

ON THE GROUND

Opening a Coherent Space for the Insights of Cultural Relativism

Dissertation Summary

It is a commonplace for philosophy instructors to complain that nearly all of their first-year students are relativists. If they can accomplish nothing else in an introductory philosophy class, they say, at least they can disabuse their students of this naïve view. There is no reason to take the prevalence of naïve relativism, however, as an indication of the naïveté of all forms of the view. We might just as well see it as a sign of the relevance of relativism for our times. In general, the fact that a particular view is held naïvely signals a need for greater reflection, not the need ultimately to abandon the view itself. The goal of my dissertation is to develop and defend a robust relativism, one that answers to our relativistic impulses without succumbing to the logical and practical pitfalls of more naïvely formulated versions of the view. I argue that the problems confronting relativism arise largely from a failure to fully situate relativist thought within the context that has, throughout its long history, inspired such views: the experience – whether through literature, the imagination or direct anthropological contact – of deeply engaging with a very different way of life. By developing the insights that emerge from a careful analysis of the experience of deep engagement, I show that a relativist line of thought is neither as absurd nor as alarming as we tend to think, and that it can lead to a coherent, fruitful way of understanding others and of evaluating our own relation to the world.

The form of relativism that I defend is rather broad, both in the content that it declares to be relative, and in the factors to which such content is supposed to be relative. I take these factors to be the historical, social, linguistic, and geographical contingencies to which human life is subject. For instance, in the case of the Chachi people, with whom I have lived and worked, these factors include that they migrated to the southernmost portion of the Chocó bioregion, that they live in an expanse of tropical rainforest bordered by Andean highlands to the East and the Pacific Ocean to the West, that they survived the Incan and then the Spanish Conquest, that they were subject to Catholic and later Protestant evangelization, that they speak a Chibchan language belonging to the South Barbacoan family, now

mixed with Spanish, that they live as multigenerational family units in raised huts along the shore of navigable rivers, and so on. It often helps, as a form of shorthand, to refer to these factors by what is their net effect: (the construction of) a particular way of life.

We may think, after Ruth Benedict, of each way of life as its own unique pattern that brings into play different features of human possibility.¹ I believe that we sense the depth and variety of this possibility only when we find ourselves, like the ethnographer, immersed in a radically different way of life. The broad relativism that I defend strives to capture this fact that life can be constructed and organized in ways that are entirely other – ways that are effective, autonomous, and irreducible to our own. In a sense, this means that everything – the way groups articulate, order, manipulate and value their world – is relative to a way of life. We tend, however, to characterize relativism not so much by the inner shape of a way of life, as by the outer effects of such articulations, orderings, manipulations and valuations. In this case, the content that is relative to a way of life becomes the claims, both explicit and implicit, that a group makes about what is true, what is actual, what is causally effective, what is good, what is beautiful, what is proper, what is noble, and so on. When the Chachi do not offer assistance to a person who is troubled and crying, at stake are their (implicit and explicit) claims that this is a right action, that a good person must control his displays of emotion, that there is nothing another can do to assist in an affair so utterly private, and so on. Similarly, when a Chachi shaman calls upon his magic stones to identify the source of illness in his patient and to effect a cure, at issue are his (implicit and explicit) claims about the nature and cause of the illness, the veracity of his understanding, and the actuality of the concepts and mechanisms that he employs.

By focusing on implicit and explicit claims, we may sharpen the relative content of our view, but we do little to limit its scope. And it is this latter aspect that perhaps most unnerves the traditional analytic philosopher, who is by training anxious to pin down ideas and to avoid sweeping generalizations. A way of life encompasses and interweaves the narrower domains in which we often consider more specific forms of relativism, such as moral, linguistic or epistemic relativism. I am happy at least to

¹ Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1934).

concede that it can be useful to think through relativism in terms of concrete cases, and that narrower labels may help, to a certain extent, to focus our dialogue. In my discussion of deep engagement, however, I show that our arguments in a given domain often depend on claims in other domains. We find this interdependence even in examples strictly within Western life, such as in the debate about abortion. The standard arguments about whether or not it is acceptable to abort a fetus depend not only on moral claims, but on claims about the nature of life, cognition, and feeling. Or, to turn to a cross-cultural example, as the anthropologist Richard Shweder has observed, whether or not we approve of a practice such as sati, the live cremation of a widow on her husband's funeral pyre, depends not only on moral claims, but on claims about the reality of reincarnation and the nature of the soul.² Even whether or not we find hideous a son's eating fish and cutting his hair after the death of his father depends on extra-moral claims about spiritual purity and pollution.³ In fact, in these last two examples we see that different ways of life do not always agree about the nature, boundaries, interactions, or even the existence of certain domains. When we consider relativism only in narrowly circumscribed domains, then, we assume the primacy of our own concepts and distinctions. We end up overlooking large areas of difference and begging a very important part of the question against relativism. In this respect, I am quite unabashed in my defense of a relativism that is very broad and might answer to the name of "cultural relativism."

While such a view encompasses many interwoven levels, it does become particularly pressing in two domains. The first is the practical domain of prescription, action and judgment, often referred to as "moral relativism." The second is the theoretical domain of description, prediction, and explanation, associated with cognitive and epistemic relativism. When two or more divergent ways of life encounter each other, the political questions of whose interests will prevail, whose will be subjugated, whose will, as a result, be transformed, play out in these moral and theoretical dimensions. They become questions of

² Richard A. Shweder, *Thinking Through Cultures: Expeditions in Cultural Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 15-17.

³ Richard A. Shweder, "Relativism and Universalism," in *A Companion to Moral Anthropology*, edited by Didier Fassin (Chichester, West Sussex, U.K. and Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 85-102.

who knows the right way to act and must show (by conversion, by forced indoctrination, by absolute coercion...) the other. Who best understands the way the world works and must enlighten the other. Who best organizes life and must meld his structures onto the society of the other...Because of their strategic importance, my exploration of relativism gravitates toward these two dimensions. From the discussion above it should be clear, however, that considering the epistemic and moral dimensions of a broad cultural relativism is a distinct pursuit from considering epistemic and moral relativism in turn.

There is a sort of methodological relativism that has long been popular in anthropology which asserts that in order to understand a group's claims about what is good, what is right, what is true, what makes up the world, etc., we must take them in the context of their way of life. I defend the deeper and more radical philosophical variant of this view: that not only is it helpful to place such claims in the context of a way of life, but they are inevaluable outside such a context. There are multiple ways of solving the human puzzle, which do not fit neatly together. They are built in different social and environmental contexts, using different foundational concepts and standards of assessment. The space of reasons and the space of actions are laid out differently in different ways of life. The claims made in different ways of life about what that world is like and how it should be often overlap enough to engage each other, often even enough to conflict with each other, but not always enough to resolve such conflicts. Different ways make different choices in favor of different goods – different values, different species of truth, different relations to the surrounding world. These goods are in conflict with each other; they cannot all be held to the same degree in a single way of life. This conception leads us to a version of relativism that incorporates the insights of cultural relativism and is defined by *entrenched conflict*:

Our normative claims, as much in the theoretical as in the practical (and other) domains, about what is real, what is true, what is good, what is right, and so on, are inextricably tied to a particular way of life such that when they conflict with each other across different ways of life, we have no absolute, neutral or highest ground on which to arbitrate their conflict.

It is important to note some of the ways in which this contrasts with more strawman versions of relativism:

(1) **Not Defined by Polar Opposition of Claims:** It is rarely the case that two different ways of life conflict with diametrical opposition. What first appears to be a conflict between A, grounded in one way of life, and not-A, grounded in another way of life, turns out, on closer examination, to be a conflict between A and not-A', claims which are grounded in different ways of life and are in tension with each other, but are not diametrically opposed. Chachi and US Americans disagree about whether it is right to offer assistance to an adult who is crying; but, at the same time, they also disagree about what identifies a mature adult, the sort of act that crying constitutes, and the social space in which such an event transpires. They even disagree about what acts could count as assistance. In at least these ways, "it is right to offer assistance to an adult who is crying" is not the same claim for the two groups, and we may more accurately refer to the type of opposition here as between A and not-A'. Yet, in many such cases, A and A' do pick out overlapping events, so that both groups point roughly at the same agents and actions, one with approval and the other with disapproval. This is what we mean by conflict between claims that are in tension with each other without being diametrically opposed.

(2) **Not Dependent on Reified Concept of Culture:** Groups are fluid, dynamic, and influenced by the agents who compose them. It is not as if in our interactions we arrived at a line drawn on the ground with a sign that says, "a new culture starts here." Though our version of relativism distinguishes different contexts by reference to different cultures or ways of life, it does not imply that cultures themselves are reified, unchanging entities. In fact, by encouraging us to encounter other ways of life and to gaze into their practices and beliefs, often leads us to reflect back on our own claims and the conditions of our own way of life. It thus does not preclude, but often foments cultural fluidity and change.

(3) **Not Defined by Complete Untranslatability or Incomprehensibility:** The conceptual differences across different ways of life are neither crystalline nor perfectly opaque. There would be nothing for anthropologists to report about other ways of life if they could not in some way and to some extent grasp the concepts at play in another way of life. On the other hand, the relativist cannot claim that the anthropologist, or another like-situated cultural interloper, steps completely outside of herself to capture a radically different conceptual scheme. Our version of relativism stresses, instead, a *partial*

failure of translation. The relativist relies on analogical thought, the exercise of imagination, extrapolation and inference, to represent another conceptual scheme within her own. Her grasp of difference always remains tethered back to her own place of situatedness, to her own concepts and experience. This is what allows her to represent otherness without occupying a neutral or omniscient perspective and violating relativistic constraints.

(4) **Not an “Anything Goes” View:** Relativism is often understood as synonymous with arbitrariness: If truth is relative, then anything can be true; and everything is as true as it is false. The same follows for rightness, goodness, and the rest of our normative concepts. However, to grant a role to contingency in our practices and beliefs – even to incorrigible, inextricable contingency – is not to declare them *merely* contingent. Whether the world alone, or some shared human aspect of it, can arbitrate conflicting normative claims on non-relative grounds is a very different matter than whether the world alone, or some shared human aspect of it, makes an essential contribution to our normative claims. And it is only the latter that is upheld by our version of relativism. Deep engagement both encourages and is consistent with the realist observation that the world constrains our thought and gives it content. In this sense, it allows for a kind of relative transcendence: the inference, itself tied to a particular perspective (a perspective that happens already to acknowledge a plurality of perspectives), that our claims are responsive to and expressive of a transcendent reality. Yet this relation does not raise our claims themselves above the contingent contexts in which they are formulated, hold meaning, and inhere. They point to a transcendent reality without becoming transcendent themselves. This degree of realism is what distinguishes the atheistic claim that all of us are bound up in shades of illusion from the polytheistic claim of entrenched conflict: that all ways of life capture pieces of the world in incommensurable ways.

(5) **Not Defined by Tolerance:** Relativism is a view so closely associated with tolerance that in some of its more strawman versions it is actually formulated in terms of tolerance. The relationship between our robust relativism and tolerance, however, is much more complex. It generally *inclines* us toward tolerance because it reserves a space for the legitimacy of other practices and beliefs. It creates this space by suggesting that even normative claims that are in conflict with our own may be judged

reasonable and well-supported in their native context. However, it certainly does not entail or require us to be tolerant. In cases of extreme conflict, this space for tolerance will easily be exhausted. What will weigh most strongly with us is not the potential relative coherence of the claims with which our own are in conflict, but the judgment that, given our most careful understanding of what the world is like and how we should act in it, such claims cannot possibly be right. And on these relative grounds, we can oppose the claims of another way of life and their associated practices and beliefs.

Demonstrating that relativism is a coherent and fruitful view involves some innovation and detailed analysis. But the degree of difficulty and originality of this work alone is not high enough to account for the dismissive treatment that the view typically receives. Rather, it suggests that something more than mere misunderstanding or logical confusion must stand behind the common rejection of relativism. This does not have to be a deep, calculating and sinister force, but may more likely be something along the lines of inertia and self-interest. Perhaps what most keeps us from embracing relativism is a vestedness in the power relations that we sense it would disturb.⁴ While I do not delve into the nature of these psychological and political motivations, hidden or explicit as they may be, I do at least stress the philosophical analysis which suggests their existence. And I hope that to promote relativism as a coherent and viable view is to open doors of possibility for those on the weaker side of such relations – that relativism places value and power within the reach of other ways of life and, at the same time, goads, critiques, challenges our own life in different ways it can grow and change.

In chapter one, I begin by asking the question why one might be led to a relativist view in the first place. After all, there are seemingly easier ways to account for the fact that the practices and beliefs of those peoples who live at different places, and in different times than do we, differ, sometimes dramatically, from our own. Such people may, for instance, simply be wrong. Their understanding may be less developed than our own. Or, alternatively, it may be that the practices with which they engage the world, and the claims internal to these practices, may not be as different from our own as they at first

⁴ Cf Michael N. Forster, "On the very Idea of Denying the Existence of Radically Different Conceptual Schemes," *Inquiry* 41, no. 2 (06, 1998), 133-185.

seem. I argue that what motivates a relativist response to diversity over these alternatives are specific features of the deep engagement with a very different way of life. Drawing on the work of anthropologists such as E.E. Evans-Pritchard and Bronislaw Malinowski, as well as on my own experience living with the Chachi of Northwestern Ecuador, I discuss five features of deep engagement, and explain how it is that they push us towards a relativist view and away from the alternatives. These features are: (1) the coherence of another way of life (attributive symmetry); (2) the inconsistencies of our own way of life (reflexive symmetry); (3) the radical difference between our conflicting claims with other ways of life (complexity of conflict); (4) the important elements in other ways of life that find no ready equivalent in our own (dangling pieces); and (5) the rich, experiential learning that brings the facts of cultural diversity to light (first person.)

In chapter two, I address the worries about the coherence of relativism that have plagued philosophers since Plato. The heart of this chapter is written as a dialectic between the anti-relativist and the relativist, inspired, in large part, by the real-life exchanges between Harvey Siegel and Jack Meiland. The anti-relativist would like to pin the relativist between the two horns of a dilemma: either relativism is absolutely true, in which case the very assertion of relativism demonstrates that some truths are absolute, and the view is self-contradictory; or else, relativism is only relatively true, in which case relativism must also, in some contexts, be false, and the view appears to lose quite a bit of its force. I forge a path for the relativist by embracing the second horn of the dilemma, introducing several distinctions that help to develop a richer and more coherent account of relative truth. These include the contrast between internal and external claims, the analogical nature of our understanding of a different way of life, and world resistance – the presence of an external constraint to our claims even within a relativistic framework.

Next, I turn to an intuitive objection that seems to stand in the way of developing a philosophically satisfying relativist view, namely, that any such view will be unable to account for the apparently objective success of science. If our science and the technologies to which they give rise are so successful that anyone from any way of life can appreciate, for instance, the remarkable achievement of an airplane flying across the sky, then mustn't this universal acknowledgement make appeal to some

shared, culturally neutral standard of success? My answer to this question takes several stages. In chapter three, I argue that whether we compare the success of competing practices by their fruits or by the inner workings of their theories, the determination of success does not separate neatly from the social, environmental and conceptual context in which the practice is enacted. Because of this context dependence, the success of science does not constitute a neutral ground on which to arbitrate conflicting claims across different ways of life. Success is underdetermined without context and leads to dramatically different conclusions when we consider different contexts.

In chapter four, I argue, moreover, that success cannot be measured independently of the standards of assessment internal to a given practice. I explore the ambivalence that we encounter in the face of alternatives to our science, such as Zande magic. Building on the work of Charles Taylor and David Wong, I describe a “dynamic of resonance and loss” that allows the relativist to embrace her own point of view and yet to acknowledge the possibility of a context in which practices and beliefs that are in deep tension with her own also hold of the world. She does so by constructing an analogical understanding of other practices and beliefs from small seeds of similarity within her own way of life. She recognizes their appeal by re-evaluating her own practices and beliefs from a new perspective, which identifies in them certain deficiencies. She cements the difference between alternatives and her own practices and beliefs by recognizing that such losses are inevitable products of choices that we make in our ways of understanding and engaging the world. And she sees that the conflicts among different practices and beliefs cannot be arbitrated independently of these choices or of the ways of life in which they are made.

In chapter five, I explore from a different angle the tension between science and the possibility of developing a plausible relativist view. The worry that I address here stems not, as in the previous chapters, from the pragmatic success of science alone, but from the realist intuition that this success, together with the purported comprehensiveness of scientific explanation, inspires, namely, the intuition that science provides a comprehensive account of the ultimate structure of a unitary world. If science can explain everything there is, from the smallest particle to the multiverse, then how could there be room for

genuinely different practices that are neither simply mistaken about the world, nor simply reducible to science? Or, in other words, if the relativist acknowledges that there is a world transcending our judgments, which constrains them, and with which our judgments enter into relations of responsiveness, then why doesn't the existence of such a reality imply that there is one best way of understanding it? My response, inspired by the early rationalists and the contemporary work of James Ladyman and Don Ross, is an argument from the underdetermination of not merely our theories, but of the very concepts and objects with which they are formulated. It is, in a sense, a re-articulation of the argument from chapter four on realist, instead of pragmatic, ground: through analogy and an appreciation of the inevitable loss of structure involved in bringing the world into view, we can acknowledge a conceptual space for practices that engage and respond to the world in ways that do not reduce neatly to any combination of science, proto-science and error.

In my final chapter, I draw together a relativist view from the various arguments and explorations of the previous chapters. The result is not a strawman relativism, but an account of the entrenched conflict to which the deep complexity and variety among human ways of engaging the world can lead, and of why such conflict precludes any shared or highest ground on which it can be arbitrated. I conclude with some remarks about the practical consequences of accepting the version of cultural relativism developed in my thesis. While it may tend to make us tolerant of others, it need not take away our ability to critique others on our own ground, from our own place of situatedness. It leaves us, in fact, with a space for both relative critique and relative resolution of conflict – two important, and underused tools for navigating the delicate web of our increasingly global world. Yet the timeliest aspect of relative analysis may be its potential to encourage self-critique. When we take into account other ways of knowing and being in the world, we have the resources to think creatively about the shape and direction of our own lives. If we can understand the relation between our most pressing problems (such as the destruction of the environment) and our particular modes of engaging with the world, then we have the potential to address these problems at their source.