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Philosophy and Social Hope



PENGUIN BOOKS

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Introduction: Relativism: Finding and Making

(1996)

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,

and on the Greek distinctions which provided the framework for Descartes' own thought. The most important thing that links the great names of each tradition to one other, and thus links the two traditions together, is suspicion of the same set of Greek distinctions, the distinctions which make it possible, natural, and almost inevitable to ask, 'Found or made?', 'Absolute or relative?', 'Real or apparent?'

Before saying more about what binds these two traditions together, however, I should say a little about what separates them. Although the European tradition owes a lot to Darwin by way of Nietzsche and Marx, European philosophers have typically distinguished quite sharply between what empirical scientists do and what philosophers do. Philosophers in this tradition often sneer at 'naturalism' and 'empiricism' and 'reductionism'. They sometimes condemn recent Anglophone philosophy without a hearing, because they assume it to be infected by these diseases.

The American pragmatist tradition, by contrast, has made a point of breaking down the distinctions between philosophy, science and politics. Its representatives often describe themselves as 'naturalists', though they deny that they are reductionists or empiricists. Their objection to both traditional British empiricism and the scientific reductionism characteristic of the Vienna Circle is precisely that neither is sufficiently naturalistic. In my perhaps chauvinistic view, we Americans have been more consistent than the Europeans. For American philosophers have realized that the idea of a distinctive, autonomous, cultural activity called 'philosophy' becomes dubious when the vocabulary which has dominated that activity is called into question. When Platonic dualisms go, the distinction between philosophy and the rest of culture is in danger.

Another way of exhibiting the difference between the two traditions is to say that the Europeans have typically put forward a distinctive, new, post-Nietzschean 'method' for philosophers to employ. Thus in early Heidegger and early Sartre we find talk of 'phenomenological ontology', in late Heidegger of something mysterious and wonderful called 'Thinking', in Gadamer of 'hermeneutics', in Foucault of 'the archaeology of knowledge' and of 'genealogy'. Only Derrida seems free from this temptation; his term 'grammatology' was evanescent

whimsy, rather than a serious attempt to proclaim the discovery of a new philosophical method or strategy.

By contrast, the Americans have not been much given to such proclamations. Dewey, it is true, talked a lot about bringing 'scientific method' into philosophy, but he never was able to explain what this method was, nor what it was supposed to add to the virtues of curiosity, open-mindedness and conversability. James sometimes spoke of 'the pragmatic method', but this meant little more than the insistence on pressing the anti-Platonist question, 'Does our purported theoretical difference make any difference to practice?' That insistence was not so much the employment of a method as the assumption of a sceptical attitude towards traditional philosophical problems and vocabularies. Quine, Putnam and Davidson are all labelled 'analytic philosophers', but none of the three thinks of himself as practising a method called 'conceptual analysis', nor any other method. The so-called 'postpositivistic' version of analytic philosophy which these three philosophers have helped to create is notably free of methodolatry.

The various contemporary contributors to the pragmatist tradition are not much inclined to insist on either the distinctive nature of philosophy or the pre-eminent place of philosophy within culture as a whole. None of them believes that philosophers think, or should think, in ways dramatically different from the ways in which physicists and politicians think. They would all agree with Thomas Kuhn that science, like politics, is problem-solving. So they would be content to describe themselves as solving philosophical problems. But the main problem which they want to solve is the origin of the problems which the philosophical problem has bequeathed to us: why, they ask, are the standard, textbook problems of philosophy both so intriguing and barren? Why are philosophers, now as in Cicero's day, still arguing inconclusively, tramping round and round the same dialectical circles, never convincing each other but still able to attract students?

This question, the question of the nature of the problems which the Greeks, Descartes, Kant and Hegel have bequeathed to us, leads us back around to the distinction between finding and making. The philosophical tradition has insisted that these problems are *found*, in the sense that they are inevitably encountered by any reflective mind.

The pragmatist tradition has insisted that they are *made* – are artificial rather than natural – and can be *unmade* by using a different vocabulary than that which the philosophical tradition has used. But such distinctions between the found and the made, the natural and the artificial are, as I have already said, not distinctions with which pragmatists can be comfortable. So it would be better for pragmatists to say simply that the vocabulary in which the traditional problems of Western philosophy were formulated were useful at one time, but are no longer useful. Putting the matter that way would obviate the appearance of saying that whereas the tradition dealt with what was not really there, we pragmatists are dealing with what *is* really there.

Of course we pragmatists cannot say *that*. For we have no use for the reality–appearance distinction, any more than for the distinction between the found and the made. We hope to replace the reality–appearance distinction with the distinction between the more useful and the less useful. So we say that the vocabulary of Greek metaphysics and Christian theology – the vocabulary used in what Heidegger has called ‘the onto-theological tradition’ – was a useful one for our ancestors’ purposes, but that *we* have different purposes, which will be better served by employing a different vocabulary. Our ancestors climbed up a ladder which we are now in a position to throw away. We can throw it away not because we have reached a final resting place, but because we have different problems to solve than those which perplexed our ancestors.

So far I have been sketching the pragmatists’ attitude towards their opponents, and the difficulties they encounter in avoiding the use of terms whose use would beg the question at issue between them and their opponents. Now I should like to describe in somewhat more detail how human inquiry looks from a pragmatist point of view – how it looks once one stops describing it as an attempt to correspond to the intrinsic nature of reality, and starts describing it as an attempt to serve transitory purposes and solve transitory problems.

Pragmatists hope to break with the picture which, in Wittgenstein’s words, ‘holds us captive’ – the Cartesian–Lockean picture of a mind seeking to get in touch with a reality outside itself. So they start with

a Darwinian account of human beings as animals doing their best to cope with the environment – doing their best to develop tools which will enable them to enjoy more pleasure and less pain. Words are among the tools which these clever animals have developed.

There is no way in which tools can take one out of touch with reality. No matter whether the tool is a hammer or a gun or a belief or a statement, tool-using is part of the interaction of the organism with its environment. To see the employment of words as the use of tools to deal with the environment, rather than as an attempt to represent the intrinsic nature of that environment, is to repudiate the question of whether human minds are in touch with reality – the question asked by the epistemological sceptic. No organism, human or non-human, is ever more or less in touch with reality than any other organism. The very idea of ‘being out of touch with reality’ presupposes the un-Darwinian, Cartesian picture of a mind which somehow swings free of the causal forces exerted on the body. The Cartesian mind is an entity whose relations with the rest of the universe are representational rather than causal. So to rid our thinking of the vestiges of Cartesianism, to become fully Darwinian in our thinking, we need to stop thinking of words as representations and to start thinking of them as nodes in the causal network which binds the organism together with its environment.

Seeing language and inquiry in this biologicistic way, a way made familiar in recent years by the work of Humberto Maturana and others, permits us to discard the picture of the human mind as an interior space within which the human person is located. As the American philosopher of mind Daniel Dennett has argued, it is only this picture of a Cartesian Theatre which makes one think that there is a big philosophical or scientific problem about the nature of the origin of consciousness. We should substitute a picture of an adult human organism as one whose behaviour is so complex that it can be predicted only by attributing intentional states – beliefs and desires – to the organism. On this account, beliefs and desires are not prelinguistic modes of consciousness, which may or may not be expressible in language. Nor are they names of immaterial events. Rather, they are what in philosophical jargon are called ‘sentential attitudes’ – that is

to say, dispositions on the part of organisms, or of computers, to assert or deny certain sentences. To attribute beliefs and desires to non-users of language (such as dogs, infants and thermostats) is, for us pragmatists, to speak metaphorically.

Pragmatists complement this biologicistic approach with Charles Sanders Peirce's definition of a belief as a habit of action. On this definition, to ascribe a belief to someone is simply to say that he or she will tend to behave as I behave when I am willing affirm the truth of a certain sentence. We ascribe beliefs to things which use, or can be imagined to use, sentences, but not to rocks and plants. This is not because the former have a special organ or capacity – consciousness – which the latter lack, but simply because the habits of action of rocks and plants are sufficiently familiar and simple that their behaviour can be predicted without ascribing sentential attitudes to them.

On this view, when we utter such sentences as 'I am hungry' we are not making external what was previously internal, but are simply helping those around to us to predict our future actions. Such sentences are not used to report events going on within the Cartesian Theatre which is a person's consciousness. They are simply tools for coordinating our behaviour with those of others. This is not to say that one can 'reduce' mental states such as beliefs and desires to physiological or behavioural states. It is merely to say that there is no point in asking whether a belief represents reality, either mental reality or physical reality, accurately. That is, for pragmatists, not only a bad question, but the root of much wasted philosophical energy.

The right question to ask is, 'For what purposes would it be useful to hold that belief?' This is like the question, 'For what purposes would it be useful to load this program into my computer?' On the Putnamesque view I am suggesting, a person's body is analogous to the computer's hardware, and his or her beliefs and desires are analogous to the software. Nobody knows or cares whether a given piece of computer software represents reality accurately. What we care about is whether it is the software which will most efficiently accomplish a certain task. Analogously, pragmatists think that the question to ask about our beliefs is not whether they are about reality or merely about appearance, but simply whether they are the best habits of action for gratifying our desires.

On this view, to say that a belief is, as far as we know, true, is to say that no alternative belief is, as far as we know, a better habit of acting. When we say that our ancestors believed, falsely, that the sun went around the earth, and that we believe, truly, that the earth goes round the sun, we are saying that we have a better tool than our ancestors did. Our ancestors might rejoin that their tool enabled them to believe in the literal truth of the Christian Scriptures, whereas ours does not. Our reply has to be, I think, that the benefits of modern astronomy and of space travel outweigh the advantages of Christian fundamentalism. The argument between us and our medieval ancestors should not be about which of us has got the universe right. It should be about the point of holding views about the motion of heavenly bodies, the ends to be achieved by the use of certain tools. Confirming the truth of Scripture is one such aim, space travel is another.

Another way of making this last point is to say that we pragmatists cannot make sense of the idea that we should pursue truth for its own sake. We cannot regard truth as a goal of inquiry. The purpose of inquiry is to achieve agreement among human beings about what to do, to bring about consensus on the ends to be achieved and the means to be used to achieve those ends. Inquiry that does not achieve coordination of behaviour is not inquiry but simply wordplay. To argue for a certain theory about the microstructure of material bodies, or about the proper balance of powers between branches of government, is to argue about what we should do: how we should use the tools at our disposal in order to make technological, or political, progress. So, for pragmatists there is no sharp break between natural science and social science, nor between social science and politics, nor between politics, philosophy and literature. All areas of culture are parts of the same endeavour to make life better. There is no deep split between theory and practice, because on a pragmatist view all so-called 'theory' which is not wordplay is always already practice.

To treat beliefs not as representations but as habits of action, and words not as representations but as tools, is to make it pointless to ask, 'Am I discovering or inventing, making or finding?' There is no point in dividing up the organisms' interaction with the environment in this way. Consider an example. We normally say that a bank account is

a social construction rather than an object in the natural world, whereas a giraffe is an object in the natural world rather than a social construction. Bank accounts are made, giraffes are found. Now the truth in this view is simply that if there had been no human beings there would still have been giraffes, whereas there would have been no bank accounts. But this causal independence of giraffes from humans does not mean that giraffes are what they are apart from human needs and interests.

On the contrary, we describe giraffes in the way we do, *as* giraffes, because of our needs and interests. We speak a language which includes the word 'giraffe' because it suits our purposes to do so. The same goes for words like 'organ', 'cell', 'atom', and so on – the names of the parts out of which giraffes are made, so to speak. All the descriptions we give of things are descriptions suited to our purposes. No sense can be made, we pragmatists argue, of the claim that some of these descriptions pick out 'natural kinds' – that they cut nature at the joints. The line between a giraffe and the surrounding air is clear enough if you are a human being interested in hunting for meat. If you are a language-using ant or amoeba, or a space voyager observing us from far above, that line is not so clear, and it is not clear that you would need or have a word for 'giraffe' in your language. More generally, it is not clear that any of the millions of ways of describing the piece of space time occupied by what we call a giraffe is any closer to the way things are in themselves than any of the others. Just as it seems pointless to ask whether a giraffe is really a collection of atoms, or really a collection of actual and possible sensations in human sense organs, or really something else, so the question, 'Are we describing it as it really is?' seems one we never need to ask. All we need to know is whether some competing description might be more useful for some of our purposes.

The relativity of descriptions to purposes is the pragmatist's principal argument for his antirepresentational view of knowledge – the view that inquiry aims at utility for us rather than an accurate account of how things are in themselves. Because every belief we have must be formulated in some language or other, and because languages are not attempts to copy what is out there, but rather tools for dealing with what is out there, there is no way to divide off 'the contribution to our

knowledge made by the object' from 'the contribution to our knowledge made by our subjectivity'. Both the words we use and our willingness to affirm certain sentences using those words and not others are the products of fantastically complex causal connections between human organisms and the rest of the universe. There is no way to divide up this web of causal connections so as to compare the relative amount of subjectivity and of objectivity in a given belief. There is no way, as Wittgenstein has said, to come between language and its object, to divide the giraffe in itself from our ways of talking about giraffes. As Hilary Putnam, the leading contemporary pragmatist, has put it: 'elements of what we call "language" or "mind" penetrate so deeply into reality that the very project of representing ourselves as being "mappers" of something "language-independent" is fatally compromised from the start'.

The Platonist dream of perfect knowledge is the dream of stripping ourselves clean of everything that comes from inside us and opening ourselves without reservation to what is outside us. But this distinction between inside and outside, as I have said earlier, is one which cannot be made once we adopt a biologicistic view. If the Platonist is going to insist on that distinction, he has got to have an epistemology which does not link up in any interesting way with other disciplines. He will end up with an account of knowledge which turns its back on the rest of science. This amounts to making knowledge into something supernatural, a kind of miracle.

The suggestion that everything we say and do and believe is a matter of fulfilling human needs and interests might seem simply a way of formulating the secularism of the Enlightenment – a way of saying that human beings are on their own, and have no supernatural light to guide them to the Truth. But of course the Enlightenment replaced the idea of such supernatural guidance with the idea of a quasi-divine faculty called 'reason'. It is this idea which American pragmatists and post-Nietzschean European philosophers are attacking. What seems most shocking about their criticisms of this idea is not their description of natural science as an attempt to manage reality rather than to represent it. Rather, it is their description of moral

choice as always a matter of compromise between competing goods, rather than as a choice between the absolutely right and the absolutely wrong.

Controversies between foundationalists and antifoundationalists on the theory of knowledge look like the sort of merely scholastic quarrels which can safely be left to the philosophy professors. But quarrels about the character of moral choice look more important. We stake our sense of who we are on the outcome of such choices. So we do not like to be told that our choices are between alternative goods rather than between good and evil. When philosophy professors start saying that there is nothing either absolutely wrong or absolutely right, the topic of relativism begins to get interesting. The debates between the pragmatists and their opponents, or the Nietzscheans and theirs, begin to look too important to be left to philosophy professors. Everybody wants to get in on the act.

This is why philosophers like myself find ourselves denounced in magazines and newspapers which one might have thought oblivious of our existence. These denunciations claim that unless the youth is raised to believe in moral absolutes, and in objective truth, civilization is doomed. Unless the younger generation has the same attachment to firm moral principles as we have, these magazine and newspaper articles say, the struggle for human freedom and human decency will be over. When we philosophy teachers read this sort of article, we find ourselves being told that we have enormous power over the future of mankind. For all it will take to overturn centuries of moral progress, these articles suggest, is a generation which accepts the doctrines of moral relativism, accepts the views common to Nietzsche and Dewey.

Dewey and Nietzsche of course disagreed about a lot of things. Nietzsche thought of the happy, prosperous masses who would inhabit Dewey's social democratic utopia as 'the last men', worthless creatures incapable of greatness. Nietzsche was as instinctively antidemocratic in his politics as Dewey was instinctively democratic. But the two men agree not only on the nature of knowledge but on the nature of moral choice. Dewey said that every evil is a rejected good. William James said that every human need has a *prima facie* right to be gratified, and the only reason for refusing to gratify it is that it conflicts with

another human need. Nietzsche would have entirely agreed. He would have phrased this point in terms of competition between bearers of the will to power, whereas James and Dewey would have found the term 'power', with its sadistic overtones, a bit misleading. But these three philosophers made identical criticisms of Enlightenment, and specifically Kantian, attempts to view moral principles as the product of a special faculty called 'reason'. They all thought that such attempts were disingenuous attempts to keep something like God alive in the midst of a secular culture.

Critics of moral relativism think that unless there is something absolute, something which shares God's implacable refusal to yield to human weakness, we have no reason to go on resisting evil. If evil is merely a lesser good, if all moral choice is a compromise between conflicting goods, then, they say, there is no point in moral struggle. The lives of those who have died resisting injustice become pointless. But to us pragmatists moral struggle is continuous with the struggle for existence, and no sharp break divides the unjust from the imprudent, the evil from the inexpedient. What matters for pragmatists is devising ways of diminishing human suffering and increasing human equality, increasing the ability of all human children to start life with an equal chance of happiness. This goal is not written in the stars, and is no more an expression of what Kant called 'pure practical reason' than it is of the Will of God. It is a goal worth dying for, but it does not require backup from supernatural forces.

The pragmatist view of what opponents of pragmatism call 'firm moral principles' is that such principles are abbreviations of past practices – way of summing up the habits of the ancestors we most admire. For example, Mill's greater-happiness principle and Kant's categorical imperative are ways of reminding ourselves of certain social customs – those of certain parts of the Christian West, the culture which has been, at least in words if not in deeds, more egalitarian than any other. The Christian doctrine that all members of the species are brothers and sisters is the religious way of saying what Mill and Kant said in non-religious terms: that considerations of family membership, sex, race, religious creed and the like should not prevent us from trying to do unto others as we would have them do to us –

should not prevent us from thinking of them as people like ourselves, deserving the respect which we ourselves hope to enjoy.

But there are other firm moral principles than those which epitomize egalitarianism. One such principle is that dishonour brought to a woman of one's family must be paid for with blood. Another is that it would be better to have no son than to have one who is homosexual. Those of us who would like to put a stop to the blood feuds and the gaybashing produced by these firm moral principles call such principles 'prejudices' rather than 'insights'. It would be nice if philosophers could give us assurance that the principles which we approve of, like Mill's and Kant's, are 'rational' in a way that the principles of the blood-revengers and the gaybashers are not. But to say that they are more rational is just another way of saying that they are more universalistic – that they treat the differences between women of one's own family and other women, and the difference between gays and straights, as relatively insignificant. But it is not clear that failure to mention particular groups of people is a mark of rationality.

To see this last point, consider the principle 'Thou shalt not kill'. This is admirably universal, but is it more or less rational than the principle 'Do not kill unless one is a soldier defending his or her country, or is preventing a murder, or is a state executioner, or a merciful practitioner of euthanasia'? I have no idea whether it is more or less rational, and so do not find the term 'rational' useful in this area. If I am told that a controversial action which I have taken has to be defended by being subsumed under a universal, rational principle, I may be able to dream up such a principle to fit the occasion, but sometimes I may only be able to say, 'Well, it seemed like the best thing to do at the time, all things considered.' It is not clear that the latter defence is less rational than some universal-sounding principle which I have dreamed up *ad hoc* to justify my action. It is not clear that all the moral dilemmas to do with population control, the rationing of health care, and the like – should wait upon the formulation of principles for their solution.

As we pragmatists see it, the idea that there must be such a legitimating principle lurking behind every right action amounts to the idea that there is something like a universal, super-national court of law before which we stand. We know that the best societies are those

which are governed by laws rather than by the whim of tyrants or mobs. Without the rule of law, we say, human life is turned over to emotion and to violence. This makes us think that there must be a sort of invisible tribunal of reason administering laws which we all, somewhere deep down inside, recognize as binding upon us. Something like this was Kant's understanding of moral obligation. But, once again, the Kantian picture of what human beings are like cannot be reconciled with history or with biology. Both teach us that the development of societies ruled by laws rather than men was a slow, late, fragile, contingent, evolutionary achievement.

Dewey thought that Hegel was right, against Kant, when he insisted that universal moral principles were useful only insofar as they were the outgrowth of the historical development of a particular society – a society whose institutions gave content to the otherwise empty shell of the principle. Recently Michael Walzer, a political philosopher best known for his earlier work *Spheres of Justice*, has come to Hegel's and Dewey's defence. In his more recent book *Thick and Thin*, Walzer argues that we should not think of the customs and institutions of particular societies as accidental accretions around a common core of universal moral rationality, the transcultural moral law. Rather, we should think of the thick set of customs and institutions as prior, and as what commands moral allegiance. The thin morality which can be abstracted out of the various thick moralities is not made up of the commandments of a universally shared human faculty called 'reason'. Such thin resemblances between these thick moralities as may exist are contingent, as contingent as the resemblances between the adaptive organs of diverse biological species.

Someone who adopts the anti-Kantian stance common to Hegel, Dewey and Walzer and is asked to defend the thick morality of the society with which she identifies herself will not be able to do so by talking about the rationality of her moral views. Rather, she will have to talk about the various concrete advantages of her society's practices over those of other societies. Discussion of the relative advantages of different thick moralities will, obviously, be as inconclusive as discussion of the relative superiority of a beloved book or person over another person's beloved book or person.

The idea of a universally shared source of truth called ‘reason’ or ‘human nature’ is, for us pragmatists, just the idea that such discussion *ought* to be capable of being made conclusive. We see this idea as a misleading way of expressing the hope, which we share, that the human race as a whole should gradually come together in a global community, a community which incorporates most of the thick morality of the European industrialized democracies. It is misleading because it suggests that the aspiration to such a community is somehow built into every member of the biological species. This seems to us pragmatists like the suggestion that the aspiration to be an anaconda is somehow built into all reptiles, or that the aspiration to be an anthropoid is somehow built into all mammals. This is why we pragmatists see the charge of relativism as simply the charge that we see luck where our critics insist on seeing destiny. We think that the utopian world community envisaged by the Charter of the United Nations and the Helsinki Declaration of Human Rights is no more the *destiny* of humanity than is an atomic holocaust or the replacement of democratic governments by feuding warlords. If either of the latter is what the future holds, our species will have been unlucky, but it will not have been irrational. It will not have failed to live up to its moral obligations. It will simply have missed a chance to be happy.

I do not know how to argue the question of whether it is better to see human beings in this biologicistic way or to see them in a way more like Plato’s or Kant’s. So I do not know how to give anything like a conclusive argument for the view which my critics call ‘relativism’ and which I prefer to call ‘antifoundationalism’ or ‘antidualism’. It is certainly not enough for my side to appeal to Darwin and ask our opponents how they can avoid an appeal to the supernatural. That way of stating the issue begs many questions. It is certainly not enough for my opponents to say that a biologicistic view strips human beings of their dignity and their self-respect. That too begs most of the questions at issue. I suspect that all that either side can do is to restate its case over and over again, in context after context. The controversy between those who see both our species and our society as a lucky accident, and those who find an immanent teleology in both, is too radical to permit of being judged from some neutral standpoint.

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Autobiographical