

RELATIVISM, CONTEXT, AND TRUTH

Introduction

Recently there has been a revival of philosophic interest in, and discussion of, 'relativism'. Debates concerning relativism, however, tend to have an odd air of unreality. It is odd that while most everyone wants to refute relativism, just about no one wants to be identified as a relativist. There is even a tendency to use 'relativist' as an epithet of abuse. But, if relativism is universally acknowledged to be refuted, even self-refuting, then why is there so much discussion of it, and why is there such a temptation to accuse opponents of this sin? The answer to this question which I wish to propose in this paper is that there are two sources for this situation. First, the fact that while no one sees themselves as relativists, many are *seen* as relativists suggests that there is a fair amount of current confusion in regard to what precisely 'relativism' is. Whenever there is a high degree of disagreement about the extension of a term, especially a term used to describe a philosophical position, it is reasonable to investigate whether there is some equivocation in the use of that term. Such an equivocation by itself, however, would not account for the present state of affairs. That 'relativism' is only applied to opponents suggests that there is some similarity between 'relativist' positions, in at least some senses of that word, and some other positions that people *are* interested in defending.

A brief look at even a partial list of those who have been accused of relativism, such as Rorty, Putnam, Goodman, Foucault, and Derrida, hints at those positions which are akin to relativism, without giving any clue as to whether they imply or are identical with it. Seen from the perspective of metaphysical realism, any doctrine which asserts that propositions can be justified only in terms of a network of other propositions and that there is relative independence of such networks from each other, runs the risk of reducing justification to justification-in-relation to a network (or language, or version, or discourse). Also, for the confirmed realist the denial that truth necessarily involves correspondence with the facts of the case as they are independent of human language, practices, and knowledge sounds perilously close to the claim that truth is relative to human language, practice, or knowledge. Thus for those who deny what I will call justificational holism, meaning holism, and non-correspondence theories of truth, those

who accept these positions look suspiciously like relativists. Further, even those who accept one or more of these positions often try to distinguish their own versions of these views from different similar positions by pointing out that their versions avoid the twin traps of realism and relativism, while their opponents' do not.

In this paper I will claim that contemporary discussions of relativism, and accusations of relativism, are confused in two different ways. First there is no clear understanding that there are a variety of senses in which one may talk of 'relativism' and, that a theory which is relativist in one of these senses need not be in others. Correlated with this goes a failure to recognize that arguments which are quite conclusive against some forms of relativism entirely miss the mark when leveled against other kinds. Second, 'relativism', in a number of different senses of the term, is often confused with the separate doctrines of justificatory holism, and non-correspondence theories of truth. In order to clarify the connections between these doctrines and relativism one needs a careful examination of what these doctrines do and do not imply and a thorough consideration of whether and in what senses these implications can be termed 'relativistic.' I propose to begin such an examination here. Ultimately I intend to show that none of these doctrines need to be relativistic in any vicious sense of the term and that the entire discussion of relativism is thus something of a red herring.

A Variety of Relativisms

Discussions of philosophical relativism are usually concerned with relativism in regard to truth. This, however, is not always the case. Occasionally the term is also used in discussions of knowledge, or even meaning. For the present, however, I propose to focus primarily on relativism in regard to truth. On the basis of even a brief analysis of "relative to" we can see that to say that truth is "relative to" is to say that something, presumably (but not always) a proposition, has the property of being true only insofar as it stands in a certain relation to something else. But this formula leaves several factors completely unexamined. Aside from the potential ambiguity in regard to *what* has the property of being true, two other elements in the relation remain undetermined. If *x* is true relative to *y*, then *x* stands in some relation *R* to *y*, but we need not know what relation *R* is, or what *x* is related to, i.e., what is *y*. Now it is clear that there is at least one sense in which almost every theory of truth involves a relativism, insofar as almost everyone holds that there is something *in virtue of which* a proposition (or whole, or theory, or sentence, or whatever) is true. If, for example, one holds a correspondence theory of truth what this *means* is that a proposition is true if and only if there is some fact (or whatever) in virtue of

which it is true. The proposition is true in that it stands in the relation 'corresponding to' with a fact. The proposition is true relative to a fact. On almost any view truth is a relational property, propositions are true in that they stand in a certain relation to something else, the world, a fact, a set of other propositions, or whatever. The difficulties only start arising when we begin asking what is related to what, and how they must be related, for something to be true.

But this trivial sense in which almost all theories of truth are relativistic can't be the sense which everyone objects to. When we think of relativism we tend to think of something like the ancient Protagorean view. According to Plato, for Protagoras all propositions which are true are of the form "I think that *x*" rather than simply *x*.¹ In addition to the relation to fact in virtue of which propositions are true, there seems to be some additional relation thought to be involved in truth, a relation to a subject, or even specific acts of cognition. This way of putting the position is misleading, however. The most plausible way to read Protagoras' position is not that there are two distinct relations involved in truth, but rather that there is only one relation, the ordinary relation of 'corresponds to'. What makes this position distinct and what qualifies it as a relativism in a non-trivial sense is not the character or number of relations involved in truth, but rather *what* the proposition is taken as 'corresponding to' when it is true. The Protagorean view of truth as described in the *Theatetus* arises out of a Heraclitean metaphysics of momentary existences without continuity combined with an idealist or subjectivist understanding. For Protagoras all true propositions have the form "I think *x*" because all facts are momentary facts about individual consciousness, all that exist are momentary acts of cognition. If all meaning is seen as involving some kind of intentional relation to something which is, (a thesis inherited from Parmenides), it further follows that all meaning is 'relative to' individual acts of cognition. As the referents of Protagorean propositions are Protagorean facts of consciousness, Protagorean propositions are true relative to such individual facts. This position is seen as a non-trivial relativism simply because all facts, and thus all truths, are seen as mind dependent. This is the only factor which distinguishes the position from ordinary views. This in turn suggests that mind dependency of fact and thus indirectly of truth, is the crucial objection to Protagorean relativism and the feature which marks it as 'relativist': the real problem with relativism concerns the claim that fact or what is the case is "dependent upon" something, most usually mind or human practice or language.

Protagoras' position is of interest only because the facts of the case are held to depend upon mental states. But the notion of 'depend upon' is as ambiguous as that of 'relative to'. So, for example, if someone held that a

mental state caused there to be some non-mental fact, then we might say that the fact was relative to the mental state by being dependent upon it. On the other hand, if one were to point out that, e.g., my desire for strawberry ice cream, which is presumably a mental state, in some sense causes the non-mental state of affairs of walking to the store, no one would accuse me of 'relativism'. That is, although a straightforward causal sense of 'depend upon' is perfectly good English, it is irrelevant to whether or not a fact is mind dependent in any sense which would make truth relative to mind in any vicious way. There is, however, another sense of dependency which might be relevant. One way of reading the Protagorean case would be that the fact is dependent upon the mental state but not in the sense that there are two separate events which are linked temporally by the causal relation. The crucial non-mental fact here, of course, would be the fact which is the meaning correlate of the proposition, e.g., the ice cream *being* sweet. One way of seeing the Protagorean claim would be to see it as the assertion that my sensing or asserting the ice cream as sweet explains or accounts for the ice cream *being* sweet. But as on this view your perception or assertion may determine the ice cream as sour, we must distinguish the two propositions 'ice cream sweetm' and 'ice cream sweety' the first of which is true, the second false. On this view, for a Protagorean, while I am believing that the ice cream is sweet there is no independent fact of the ice cream *being* sweet (or not) to which that mental state could be related, causally or epistemically. Hence an ordinary causal relation is ruled out. Rather the fact of the matter, the fact in virtue of which the proposition 'the ice cream is sweet' would be true is identical with the mental state of sensing or believing the ice cream to be sweet. The situation is supposed to be that there is only one fact, the mental one, but two distinct descriptions; that the ice cream is sweet and that I think that the ice cream is sweet. the non-mental fact is seen to be 'dependent upon' and hence 'relative to' the mental fact in the sense that it really is a fact about a state of consciousness—the non-mental fact has no degree of independence whatsoever. Hence a proposition like 'the ice cream is sweet' would be true in virtue of its correspondence with the mental fact that I presently think it is. Its truth would be "relative to" a state of consciousness.

This form of relativism would thus be reducible to an extreme form of subjective idealism which also rejected any distinction between believing and being immanent *within* consciousness. This qualification must be added because an idealism analogous with either Kant's or Berkeley's, which both insist upon a distinction between appearance and being internal to experience, would admit a fact of the matter, in virtue of which propositions are true, but which is not identical with what one believes to be true. If we

take a simplified version of Kant's position as an example, we can see another sense of the term 'relativism', a sense more directly relevant to contemporary concerns. As opposed to Protagoras, Kant of course insists upon the distinction between appearance and reality. The Kantian notion of reality is that of the real predicates which pertain to objects, or the positive properties of objects. Something can appear to have a property without having that property, e.g., the fact that I sense the ice cream as sweet is not identical with the ice cream being sweet. Nevertheless, that there is any object which is the ice cream, and that it is such that it can have properties at all, does 'depend upon', in some sense, cognitive or mental activity. It is Kant's doctrine (roughly) that the elements of content which compose experience, the intuitions, must be synthesized and organized into a particular form according to rules of synthesis, concepts, if there are to be any objects of experience and hence any distinction between real and apparent properties, and if Protagorean relativism is to be avoidable. But, then, that there are objects at all and that they have properties in the way they do 'depends upon' both the formal structure of cognition as such, the categories, and activity in accordance with those rules. This form and this activity are not distinct events which cause specific other events, rather they are seen as general conditions for the possibility of objects and events as such. Following Kant we may say that they are transcendental conditions for the possibility of experience, objects of experience, and truth. If, further, truth is defined, as Kant does define it, as a correspondence between cognition and an object' and objects 'depend upon' the transcendental conditions of experience in that there could not be objects without them, then the facts about objects in virtue of which judgments are true depend upon the form of experience. It is thus the case in Kant that, (1) truth is a property of judgments which are relative to fact (as true in virtue of corresponding to fact), and (2) the facts themselves are dependent upon the formal structure of cognition in the sense that there are facts at all only in virtue of the formal activity of consciousness.

But is this position a relativism in any important or non-trivial sense? This question turns on the sense in which fact depends upon mind in Kant. One does not usually think of Kant's position as relativistic. There seem to be two reasons for this. First, for Kant there is only one necessary form of experience. That is, objects all and always have the same formal constitution, which implies that what it means for objects to have properties is always and necessarily the same. Thus while the form of objectivity is relative to and depends upon the form of experience, that form is necessary and fixed. This observation concerning Kant gives us a third necessary, but not sufficient, condition which must be fulfilled if a position is going to answer to

our ordinary rough and pejorative sense of relativism. Not only must truth be relative to fact, and fact depend upon human language, practices, cognition, etc., it also must be the case that there is or might be variation of the factors upon which facts depend across time, or observers, or cultures. As Kant's position does not allow for this possibility he is rarely thought of as a relativist.

There is, however, a second reason that Kantian type positions may not be relativist in any ordinary sense. For a Kantian the content of no particular fact depends upon mind in any sense. For the Protagorean the particular property which an object has is identical with the sensation which I have of the object. Of course the object, then, can be only a momentary object for me, and its properties are identical with my perceptions. For a Kantian, the fact that I have a particular set of perceptions, or that I think that an object has some particular property, in no way necessitates or guarantees that that object *does* have that property. I could be wrong. It is only the form of experience and factuality, not its content, which is determined by or dependent upon mind. That an event, or any event has a cause, for example, is mind dependent, but that this event has this particular cause is *not* mind dependent. It is as objective as you like and admits of no variation across observers who use the causal category. In short, for Kantians the form but not the specificity of the facts in virtue of which propositions are true are relativistic in the sense of mind dependent. That there are causes or objective properties is seen as relative to cognition, what those causes or objective properties are is not.

I think that it is this Kantian version of 'relativism' which supplies the background for contemporary discussions, and ascriptions, of relativism. But this type of 'relativism' is certainly not a vicious one. Kant may be wrong (he certainly is about many things) but he is not incoherent and self-refuting in the way in which e.g., Protagoras is. The standard sort of objection to 'relativism' turns on variations on the claim that to state the relativist thesis is to refute it. If all truth is relative to opinion, then isn't the metatruth which states this relative to opinion? If it is, then if I am of the opinion that relativism is false, then on his own grounds the relativist must admit that it is false for me, i.e., some truth is not relative to opinion, either the truth that all truth is relative (which is then clearly self-refuting) or the truth of the proposition 'all truth is relative to belief is false for x', regardless of whether it seems to the relativist that it is true for x. Another variation is that if all justification is relative to a version (or episteme, or shape of consciousness, or whatever) then whether everything is justified relative to a version is itself relative to a version. That is, there could never be *any* standards for accepting a justification and hence there could be no justification

for the position that all justification is relative to a version. What these and other refutations share in common is that they all turn on the inability of the relativist to say truly what he means to say. What he means to say is that it is *true* that all truth depends upon mind, opinion, sensation, etc. But if all truth depends upon belief or sensation then that it does is also so dependent. And hence the simplest possible refutation of the relativist is to say, "I don't think so" and if he responds that nonetheless it is true, then he invokes a distinction between facts of mental life and facts independent of mental life which he must not admit, if he is to be a relativist. But this argument is totally irrelevant to a Kantian style position. Kant's whole aim is to preserve the concept of a mind independent truth within a sensationist intellectual climate. Facts depend on mind only in regard to their form and that form never changes. Kant can say this and it *might* be said truly. That is, for Kant there *is* a distinction between a proposition being true and one thinking it is true and thus it is no refutation of Kant to say "I think you are wrong," and there is nothing formal which precludes Kant from responding "No I'm not."

But there are still problems and difficulties here. First, it is unclear which factor in the Kantian style position effectively resists the incoherent implications of self-contradictory relativism. Is it that the form of experience and factuality is always the same or is it that only the form of factuality and objectivity is seen as mind or human dependent and not the content? Second, what is the status of the Kantian or quasi-Kantian metaclaim that the form of factuality depends upon language, cognition, culture, etc., and does this claim involve incoherence? And third, if it is the case that the Kantian resistance to the self-contradiction of relativism depends upon a rigid distinction of form and content of experience and factuality, can the contemporary successors to the Kantian position which reject such a hard distinction still resist the viciousness of relativism?

The Hegelian notion of a shape of consciousness, the stages in a Nietzschean genealogy, a Foucaultian episteme, an Heideggerian epoch of Being, a Goodmansque version, and a Kuhnian paradigm are all direct descendents of the Kantian formal structure of experience and objectivity, although some of the propagators of these positions do not recognize this. What all of these views, as well as some others enunciated by Rorty, Quine, and Putnam, share in common which differentiates them from Kant, is the willingness to countenance multiplicity of versions. This multiplicity operates on an ontological level. That is, what it means to be an object at all, what it means to have properties, and what sort of properties an object may have vary as a function of the structure of human language, knowledge, or action. All of these positions admit a multiplicity of versions

of the "real" furniture of the world and its descriptions, while denying that they are relativistic. Is this possible? This question reduces to the issue of the way in which the facts in virtue of which propositions are true are dependent upon language, practice, etc. A position is incoherently relativistic if on that position it is impossible to distinguish what is the case from what seems to be the case given some opinion, language, or whatever. But the type of view we are discussing is similar to the Kantian position in this respect. That an event has some cause depends upon the ontological structure of the world, which itself 'depends upon' language, practice, etc., but what that cause is is in no way dependent. There is a distinction between being right in regard to the cause, and believing, saying, acting as if one is right. What question one asks of the world and what sentences *can* be asserted of the world are functions, in some sense, of one's ontology, but what answers one gets and which sentences are true depend upon the world.

There is, however, a second level at which the historicizing and relativizing of Kant does seem incoherent. If it is asserted that, e.g., *whether* an event is caused, (for example a human action) itself depends upon human language or practice in the sense that that causal accounts are allowable or necessitated is a function of language, etc., then whether there is a cause to any given event will be dependent upon and relative to a language, practice, etc. That is, the propositions 'every event has a cause' or 'this event has a cause' will be made true by facts which themselves depend upon who is telling the story and what sort of story they are telling. But then 'ontological' facts (i.e., facts about what it means to be a thing or event) would be identical to the holding of a version. That is, that an event has a cause (but not what that cause is) would merely be another way of saying that the world is being described in a particular way. As the propositions 'this event has a cause' and 'this event does not have a cause' would both be true relative to different ontological versions there could be no difference between holding a version and it being true or holding a proposition which directly expresses a structural truth of a version and its being true. So if this form of ontological variability is adopted, it is impossible to say that a version is true or that some ontological feature of the world obtains, for on this position there is no distinction between the version being true or the world having that structural feature and one thinking it does.

There are a number of different possible responses to this problem. One could, of course, adopt a Kantian solution and deny the conclusion by denying the premise. On this view propositions concerning the structure and form of objectivity are true in virtue of the world which is experienceable *having* a necessary structure which is itself a function of mental activity. As this structure is necessary and fixed, ontological truths are known *a priori*

and are necessary. Relativism in regard to the truth of propositions which express the form of the world is avoided because all such propositions which are true are true relative to and depend upon the same formal, transcendental conditions. But few of the contemporary successors to Kant want to maintain the ahistoricity of reason. Alternatively one could posit what Putnam calls "a limit-concept of ideal truth" or what Hegel calls "the absolute." These differ in that the first is at best what Kant would call a regulative idea, a goal to be asymptotically approached but never reached, while the latter is conceived as a realizable end. Both posits however share the requirement that there be a hierarchical ordering of shapes of consciousness or rationality in terms of a final ideal of pure truth. In Putnam's version of this move this ideal serves to preserve at least the possibility of a distinction between holding an ontological structuring of reality and that structuring being true, and thus avoiding the incoherent relativizing of such structures. While this move does indeed avoid the problem, it is difficult to understand what grounds could be advanced in favor of such a limit, or even what it would mean that there be such a limit, given the general rejection in these successor theories of the correspondence notion of truth. Fortunately however no such move need be made because no such move is required. There is nothing vicious or incoherent in the ontological relativism which is the only kind of relativism to which historicized Kantian views are exposed.

According to the type of ontological relativism which is an implication of several contemporary positions and is being discussed here, a proposition of the form 'this event has a cause' or even propositions identifying objects and events can be true only relative to some context of discussion, vocabulary, practice, etc. It follows from this that any assertion in regard to the truth of any such ontological structuring, whether it is one which asserts universal causality or a priority to human understanding, or whatever, will be viciously self defeating. That is, there can be no distinction between holding an ontological position and its being true, or holding that the world has a certain structural ontological feature and it in fact having it. Thus there could not be any 'true' ontology if these positions are assumed. But this is precisely the result which *some* of the more extreme forms of this view want to maintain. The self-refutation at this level disappears as soon as it is recognized that there is a distinction in principle between (1) asserting that all ontological truth, i.e., truth in regard to structural or categorical features of being and meaning, is relative to and depends upon some context of practices, rules, language, or whatever and (2) assertions to the effect that some categorical structuring is true. If a proposition of the first type is accepted, then a proposition of the second type cannot be true, and if a

proposition of the second type is accepted, then a proposition of the first type cannot be true. But the fact that two propositions are mutually inconsistent does not mean that either is internally incoherent.

In effect what I am doing is making a distinction between traditional ontological propositions and a second, new class of propositions concerning the necessary conditions for and necessary features of experience, meaning, or being (choose one or more than one). In fact, of course, such a distinction is already implicitly present in Kant, which is why I developed this distinction with reference to Kant. It is one thing to assert that the world has certain structural features and that those features are necessary, and another to assert that the world could have this type of feature only if certain conditions are met or that those characteristics are dependent upon a relation to some context. Propositions of type (1) are analogous to Kant's claims in regard to how the system of principles is possible. We will label such propositions 'transcendental' propositions. What we have seen is that the two transcendental propositions 'all ontological truths are relative to and depend upon some context of rules, practices, or discourse' and 'there is more than one possible such context' together imply that it is impossible to assert that any ontological assertion is true. At best one may assert the analogue of the Protagorean 'I think the ice cream is sweet', e.g., 'relative to this context, every event has a cause'. As transcendental propositions are about the conditions for the possibility of being and meaning, however, and not about being itself this need not imply that ontological relativistic assertions are viciously self-refuting.

We now have an answer to the first of the questions we posed above. The Kantian position resists the viciously self-refuting character endemic to relativism not only because of its ahistorical, monistic character, but also because of a double distinction between form and content. On the explicit level there is a distinction between the content of the world, experience and objectivity, supplied by intuition, and the form of the world, experience, and objectivity, supplied by the categories and dependent upon human activity. This distinction allows a distinction between thinking a factual proposition is true and it being true, and thus avoids relativism of a Protagorean sort. On the other hand, this same distinction allows for the possibility of a new kind of relativism, ontological relativism. This new relativism is not relativism of fact, but rather a relativism in regard to what it means for objects to be at all; a relativism in regard to the Kantian categories. But the quasi-Kantian distinction between the content of the categories, as it were, and their form successfully avoids the vicious character of this relativism. That is, it is one thing to assert that some particular category or set of categories is true of the world, and quite another to assert that there must be

some such categories and that all such are only possible if they show certain formal features.³ In the modern case, an implicit (though unfortunately not explicit) distinction is drawn between the formal structure which any ontologically determining context must exhibit, together with implications drawn from that form, and the specific categorial structure of the world, which is seen as relative to and dependent on context. But this characteristic feature of contemporary ontological relativism suggests a further problem. Must such a position be relativistic at the transcendental level? That is, what can be the status of the metaclaim that all ontological truth depends upon context, and thus that all specific truths, while objective, are dependent upon and relative to a context? Can this assertion be held to have only relativistic truth value?

Relativism is self-refuting only if that in virtue of which propositions are true is dependent upon mind, context, language, etc. in such a way that it is impossible to distinguish between the mere assertion of such dependence and the truth of such dependence. In Protagorean relativism in regard to ordinary factual assertions, no distinction is made among types of propositions, so the relativistic thesis can be true only relativistically and no distinction can be drawn between the position being held and being held truly. It is thus self-refuting. Kantian transcendentalism and its descendants distinguish explicitly between two types of propositions, ordinary factual ones and ontological assertions in regard to the necessary structure of the world. As the truth of the factual propositions depend upon and is relative to the structure of the world, in a particular sense, but judgments in regard to structure are taken to be synthetic *a priori*, the statement that factual truth is relative to ontological structure is not itself taken to be relative or dependent, and thus there is no self-refutation. But if the historicization and relativization of truth is extended to include all propositions, then the self-refuting character of relativism is reinstated. There is an implicit distinction invoked in modern contextualism between assertions in regard to the truth 'of' particular contexts and assertions in regard to the nature and possibility of contexts. This allows for the possibility of asserting that ontological claims are relative to context while the truth of that assertion would not be dependent upon and relative to any ontologically definatory context. If this distinction is ignored or unrecognized, as it often is in contemporary holism and contextualism, then the claim that ontological truths are relative must itself be seen as an ontological truth which is itself relative to and dependent upon context. Though he is anything but clear about these issues, this seems to be Rorty's position in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. But this position is immediately and viciously self-refuting. Let us assume that all propositions, including the proposition that 'all truths depend upon and are

relative to context' depend upon and are relative to context, however we understand that word. It follows that the truth of the embedded proposition depends upon context, and that it is impossible to distinguish between being in that context in which it is true that all truth depends on context and it being true that all truth depends on context. It follows that if we assume the truth of the claim that *all* truth depends upon context, it becomes impossible to object to someone saying that in his context it isn't true. If the assertion is true, it isn't true. And if someone wants to say "Well, it's true for me in my context"; then someone else could say, "No it isn't, it only seems to be, as could be seen from my context," etc. Thus it is a necessary, though perhaps not sufficient, condition for the coherence of modern contextualisms that assertions in regard to the nature, possibility and implications of ontological propositions must have a different, non-relativistic status from ontological assertions which are seen to be true only contextually and relativistically. We then have an answer to the second question posed above. It is a formal condition for the coherence of any doctrine which claims that (1) there are a number of different possible ontologies, (2) the truth of particular factual assertions is independent of ontological context, but whether the world has those ontological features presumed by those assertions is not, and (3) there is no 'true' ontology in the sense of one which corresponds to the world, that (4) claims (1), (2), and (3) themselves have different, non-relativistic status from the propositions mentioned in (1) through (3). There are a number of different ways this distinction could be maintained, but it must be maintained in some way or the doctrine becomes self-refuting.

So far we have traded pretty heavily on the metaphorical distinction between form and content. But almost everyone who could properly be described as a contemporary contextualist, from Quine, to Rorty, to Foucault, would deny the viability of this distinction. How much of my defense of relativism survives this denial? All of it. The distinction between form and content has only been invoked heuristically. The crucial distinction, the distinction drawn in the last several paragraphs between ontological and transcendental propositions, can more properly be seen as a distinction between a class of propositions and propositions *about* those propositions. What distinguishes ontological propositions as a group is that they attempt to assert that objects must have certain necessary features and relations. Transcendental propositions, on the other hand, claim something in regard to the status of ontological propositions, e.g., that there must be some which are taken to be true, but that their truth is dependent upon which practices a group is engaged in or which language they speak. This distinction, then, can be seen just as easily as a distinction of logical level as

a distinction of form and content, and nothing hangs on which way it is conceived.

Holism and Truth

Put in its most general terms, holism is the philosophical doctrine which asserts that a number of different, apparently distinct elements are so integrally related that they must be considered, evaluated, or be seen to be as a whole rather than as separable atomic bits. Recently a number of philosophers have resuscitated holism, but it is not quite clear what these doctrines are asserting. Taken together these various doctrines are sometimes seen as a new form of anti-realism and are sometimes castigated as relativist. In light of the above discussion of the varieties of relativism I will discuss a particular variety of holism, justificatory holism, its relation with the denial of truth as correspondence, and consider whether those who hold this doctrine must be committed to a self-refuting relativism. It will become plain that holism does not imply vicious relativism and that noncorrespondence theories of truth can be made consistent. It is of course an entirely separate question whether any of these doctrines are justified or true, however we construe those terms.

Probably the most common contemporary form of holism is justificational holism. Roughly speaking this is just the view that whatever evidence is advanced in order to justify beliefs or opinions must be considered as evidence in favor of or justifying theories as a whole rather than individual sentences. Instead of each individual factual proposition being evaluated in light of experience, theories "meet the test of experience as a corporate body," as Quine puts it. Thus justification is seen to be justification of a whole complex and integrally related web of assertions and it is claimed that individual assertions cannot be evaluated separately. So, a particular proposition being justified involves a three way relation among that proposition, the theory of which it is a part, and the facts as construed by that theory. Sometimes this justificational holism is associated with the further holistic doctrine which Rorty calls "epistemological behaviorism." On this modification of justificational holism the reason that theories can only be evaluated as a corporate body is that propositions can only be justified by other propositions, that while facts or states of affairs may be invoked to causally explain the fact that a proposition is being asserted they can never be used to justify that proposition, and that all justifications thus presuppose the truth of other claims which in turn can only be justified in terms of other accepted propositions. So epistemological behaviorism is radically anti-foundationalist and radically holist in the sense that there is no non-propositional foundation for our justified beliefs and that all justifications

are justifications in terms of other propositions, all of which come together to comprise a justificational whole. In Rorty's version of this view such wholes stand and fall by being successful or unsuccessful for the purposes for which they are designed.

The justificational holist typically argues that, as all justification is justification in terms of a network of already accepted propositions, and explanation in terms of fact is different in principle from justification, it follows that that which warrants the truth of any assertion must be the truth of other assertions. But as this is true of every proposition, the whole complex of propositions can be deemed true only if all of the propositions cohere together without contradiction. Falsity thus consists in incoherence of a group of propositions, truth in coherence. When there is incoherence there are always several optional ways to overcome it, i.e., different propositions can be thrown out and some attempt is usually made to establish some value (as opposed to factual) constraints on the choice. As opposed to this the realist usually responds that the most this argument shows is that we could never know if our propositions were true, in the old-fashioned correspondence sense, but not that truth means something other than correspondence with the world independent of us. The holists' next maneuver is to invoke one of the forms of a second holistic doctrine, a holism in regard to meaning. If words and sentences can only mean in relation to other words and sentences and in terms of a set of linguistic or non-linguistic practices, then the very meaning of the assertions which are to be true is their meaning in relation to a linguistic whole and their reference is a reference to objects which are constituted in terms of that whole. At this point in the debate the realist launches the charge of relativism, i.e., that the combination of justificatory and meaning holism which is used to support the attack on correspondence must be self-refuting. We are now in a position to evaluate this charge.

To put the issue into perspective it is necessary to return to the distinction between ontological and transcendental propositions which we sketched above. The problem about relativism arises for holism because justificational holism and coherence theories of truth must be self-referring as well as non-self refuting. The claim of justificational holism is that all justification is justification within a whole theory or practice. Epistemological behaviorism goes on to assert that justification of a proposition is always in terms of the presupposed truth of other propositions. But then the proposition that 'all justification is justification within a whole because the justification of a single proposition is in terms of the assumption of others' itself can only be justified given assumptions in regard to the truth of other propositions and only as part of a network of propositions.

That is, justification of justificatory holism must be justification in relation to some justificatory whole. Similarly, if 'the sentences in all discourse mean only in relation to some other sentences, and are governed by linguistic or extra-linguistic rules or practices which change language as a whole', then the words in the embedded sentence in the last clause are also meaningful only in relation to a linguistic whole. Finally, if truth is coherence, then that it is true only as part of a coherent whole of propositions.

So each of the key doctrines of contemporary holism and contextualism are relativistic at least in the sense that the assertions that justification, meaning, and truth are relative to wholes are themselves relative to wholes. But must this relativism be viciously self-refuting? A relativism is self-refuting if it is impossible to distinguish between the statement of the relativism seeming to be true and it being true. The "objects" discussed in justificational and meaning holism and by coherence theories of truth are justification, meaning, and truth themselves. What these views hope to gain is insight into the nature of and necessary conditions for meaning, justification, and truth. As such the propositions which state these views are transcendental rather than ontological assertions. To know that all truth is the truth of coherent wholes tells us nothing about which network of propositions can be made coherent. To know that all justification of propositions presupposes the assumption of some other propositions, tells us nothing in regard to which sets of interlocking propositions can be mutually justifying. What the theses of holism attempt to state are structural conditions for there being objects, assertions, meaning, justification, and truth rather than substantive claims in regard to what objects there are or what properties they could have. On the other hand these theses are assertions and thus must be self-referring. If it is recognized that these claims are transcendental, however, this presents no problem. If it is indeed the case that it is necessary that if there is any justification then it is justification in terms of a whole and in terms of the acceptance of other propositions, then insofar as any whole is justified it implies the justification of the thesis of justificatory holism. That is, if the transcendental claim of justificatory holism is justified what this means is that this claim is itself included in the set of justified propositions of *all* justified wholes. This is true because as a transcendental proposition justificatory holism asserts that justification in terms of a whole is a necessary condition for the justification of any proposition, i.e., that it is itself implied by all justified propositions. If one assumes that justificatory holism is true, then it is a necessary condition for the justification of any justified proposition that it is only justified as part of a whole. That is, that any proposition is justified implies the truth of the

assertion that it is justified as part of a whole. Therefore, if justificatory holism is true, then each justified proposition justifies that it is justified as part of a whole. This is true regardless of *which* whole any proposition is justified in terms of; i.e., each justified proposition implies and thus justifies the truth of the claim that it is justified holistically and this is true in every context of justification. Thus, since all justified propositions imply that they are justified in terms of a whole, the claim that all justified propositions are so justified is itself justified by the entire set of these implications taken together. But, then, within each contextual whole, all the justified propositions taken together would justify, within that whole, the thesis of justificatory holism. (Despite appearances I am not asserting that everyone operating within every context of justification must *recognize* the truth of justificatory holism in order for it to be true. Nor am I suggesting that every proposition which is taken to be justified in every context must imply *by itself* that it is justified within a whole. Rather, every context of justification has explicit or implicit criteria of justification. It is the thesis of justificatory holism that these *standards* all imply justificatory holism, whether those who accept them know it or not. Thus the holist must claim only that it is the justified character of any justified proposition which implies justificatory holism and that every context of justification implies, on its own terms, the truth of holism, whether this is recognized or not.) Therefore, the statement of justificatory holism is such that it must be justified within every justificational whole or it is not justified. But this allows this statement to be both self-referring and not self-refuting. It is self-referring in that justificational holism *is* justified within justificational contexts and only within them. On the other hand, it must be justified in all such contexts if it is to be justified. Thus if justified it is not just justified relative to a single context. It is thus possible to distinguish between the justification of justificatory holism and its seeming justification, and the statement of the claim is not self-refuting.

Similarly, the coherence theory of truth is a transcendental and not an ontological assertion. It asserts that all truth is truth of a coherent set of propositions, i.e., it is a necessary condition of any proposition being true that it has certain logical relations to other propositions. But since *this* claim is that it is a *necessary condition* for the truth of *any* assertion that it stand in these relations, it follows that for it to be true it must stand in a coherence relation with every true proposition, otherwise what it asserts would not be true. For, if we assume a coherence theory of truth, then that a proposition is true implies that it is coherent with a group of other propositions (this is what 'necessary condition' means, after all). Indeed, every true proposition in every coherent group of propositions would need to imply that it was

coherent with the other propositions in that group. Thus it would be a theorem in every such context of propositions that every true proposition was coherent with every other member of that group. That is, on its own grounds, in order for coherence theories of truth to be true, they must be coherent with every coherent group of propositions. So coherence theories of truth can be self-referring in that they are true only by being coherent with other propositions but not viciously self-refuting because they may be coherent with every potentially coherent set of propositions.

Thus, even though there is a sense in which justificatory holism and coherence theories of truth are relativistic, they need not be self-refuting. They are self-refuting, however, if their proponents fail to distinguish transcendental from ontological assertions. If these theses are to have any chance of success, they must be transcendental claims in regard to the nature and possibility of justification, meaning, and truth, rather than assertions which concretely define specific justificatory and meaning wholes. By asserting what is necessary for justification and truth these transcendental claims establish truth and justification conditions for themselves which involve being justified by and coherent with every justified and coherent whole. Thus if true and justified, they are so in all valid contexts, not just some, and therefore there is no question of a vicious self-refuting relativism. This also means, however, that just because these doctrines are not self-refuting it does not follow that we know whether they are true or justified, even in their own sense. As transcendental propositions they must be true in and of all coherent contexts if they are to be true. This needs to be shown by independent arguments. The price of the distinction between being true and seeming true which is necessary to avoid self-refutation is that holism may be false even though it seems to one that it isn't.

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NOTES

1. Cf. H. Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 120 ff, for a discussion of this claim. Unfortunately Putnam isn't clear whether Protagoras is asserting a relativism in regard to truth or in regard to meaning.

2. I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, (New York: St. Martin's, 1965), A. 58, B. 82; A. 191, B. 136; A. 642, B. 670.

3. This distinction mirrors the division in the *Critique of Pure Reason* of the job of the Metaphysical Deduction, which attempts to argue for Kant's specific list of categories, and the Transcendental Deduction which only attempts to show that there must be some categories and tries to outline the conditions under which there could be categories.