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Politics¹

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Relativism connects philosophy with politics. Take the current situation: *On the one hand*, political motifs are an important issue in philosophical debates about relativism. Relativism is often rejected because of its alleged political consequences. Anti-relativists consider the relativization of beliefs to a framework of reference as undermining the authority of truth. They claim that the alleged incapability to discriminate between true and false has troubling consequences for our public discourse: relativism is blamed for the emergence of the so-called “post-truth politics.” Anti-relativists argue that without an objective criterion to classify beliefs as true or false facts can be replaced by fakes and “truthiness” outdoes accuracy. Under such a “dictatorship of relativism” (Pope Benedict XVI.), there is simply no means to call politicians out on their blatant lies. *On the other hand*, there is a relativistic tendency in contemporary political theory. Political struggles by, for instance, indigenous people and feminists have prompted debates about cultural diversity. The plurality of ways of life and deep disagreements are a permanent challenge to our current polities. In the fierce debate about managing conflicts within culturally diverse communities and between them relativism is discussed as a plausible option, however mostly critically. Anti-relativists claim that this political context—the contingent connection of relativism with progressive policies such as post colonialism and feminism—grounds the intellectual appeal of relativism in the first place. They argue that the adoption of relativism as a philosophical position is motivated more by political correctness than by theoretical insight.

These political aspects of debates on relativism connect the current use of the term with its multi-faceted history, especially in German-speaking philosophy. Issues of *cultural diversity*

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were already fiercely debated in the second part of the eighteenth century. The discovery of human communities with quite different habits and customs showed the cultural diversity of humanity. The emphasis on human difference also revealed a downside of the newly established framework of Enlightenment thinking: its universal aspiration suggested ethnocentric treatments of other cultures and justified the atrocities of colonialism. *Vicki Spencer* puts Johann Gottfried Herder's (1744–1803) contribution to these eighteenth-century debates in conversation with leading relativists in the social sciences today. She shows that Herder's extensive and concrete studies of different cultures are motivated by an appreciation of cultural diversity. Although Herder emphasizes the particularity of human communities in his historical and cross-cultural research, his hermeneutic method is not relativistic. Herder derives "thin" universal principles from his concept of *Humanität* (humanity). Since he uses these principles to assess the features of other cultures across the board, he fails to adhere to the weakest form of current relativism in the social sciences. According to Spencer, the weak relativist has to insist on the non-appraisal of other cultures. Herder is, thus, no relativist, but a pluralist. Spencer emphasizes that his attempt of balancing unity with diversity is the enduring legacy of his methodological and political pluralism (see also Spencer 2012).

The nineteenth century was characterized by deep and rapid changes in all areas of life. Developments such as the rise of the empirical sciences, a new understanding of history, and the progressing secularisation of society changed the intellectual landscape profoundly. As a result, the traditional place and self-understanding of philosophy as a supreme discipline were challenged. This "identity crisis" of philosophy also fuelled the *pejorative use* of the term relativism. Philosophers such as Wilhelm Windelband or Wilhelm Dilthey presented relativism as a dangerous consequence of the modern spirit. They conceptualized the intellectual changes of modernity as a loss of certainty that threatens the normative foundations of society. Construed as dissolution of fixed values, the rise of empiricism, historicism, and secularization seemed to bring about anarchy and nihilism. It was, of course, the task of philosophy to meet the relativistic challenge of the modern spirit. Hence, the diagnosis of relativism and the philosophical efforts to overcome it were a strategy to re-establish the intellectual authority of philosophy.

As proponents of societal change based on historical insight, Marx (1818–1883) and Engels (1820–1895) were and still are natural objectives of the charge of relativism. *Terrell Carver's* close reading of the drafts of the posthumously compiled *German Ideology* teaches us an important lesson about the politics of relativism. Carver reads the theoretical endeavour of Marx and Engels as an innovative attempt to ground their activist interventions into the politics of the time (for his reading of Marx as a political activist see Carver 2018). He shows that they develop a new concept of knowledge that challenges the philosophical assumptions of both rationalism and empiricism. Marx' and Engels' emphasis on knowledge-making as practical social activity gave rise to a fully socialized and historicized epistemology. This nascent view of knowledge as social practice, practice as politics, and politics as future challenged the philosophical perspective from which the problem of relativism makes sense. According to Carver, relativism only arises from the philosophical prejudice that knowledge must have foundations outside of practical, social activity. From the anti-philosophical outlook of Marx and Engels, relativism is thus no issue at all. In a concrete political context, relativism quickly appears to be nothing but an artificial creation and whipping boy of philosophers.

The political debates on relativism nevertheless continued and culminated in the early twentieth century. Although the pejorative use of the term relativism prevailed, notable exemptions emerged on both ends of the political spectrum: Oswald Spengler (1880–1936) derived his political conservatism from a radical cultural relativism that regarded all kinds of truth as mere expressions of a certain time and place. Benito Mussolini (1883–1945) characterized fascism as a relativistic movement because of its anti-scientism and voluntarism. With his belief in the ultimate authority of pure power, the fascist despised all fixed and stable categories (Mussolini 1921). Hans Kelsen (1881–1973), on the other hand, considered the relativistic denial of absolute truth and values as the prerequisite of liberal democracy. He believed that philosophical absolutism goes hand in hand with political absolutism and is thus the philosophical henchman of despots, dictators, and autocrats.

Yet not only relativism could be combined with opposite political positions. *Johannes Steizinger's* critical examination of the context of National Socialism (NS) reveals an anti-relativist template that was used by Nazi philosophers, academic philosophers, and Nazi

critics alike. Here the charge of relativism was an important polemical motif to discredit the philosophical and/or political enemy. This polemic use rested on a specific understanding of relativism: Relativism was considered as a fundamental problem that has to be overcome. It was thus depicted as a vague threat that endangers not only philosophy proper, but society and life in general. Moreover, it was always the same strands of nineteenth-century philosophy who were found guilty of having caused this problem and the subsequent “crisis” of the modern spirit. Steizinger presents the politics of relativism in the context of NS as a typical case of the pejorative use of the term. The analysis of the actual debate on relativism during NS also shows its enduring connection with the issue of cultural diversity. The relativistic tendency of NS arose from a radical critique of universal concepts of humanity. Nazi philosophers insisted on the particular identity of *Völker* (people) and regarded universal claims as purely ideological mechanisms. They considered the native community as the only source of normative authority. Yet, they did not advocate tolerance of other ways of life or keep neutral when being confronted with different worldviews. Nazi ideology was a *racist* anthropology. Nazi philosophers believed in an objective hierarchy of races and attempted to justify their ranking. The conviction that there is a “master race” (*Herrenrasse*) and that its superiority can be demonstrated is the non-relativistic core of Nazi ideology. Although Nazi philosophers presented their view as overcoming the opposition between absolutism and relativism, they could never resolve the tensions between its relativistic tendency and its anti-relativistic assumption.

Literature

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