

Draft of a paper to appear in *Relativism: A Contemporary Anthology*, (Michael Krausz, ed.), Columbia University Press

Comments are welcome

A Brief History of Relativism
Maria Baghramian
School of Philosophy
University College Dublin

I. Introduction

Writing a history of relativism, and a brief one at that, poses particular challenges as the blanket term ‘relativism,’ does not stand for a unified doctrine with a more or less discrete boundaries or intellectual genealogy. Relativism is not one but several loosely interconnected doctrines developed and shaped in response to a variety of philosophical concerns and unified more by what they deny – absolutism, universalism and monism—rather than what they endorse. The varieties of relativism are customarily individuated in terms of their domains—hence the customary distinction between ontic, cognitive, moral, and aesthetic relativisms—or their objects, for example, relativism about science, law, religion, etc., and each variety has a distinct, if occasionally overlapping, history.¹

In recent decades, four schools of thought with strong relativistic tendencies have been influential in academia and beyond. The doctrine of cultural relativism, inspired by the work of social anthropologists, where it is argued that there can be no such thing as a culturally neutral criterion for adjudicating between conflicting claims arising from different cultural contexts, has become one of the best known forms of relativism and has shaped not only the theoretical framework of the social sciences but also the ethical and political outlooks of many non-specialists. Conceptual relativism, a more narrowly delineated form of relativism where ontology is relativized to conceptual schemes, scientific paradigms, or categorial frameworks has been

influential among a number of philosophers from the analytic tradition. It has also shaped the work of philosophers of science such as Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend. The underlying rationale for this form of relativism is the belief that the world does not present itself to us ready-made or ready carved; rather we supply the different, at times incompatible, ways of categorizing and conceptualizing it. The extreme form of this approach is social constructionism where it is claimed that reality—objects, entities, properties and categories—is not simply out there to be discovered by empirical investigation or observation only; rather it is constructed through a variety of norm governed socially sanctioned cognitive activities such as interpretation. Social constructionism has relativist consequences insofar as it claims that different social forces lead to the constructions of different ‘worlds’ and there is no neutral ground for adjudicating between them. Finally, Postmodernism is arguably the most potent source of the popularity of relativism today. The movement is identified with relativism because of its mistrust of claims to objectivity, denial of universal conceptions of rationality, and rejection of the role of truth and reason as courts of appeal.

Different stories may be told about the philosophical pedigree of each of these strands of relativism, but all these stories begin with the Ancient Greeks.

II. The Beginnings

We can detect an increasing awareness of diversity in cultural beliefs and habits foreshadowing relativism in Greek thought from fifth century BCE onwards. Herodotus (c 485–430 BCE) provides accounts of the variability of customs and habits in Persia and India and argues that if people were asked to name the best laws and customs, they would name their own for as Pindar had said, ‘custom’ is the king of all.² Euripides (c. 485–c. 406) shocked his audiences when one

of his characters, discussing incest with his sister, announces that no behavior is shameful if it did not appear so to those who practice it.³ Xenophanes (c.570–475 BCE) went even further by arguing that different people have different conceptions of God for “Ethiopians say that their gods are black and snub-nosed, while the Thracians say that theirs are blue-eyed and red-haired.” Indeed, he argues, “if cows, horses, and lions had hands, and were able to draw with their hands and do the work men do, horses would draw images of gods like horses and cattle like cattle.”⁴

Protagoras of Abdera (c. 490–420 BC) however, is considered the first official voice of relativism when he proclaims: “man is the measure (*metron*) of all things (*chremata*): of the things which are that they are, and of the things which are not, that they are not.”⁵ Plato reports the dictum in *Theaetetus*, and Sextus Empiricus tells us that it was the opening passage of Protagoras’ treatise *Truth (Al_theia)*. Plato interprets Protagoras as meaning: “Each thing appears (*phainesthai*) to me, so it is for me, and as it appears to you, so it is for your—you and I each being a man”⁶ and gives the example of the same wind feeling cold to one person and hot to another. Sextus also introduces the topic of conflicting appearances and attributes to Protagoras the view that truth is whatever appears to each individual.

It is difficult to know what variety of relativism, if any, Protagoras was defending.⁷ But Plato appears to attribute alethic relativism—that truth should be relativized to a framework or perspective—to Protagoras and “Man is the measure” being the opening statement of a treatise on truth lends further credence to this interpretation. Plato also emphasizes the social and ethical dimensions of Protagorean relativism by attributing to him the view: “what may or may not fittingly be done, of just and unjust, of what is sanctioned by religion and what is not; and here the theory may be prepared to maintain that whatever view a city takes on these matters and

establishes as its law or convention, is truth and fact for that city. In such matters, neither any individual nor any city can claim superior wisdom.”⁸

The history of relativism is simultaneously a history of the attempts to refute it and nowhere is this more evident than in the case of Protagoras, who speaks to us today only through the writings of his critics. It is a testament to the significance of Protagoras’ work that Plato devotes two dialogues to his views and constructs painstaking arguments to refute them. In *Theaetetus*, he advances a sequence of arguments against ‘Man is the measure,’ known as *peritropē*—turning about or reversal—to demonstrate the contradiction inherent in relativism. The argument, a model for numerous attempts to show that relativism is self-refuting, famously culminates in the conclusion:

Most people believe Protagoras’s doctrine to be false.

Protagoras believes his doctrine to be true.

By his own doctrine, Protagoras must believe that his opponents’ view is true.

Therefore, Protagoras must believe that his own doctrine is false.⁹

Plato’s argument, at least as it stands, is damaging only if we assume that Protagoras is at least implicitly committed to the truth of his doctrine for everyone, that he smuggles the self-refuting assumption that truth is absolute after all. There has been much discussion as to whether Plato is entitled to impute this assumption to Protagoras.¹⁰ What is beyond dispute, however, is that Plato initiated a particular line of argument against relativism that remains popular to this day.

Protagorean relativism casts its negative shadow on Aristotle’s work as well. In Book I of *Metaphysics*, Aristotle argues that relativism is tantamount to the denial of the principle of non-contradiction for if man is the measure of all things, then different people would assign the value true or false to the same assertion rendering it both true and false. Such a move, however,

contravenes the principle of non-contradiction, the most certain of all basic principles and a presupposition of all thought and speech.¹¹ The relativist, Aristotle argues, assumes that every utterance and its negation is true by the measure of its utterer. Therefore, the relativist is unable to make a meaningful statement, and even the very expression of relativism is meaningless since it does not exclude its denial. The relativist, then, by attaching the relativizing clause to all statements makes contradictions in principle impossible, and by so doing, all discourse is rendered devoid of content. Aristotle's criticism of Protagoras, not unlike Plato's, is based on an implicit and, from the relativist's perspective, question-begging use of a non relativized truth predicate. Protagoras advocates the legitimacy of (1) *P* is true for *F1*; and (2) not-*P* is true for *F2*; and (1) and (2) are not mutually contradictory. However, Aristotle's discussion of the principle of non-contradiction, in refutation of Protagoras, was one of the first and finest instances of engaging in philosophy of logic and remains influential to our day.

Despite Plato and Aristotle's criticisms, Protagoras's influence survived into the Hellenistic period in the work of the Pyrrhonian Sceptics in particular, who used 'Man is the measure' to strengthen their claims for skepticism. Sextus Empiricus, the most influential Pyrrhonian, reports:

Protagoras has it that human beings are measure of all things, of those that are that they are, and of those that are not that they are not. By 'measure' he means the standard, and by 'things' objects; so he is implicitly saying that human beings are the standard for all objects, of those that are that they are and of those that are not that they are not. For this reason he posits only what is apparent to each person, and thus introduces relativity. Hence he is thought to have something in common with the Pyrrhonists.¹²

Sextus bases his 'Relativity Mode' (Mode 3 of the Ten Modes of skepticism), on Protagoras and argues that judgments and observations are relative to the person who makes them, to their context as well as the object being observed. The example he gives is that of the right and left, which can be established only in relation to other objects. The conclusion Sextus

derives is, “since we have established in this way that everything is relative (*pros ti*), it is clear then that we shall not be able to say what existing objects is like in its own nature and purely, but only what it appears to be like relative to something. It follows that we must suspend judgment about the nature of objects.”¹³ Sextus’ Tenth Mode of skepticism, the Mode from variations in customs and laws, bears greater similarities to the modern understanding of relativism where he lists the habits, beliefs, and laws of different people to argue that “since so much anomaly has been shown in objects by this mode too, we shall not be able to say what each existing object is like in its nature, but only how it appears relative to a given persuasions or law or custom and so on.”¹⁴

One of the difficulties in constructing an intellectual history of relativism is to decide how closely we could map our current understanding of it onto earlier ones. For instance, among classical and medieval philosophers, we find a conflation of the ideas of relativism and relativity. Relativism, as currently understood, is the claim that what is true or false, right or wrong, logical and rational, is relative to a culture, belief system, conceptual scheme, or the psychological makeup of different people. Sentences expressing relational properties, such as taller, shorter, to the left of, to the right of, on the other hand, could be assigned non-relativized or absolute truth-values and do not support relativists’ claims.¹⁵ Many Greek philosophers, however, include in their discussions of relativism the idea of ‘things relative to something’ (*tapros ti*) meaning something is what it is in relation to other things, that it has no *sui generis*, but only relational properties. This conflation of the two senses of ‘relative’ is evident when, among instances of relativity, Sextus lists not only beliefs and sense experiences, but also signs and causes; he argues, “we shall not be able to say what each object is like in its nature but we shall be able to say how how it appears relative to a given persuasion or law or custom and so on.” He explains

further, “an existing object appears to be such and such relative to the subject judging and to the things observed with it”¹⁶

The boundaries between relativism and skepticism were also often blurred. Sextus, for instance, bases his arguments on data that may appear to favor relativism but the conclusions he draws support skepticism. Like Plato, Sextus believes that Protagorean relativism is self-refuting for “if every appearance is true, it will be true also, being in accordance with an appearance, that not every appearance is true, and thus it will become a falsehood that every appearance is true.”¹⁷ Pyrrhonism, in contrast, is not susceptible to the self-refutation argument as it does not commit itself to the truth of any of the contested judgments but chooses to suspend belief on all such matters. Despite these differences, there are notable similarities between Pyrrhonian skepticism and some contemporary approaches to relativism, particularly when Sextus argues for non-naturalism and relativism in ethics and claims, “there is nothing good or bad by nature, for if good and bad exists by nature, then it must be either good or bad for everyone. But there is nothing which is good or bad for everyone in common; therefore, there is nothing good or bad by nature.”¹⁸

The discovery of Pyrrhonian skepticism and the publication, in 1562, of a Latin edition of the *Outlines of Scepticism* by the French scholar Henri Etienne, had a profound impact in shaping Modern Philosophy and its sensibilities. In the Modern era skepticism and relativism, which had been ignored for almost fifteen centuries, once more became live philosophical topics.

III. Relativism in Modern Philosophy

The most notable proponent of skepticism and relativism in the early modern period is Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592), whose work is the most significant link between the relativism and

skepticism of the ancients and the various relativistic doctrines developed by modern philosophers.¹⁹

Montaigne uses the argument schemas made familiar by the Pyrrhonian skeptics in support of relativism and skepticism. Like Sextus, he points out that that with changes in our bodily and emotional conditions one and the same judgment may appear true to us on one occasion and false on another; therefore no absolute truths on such matters exist. He also cites the diversity of opinion on scientific issues—for instance, the Ptolemaic astronomers' disagreement with Cleanthes or Nicetas and the Copernican claims that the earth moves—as evidence that we are not in a position to make well-grounded choices between conflicting scientific claims. How do we know that, a millennium hence, another theory will not be offered which would replace existing ones? Foreshadowing nineteenth-century discussions of non-Pythagorean geometries, he argues that even the allegedly most certain of sciences can be doubted, since alternative systems of geometry such as in Zeno's, can be sketched.²⁰ Encounters with new peoples and worldviews spurred debates on universalism and relativism in early modern philosophy as they had done for the ancient Greeks and would do again for the twentieth-century social anthropologist. Montaigne relies on accounts of recently discovered faraway cultures to argue that there are no universal laws of human behavior and no innate human nature. In a highly provocative essay on the habits of the cannibals, he proclaims that there is nothing “savage or barbarous about those peoples, but that every man calls barbarous anything he is not accustomed to; it is indeed the case that we have no other criterion of truth or right-reason than the example and form of the opinion and customs of our own country.”²¹

Montaigne connects this last point to the Tenth Mode of Sextus and concludes that, given the diversity of moral, legal, and religious behavior, ethical relativism is the only possible

position. Unlike Sextus, however, Montaigne does not distinguish very clearly between relativism and skepticism and seems to think that the two philosophical attitudes are fundamentally at one.

Montaigne was a major influence in the development of French Enlightenment, which heralded the emergence of the Modern scientific outlook and secular humanism. Contemporary Postmodernist relativists condemn the Enlightenment for its faith in universal norms of rationality but at least some strands of the Enlightenment bear the unmistakable signs of a nascent relativism. A strong interest in distant cultures of the New World and a call for tolerance towards other creeds and peoples marks the writing of key Enlightenment figures such as Voltaire (1694–1778), Diderot (1713–1784), and Montesquieu (1689–1755). The abundance of still-fresh accounts of travelers charting unknown territories and peoples led to the construction of idealized versions of their exotic cultures and a valorization of their beliefs and outlooks—or what Todorov calls ‘exoticism,’ a tendency which foreshadows the ethical outlook of the cultural relativists of our time.²² These authors were also the first to explore the idea of viewing one’s culture from an outsider’s point of view and using this external perspective as a vehicle to criticize local customs and norms.²³ For instance, Diderot, in his “Supplement to the Voyage of Bougainville,” tells us that the Tahitian is mild, innocent, and happy while civilized people are corrupt, vile, and wretched; the natives live according to customs and rules that vary greatly from the Western ones. They do not possess private property or operate their affairs based on egalitarian principles, and they exercise sexual freedom not accepted in ‘civilized societies.’²⁴ Diderot is opposed to the European mission of civilizing the natives. Despite his belief that a common human nature is the foundation of trans-cultural norms of morality, he advocates the

relativistic sounding maxim to “be monks in France and savages in Tahiti. Put on the costume of the country you visit, but keep the suit of clothes you will need to go home in.”²⁵

Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters* presents a further instance of this proto-relativism. In this fictional conversation and correspondence between Persian visitors to Europe and their friends and relations in Persia, Rical, one of the two characters, echoing Xenophanes, says, “it seems to me, Uzbek that all our judgments are made with reference covertly to ourselves. I do not find it surprising that the Negroes paint the devil sparkingly white and their gods black as coal.” He concludes that if “triangles had a god, they would give it three sides.”²⁶ The Enlightenment is particularly important in the story of relativism for fostering an intellectual climate inimical to ethnocentrism. The need for tolerance and respect for other cultures and beliefs are frequently used as key justifications for cultural relativism, the Enlightenment prepared the ground for this attitude of tolerance by turning alien cultures, habits and perspectives into central areas of literary and philosophical concern.

Contemporary relativism paradoxically also owes its origins to prominent strands of the Counter-Enlightenment of the eighteenth century and the ensuing Romantic movement of the nineteenth century. Giambattista Vico (1668–1744), prominent above all for his anti-Cartesianism, Johann Georg Hamann (1730–1788), Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), and Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835) introduced the idea that an understanding of cultural outlooks and norms is possible only within their historical contexts and hence opened the way for a historicized and situational interpretation of cognitive and moral systems. Vico’s views were influential on the development of a relativist approach to history. Collingwood’s historicism, which is frequently but arguably^[edib2] mistakenly identified with relativism, is an example of this influence.²⁷ Hamann, to take another example, was a precursor of modern

relativism in two senses: first, he initiated what Isaiah Berlin calls “the great romantic revolt, the denial that there was an objective order, a *rerum natura*, whether factual or normative, from which all knowledge and all values stemmed, and by which all action could be tested.”²⁸ This romantic revolt in turn has inspired philosophers with relativistic instincts from Nietzsche to contemporary Postmodernists. Second, Hamann’s views on language foreshadow contemporary epistemic and linguistic relativism. Hamann maintained that language is the “instrument and criterion of reason” and as well as the source of all the confusions and fallacies of reason. Furthermore, the rules of rationality are embedded within languages “whose only warrant is custom, tradition and use.”²⁹

Similarly, Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835) sees language as the medium through which the collective spirit of a people manifests itself. “Language is, as it were, the outer appearance of the spirit of a people, the language is their spirit and the spirit their language; we can never think of them sufficiently as identical.”³⁰ Every language has an inner linguistic form or distinctive essence that shapes the thinking and the ‘world picture’ of its speakers. Language provides a conceptual framework for its users for thinking about the world. Different linguistic communities each bring their own possibly unique framework to bear on their ontological and metaphysical commitments. Despite a gap of two centuries, the distance separating von Humboldt and modern day linguistic relativists such as Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf is negligible. Hamann directly influenced Herder, another major figure in the Counter-Enlightenment. With an intellectual attitude reminiscent of contemporary Postmodernism, Herder saw the rational, universal, and scientific civilization—the Enlightenment—as the enemy.³¹ According to Herder, different historic periods demonstrate different tastes and preferences in ethics and aesthetics; we are not in a position to rank them or objectively choose

between them. His leaning towards historicism, which is a form of cultural relativism, is evident in the following passage: “Could it be that what a nation at one time considers good, fair, useful, pleasant, and true it considers at another time bad, ugly, useless, unpleasant, false?—And yet this happens!... one observes that ruling customs, that favorite concepts of honor, of merit, of what is useful can blind an age with a magical light, that a taste in these and those sciences can constitute the tone of a century, and yet all this dies with the century.”³²

The Counter Enlightenment played a significant role in the work of Hegel, Nietzsche, and Dilthey, who in turn represent the intellectual force behind various strands of contemporary relativism.

It is only in mid-nineteenth century that we encounter the first use of the terms ‘relativism’ and ‘relativity.’ John Grote, in his *Exploratio Philosophica* (1865), is often credited with coining the term. He says, “The notion of the mask over the face of nature is. . . . what I have called ‘relativism.’ If ‘the face of nature’ is reality, then the mask over it, which is what theory gives us, is so much deception, and that is what relativism really comes to.”³³ Around the same time, William Hamilton advocated what John Stuart Mill calls the “doctrine of relativity of our human knowledge,” according to which there can be no unconditional knowledge, for all knowledge lies between two contradictory inconceivables. Interestingly, Grote’s brother, the historian and philosopher George Grote, in his monumental history of Greece and Greek philosophy, complains about the injustice of Plato’s negative portrayal of Protagoras and identifies ‘the principle of relativity,’ laid down by Protagoras with the more contemporary relativism of Hamilton and others.³⁴ The Victorian relativists, like many of those who came later, received their inspiration not from the ancients but from German philosophers of eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

IV. The Roots of Contemporary Relativism

The four main contemporary relativistic views outlined in section I owe their origins primarily to the work of Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche.

A. Kant and the Many Worlds We Make

Kant famously argued that although the very possibility of thought requires the assumption that the noumenal world and the world of the ‘thing in itself’ exists; we are not in a position to grasp it directly through our perceptions alone for “What objects may be in themselves, and apart from all this receptivity of our sensibility, remains completely unknown to us.”³⁵ The world we know—the phenomenal world—is grasped by our senses, but our worldly apprehensions are invariably mediated through ‘forms of intuition’ or the ‘categories’ that are the necessary elements of all knowledge. The raw data of our sensory experiences are organized and made intelligible by the concepts such as space and time, and the categories of understanding such as cause, unity, and substance. Without these *a priori* categories, experience itself would be impossible. “But though our knowledge begins with experience, it by no means follows that all arises out of experience. For on the contrary, it is quite possible that our empirical knowledge is a compound of that which we receive through impressions, and that which the faculty of cognition supplies from itself . . . independent of experience, and even of all sensuous impressions.”³⁶ The forms of our experiences provide the very framework within which all thinking becomes possible, they are *a priori* and necessarily universal. Our experiences of the world, and their descriptions, are subject to the laws of these *a priori* categories, which are the preconditions of all actual and possible experiences.

Kant's thinking on metaphysics and ethics was far removed from relativism; however, his distinction between raw experience and the conceptual principle for organizing them introduced the possibility that a variety of equally acceptable incompatible schemes of organization could exist to which ontology is relativized. During the nineteenth century, naturalist interpretations of Kant's scheme-content distinction by the physiologist, von Helmholtz, and the psychologist, Wundt, turned the Kantian *a priori* into the psychological or physiological categories, and hence contingent preconditions of human knowledge.³⁷ For this very reason, Husserl blames Kant, more than any other philosopher, for psychologism and relativism. He argues that there is nothing in Kant's work to prevent us from thinking that the Kantian table of categories could vary in different species or even individuals.³⁸

Conceptual relativism is what Grote had in mind when he introduced the term 'relativism,' a way of thinking about ontology that found its full expression in twentieth century in the writings of neopragmatists Quine, Goodman, and Putnam. Classical Pragmatists, in the earlier part of the twentieth century, renewed the Kantian dualism of scheme and content. William James, for instance, argued that we cannot make sense of the idea of a reality presented to us already formed, for the so-called reality is at least in part constructed through the very attempts to describe it. James writes, "Although the stubborn fact remains that there is a sensible flux, what is true of it seems from first to last to be largely a matter of our own creation"³⁹ Furthermore, we cannot single out a unique set of descriptions as superior to all others.

Foreshadowing Quine, James continues:

There is nothing improbable in the supposition that analysis of the world may yield a number of formulae, all consistent with the facts. In physical science different formulae may explain the phenomena equally well—the one-fluid and the two-fluid theories of electricity, for example. Why may it not be so with the world? Why may there not be different points of view for surveying it, within each of which all data harmonize, and which the observer may therefore either choose between, or simply cumulate one upon another?⁴⁰

Quine's notorious thesis of ontological relativity echoes James when it advances the view that numerous incompatible but equally adequate translation manuals can be constructed for any given language each delivering a different ontological commitment. According to Quine, ontology, or the theory of what there is, is always relative to a language or conceptual scheme for there are no facts, independently of a theory or language or so called 'manual of translation,' to determine one's ontological commitments. Quine's thesis relies on what has become known as the Quine-Duhem thesis of underdetermination of theory by data, or the claim that any set of empirical data can give support to more than one plausible theory and consequently rival hypotheses may be equally justified by the same set of observations. In constructing a scientific hypothesis, the evidence available is not adequate for deciding in favor of a unique system or as Quine puts it, "Physical theories can be at odds with each other and yet compatible with all possible data even in the broadest sense. In a word, they can be logically incompatible and empirically equivalent"⁴¹

Quine was quite clear in his rejection of more extreme forms of relativism—cultural relativism and relativism about truth in particular—however, the Quine-Duhem thesis was central in shaping Paul Feyerabend's version of relativism, and the less overtly relativistic tendencies of Thomas Kuhn. Feyerabend's democratic relativism—the view that different societies may look at the world in different ways and regard different things as acceptable—is rooted in the thesis of underdetermination insofar as it defends the view, "for every statement, theory, point of view believed (to be true) with good reason there exist arguments showing a conflicting alternative to be at least as good, or even better."⁴² Feyerabend believes that privileging one conception of truth, rationality, or knowledge in the name of scientific objectivity runs the risk of imposing a repressive worldview on members of other cultural

groupings who do not share our assumptions and intellectual framework. He sees his brand of relativism as a plea for intellectual and political tolerance and a denunciation of dogmatism in science and in politics, “It says that what is right for one culture need not be right for another.”⁴³

On the opposite side of the debate on relativism, Donald Davidson also sees the distinction between scheme and content dualism largely responsible for the popularity of the heady but ultimately empty doctrine of relativism. He argues that the very idea that there diverse and mutually incompatible conceptual scheme, an idea that is at the core of relativism, hinges on the hypothesis of incommensurability or untranslatibility between languages. But contra Kuhn and Feyerabend, he thinks incommensurability is not a genuine possibility for something counts as a language, or conceptual scheme, only if it is translatable into ours. The idea of a language forever beyond our grasp is incoherent in virtue of what we mean by a system of concepts, so a worldview governed by a paradigm or conceptual scheme radically different from ours will necessarily turn out to be very much like our own.⁴⁴

Nelson Goodman’s ‘Worldmaking,’ an even more radicalized form of conceptual relativism, has been influential in the development of recent relativist trends in social constructionism, science studies and sociology of knowledge.⁴⁵ The driving idea behind Goodman’s worldmaking suggests that our categories and conceptual schemes not only carve up the world, but also, in an important sense, create or construct the world. We are actively engaged in making a world when, for instance, we make constellations by picking out and putting together certain stars rather than others, or when we make stars and planets by drawing certain boundaries rather than others. It makes no sense to talk about a pre-existing world prior to these human carvings, because nothing in nature dictates whether the sky should be marked off into

constellations or other objects. Furthermore, the worlds we construct would vary with the different conceptual tools we bring into play, tools shaped by our social background, cultural settings and context-bound interests.⁴⁶

The Strong Programme of Barry Barnes and David Bloor,⁴⁷ and ‘science studies,’ influenced by Bruno Latour, take the Kantian insights into its most extreme by arguing that scientific facts, and even reality, are not simply ‘out there’ to be discovered by the scientists, through their experiments or observations. Rather, they are constructed via interactive norm-governed processes and practices such as negotiations, interpretations and manipulation of data, etc. As Latour and Woolgar put it, “Our point is that ‘out-there-ness’ is the consequence of scientific work rather than the cause.”⁴⁸ Even bacteria were ‘invented,’ and not discovered as it commonly assumed, through the practices of the nineteenth century scientists. Although they do not dispute the existence of a world or a reality independent of us, they insist that ‘scientific facts’ and scientific ‘truths’ are the products of socially sanctioned norms and practices that emerge out of social and conceptual practices and their construction is guided by projects that are of cultural, economic, or political importance. In their hands, the anti-realist insight, inspired by Kant, that we do not have access to a world uncontaminated by our concepts, becomes a fully fledged relativist position barely distinguishable from Postmodernism.

B. Hegelian historicism and contemporary cultural relativism

Like Kant, Hegel, the towering figure of nineteenth-century philosophy, could not be characterized as relativist. However Hegelianism, which itself was influenced by the counter-Enlightenment, through its emphasis on the historical dimension of human reason and

understanding, gave rise to the idea that different histories, rather than the transcendental absolute idea of history, shape human understanding and knowledge in distinct ways.

Hegelian historicism had a crucial influence on Marxist and neo Marxist historical relativism and the relativistic Hermeneutics of Wilhelm Dilthey and his followers. According to Engels' brand of relativism, truth and falsity have absolute validity only within an extremely limited sphere. Not only ethics, which varies greatly from society to society, but also even logic cannot give us conclusive truths and do not deal with unassailable universal principles. Different social systems, with their varying modes of production,—feudal aristocracy, the bourgeoisie, and the proletariat,—give rise to unique beliefs and practices and therefore knowledge claims, especially those concerning the historical or human sciences, are “limited to an apprehension of the pattern and the effects of certain forms of society and of the state that exist only at a particular time and for a particular people and that are by their very nature transitory.”⁴⁹

Although Marxist relativism is most readily identifiable with historical and cultural relativisms, it has also shaped the thinking of Postmodernist philosophers and social scientists such as Michel Foucault. Furthermore, it has had a role in the advent of social constructivism through the work of the Russian psychologist and social constructivist, Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934), an important figure in the development of social constructionism and sociology of knowledge, who, in turn, was strongly influenced by Marxist and Humboldtian approaches to culture and language.⁵⁰

Hegelian historicism also shapes the Hermeneutics of Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911). In a manner reminiscent of Herder and Hamann, Dilthey argues that each nation is a self-contained unit with its own ‘horizon,’ that is, a characteristic conception of reality and system of values. The Hegelian ‘objective *Geist*’ or collective spirit manifests itself through texts and other uses of language, and so is available for study, but only by way of subjective, intuitive, empathetic

understanding. Therefore the methods of the natural sciences are completely inappropriate for the study of the human realm. According to Dilthey's 'historical relativism,' comparisons of views and perspectives held in different periods show the relativity and contingency of all historical convictions. Ironically, those beliefs that present themselves as unconditional and universal—metaphysical and religious systems in particular—more than all others carry the imprint of their historical conditions and consciousness. Different historical epochs produce different values or norms, each presenting itself as unconditional and universal. By acquiring historical consciousness, we become aware of the conflicts between these supposedly unconditional and hence universal values and discover their historical contingency.

However, for Dilthey, relativism does not lead to a free-for-all cognitive anarchy, because "The historical consciousness of the finitude of every historical phenomenon . . . and of the relativity of every kind of faith, is the last step toward the liberation of mankind." Hence, the one non-relative 'truth': for although metaphysical systems are historically relative, historical relativism as a non non-contingent philosophical proposition is not, and the discovery of its truth leads to liberation from dogmatism and ensures continuous creativity.⁵¹

Dilthey's views directly influenced Franz Boas, the founder of cultural anthropology, who attended Dilthey's lectures in Berlin; and Ruth Benedict, the anthropologist responsible for popularizing cultural relativism, who cited Dilthey in her 1934 *Patterns of Culture*.⁵² Boas saw cultural relativism as an antidote to the then prevailing evolutionary theories of culture, advocated by Charles Taylor and James G. Frazer, which placed Western societies in the highest echelons of the development of human civilization and 'primitive' tribes in its early stages. Boas countered the ethnocentrism of the early anthropologists by arguing that the "data of ethnology prove that not only our knowledge but also our emotions are the result of the form of our social

life and of the history of the people to whom we belong,”⁵³ Cross-cultural comparisons and ranking, of the type that evolutionary anthropologists advocated, are baseless. Through the work of Edward Westermarck, Margaret Meade, and Melville J. Herskovits, cultural relativism not only became the orthodoxy in social anthropology but also shaped popular contemporary views on relativism in the moral and social domains.

C. Nietzsche and Postmodernism

Nietzsche is possibly the most influential single philosopher in the recent history of relativism. His writing directly and indirectly influenced many varieties of contemporary relativism, but most notably foreshadowed and shaped key ideas of Postmodernism. Nietzsche agrees with Kant that we are incapable of unmediated knowledge of the world or the ‘thing in itself’ but radicalizes this Kantian view by rejecting the very distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenal world. This distinction has no coherent basis because to draw it is to presuppose the very thing Kant ruled out: the possibility of separating what the mind contributes to the world and what is in the world. All reports of so-called facts are statements of interpretation and could always be supplemented or replaced by other interpretations: “The world with which we are concerned is false, that is it is not a fact but a fable and approximation on the basis of a meager sum of observations; it is ‘in flux’ as something in a state of becoming, as a falsehood always changing but never getting near the truth: for—there is no ‘truth.’”⁵⁴

All the Kantian categories, such as cause, identity, unity, substance, etc., arise from language. Language however, is not the simple means of describing what there is. Instead, it imposes its own interpretation or ‘philosophical mythology’ on our thoughts. All our conceptions and descriptions, even those in physics, the purest of all sciences, are “only an interpretation and

arrangement of the world (according to our own requirements, if I may say so!)—and not an explanation of the world.”⁵⁵ Descriptions of reality, claims to knowledge, and moral judgments are inevitably made from a certain standpoint or perspective and hence cannot be representations of what is really out there. “There is only a perspective seeing, only a perspective knowing.”⁵⁶ Our perceptions and our understanding of the world are partial in two different senses. We can only see the world, literally and metaphorically, from a particular angle. Furthermore, our perceptions and conceptions are colored by our values and desires. No one perspective can occupy a privileged position for there are no true or objective perspectives, only perspectives that prevail at any given time in history. We cannot appeal to any facts or standards of evaluation independently of their relation to the perspectives we have; we can do little more than insist on the legitimacy of our own perspective and try to impose it on other people. Nietzsche’s perspectivism, if not identical to relativism, comes quite close to it.

Nietzsche’s influence is evident in the postmodernist movement’s questioning of the very possibility of objective norms, truth, reason, and justification. The key ideas of postmodernism were propagated by a number of post-structuralist French philosophers during the 1970s. Prominent among them were Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Jean François Lyotard. The postmodernists trace their intellectual genealogy to the historicism of Hegel, the radical politics of Marx, Heidegger’s phenomenology, and Saussurian linguistics. Above all, Nietzsche’s iconoclasm, his rejection of a realist and foundationalist conceptions of truth and objectivity, conjoined with his perspectivism, proved to be a continued source of inspiration for postmodern thought. Like Nietzsche, Postmodernists scorn the quest for universal values, cognitive and moral. They see it as a manifestation of the will to power masquerading as objectivity. They reject the Enlightenment as an authoritarian movement and a formative ideology of Western

imperialism and colonialism. Postmodernism, on the other hand, is presented as an ally in the fight for emancipation from tyrannies of all sorts.

Nowhere is Nietzsche's imprinting of postmodern thinking clearer than in Michel Foucault's thesis that all claims to knowledge and truth are disguised power relationships. The will to truth is always bound up with particular political (social, cultural, economic) hegemonies. Philosophers discussing traditional ideas of truth inevitably share the presuppositions of such power structures, for they are inevitably located within the nexus of particular social relations. Since Nietzsche, Foucault argues that we have come to realize that "truth is undoubtedly the sort of error that cannot be refuted because it was hardened into an unalterable form in the long baking process of history."⁵⁷

Foucault historicizes, and in that sense relativizes, truth and knowledge by claiming that each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth. Each society, or locus of power, generates its own truths and moral imperatives and with different historical and political periods these claims to power, and hence claims to knowledge and truth, take different forms.⁵⁸

Since the 1980s, Postmodernism has become a dominant theoretical approach in literary theory, sociology, social anthropology, cultural studies, feminist theories, and more. Although not many postmodernists evoke the term relativism in expounding their views, the relativistic implications of their Nietzschean outlook is evident to their critics, if not to them.⁵⁹

Relativism, unlike many other influential philosophical ideas, has often met with opprobrium, if not dismissive contempt, by professional philosophers. It is, however, a testament to its longevity and influence that this brief sketch of its history spans a period of 2,500 years and evokes the names of so many philosophical giants, from Plato and Aristotle to Kant and Hegel.

Notes

¹ For a more detailed historical account of relativism see Maria Baghramian, *Relativism* (New York: Routledge, 2004), chap. 1–3.

² Herodotus, *The History*, bk. 3, trans. D. Grene (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), chap. 38.

³ Euripides, *Andromache*, in W. K. C. Guthrie, *The Sophists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 173–176.

⁴ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis*, 7 22 1 and 5 109 3, in R. J. Hankinson, *The Sceptics* (London: Routledge, 1995), 31–32.

⁵ Plato, *Theaetetus*, 152a1–3, in *Complete Works*, trans. M. J. Levett, rev. Myles Burnyeat, eds. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1997),

⁶ *Ibid.*, 152a 6–8. It is very likely that this passage is a direct quotation from Protagoras's *Truth* as the same passage also appears in Plato's *Cratylus* 386a. Aristotle and Sextus Empiricus also use examples of conflicting sensory experiences in their restatements of Protagoras' position.

⁷ See Baghramian, *Relativism*, chap. 1 and Mi-Kyoung Lee, *Epistemology after Protagoras: Responses to Relativism in Plato, Aristotle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), for discussions of alternative interpretations of the Protagorean doctrine.

⁸ Plato, *Theaetetus*, 172a 2–6.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 169–171; also see M. F. Burnyeat, "Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Later Greek Philosophy," *The Philosophical Review* 85, no.1 (January 1976): 44–69, and Lee, *Epistemology after Protagoras* for detailed reconstructions of Plato's argument.

¹⁰ See Burnyeat Burnyeat, "Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Later Greek Philosophy" for examples.

¹¹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, bk. I, 1011b in *The Works of Aristotle Translated into English*, vol. VIII, trans J. A. Smith and W. D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908).

¹² Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, trans. J. Annas and J. Barnes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), PH I I 216–217.

¹³ *Ibid.*, PH I 140.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* PH I 163.

¹⁵ See J. Annas and J. Barnes, *The Modes of Skepticism: Ancient Texts and Modern Interpretations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 130–145, for a useful discussion of this topic.

¹⁶ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, HP 163, 167.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, HP 389–390.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, HP 29.

¹⁹ Montaigne, however, was not the only philosopher of the period to discuss relativism. For instance, in *Les Dialogues de Guy de Brués, contre les nouveaux Academiciens* (1557), de Brués presents the skeptics Baif and Auber, adducing arguments in favor of relativism based on the diversity of human opinions. They conclude that ethical and legal views are mere beliefs and hence do not have the absolute or universal authority of genuine knowledge claims. See Richard Popkin, *The History of Scepticism* (New revised edition) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). In conversation, Popkin expressed the view that no philosopher in this period made a firm distinction between relativism and skepticism.

²⁰ Montaigne was writing in the shadow of the heretic Giordano Bruno, who posited the existence of an infinity of worlds and speculated about recurrent incarnations; he was burned at the stake for his views.

- ²¹ M. Montaigne, "On Cannibals," in *Essays* (London: Penguin, 1991).
- ²² T. Todorov, *On Human Diversity*, trans. C. Porter (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).
- ²³ Descartes also was aware of the diversity in religious beliefs; for instance, he mentions that the Hurons in Canada believe that God is a tree or a stone. However, he thinks that this shows that all human beings have an innate and universal idea of God.
- ²⁴ D. Diderot, "Supplement to Bougainville's 'Voyage,'" in *Rameau's Nephew and Other Works*, trans. J. Barzum and R. H. Bowen (New York: Doubleday, 1956), 183–239.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 228.
- ²⁶ C. De Secondat Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*, trans. C. J. Bretts (London: Penguin, 1821/1973), lix;
- ²⁷ See Modood, T., "The Later Collingwood's Alleged Historicism and Relativism" *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 27 (1989): 101–125.
- ²⁸ I. Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder*, ed. H. Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 354.
- ²⁹ Hamann, J. G., *Hamann's Socratic Memorabilia. A Translation and Commentary*, trans and ed., James C. O'Flaherty. (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967)
- ³⁰ Humboldt, W. von, *On Language*, trans. P. Heath, ed. M. Losensk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
- ³¹ See Kuper, A., *Culture: The Anthropologists' Account* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 7.
- ³² J. G. Herder, *Philosophical Writings*, ed. M. N. Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1766/2002), 256.

- ³³ J. Grote, *Exploratio Philosophica: Rough Notes on Modern Intellectual Science* (Cambridge: Deighton, Bell and Co., 1865), I.xi, 229.
- ³⁴ C. Herbert, *Victorian Relativity: Radical Thought and Scientific Relativity* (Chicago: University Press, 2001).
- ³⁵ I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. N. Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1929):A 26/B42).
- ³⁶ Ibid., B1
- ³⁷ M. Kusch, *Psychologism* (London: Routledge, 1995), 327.
- ³⁸ E. Husserl, *Prolegomena to the Logical Investigations* (London: Routledge, 2001), 132.
- ³⁹ James William,) *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), 398
- ⁴⁰ James, William, *The Will to Believe*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. 1979), 66
- ⁴¹ W. V. O. Quine, "On the Reasons for Indeterminacy of Translation," *Journal of Philosophy* 67 no. 6 (26 March 1970): 178–183, 179.
- ⁴² P. Feyerabend, *Science in a Free Society* (London: Verso. 1987), 59, 76.
- ⁴³ Ibid., 85. Feyerabend's relativism diverges strongly from Popper's views, which involved accepting a version of dualism of scheme and content but condemning relativism as a key component of modern irrationalism. See his *The Myth of the Framework: In Defence of Science and Rationality* (London: Routledge, 1994).
- ⁴⁴ Davidson, Donald, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press.1984).
- ⁴⁵ See Nelson Goodman, "Just the Facts, Ma'am!" chap. 4 in this volume.

⁴⁶ For reasons of space, this account leaves out the significant role of Richard Rorty's brand of relativism, which he paradoxically calls ethnocentrism..

⁴⁷ Barry Barnes and David Bloor, "Rationalism and the Sociology of Knowledge," in *Rationality and Relativism*, eds. Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1982).

⁴⁸ B. Latour and S. Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 180.

⁴⁹ Friedrich Engels, *Anti-Düring*, 1886, reprinted in *Ethical Relativism*, ed. J. Ladd (New York: University Press of America, 1985), 18.

⁵⁰ L. S. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978).

⁵¹ W. Dilthey, *Introduction to the Human Sciences*, trans. R. J. Betanzos (London: Harvester Press, 1988).

⁵² Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1934).

⁵³ F. Boas, "The Aims of Ethnology," in *Race, Language, and Culture* (New York: Free Press, 1940), 636.

⁵⁴ F. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), §616.

⁵⁵ F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1886/1996), §14. The similarities to social constructivist view of science are unmistakable.

⁵⁶ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, §540

⁵⁷ M. Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," trans. D. Bouchard and S. Sherry, in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practise*, ed. D. Bouchard (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), 143.

⁵⁸ Foucault singles out the Renaissance, the Classical Age (seventeenth and eighteenth centuries), and the Modern Age (nineteenth and twentieth centuries) as three key historical periods where distinct conceptions of knowledge or ‘epistemes’ and what counts as true were produced. See M. Foucault, “Truth and Power,” in *The Nature of Truth*, ed. M. P. Lynch (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), 14.

⁵⁹ See for instance, A. Sokal and J. Bricmont, *Intellectual Impostures* (London: Profile Books, 1998).