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# Philosophy and Social Hope



PENGUIN BOOKS

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## Introduction: Relativism: Finding and Making

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The epithet 'relativist' is applied to philosophers who agree with Nietzsche that "'Truth" is the will to be master of the multiplicity of sensations'. It is also applied to those who agree with William James that 'the "true" is simply the expedient in the way of believing' and to those who agree with Thomas Kuhn that science should not be thought of as moving towards an accurate representation of the way the world is in itself. More generally, philosophers are called 'relativists' when they do not accept the Greek distinction between the way things are in themselves and the relations which they have to other things, and in particular to human needs and interests.

Philosophers who, like myself, eschew this distinction must abandon the traditional philosophical project of finding something stable which will serve as a criterion for judging the transitory products of our transitory needs and interests. This means, for example, that we cannot employ the Kantian distinction between morality and prudence. We have to give up on the idea that there are unconditional, transcultural moral obligations, obligations rooted in an unchanging, ahistorical human nature. This attempt to put aside both Plato and Kant is the bond which links the post-Nietzschean tradition in European philosophy with the pragmatic tradition in American philosophy.

The philosopher whom I most admire, and of whom I should most like to think of myself as a disciple, is John Dewey. Dewey was one of the founders of American pragmatism. He was a thinker who spent 60 years trying to get us out from under the thrall of Plato and Kant. Dewey was often denounced as a relativist, and so am I. But of course we pragmatists never call *ourselves* relativists. Usually, we define ourselves in negative terms. We call ourselves 'anti-Platonists' or 'antimetaphysicians' or 'antifoundationalists'. Equally, our opponents almost

never call themselves 'Platonists' or 'metaphysicians' or 'foundationalists'. They usually call themselves defenders of common sense, or of reason.

Predictably, each side in this quarrel tries to define the terms of the quarrel in a way favourable to itself. Nobody wants to be called a Platonist, just as nobody wants to be called a relativist or an irrationalist. We so-called 'relativists' refuse, predictably, to admit that we are enemies of reason and common sense. We say that we are only criticizing some antiquated, specifically philosophical, dogmas. But, of course, what we call dogmas are exactly what our opponents call common sense. Adherence to these dogmas is what they call being rational. So discussion between us and our opponents tends to get bogged down in, for example, the question of whether the slogan 'truth is correspondence to the intrinsic nature of reality' expresses common sense, or is just a bit of outdated Platonist jargon.

In other words, one of the things we disagree about is whether this slogan embodies an obvious truth which philosophy must respect and protect, or instead simply puts forward one philosophical view among others. Our opponents say that the correspondence theory of truth is so obvious, so self-evident, that it is merely perverse to question it. We say that this theory is barely intelligible, and of no particular importance - that it is not so much a theory as a slogan which we have been mindlessly chanting for centuries. We pragmatists think that we might stop chanting it without any harmful consequences.

One way to describe this impasse is to say that we so-called 'relativists' claim that many of the things which common sense thinks are found or discovered are really made or invented. Scientific and moral truths, for example, are described by our opponents as 'objective', meaning that they are in some sense out there waiting to be recognized by us human beings. So when our Platonist or Kantian opponents are tired of calling us 'relativists' they call us 'subjectivists' or 'social constructionists'. In their picture of the situation, we are claiming to have discovered that something which was supposed to come from outside us really comes from inside us. They think of us as saying that what was previously thought to be objective has turned out to be merely subjective.

But we anti-Platonists must not accept this way of formulating the issue. For if we do, we shall be in serious trouble. If we take the distinction between making and finding at face value, our opponents

will be able to ask us an awkward question, viz., Have we *discovered* the surprising fact that what was thought to be objective is actually subjective, or have we *invented* it? If we claim to have discovered it, if we say that it is an objective fact that truth is subjective, we are in danger of contradicting ourselves. If we say that we invented it, we seem to be being merely whimsical. Why should anybody take our invention seriously? If truths are merely convenient fictions, what about the truth of the claim that that is what they are? Is that too a convenient fiction? Convenient for what? For whom?

I think it is important that we who are accused of relativism stop using the distinctions between finding and making, discovery and invention, objective and subjective. We should not let ourselves be described as subjectivists, and perhaps calling ourselves 'social constructionists' is too misleading. For we cannot formulate our point in terms of a distinction between what is outside us and what is inside us. We must repudiate the vocabulary our opponents use, and not let them impose it upon us. To say that we must repudiate this vocabulary is to say, once again, that we must avoid Platonism and metaphysics, in that wide sense of metaphysics in which Heidegger said that metaphysics *is* Platonism. (Whitehead was making the same point when he said that all of Western philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato. Whitehead's point was that we do not call an inquiry 'philosophical' unless it revolves around some of the distinctions which Plato drew.)

The distinction between the found and the made is a version of that between the absolute and the relative, between something which is what it is apart from its relations to other things, and something whose nature depends upon those relations. In the course of the centuries, this distinction has become central to what Derrida calls 'the metaphysics of presence' – the search for a 'full presence beyond the reach of play', an absolute beyond the reach of relationality. So if we wish to abandon that metaphysics we must stop distinguishing between the absolute and the relative. We anti-Platonists cannot permit ourselves to be called 'relativists', since that description begs the central question. That central question is about the utility of the vocabulary which we inherited from Plato and Aristotle.

Our opponents like to suggest that to abandon that vocabulary is

to abandon rationality – that to be rational consists precisely in respecting the distinctions between the absolute and the relative, the found and the made, object and subject, nature and convention, reality and appearance. We pragmatists reply that if that were what rationality was, then no doubt we are, indeed, irrationalists. But of course we go on to add that being an irrationalist in *that* sense is not to be incapable of argument. We irrationalists do not foam at the mouth and behave like animals. We simply refuse to talk in a certain way, the Platonic way. The views we hope to persuade people to accept cannot be stated in Platonic terminology. So our efforts at persuasion must take the form of gradual inculcation of new ways of speaking, rather than of straightforward argument within old ways of speaking.

To sum up what I have said so far: We pragmatists shrug off charges that we are 'relativists' or 'irrationalists' by saying that these charges presuppose precisely the distinctions we reject. If we have to describe ourselves, perhaps it would be best for us to call ourselves anti-dualists. This does not, of course, mean that we are against what Derrida calls 'binary oppositions': dividing the world up into the good Xs and the bad non-Xs will always be an indispensable tool of inquiry. But we are against a certain *specific* set of distinctions, the Platonic distinctions. We have to admit that these distinctions have become part of Western common sense, but we do not regard this as a sufficient argument for retaining them.

So far I have been speaking of 'we so-called relativists' and of 'we anti-Platonists'. But now I need to become more specific and name names. As I said at the outset, the group of philosophers I have in mind includes a tradition of post-Nietzschean European philosophy and also a tradition of post-Darwinian American philosophy, the tradition of pragmatism. The great names of the first tradition include Heidegger, Sartre, Gadamer, Derrida and Foucault. The great names of the second tradition include James, Dewey, Kuhn, Quine, Putnam and Davidson. All of these philosophers have been fiercely attacked as relativists.

Both traditions have attempted to cast doubt on the Kantian and Hegelian distinction between subject and object, on the Cartesian distinctions which Kant and Hegel used to formulate their problematic,

