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Relativism and Cultural Relativity

It is a truism at once baffling and reassuring that there are apt bilinguals for every known natural language. It is the corollary, of course, of an equally baffling and equally reassuring truism—namely, that a newborn child can have learned any language as their first language if they can have learned the language they eventually acquire. And yet, at the point of mature competence, everyone is aware of the deep uncertainty of understanding the speech and behavior of others belonging to the same culture as well as to another culture. In fact, we may as well admit that we are not always sure whether we understand ourselves at certain critical moments or, indeed, sure about what we may have done or said or made at some moment in our past. Plato broadly suggests in the *Ion* that the gods make captive the minds of poets in order to express through them their own thoughts. But the gods are notoriously difficult to understand. Furthermore, we are hardly confident about what it is we do when we understand ourselves, one another, those of our own culture, and those of another culture. No one, I think, has satisfactorily answered these questions.

When we ponder these familiar puzzles, we begin to suspect that often—possibly always—what we call *understanding* and *knowledge* may not be capable of being as crisp, as univocal, or as confirmable as we should like. If, to take a compelling example, I stand before a number of Paul Klee's enigmatic drawings, I am aware that part of their great charm rests in the fact that I can place them with assurance in an art tradition with which I am well acquainted, though I am unable to state their meaning and what their purposive structure is with a precision and assurance matching their obvious mastery. I fall back to weaker claims, and I take Klee's works to

convey not a dearth of evidence I might otherwise have collected but a sign I am at the limit of what evidence could possibly be added that could bring my interpretive conjectures to any single, final, exclusive truth about their meaning.

I am impressed with the uncertainty (that is, the certainty) that what Klee produced might not be able to support any uniquely valid description, interpretation, or explanation of its meaning and that what holds for Klee's drawings holds everywhere, or for the most part, or often enough that we must make conceptual room for such occasions. Others may not believe as I do, may not be struck in the same way I am. It is for that reason I confess that I am a relativist, though I am aware that others are not.

Of course, in mentioning Klee's works, I am not insisting so much on the possibility of alternative interpretations of any particular piece as on the initially problematic nature of first confronting a Klee. Anyone familiar with the usual Klee prints and paintings knows how difficult it is to determine what to regard as the right way to read them. No telltale clues reassure us, confirming that we're simply right, after all. We are obliged to construct (within our sense of the tradition of receiving art) what we judge to be a fair way of entering the (Intentional) "world" of any particular Klee. (I am convinced that the same is true as well in getting our bearings on, say, a more legible Vermeer.) But the deeper point is that *how* we enter Klee's "world" is a function of how we ourselves have been formed and altered by the ongoing history of painting we suppose we are able to master, well after the original Klees were produced.

In the West, the history of relativism is a conceptual disaster: not, as one might imagine, because of the futile efforts in its defense but rather because of the remarkable constancy of philosophy's adverse judgment that relativism cannot possibly be made coherent. It is an extraordinary fact that, from ancient times to the beginning of the twenty-first century, there have been no more than one or two principal objections against the coherence of relativism—already formulated by Plato and Aristotle—which have been thought so decisive that we still invoke the ancient arguments almost without modification.

As far as I know, there is no other doctrine of comparable importance—skepticism (which is altogether different) springs to mind—that shows the same degree of philosophical inertia. The ancients thought of the matter primarily in logical or formal terms (even if ontologically or epistemologically), and, in the modern world, the ancient puzzles have been additionally complicated by the general admission of historical and cultural

diversity (the consequence, I should say, of philosophy's reflections on the meaning of the French Revolution). You see the difference at once when comparing Plato's *Theaetetus* and Aristotle's *Metaphysics* 4 (both addressed to Protagoras) to the more diffuse accounts of Thomas Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* and Michel Foucault's "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History."¹ Of course, the modern exemplars are hardly canonical in the same sense the ancient texts are thought to be. But the plain fact is the ancient arguments are remarkably easy to defeat (though they have hardly been strengthened over the centuries) and the modern discussions are not so much arguments one way or another as unavoidable confirmations of the kind of cultural site at which the threat of relativism must be met. Any proper defense of relativism must address both themes.

I am convinced that the ancient and modern ways of rejecting relativism depend on the same unearned convictions—namely, that whatever is truly real possesses some unchangeable structure, that whatever changes occur in the real world may be explained only in terms of what is changeless, and that whatever we come to know of reality involves a grasp (however approximate) of that underlying structure.

The opponents of relativism are aware that its deepest defense relies on it *not* being demonstrable that this executive conviction can ever be shown to be necessary or inviolable in reality or in thought—that is, to avoid paradox or self-contradiction. Aristotle is entirely explicit on the matter. In fact, what I have just offered is a summary of his argument in *Metaphysics* 4, and Plato's sketch of Protagoras's thesis on the meaning of truth shows how opposing the canonical view of fixity (in at least one way, certainly not in every eligible way) instantly produces a self-defeating paradox.

Protagoras seems to have been aware of the underlying confrontation between necessary invariance and flux; very possibly, he meant his famous doctrine, "Man is the measure," to accord with the rejection of Parmenides' dictum, which (we may suppose) Plato and Aristotle wished to reconcile with the reality (or the appearance of reality) of the changing everyday world. But I must also warn you that part of the argument that is needed cannot altogether escape certain formal considerations. (I intend to press these to advantage.)

You see how complicated the underlying quarrel is. I have no wish to pursue it here, though its relevance can never be rightly ignored. In the modern world, the ancient doctrine of invariance is most compellingly championed in the familiar dictum that nature is governed by universal, changeless, and exceptionless laws and that the work of the sciences is directed toward

their discovery or approximation.² The fact is, now, even that notion is no longer thought unassailable: the laws of nature, we suppose, may (without contradiction) be artifacts or idealizations of some sort from the informal and imperfect regularities of the observed world.³ Furthermore, the world of human culture—of language, languaged thought, history, technology, art, and, most provocatively, whatever we suppose are the competence of science and the conditions of the world's intelligibility—is clearly contingently formed, impressively variable in structure, eminently alterable by human intervention, problematically intelligible under conditions that change with changing history, and endlessly novel and creative.

In that sense, the prospects of defending relativism are paradigmatically focused in the puzzles of interpreting the art world—for, it may be argued, if relativism can be defended in the world of the arts, then, assuming that modal invariance cannot be secured philosophically and that it cannot be unreasonable to regard our conceptual resources as common coin for theorizing about nature and culture alike, what is gained in one corner of inquiry may be pressed into service in another. Seen that way, you realize that the contest regarding the defense of relativism harbors rather grand pretensions—for instance, about essentialism and the fixed conditions of intelligibility. I set these aside here, but only as an economy. The fact remains that the classic defeat of relativism is given in ontological or logical terms brought into accord with an acceptable ontology.

Now, the defense of relativism joins two lines of reasoning: one is more or less confined to formal, uninterpreted, or logical considerations bearing on the treatment of truth or what we should take our truth-values to be, as far as admissible inferences go; the other addresses what, regarding one or another local sector of reality and knowledge, favors or disfavors the relativistic preferences arrived at in the first. The division is obviously artificial, since the intended benefits of the first are offered in the service of the second, and the possibilities the second suggests must be shown not to produce difficulties for the first.

For convenience, I tag inquiries of the first sort *alethic* and inquiries of the second sort *ontic* and *epistemic*; also, I urge that they be viewed as no more than distinct aspects of a single indivisible inquiry. You see, therefore, that a responsible relativism must provide an alternative logic on which its larger rationale depends, but it cannot pursue the large claim if it does not exceed the alethic issue. By the same token, attacks on relativism that are purely formal but are thought to bear on epistemic or ontic issues (once

the coherence or nonparadoxicality of relativism is admitted) are, to put it mildly, philosophically irresponsible.

The alethic question is entitled to a certain priority, however, because if it may be shown that relativism's logic cannot but be self-defeating, there would be little point to going on to the ontic and epistemic questions artworks and other cultural artifacts oblige us to consider (that is, in defense of relativism). But, of course, if you take seriously the inseparability of the two sorts of question, you see at once that its priority is no more than a convenience, for what the appropriate logic should be, in servicing, say, the interpretation of the arts, will be a function of what we take the objective features of the arts to be. Alethic, ontic, and epistemic questions are inseparable from one another relative to truth claims because they are inseparable within objective inquiries. To deny this would be no more than to favor another version of the invariantist thesis: for instance, to claim that, regarding reality, only some form of bivalence (taking *true* and *false* as disjunctive and exhaustive truth-values) could possibly serve coherently and adequately. That is exactly Aristotle's claim in the *Metaphysics*.

No evidence shows that one cannot depart, coherently, from an all-encompassing bivalence, and there is no reason to object to the compatibility of employing both a bivalent and a relativistic logic—wherever wanted—provided only that such policies be properly segregated, on grounds of relevance, so as to avoid avoidable difficulties. It is also excessive to insist that no such division of labor may be conducted in as informal a way as we please, for all that is needed is that we fit the picture of our practice to what is reasonably close to the actual practice.

It is *not* a necessary part of the relativist's brief, for instance, that in accommodating diverse interpretations of Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, which, on the evidence, cannot be reconciled with a bivalent logic,⁴ we should be obliged to forego the advantage that there are indeed uncontested descriptive claims about *Las Meninas* that rightly fit a bivalent model and even provide, as such, the initial grounds on which relativistically disputed interpretations of the painting effectively vie for objective standing.

That comes as a surprise, though it is hardly problematic. In fact, it suggests the general irrelevance of that larger well-known canard holding that relativism can only be "true" relativistically—that if relativism holds anywhere, it must hold everywhere, which is plainly arbitrary and absurd. What the canard insists on is simply that no relativism can be coherently formulated. As it turns out, that implicates a version of the usual sense of

Socrates' devastating defeat of Protagoras in Plato's *Theaetetus*. But, as I say, such an interpretation is neither inescapable nor plausible, given Protagoras's great reputation in the ancient world and the options available to us still. (Protagoras cannot have been as stupid as the counterargument requires.)

I have introduced three important caveats in approaching the alethic question. I find them reasonable and compelling. More than that, they are not noticeably skewed in relativism's favor. Before going on and in order to avoid misunderstanding, I restate them here: (1) alethic, ontic, and epistemic questions are inseparable in analyzing would-be truth claims; (2) the proper "logic" of any set of truth claims is a function of what we take to be the domain of inquiry and the conditions of knowledge; and (3) no formal reason precludes us from mingling the logics of different sorts of truth claims, provided only they are rightly segregated on grounds of relevance.

These are very slim constraints, but they touch on much more fundamental questions than I am willing to pursue here. I allow them to surface for strategic reasons, but they are too global for the local issues that metonymically arise in interpreting the arts. I give fair warning, however, that if what I have been saying is reasonably correct, there will be no defensible disjunction between inquiries into nature and inquiries into culture (though they are plainly not the same); in that case, if relativism seems apt in cultural matters, then it cannot (I say) be altogether inapt among the natural sciences. That, however, is not my concern here.

Item (2) is the operative thesis of the tally just given. I read it in the spirit of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (in the spirit of holding that the valid forms of argument are embedded in social practices), but (2) is not in accord with Aristotle's actual policy, because, of course, Aristotle is committed to ontic invariance and the necessity of bivalence, and there is no compelling argument in favor of either. The most recent formulas directed against relativism in interpreting artworks claim either (a) that relativism (which eschews bivalence) cannot do more, or anything other, than what can be done with a bivalent logic or (b) that if one insists on departing from bivalence, one inevitably produces results no one would sensibly favor. I reject both claims. I should add, however, that the interpretive theories of Monroe Beardsley and E. D. Hirsch (which adhere to bivalence) are indeed philosophically responsible, albeit unconvincing.⁵

In any case, I draw your attention to the measure of philosophical freedom I've secured by proceeding as I have, for the opponents of relativism usually ignore the inseparability of alethic and both ontic and epistemic matters. They claim we must adhere in an invariant way to bivalence wherever

truth claims are at stake, but they neglect to explain why our local “logic” should not be tailored to what we believe a given sector of reality can rightly support in the way of truth claims, and they cannot satisfactorily explain why a restriction in the scope of bivalence should be thought to produce an insuperable paradox. For instance, they surely cannot show that a three-valued logic is inherently self-defeating or that a would-be bivalent logic cannot accommodate truth-value gaps.⁶ Here, of course, I am approaching the logical needs of an interpretive practice addressed to the Intentional complexities of artworks. I therefore invite your patience.

I can now provide an answer to the alethic question. The following are the essential elements of a relativistic logic—where, by a *logic*, I mean nothing more than a policy regarding the formal conditions for the choice and assignment of truth-values affecting admissible inferences in the space in which they are applied, without (yet) specifying the evidentiary grounds on which they are empirically assigned: (1) the concept and practice of a bivalent logic are assumed to be in general play in all our inquiries, but the bivalent values themselves (true/false) are restricted in scope or denied application among selected truth claims admitted to the domain in question; (2) within relativism’s scope, the values *true* and *false* are treated asymmetrically: *false* is retained, but *true* is denied application, and a many-valued set of truth-values (not a three-valued set—one that merely adds *indeterminate* to the usual bivalent pair) replaces *true*, so that *not false* is no longer equivalent, as in standard bivalent logic, to *true* but is equivalent instead to values drawn from the replacing many-valued values; (3) within the scope of (1)–(2), truth claims that on a bivalent account would be formally contradictory or incompatible may be logically compatible when assigned one or another of the replacing values; these may be termed “incongruent” values, meaning that what they permit would be incompatible on a bivalent logic but is (now) formally consistent within the alethic scope intended and, also, that further constraints of inconsistency and contradiction may be admitted (on substantive grounds) involving opposing the value *false* and one or another of the replacing values; (4) bivalent and relativistic logics remain compatible and may be jointly used, provided only the scope and relevance constraints binding different sets of truth-values and their applications are segregated—in ad hoc a way as we please; (5) the resultant logic may, when rightly joined to ontic and epistemic considerations, be as realist in import as the applications of any standard bivalent logic; and (6) the values invoked remain entirely formal—lack all epistemic and ontic import—until the domain in which they are applied is pertinently interpreted.

To offer a small clue about items (1)–(6), I should say that I can easily believe what Roland Barthes called “readerly” and “writerly” reading—in effect, a bivalent and a relativistic reading of Balzac’s *Sarrasine*—may be jointly supported (without contradiction).⁷ I also believe descriptive considerations are bound to form the common evidentiary ground for both practices, so that they may still be assigned the value *true* (in the bivalent sense) but may then be used to justify confirming that a relativistic reading is as “objective” in its own sphere as bivalent claims are in the bivalent sphere.

Plainly, the rationale for so speaking will depend on how we characterize the interpretable properties of a literary piece like *Sarrasine*. How could the supposed normative but purely formal invariance of bivalence possibly decide the right way to proceed in accommodating would-be interpretations of *Sarrasine*? It seems an awkward question for the enemies of relativism. Furthermore, we may invoke bivalent values wherever we speak of consistency of usage—that is, when using terms in the same way in different contexts—but that shows the benign sense in which we may reconcile bivalence and many-valued values. Alternatively, of course, consistency and noncontradiction arise in many-valued contexts just as they do in bivalent ones.

A few explanatory remarks may be helpful here. First, I treat cultural entities in a realist way—in other words, no more than that they are real and that their properties may be fairly said to be discerned. In this minimal sense, *realism* is neutral as between bivalence and a relativistic logic (though, of course, many would not be willing to admit as much). Second, on my view, a relativism regarding interpretation is not precluded from treating certain descriptive (even certain interpretive) attributions bivalently; that is just what I had in mind in admitting an informal and relatively ad hoc mix of bivalent and relativistic values in interpreting familiar artworks (for instance, in speaking of Hamlet’s procrastination). But admitting this much goes no distance toward admitting *any* antecedently fixed general range of application of bivalent values in interpretive contexts, and what we should understand as the right relationship between description and interpretation depends on our theory of what an artwork is. It certainly cannot be decided by appeal to how things may go (analogously) in speaking, say, of physical objects. This is often overlooked.⁸ Third, in defending relativism, it is irrelevant that interpreters often believe their own accounts preclude other “incongruent” interpretations if a disciplined practice (as among professional critics and scholars)—that is, a collective practice, as opposed to an individual idiosyncrasy—finds it worth conceding that such interpretations may be

jointly valid. And, fourth, the entire issue is worth very little if the alethic questions are disjoined from a reasonably ramified account of the ontology of art and the epistemology of interpretation. It is extraordinary how many discussants disregard these very modest constraints.

The marvel is that it is so terribly easy to accommodate (in a formal way) the practice of contemporary literary and art criticism as at once objective *and* relativistic. The objections of the ancients and of contemporary antirelativists like Monroe Beardsley and E. D. Hirsch have no force at all, or if they do, it rests on ontic and epistemic grounds suited to one or another domain of inquiry—*not* for the formal reasons usually advanced—which is precisely what I wish to champion.⁹

Many who have been sympathetic to the relativist's view of criticism but who both despair of ever recovering the required alethic policy and are simply unwilling to oppose bivalence must themselves now come to terms with the obvious coherence of the relativist's alethic policy. This is especially true of those who have been tempted to drop the notion that interpretive judgments take truth-values at all (for instance, an otherwise excellent study by Torsten Pettersson of interpretive options in poetry).¹⁰ They, too, are now obliged to explain their stance in terms that have nothing to do with avoiding formal difficulties. That is a considerable gain.

I should perhaps add that I am entirely willing to label my many-valued values in any way that suits the occasion at hand (*apt*, *reasonable*, *plausible*, or the like). All I insist on is that, thus far at least, they are merely alethic—that is, not yet interpreted epistemically or ontically. It is, of course, entirely possible that such values as *apt* or *plausible* should also be construed in evidentiary ways. However, if you allow them here in the alethic sense, they are not yet epistemically informed. I should say that something similar obtains in a many-valued logic that admits *probable* or *probably true*, although they are characteristically linked to a bivalent logic and likely to be intended in nonrelativistic ways. There may be many such loosely similar distinctions to consider. (Relativist values, however, are not probabilistic values of any kind.)

We have reached a stalemate, then, on the alethic issue. Whatever advantages accrue to bivalence or relativism depend entirely on our picture of the world in which they apply. Even that is a stunning gain—for if you review the history of relativism, you will not fail to see that it has never been conceded that a relativism close to Protagoras's conception could possibly escape one or another lethal paradox. That now turns out to have been a mistake.

I trust you approve my initial constraints on the airing of relativism's prospects. I have, in the foregoing, confined my analysis to the alethic in order to demonstrate, within the usual terms the canonical opponents of relativism insist on, that relativism remains as coherent as bivalence—and need not even refuse to be linked to the use of bivalence. In arguing thus, I may have prompted objections of two related sorts that I should like to offset. Many will say that if you treat relativism in the alethic way, you have yourself fallen in with relativism's opponents; you must believe that a relativistic logic is, on objectivist grounds, the right logic to prefer everywhere. By *objectivism*, I mean no more than that there is an independent order of reality—including artworks and other cultural entities—and that we are fortunately endowed with the cognitive capacity to discern its determinate structure as it exists independently.¹¹

No. What I have offered in the foregoing is an attempt to vindicate relativism within the terms of reference the opponents of relativism insist on: my limited claim here is that they fail under that constraint. But I also want to insist, first of all, that the entire alethic policy I am advocating is *not* detachable from the encompassing ontic and epistemic considerations relative to which a relativistic logic (or a bivalent logic, for that matter) works at all and, second, that here the invariances and modal necessities of the objectivist orientation are to be rejected.

You will notice that I have avoided introducing flux or historicity or incommensurability in speaking of the mere alethic structure of relativism. That was meant to preclude certain irrelevant objections. Nevertheless, once, on independent grounds, you acknowledge historicity, the range of application for a relativistic logic is bound to be much larger than might otherwise be supposed. Relativism is hardly interesting when presented as a mere abstract possibility. It gains standing only by being put to use in one important sector of inquiry or another. Here, of course, I am attempting to show its advantage in the criticism of the arts, but I set no antecedent limitations on its use. On the contrary, you see that vindicating relativism in the formal sense is only a small part of recovering the puzzle that the modernist/postmodernist dispute obscures.

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Matters change abruptly once we turn from formal to substantive considerations, for relativism has its best inning in judgments about cultural

phenomena. Even if admitting that were tantamount to admitting a restriction on relativism's range of application, nothing would be lost: as I have said, relativism need not be an all-or-nothing affair. The opponents of relativism forever point to inquiries that (as they believe) could not possibly recommend a relativistic logic. Perhaps. But if relativism may be defended piecemeal, for different sectors of inquiry, this objection would be irrelevant. There are also, I may say, arguments to the effect that physical nature is itself a distinction drawn from within the scope of culturally qualified phenomena. I cannot do full justice to these deeper speculations—they would be out of place—but they might easily affect our sense of the conceptual link between nature and culture and the fortunes of Protagorean relativism. In particular, if realism with regard to physical nature must take a constructivist form, as I believe it must, then the prospects of relativism will be greatly enhanced, even with respect to the physical sciences. I shall leave the matter thus—quite unresolved.

It is hard to convey how far we've come. To grasp the full force of what has already been said, you must realize that what is still needed to clinch the argument in relativism's favor is simply to show a proper fit between some sector or sectors of inquiry and the accommodating logic. That's all. Wherever we want to admit incongruent truth claims, we need only fall back to a relativistic logic. The question remains whether there are any such sectors of inquiry—whether it would be no more than stonewalling to deny they exist. Of course they do! I shall come to the argument in a moment. But, more to the point, you must realize that what remains to be supplied is not so much a further formal defense of relativism as an ontic and epistemic characterization of the phenomena of certain exemplary inquiries and of what it is possible to claim and confirm about them. These, it may be hoped, can be shown to fit especially well the peculiar resources of a relativistic logic. What this shows is the misplaced zeal with which relativism is usually condemned and the profound mistake of conflating relativism with skepticism—or worse. For to justify relativism is to qualify the logical variety of admissibly objective truth claims and to explain why relativism should be favored in certain domains at least. That runs absolutely contrary to skepticism's objective—as well as anarchism's and nihilism's, for that matter.

One extremely tame concession is too easily confused with the relativist's claim. We need to be clear about this possibility in order to dismiss it as a false pretender. The irony is that, when certain further distinctions are put in play, the tame concession in question—often dubbed cultural

relativity—suddenly takes on a meaning that *does* indeed bear in an important way on relativism's (ontic and epistemic) fortunes. Nevertheless, by itself, it is a truth no one would ever dream of disputing or rightly suppose was equivalent to the relativist's thesis—for, of course, if it were the true nerve of the issue, we would all be both instant relativists and relieved to say so.

By *cultural relativity*, then, I mean no more than the pedestrian fact that different societies have different histories, languages, customs, values, theories, and the like. I do *not* mean, in that sense, that what is true is also different among different peoples or that knowledge differs among different peoples because knowledge must be relativized to what is already relativized in the way of truth. Such a position would be a conceptual blunder as well as a complete non sequitur. What, substantively, is claimed to be true will doubtless differ from one cultural orientation to another, but truth and knowledge, as such, cannot be construed, on pain of contradiction, as culturally variable—for that would mean what is (rightly) true might also be (rightly) false. This is the reason for distinguishing between truth and truth claims.

Simply put, the theme of cultural relativity is a matter of first-order fact, whereas the relativist's thesis is a matter of second-order legitimation. That languages and customs differ is no more than a tiresome first-order fact, but that a relativistic logic should fit certain inquiries better than a bivalent logic, *without yet implicating any variability in truth or knowledge as such*, is a question open to serious second-order philosophical dispute. I see no quarrel here. By themselves, the bare facts regarding cultural relativity have no philosophical importance at all. They acquire importance only when they are pressed in the direction of the blundering thesis I have just flagged or of whatever accords with relativism proper. This matter is almost universally overlooked.

What is potentially interesting about cultural relativity is that the differences noted between cultures may also obtain within them—that intersocietal differences are no different in any principled way from intrasocietal differences; therefore, it is just as philosophically difficult to fix objective truth and knowledge within any one society or culture as it is to do so between very different societies or cultures. That, I should say, was the absolutely splendid thesis of W. V. Quine's enormously influential book *Word and Object*, though that connection is never pointedly addressed in *Word and Object* (in the sense relevant to relativism) or anywhere else in Quine's publications.¹² Of course, it is also the central thesis of Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* and Foucault's "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," which,

by and large, are inchoate relativisms addressed to the possible philosophical importance of cultural relativity and historical change. For what Kuhn and Foucault were willing to concede—which Quine was not—was that what we count as truth and knowledge (that is, the legitimated concepts, not the bare, first-order facts accumulated by different societies) are *artifacts of history* in the very same way first-order facts are. Yet that is no longer mere cultural relativity but relativity housing relativism, the conjunction of alethic and ontic/epistemic issues.

We don't actually know what Kuhn's and Foucault's theories of relativism were. They were never explicit enough. Kuhn was content to deny that we could ever directly discern any principle of neutrality regarding objective truth (objectivism), and Foucault had no patience with the question. The usual philosophical error spun from the facts of cultural relativity is, in effect, the same error Socrates attributes to Protagoras in the well-known exchange with Protagoras's student, in the *Theaetetus*. "True," for Protagoras, Socrates affirms, means "true-for-*x*." Truth is an inherently relational notion, relativized to whatever contingently, merely appears—or is believed—true by this person or that, or by the same person at different times. This has become the standard reading of Protagoras's doctrine over twenty-five hundred years.¹³ Of course, if that is what relativism comes to, then certainly relativism is absurd—because it is self-defeating in an insuperable way.

One could never, for instance, say what anyone took to be true by their own or anyone else's lights; every effort to do so would be caught in the relationalism of the original definition of *true*. I trust it is clear that I have, by what has already been offered in the way of analyzing relativism's logic, completely obviated the need to fall back to this preposterous reading of either cultural relativity or Protagoras's doctrine. We must go further. I do acknowledge that a bewildering number of commentators suppose either that cultural relativity *is* what relativism comes to or that, in virtue of cultural relativity, adopting relativism is tantamount to admitting Socrates' formula.¹⁴ But that is surely a non sequitur. I am unconditionally opposed to such readings.

All this is by way of clearing the air. The primary point about cultural relativity is not mere first-order variety but rather that, within such variety, we must single out the possible import of its being the case that expressive, representational, stylistic, rhetorical, symbolic, semiotic, linguistic, traditional, institutional, and otherwise significant features of artworks and other cultural phenomena fall within the scope of the culturally variable. If such properties are subject to cultural relativity, then it must dawn on

us that we may not be able to defend the objectivity of truth claims about them in the usual bivalent way. We may have to fall back to the relativist's option. Such is the full connection between the two questions I originally distinguished.

I call all such properties (the expressive and the representational, for instance) "Intentional" properties, which means they designate meanings assignable to certain structures or meaningful structures as a result of the various forms of culturally informed activity (speech, deeds, manufacture, artistic creation), such that suitably informed persons may claim to discern these properties and interpret them objectively. *Intentionality* is a term of art here, which I designate by capitalizing the initial *I*. I use the term predicatively, to mark a family of sui generis properties confined to the cultural world—that is, to designate the collective, intrinsically interpretable features of societal life. I do *not* equate the term to the essentially solipsistic, ahistorical, and acultural forms of intentionality featured in the theories of Brentano and Husserl, yet I apply *Intentionality* in a way that still provides for something like the use they intended, but only under enculturating conditions (the conditions of acquiring, in infancy, a natural language and a grasp of the practices of one's surrounding society).¹⁵

That is a large story of its own, which I cannot properly relate here.¹⁶ I merely co-opt the benefit of admitting its relevance. The most strategic theorem it offers—not the most important for our question—rests with the fact (congenial to cultural relativity) that Intentional properties are quite real. For convenience, I recommend the following postulate: the Intentional is equal to the cultural. For what is normally contested (remember Danto) in admitting the world of human culture is whether it is real at all—as real (say) as physical nature—and, qua real, marked by the sui generis properties I've just collected (the Intentional). That, of course, lays a proper ground for the objectivity of interpretive truth claims that is conveniently indifferent to the alethic quarrel between bivalent and relativistic logics.

There's much more to the story than that. I'm being more than cautious in drawing your attention to the unfinished tale on which the completion of the argument favoring relativism depends. It's not needed in any narrow sense here, but it would help to reassure you that, both prephilosophically and philosophically, questioning the reality of the cultural world would produce an instant and insuperable paradox. On my own argument, it would involve questioning our own existence. As I see matters, we ourselves ("selves") are also artifacts of cultural life formed by transforming the members of *Homo sapiens* into linguistically and culturally apt subjects,

marked (by that process) for discerning the Intentional features of whatever, as selves, we make and do. To put the point in its most provocative form, one could assert that no principled ground exists on which to disjoin the realist reading of human selves and the realist reading of the artifacts of their world; both are culturally constituted in similar ways, and both are subject to similar interpretive interests. I would not press the point, except for the fact that the most fashionable analytic theories in the West (particularly in the philosophy of mind) completely discount the reality of the cultural (and the intentional in general) or make it entirely derivative, logically, from whatever may be specified in purely biological or computational terms.¹⁷

Even that might not be troubling, since these theorists often have little interest in the philosophical problems of the cultural world. But what should we say when leading theorists of the arts—Arthur Danto, most notably—commit themselves to the *denial* of the reality of the cultural (or the Intentional)?¹⁸ I must alert you to the fact that even a bivalent account of the objectivity of literary and art criticism would utterly founder on anything like Danto's thesis; so that admitting the reality—a fortiori, the discernibility—of the Intentional structure of artworks and human careers lays a needed ontic and epistemic ground for the would-be objectivity of critical interpretations and histories, *whether construed bivalently or relativistically, objectivistically or constructivistically*. Allow the gain, if you will, however provisionally: it does not quite reach to what is decisive for or against relativism, but it makes the debate worth the bother.

Let me summarize what I have already established in this chapter, with an eye to securing a further goal. Thus far, we have (1) distinguished a relativistic logic from a bivalent logic and shown its formal coherence; (2) discovered that the defense of relativism, as in a relativistic theory of interpretation or history, is largely occupied with demonstrating, ontically and epistemically, a certain suitable fit between manageable inquiries in one or another sector of the world and the resources and advantages of a relativistic logic; (3) acknowledged that no insurmountable paradox results from using a bivalent and a relativistic logic together, even in a lax and ad hoc way; and (4) determined that relativism and cultural relativity are entirely different doctrines, since the first is a second-order thesis and the second is a first-order thesis. We want, of course, to know how relativism and cultural relativity may be fruitfully linked so that an obviously robust practice—such as the ongoing work of a professional cohort of historians or art critics, or lawyers or moralists, for that matter—could be sustained or would strike us as worthwhile (not prone to any serious loss of investigative

rigor) and would actually be less arbitrary and more rewarding than champions of the bivalent canon suppose.

The general answer is plain enough: on the one hand, the defenders of the bivalent canon cannot make their own case everywhere and, indeed, inevitably betray their awareness that they cannot; on the other hand, we already have the supportive of the pluralized practices of interpretive critics and historians. The essential clue is this: the switch from bivalence to relativistic values is not a change in rigor at all but a change in what we understand to be the nature of the *objects* on which the relevant rigor is to be practiced. In claiming that the Intentional structure of artworks definitely favors relativism over bivalence, I take the general failure on the part of most critics of relativism to analyze Intentionality to be knockdown evidence of their failure to address the full question of relativism itself. For Intentional attributes are not determinate—though, under interpretive conditions, they are determinable—when compared with what is usually taken to be the determinate nature of physical or non-Intentional attributes. It's this issue that needs to be pursued—along with, of course, its bearing on the question of objectivity.

I can well imagine that Barthes's intuitive discipline in reading *Sarrasine* may set a higher mark for acceptable relativistic interpretations than conventional bivalent readings of established texts. Harold Bloom's ingenious reading of Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*, for instance, is, despite Bloom's own antirelativistic proclivities, a fine example of a relativistic exercise akin to Barthes's.¹⁹

It may also be that a potential social benefit results from calling *all* pretensions of objectivity into question at the present time. I am willing to concede the possibility, but it is not my principal concern here. Nevertheless, I'll add in all frankness that to reject objectivity because one rejects objectivism is excessive—and more than misleading—because we obviously need *some* normative sense of the rigor of inquiry and the attribution of truth-values. Whatever is best in that sense is what we must recover as objectivity. (There's a danger here of being misunderstood.) But strict postmodernism is conceptual anarchy: whatever first-order recovery may be defended implicates some form of second-order legitimation.²⁰

For present purposes, I bridge the difference between the two issues by admitting straight out that what counts as objectivity is—ineluctably—a reasoned artifact of how we choose to discipline our truth claims in any sector of inquiry. The assumption is that there is simply no way to *discover* the true norms of objectivity in any domain at all. Acceptable norms will

have to be constructed as one or another disputed second-order proposal fitted to what we claim are our best first-order interests in this domain or that. What's important is that such a construction is not tantamount to relativism—in the straightforward sense that even our adherence to a bivalent logic (in physics, say) may have to take a constructivist turn. Constructivism is not, as such, equivalent to relativism.

Kuhn may well be right to say that it is “hopeless” to pretend to discover the changeless marks of objectivity.²¹ Some claim to see in this a return to Socrates' interpretation of Protagoras. But that would be a mistake, a complete non sequitur, for, as already remarked, *true* is laid down in the *Theaetetus* as meaning “true-for-*x*” and is thereafter rigorously applied (when possible), whereas here it is not a question of the meaning or criteria of *true* at all but of how, socially, the practices of what we call objective inquiry are first formed. There is no ulterior judgment to the effect that what is posited as a defensible practice in this regard is tantamount to, or entails, the finding that that (also) is true-for-*x* (where *x* is now the society that supports the practice).

II

I freely admit there's a puzzle here, one very close to what I wish to secure—that is, a fifth theorem in the tally I have just collected. But it cannot be captured by the relationalist formula drawn from the *Theaetetus* or from any simple Kuhnian or Foucauldian analogue applied to history. That would merely repeat the disaster of the standard history of relativism, formed, without protest, from ancient times to the present. We are in uncertain waters here, not because of deeper doubts about relativism but because of the primitive state of all our inquiries into cultural life. The entire rationale for shifting from bivalence to relativism depends on how clear we really are about the *nature* of an artwork or a self.

You see this instantly if you recall the bivalent arguments of Beardsley and Hirsch. Why do they insist on the inviolability of bivalence in literary and art criticism? Beardsley claims no fundamental difference exists between the describability of a stone and the describability of a poem, except that poems have “meanings” for properties and stones do not. Surely, that's preposterous. Beardsley himself admits he cannot tell when a meaning is in a poem or merely imputed to it.²² He certainly cannot offer us anything like a rule or criterion in support of his bivalent claim. For his part, Hirsch

denies that poems are objects of any kind. They are, he suggests, what may be imaginatively reconstructed by discerning, among the ordered words of a text, evidence of the original intent of the one who first assembled them.

And how is that done? Hirsch claims that every possible poetic utterance—effectively, the intentional ordering of words—quite naturally instantiates one or another fixed genre of utterance formed within the ethos of the would-be poet's voice. Still, human history itself, Hirsch admits, makes it impossible to fix any of these supposedly essential genres; the entire enterprise is an improvisational fantasy (“probabilized,” Hirsch says) that cannot do more than pretend to discover the invariant forms of meaning.²³

It's the elusive nature of artworks that forces us to give up a strict bivalence. (If art is Intentionally structured and if Intentionality is determinable—interpretively—but not independently determinate, in the way physical objects are said to be, then bivalence must be threatened.) Also, of course, on Hirsch's own account, authors need not know what it is they themselves “intend”; their conformity with objective genres decides the issue. Yet Hirsch's solution cannot escape the indeterminacies of the hermeneutic circle.

This brings me to the missing theorem we need: (5) the very nature of cultural entities and phenomena—artworks, histories, sentences, actions, societies, persons—is such that, for obvious ontic and epistemic reasons, they cannot support any objective description or interpretation confined exclusively along bivalent lines. The decisive point is that no one can even say what the logic of criticism should be, unless they can also say what the nature of a poem or a painting is, relative to discursive and interpretive truth claims.

For his part, Arthur Danto never tells us what an artwork or a history *is*, except to say no actual artworks exist. Presumably, this is because their intentional features—representationality and expressivity—are rhetorically assigned “mere real things,” in virtue of which they become rhetorically accessible. They cannot be more, since, it seems, the intentional features in question are never more than rhetorically ascribed, so they cannot be objectively discerned. Possibly, no histories exist either. Or, if they do, then artworks do not, and Danto will have succumbed to an incoherent claim (a vicious regress). Even though artworks are plainly uttered by human artists as the Intentionally structured expressions they are, Intentional properties will (have to) be real in the case of persons but be deemed unreal in artworks. Apparently, for Danto, artworks are what we imagine, fictively, when, by rhetoric or “transfiguration,” we construe “mere real things” (physical

objects or utensils, chiefly) as belonging to an ethos or an “artworld.”²⁴ But what’s the basis for any would-be objective claims about the meaning of a painting *within* that world? Danto never says. Beardsley and Hirsch are more adventurous but hardly more successful, for they are prepared to risk their own peculiar theories of what an artwork is. Plainly, we cannot hope to fob off any theory of interpretation—good, bad, or indifferent—if we have no theory of the Intentional structure of artworks or human careers.

I have just stated the reason for favoring relativism. Relativism is not inherently a subversive doctrine, a way of destroying the fabric of decent society. It is, rather, the upshot of a quite sober reckoning of the false pretensions of a canon that might well wreck us with its own misguided zeal. Imagine that the champions of some political status quo insisted they had found the true norms of invariant human nature and therefore were obliged to treat moral, legal, political, and religious questions in accord with a strict bivalence informed by those ulterior truths; that would be the analogue of Beardsley’s and Hirsch’s doctrines. They can’t possibly work: the Intentionality of the human world is far too complex, far too equivocal, far too mongrelized, far too transient, and far too easily altered by our own efforts to determine its meaning. Here, you begin to see the advantage of conceding no more than the Intentionality of artworks and the formal resources of relativism.

Please explain yourself, you’re bound to say. Don’t just rail against the honest labor of more conventional theorists. Tell us how you would reconcile relativism and objectivity—in criticism, for example. Tell us that, or go away! Fair enough. I accept the complaint, but my answer stares you in the face. A proper elucidation would doubtless be interminable, but the essential clue is clear enough: Intentional properties—expressive, semiotic, representational, and all the other significative properties I’ve gathered under the umbrella term *Intentional*—cannot be determined criterially, algorithmically, evidentially, except in ways that are already subaltern to the consensual (not criterial) tolerance of the apt agents of the collective practices of a particular society. That is the reason all analogies drawn from physical nature won’t do, for cultural phenomena exhibit and physical phenomena lack Intentional properties. Hence, what we mean by description and interpretation is not quite the same in the two domains (though they are not disjoint, either).

In our own time, the thesis may be drawn, in different ways, from Wittgenstein’s notions of a *Lebensform* and a “language game,”²⁵ and from Kuhn and Foucault as well. Historically, I am convinced it captures the leanest way to read Hegel’s notions of *sittlich* as well as *Geist*.²⁶ It appears

as a recognizable stream of thought running from Hegel through Marx, Nietzsche, Dilthey, Heidegger, Horkheimer, and Gadamer, down to Foucault. If you grasp the point, you see at once it is not possible to segregate the theory of interpreting artworks from a general theory of cultural reality. Professional work will have its local policy, to be sure, but its logic and its sense of a viable practice will be governed by our general conception of the *sui generis* features of the culture we share—any culture, as we now understand matters.

The important point to bear in mind is that a proper analysis of Intentionality is in no way hostage to relativism. It's the other way around: Intentional properties, which distinguish the world of human culture—a fortiori, literary and art criticism and, on a plausible argument, even explanatory theories in the physical sciences—will ultimately signal what our alethic, ontic, and epistemic policies should be.

The entire contest can be decided by reviewing two corollaries of my characterization of Intentionality—applied, if adopted, to the special concerns of professional critics, historians, or the like. First of all, predication in general cannot be epistemically managed on criterial or algorithmic grounds unless, *per impossibile*, Platonism is proved viable. I claim that general predicates, and Intentional predicates in particular, cannot be extended to new instances, except informally, in terms of what, consensually, may be tolerated as effective or incremental extensions from acknowledged exemplars. Any difficulties incurred—for example, in the sciences, with respect to would-be laws, prediction, explanation, or technological control—can be readily resolved along alternative lines that will proceed informally as well.²⁷

But the hopelessness of all theories of universals—realist, nominalist, conceptualist—remains confirmed quite independently of all that. If so, then bivalence will *always* be subject to a policy of accommodating predicative similarities that cannot themselves be strictly applied (algorithmically, for instance) in bivalent terms. This concession is generally ignored by the opponents of relativism, even though the tolerance that must be admitted is not inherently relativistic in its own right. Bivalence itself must be applied in a constructivist way to predicables. Even a bivalent treatment of predicative truth must acknowledge that informality.

If you add to this (the first corollary) the obvious adjustment—that the particular exemplars on which extended predicative tolerance depends will always be subject to replacement, on the strength of changing convictions of what to look for in the way of observable similarities—then *whatever* we judge to be objective in the predicative way will elude the impossible