truth is right in saying that its truth-value must vary across perspectives. Of course, others have employed the transcendental argument-structure given here, to apply to relativism about meaning rather than truth. That just isn't what is being done now.

## IV

Here is the semantics that will be used to investigate things. The domain is a set  $\Pi$ , containing as elements all the individual perspectives,  $\{p_1, p_2, \dots\}$ . Truth is, in the first instance, a predicate applying within a perspective. This notion of truth – truth within a perspective  $p \in \Pi$  – will be left unanalysed; it must be, to serve as the analysans of relative and absolute truth both. Call it truth *simpliciter*. This is precisely not a term of art indicating some new and exciting state or relation that truth in a perspective consists in. It is merely used to indicate that the relativist's 'true for' locution, whatever it means, will not be further analysed, but used in analysis.

What is here baptized 'truth simpliciter' has been associated by some absolutists with the notion of absolute truth:

a proposition of the form 'x is F' is true (relatively) for person a, if and only if 'x is F for a' is true (absolutely). Call this the principle of translation. . . . when a person a states that some proposition p is true, and the [Protagorean] measure doctrine declares that p is true (relatively) for a, this in turn means, by the principle of translation, that 'p is true for a' is true absolutely.

(Burnyeat, 1976: pp. 193–4)

Contrariwise, this notion of truth simpliciter – truth within a perspective  $p \in \Pi$  – is identified by all relativists as relative truth. There is a danger that either such claim may be question-begging and a category error. If one is to use this kind of semantics to investigate relativism (and it seems to differ from less formal approaches only in being thoroughly explicit), one must maintain that there is one kind of truth of which it cannot be said that it is true either relatively or absolutely, and that is truth simpliciter – truth within a perspective  $p \in \Pi$  – for it is from this prior notion that one may construct, *at the meta level*, each of the notions of absolute and relative truth. This point only applies to the sense of 'truth simpliciter' as such. On the conclusion of arguments which use this notion, it may or may not prove to be the case that a given truth simpliciter can also be true relatively or absolutely.

*Definitions*

- A statement, s, is true absolutely iff s is true simpliciter in every perspective  $p \in \Pi$  (set of all perspectives). It is not true absolutely else.<sup>3</sup>
- A statement, s, is false absolutely iff false simpliciter in every perspective  $p \in \Pi$ . It is not false absolutely else.

- A statement,  $s$ , is true relatively iff it is not absolutely true<sup>4</sup> and there is at least one perspective,  $p \in \Pi$ , in which  $s$  is true simpliciter.
- A statement,  $s$ , is false relatively iff not absolutely false, and false simpliciter in at least one perspective.

Clearly a statement,  $s$ , is true relatively iff false relatively; though it takes these values in *different* perspectives. Why not even the same perspective, though? Well, suppose one investigated a sociocentric relativism with a model in which each  $p \in \Pi$  was a grouping of persons, a culture. Within one such culture, for a given statement,  $s$ , some persons have  $s$  true for them and others have  $s$  false for them. Notice, though, that this is just the existing model, only what was called ‘ $\Pi$ ’ is now called ‘ $p$ ’, and what was called ‘ $p$ ’, is now called ‘a person’. Perhaps there might be relativistic arguments that a statement,  $s$ , could be ‘true for me’ within some culture or social grouping and ‘false for you’ even within this same culture or grouping – nothing here takes issue with that. The point is, this possibility introduces no new issues which affect our choice of model to investigate the structural problems involved in metaphysical relativism; the same model investigates the same structural problems of this reformed subjectivist relativism. (Recall that ‘ $p$ ’, and hence ‘ $\Pi$ ’, is just a marker term, and that sociocentric and subjectivist relativisms are equally the target of the transcendental argument.)

So in a contentful, empirical sense, any claim that a statement,  $s$ , may be true simpliciter for some and false simpliciter for others can be represented in this model, but this is done by using one indexed marker-term,  $p$ , to refer to the perspective in which  $s$  is true and another such term,  $p'$ , to refer to the perspective in which  $s$  is false. Relativism precisely motivates us seeing there as being, for any statement,  $s$ , some perspective (paradigm, conceptual scheme, form of life, etc.) in which  $s$  is true, and another in which  $s$  is false; and the concern here is to examine what relativism itself motivates, as a metaphysics. Relativism, itself and as such, does not motivate the urging of, say, a para-consistent logic independent of this metaphysics of perspectives, so this model does not then restrict relativism by not permitting talk of there being a statement,  $s$ , which is true simpliciter and false simpliciter within the same  $p \in \Pi$ .

Note, further, that it is possible for a statement to be both *not absolutely true* and *not absolutely false* in this model. The model allows for a rejection of bivalence for absolute truth and falsity. This may seem to leave a toe-hold for arguing that the earlier, simplified, transcendental argument against relativism represented a false dilemma: it is worth nailing any such objection here. Of course one may not stipulate of relativism that it has to be either true absolutely or false absolutely, but nowhere was this done. The dilemma for relativism was expressed cautiously – relativism was required to be either ‘true absolutely or not true absolutely’ (a cue was taken from the strengthened liar literature). Expressed in such a way this



is not a false dilemma on grounds motivated for the relativist. So, to resist the transcendental argument against their position, relativists will indeed have to accept one or other horn of the dilemma. With these points in place, here, in terms of the above semantics, are the final definitions needed for the argument.

*Further Definitions*

- Relativism (**R**) holds just in case there is no statement, *s*, true simpliciter in every  $p \in \Pi$
- Absolutism (**A**) holds just in case there is a statement, *s*, true simpliciter in every  $p \in \Pi$

Notice that Absolutism (**A**) is on this definition really just the negation of Relativism – i.e. (**A**  $\equiv$   $\neg$ **R**). Clearly this doesn't correspond to most conceptions of absolutism – in which every truth is true in all  $p \in \Pi$ . It is, however, the complement of transcendental relativism, on which basis it is chosen. Really, then, the argument will be against transcendental relativism rather than *for* an independently motivated (as opposed to stipulative) notion of 'absolutism'; and this, as will be explained below, is in line with my remarks already about empirical relativism. This definition, plus the foregoing remarks, makes innocuous the first step of the following argument.

- 1 Dilemma: **R** or **A** ( $\equiv$   $\neg$ **R**).
- 2 If **A** is the case, then it follows semantically that the following statement, **A<sub>w</sub>** (*within*), is true simpliciter in every  $p \in \Pi$ :

**A<sub>w</sub>** 'Some statement, *s*, true simpliciter within this  $p \in \Pi$ , is true simpliciter in every  $p \in \Pi$ '

If **A<sub>w</sub>** is true simpliciter in every  $p \in \Pi$ , then some statement, *s*, is (subs. **A<sub>w</sub>/s**), and the definition of **A** is satisfied. So, if **A** then **A**. (If  $\neg$ **R** then  $\neg$ **R**.)

- 3 If **R** is the case, then it follows semantically that the following statement, **R<sub>w</sub>**, is true simpliciter in every  $p \in \Pi$ :

**R<sub>w</sub>** 'No statement, *s*, true simpliciter within this  $p \in \Pi$ , is true simpliciter in every  $p \in \Pi$ '

But if **R<sub>w</sub>** is true simpliciter in every  $p \in \Pi$ , then, again, some statement, *s*, is (subs. **R<sub>w</sub>/s**) and the definition of **A** is satisfied. So, if **R** then **A**. (If **R** then  $\neg$ **R**.) Or, put another way, the statement '**R<sub>w</sub>** is true simpliciter in every  $p \in \Pi$ ' follows from **R** and denies it – contradiction! We conclude to the negation of the premise which led to contradiction: So, if **R** then  $\neg$ **R**.

- 4 So, either **R** or **-R**; if **R** then **-R**, if **-R** then **-R**, so **-R**. This is the transcendental argument against relativism.

Note that this is not just a semi-formalized form of the argument given earlier, but is rather a precursor to it. The earlier argument is best seen as addressing the options which are available to the relativist once the argument just given is on the table. That is, one who wished to continue to be a relativist in the teeth of the transcendental argument just given would now have to choose one of the two options identified earlier: Absolute Relativism or Reflexive Relativism. Here, relativism has the option of saying that **R/R<sub>w</sub>** is indeed true absolutely, hence **A/A<sub>w</sub>** false absolutely. The ‘absolute relativist’, who accepts this horn of the dilemma, is considered in my concluding remarks. Most relativists – ‘reflexive relativists’ – choose the other horn. Their position is to be considered now.

## V

### *Reflexive Relativism*

The reflexive relativist has either to stop relativism leading to its own refutation or, more ambitiously still, stop absolutism leading to this. That is, reflexive relativism has to stop an adherence to relativism leading to a statement, **R<sub>w</sub>**, being true in every  $p \in \Pi$ , and hence refuting relativism. It does this by holding that statements *of* relativism (and absolutism) are themselves not true, false, *absolutely* – in every perspective.

### *Definition*

- Reflexive Relativism (**RR**) holds just in case there is no statement, *s*, true simpliciter in every  $p \in \Pi$ , where *s* includes statements *about* whether there is a statement, *s*, true simpliciter in every  $p \in \Pi$  – i.e. where this includes any statement of relativism (**R**) itself, and absolutism (**A**) itself.

Considered as a response to our transcendental argument, the reflexive relativist can hold that in some sense **A** does lead to **A<sub>w</sub>**, and **R** does lead to **R<sub>w</sub>**, but

**RR(A):** **A** is true only within the absolutist’s  $p \in \Pi$ , and

**RR(R):** **R** is only true within the relativist’s  $p \in \Pi$

We have what can (perhaps question-beggingly) be considered a non-literal semantics, with **RR(R)** replacing a literal (= ‘trans-perspectival’) reading

of **R** as the meaning of ‘relativism’ and **RR(A)** replacing a literal reading of **A** as the meaning of ‘absolutism’. The absolutist and absolute relativist alike agree in the literal, trans-perspectival meaning of absolutism (**A**) and relativism (**R**); they disagree over which of these theses is (trans-perspectively) *true*. The reflexive relativist, on the other hand, disagrees with each – the absolute relativist no less than the absolutist – opposing their assumption that absolutism, relativism, are trans-perspectively true or false.

Two lines of questioning then present themselves. One is to ask what the *content* is of statements such as **R, A**, if they are to be understood thus – i.e. ‘relativistically’. There are obvious problems in understanding what content can be given to talk of ‘relativism’, much less ‘absolutism’, if these be held to be only true relatively. However, we will best get a purchase on this issue if we bracket this problem and begin by assuming that such talk can somehow be made sense of, the better then to ask whether it can anyway solve the problems which transcendental arguments present for relativism.

#### *Laddering Up the Transcendental Argument*

With the rejection of an absolutist reading of **R**, once again all things, including apparently meta-level, trans-perspectival claims like **R** and **A**, are held to be really true only relatively – only first-order, within-perspective claims. Either of two paths can now be pursued, in that we can look at the reflexive relativist’s treatment of absolutism or relativism.

First, reflexive relativism entails that absolutism, no less than relativism, is true relatively. Absolutists, however, will reject this, since it is intrinsic to their philosophy as such, not an ad hoc addition to it, for them to say:

$\alpha$ : That ‘there is a statement, *s*, true in every  $p \in \Pi$ ’ is not just ‘true for me’, it is true for all  $p \in \Pi$  (i.e. ‘**A** is not just “true for me”’).

Reflexive relativism must combat such statements as  $\alpha$ , for  $\alpha$  directly opposes the position adopted by reflexive relativism to avoid the transcendental argument against relativism as such: **RR(A)**. If, though,  $\alpha$  is rejected, it follows semantically that the following statement, **RR(A)<sub>w</sub>** (*within*), is true simpliciter in every  $p \in \Pi$ :

**RR(A)<sub>w</sub>** No statement to the effect

$\alpha$  ‘that “there is a statement, *s*, true in every  $p \in \Pi$ ” is not just true for me, it is true for all  $p \in \Pi$ ’

is true simpliciter in this  $p \in \Pi$

But if  $\mathbf{RR(A)}_w$  is true simpliciter in every  $p \in \mathbf{\Pi}$ , then some statement,  $s$ , is (subs.  $\mathbf{RR(A)}_w/s$ ) and reflexive relativism is false. Or, to put it another way, the statement ' $\mathbf{RR(A)}_w$  is true simpliciter in every  $p \in \mathbf{\Pi}$ ' follows from  $\mathbf{RR}$  yet refutes  $\mathbf{RR}$  – contradiction! We conclude to the negation of the premise which led to contradiction: So, if  $\mathbf{RR}$  then  $\mathbf{-RR}$ . We have seen that if reflexive relativism doesn't oppose statements like  $\alpha$  it is refuted, but if it does it is refuted, so it is refuted. This is the transcendental argument against reflexive relativism ( $\mathbf{RR}$ ) – at least as this is when applied to absolutism:  $\mathbf{RR(A)}$ .

Second, reflexive relativism also, of course, applies to relativism itself:  $\mathbf{RR(R)}$ . So, reflexive relativism entails that our erstwhile statements of relativism,  $\mathbf{R}$  and  $\mathbf{R}_w$ , are in error when asserted in their literal sense, as trans-perspectival statements. This is only to be expected: relativism diverges over the dilemma which confronts it; the reflexive relativist who accepts the one horn must disagree with the absolute relativist who accepts the other horn.

If  $\mathbf{R}$  were read ingenuously – say, by an unsophisticated relativist unaware of the need to react to transcendental arguments, or by an absolute relativist who had chosen to take the other horn of the dilemma – it would entail that  $\mathbf{R}_w$  was true in every  $p \in \mathbf{\Pi}$ . One who adheres to reflexive relativism must oppose the more unsophisticated relativism  $\mathbf{R}$ , no less than it opposes  $\mathbf{A}$ , holding these two positions to be wrong for just the same reason: each claims to be true in every  $p \in \mathbf{\Pi}$  rather than just its own. Such a trans-perspectival relativism is precisely distinguished from reflexive relativism in being committed to statements like  $\rho$ :

$\rho$  that 'there is no statement,  $s$ , true in every  $p \in \mathbf{\Pi}$ ' is not just 'true for me', it is true for all  $p \in \mathbf{\Pi}$

Reflexive relativism must combat such statements as  $\rho$ , for  $\rho$  and the like directly oppose the position adopted by reflexive relativism to avoid the transcendental argument against relativism as such:  $\mathbf{RR(R)}$ . If, though,  $\rho$  is rejected, it follows semantically that the following statement,  $\mathbf{RR(R)}_w$  (*within*), is true simpliciter in every  $p \in \mathbf{\Pi}$ :

$\mathbf{RR(R)}_w$  No statement to the effect

$\rho$  that 'there is no statement,  $s$ , true in every  $p \in \mathbf{\Pi}$ ' is not just 'true for me', it is true for all  $p \in \mathbf{\Pi}$

is true simpliciter in this  $p \in \mathbf{\Pi}$

But if  $\mathbf{RR(R)}_w$  is true simpliciter in every  $p \in \mathbf{\Pi}$ , then some statement,  $s$ , is (subs.  $\mathbf{RR(R)}_w/s$ ) and reflexive relativism is false. Or, to put it another way,

the statement ' $\mathbf{RR}(\mathbf{R})_w$  is true simpliciter in every  $p \in \mathbf{\Pi}$ ' follows from  $\mathbf{RR}$  yet refutes  $\mathbf{RR}$  – contradiction! We conclude to the negation of the premise which led to contradiction: So, if  $\mathbf{RR}$  then  $\neg\mathbf{RR}$ . We have seen that if reflexive relativism doesn't oppose statements like  $p$  it is refuted, but if it does it is refuted, so it is refuted. This is the transcendental argument against reflexive relativism ( $\mathbf{RR}$ ) – at least as this is when applied to relativism:  $\mathbf{RR}(\mathbf{R})$ .

These transcendental arguments – against  $\mathbf{RR}(\mathbf{A})$  and  $\mathbf{RR}(\mathbf{R})$  – can be combined into a general opposition to reflexive relativism: define a type of statement  $w$  as any statement *about* whether there is a statement,  $s$ , true simpliciter in  $w$ 's  $p \in \mathbf{\Pi}$  that is true simpliciter in every  $p \in \mathbf{\Pi}$ . This type of statement,  $w$ , could be a statement that there is, ( $\mathbf{A}_w$ ), or a statement that there isn't ( $\mathbf{R}_w$ ). Reflexive relativism is committed to the view that no statement of type  $w$  is true simpliciter in every  $p \in \mathbf{\Pi}$ ; not even if ostensibly a  $w$ -statement that some statement *is* true simpliciter in every  $p \in \mathbf{\Pi}$  ( $\mathbf{A}_w$ ), much less a  $w$ -statement that some statement,  $s$ , is *not* ( $\mathbf{R}_w$ ). Reflexive relativism says that each statement of type  $w$  is true in its own  $p_w \in \mathbf{\Pi}$ , and false in some other  $p \in \mathbf{\Pi}$ . So reflexive relativism's attempt to resist the transcendental argument leads to the following,  $\mathbf{RR}_w$ , *having to be true in every  $p \in \mathbf{\Pi}$* .

$\mathbf{RR}_w$  No statement  $w$ , about relativism, absolutism, that is true simpliciter in this  $p \in \mathbf{\Pi}$  is true simpliciter in every  $p \in \mathbf{\Pi}$ .

But if  $\mathbf{RR}_w$  is true simpliciter in every  $p \in \mathbf{\Pi}$ , then some statement,  $s$ , is (subs.  $\mathbf{RR}_w$  /  $s$ ) and reflexive relativism is false. Or, to put it another way, the statement ' $\mathbf{RR}_w$  is true simpliciter in every  $p \in \mathbf{\Pi}$ ' follows from  $\mathbf{RR}$  yet refutes  $\mathbf{RR}$  – contradiction! We conclude to the negation of the premise which led to contradiction:  $\neg\mathbf{RR}$ . This is the transcendental argument against reflexive relativism ( $\mathbf{RR}$ ).

Clearly the relativist will respond with the same kind of move:  $\mathbf{RR}$  does lead to  $\mathbf{RR}_w$ , but  $\mathbf{RR}_w$  is only itself true in the relativist's  $p \in \mathbf{\Pi}$ , it is false in some other  $p \in \mathbf{\Pi}$ . This will represent a further twist to relativism in its attempt to escape the transcendental argument – call it an ' $\mathbf{RRR}$ ': 'no statement *about statements about* relativism, absolutism . . . etc.'. Also clear is that this will generate a further, successful, transcendental argument, against the coherence of this attempt at a re-formed relativism, and no doubt the emergence of a further attempt at a counter to that transcendental argument – an ' $\mathbf{RRRR}$ '.

What is now plain is that to try to avoid the transcendental argument by interpreting any statement of relativism or absolutism as itself relative leads regressively merely to a deferral of the problem, since a further transcendental argument will emerge to expose the self-contradiction inherent in the attempt to articulate any such relativism.

## VI

*What Then is 'Relativism', and Who is it 'True-For'?*

Notice that relativism, in attempting to make itself reflexive, has now become wholly *reactive*. It cannot be represented by a position as such, for any such position would be vulnerable to a transcendental argument in turn. As a corollary, note that any interim statement of a putatively reflexive relativism opposes each superseded attempt at a statement of such a relativism in just the way, and to just the same extent, as such a relativism opposes absolutism. So, **R** is opposed by **RR** for just the same reasons **RR** opposes **A** – because no statement of relativism or absolutism is itself true in every  $p \in \Pi$ . But **RR** is itself opposed by a further iteration of relativism for just the same reasons, and so on. *What now is 'relativism'?* It isn't **R** or **RR**, or **RRR**, and saying that it is 'what is true for the relativist' (in the relativist's  $p \in \Pi$ ) invites the question who the relativist is.

What, then, are the criteria for being in the  $p \in \Pi$  in which either relativism or absolutism is true? Unsurprisingly this question is never explicitly addressed, for such talk is empty. As displayed in the use made by relativists of these arguments, the tacit answer which seems to be on offer is a circular, formalistic one: the relativist is one for whom relativism is true; the absolutist is one for whom absolutism is true. Might this even come down to the relativist being one who mouthed 'relativism is true', or who had this as an attitude or set of behavioural dispositions? Not even this much is typically put forward,<sup>5</sup> but in case it were: such criteria are perfectly suited to be absolute and universal.

There is no principled reason for making the criterion for being in the relativist's perspective that one will remain serenely untroubled by the emergence of problems with reflexivity, for instance. There is no principled reason for holding that the mark of being in the relativist's  $p \in \Pi$  is that one will claim to find no problems with the emergence of transcendental arguments. Such moves will be viciously question-begging when the issue has become whether the challenge of such arguments uncovers that there is nothing it would be to be a reflexive relativist at all. What is it to be a reflexive relativist? A: Being in the reflexive relativist's  $p \in \Pi$ . And what is it to be in that? A: Not to be troubled by such questions.

*A General Reflexive Relativism?*

One might, on behalf of the relativist, try another tack. Suppose these arguments do establish that reflexive relativism is merely a reactive position; still, given thus an understanding of how such a relativist will *react* in any given case, it should be possible to put it into words – to make a general statement of this kind of relativism. Try the following:

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**R<sub>g</sub>** Take any putatively higher-order statement,  $\sigma$ , whether second-order or  $n$ th order, that is, a statement *about* a series of first-to  $(n-1)$ -order statements, ultimately *about* whether there is a statement,  $s$ , true in every  $p \in \mathbf{\Pi}$ . Relativism generally claims that really every such  $\sigma$  is just a first-order statement,  $s$ ; itself true in one  $p \in \mathbf{\Pi}$  and false in some other  $p \in \mathbf{\Pi}$ . There is no level of putatively higher-order statement for which this approach will not be taken.

The problem is that **R<sub>g</sub>** entails that the following, **R<sub>gw</sub>** is true in *every*  $p \in \mathbf{\Pi}$ :

**R<sub>gw</sub>** Within this  $p \in \mathbf{\Pi}$ , any putatively higher-order statement,  $\sigma$  (whether second order or  $n$ th order, ultimately about whether there is a statement,  $s$ , true in every  $p \in \mathbf{\Pi}$ ), is itself just a first-order statement,  $s$ ; true in one  $p \in \mathbf{\Pi}$  and false in some other  $p \in \mathbf{\Pi}$ .

The conclusion the absolutist and absolute relativist alike will draw from this extended line of reasoning is that no statement of reflexive relativism is coherent. At some high-order level, a notion like **R<sub>g</sub>** is being tacitly relied upon – our understanding of a reflexive relativism as distinct from an absolutist relativism is illusory. Absolute relativists respond to the statement of **A** by saying that it is false in every  $p \in \mathbf{\Pi}$  – or conversely that **R** is true within every  $p \in \mathbf{\Pi}$ . They stop the regress at the first iteration of it. All that the other horn of the relativist's dilemma does is regressively defer doing this until a statement like **R<sub>gw</sub>** appears (or more likely: remains concealed); but the appearance of understanding a wholly reflexive (wholly non-absolute) relativism is just an illusion – one achieved by concealing what the absolutist relativist does straight away, with the help of such regresses. The hidden generator of these regresses – which is really what the understanding of 'reflexive' relativism consists in – is an absolute-relativist formulation like **R<sub>g</sub>**.

Is this judgement on reflexive relativism fair? The relativist might of course take the position that statements like **R<sub>g</sub>** already contain, up-front with their content, the stated intention to apply the non-literal 'laddering' technique to any transcendental argument against them. ('There is no level of putatively higher-order statement for which this approach will not be taken.') And that this intention can derive from something called 'the content of relativism as such', something which is somehow pellucid to the relativist, yet ineffable and incommunicable to the absolutist, something in no way parasitic upon a concealed absolutist interpretation of statements like **R<sub>g</sub>**.

*A Deeper Level of Incoherence*

However, if relativism is to be granted the right to have its (unstatable) content interpreted according to its (unstatable) intentions, the question arises as to why absolutism cannot have its perfectly statable content interpreted as it clearly states it should be interpreted, trans-perspectively: that there is a statement, *s*, true in every  $p \in \Pi$ . Absolute relativism (**R**) does indeed do this: it interprets absolutism as its proponents do, then to claim that it is false, in error: there is one thing absolutely false – absolutism (**A**) – or, to put it another way, one thing absolutely true – relativism (**R**).

The reflexive relativist, however, does not and cannot cede to absolutism the right to have itself interpreted absolutely, all the way up, for this would remove from reflexive relativism the right to say ‘yes, absolutism is *true for you*’ – reflexive relativism would collapse onto the other relativist horn, making it into absolute relativism, a relativism which understands absolutism just as absolutism understands itself, as being a trans-perspectival thesis, but which takes that thesis to be absolutely false. To avoid this, reflexive relativism would have to claim an exclusive right to be interpreted in accordance with the [ineffable] intentions of the relativist; an exclusive right not to have what it claims interpreted in a way which undermines it. An absolute relativism about meaning (one perilously close to solipsism) would be needed to defend a reflexive relativism about truth.

But such a position would not simply be unfair, or arbitrary: it is inconsistent with the relativist ethic as such to refuse absolutism the right to interpret itself for itself, as not merely ‘true for’ the absolutist. The relativist simply cannot patronize the absolutists’ value- and belief-system with comments to the effect that ‘of course absolutism is *true for you*’. Much less, when the absolutist replies ‘that is not what I meant at all – I meant absolutism is true *absolutely*, not relatively’, can they reply ‘of course, that too is *true for you*’. The point is, in a deeper than merely semantic sense, in an *ethical* sense, that this attempt at a response is incoherent. If the relativists oppose absolutism, nevertheless, their relativistic values require them to take absolutism for what it itself takes itself to be, not for what they, with the last word, impose upon it from outside its ‘perspective’. In this respect, it is the absolute relativist who, paradoxically, appears to be more consistently relativistic, who adheres more consistently to the relativist ethic, in making the absolutists the ultimate arbiters and interpreters of their normative categories: meaning, truth, and so on. This above all motivates the relativist not to go down this road. (It is not so clear whether all absolutists do violence to the relativists’ value-system; though they could do this, of course, without incoherence.)



## VII

*Content – Plainer*

Notice that the issue of content could have been approached more directly than this, simply by asking what it would be for relativism or absolutism to be true only within one  $p \in \Pi$ . Relativism of this stamp is making a claim quantifying over all the  $p \in \Pi$  while claiming to be trapped within one  $p \in \Pi$  alone. What can this mean?

The content of metaphysical relativism is what it claims: that *no* statement, *s*, is true simpliciter in every  $p \in \Pi$ . This is a trans-perspectival, meta-level, claim: it quantifies over all the  $p \in \Pi$ . Yet more obviously does absolutism quantify over all the  $p \in \Pi$ . It is the content of these positions that the transcendental argument is generated from; only by ignoring this content through giving them a label ('A', 'R') can this be obscured.

One cannot ignore the content of relativism and just consider the question of whether something (a cypher, 'R'), should be held to be true in all  $p \in \Pi$  or only some. Were this an option, clearly one would have to hold such a 'cypher', **R**, to be true only for some  $p \in \Pi$  to avoid begging the question against relativism, but it is the content of relativism itself that forces one to do otherwise.

The difficulty is that relativism is at once both an essentially trans-perspectival thesis and a thesis that we are essentially limited to, by, within, our own perspective. Making this a problem for the relativist is not a contrivance of the absolutist, but a feature of the content of relativism as such. The relativist requires us to interpret relativism as only 'true for' its proponent, and only 'false for' its opponent – that is, only *relatively true*, *false*. But these are intrinsically trans-perspectival, meta-level terms. Within a  $p \in \Pi$  there is only truth simpliciter, falsity simpliciter. Relative truth/falsity is not a property that is possessed within a  $p \in \Pi$ , any more than Ryle's team spirit is possessed within a person.<sup>6</sup>

To apply these terms – 'relative', 'absolute' – within a perspective is not necessarily a mistake. One can of course import meta-level terms into one's object language – in natural languages we do this all the time. If, within a  $p \in \Pi$ , I claim that something is only relatively true, relatively false, that claim can still be true if the right conditions obtain in the other elements of the set. But it commits me to being able to talk about meta-level, trans-perspectival things, notwithstanding the fact that I am presumed to be located within a perspective myself. It is not coherent to suppose that I can both be unable to say anything trans-perspectival and say that something is 'only true relatively'. If I were unable to make any trans-perspectival, meta-level claims, then I would be unable to say: 'this . . . such and such . . . is *true for me*'. I would just have to say *true*. (I wouldn't even be able to say 'true simpliciter', though this has been done to clarify things in commentary upon this position.)

The attempt to state an apparently trans-perspectival thesis, relativism, while at the same time claiming to remain trapped within one perspective alone, leads to these difficulties with content. Some relativists, having come this far, now take the ‘moving target’ approach, and are driven to argue that the notion of truth simpliciter has multiple meanings which are trans-perspectivally opaque:

[One] can no more reasonably ask what the word ‘true’ means in the expression ‘true for w’ than one can ask what the word ‘cat’ means in cattle.

(Meiland, 1977: p. 574)

So, each  $p \in \mathbf{II}$  has its own array of letters T-R-U-T-H, in hyphenated attachment to other concepts in their perspective. Why use the letters T-R-U-T-H, though? One doesn’t put forward a philosophical theory that everyone has their own Cat-for-them, whether they be cattle, Catalans, Catholics and so on. If the invariant use of the letters T-R-U-T-H prefaced to F-O-R were a source of orthographically inspired error, why use them, even hyphenated, to give an account of the content of relativism? The answer is that were ‘true’ in ‘true for’ really a trans-perspectivally opaque notion, relativism’s meaning would not have been given – nor yet would it have been possessed by the relativist. Relativism must use the same term, ‘truth’, for every ‘true for’ claim it sanctions, and mean something similar by each use of such a term, or it will not have stated itself as a position.

There are limits to a relativism about meaning, and much else besides, limits which this paper, as being primarily about truth, is not concerned to map. What is clear is that a relativism about truth which, to defend itself against transcendental arguments about truth, has to repair to an extreme opacity about what this ‘thing’ it was putatively defending is – what an apparently shared discourse means – is clutching at straws, and on the way to a Pyrrhic victory. That is, repairing to an extreme ineffability about what relativism is defending, to disguise the fact that relativism involves an essentially trans-perspectival claim, though one that cannot be defended, is unprincipled – with the price of success for this tactic being to embrace solipsism (see Siegel, 1987).

### VIII

This concludes the treatment of the reflexive relativist horn of the dilemma. What of the other horn – whereby relativism is the one truth that is seen as absolute? This would be both a more defensible and also a less interesting position. Notice its similarity to what was called ‘empirical relativism’ above; for in a sense it is the limiting case of this. Empirical relativism is the claimed discovery of first-order facts about variability in

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human standards, values, and so on, in any area. It was pointed out that any such facts empirically undermining a claim to absolutism could not extend to the status of these putative facts themselves. Absolute relativism could be described as the minimal recognition of this, represented by the claim that *every* first-order truth is relative, yet *one* higher-order truth is absolute – that these truths are all thus relative.

Can empirical relativism be pushed to a point whereby it becomes absolute relativism? Can one occupy a standpoint whereby there is one thing alone that is absolute: *that* nothing is absolute? In some formal sense it appears that one could coherently maintain that one thing only is true absolutely – namely, relativism – but actually this should be seen not as a viable position in its own right. It is rather an extreme, limiting case of an array of positions that the relativist now has to choose between. In making space for empirical relativism one makes space for interesting scientific and constructive-philosophical work whose uninteresting, purely conceptual limit would be a position like this. This is now as much relativism as can be made sense of – but it is surely not meant to be taken seriously as a position, rather than a limit on positions. For one thing, the relativist would presumably have to claim to know that relativism was the One Truth, so there would be another singular absolutism, about knowledge (and rationality, and meaning, etc.). These things in turn make conceptual – and other – connections with other things: other beliefs, values, actions, the preconditions of our philosophical and ordinary discourse. It is not at all clear how the idea of a genuinely singular, absolute truth could make sense.

How much empirical relativism is intelligible – how close to the conceptual limit one can sail – is itself a difficult question, or rather set of difficult questions, without one single, fixed answer. Such questions should not be addressed in the abstract: one would need to see what kind of empirical relativism was being put forward in which area, and how much else was held to be relative at the same time, then to see what mix of transcendental argument, other philosophical argument, and constructive empirical argument could decide how intelligible, and how true, it was.

In making space for empirical relativism, I resisted putting forward a transcendental defence of any armchair social science. There does come a time when, though there are not transcendental limits on various positions, yet there are limits well enough – for the more constructive philosopher, or even the scientist, to investigate. In the case of relativism, the job of these transcendental arguments is to clear the space for such discussions, free from the attempt to foreclose them with incoherent talk about ‘everything’ being relative. To attempt to foreclose such discussion with a claim that ‘everything but relativism is relative’ simply won’t work in the same way. With such talk there is a presupposition that there is something that is absolute, and a limit criterion on its being absolute. There is then a

framework within which other things may be seen as absolute; and which are and which aren't becomes a matter for shared, open debate.

If one makes space for the existence of the property of absolute truth, one makes space for a discussion of the extent to which things have this property or lack it – the relativist must have conceded this. But then the job of pure transcendental argument is done.<sup>7</sup>

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### Notes

- 1 This claim about structural similarity is not meant to deny that an exploration of the differences is important also. In particular, it is not easy to develop a transcendental argument against ethical relativism, despite many authors noting a powerful mapping between the structure of ethical and epistemic normativity (see, e.g., Plantinga, 1993). Still, the structural similarities between versions of this argument as applied to truth, meaning and epistemology are so marked as to suggest strongly that we have one general argument-type against one general philosophical position – 'relativism'.
- 2 Cf. Plato, *Theaetetus* 179e (see also 171d).
- 3 Note that this semantics is by no means *prima facie* unfriendly to the relativist: much is conceded to relativism by defining absolute truth as 'true in all perspectives' – a point Meiland (1979) even argues makes absolute truth parasitic on relative truth.
- 4 Hales (1997) uses a similar, though rather more formal semantics to this, to defend the possibility of what I call 'empirical' relativism against transcendental argument, differing from this in that he stipulates that a statement can be true relatively despite (also) being true absolutely. I find such talk rather peculiar; nevertheless, this is a matter of terminology: his defence goes through easily enough once the terminology is conceded. (Of course, 'everything that is true is true relatively' can be true if a relative truth is *also* allowed to be 'absolute'.)
- 5 With some relativists, however, it does appear very much as if 'truth' is no longer treated as an *alethic* predicate, but (tacitly) as a kind of expressivist 'hurrah'. This perhaps explains their lack of concern with this otherwise perplexing question – as to the content of putatively trans-perspectival, meta-level predicates, given that these are held to take their meaning within a perspective alone. Expressivism though, is not relativism – on the contrary, it gives an absolutist (debunking) account of 'truth'.
- 6 It may turn out that a given truth simpliciter (truth within a perspective) is *also* true absolutely or relatively, but the moment we state even the latter we are quantifying over the set of all perspectives. Likewise, an individual's mettle may or may not be conducive to the good workings of a team, but the moment we state even the latter we are making dispositional or counterfactual statements about that individual functioning within a team.
- 7 My thanks go to Michael Morris, Michele Friend and an anonymous referee for this journal.

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