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Realism, Relativism and Pluralism: An Impossible Marriage?¹

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Abstract

In broad terms, realism, relativism and pluralism can be regarded as the theoretical articulations of the following insights. Realism embodies the sense that what is at stake in our beliefs is something serious, i.e. that there is a fact of the matter, independent from our desire, which is going to decide whether what we believe in is true or not. Relativism, on the other hand, incorporates the realization that our cognitive take on the world is always perspectival, that there is no way to overcome the blind spot which enables the knower to have a world in view at all. Pluralism, finally, draws on the intuition that every human being and every human community cannot fully understand, let alone save themselves, without the help of others' sense-making efforts.

Against the background of Charles Taylor's philosophy, the core of truth of the above insights will be discussed and arranged to develop an active view of toleration, that not only urges us to put up with others, but encourages us to rely on the benefit of coming to terms with different outlooks and ways of life.

Keywords

Relativism, Realism, Pluralism, Religious Pluralism, Toleration

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Making Sense of Pluralism

We are all aware of the existence of a rhetoric of pluralism and diversity in the contemporary world. There is, of course, also an opposing rhetoric of homogeneity and purity – that tends to increase in time of economic and social crisis – but the latter is surely less popular among intellectuals and the advocates of a decent society than the former. If there is a catchphrase that makes their heart swell, it is something along the lines of Mao Zedong's slogan 'let a hundred flowers bloom!' and not certainly the hymns to racial or cultural purity.

Set against this background, no deep philosophical arguments are required to endorse the primacy of plurality over homogeneity. To bolster this claim, it is enough to remark that, in today's intellectual climate, mildly sympathetic with philosophical naturalism, even Darwin's view of nature – which appeared as 'red in tooth and claws' to his Victorian contemporaries – can be brought in support of the pluralist outlook: no evolution and, most of all, no natural selection without an antecedent biological diversity. The appeal to 'biodiversity', in fact, often acts as a trump in our after-dinner-conversations. Who can ever be against it?

But, leaving naturalism aside, the insight underlying this majority consensus for pluralism, and against monism, is better captured by Hannah Arendt's matter-of-fact remarks, that she put at the center of her praise of politics in *The Human Condition*. There she maintains that 'action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world. ... this plurality is specifically *the* condition — not only *the conditio sine qua non*, but the *conditio per quam* — of all political life.'

‘Plurality – Arendt continues – is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live.’² For Arendt, in short, plurality is the constitutive rule of the human game, and the attempt to deny it – as it was the case in totalitarian states – amounts to a rejection of humanity as such.

Not accidentally, she gets the idea of the constitutive import of plurality from her favorite Christian thinker, Augustine, who went so far as to claim that, since we are made in the image of a Trinitarian, i.e. internally plural, God, our nature is not *within* us, but is *in-between* us. That is to say, it realizes itself through a complementary relationship among individuals, who are unique, but not complete, creatures. In Arendt’s secular vocabulary, this means, inter alia, that, in order to live a fully human life, humans need a functioning and flourishing public realm operating as the precondition for the emergence and displaying of their own personal identity. This space of appearance is an inherently common good, not decomposable into private possessions. It is there neither for me nor for you, separately, but for us together.

Now, this is all very nice in theory, but much more difficult in practice. That is why praising pluralism as such, without qualifying it, runs the risk of turning into an empty rhetorical exercise. Augustine himself, when he left the peaks of theological reflection, was ready to admit that it is easier to get along with your dog than with a fellow human being speaking a different tongue and having different habits, customs, rituals, beliefs.³ After Babel, once deprived of their linguistic commonality, men are lonelier than dumb animals.

² Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp. 7-8.

³ Augustine, *The City of God*, XIX, 7; quoted by Jean Bethke Elshtain, ‘The Just War Tradition’, *Fordham International Law Journal* 28(3) (2004): 742-755 (the quotation is from p. 749, fn 38).

As a result, any adhesion to pluralism must be a qualified commitment to it. Many different, and not easily reconcilable, things fall under the label. This renders it a challenging philosophical and existential stance, no less difficult to defend with robust arguments than to be lived (and much less exciting than our espousing the rhetoric of diversity would suggest). Accordingly, in what follows, I shall provide a reconstruction of the pluralist stance as an amalgam of different elements. More precisely, I shall describe it as a precarious and open-ended combination of realism and relativism.

If I succeed to make my construal at least plausible, my argument will do justice to what I see as the two main sources of pluralism's appeal. On the one hand, the idea that the world as it is, because it is so and not because we want it to be so, demands a plurality of accesses and approaches to be known and cherished as such. In this view, the world, as 'everything that is the case', cannot be grasped with a glance. As Alice Munro, the 2013 Nobel laureate, once remarked, there is a 'complexity of things – the things within things' that makes the idea of a complete representation of reality unintelligible.⁴ And yet, the intuition of reality's unity remains at the core of our search for truth, of our attempts to get it right. It is up to me, then, to show how this pursuit can come about by means of assiduous efforts to relativize our legitimate claims to truth.

The prospect of reconciling realism and relativism seems quite counterintuitive. Thus, it will take a rather long and tortuous ride to make it less moot. In order to do this, I shall start from two different notions of relativism: a 'lazy' relativism (which aims at escaping the debate as soon as possible) and a 'compulsive' relativism, whose main shortcoming is its inability to bring the case to an end. I shall, then, provide a definition of realism, that I regard

⁴ Munro's remark is quoted by Jonathan Franzen in 'What Makes You So Sure You're Not the Evil One Yourself?', in *Farther Away* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), pp. 283-296, here p. 290.

not just as compatible, but indispensable to make sense of the relativist's performance. From this angle, realism should appear as a non-hostile constraint of relativism.

The Truth in Relativism

In everyday life, to claim that 'everything is relative' only means expressing one's own desire to be left in peace, to put an end to a thread one is no longer interested in. Far from being a knock-down argument, it is an exit strategy that leaves everything unchanged in people's lives. What is, then, the philosophical interest of this cliché, if there is any? Its theoretical significance – the idea that whets the curiosity of the lovers of philosophical controversies – lies in its insinuating that every opinion, and any justification strategy that seeks to validate it, is always the expression of a point of view and, consequently, the product of an unwarranted reduction of the infinite complexity of experience, affected by its inevitable blind spots.

The doubt is contagious. What if our access to the content of knowledge is not neutral at all? What if it were the result of a style of partiality impossible to justify? And what if the use of ostensive demonstrations – 'look there, things are exactly as I told you' – turned out to be impracticable outside of minimal, cognitively insignificant, situations?

The consequences of this escalation of concern could be catastrophic for our certainties and, therefore, for our own inner peace. In this case, though, how might one sensibly speak of an 'exit strategy'? The point, as anyone even only slightly familiar with the art of argumentation can easily guess, is that the claim feeds back on itself, immediately limiting its universal scope and the disturbing potentiality of what is being stated at start. In fact, the claim that everything is relative is relative as well. Nothing absolute is implied by it. No serious threat, then, is posed to our freedom to stop thinking when we want.

Understandably, it is the relativist's disengagement, her quietism, the ease with which she desists from the game of giving and asking for reasons, that provokes the angry reaction of the majority of philosophers, who sense in this scanty argumentative combativeness a lack of seriousness, an intellectual laziness, that does not do honor to a thinker worthy of the name. How can one continue to claim for oneself the title of philosopher once one has given up in advance the disjunction between appearance and reality, or between what is the case and what is not? As Agnes Heller remarked with undisguised contempt a few years ago: 'Relativism is not an epistemological position, but the philosophical manifestation of avoiding the wager. Relativists are the cowards of thinking.'⁵

Accusing the relativist of being a coward may be an overstatement, but, conversely, what is left of the intellectual work once it is stripped of the dimension of struggle, effort, of the fight against something that resists one's will? For the very notion of scientific integrity requires acknowledging that, in the pursuit of knowledge, it is not easy to resist the temptation to cheat, to adjust the results, to give in to fatigue, wishful thinking, or to take a shortcut to reach faster the desired goal.

Is it all there is, then? Nothing else but a choice between laziness and intellectual honesty? As it happens, it is not at all obvious that the relativist must always play the role of the lazy lad in that frenetic exchange of parts characterizing the debates between critics and defenders of relativism. Is not the sense of shakiness of even the seemingly firmer beliefs an achievement that comes at a high price? And is not complacency a defect typical of unexperienced people? Not accidentally, Bertrand Russell once spoke of the 'dogmatism of the untravelled'.⁶ In the same vein, Clifford Geertz concluded his famous plea in support of

⁵ Agnes Heller, *A Philosophy of History in Fragments* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 35.

⁶ Bertrand Russell, *Unpopular Essays* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 14.

anthropological relativism (or, better, ‘anti anti-relativism’) with a warning not to take refuge in the reassuring certainties of what is familiar: ‘If we wanted home truths – he wryly noted – we should have stayed at home.’⁷ In this case, the charge of intellectual laziness is overturned and falls on the premature syntheses, ethnocentrism, premodern absolutism of antirelativists.

If no one is entitled to claim for oneself the monopoly of the intellectual virtues, it may be worthwhile to return, if possible *sine ira et studio*, to the issue of the epistemic value of the relativist stance. Just like the skeptic embodies the qualities required by any genuine cognitive effort (i.e. restlessness, subtlety, an unrelenting self-criticism), the awareness of the relativity of every standpoint, including one’s own, can also be seen as the purest expression of the power of reflexivity. For, with an agility and strength worthy of the Baron Münchhausen, the consistent relativist is willing to recognize that even her most treasured and seemingly indubitable truths are made available only by taking an ultimately not fully warranted view. As Karsten Harries, reflecting on the origin of the modern fascination with perspective, once put it: ‘The awareness of how my point of view lets things appear to me as they do cannot be divorced from another realization: awareness of what constitutes a particular point of view inevitably carries with it an awareness of other possible points of view. To recognize the limits imposed on what I see by my location here and now, I have to

⁷ Clifford Geertz, ‘Distinguished Lecture: Anti Anti-Relativism’, *American Anthropologist* 86(2) (1984): 263–278, the quotation is from p. 278. In the context of this essay, it is worthy of note that a philosopher, who also aims to challenge the ordinary empiricist way of framing the question of our grip on reality, chose the negative label of ‘anti-anti-realism’ to describe his own stance. See John McDowell, *Mind, Value, & Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. viii.

be in some sense already beyond these limits, capable of imagining and conceiving other locations.⁸

Needless to say, becoming aware of the horizon that operates as a tacit background to our explicit cognitive relation to the world is the byproduct of a valuable epistemic virtue, which compensates for the unbridgeable gap between justification and truth. The structural revisability of all knowledge – the fact, in other words, that it embodies a *claim* to truth and it is not conceivable as the contingent effect of an independent cause – demands as a counterpart mental agility: the capacity, that is, to distance itself from any givenness and asking for reasons. In this sense, no justification can be replaced by a brute fact and any claim to truth is an ‘open question’, in the sense given to the expression by G.E. Moore in his *Principia Ethica*.

Of course, the never perfect overlap between the property of being justified and of being absolutely certain, do not prevent us from holding certain beliefs as fairly warranted truths for the time being, and therefore as the deposit of a reliable knowledge. It is equally clear, however, that such recognition does not exempt the knower from a request, always possible, for further reasons. This is, after all, what makes every form of knowledge an exercise of freedom. And there is no better argument against those who deny the existence of free will than pointing out that the giving and asking for reasons is already a manifestation of liberty *as such*.

Realism without Pathos

To what extent, though, does it make sense to assert the primacy of liberty against reality itself, as when it is claimed that there are no facts, only interpretations? In order to

⁸ Karsten Harries, *Infinity and Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), pp. 42-43.

answer this question, which is dormant in every debate about relativism, a few general remarks on realism are in order. By ‘realism’ I mean, in a broad sense, the claim that we have sufficient reasons to believe that there is a world out there that is not reducible to the thoughts (concepts, images, beliefs) that have it as their reference or content. But where do these reasons come from? If I am not mistaken, they do not issue from particularly convincing justifications – which, the more refined they are, the more they appear vulnerable to skeptical doubts – but from the invitation to re-awaken a familiarity with reality that dwells in our less remarkable relations with the world and which, precisely because it lacks any drama, tends to go unnoticed.

After all, what does it mean to be born, to exist, if not to be immersed in reality, to be in contact with it? The very concept of reality (with the correlative distinction between it and appearance or delusion) presupposes a basic *sense of reality* which is not the product of a head-on view of the whole that can aspire to be included into the realm of objectivity.⁹ In its original meaning, reality can be likened to an atmosphere, a medium with which we are in contact on each side (and in this sense, neither subjective nor objective) – something that is never noticed: the ‘familiar’ par excellence. What is familiar or well-known (*bekannt*), however, cannot become explicitly known (*erkannt*) without undergoing a radical metamorphosis.¹⁰ In point of fact, we do not entertain an epistemic relation *stricto sensu* with it. The ‘reality’, as such, is not amenable to justification: it is what it is. Nonetheless, an unproblematic contact with it is the precondition so that our cognitive relation with the

⁹ For a compelling argument in support of the claim that ‘the idea of a view from nowhere is incoherent’ see John McDowell, ‘Aesthetic Value, Objectivity, and the Fabric of the World’, in *Reason, Value, & Reality*, pp. 112–130 (the quotation is from p. 118).

¹⁰ On this point see my “‘What is Familiar is not Understood Precisely Because It is Familiar’: A Re-Examination of J. McDowell’s Quietism”, *Verifiche* 41(1-3) (2012): 103–127.

various portions of the world that are delimited and thematically focused on does not spin frictionless.

We could describe this sense of reality as an antisolipsistic or antiphenomenalist bulwark: it is the pre-thematic certainty that one does not have to do only with oneself or, in Bernard Williams' words, that in the pursuit of truth, 'the struggle is with something other than oneself.'¹¹ Compared to this 'otherness' that refuses to give in, the feeling of frustration that can be felt is very real. For it is not akin to a titanic revolt against something logically impossible (for example, that $2 + 2 = 5$ or the desire to 'be monogamously married to each of four women at once')¹², but rather stems from the observation that a painful 'conceivable alternative' is foreclosed to us for contingent reasons: because this is how the world is. A painful truth that we have somehow to come to terms with.

As I noted above, this basic sense of reality is usually dormant: it does not play a big role in the daily life of people who, like any other animal, are generally saturated with the world around them. It is rather the 'unsaturability' of our cognitive relationship with the world and the infinite extensibility of the connections between reasons that has a de-realizing effect on the epistemic subject. If (as it happens with special force in the modern age) this is amplified by a social environment that encourages people to take an objectifying stance towards the life-world, the feeling of being naturally in contact with a reality that does not depend on our ability to represent it or justify it can be severely undermined.

It must be emphasized, however, that a defense of realism along this line is compatible with a highly revisionist attitude towards the different regional ontologies. Indeed, once the

¹¹ Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 145.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 139.

exaggerated fear lest there may be a total disconnect between us and reality is exorcised, it is only natural to expect that the specific queries about the ‘realness’ of more or less complex theoretical constructs, about whose existence we are committed in our scientific or folk understanding of the world (atoms, biological species, society, love, the past, and so forth), lose much of their drama.

I may have to work hard to warrant my belief that the creature that devoured my sheep can be correctly identified as a member of the species *canis lupus*, but the fact remains that my desire that the sheep be still alive will be inevitably frustrated. I may entertain many reasonable doubts about the ontological consistency of money, about its delusional, if not ‘religious’ nature, but that will not dissolve my worries about the state of my bank account, whose effects on my behavior and my decisions will reactivate my natural sense of reality. Drawing attention to the power of reflectivity to undermine any claim to settle in a permanent center of gravity does not mean to ignore the fact that such ex-centricity supervenes on the animal condition of spatio-temporally situated individuals, who are constantly at grips with the world and whose experience is full of ordinary hackneyed truths. After all, the endless search for the right distance, which characterizes the human effort to feel at home in the world, is built on this structural tension.

To sum up, what can be learned from this way of articulating the connection between realism and relativism? The first lesson is very general. Relativism is a multifaceted phenomenon worthy of a qualified judgment. A distinction must be drawn, for example, between acceptable and unacceptable excesses of relativism. The former may be described as excesses of openness, which are the actualization in an extreme, playful, form of the potentialities opened up by duplicating the point of view on reality (what it is and what it might or ought to be). The latter, on the other hand, are the expression of an opposite logic of re-centering, fixing the viewpoint and smothering the essential tension between the two

(normative and factual) orders of existence: an attitude surfacing in the ‘lazy’ relativism decried by the vast majority of philosophers.

A second lesson might lead, in turn, to a re-interpretation of the metaphor of the right distance, not in terms of an ‘absolute’ perspective on the world, but as an exploratory stance towards the experiential contents. In this sense, a robust engaged realism may operate as an antidote against the ever-present risk of turning relativism into a substantive worldview. Conversely, a relativizing attitude is part and parcel of this variety of realism. Thus, if by ‘relativism’ is meant the capacity both to transform our openness to the world (*Welterschliessung*) in a static picture (*Weltbild*) and, whenever necessary, to relativize its artificial, idealized character by appealing to our original sense of reality, I see no reasons to be excessively concerned about the relativist climate prevailing in the West today. For relativism thus understood is not incompatible with a realistic attitude to truth. The latter’s main antagonist is dogmatism, as a psychological pendant to the inability to come to terms with the ‘living’ aspect of truth.

Concluding Remarks

Now, how can what I have said so far help us better understand our predicament and deal with the tough task of living with (deep) difference today?

In these final paragraphs, I shall sketch an answer to this question with a sweeping overview that should enable me to move from the sky of abstraction to the ground zero of difficult cohabitation. As far as I can see, the best way to test my argument is by applying the previous account to what is usually regarded as the most problematic variety of pluralism today: religious diversity. The issue can be summarized as follows. Are there compelling reasons to claim that a religious person, provided that such a creature actually exists,

possesses the resources to make pluralism not only a goal worthy of being pursued but also a subjectively viable option?

I am personally inclined to answer positively to this question. Why? Precisely because I think that a genuine religious experience incorporates the sort of dialectical tension investigated above. I try to elucidate this point.

In the religious life – especially as far as the *Erlösungsreligionen* or axial religions are concerned – traces of the elements enucleated in the previous scrutiny can be easily detected.¹³ Let us start with ‘reality’. Believers (just like their alleged secular antagonists: natural scientists) are realist by default. Being the case or not being the case matters a lot for them. It makes a difference. What I am gesturing at, here, is the proverbial ‘gravity’ of religious people, for whom the search for truth is a question of life and death and is hardly comparable to a battle of harmless opinions. In line with what I said above, we may interpret this seriousness as an offshoot of a realist attitude.¹⁴

Secondly, in the post-axial religions, a remarkable relativizing tendency is present as well. It emerges and becomes manifest with the very idea of a transcendent God who, precisely because of its infinite superiority, operates as a Great Leveler with regard to all the life goods. The idea is so intuitive that, instead of a religious source, we can draw on a

¹³ See Robert Neilly Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University press, 2011).

¹⁴ If one is looking for evidence in support of this claim, this can be easily found in two acute investigators of the human soul such as Friedrich Nietzsche or William James. See, e.g., the chivalrous description of the *Homines Religiosi* in Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. T. Common (Mineola NY: Dover, 2006), § 350, pp. 163–164; and the portrait of the ‘Sick Soul’ in William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study of Human Nature* (New York: Longmans, Green, & Co, 1902), Lectures VI and VII.

sensitive secular writer such as the late David Foster Wallace, who articulated the insight with admirable clarity:

In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And an outstanding reason for choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship ... is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things – if they are where you tap real meaning in life – then you will never have enough. Never feel you have enough. It's the truth. Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly, and when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you. ... Worship power – you will feel weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to keep the fear at bay. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart – you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out.¹⁵

Furthermore, the believer's recognition of the infinite gap between the heavenly and the earthly make her hospitable to the logic of complementarity. Indeed, given the immense distance between the transcendent source and the messy mundane life, there are compelling reasons, even within a faith perspective, to conclude that it is easier to save oneself with the help of other people, than on one's own (even though their ways of life are very different from ours). Borrowing a thought from Charles Taylor, this may lead to a view of humanity

as something to be realized, not in each individual human being, but rather in communion between all humans. ... The fullness of humanity comes not from the adding of differences, but from the exchange and communion between them.¹⁶

¹⁵ David Foster Wallace, *This is Water* (New York: Little, Brown & Company, 2009), pp. 98-106.

¹⁶ Charles Taylor, 'Living with Difference', in A.L. Allen and M.C. Regan, Jr. (eds.), *Debating Democracy's Discontent* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 212-226, here p. 214.

A similar intuition underpins the pluralist vision of truth of pre-and post-Romantic thinkers such as J.G. Herder and Georg Simmel who, in Taylor's words again, tended to see

our intellectual predicament as one in which any important truth is differently refracted in different lives; it is something inherently hard to define, precisely because we can only come at it through our life and life-situation. Hence the only hope to achieve somewhat more adequate definitions lies in the sensitive confrontation of ours with others.¹⁷

It makes sense, then, to suppose that a promising view of religious toleration can grow out of such a confident attitude towards human diversity. Tolerance is undoubtedly a valuable antidote against potentially destructive conflicts, but it should not inevitably lead to a 'hibernation' of the status quo. On the contrary, it can be the precondition for a peaceful struggle for recognition, governed by an intuition, however slight, of moral 'progress.' The supple moral realism underlying this conception is the foundation for the development of what Taylor on several occasions has described as 'a language of perspicuous contrast ... a language in which we could formulate both their way of life and ours as alternative possibilities in relation to some human constants at work in both.'¹⁸

¹⁷ Charles Taylor, 'Neutrality in the University', in Alan Montefiore (ed.), *Neutrality and Impartiality: The University and Political Commitment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 135.

¹⁸ Charles Taylor, 'Understanding and Explanation in the *Geisteswissenschaften*', in S. Holtzman and C. Leich (eds.), *To Follow a Rule* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 128-148, here p. 205.

This enlarged mentality may turn out to be the most precious fruit of a well-balanced combination of a both realist and relativist stance.¹⁹

¹⁹ I am grateful to Giancarlo Bosetti, Volker Kaul, Boris Rähme, Gianluigi Paltrinieri, Ulrike Spohn, Massimo Reichlin, Davide Zordan, Ingrid Salvatore, Avishai Margalit, Richard Bernstein, Charles Taylor for helping me in various ways to develop the ideas assembled into this paper.