

POSTMODERNISM IS NOT A RELATIVISM.
COMMUNICATION PRACTICES AND ETHICAL ATTITUDES
IN SOME POSTMODERN THINKERS

1. Introduction¹

The different “postmodern” philosophies that arose from the 1970s to the 1990s have often been considered as a kind of irrationalist-skeptical-relativist “ideology” or assorted amalgam, which in our time would dangerously take over the philosophical academy and western cultures, with

¹ The present article was written under the direction of Professor Gianni Vattimo, whose work group in the Università degli Studi di Torino. I was able to participate in thanks to a fellowship financed by the Basque Regional Government during the academic year 2002-04. Presented here in English for the first time are the ideas I have been working on recently in books such as Miguel Ángel Quintana Paz, *Normatividad, interpretación y praxis*. Salamanca, Publicaciones Universidad Pontificia de Salamanca, 2006; and in previous articles such as Miguel Ángel Quintana Paz, “Una tercera vía. El antirrelativismo de Vattimo, Feyerabend y Rorty”, *Laguna*, número extraordinario (1999), 193-204; Miguel Ángel Quintana Paz, “La hermenéutica se pone en acción”, *Revista de Occidente*, n. 235 (2000), 131-138; Miguel Ángel Quintana Paz, “Entre la razón contaminada y (el dogma de) la immaculada razón”, *Leviatán*, n. 83 (2001), 121-127; Joan Vergés Gifra & Miguel Ángel Quintana Paz, “Diálogo sobre tres modelos de definición de la barbarie y lo civilizado en la filosofía política actual”, *Estudios filosóficos*, n. 147 (2002), 195-221; Miguel Ángel Quintana Paz, “De las reglas hacia la X. Racionalidad, postmetafísica y retórica entre Wittgenstein y Vattimo”, *Thémata*, n. 32 (2004), 135-157; Miguel Ángel Quintana Paz, “Cómo no ser ni universalistas ni relativistas”, in Ildefonso Murillo (ed.), *Filosofía práctica y persona humana*. Salamanca, Publicaciones Universidad Pontificia de Salamanca, 2004, 149-167; Miguel Ángel Quintana Paz, “Non solum peritos in ea glorificare”, in Teresa Oñate, Cristina García Santos & Miguel Ángel Quintana Paz (eds.), *Hans-Georg Gadamer: ontología estética y hermenéutica*. Madrid, Dykinson, 2005, 613-677; Miguel Ángel Quintana Paz, “Comunidad”, in Andrés Ortiz-Osés & Patxi Lanceros (eds.), *Claves de hermenéutica*. Bilbao, Universidad de Deusto, 2005, 71-82; Miguel Ángel Quintana Paz, “L’universalismo di alcuni filosofi morali contemporanei (e le curiose idee dei drusi sui cinesi)”, *Filosofia e questioni pubbliche*, n. 10/2 (2005), 75-102.

grave risk for universalist or simply rationalist projects.² Nevertheless, as the title of this article shows, a closer examination of some trends of postmodern thought would be able to perceive that they not only are uncomfortable with the label “relativist”, “irrationalist” or “skeptical”, but also that they offer substantial arguments against, for example, the main theses of relativism. Naturally, none of these trends has any qualms about abominating universalism as well (the presumed mortal enemy of the relativists). Thus the most sensible conclusion would be that what really seems erroneous to authors such as those we shall approach here is the presumed dilemma (presented as inevitable) between relativism and universalism (it is curious that, at least as far as faith in the existence of such a dichotomy is concerned, these presumed irreconcilable enemies, which both the relativists and the universalists believe themselves to be, are plainly in agreement). Only if they subscribe to such a rejection of this dilemma could it be explained that important thinkers of the heterogeneous postmodern group (such as those whom I propose to have a dialogue with in this article) have scorned, on the one hand, any and all universal project of rationality, but have *also* strongly disallowed relativist proposals (just as, naturally, they have likewise taken advantage of the issue to deny their presumed adherence to relativism as such).

This idea, however, has not been understood by a large part of the scholars involved today in epistemology and practical philosophy (the two philosophical specialties in which one most frequently faces the question of relativism). To approach this understanding, therefore, perhaps it would not be amiss to review the different arguments that some postmodern

² Thus, for example, Manuel Cruz (in his article which appeared in the Dec. 12, 1997 edition of *Babelia*, the cultural supplement of the Spanish daily *El País*) affirms that everything that is occurring today is, deep down, that postmodernism has fostered a new relativist-skeptical academicism, an opinion shared with Fernando Broncano, “Introducción (Uno de los nuestros)”, in Paul K. Feyerabend, *Ambigüedad y Armonía*. Barcelona, Paidós, 1999. My thesis in this work will be that this academicism, if it exists, is not in any way relativist (or skeptical, although it would take another article to explain that properly). I understand, however, that Cruz and Broncano rightly perceive the existence of what Vattimo would consider the hermeneutic *koiné* that philosophy is undergoing at this turn of the century, which perhaps may be an academicism (but I do not see in that an argument against such a *koiné*). See Gianni Vattimo, “Ermenéutica, nuova *koiné*”, in Gianni Vattimo, *Etica dell’interpretazione*. Torino, Rosenberg & Sellier, 1989, 38-48.

thinkers use against relativism. Specifically, we shall take a look at the reasoning in this sense that has come from Gianni Vattimo (1936), Paul K. Feyerabend (1924-1994), and Richard Rorty (1931).³ All of them have too

³ Naturally, we could have chosen many other philosophers as the focus of our study; we have limited ourselves to these because they constitute a good sample of the very different philosophical traditions and circles in which it is possible to defend the anti-relativist (but not universalist) theories that interest us. Furthermore, Rorty, Vattimo and Feyerabend, are precisely among the postmodern philosophers most often accused of relativism (erroneously, as we shall show here). Even so, the array of thinkers that arose during the debates of Postmodernity and that could have figured fully in an article such as this is quite broad. Thus, among the Americans we could have turned to Richard J. Bernstein (especially in his *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983; *The New Constellation*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1991), Stanley E. Fish (*Doing What Comes Naturally*. Durham, Duke U.P., 1989), Arthur Fine (“And Not Anti-Realism Either”, *Nous*, 18, [1984], 51-66) or Joseph Margolis (*Pragmatism Without Foundations*. Oxford, Blackwell, 1986). The British Peter Winch (*The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy*. London, Routledge, 1958) could easily be added to this list. In German-speaking philosophical circles, the positions of Wolfgang Welsch (*Vernunft: die zeitgenössische Vernunftkritik und das Konzept der transversalen Vernunft*. Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1996; see also Diego Bermejo, *Postmodernidad: pluralidad y transversalidad*. Anthropos, Barcelona, 2005) and Odo Marquard (*Abschied vom Prinzipiellen*. Stuttgart, Reclam, 1981) can easily be placed within this “third way” between universalism and relativism. More linked to ethical-political praxis is the contribution of Hans-Martin Schönherr-Mann (*Postmoderne Theorien des Politischen: Pragmatismus, Kommunitarismus, Pluralismus*. Munich, Fink, 1996). In Mexico, philosophers as different from each other as Mauricio Beuchot (*Tratado de hermenéutica analógica*. Mexico, UNAM, 1997) and Carlos Pereda (*Vértigos argumentales*. Barcelona, Anthropos, 1994) have manifested similar opinions; thus, Beuchot postulates making what he calls “analogical hermeneutics” an escape route from the aporia we are subjected to by a confrontation between univocal meanings (of universalism) and totally equivocal meanings (of relativism). For his part, Pereda argues that it would be possible to overcome universalist certainties and relativist ignorance thanks to his model of “emphatic reason”. Similar ideas are defended, from Peru, by Víctor Samuel Rivera (“Relativismo, racionalidad y comunidad”, *Revista Teológica Límense*, vol. 31, n. 3 [1997], 329-344). In French philosophical circles, Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca may be the ones who have best developed a whole treatise (*Traité de l’argumentation*. Paris, PUF, 1958) to give an account of the idea of anti-relativist but not universalist rationality, with strong ties to an idea of “rhetoric” (already put forward by their mentor Eugène Dupréel, *Esquisse d’une philosophie des valeurs*. Paris, Alcan, 1939). Among the Italians we could mention Aldo Giorgio Gargani (“L’attrito del pensiero”, in G. Vattimo [ed.], *Filosofia ’86*. Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1987, 5-22). As for Spain, Andrés Ortiz-Osés (*Amor y sentido*. Barcelona,

often had to suffer from the suspicion of being considered as relativists. To absolve philosophers such as these from such an accusation seems to be a *sine qua non* condition for understanding their true position towards the universalism *versus* relativism dilemma. Let us begin this task, then, with one of the authors who from very early on accepted for himself the label “postmodern”: Gianni Vattimo.

2. Vattimo against Relativism: Hermeneutics and Nihilism

Any reader of Gianni Vattimo will be able to find at least two types of reasons with which to repudiate the thesis of relativism. The first kind of argument could be termed “hermeneutic”, the second, “nihilist”. In turn, it is not difficult to see that the hermeneutic arguments have a mainly theoretical component, while the nihilist arguments rest above all on practical (ethical-political) considerations. We shall now examine both types of arguments.

2.1. The Hermeneutic Attack on Relativism: Against Aesthetic Consciousness

In his rejection of relativism for hermeneutic-theoretical reasons, Vattimo is in direct debt to Hans-Georg Gadamer and the critique he developed against “aesthetic consciousness” in *Wahrheit und Methode*.⁴ In this sense Vattimo’s task, as he himself admits, would be simply to make

Anthropos, 2003), Quintín Racionero (“Más allá de la hermenéutica”, in Teresa Oñate, Cristina García Santos and Miguel Ángel Quintana Paz [eds.], op. cit., 163-200), Antonio Valdecantos (*Contra el relativismo*. Madrid, Visor, 1999) and Javier Muguerza (“Los peldaños del cosmopolitismo”, *Sistema*, n. 134 [1996], 5-25) have demonstrated (again from radically different philosophical methods and perspectives) that it is possible to distance oneself equally from the universalist club and the relativist guild. Finally it would not be amiss to point out that even classic authors such as M. Heidegger, L. Wittgenstein or J. Derrida could possibly be added to this list without any particular difficulty: see Richard Rorty, “Beyond Realism and Anti-Realism: Heidegger, Fine, Davidson, and Derrida”, in Ludwig Nagl & Richard Heinrich (eds.), *Wo steht die Analytische Philosophie heute?* Wien-Munich, Oldenbourg, 1986; Miguel Ángel Quintana Paz, *Normatividad, interpretación y praxis*, op. cit.

⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*. Tübingen, Mohr, 1960.

explicit the repercussions of Gadamer’s critique beyond the problems of historical interpretation, towards the generality of the cases of conflict between unequal paradigms. It would thus be possible to show in all cases (and not only in those related to an understanding of the past) how implausible relativism is – or how implausible the idea of “aesthetic consciousness” (as Gadamer would prefer to call it) is.⁵

Let us recall that for Gadamer one of his primordial objectives when he began to write that book was to combat the aesthetic-romantic idea of *aesthetic consciousness* “that considers the work of art as a closed and separate universe, which one approaches in an intuitive and specific experience (*Erlebnis*)”.⁶ For Vattimo, this idea can only be sympathetic with relativism and therefore to reject one is also to challenge the other: both believe in the possibility of “universes of discourse” or paradigms that are totally independent of and impossible to translate into our own. Thus, if we are to understand them we must completely renounce our heritage, our tradition (*Überlieferung*), rules, way of life (*Lebensformen*), prejudices or hermeneutic horizon, in order to thus be able to enter into their rules in an intuitive and irrationalist way. As a consequence all this would lead, both for the relativist and for the believer in aesthetic consciousness, to a denial of the possibility of an “argumentation” to decide between the different paradigms, since each argumentation only aspires to be of value “within” its corresponding paradigm, according to the rules with which the paradigm organizes the argumentations possible within it – and evidently, argumentation cannot be used to decide between unequal rules of argumentation.

The paradox, then, which Vattimo can not help but be surprised about, is the following: how can the hermeneutics stemming from Gadamer be accused of relativism if it arose precisely in opposition to relativism (aesthetic consciousness)? In fact, Gadamer provided us with some very good reasons for abhorring relativism, when he showed in *Wahrheit und Methode* that what we call understanding a text, a work of art or a legacy from the past is only realized through contact with the history of its effects (*Wirkungsgeschichte*), that is, the history of the interpretations through which it has been transmitted to us. Hence, in order to describe what is

⁵ Gianni Vattimo, “Ricostruzione della razionalità”, in G. Vattimo (ed.), *Filosofia '91*. Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1992, 89-103.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

happening when we interpret, it is much more plausible to speak of the “consciousness of the history of effects” (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*) than to speak of “aesthetic consciousness”. If one still believes in aesthetic consciousness it is because one forgets or represses the fact that it is actually the history of effects which makes understanding possible.⁷

This paradox in which, on the one hand, the hermeneutics of Gadamer refutes the relativism of “aesthetic consciousness” while, on the other hand, hermeneutics itself is at the same time accused of being relativist is for Vattimo an exceptional occasion for showing that hermeneutics, as a philosophical position, must be proposed without it falling into the temptation of the aesthetic consciousness that it criticizes, a temptation that it falls into if it renounces rational argumentation and intends to be accepted only through an arational, aestheticizing, voluntarist, intuitive decision. That it often slips into this renunciation is what justifies many authors seeing it as relativist: and it certainly is in the cases in which it proceeds that way, but only at the cost, according to Vattimo, of renouncing what is its own specificity. That is, as soon as hermeneutics flirts with relativism, it stops being hermeneutic (i.e. an enemy of the idea of “aesthetic consciousness”) in the full sense.⁸

If hermeneutics preserves its reason for being (its message), then it will present itself, in accordance with its principles, not as an irrationalist option detached from the *logos*, the rules or horizon proper to interlocutors (hermeneutics does not believe in the plausibility of such options), but will rather show itself as a *reasoned* interpretation of the inheritance that it shares with them, and which argumentatively hopes to be more *plausible* or *persuasive* than other rival interpretations of this same inheritance, this common *logos*. The acceptability of hermeneutics and its philosophical positions wants to rest exclusively on this common *logos* between “paradigms” to be rational. And therefore its very model of rationality (not only in the struggle between hermeneutics and other philosophical trends but also in the general question of relativism) is also that of *plausibly arguing among* the cultural, anthropological and civilization *paradigms from a*

⁷ All of this constitutes the well-known principle of the “history of effects” or “history of reception” (*Wirkungsgeschichte*): Hans-Georg Gadamer, op. cit., chapter 9.4.

common horizon which in each case makes mutual understanding and dialogue possible, without dia-logic leaps that are incomprehensible to some. Naturally, this common inheritance cannot be defined *a priori*: in each case whether the *logos* being shared will be one or the other, “greater” or “lesser” (if it is possible to speak here in quantitative terms) will depend on the interpretations of the world in conflict, on who the interlocutors are. In the words of Vattimo, we are now speaking of a rationality or reasonability which, unlike that of the universalist,

is not defined in relation to objective structures that thought should and could reflect, but rather with respect to and out of *pietas* for one’s fellow [*prossimo* in Italian; that is, the one with whom the dialogue takes place in each case because he/she is near to us]. Also for this reason, however, the continuity [or the absence of non-argued aestheticist leaps] cannot be defined abstractly, but must be referred to a specific *prossimo* or specific *prossimi*.⁹

But neither can we define *a priori* the impossibility that two members of two different paradigms can have a dialogue with each other (as the relativist does: here we have the nucleus of Vattimo’s criticism of it). To do this we would have to be sure of having trapped the “essences” of both paradigms indubitably – and then see them as incompatible. And hermeneutics, since it specifically does not believe in these essences as independent of our interpretation, cannot accept such an idea: what there is, is a constant and renewed interpretation within each paradigm on the part of the participants, which only through their creative interpretation comprise it as such, without that paradigm having any essence at all beyond this continuous interpretation.¹⁰ So the message of hermeneutics (that “facts” or

⁸ Hermeneutics presented as an arbitrary choice would be closer to Derrida’s deconstruction and his Mallarmean *coup de dés* than to hermeneutic philosophy as such: Gianni Vattimo, “Ricostruzione della razionalità”, op. cit., 92-94.

⁹ Gianni Vattimo, *Oltre l’interpretazione*. Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1994, 121-137, here 146 (n. 17). For some developments of Vattimo’s figure *pietas*, see Gianni Vattimo, “Postmodernità e fine della storia”, in Gianni Vattimo, *Etica dell’interpretazione*, op.cit., 20; in this text such a virtue is defined as a “devoted attention to what or to whom, having only a limited value, deserves to be attended to, precisely by virtue of the fact that such value, although limited, is after all the only thing we know”.

¹⁰ “To inhabit [a paradigm] rather involves an interpretative pertaining, which entails either consensus or else the possibility of critical articulation” (Gianni Vattimo, “La

“essences” do not exist, but rather only their interpretations¹¹) is equally valid within each paradigm, which gives them a flexibility that undermines the solidity and impenetrability that the relativist attributes them with (when considering them reciprocally incomprehensible by definition). It is in this flexibility that there lies the hope and faith of finding, by means of dialogue with the other, a common horizon that would make possible a shared rationality: what authors who can hardly be accused of piety call the “principle of charity”.¹²

Here we have the theoretical motives that distance Vattimo from relativism. Let us now take a look at the part of his philosophy most related to ethics and politics which leads him to reaffirm this distancing.

2.2. *The Nihilist Criticism of Relativism: Against the Violence of Fundamentals*

Another perspective from which the criticism of relativism can be approached is the one given by the nihilist strand of Vattimo’s project. This aspect is simply inseparable from Vattimo’s understanding of “hermeneutics” (in fact, he speaks of the “nihilist vocation of hermeneutics”¹³), but it nevertheless emphasizes the fact that the most plausible interpretation of our present is that which sees it as the moment of the absences of fundamentals, which now only show themselves in a weakened, attenuated way.¹⁴ This means that the “foundationalist” (when not openly fundamen-

verità dell’ermeneutica”. in G. Vattimo [ed.], *Filosofia* ’88. Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1989, 227-249, here 234).

¹¹ Here we are paraphrasing Nietzsche, in fragment no. 7 (60) of his *Nachgelassene Fragmente 1885-1887*; and in the famous paragraph 22 of *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*.

¹² I am thinking specifically of Donald Davidson, whom Vattimo quotes explicitly in Gianni Vattimo, *Oltre l’interpretazione*, op. cit., 146 n. 18. These ideas recall the proposal of Victoria Camps of replacing the transcendental pragmatics of Apel or Habermas, more clearly universalist, with a “real pragmatics” depending on each specific situation, a pragmatics that accepts what is already held in common to argue from there; see Victoria Camps, “El derecho a la diferencia”, in Javier Muguerza, Francisco Quesada & Roberto Rodríguez (eds.), *Ética día tras día*. Madrid, Trotta, 1991, 68-78.

¹³ Gianni Vattimo, *Oltre l’interpretazione*, op. cit., p. 3.

¹⁴ Evidently here we cannot go more deeply into Vattimo’s concept of “positive” nihilism. See, for example, Gianni Vattimo, “Nihilism: Reactive and Active”, in Tom

talist) belief of the relativist, who believes that their paradigm/way of life/hermeneutic opening/*logos*/community cannot be questioned by the others (it is, thus, as unquestionable in the end as the common and rational fundament of the universalists), is a belief that is now unsustainable in a world in which the “metaphysics of fundamentals” is showing its weakness. And it is not only an unsustainable, but also (and here we have Vattimo’s ethical and political argument) a very dangerous belief.

Vattimo is thus highlighting a similarity between universalists and relativists that perhaps neither of them suspected: both believe in unquestionable fundamentals, with all the violence that this implies for dialogue (and maybe even beyond dialogue). T.W. Adorno and E. Levinas had already linked universalist metaphysics with violence.¹⁵ Those who believe in a “peremptory presence of being – as the ultimate fundament in the face of which one can only remain silent and perhaps, feel admiration for –”,¹⁶ whether this be a rational fundament (as the universalists believe) or an irrational fundament (as relativism believes); whether it be a fundament for all Humanity, in the universalist way of thinking, or only for “our own”, in the relativist way; those who believe thus make evident their violent nature: “The fundament, if it occurs in the irrefutable presence that leaves no room for ulterior questions, is like an authority that orders everyone to be silent and imposes itself without giving explanations”.¹⁷ It is thus not a case of the universals of the universalists leading always to violence (it is true that they are often used in favor of the individual) but rather that the foundationalist way of thinking of the universalists can easily lead to violence (by making them feel legitimated in resorting to it, for example).¹⁸ And it is not that all the relative fundamentals that the relativist recognizes have to be violent (there could be pacifist ones, indifferent ones, etc.) but that thinking of them as non-arguable within each paradigm, as inevitable,

Darby, Béla Egyed & Ben Jones (eds.), *Nietzsche and the Rhetoric of Nihilism*. Ottawa, Carleton U.P., 1989, 15-21.

¹⁵ Gianni Vattimo, “Metafisica, violenza, secolarizzazione”, in Gianni Vattimo (ed.), *Filosofia* ’86, op. cit., 71-94.

¹⁶ Gianni Vattimo, *Oltre l’interpretazione*, op. cit., p. 40.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ See, for example, Wolfgang Sützl, “Human Rights in Transition: Violence and Universalism after Kosovo”. *Javnost – The Public*, vol. 7 (2000), n. 1.

as metaphysical fundamentals, culminates in the violence of people who do not want to justify themselves before the rest.¹⁹

Renouncing relativism because of its pro-violent nature is the ethical-political argument that Vattimo uses against it. These kinds of practical justifications for philosophical choices are very dear to our author, since they show most clearly that he does not seek a greater adaptation to reality (which would mean a relapse into metaphysics) but rather to show proposals capable of persuading because of their practical effects. It is not that one has to abandon relativism because it *essentially has* this or that defect in its theories that impede it from being the position that *corresponds* to reality; relativism must be rejected simply because it is attractive for our democracies to abandon a posture that historically “has shown itself as an enemy of freedom and the historicity of what exists”.²⁰

This is, in short, Vattimo’s argument against relativism. I believe it has been made sufficiently clear that it has not involved supporting *a priori* universalism of a human nature metaphysically necessary and common to all human beings. On the contrary, it has only meant claiming that there always exists the possibility of a dialogue on the bases that in each particular case are shown to be the most propitious for constituting a certain

¹⁹ This central similarity between universalisms and relativisms could explain many other similarities that unite them; for example, the fact that both run into difficulty when considering and treating as fully human those who do not share their paradigm, which also facilitates violence towards them (I am thinking of the difficulty that the ethnocentrist relativist has in considering the foreigner as worthily human as “his/her own people”, and of the ease with which some universalists accuse those who do not share their universalism of being “infrahuman” or “perverted”: see Miguel Ángel Quintana Paz, “L’universalismo di alcuni filosofi morali contemporanei (e le curiose idee dei drusi sui cinesi)”, *op. cit.*). It is also interesting that, paradoxically, universalism accuses relativism of being universalist deep down – enunciating the “absolute and universal truth” of relativism for everyone and everywhere – and relativism accuses universalism of being relativist deep down – as long as it tries to impose something that in the end is only its own specific, relative, context-bound way of thinking –). Another couple of paradoxes: relativism says that out of reason we should accept everything ... except the universalism it is arguing against! And universalism accepts only *one* of the positions involved in the universe of discourse ... which curiously is its own, with which it is most linked in a relative way!

²⁰ Gianni Vattimo, *Credere di credere*. Milan, Garzanti, 1996, p. 21. See also page 20 for a general example of the esteem in which Vattimo holds this type of argument, whose concomitances with what rhetorical tradition calls *argumentum ab utili* are evident.

continuity between those involved in the dialogue. These bases will know how to function in each case as the common inheritance of us, co-heirs, who by being such are siblings and not autistic individuals (relativists); siblings who should co-respond to the claims of the others at a time in which we only have each other and that inheritance that our father left them, a father who (like the fundament, like the god) has gone.²¹

3. Feyerabend against Relativism: The Chimera of Linguistic Limits

Although few know it, Feyerabend was a furious reviler of relativism. And this, in spite of being branded a “crass relativist”, a stigma he had to carry throughout his life since almost nobody understood the meaning of his slogan (reminiscent of Cole Porter) “Anything goes”. Indeed, Feyerabend is often mentioned as a champion of a relativism according to which, as the slogan seems to insinuate, everything would have the same value, everything would be the same. But the fact is that one would only have to read without malice any of Feyerabend’s works²² to find that this author never defended “Anything goes”. Feyerabend simply argued that if (and only if) rationalists wanted to establish at all costs a universally valid epistemological principle, and at the same time take into account what we know about science (i.e., that it functions with plural principles and methodologies according to the circumstances), *then* (and only then) the rationalists would have to recognize that the only possible principle would be the bizarre “Anything goes”, or, in other words, the non-principle. Evidently, since the antecedent of the above conditional does not apply in the case of Feyerabend (he never wished to establish a universal principle), to attribute him with the defense of the consequent is simply a manipulation of his declarations (and a curious example of the erroneous application of *modus ponens*). His “anarchism” was only “methodological”: the thesis that science does not always act with one method but rather the methods change constantly, as in the History of Art, Music, etc. But the fact that there is no single method in science, art, music or rationality does not necessarily mean that anything done in science, art, music or rationality is

²¹ See Martin Heidegger, “Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten”, *Der Spiegel*, n. 23 (31-5-76), 193-219.

²² See, for example, Paul K. Feyerabend, *Against Method*. London, NLB, 1975.

worth the same as anything else: nothing could be further from the sensibility of an opera critic as refined as this Viennese²³ than to affirm that “Anything goes” when a Puccini aria is being interpreted – although this does not mean at all by the way, that there is *one single* correct method to make such an interpretation brilliant.

Actually, Feyerabend despised universalism and relativism equally because they both fell into what he detected as a formidable error: that of assuming “boundaries that do not exist in practice” and of “postulating absurdities whenever people participate in interesting forms [...] of collaboration”, such that both can only be seen as “chimeras”.²⁴ Indeed, both relativists and universalists accept the idea that there exists something like certain “boundaries” in our language (or boundaries between the different languages). For example, the universalist thinks that there are some boundaries defined by certain rules which are either gnoseologically *a priori* or at least ontologically necessary and prior to the decisions of human beings; these rules maintain in an essentialist way the difference between language that can represent the world and that which cannot (in the way of L. Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus*), or between language oriented to understanding and that which only pursues other ends (in the way of the philosophies of K.-O. Apel and J. Habermas), or between really meaningful language and that which is not (in the way of the Wiener Kreis), or between scientifically correct language and ascientific language (in the way of the demarcationist philosophers of science). Feyerabend, as we know, attacked with resolve several of these ways of differentiating, in pursuit of universal truths, between an apt language and a spurious one, showing that the presumed boundary between the two was ambiguous, permeable or non-existent. But he also understood that the insistence on setting boundaries was very dear to the relativists as well.

It is true that the relativists did not differentiate Manichaeistically between only two languages, a “good” and a “bad” one, with a view to universality. But they deny to the multiplicity of languages that they do

²³ This is demonstrated, for example, in the fact that practically a quarter of his autobiography (Paul K. Feyerabend, *Killing Time*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995) is devoted to describing and criticizing the operas that he had seen throughout his life.

²⁴ Paul K. Feyerabend, “Potentially Every Culture Is All Cultures”, *Common Knowledge*, vol. 3, n. 2 (1994), 16-22.

postulate not only any real or potential universality but also the capability of mixing with each other, of respectively understanding each other, of being mutually translatable. Thus the speaker does not even have the alternative, which the universalist assumes, of choosing between two types of language, that which is universalizable and that which is not. For the relativist, speakers can only understand and use their own language; if they were to change to another one they would have to do it suddenly, through a kind of *metanoia*, a Kierkegaardian sudden conversion, with no link or continuity of any kind with the previous language they are abandoning. They would be incapable in the new linguistic game of doing anything that they did in the previous one, incapable of translating (in the etymological sense of crossing from one side of the boundary to the other) absolutely anything from one linguistic region to another. It could be said that the contemporary relativist has resuscitated for epistemology the depleted linguistic theory of E. Sapir and B.L. Whorf²⁵, moving from the perspective of these authors (who considered each language as equivalent to a natural language spoken by a community: English, French, Hopi, etc.) to a Wittgensteinian point of view for which each language is a language game (*Sprachspiele*) which accompanies a praxis, a way of life (i.e. the “language” of Science, the “language” of Poetry, the “language” of Morality ...; and, more concretely, the language of western morality, the language of Islamic morality or that

²⁵ After their relative success in the 1950s-60s (above all starting with Benjamin L. Whorf, *Language, Thought and Reality*. Cambridge, MIT Press, 1956; and with prolongations in the studies of D.D. Lee, N. Mathiot and H. Hoijer), these theories have been mainly rejected, in their extreme versions, by linguistics, as a result of careful research into their hypotheses. Thus, determinant in this process were both the experiences, for example, of bilingual speakers (who do not grasp the presumed abyss there would be between world views that are held as reciprocally inexpressible) and the efforts, for example, of R. Jakobson to show that with circumlocutions or neologisms it is always possible to pass from one language to another. That all languages have words without direct equivalents in another is a thesis that was perfectly well-known before J.G. Herder and W. von Humboldt; but that the world view that a language gives should be totally unintelligible or inexpressible from another is what these linguistic relativists (who were later joined by authors such as F. Boas, B. Malinowski and L. Lévy-Bruhl) have not succeeded in demonstrating: see, in this sense John Lyons, *Language and Linguistics*. Cambridge, Cambridge U.P., 1981, chapter 10; José Antonio Díaz Rojo, “Lengua, cosmovisión y mentalidad nacional”, *Tonos. Revista electrónica de Estudios Filológicos*, n. 7 (2004), <http://www.um.es/tonosdigital/znum7/estudios/clengua.htm> .

of Chinese morality; or even: the language of modern western morality, the language of medieval western morality, etc.).

Feyerabend attacked this relativism between different languages, highlighting, as if to a universalist, that the presumed rigid boundaries are not so much so; they are continually crossed, or simply do not exist. A part of this attack, for example, was his well-known battle against “specialists”. Feyerabend perceived that the specialists in each discipline (especially those who consider themselves more “scientific”) are ardent defenders of the boundaries between languages (“only we really understand what this is all about, only we understand the language that each of us speaks to the other”). Thus they protect their actions within their own specialty from justification before third parties (who do not understand nor can they understand anything of the specialized language). For our author, these considerations are actually a form of intellectual tyranny (and sometimes not only intellectual) inside each discipline. The anarchist Feyerabend criticizes this form of authoritarianism just by highlighting exactly that it is authoritarianism. He does so by pointing out that there are not any laws or rules that any methodologist can affirm are invariable in a language of scientific specialists: and we know, then, that where the law does not govern it is human beings who do, above all the human beings who have managed to get into power – that is, those presumed specialists.²⁶

However, it is also true that it is not only when specialists are in the way that people try to shut tight the possibility of understanding other languages. But actually, the reason for shutting off that road is always the same: to make it difficult for those who are arbitrarily considered as outsiders of such a language to criticize those who arbitrarily consider them-

²⁶ See Paul K. Feyerabend, *Science in a Free Society*. London, NLB, 1978. Since there are no stable rules in science that would guarantee a hypothetical “rule of law”, our author proposes that we should maintain a rule of men, but by *all* men, and scientific decisions should be taken in a democratic way. But beyond the interest of this almost Dadaesque proposal is the fact that its focus on the relationships within a discipline as relations of power (together with similar ideas from Kuhn and Foucault), have led to what today is known as the social studies of science, or “Science, Technology and Society”, which, through the School of Edinburgh, Bruno Latour, and the *Social Studies of Science ...* constitutes one of the most promising currents of philosophy today; a current, by the way, that is equally anti-relativist without falling into “modern” universalisms. See Bruno Latour, *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes*. Paris, La Découverte, 1991, chapter 5.

selves insiders of it. The truth, however, is that we are all used to living together in our respective contexts with ambiguous and gradually changing meanings. That is why when we come into contact with cultures different from our own, it is enough to apply our previous know-how about managing ambiguous meanings in our own culture; this skill would be enough for anyone to be able to understand these other cultures or conceptual frameworks. Communication and translation between different paradigms is fully viable, thanks to the fact that we, the speakers, know how to make these paradigms flexible, have enough imagination and have been frequently trained in the skills necessary for doing so. For this reason, these paradigms do not need an “instruction manual” or an abstract commensurability that can or must be demonstrated *a priori*, independently of ourselves, the skilful translators.²⁷

In short, those who realize the ambiguity of their culture, according to Feyerabend, can not help but be tolerant towards other heteroclitic elements of heterogeneous languages; they learn to play with it, to admit everything, to reconstruct everything, to not reject anything.²⁸ Furthermore, in the ever more interrelated world of post-colonialism and the “global village”²⁹, the idea of culture as an autonomous universe is becoming less and less maintainable³⁰ (although this is no longer a philosophical argument but rather a historical-sociological-anthropological one). In this kind of world we will be more easily able to leave aside “the blindness, induced conceptually, to the true causes of this lack of understanding, which are the normal and usual inertia, dogmatism, distraction and stupidity”³¹, but not a supposed existence of relativist cultural abysses.

²⁷ In this defense of the possibility of communication without the need for so-called “commensurability” between paradigms, Feyerabend is strongly critical of Hilary Putnam, who, in books such as *Reason, Truth and History*, Cambridge, Cambridge U.P., 1988, had invoked the evidence of communication in favor of commensurability, as if both things were equivalent in practice.

²⁸ Do we not have Nietzschean echoes here, or of 1 Cor 13, 7?

²⁹ Marshall McLuhan, *The Global Village*. New York, Oxford U.P., 1989.

³⁰ See R. Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth*. Boston, Beacon Press, 1993, p. 217.

³¹ Paul K. Feyerabend, “Potentially Every Culture Is All Cultures”, op. cit. See also José Antonio Díaz Rojo, op. cit., 93, who curiously enough coincides with these opinions of Feyerabend’s after having analyzed the theories of linguistic relativism from the point of view of linguistics (not the philosophical point of view, as in Feyerabend): “The partial (never total) incommensurability of languages is not a ne-

4. Rorty against Relativism: Ethnocentrism and Anti-Epistemology

Whoever wishes to find anti-relativist arguments in Richard Rorty (the third of the postmodern thinkers who will be useful for us here) is going to run into at least two difficulties. The first has all the force of an explicit affirmation from this American philosopher: his declaration that the polemics over relativism remain for him, just as they do for Davidson, outside the main interest of his theories; in sum, relativism "does not concern them."³² The second difficulty is that, although he does not declare himself literally as a relativist, he does recognize that he is ethnocentric³³, and even goes so far as to support the *ethnos* of the rich, advanced societies of the North Atlantic, and "postmodern bourgeois liberalism"³⁴, as well as a certain kind of nationalism.³⁵

Even so, it is possible to verify that, in spite of what seems to appear as the first difficulty, the fact is that Rorty is interested, perhaps in spite of himself, in the theme of relativism; and he is also interested in condemning it. As to the second difficulty, let us not forget that his identification with ethnocentrism is accompanied by an explicit dissociation from every trace

gative consequence of the principle of relativity, but only the verification of an obstacle that can be overcome by knowing foreign languages, translation and Interlinguistics. Relativism therefore has to be, not the negation of universalism, but the starting point in the search for principles [...] that will permit the communication between and the understanding of different cultures and languages [...]. Following the eclectic position of Kant, who attempted a synthesis between platonic rationalism [*sic*] and empiricism, we believe that linguistic knowledge can not be reduced to innate principles (universalism), but neither is it simply the reflection of the specific life experience of each culture (relativism)."

³² As in Richard Rorty, "Pragmatism and Anti-Representationalism", in John P. Murphy, *Pragmatism*. Boulder, West View Press, 1990, 1-6.

³³ Richard Rorty, "Solidarity and Objectivity", in John Rajchman & Cornel West (eds.), *Post-Analytic Philosophy*. New York, Columbia U.P., 1985, 3-19.

³⁴ Richard Rorty, "Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism", in Robert Hollinger (ed.), *Hermeneutics and Praxis*. Notre Dame, Notre Dame U.P., 1985.

³⁵ Michael Billig, "Nationalism and Richard Rorty: The Text as a Flag for *Pax Americana*", *New Left Review*, n. 202 (1993), 69-83. See a criticism of these positions of Rorty's in Gabriel Bello, "Desde el centro hasta la X", in Javier Muguerza, Fernando Quesada & Roberto Rodríguez (eds.), *Ética día tras día*, op. cit., 29-39. Bello in this article furthermore traces some very fruitful indications on how Vattimo's thought would differ from Rorty's in this respect (and on how the latter has potential imperialist dangers).

of relativism that this may have. Does the apparent contradiction between the affirmations made in the previous paragraph and those just made in this one form part of the ambivalences which, according to Habermas³⁶, Rorty shows throughout his philosophy? These ambivalences would be that of a critic of Platonism who, nevertheless, would need Platonism to subsist as the target of his very criticism; that of an impugner of philosophy as an activity but who necessarily participates in it in order to carry out the impugnation; that of a dynamiter of metaphysics who also yearns for the harmonies it brings us ... and above all, the ambivalence that most concerns us here, that of a thinker who wishes to persuade an ever greater number of individuals (as heir to the pragmatism of C.S. Peirce and J. Dewey) but who nevertheless is simultaneously aware that one's own arguments only have value thanks to the authority of the community within which they make sense. That is, an ambivalence that places Rorty in tension between universalism and relativism, and as such is difficult to solve. Or, is Rorty perhaps actually opting for an intermediate path that would avoid these kinds of tensions and the contradictoriness that Habermas holds him responsible for?

I believe that is the case, and shall proceed to demonstrate it in two steps. In the first I shall sketch out how within Rortyan pragmatism one may seek to be accepted by an ever greater number of individuals even though to do this one need not believe in the Peircean idea of an "ideal rational acceptability", but rather only in contextual criteria. This would explain how one can be ethnocentric *à la Rorty* without being relativist at the same time. The second step will explain Rorty's other controversial declaration, that he is not interested in relativism. I shall show that this lies in his belief that this problem has already been efficiently resolved by D. Davidson³⁷ in particular, and we shall see how Rorty considers this Davidsonian anti-relativism to be an ally in his battle against epistemology. In the end, this leads him to the desire to marginalize the importance of the very problem of relativism, since at the end of the day it is a typical

³⁶ Jürgen Habermas, "Rortys pragmatische Wende". *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, vol. 44, n. 5 (1996), 715-741.

³⁷ The place where Donald Davidson would have paradigmatically resolved this question would be in his article "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme", *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association*, n. 47 (1973-74), 5-20.

epistemological question. (This circle explains that Rorty can affirm that he is not concerned with the problem of relativism, as a way of saying he is not concerned with epistemology in general, since he is convinced by the Davidsonian anti-relativism that condemns it³⁸; although then, up to *that* exact point, up to the moment when we are convinced by Davidson's theses, it can certainly be said that he is interested in the anti-relativist *epistemological* controversy).

4.1. *How to Be an Ethnocentrist and an Anti-Relativist at the Same Time*

As is well known, Rorty makes an effort to maintain that our epistemic authority can no longer be "objective reality", but is rather a human community (or the first person plural) that approves as true and justified knowledge that which fits the criteria of rationality that the community has. There is no access to the world other than the practices of understanding which we find "in us", in a *Lebenswelt*. Up to this point, however, there would be nothing to distance our author from the sympathizers of pragmatism such as J. Habermas, C.S. Peirce or H. Putnam. But the novelty comes when, just as David Hume saw the definitive authority in each specific consciousness of each individual (the empirical self) as opposed to Kant, who placed it in the human consciousness "in general", common to all people (the transcendental self), Rorty places the authority *in each of the communities* that have existed empirically in the contingent history of Humanity, and not in a community "in general", or one that is "ideally convergent" or absolute, as the other three authors mentioned above would do (as well as Apel, who is much more clearly transcendentalist).³⁹

In the case of Rorty himself, that community is the one already described as liberal, North Atlantic, developed, etc. However, (and this nuance is extremely relevant) Rorty remarks that this community has among its most genuine characteristics that of the commitment to broadening itself, always creating an ever larger and more diverse *ethnos*.⁴⁰

³⁸ Rorty, in any case, had already considered this discipline outmoded since the exhaustion of the linguistic turn – see Richard Rorty, "Introduction", in Richard Rorty (ed.), *The Linguistic Turn*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1967, 1-39.

³⁹ See Jürgen Habermas, *op. cit.*

⁴⁰ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*. Cambridge, Cambridge U.P., 1989, p. 198.

Why this insistence on broadening the community? Would it not be enough to aspire less loftily and try to receive the approval only of the already existing community? Would it not be enough to be satisfied that "our people" sanction my positions as "true"? That would be relativism. Rorty, however, considers that being satisfied (relativistically) with the acceptance of the members of our limited *ethnos* without trying to expand it is not acceptable, for several reasons. His three main reasons would be the following:

1) In the first place, this idea would involve something like one being able to define and limit who forms part of *our* community and who does not. But that is hardly possible, especially in the pluralist societies he is speaking of in the first place. In these societies (our societies), each individual forms part of numerous communities, and some of these communities even require conflicting loyalties between them. Furthermore, we form part of them in different degrees and at different moments (and all of this without it meaning that we are something like being schizophrenic). It is an indemonstrable problem who belongs "in general" to "my" class. For example, if by chance he aspired to such a thing, Rorty could not definitively delimit who is liberal, advanced, North Atlantic and postmodern. Many of us humans are so and are not so at the same time. Should we include or exclude from that group, for example, the westernized layers of non-western countries (the so-called "Davos culture")? Would a rich man from the banks of the Po River, but who nationalistically would distance himself proudly from liberal principles, be included or not in this definition? What about a Mexican immigrant to the U.S. who makes good? And what if he is not so successful? Based on what level of exact income, what specific latitude, what quantitatively assessable coefficient of liberal ideology would we permit entry to the club of "our own" (the liberal, North Atlantic, rich and postmodern)? This dilemma calls to mind that of Wittgenstein's aporia about exactitude⁴¹, or that other Greek paradox (the paradox of the *sorites*) of how to delimit how many grains of wheat are needed exactly to make a heap of cereal. Thus the community for which one speaks with pretensions of truth is to a great extent an indeterminate *ethnos*. It makes no sense and it can make no sense, therefore, to say: "I

⁴¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen / Philosophical Investigations* (2nd edition). Oxford, Blackwell, 1958, § 88.

have already convinced those of my *ethnos* and hence I do not need to convince anyone else” the way the relativists do.

2) In the second place, the most characteristic thing about the liberal-ironist community that Rorty calls for is precisely that it has a historicist, skeptical, contingentist attitude, an attitude that is formed by a narrative-sentimental education, and not with rigid theories about “human nature”. This attitude is conducive (thanks to its literary, cinematographic and journalistic genres) to a moral position that does not consider others as an essential “them” who are definitely not a part of those who are “mine”; but rather its moral atmosphere tends to always see each individual as “one of us”⁴², to see the differences between humans as historicistically contingent and not as symptoms of insurmountable differences and distances. With a position such as this one there is no room whatsoever for the relativist disdain for “those outside”: what there is room for is a sustained effort to extend the plausibility of one’s own assertions to all those that the liberal ironist recognizes as their fellow humans.⁴³

3) Finally, and in a way closely linked to the above, it may be the case that the very empirical authority of our community contingently (but not for this reason less vehemently) summons us to try to extend the rational acceptability of our ideas to the largest number of individuals possible. And, indeed, that is what is happening with the inheritance of the West, desirous of universality. Along this line, curiously enough, we would be universalists for relativist motives, or rather, neither one thing nor the other: only ethnocentrically desirous of a universal *ethnos*.⁴⁴

In short, then, Rorty’s postmodern philosophy is as ethnocentric as it is not relativist, and leaves the relativists in a difficult position: all good relativists must necessarily be ethnocentric at the same time, and Rorty has

⁴² Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, op. cit., p. XVI.

⁴³ For a reason similar to this Fernando Vallespín (“Desafíos y limitaciones de la teoría política”, *Lecturas*, n. 15 [2001], <http://www.datastrategia.com/elecciones/novedades/rs/lect152001-004.html>) considers that the debate between communitarians and liberals has become a mere “family discussion”, since the western communitarians end up defending a community ... in which it is precisely liberal values which bring the members together.

⁴⁴ The possible suspicions that this project of Rorty’s may arouse are shown in Ronald L. Jackson, “Cultural Imperialism or Benign Relativism? A Putnam-Rorty Debate”, *International Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 28, n. 4 (1988), 383-392.

effectively shown that, for us, being the latter impedes us from being the former.

4.2. *How to Lose Interest in Epistemology (and in its Discussions on Relativism)*

Let us now move summarily onto the other great Rortyan tendency regarding relativism: the argumentation of how the epistemological commonplace of relativism is no longer interesting for anti-relativist reasons. Rorty’s argument is simple. To be a relativist one would have to defend something like what Sellars called the “Myth of the Given”: the dogma according to which “The Way the World Is” (in N. Goodman’s terms) or the “View From Nowhere” (in T. Nagel’s words) would be distinguishable (at least hypothetically) with respect to the conceptual schemes with which each one organizes that original cognitive raw matter. Both realists and relativists would share this myth, with the only difference that the relativists believe it is impossible to separate again the previously separated “Given” from its mixture with “our schemes” – and therefore we will not be able to communicate if we belong to cultures that apply different schemes – whereas the realists do believe this is possible – and even necessary if we want to know the true reality, to rescue “the Given” once it has been purified, decontaminated from its mixture with our relative conceptual schemes –.

In any case, such a “myth”, although a common presupposition of both realists and relativists, has been convincingly criticized by an illustrious group of American philosophers: J. Dewey, N. Goodman, T. Nagel, C.S. Peirce, W. Sellars, H. Putnam, etc. and especially D. Davidson, whose critique Rorty has no trouble in assuming in its entirety.⁴⁵ Hence, by abandoning this “Myth of the Given”, we would simultaneously get rid of realism and relativism, and their common idea of certain “schemes” that can be applied to “reality”.⁴⁶ And in this way the polemical realism vs. relativism debate would lose all pertinence.

⁴⁵ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton, Princeton U.P., 1979, chapter 6.

⁴⁶ Richard Rorty, “Realism, Antirealism and Pragmatism: Comments on Alston, Chisholm, Davidson, Harman and Searle”, in Christopher B. Kulp (ed.), *Realism/*

There is, also, from Davidson's point of view, another quite strong reason for repudiating relativism. At the end of the day, the relativist postulates the existence of conceptual frameworks different from our own and radically incomprehensible from the point of view of our own. But to see them as different, the relativist first has to previously understand them as frameworks, and thus they lose all that presumed radical incomprehensibility: "We cannot intelligibly say that schemes are different."⁴⁷

Has then the universalist been supported instead of the relativist? No, since immediately after the last sentence quoted, Davidson's seminal article adds "neither can we intelligibly say that [all schemes] are one".⁴⁸ This is so because, in order to understand what it means that there is only one scheme, we would also have to understand what it would be like if other schemes existed – something that we have just seen is impossible. Davidson has thus left the controversy at a dead end, and Rorty has taken up this inheritance to likewise declare dead all the epistemological discussions similar to it, in order to be able to unashamedly open up the road of philosophy to the more edifying work of what he calls "hermeneutics"⁴⁹, instead of "epistemology." This is the road that allows him to be anti-relativist without becoming too interested in the problem of relativism, exactly like many current philosophers can be against the Thomist ideas of transubstantiation without having devoted much time to the analysis of such a difficult problematic.⁵⁰ Rorty's post-modern philosophy thus manages to attack relativism in the most radical way possible: not only giving

Antirealism and Epistemology. London, Rowman & Littlefield, 1997, 149-171. See also Dorothea Frede, "Beyond Realism and Anti-Realism: Rorty on Davidson", *Review of Metaphysics*, vol. 40, n. 4 (1987), 733-757. For a subsequent critique of this Davidsonian refutation of relativism, a critique which is turning out to be very provocative (since it maintains that Davidson's philosophy incites rather than protects from the relativist threat) and which proposes another totally different type of defense against this threat, see John McDowell, *Mind and World*. Cambridge, Harvard U.P., 1994.

⁴⁷ D. Davidson, op. cit., 20.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, op. cit., chapter 8. See also Christopher B. Kulp, *The End of Epistemology*. Westport, Greenwood Press, 1992.

⁵⁰ For this tactic of "leaving aside" rather than "presenting arguments against," see the "Introduction" to Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, op. cit. Such a tactic has an evident Wittgensteinian air, which I have tried to discuss in Miguel Ángel Quintana Paz, *Normatividad, interpretación y praxis*, op. cit.

arguments against it, but also giving arguments against the idea that it should still be discussed.

5. Conclusion

Although I have primarily focused on these thinkers and their arguments, Vattimo, Feyerabend and Rorty are not the only postmodern philosophers who clearly distance themselves from relativism to at least the same degree as they do from universalism. Actually, the strange thing would be the opposite: to find a philosopher in so-called Postmodernity who declares him/herself to be a relativist (or a universalist)⁵¹ and does not therefore repudiate this dichotomy as such.⁵² However, once it has been verified that it is absolutely compatible to be a standard-bearer of postmodern thought (as are Rorty, Feyerabend and Vattimo, together with many others) and be horrified by relativism and universalism in an equal way, we may provisionally ask ourselves: is it possible to detect something in common among the diverse approaches of all these three philosophers? Because if that were true, it would undoubtedly be a help in more effectively characterizing a trend, such as the one grouped somewhat diffusely under the label "postmodern", which so often has seemed impossible to describe under common traits.

In this sense, at least provisionally, it could be discovered that, underneath the reasoning of all the authors examined here, there lies *one same desire: that of avoiding putting boundaries, limits, and conditions on dialogue*. The universalists would like to put fences around the communicative capability of humans, transcendental conditionings on their spontaneous expressiveness, and restrictions on their freedom in the use of language, marking out for them what is a good language (universal) and what is not, which ways of speaking are licit and which are almost illegal. (It is

⁵¹ We can see how another well-known postmodern thinker, Jacques Derrida, abjures as well "relativism" in Jacques Derrida, "Sokal et Bricmont ne sont pas sérieux", *Le Monde*, November 20th (1997), 17.

⁵² In fact, it is also the effort to distance themselves from this dualism that has perhaps caused the creation of "anti-anti-relativism", in order to move away from the anti-relativists without for that reason having to assume relativism *tout court*. See in this sense, Clifford Geertz, "Anti-Anti-Relativism", *American Anthropologist*, vol. 86, n. 2 (1984), 263-278.

to be expected that they often feel legitimated to impose, with something more than the force of arguments, their principles which, surprisingly, some still refuse to subscribe to in spite of their "evident" universality⁵³). The relativists impose the same limits, but this time between social groups: groups which one cannot leave or, if one goes out, it is to never go back in except if one abandons in turn the iron discipline of the new group one has joined – since the laws of each group are not only strict but reciprocally incompatible –; autistic groups, incapable of dialogue, perhaps only interactive through the use of brute force, the temptation of which is then also difficult to resist. As opposed to both (and their just mentioned violent temptations), the authors who have accompanied us up to here in this paper are in favor of using mainly the power of arguments to communicate our principles, risking even the possibility that it may be ourselves who have to change our opinions when coming into contact with others. For there is nothing certain, neither presumed absolute principles nor supposed particularistic fundaments. We only have freedom: the disturbing freedom to be able to enter into dialogue with others, to be able to find points of convergence together and transform each other, to learn to be, if not now "rational", then at least reasonable. And so perhaps, after all, Postmodernity is not so far from Socrates.

⁵³ See Miguel Ángel Quintana Paz, "L'universalismo di alcuni filosofi morali contemporanei (e le curiose idee dei drusi sui cinesi)", op. cit.

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L'IRRÉDUCTIBLE POLYPHONIE DES CULTURES.
PENSER LA DIVERSITÉ CULTURELLE À L'ÈRE DE LA GLOBALISATION

1. Les avatars de la globalisation

La globalisation caractérise le contexte actuel dans lequel se développe le débat sur la diversité culturelle. Aussi est-il pertinent d'en rappeler les traits essentiels avant d'aborder la problématique concernant la gestion ou plutôt l'avenir de cette dernière.

C'est un lieu commun de reconnaître que la globalisation est, en tant que concept, objet d'un usage massif et d'interprétations les plus diverses. D'aucuns y voient une forme d'expression suprême du capitalisme. Il s'agit d'une forme du capitalisme de marché dont le développement pluri-séculaire a atteint un niveau d'expansion inédit dans sa dimension géographique et dans ses ramifications sociales. Il est question, en d'autres termes, de la constitution «d'un grand marché mondial unique, intégré et autorégulateur» (R. Petrella, 1997, 9). L'existence d'un tel marché implique des changements qualitatifs et quantitatifs importants en ce qui concerne la production, la distribution, les échanges des biens et des services entre les pays et ce en réponse aux nouveaux standards et accords internationaux, à l'extension des marchés et à une plus grande flexibilité, voire à la quasi disparition des frontières nationales. Ces changements sont palpables dans le domaine des technologies de l'information, des transports et des communications, les médias, la restructuration et la fusion d'entreprises en cours dans plusieurs pays.

Loin d'être une simple conjoncture économique, l'avènement du marché unique accuse également une haute prétention dogmatique et métaphysique. Il se conçoit comme une véritable idéologie fondée sur le postulat selon lequel la libéralisation des marchés nationaux et mondiaux, la libre circulation des capitaux, des biens et services et de l'information produira la croissance économique et le bien-être pour tous. Dès lors, la globalisation est pensée en termes d'un nouveau paradigme de développement, d'une clé incontournable par la saisie de notre réalité sociale, politique et économique. Elle est considérée comme étant la destinée logique, naturelle