# Relativism and Progress

I wish to defend a kind of relativism. Relativism is often caricatured as the view that there are no factual or moral truths of the matter; what's "true for me" doesn't have to be "true for you." A relativist, so it is said, can believe whatever he or she likes. The result is a slackness of thought and morals. Moreover, it is often charged that relativism is self-contradictory, because it must allow that realism can be "true for realists." Again, it is argued that relativism is unable to explain the obvious growth in human knowledge over the years. Finally, it is often suggested that in these troubled times, relativism can offer no convincing explanation of the superiority (both moral and material) of the open societies of the West to the closed societies of the Middle East.

I shall argue that all these arguments are misconceived. In particular, relativists can defend particular moral positions, can make cross-cultural comparisons, and can criticize alien cultures. Indeed, relativism is a philosophy with a particular world-view that favors tolerant open societies, and has a convincing analysis of the causes of their superiority. But before I deal with the misconceptions, I shall advance a positive argument for relativism.

## *An argument for relativism*

*I believe in a universe that is too complex for any of us to really understand. Each of us has an organized way of thinking about the world—a paradigm, if you will—and we need those, of course; you can't get through the day unless you have some organized way of thinking about the world. But the problem is that the real world is vastly more complicated than the image of it that we carry around in our heads. Many things are real and important that are not explained by our theories—no matter who we are, no matter how intelligent we are.*

-- William (Bill) James, explaining (or not) the Red Sox comeback in the 2004 American League Championship Series[1]

Relativism is a theory about how people organize their beliefs. It's philosophical roots can be found in the philosophy of David Hume and the American pragmatists. Hume argued that all our beliefs about matters of fact and morals were based, not on fundamental principles that could be true or false, but on psychological principles. Such principles — "habits of the mind," he called them — were neither true nor false, but simply *were*.

The pragmatists argued that we organize our beliefs to guide our actions. If our actions don't produce the results we want — that is, if we don't achieve our goals — we modify the beliefs (though we occasionally modify the goals). On the pragmatists' view, beliefs are merely tools for achieving goals, and goals are neither true nor false. Of course, most pragmatists were not relativists. The pragmatists realized the obvious — that people had different goals and had to realize these goals in a variety of environments. But many pragmatists (Peirce, for one) believed that, in the end, our differing belief systems would "converge" to a single set of optimal beliefs that would best enable everyone to achieve their differing goals in any environment, and these optimal beliefs could be called the true (for everybody) beliefs.[2]

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[1] At http://p086.ezboard.com/fsonsofsamhorn-bostonredsox.showMessage?topicID=15151.topic

[2] ""The opinion which is *fated* to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate, is what we mean by the truth …." in Charles Saunders Peirce, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," *Popular Science Monthly* 12 (January 1878), 286-302, on the web at http://www.peirce.org/writings/p119.html. I argued against convergence many years ago in "Better Theories," PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE 42 (1975), 20-27.

Despite the optimistic view of some pragmatists that beliefs would converge to an optimal set, pragmatism leads to a simple and powerful argument for relativism:

First premise: We construct mental representations of the world to guide our actions. If the actions don't produce the results we want — that is, if we don't achieve our goals — we usually modify the representations (though we may occasionally modify the goals). This is a restatement of pragmatism in terms of representations rather than beliefs. I won't say anything more about actions and goals, assuming that these concepts are well enough understood for the purposes of this discussion. As for representations, I'll discuss them in a bit more detail below; for the moment you can imagine a representation as some sort of internalized picture of the world.

Second premise: Our brains contain only a minuscule part of the world's stuff. Even if we imagine all human brains as part of one Big Brain, there isn't anywhere near as much brain stuff as there is non-brain stuff. (Since brains are part of the world, there will always be more stuff than brain stuff. But the problem is quantitatively much greater: Only a minuscule percentage of the world's stuff is brain stuff.)

Third premise: Representations and goals are particular configurations of our internal brain stuff.

These premises lead to a relativistic conclusion: Given the limited brain stuff available, how accurate can we expect our representations to be? Clearly, we can't keep track of every atom in the universe, or even every millionth atom in Topeka. Rather, we are forced to choose where to invest our representational capital: We can have detailed representations of some features of the world only if we severely simplify our representations of other parts of the world. The argument for relativism is simply that our internal representational means are too meager to enable us to accurately represent reality in its full scope.

Perhaps I can make the argument clearer by analogy: Imagine that you are standing before Breughel's painting, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*.[3] Your task is to represent the painting on an 8½ x 11 sheet of paper using a felt-tip pen.

Clearly, your equipment is too limited to recreate the painting — if you can, then Pieter Breughel the Elder is overrated — or even to communicate more than a fragmentary sense of what the painting is. You can do a sketch of the painting, or a more detailed sketch of a part of the painting. You can write a verbal description of the painting. Or, like Auden, you can write a poem about the painting's effect.[4] But whatever you do, you're going to leave something out.

Trying to represent the world internally is much like trying to represent the Breughel with a felt-tip pen and a sheet of paper: The means are too impoverished to enable a full representation.

For a relativist, our internal representations of the world bear the same relation to the actual world as our sketches (or word sketches) of *Icarus* bear to the actual painting. The sketches are necessarily imperfect and fragmentary; what's more, different sketches can represent different aspects of *Icarus*.

A second analogy might be helpful: As is well known, flat (that is, two-dimensional) maps of our spherical (three-dimensional) Earth introduce distortions. Different types of maps eliminate some distortions at the expense of others. For example, the well known Mercator projection possesses advantages for

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[3] You can see the painting on the web at http://www.artchive.com/artchive/B/bruegel/-icarus.jpg.html.

[4] I chose Breughel's painting as an example because of Auden's poem, *Musée des Beaux Arts*, which you can read at http://itech.pjc.cc.fl.us/-cschuler/clt1500/Poetry/auden.html

navigation, but tends to distort areas; in a Mercator projection, Greenland appears larger than South America, when it is in fact less than one-eighth the size. Our representations, I would argue, are like two-dimensional maps of a three-dimensional world — there is always distortion, but we can choose which distortions we allow and which we don't.

### More on representations

"Representation" is a word that tends to get the philosophical juices running in torrents, so I'll try to explain my usage, and the argument, a bit more fully.

In my parlance, a *representation* is not a sentence or a belief, but a mental structure that underlies our beliefs about a particular subject matter. (Perhaps "schematic" would be a better term than "representation," as it suggests a rendering that is unfaithful in some respects.)

A good analogy would be with a road map: A road map deals with a particular subject matter in a way that can underlie a virtually limitless body of beliefs about that subject matter — that A is north of B, that the distance from A to B is the same as the distance from C to D, and so on.[5]

Just as there can be many different maps of the same geographical terrain, each useful for a particular purpose — road maps, topographical maps, and so forth — so there can be many representations of what is ostensibly the same subject matter — for example, legal and economic representations of monopoly enterprises, artistic and engineering representations of a building, and so on.

The diversity of maps of a single geographical area is not inconsistent with there

being right and wrong maps. If a road map says that you can take Route 4 from Hither to Yon, but taking Route 4 from Hither lands you in Strangeville instead, then there is something wrong with the map.

This last example emphasizes another feature of my use of "representations": Representations are right or wrong when measured by human purposes. If we never had any interest in using the map to go from Hither to Yon, the map might not be wrong — or rather, it would have to be judged by other purposes.

The preceding paragraphs may reassure readers that accepting my argument will require no wholesale rejection of our representations as inadequate or inaccurate, or of our accustomed standards for adopting, modifying or abandoning representations. And, as will be seen, my kind of ethical relativism does not counsel a substantial modification or abandonment of our ethical principles. In short, there is no need to walk around in a funk (unless, of course, you're a philosophical realist).

We might analogize an acceptance of relativism to the acceptance of the theory of relativity. Einstein's theories required a massive shift in how physicists viewed the world, and yet for most of us very little changed. Our world may be non-Newtonian, but at an everyday level there are few consequences. Physicists and engineers still learn and apply Newtonian mechanics, and the rest of us assume a non-Einsteinian world. Only in the most recondite areas does relativity theory become important. Similarly, my kind of relativism is unlikely to change our ways of understanding the factual or moral universe, except at those points where we run up against radically different representational systems.

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[5] I have resorted to this map analogy many times since I first encountered it, as an undergraduate, in a paper by Nelson Goodman, the title of which I have long since forgotten.

## Is relativism self-contradictory?

Many philosophers have argued that relativism is self contradictory.[6] They would argue that, on my view, relativism itself must be a representation, and therefore no more "true" than any other representation.

Let's clear the ground a bit. On my theory, there are better and worse representations, as measured against human purposes. So a better way of framing the "self-contradiction" argument is to say that since relativism is only a representation that may answer to certain human purposes, and since I deny that there is any "convergence," there could also be realist representations that answer to other human purposes. Therefore, since relativist and realist representations would each answer to (different) human purposes, the relativist (though not the realist) can not argue for the superiority of his views.

So? As a relativist, I'm arguing against the "ultimate" truth of any representation, including relativism itself. But I'm not arguing against the instrumental "truth" of representations, that is, their ability to advance human purposes. Of course, there are all sorts of human purposes, and I would not deny that realism may answer to some of those purposes better than relativism. But I shall try to show below that relativism may better serve some important goals.

Relativism is a theory about how humans work, and that theory countenances that humans may reject relativist representations. That should not surprise us: It is not self-contradictory or circular for a theory of how humans think to allow, as part of the theory, that humans need not believe the theory.

## Progress and relativism

It is time to deal with what may be the main obstacle to acceptance of relativism: its seeming denial of human progress.

We live in a world of technological marvels. In little more than a century we have conquered the air and outer space, split the atom, invented the computer, and unlocked the secrets of heredity. Aren't these truths about the world? Wouldn't relativism deny what seems plainly evident — that we know a great deal about the world, and are learning a great deal more at an accelerating rate? How can the kind of progress we all observe be compatible with relativism?

Let's return to the basic argument: The world is simply too complex and diverse to be adequately represented by the limited mental resources we possess. Nonetheless, some representations may be more useful than others, in the sense of being more likely to get us to the result we desire in the situations we care about. And we can improve upon our representations still more if we can increase our representational power.

Think again of my *Icarus* example. Suppose that I increased the size of the paper to two feet on a side, and permitted the use of colored pens with finer points. Then we could produce more detailed representations of *Icarus*. And just as we can improve our representational power by improving our tools, we can also multiply that power by organizing the world to help us generate more detailed representations.

Consider: I'm feeling sick, so I consult a doctor. By doing so, I avail myself of the doctor's stock of representations, gathered and refined over many years. Because the doctor went to medical school, and then practiced medicine, I don't have to. In a world with doctor and lawyers, butchers and bakers — not to mention philosophers — we can enor-

[6] See, for example, Hilary Putnam, *Realism With a Human Face*, Harvard University Press, 1990, at 125 and 210. Putnam's argument might not be applicable to my kind of relativism because, as discussed below, my kind of relativism is similar in many respects to Putnam's "internal" realism.

mously expand our representational resources. We multiply our representational power through specialization.

But not only through specialization. Consider: You go to a library to get a specific book. You know the author and title of the book, so you first go to the catalog, where books are indexed by title and by author. You locate the book you want by locating the author's name in the catalog, going through the alphabetical list of books by that author, and noting the alphanumeric code assigned to the book. You then follow signs posted in the library that lead you to the general area where books with codes close to the code for your book are located. You search along the shelves where the books are ranged in alphanumeric order until you find the book you are looking for. The library contains a million books, the catalog five million entries, but your search takes only a few minutes.

For our purposes, the most important part of this story is that to find your book you didn't have to know anything about the other five-million-less-one entries in the catalog or the one-million-less-one other books in the library. All you had to know was how to use the catalog. We can increase our representational power through organization of our environment.

It might be useful to realize how widespread these phenomena are. I live in Connecticut, and my older son goes to school in California. Living on opposite ends of a country 2,800 miles wide and containing 290 million people, I can nevertheless reach him on the phone in seconds, and I only have to know one 10-digit number. (Although he's usually too busy to talk to me.) If I decided to drive across the country to see him, I could get from my driveway to his dormitory with only the simplest of maps: Interstate 95S to I-80W, to I-76W, to I-70W, to I-15S, to I-10W almost to Los Angeles are all the directions I need, except for

the first and last few miles. We seldom think about these marvels, but they are all around us.

Think about the library example: The reason why it's easier to locate a particular book in a library than to locate a needle in a haystack, is that the books are arranged on the shelves in an alphanumeric order, the catalog entries are in alphabetical order, and the books and the catalog entries are linked by the alphanumeric codes — that is, the code in the catalog is identical to the code written on the book's spine.

There's magic here, but of an easily comprehensible kind: Someone designed a coding system for the books, based on the useful facts that most books have a title and an author. There's also a well-understood ordering for letters and numerals. All these apparently simple systems require, of course, immense material and social infrastructures — the authors, the books, the book publishing industry, the library, the catalog, the library staff, to name a few. It took enormous time and effort —we're talking here about a million books that had to get written by several hundred thousand authors — but the result is that we possess means to retain, organize and work with representations that go far beyond the resources of any single person or group of people. We make progress, even in a relativistic world, by multiplying our representational resources and allowing them to be efficiently accessed by those who need them.

(Our power to produce more useful representations also depends, of course, on the creativity with which individuals use the available resources. I do not wish to denigrate the accomplishments of a Newton or Pasteur — or a David Hume, for that matter — by suggesting that the social resources made their accomplishments inevitable. Necessary conditions are not sufficient conditions, and extraordinary individuals may shape our representations in extraordinary ways.)

Relativism claims that our representational resources will always lag behind reality. But saying that we can't represent everything, or that we can't adequately represent everything we care about, does not mean that we can't represent lots of things, including lots of things we do care about. The representational progress we make is real enough, but can never be complete. In the course of human history, we have developed larger, more interconnected societies that have enabled people to deal with more varied problems. We have invented writing, books, libraries, and computers. We know more than we used to, and we'll know lots more tomorrow.

For a realist, progress means an increase in our stock of true beliefs and a decrease in our stock of false beliefs. For a relativist, progress means an increase in our stock of useful representations. But for a relativist, such an increase is inseparable from developments in social organization. I don't increase my stock of useful representations by ingesting *Gray's Anatomy* or Macmillan's *Highway Atlas*. I have specialists I can consult, and books I can refer to. Moreover, progress for a relativist does not depend on the balance of useful representations in a single individual. If medical doctors were the only people who believed in the circulation of the blood, it might not make much difference as long as people go to doctors when they get sick. *Relativism is a view about progress through social organization.* A realist might consider a life alone in the woods as ennobling, but a relativist would see it as a rejection of knowledge, for it would be a rejection of access to the representations of other people. For a relativist, knowledge is inconceivable without societies, and progress inconceivable without the development of larger and more integrated societies, with highly developed systems of specialization and environmental organization.

For a relativist, the development of civilization is an epistemological development.

### Moral dynamics

Relativism posits representations that function as guides for action. But in this regard, "factual" representations are much the same as "moral" representations: Both provide guides to action. This is not to say that there is no difference between matters of fact and matters of value: Since we can generally distinguish between them, there must be a basis for the distinction. But I would argue that just as there can be many different "factual" representations, so there can be many different "moral" representations. Moreover, we modify our moral representations as well as factual representations based on our goals and experience.

A moral system is a system of rules for dealing with other people. Plants don't need a moral system, even for dealing with other plants. Lots of animals do need such a system, however. They have to devote some attention to their offspring or the species will not survive, which means they have to have some system of rules (or predispositions, if you want) for mating and for treating their young. Animals who live in communities need more elaborate rule systems; lions, who live and hunt in groups, need more elaborate rules than leopards, who hunt alone.

Humans have the most elaborate communities of all, and thus require the most elaborate rules. (You can also state it as "Humans have the most elaborate rules, which permits them to have the most elaborate communities.") But human communities differ significantly, both between cultures at a single time, and between the same culture over time. So a set of rules that works for one culture or at one time may not work in a different culture or in a different time.

Let's consider a specific example: A few centuries ago, Western societies were different in ways that were significant for people's

understanding of whether daughters should be educated. First, families had more children, both because infant mortality was higher, and because children became useful at an early age for largely agricultural family work units. This meant that women had to spend more time in child-bearing and child-raising.

Second, everyone worked hard, but men were needed to do the heavy work, of which there was plenty.

Third, women received little education, partly because everyone received little education, but also because the limited education was provided to those who would not be occupied with child-rearing.

In such a society, women and men had clear work and family responsibilities, which militated against them having the kinds of rights we take for granted today. Women were expected to stay home and raise (lots of) children, just as men were expected to work in the fields.

Fast forward to the present: With low infant mortality, families have fewer children. Perhaps as important, each child requires much more time and resources to prepare it for the modern work environment, and this also tends to result in smaller families. Moreover, today's work environment usually involves working in other people's enterprises, not the family enterprise. Finally, the changed work environment means that women can now be more economically valuable to their families as educated workers than as home-makers.[7]

The result of these changes is that today parents who refuse to send their daughters to college, while sending their sons, are considered Bad People, whereas that wouldn't have been true a century or two ago. But, of course, we didn't get from there to here in one jump. We didn't all wake up on July 17, 1923 and say "Yesterday, I would have refused to send my daughter to college, but from now on I'm going to act on a different rule." People didn't all change at the same time (and some people still haven't changed), so at any time between 1800 and the present, there was probably a sizeable difference in views on how much education a daughter should receive. As long as rules change, there will always be differences of opinion as to the correct rules.

It's easy from my example to conclude that advocates for women's education were on the side of history, and therefore morally right. One might think that if we're all going to end up in 2000, then in 1900 people who held the 2000 views were admirable visionaries, while those who still held the 1800 view were contemptible bigots. But of course, people who hold "advanced" views only do so in hindsight. In 1900, the future was as inscrutable as it usually is, and it's hard to fault people who got it wrong, or credit people who got it right. Similarly, the shape of 2100 is not known to us now, which is OK because we don't choose our rules by guessing what the state of civilization will be a century hence.

And, of course, history doesn't have a direction, except in retrospect; trends can be unstoppable for some period of time, and then reverse. Things change, but the direction can be erratic.

It's important to realize that lots of behavior that runs counter to our moral rules can be made to seem OK for others if we can see more of the others' cultural context. After all, we usually find it possible to forgive our parents' blinkered views, all of whom grew up in a chronologically different culture, and we hope that our children will make similar allowances for us.

### Moral persuasion

The view of moral dynamics sketched in the preceding section might seem to leave no

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[7] As a relativist, it doesn't trouble me that this explanation/representation is, for many purposes, overly simple.

room for moral persuasion: If you believe, say, that abortion is wrong, and I believe that it is permissible, then you might think that, as a relativist, I must believe that there is no way for us ever to reach agreement. But this needn't be the case in a relativistic world.

A long time ago, when I was in my 20s, I chanced to read Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. I don't remember it's being a particularly good book, but it did leave me somewhat shaken. I had never been close to marriage. However, I had always thought — though I hadn't thought about it very much — that eventually I would settle down with a Good Woman who would cook my meals, raise my kids, and tend to all my other material and psychological needs. That was how I imagined marriages were supposed to work, although I knew from my own family that things often did not run that smoothly.

Friedan's book convinced me that this would not be my future. For one thing, the book argued that many modern women would want careers outside the home, and I knew that I was not the kind of person who was likely to insist on my future wife's finding fulfillment in housewifery. So in part the argument of the book was that I would have to resign myself to the new social order.

But there was a second, stronger argument (though it wasn't made by Friedan): I realized — Why hadn't this occurred to me before? — that the women I had always been attracted to were the ones least likely to want to wait at home to cook my dinner. So the force of the book's argument — at least for me — was not merely that I would have to adjust, but that I would *want* to adjust, to these new arrangements. I now looked to a life of take-out dinners and shared housework, but I saw it as not only inevitable, but as a reasonable sacrifice to

make to secure the kind of life-partner I wanted.[8]

I can't say that all moral persuasion works like this, but I suspect a good deal does. We try to convince people to adjust their views as to proper conduct by convincing them that the conduct they think immoral is going to take place no matter what, and that it really isn't so bad, or at least that it isn't as bad as attempts to repress it.

Not all moral issues yield to these attempts at persuasion. Abortion, for example, may for many people involve a moral belief that is so central that usual modes of persuasion don't work. But it's also hard to deny that precisely these types of arguments — that fetuses will be aborted in any case, and that the results of trying to repress abortion may be worse than allowing it — have in fact convinced many, perhaps reluctantly, to accept abortion.

Nonetheless, in most societies, by a combination of carrots and sticks, most people come to internalize the dominant moral views of the society. And as societies change, so do the moral views. In the early 1970s, Chinese students ran through the streets waving Mao's Little Red Book; now they stay home and read Adam Smith.

Relativism sees epistemological progress coming from a more integrated world. Accordingly, the processes of moral persuasion in a more integrated world society will lead to a less diverse set of moral beliefs. And it seems clear, to a relativist, that absent some terrible world catastrophe, this set of moral beliefs will be closer to those espoused in open Western societies than in, say, Ayatollah-ized Iran.

### Cross-cultural comparisons

Which leads us to another problem people have with relativism: its supposed inability to permit cross-cultural criticisms.

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[8] And in fact, things worked out rather well.

Our representations are tested by seeing if they allow us to obtain the results we value. If they don't, we look for better representations. But if we value one thing, and another group — Islamic fundamentalists, say — value another, then we and the Islamists might be well served by quite different representations. So in this respect, relativism might not seem to allow us to make cross-cultural criticisms.

But relativism does allow us to ask the following question: Does the representational system used by Islamic fundamentalists allow them to obtain the results *they* value? And here I believe the answer may be *No*.

I'm not a Muslim, let alone a fundamentalist Muslim, so the following characterization is going to be somewhat unsophisticated. Nonetheless, in trying to understand the Islamist's rejection of Western values, I sense a certain schizoid quality. There is a rejection of some Western values, but not all. Like Westerners, Islamic fundamentalists often want advanced medicines, and probably other advanced technologies. But they don't want the freedom of thought and action that fosters creation of these products. Of course, I may be wrong about why Western cultures are so successful at producing technological advances, but it seems clear that these products arise in Western societies and not in Muslim ones. What we are witnessing seems to me less the clash of incompatible cultures than the convulsions of an Islamic world wracked by incompatible mandates.

When a Western realist debates with an Islamic fundamentalist, the interchange is likely to consist of conflicting assertions about the way the world (truly) is. For realists, beliefs are true or false, so the only question is which one of us has the true beliefs and which the false. For a relativist, in contrast, each of our differing representations is too simple to reflect reality in all its messy abundance. And a relativist can ad-

mit that beliefs that answer to your goals, to some degree, may not answer to mine, and vice versa. But the relativist has an additional point to make: Western societies have superior resources for generating useful representations.

For a relativist, the development of Western societies is the development of social systems for generating and coordinating representations. In Western societies, heterodox opinions are cultivated; there are no Nobel prizes in science for people who merely retail the received wisdom. Moreover, in Western societies, education is near universal, and higher education increasingly available. Everyone, including women and minorities, is encouraged to get into the representational fray.

Of course, what makes this representational diversity work is the development of agreed procedures for settling representational disputes, scientific experiments and democratic elections being the two best known. In Islamic societies, on the other hand, education is more narrowly available, heterodox opinions discouraged, and dispute resolution procedures frequently nasty.

But, you may say, relativism can't settle the debate, because the Islamist won't accept it. Granted. But relativism can help us understand what's going on, and would help the Islamic world as well, if they ever come to accept it. And help is all that any theory can offer.

*Living with my relatives*

It's easy enough to say — I said it earlier — that some representations are better than others because they are better at enabling us to reach our goals. But what are "our" goals.

My mother-in-law is a fundamentalist. She believes that the world was created by God in six (non-metaphorical) days. Darwin, to her, is a dangerous quack.

I, on the other hand, am an atheist, and I find her views quite daft. More importantly,

no one I hang out with believes in creationism, including my wife and children (not all of whom share my atheism). In my world, creationism is beyond the pale.

But not in my mother-in-law's world. She attends a church where creationism is the only acceptable view. She can tie in to a network of televangelists and book publishers who offer irrefutable proof that Darwinism is bunk. I find the whole thing semi-repellent, and I imagine she feels the same about my views. (By tacit agreement, we don't discuss these subjects, though she occasionally gives my wife an earful.) Of course, I have a clutch of Ivy League degrees, but that's not going to cut any ice with her.

The truths of Darwinism, and the truths of creationism, are the truths of communities. But that doesn't mean that we have to leave it there. Consider this thought experiment: Suppose we separated the two communities more completely than at present. In this divided world, I (and my co-communicants) wouldn't be able to watch Jerry Falwell on TV, and my mother-in-law and those of her persuasion wouldn't have access to a TV or modern hospital. Which way do you think immigration would run? The debate within our own society over evolution looks somewhat like the debate between Westerners and Islamists, although the former is conducted within the context of gentler dispute resolution procedures.

As it happens, my and my mother-in-law's differing views on evolution, while central to our world-views, are peripheral to our day-to-day lives. We don't choose our doctors, auto mechanics or gardeners on the basis of their views on evolution.

### The erosion of relativity

As communication and transportation technologies shrink our world, and global trade increases the rate and advantage of interaction, it's reasonable to think that we may be slowly evolving towards a single world culture. Of course there's no way to demonstrate that larger-scale, increased representational life is best; if you want to be a hermit, living in the woods, or practice cannibalism in Manhattan, there may be no way to reason you out of it. But most of us don't want to be hermits or cannibals, least of all people who might read this essay.

It might seem that "one world" will mean one system of moral rules, but I think that is a mistake. What seems more likely is that there will be many rule systems, but these various systems will grant believers in other systems a wide latitude to practice their divergent mores. There will be a great deal of interaction between members of different rule communities, not least because the different rule communities will not be geographically separated. Members of different rule communities will intermingle in the daily course of things, but with the expectation of, and a large tolerance for, rule differences.

A tolerance for rule differences is, for many people, what makes moral relativism anathema. But it strikes me that it is difficult to imagine the modern world without such tolerance. Moreover, I doubt if many people who disdain moral relativism as a philosophical theory realize how much tolerance they have in their everyday lives for moral differences. We tolerate the Amish, the Arabs (up to a point), and those most familiar time travelers, our parents. Toleration of divergent rule systems is part of our daily experience.

In a complex society with role specialization, it's familiar that people with different jobs have different rights to interact with their co-workers and with the general public. In our society, police have rights to be intrusive that few other people have. Indeed, we want police officers to be nosey — at least when it comes to other people's business. A police officer's right to stop and frisk a citizen may be limited, but it's a lot less limited than a philosopher's right to stop and frisk some-

one he regards as suspicious (Could that swarthy fellow be a relativist?). Similarly, I don't have a right to cut your belly open, even if you should for some reason agree — unless, of course, I'm a surgeon in an operating room. We may see these different interaction roles as all part of a single social scheme, which indeed they are, but that just means that people can live and work together even though they have different rules for interaction.

The specialization can be extreme. U.S. soldiers are allowed, even encouraged, to kill people meeting certain criteria — for example, for a short time, any Iraqi in uniform who wasn't actively surrendering, or any Iraqi out of uniform who appeared to be armed and dangerous. Too much hesitation, and the soldier can get killed, which isn't good for him or us. These rules are so different from the rules that other people follow, or that the soldier is expected to follow in non-combat areas, that a good deal of training is required, often of a type that would not be permitted in most other situations. Soldiers are trained, in effect, to be unsociable, at least towards those outside their unit.[9]

Are these examples of moral relativism, or are they just parts seen without the whole? In soccer, goalies are permitted to take actions that are penalized if taken by other players, yet soccer has an overall set of coherent rules. Are the differences between the rules followed by police officers, surgeons, and soldiers simply pieces of a coherent system of moral rules?

One problem with the "it's all one big coherent scheme" picture is that it seems to

view all role-dependent rules as rules that you can put on or take off like clothing. But the ability to follow moral rules depends in some measure on character traits — some people make better police officers, others better school teachers, some people are good bosses, others good employees. And the character traits that are valued in the operating room or on the battlefield may be counter-productive in the chemistry lab or the nursery. One of the tricks about our kind of non-traditional society is coaxing the round pegs into the round holes.

### But is it relativism?

Some readers may object that what I call "relativism" is close to views championed by Hilary Putnam under the rubric of "internal" or "pragmatic" realism. [10] For one thing, we both reject the correspondence theory of truth[11] and any philosophically important fact/value dichotomy.[12] Moreover, Putnam's realism, like my relativism, sees our representations as merely partial pictures of the world, guided by our interests.[13] But, accord-

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[9] The first half of Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) and the novel from which it was adapted, Gustave Hasford's *The Short Timers* (1985), make this point convincingly, even though I doubt that current training is quite so ferocious.

[10] Putnam notes the similarity of his views to relativism at, for example, *Realism with a Human Face* at 117.

[11] Putnam announced his rejection of the correspondence theory in his Presidential Address to the Easter Division of the American Philosophical Society in December 1976, reprinted as "Realism and Reason" in *Meaning and the Moral Sciences*, Routledge & Kegan Paul 1978, 123-140. My own rejection of the correspondence theory antedates Putnam's by a few years. See my "Can Beliefs Correspond to Reality?," THE JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY, vol. LXXI, pp. 302–314 (1974).

[12] Putnam, for example, in *Realism with a Human Face*, at 163–178, and 115-117.

[13] *Realism with a Human Face*, at 114: "[T]he internal realist … is willing to think of reference as internal to 'texts' (or theories), *provided* we recognize that there are better and worse 'texts.' 'Better' and 'worse' may themselves depend of our historical

ing to Putnam, this does not mean that all representations are acceptable, because our interests could be "silly, deluded, [or] irrational."[14]

But what makes an interest "silly, deluded, or irrational"? I would argue, and I think Putnam would agree, that there are some interests that are incompatible with social organization; as human societies evolve, these interests — which we can characterize as silly, deluded, or irrational — will be winnowed out; that is, people with those interests will be denied roles (for example, as surgeons or university professors) where those interests would inconvenience the rest of us. But this agreement between Putnam and me still leaves a major issue unresolved: It may be that there are some interests that are incompatible with any organized society, but it also seems that there are interests that are incompatible with some forms of organized society but not others. For realism to work, one has to believe that societies — all societies, will converge towards a single "optimal" society. But Putnam and I both believe that there is no evidence for such a theory of convergence.[15] Yet without such a theory, how does one judge that an interest is silly, deluded or irrational?

Putnam argues that "our norms and standards of warranted assertibility … reflect our interests and values," but then adds that "there are better and worse norms and standards."[16] Then, arguing against Rorty's view that better standards are just those that seem to us to better enable us to "cope," Putnam argues that ["]it might seem to a neofascist community that they

are coping better by dealing savagely with terrible Jews, foreigners and communists."[17]

I can understand Putnam's desire to be able to declare fascism wrong, but I fear that in doing so he is leaving pragmatism behind.[18] Nothing seems more likely to me that in the future there will be flourishing human societies that condemn practices that I and Putnam regard as unproblematic, and accept other practices that I and Putnam find repugnant. I can imagine a future in which it's a crime to eat animals, but where humans are euthanized on reaching 110. Or where everyone prefers rap to Bach.

### The vision thing

Readers who have gotten this far, but still resist the argument, may feel that whatever the virtues of relativism as a philosophical theory, it lacks the inspirational force of realism: Relativism seems to offer no firmly planted standards around which its adherents can rally. There are no creeds to live by, no fixed stars to guide our wanderings. In particular, with so many rule systems on offer, how can you know which rules to accept? And what rules should you teach your children? On life's wide sea, how can you get anywhere without a moral compass? And how can relativism provide that compass?

Relax. Relativism is not a system of moral rules, only a philosophical position about moral rules. And as to the moral rules you, the reader, should adopt, the obvious answer is "Stick with the ones you've got — they've brought you this far." You already have a system of moral rules, and if you're not read-

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situation and our purposes; there is no notion of a God's-Eye View of Truth here."

[14] *Realism with a Human Face* at 211.

[15] *Realism with a Human Face* at 130.

[16] *Realism with a Human Face* at 21.

[17] *Realism with a Human Face* at 22.

[18] Which is not to deny that there may be solid pragmatic arguments against fascism, of the type I sketched against Islamism. Robert O. Paxton's *The Anatomy of Fascism*, Alfred A. Knopf 2004, suggests that fascism may be incompatible with any knowledge community much larger than a nation state.

ing this in a prison or a padded cell, then they are probably working (for the most part). Of course, you didn't choose them, or at least you didn't choose most of them. You got them from your parents, your friends, your co-workers, your significant others, all those formative influences we can lump together under the rubric "culture." And your children will get them in the same way. Since your rules work for you, something similar is likely to work for them. They aren't you, and will no doubt modify them somewhat, but, hey, they've got to live in their world, not yours. But those worlds have a lot of overlap, and so will your rule systems.

Of course, relativism doesn't mean that every rule system must be accommodated. Our prisons are full of people who don't want to play by the rules, or rather, who want to exploit the fact that the rest of us do play by the rules. We tolerate other rules systems because in a complex world, such tolerance makes sense. But it only makes sense up to a point. And the point at which it stops making sense can be a subject of lively debate.

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