

## **Relativism and Autonomy<sup>1</sup>**

Emrys Westacott

### **Abstract**

Hilary Putnam's critique of relativism ultimately rests on the claim that relativism undermines or denies our intellectual autonomy, both as individuals and as a culture. I argue that while Putnam is correct in claiming that the complete 'naturalization' of our central epistemic concepts would undermine the possibility of self-criticism, and therefore of autonomy, he is mistaken in assuming that the relativist must exhaustively identify such concepts with the epistemic norms currently prevailing in his or her culture. There is a form of relativism, akin to the position taken up by Rorty, according to which criticism of existing norms can be viewed as both possible and valuable. I go on to defend this form of relativism against two further objections: that it renders it impossible for us to recognize alternative conceptions of rationality to our own; and that it undermines any motive we might have for engaging in self-criticism.

Hilary Putnam has locked horns with the doctrine he refers to as "cultural relativism" on a number of occasions.<sup>2</sup> In doing so he has helped to clarify and sharpen a debate concerning the tenability of relativism that goes back to Plato's critique of Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*. Putnam's arguments against relativism have occasioned many responses, some sympathetic to his views, others highly critical.<sup>3</sup> Since he frequently identifies Richard Rorty as a relativist of just the sort he is out to refute, much of the discussion surrounding his critique has focused on the question of how his position differs--if it differs at all-- from that advanced by Rorty.<sup>4</sup> In the following discussion I will put this question to one side in order to concentrate instead on the nature and merits of what I take to be Putnam's fundamental objection to relativism. I will offer an interpretation of Putnam's critique which I believe is

both faithful to his intentions and fruitful in that it highlights its insights as well its limitations. My main purpose, however, is to show how the relativist, arguing from a position akin to Rorty's, is able to answer this objection.

### **Putnam's principal objections to relativism**

Let us first clarify exactly what Putnam intends by the term "cultural relativism." This is necessary because like so many other critics of relativism Putnam tends to define his target rather loosely. Cultural relativism is variously represented as the view that "no point of view is more justified or right than any other;"<sup>5</sup> the belief that "reason is whatever the norms of the local culture determine it to be;"<sup>6</sup> and the doctrine that truth should be defined "in terms of the agreement of one's 'cultural peers.'"<sup>7</sup> Despite his different formulations, however, a reasonably well-defined picture of what he is attacking emerges. Cultural relativism, as he conceives it, is the view that the only philosophically respectable way of defining notions such as knowledge, rightness, truth and rationality is one which exhausts their content in a description of the norms and standards that actually operate at a given time in a particular community. The meaning of such terms is thus held to be entirely relative to some culture. Their various possible definitions can only describe what is *immanent* to the various cultures in which they occur. The question of whether a certain belief is true or rational is one that is only considered meaningful when related to a particular culture, and the answer can be determined simply by seeing how well the belief in question satisfies that culture's criteria of truth or rationality.

Putnam claims that the self-refuting character of this sort of relativism has been demonstrated many times, the first such refutation being that put forward by Plato against Protagoras in the *Theatetus*. Building on what he takes to be Plato's insight, he develops his own original criticisms in a number of different places. Although he does not simply rehearse the same objection over and over, there is, naturally enough, some overlap between

the various arguments he presents, and it is possible, I believe, to distill his critique of cultural relativism down to two principal objections:

1) Cultural relativism is logically incoherent because its central thesis must, yet cannot without self-refutation, include itself within its scope.

2) Cultural relativism is false (and its affirmation self-refuting) because it implicitly denies our intellectual autonomy.

Of these I would argue that the second criticism is the more fundamental. Let us see how this is so.

The first objection is initially directed against the kind of relativism which does not allow for the relativity of its own claims, the kind that asserts its central thesis--that epistemic norms are always relative to some particular cultural framework-- from a transcendental standpoint. Against this form of relativism Putnam offers an incisive criticism which brings out its incoherence by likening it to methodological solipsism.<sup>8</sup> The methodological solipsist regards other people as mere constructs out of his or her own experiences, and yet also maintains that the same is true for other people--a transcendental claim that only makes sense if the other people it refers to are not mere constructs out of the solipsist's experiences. Similarly, Putnam argues, the relativist who holds epistemic norms to be relative to a particular culture must treat other cultures as something like logical constructions out of his or her own culture's norms and practices; in which case it is unintelligible to view the epistemic relations between cultures as symmetrical.

Putnam concedes, however, that the relativist can evade this criticism by embracing a more thoroughgoing relativism which accepts the relativity of its own claims.<sup>9</sup> He labels this position "cultural imperialism" since it implies that we can only understand other cultures, including their epistemic norms, by reference to our own conceptual framework. This view, he claims, may be logically coherent, but it is nevertheless "contingently self-refuting" in a liberal culture such as our own.<sup>10</sup> Putnam sometimes seems to think that this follows from the fact that in a liberal culture the nature of rationality is an open question. But even if this

is so it does not render *self-refuting* the claim that rationality can be exhaustively defined by describing the epistemic norms currently prevalent in our culture. All that follows regarding this thesis is that it is false. What is self-refuting is not the thesis but the *enterprise* of arguing for its acceptance. It is as if I were to advance the view that the only means of persuasion anyone actually utilizes in our culture is physical force. Obviously, this claim is empirically false; but it is not self-refuting. There is, however, something odd--a form of pragmatic contradiction-- about my proceeding to argue in the customary, semi-civilized manner for its acceptance. Interpreted in this way, the argument can be seen to overlap, or even merge with, Putnam's other main line of attack against relativism: namely, that it denies the intellectual autonomy of both its advocates and their audience. To say that philosophical discussion presupposes that the meaning of our central philosophical concepts is open, is to say that it presupposes the possibility of our taking a critical, reflective attitude toward these concepts. And being able to do this is, to a very great extent, what is meant by intellectual autonomy. It is in virtue of these considerations that I propose to treat the second of the objections to relativism identified above--the "argument from autonomy"--as being more fundamental.

Putnam's notion of autonomy is in many ways classically Kantian. Autonomy is the power of rational choice; a condition of its possibility is that our beliefs, decisions and actions not be heteronomously determined. In the moral sphere, this means not being compelled to accept from some authority, other than our own critical judgement, the maxims we live by. More than that, though, it also means not being merely passive with respect to the principles we affirm and the norms that govern our behaviour. Moral autonomy (which relates to action as well as belief) is thus unimaginable without intellectual autonomy: the capacity for standing back from one's beliefs, assumptions, traditions, cultural norms and community standards, and making them an object of critical reflection.

The concept of autonomy (both intellectual and moral) has played an increasingly important role in Putnam's philosophy. In his recent ethical writings he explicitly associates

his views with those of Kant and Rawls, affirming autonomy as a "supreme value" without which nothing else about our lives or our culture would retain its value for us. In "Scientific Liberty and Scientific License," for instance, he writes,

Asking me "But how do I know autonomy is a good thing?" in the familiar philosophical-epistemological fashion is inviting me to provide a foundation for my own integrity as a human being. Rather than do that, I have to say "I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned."<sup>11</sup>

That autonomy should be treated as fundamental in this way is no surprise. Even in his earliest writings concerned with developing a functionalist philosophy of mind Putnam insisted that if a computer program is to provide an adequate model of human rationality it must be the kind of program that itself remains open to rational criticism.<sup>12</sup> A similar concern can be seen to underlie his early critique of linguistic conventionalism, a doctrine which, he argues, is like behaviourism in implying that when we engage in what we ordinarily think of as rational, cognitive discourse, we are doing "no more than making noises in response to macrostimuli in accordance with arbitrary conventions."<sup>13</sup>

Why does Putnam believe that cultural relativism undermines or denies the possibility of intellectual autonomy? His argument may be sketched as follows. Intellectual autonomy involves the capacity for self-criticism. This, in turn, requires one to make a distinction between what one *believes* to be true and what really is true. Without this distinction self-criticism could have no basis (or motive) from which to proceed. But the relativist, by identifying reason with the norms of rationality currently prevailing in our culture, and truth with whatever the majority of one's peers believes to be true, closes down the possibility of making such a distinction. In doing so, Putnam argues, the relativist not only undermines the possibility of self-criticism, but also seriously misrepresents the nature of our central epistemic concepts. For "it is a property of truth that whether a sentence is true is logically independent of whether a majority of the members of the culture *believe* it to be true."<sup>14</sup> Similarly, "whether a statement is warranted or not is independent of whether the

majority of one's cultural peers would *say* it is warranted or unwarranted."<sup>15</sup> He concedes that he cannot defend his view here by appealing to trans-historical canons of justification. Instead, he simply argues that a principle such as the one just cited articulates "a property of the concept of warrant itself . . . part of our picture of warrant."<sup>16</sup> This is what the relativist fails to recognize. In fact, however, the very project of defending a view of these concepts that runs contrary to majority opinion reveals that the relativist must also implicitly believe that truth and justification are logically independent from what the majority think. For only if this is so can a dissenting philosophical view about the character of our epistemic concepts be taken seriously.

### **A relativist response to Putnam's critique**

There is much that is right in what Putnam says here. Where he is mistaken, however, is in thinking that the relativist needs to insist that our central epistemic concepts be exhaustively defined by reference to the norms currently prevailing in our community. He forces this view on his relativist opponent, I believe, because he considers it to be the view one must adopt if one rejects--for relativistic reasons--his own conception of truth as *idealized* rational acceptability. (According to this view, to describe a statement as true is to ascribe to it an objective property: namely, that it would be considered rationally acceptable by a competent judge under ideal epistemic conditions.<sup>17</sup>) But there is no obvious reason to suppose that the relativist must accept this dilemma. On the contrary, there is a philosophical position, clearly and thoroughly relativistic, which is immune to Putnam's criticisms but which avoids the problems associated with Putnam's own attempts to capture the critical or "transcendent" function of our epistemic concepts by reference to ideal justification conditions.

The kind of relativism I wish to defend here is a very general form of cognitive relativism which takes as its object judgements in general rather than some specific class of judgements such as those expressing moral or aesthetic opinions. It is based on two theses:

1) The truth value of all judgements is relative to some particular standpoint (otherwise variously referred to as a theoretical framework, conceptual scheme, perspective, or point of view).

2) No standpoint is uniquely or supremely privileged over all others.<sup>18</sup>

An adequate explication of this definition would require at least another paper. Here, therefore, I will offer only a brief elaboration.

The claim that the truth value of a judgement is *relative to* some conceptual framework means, primarily, that the truth value of the judgement is established by reference to the rules of evidence and the standards of truth and rationality characteristic--or, better, constitutive--of the framework. Establishing the truth of a belief here means justifying it in terms of the other beliefs and attitudes that constitute the framework in question.<sup>19</sup> This justification will naturally proceed according to norms of justification that are also constitutive of the framework. These may or may not be recognized by us as sound, depending on the extent to which they include or accord with our own. It is because relativism requires us to relativize not just the truth value of judgements but also the epistemic norms according to which people decide which of their beliefs should be deemed true that it can be difficult to abstract completely from one another the probabilistic claim about what people are likely to believe and the philosophical claim about the epistemic status of their beliefs.<sup>20</sup> But the form of relativism I wish to defend is essentially a theory of the latter sort.

This form of relativism is intended to allow for a concept of objective truth; but this must remain a thoroughly relative notion. A statement is objectively true relative to some framework if it satisfies the criteria of warranted acceptability that operate within that framework. This does not, of course, exclude the possibility of someone being mistaken according to the epistemic norms of their own group--norms to which they subscribe, but which they may misapply. But it does mean that it is possible for the same statement to be objectively true in one sense and objectively false in another sense. One can also evaluate

the standards of epistemic justification employed by a particular group in more than one way: either internally, by looking at how well they serve the group's interests and goals, or from an external point of view, by considering how well they would serve the purposes of some other group. As when evaluating particular judgements, the external standpoint that one adopts most naturally and whose verdict one is most interested in will be, of course, that of one's own group.

The second thesis--the denial that there is any uniquely privileged standpoint--is a metaphysical claim. Relativists cannot claim to be able to prove it to be the case any more than atheists can claim to be able to prove the non-existence of God. But their skepticism regarding the existence of such a standpoint may be viewed as a pragmatic extension of the epistemological thesis that it is not possible conclusively to prove the superiority of one standpoint over any other.<sup>21</sup> The justification for this latter claim is simple and familiar. A conclusive proof of the superiority of one standpoint over another would have to proceed in a non-circular, non-question-begging manner. In order for any argumentative proof to work as a method of persuasion the party to whom it is addressed must accept the premises along with the relevant rules of inference.<sup>22</sup> Where fundamental matters such as the relative merits of different theoretical frameworks are at issue, the most important premises will be affirmations of value. These values are the criteria of superiority to which appeal must be made. If another person accepts these values I may be able to convince them to adopt the same standpoint as myself. What I cannot do, however, is prove to someone who does not accept my criteria of superiority that the standpoint I favour is better than their own.<sup>23</sup>

The conception of relativism I have elaborated is not exactly that of every other avowed relativist; nor does it cover all the various conceptions of relativism that non-relativists like to set up and knock down. (No definition could do that!) But it does, I believe, capture what is genuinely essential to any form of relativism: the assertion of the relativity of judgements, and the denial of a privileged standpoint. So understood, relativism



is a philosophical doctrine about the epistemic status of our judgements. It is neutral with respect to empirical questions such as whether or not there are cultural universals.

This form of relativism (which I take to be similar in essentials to that defended by Rorty)<sup>24</sup> can recognize, with Putnam, both the possibility and the value of a community adopting a critical attitude toward its own epistemic norms. But criticism of the prevailing beliefs and norms is understood to proceed not in the name of an idealized or transcendent notion of truth, justification, or rationality, but simply through an appeal to some other set of norms which the critics in question happen to favour. These norms could be those characteristic of an earlier culture, as in the case of religious fundamentalists condemning the secularization of modern educational and political institutions. Or they could be norms that prevail in some rival contemporaneous culture--the sort of appeal made, for instance, by those whose experience and knowledge of Eastern philosophies and religions underlie their critical assessment of "Western rationality." Very often, however, critics of existing norms advance their criticisms in the name of a new set of ideas concerning methodology and epistemic authority, ideas largely extrapolated from principles that are widely accepted but whose radical implications are only recognized by a minority. Historically and philosophically this tends to be the most significant form of criticism. It is the kind offered, for instance, by Socrates of Athenian moral and religious conventions, by Bacon of medieval science, by Descartes of medieval metaphysics, and by Nietzsche of the Platonic-Christian philosophical tradition.

Putnam's claim that our central epistemic concepts are logically independent of the beliefs and norms accepted by the majority in our culture is not a claim the relativist need dispute. At least, the relativist need not object if it is simply a claim about the way we *conceive* of such notions as truth, justification, or rationality. As such, it concerns the meaning of these concepts, or, as Putnam prefers to say, our "picture" of them.<sup>25</sup> And the relativist can accept Putnam's account of their meaning just as a defender of the coherence theory of truth can accept that the correspondence theorist offers a characterization of truth

which is closer to what the word "true" means in its everyday use. What the relativist denies, though, is the possibility of a substantive account of the essential nature of such concepts which refers to norms and standards which are not those accepted by some actual community. It is in treating this as a meaningful possibility that Putnam seems to resurrect the idea of trans-historical epistemic norms, and with it the discredited notion of a transcendent standpoint.<sup>26</sup>

### **Recognizing alternative conceptions of rationality**

Now it might be objected that this line of defense lets the relativist off the hook too easily. In an article defending Putnam's critique of Rorty, Carolyn Hartz argues that Rorty's reduction of truth to mere conformity with existing norms, and his insistence that we can only form judgements "according to our own lights," renders his position "imperialistic" in the sense that it excludes the possibility of our even *recognizing* alternative conceptions of rationality to our own.<sup>27</sup> Rorty would, of course, reject this conclusion. And Hartz' interpretation of Rorty, like Putnam's, is certainly questionable.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, one might try to press Hartz's point against the (Rortian) form of relativism I wish to defend. If every community and sub-community identifies rationality with some particular set of norms, even though these need not be the norms that enjoy the widest acceptance, does it not follow that none of them will be capable of acknowledging any conception of rationality other than the one to which they subscribe?

Such a conclusion would, I agree, be lamentable. And since it seems to be empirically false it would also constitute a *reductio ad absurdum* of any view that entailed it. But I do not think it is entailed by the sort of relativism I wish to maintain. There is, I would agree, something right about what Hartz says. If the general notion of rationality were reduced, without remainder, to the particular, determinate conception of rationality to which I and my cultural peers happen to subscribe, then it would seem we could not "make sense of

the idea that a culture sufficiently different from ours might be rational."<sup>29</sup> But nothing in the relativist position necessitates such an extreme reductive view.

We should note, first of all, that Hartz's contention could, with equal justification, be made about many concepts other than rationality: for example, justice, success, chivalry, or music. In these and countless similar cases, if we define a term solely through a description of how it is conceived and realized in our own community then it is hard to see how we could meaningfully talk about significantly different renderings of the concept in question. To avoid this problem, however, we do not need to posit any sort of ideal or limit to which such concepts implicitly refer. All we need do is recognize that many of our concepts have both a formal and a concrete component determining their overall meaning. Take the concept of justice, for example. The concept might be formally defined along Aristotelian lines as the virtue of giving to each their due. Clearly, such a definition is not very informative. As used by any particular group engaged in significant ethical discourse within a concrete social context, however, the term will have a much more determinate meaning. Slave owner and slave, landowner and serf, capitalist and worker may all agree that each person should receive what is due to them; but they will define justice differently according to their understanding of who is to count as a person, and what the grounds of entitlement should be. In spite of these differences, however, each group is capable of *acknowledging* that the other groups have different notions of justice. They are able to do so in virtue of the concept's formal meaning which is accepted by them all.

The concept of rationality can be analysed in a similar way, as having both a formal and a substantive meaning. Its formal meaning must, of course, be general enough to accommodate many different notions of rationality as these are instantiated in the theoretical frameworks, practices and institutions of diverse cultures. Not surprisingly, therefore, this formal definition will be somewhat trivial. One might say that a belief is rational for some agent or community if it is believed for reasons they regard as good ones, and an action is rational if it seeks to further some end that they endorse. The presence of terms like "good"

and "legitimate" indicate the irreducibly normative character of the concept.--a point Putnam rightly insists upon. But they tell us nothing more. It is only by fleshing them out in light of our particular needs, interests, beliefs, values and norms, that we construct a more determinate idea of rationality, one that we can use for critical and practical purposes.

Of course, the sort of definitions I am here invoking contain some circularity. Justice is defined by reference to the notion of desert; rationality is defined in terms of "having good reasons." But this is no objection. On the contrary, if I am right in claiming that it is these formal interpretations of our concepts which enable us to recognize alternative determinate constructions as instances of the same concept, the circularity of such definitions only indicates how little is required to make such recognition possible.

Nor should it be thought that this notion of a formal component in the concept of rationality surreptitiously reintroduces something like the kind of transcendence to which Putnam appeals. It is true that what I have called the formal interpretations of concepts like rationality, in virtue of their generality, may be said to span cultures. But they cannot be said to represent idealizations towards which we are working and which supposedly provide purchase for critical appraisals beyond that provided by the particular set of norms and values we currently hold. And this is what Putnam has in mind when he describes the concept of rationality as having a transcendent dimension.

The fear that a relativistic conception of rationality would undermine the possibility of a culture's being able to critique its own norms of rationality is thus unjustified. Of course, such criticism will need to employ a rhetoric; and this rhetoric will probably make use of the formal sense of our concept of rationality. The same observation holds equally for many other concepts whose interpretation in a culture can be transformed through the process of self-criticism. Our notion of justice may be criticized in the name of justice; our view of what constitutes epistemic warrant may be declared unwarranted. But the fact that our self-criticisms are often expressed in this way should not mislead us into thinking that we have here an implicit reference to ideal realizations of these concepts. Even if there was such a

reference it could do no critical work. For to repeat what was stated earlier: all criticism of existing norms proceeds by appealing either to those same norms, or to extrapolations from them, or to some competing set of norms actually held by someone.

### **Relativism and the motive for self-criticism**

Against the form of relativism I am defending one might yet object that even if it provides an acceptable account of *how* self-criticism is possible, it still leaves something very important out of the picture: namely, the *motive* for self-criticism. Presumably we undertake the criticism of existing norms with a view to effecting some improvement in our theory and our practice. Without this goal our self-criticism would be pointless. But then self-criticism requires more than just an alternative framework or set of norms from which to work; it also requires the belief that these new norms are in some way better. Can the relativist make sense of this belief? The question seems to have a simple answer. Relativists can and do advocate and participate in the critique of existing norms, conventions, and practices, and they do so with the intention of improving them. Rorty, for instance, explains and justifies his critique of the assumptions, methods, and self-image of modern philosophy by invoking, in the first instance, the value of tolerance, and indirectly such values as happiness, the alleviation of suffering, and the enhancement of our ability to "cope" with the world.<sup>30</sup> Of course, the criteria according to which one perspective is held to be superior to another can be given no special, privileged status. They constitute one perspective among several available. And any attempt to justify these standards will inevitably be circular since it will have to appeal to the very values that underlie them. But that is no reason to suppose relativists are not entitled to make this sort of evaluation, or that their doing so renders their position somehow incoherent.

Putnam strongly disagrees, however, and it is on just this point that he is most severely critical of Rorty's position. Rorty pays lip service, he says, to the idea that we can and should look for reforms in our ways of thinking, speaking, and acting, that enable us to

"cope better." But it is clear that all he means, and all he consistently can mean by this is that the new norms *seem* to be an improvement to those who adopt them. Putnam objects:

This concept of "coping better" is not the concept of there being *better* and *worse* standards at all. Just as it is internal to our picture of warrant that warrant is logically independent of the opinion of the majority of our cultural peers, so it is internal to our picture of "reform" that whether the outcome of a change is good (a reform) or bad (the opposite) is logically independent of whether it *seems* good or bad.<sup>31</sup>

As Putnam points out, this is essentially the same argument that we dealt with earlier in connection with our central epistemic concepts. It can thus be met along similar lines. If Putnam's point is that in ordinary discourse when we use words like "good" and "better" we don't actually *mean* "seems good to us" or "seems better to us" then he is clearly correct. But this is not a thesis that relativism--at least the kind I am defending here--seeks to challenge. Even if Putnam's objection concerns not just the meanings of terms but also the rules of our language games, it is difficult to see what it is that the relativist is supposed to be embarrassed by. The relativist can concede that all discussion takes place against a background of shared assumptions, and according to a complex of conversational conventions. These assumptions and conventions are rarely, if ever, articulated; but they are necessary conditions for meaningful discourse. When we discuss whether a certain reform in our intellectual culture is a change for the better we do not usually need to make explicit every shared normative assumption. Similarly, we do not need to constantly attach philosophical qualifiers to every judgement passed. To do so would in fact be unfruitful and inappropriate. Two dyed-in-the-wool relativists may argue fiercely over a moral issue. Both may accept that their claims can only be justified relative to the particular perspective of the community to which they belong, and that this perspective admits of no foundational or transcendental justification. But this does not make their behaviour inconsistent or ridiculous. Their conversation takes place at a certain level of discourse, and at that level

continual reference to their philosophical views concerning the epistemic status of their assertions is neither necessary nor desirable.

It might still be thought, however, that this response to Putnam's objection misses its real point, which has to do, as was originally stated, with the problem of motivation. How is it possible for a relativist to engage in and encourage critical reforms while believing all along, no matter at what level of discourse, that all change is *mere* change? Don't we have to be committed to some notion of *real* progress in order to take ourselves and our activities as thinkers and critics seriously? The relativist's notion of progress, on Putnam's view, is a fraud. And relativists who joins a community's efforts at self-criticism must either not really hold a relativistic view of progress, or must temporarily keep their true beliefs out of sight and (literally) out of mind.

Understood in this way the objection takes the form of a psychological rather than philosophical assertion. And as a psychological thesis it has, I would concede, some theoretical plausibility, but is, nonetheless, empirically false. Relativists generally are perfectly able to criticize existing norms, even though they recognize that their criticisms are advanced in the name of beliefs and values that cannot be given a foundational justification, or any justification that is not at some point circular. Moreover, they can do so without inconsistency or hypocrisy. It is unreasonable to insist that belief in the value of participating in a community's efforts at self-improvement requires, either intellectually or morally, faith in the possibility of a non-relativistic justification of one's convictions. The idea that philosophical relativism, taken seriously, will undermine any commitment to "progress" is as well refuted as the view that atheism entails moral nihilism.

To this a critic might still object (arguing now from a slightly different angle) that relativists who offer a critique of existing norms while admitting that this critique rests on assumptions which cannot be given a non-circular justification will be unable to do so with much conviction. Consequently, they will have difficulty persuading anyone who does not already agree with them. They will be in the position of builders who build on quicksand and

whose knowledge of this fact inevitably saps their own confidence in and commitment to their work, making it unlikely that other builders would feel inclined to view their work seriously as a model to be followed.

The first thing to notice about this objection is that, like the previous one, it rests on a psychological claim about what must be the case for people to feel conviction and for them to convince others to adopt their views. Let us agree, for the sake of argument, that a person who makes a claim without conviction is unlikely to convince others of what they say (although it would be interesting to know the innermost thoughts of advertizers, salesmen, speech writers, politicians, and television evangelists on this point). The question, then, is whether relativists can criticize existing norms with conviction. To the suggestion that they cannot, all I can say, once again, is that those who would deny this seem to be deducing a priori conditions of conviction which are at odds with the facts. To be convinced that an assertion is true and has value it is not necessary for me to believe that it admits of a non-circular justification. A person can believe wholeheartedly in the existence of God (and can effectively convert others to this belief) without necessarily holding that their belief can be justified in a non question-begging manner. A mathematician can assert the truth and practical value of a theorem in Euclidian geometry without having to believe that the axioms of Euclidian geometry constitute the only conceivable or legitimate basis for geometrical knowledge. Even non-relativists have to concede that circular justifications for our beliefs are often all we can manage. Putnam, for instance, defends inductive reasoning while admitting its circular nature, on the grounds that

Circular justifications need not be totally self-protecting nor need they be totally uninformative . . . The fact that a justification is circular only means that that justification has no power to serve as a *reason*, unless the person to whom it is given as a reason already has some propensity to accept the conclusion.<sup>32</sup>

It seems to me that underlying the objection under consideration is the assumption that conviction requires certainty which, in turn, requires that we can provide an absolute



justification for at least some of the statements we wish to assert. This is a paradigmatic expression of an attitude that Richard Bernstein has aptly dubbed the "Cartesian anxiety."<sup>33</sup> It is an anxiety we need to transcend.

The immediately preceding discussion has focused on the issue of whether relativism undermines our motives for criticizing the norms which happen to prevail in our culture or which we currently endorse. I have argued that it does not. One could also ask, however, a quite different and very interesting question about the motivations for adopting a relativistic outlook in the first place. A critic might argue that even if I have succeeded in showing that relativists can consistently do all the things non-relativists can do, I still have not offered any positive reasons for preferring relativism over rival conceptions of truth and rationality. In short, what is the point of relativism? What advantages can it claim to offer over other points of view? What can relativists say to non-relativists that might persuade the latter to adopt a relativistic way of thinking?

In my opinion this is one of the most intriguing and difficult questions which relativists must face. It is too large an issue to be adequately dealt with here.<sup>34</sup> I will, however, indicate briefly how I think relativists should address this problem.

It is not difficult to see what makes these awkward questions for the relativist. If truth is relative, then non-relativist points of view can legitimately claim to be true relative to some other theoretical standpoint. Moreover, relativism, as I have defined it, excludes the possibility of demonstrating the superiority of one standpoint over any other. So the usual reason that we give, on both mundane and theoretical issues, as to why someone should come over to our own way of thinking--namely, that our point of view is true, the other point of view is false, and it is better to believe what is true--is not available to the relativist who wishes to proselytize. This is something that Rorty recognizes very clearly. It is why he justifies and recommends his perspective almost entirely by appealing to its *practical* virtues.<sup>35</sup> I believe that in seeking to recommend his position on pragmatic rather than theoretical grounds Rorty takes the right tack. This is not to say that there are no theoretical

grounds for preferring relativism over its rivals. One could argue that relativism is the only view that is consistent with the other beliefs that an individual holds (a line of argument that Rorty presses on Putnam)<sup>36</sup>. One could also argue that relativism is the most reasonable position to adopt given the plurality of internally coherent points of view and the general lack of agreement about which, if any, is superior. But while these arguments may show relativism to be preferable to some non-relativist points of view, they cannot, in my opinion, show it to be the *only* internally coherent position or the *only* legitimate response to the facts of plurality.

Of the pragmatic arguments that one might give for favoring relativism, I will mention just two here (both advanced by Rorty). First, there is the argument that relativism best coheres with and promotes liberal values such as tolerance, freedom and democracy. Second, there is the claim that relativism encourages a pragmatic attitude towards existing norms, leading us to recognize that they have a contingent, conventional status and are therefore open to reflective criticism and modification according to our needs and interests. Of these I find the latter to be the most interesting and powerful justification for adopting a relativistic outlook. Having said that, however, I should also say that I have doubts about the persuasive power of any of these arguments. For I do not think they show that relativism alone carries the practical advantages in question. Nor do they show that these practical advantages necessarily outweigh other advantages which non-relativistic positions might be able to offer.

But even if these doubts are well-founded, that does not mean that an individual thinker can have no reason to embrace relativism. We all begin to philosophize from a particular starting point characterized by certain deeply held assumptions, initial leanings, and a guiding intellectual orientation. These do not rigidly determine the course of our thinking. But they do point us in a certain direction, set limits on what seems plausible, and render certain ideas more naturally appealing than others. In my opinion, the opposition between relativism and non-relativism, like other fundamental philosophical differences, has

to be understood as a reflection and a consequence of these different initial leanings. Relativists must, if they are to be consistent, recognize that non-relativistic points of view can also be true. And they can, without inconsistency, acknowledge that these other points of view may carry practical benefits which relativism does not offer. But it does not follow that these alternative viewpoints are real options for the relativist who, if only he or she were sufficiently rational, would jump ship. That is to misunderstand the nature of fundamental philosophical disagreements. Nor do relativists have to regard themselves as under an obligation to proselytize. They are, however, obliged to show (at least to themselves) that their position is coherent on its own terms and free from the sort of failings that critics like Putnam see in it. This is what I have tried to do here.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion: Putnam's charge that a thoroughly relativistic view of rationality is incompatible with the idea of intellectual autonomy contains some important insights, but does not constitute a decisive refutation of relativism. He is right to affirm that both as individuals and as a community we can, do and should exercise intellectual autonomy through the practice of self-criticism, particularly where this criticism is directed against existing epistemic and ethical norms. He is right to insist that we can, do and should recognize alternative conceptions of rationality to our own; further, that we are capable of *understanding* these alternative views, and possibly using them as critical levers on our own standards and norms. Finally, he is right in claiming that none of this would be possible if our concept of rationality could be reduced entirely to the norms of rationality currently prevailing in our culture. I have argued, however, that he is mistaken in thinking that relativists need to "naturalize" reason to this extent. He seems to think they must do so if they reject his idea that concepts such as rationality contain an implicit reference to an ideal or limit. But this is not the case. What makes it possible to recognize alternative conceptions of rationality as conceptions of rationality is not the existence of some ideal component in

our own notion, but merely its formal character, which enables it (like many other concepts) to have a sense over and above whatever determinate meanings it may be given. And what makes possible the critique of our present norms is simply our ability to judge them according to some other set of norms. Such self criticism is, to be sure, essential to autonomy; but nothing in the form of relativism I have been defending rules it out.

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<sup>2</sup> See, in particular, Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), chapters 5 and 7, hereafter cited as *RTH*; "Philosophers and human understanding," "Why reason can't be naturalized," "Beyond historicism" (all reprinted in *Realism and Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), hereafter cited as *RR*; "Realism with a Human Face," "Why is a philosopher?" "The Craving for Objectivity," and "Beyond the Fact/Value Dichotomy" (all reprinted in *Realism with a Human Face*, ed. James Conant (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1990), hereafter cited as *RHF*; and *Renewing Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), chapters 5 and 8.

<sup>3</sup> Sympathetic responses include Carolyn G. Hartz, "What Putnam should have said: an alternative reply to Rorty," *Erkenntnis* 34, 1991, pp. 287-295, and Ronald Lee Jackson, "Cultural Imperialism or Benign Relativism? A Putnam-Rorty Debate," *International Philosophical Quarterly* Vol. XXVIII, No. 4 Issue No. 112 (December 1988). Jeffery L. Johnson, in "Making Noises in Counterpoint or Chorus: Putnam's Rejection of Relativism," *Erkenntnis* 34, 1991, pp. 323-345, provides a careful and sympathetic analysis of Putnam's critique of relativism, but suggests that Putnam's arguments are not conclusive. For a more critical analysis leading to a similar conclusion see John Preston, "On Some Objections to Relativism," *Ratio* 5 (1), June 1992, pp. 57-73. For more positive defences of relativism against Putnam's attack see Miriam Solomon: "On Putnam's argument for the inconsistency of relativism," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* (1990), Vol. XXVIII, No. 2, pp. 213-220, and William M. Throop, "Relativism and Error: Putnam's Lessons for the Relativist," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 49, June 1989, pp. 675-678.

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<sup>4</sup> In addition to the articles by Hartz and Jackson cited above see, for instance, Paul D. Forster, "What Is at Stake Between Putnam and Rorty?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. LII, No. 3, Sept. 1992, pp. 585-603. For the way Putnam and Rorty themselves understand the differences between them, see Putnam's "Realism with a human face," RHF, pp. 18-29, and Rorty's response, "Putnam and the Relativist Menace," *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. XC, No. 9, Sept. 1993.

<sup>5</sup> RTH, p. 119

<sup>6</sup> Putnam, "Why reason can't be naturalized", *RR*, p. 235.

<sup>7</sup> Putnam, *Representation and Reality* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1988), p. 110.

<sup>8</sup> *RR*, p. 236-8.

<sup>9</sup> *RR*, p. 238.

<sup>10</sup> *RR*, p. 239-240.

<sup>11</sup> "Scientific Liberty and Scientific License," RHF, p. 203. See also *The Many Faces of Realism* (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1987), Lecture III.

<sup>12</sup> See "Minds and Machines," MLR, p. 373.

<sup>13</sup> "The analytic and the synthetic," MLR, p.41.

<sup>14</sup> *Representation and Reality*, p. 109.

<sup>15</sup> "Realism with a Human Face," RHF, p. 21.

<sup>16</sup> "Realism with a Human Face," RHF, p. 22

<sup>17</sup> Putnam's "internalist" account of the relation between truth and rationality is presented most fully in RTH; see especially Ch. 3.

<sup>18</sup> This definition of relativism is intended to conform with the way relativism is conceived in much of the contemporary literature. It is essentially the same as that given by Richard Bernstein in *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), p. 8. Bernstein there defines relativism as the view that all the concepts philosophers typically consider fundamental, such as truth, reality, rationality, rightness, or goodness, "must be understood as relative to a specific conceptual scheme, theoretical framework, paradigm, form of life, society, or culture," and adds that "for the relativist there is no substantive overarching framework or single metalanguage by which we can rationally adjudicate or univocally evaluate competing claims of alternative paradigms."

<sup>19</sup> It would be a mistake to say that a judgement whose truth value is relative to some standpoint can *only* be established on the basis of that standpoint since the judgement could quite possibly be justified from other standpoints (within other theoretical frameworks) also.

<sup>20</sup> Some of the literature on relativism seems to imply that the relation between judgement and framework can be understood either as that of logical entailment or as a case of causal determination. John Preston, for instance, takes the idea that the truth of p is relative to mean that "p 'follows from' or is 'determined by' the framework assumptions or agreement that the person subscribes to, together with the nature of the world." (John Preston, "On Some Objections to Relativism," *Ratio* 5 (1), June 1992, pp. 60-61). But neither of these ways of understanding the relation in question is satisfactory. Although on some descriptions of a conceptual framework it may be possible to show how a particular statement would be logically entailed by the framework, this will clearly not always be the case. Many beliefs will appear more probable, more plausible, more reasonable from the perspective of one system rather than another, without being logically deducible from other elements of that

system. The temptation to regard the relation between framework and particular judgement as one of causal determination--an inclination that is apparent in the Marxist tradition--should also be resisted. To understand the relation in this way effectively replaces the kind of philosophical doctrine under consideration. The relativism we are discussing here is, first and foremost, a claim about the *status* of our beliefs which rests on an examination of the relation between these beliefs and their manner of justification. A causal account of this relation belongs to a different level of discourse altogether.

<sup>21</sup> The epistemological thesis does not logically entail the metaphysical thesis. One could acknowledge the impossibility of *proving* any standpoint to be ideal, absolute, or supremely privileged while holding onto the idea that such a standpoint exists, perhaps even that it is attainable. But just as relativism tends to presuppose some form of non-realism, so they also typically incline towards a pragmatically grounded skepticism regarding the value--even the meaningfulness--of a concept like that of an absolute standpoint, the use of which cannot be experientially justified. Their attitude is similar to that expressed by Nietzsche toward the philosopher's concept of "the true world":

The true world--unattainable, indemonstrable? At any rate, unattained. And being unattained, also *unknown*. Consequently, not consoling, redeeming, or obligating: how could something unknown obligate us? . . .

The "true" world--an idea which is no longer good for anything, not even obligating--an idea which has become useless and superfluous--*consequently*, a refuted idea: let us abolish it!

(Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Walter Kaufmann in *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Viking Press, 1954), p. 485.) Much more could be said, of course, on the desirability of making this move; but that is a subject for a different paper.

<sup>22</sup> The person being addressed must also, of course, accept the rules that define valid argumentation. That these cannot themselves be established by means of an argument is the point Lewis Carroll's "What the tortoise said to Achilles" (*Mind*, 4 (1895), pp. 278-80).

<sup>23</sup> Conflicts of opinion too fundamental to be settled by an agreed upon procedure on the basis of tenets and norms accepted by both sides are not confined to large scale cultural conflicts such as arose between science and religion or between the defenders of slavery and abolitionists. The same difficulty can be encountered in much less dramatic conflicts in the arts and sciences. This point was made familiar by Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*:, where he described the opposition between conflicting paradigms within natural science in the following terms:

When paradigms enter, as they must, into a debate about paradigm choice, their role is necessarily circular. Each group uses its own paradigm to argue in that paradigms defence. The resulting circularity does not, of course, make the argument wrong or ineffectual. The man who premises a paradigm when arguing in its defence can nonetheless provide a clear exhibit of what scientific practice will be like for those who adopt the new view of nature. That exhibit can be immensely persuasive, often compellingly so. Yet, whatever its force, the status of the circular argument is only that of persuasion. It cannot be made logically or even probabilistically compelling for those who refuse to step into the circle. (Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 94.)

What Kuhn says here with respect to natural science may, of course, be generalized, and not just to conflicts in other areas of theoretical activity but more widely to all conflicts between "incompatible modes of community life." This is precisely what Rorty does in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Discussing the question of how liberal values might be justified, he writes: "a circular justification of our practices, a justification which makes one feature of our culture look good by citing still another, or

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comparing our culture with invidiously with others by reference to our own standards, is the only sort of justification we are going to get." (Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Solidarity, and Irony* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 57.)

<sup>24</sup> Rorty describes his position as "the view that there is nothing to be said about either truth or rationality apart from the descriptions of the familiar procedures of justification which a given society -- *ours* -- uses in one or another area of enquiry." (Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity," : *Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 1 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 23. He prefers the labels "pragmatism" or "ethnocentrism" to "relativism, since he thinks the term "relativism" implies (and is often taken to denote) a positive theory of truth. What Rorty wishes to avoid is any theory that claims to identify what it is that all true beliefs have in common in virtue of which they are true. But relativism as I have characterized it here is not a theory of that sort. For it does not conceive of a statement's "truth value" as something it can have independent of the procedures by which it is justified or refuted.

<sup>25</sup> Putnam prefers to speak of our "picture" of these concepts rather than their "meaning" since this does not imply that the claims he makes about them should be considered analytic. See *Representation and Reality*, p. 133.

<sup>26</sup> A similar point is made by Paul Foster, "What is at stake between Putnam and Rorty," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. LII, No. 3, Sept. 1992, p. 593.

<sup>27</sup> Carolyn G. Hartz, "What Putnam should have said: an alternative reply to Rorty," *Erkenntnis* 34, 1991, pp. 287-295.

<sup>28</sup> Putnam's reading of Rorty is questionable, in my opinion, because I do not think Rorty wishes to *identify* the concept of truth or the concept of rationality with the norms governing their employment in our present culture. Rather, he simply maintains that that there is no useful notion of reason or truth that is not equivalent to some set of norms that a particular community actually employs. In his "Reply" to Hartz (*Erkenntnis* 34, p. 402) Putnam himself criticizes her reading of Rorty for being "uncharitable." To be fair to Hartz, though, what is at issue is not whether Rorty actually denies that we can make sense of other conceptions of rationality, but whether his relativism entails this consequence.

<sup>29</sup> Hartz, p. 288.

<sup>30</sup> See Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony and solidarity* , especially chapters 3 and 9.

<sup>31</sup> See Putnam, "Realism with a Human Face," RHF, p. 24.

<sup>32</sup> Putnam, "The 'corroboration' of theories," *Mathematics, Matter and Method* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 269.

<sup>33</sup> See Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, pp. 16-26.

<sup>34</sup> I plan to address this issue more thoroughly and systematically in the future.

<sup>35</sup> See Rorty, *Contingency, irony and solidarity*.

<sup>36</sup> See Rorty, "Putnam and the Relativist Menace," *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. XC, No. 9, Sept. 1993.