



Book Reviews



C. Rovane

The Metaphysics and Ethics of Relativism (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 2013), 289 pp. ISBN: 9780674725713 (hbk). \$39.95.

Finding a proper formulation of relativism turns out to be particularly intricate, which causes the term 'relativism' to be applied to quite diverse views. In this controversial and thoughtful book, Carol Rovane proposes both to offer a correct formulation of relativism and to evaluate the arguments pro and con this stance in the domains of natural facts and moral values. The book is accordingly divided into two parts, each comprising two chapters.

In the Introduction, Rovane claims that an appropriate formulation of relativism should meet four desiderata: it should (*i*) capture a central intuition about its content, (*ii*) ascribe to the relativist a metaphysical commitment, (*iii*) make it possible to avoid the charge of incoherence, and (*iv*) show how we could live in accord with relativism. In her view, three intuitions about the content of relativism can be identified in discussions of this stance: the Disagreement Intuition, the Relative Truth Intuition, and the Alternatives Intuition. According to the first intuition, relativism arises with a disagreement that is metaphysically irresolvable, i.e., irresolvable not because the parties cannot know which (if either) is right, but because both are right. According to the second intuition, which has been advanced in order to help elaborate the Disagreement Intuition in a coherent way, truth is relative to context. And according to the third intuition, there are alternative conceptual schemes.

Chapter 1 argues against the Disagreement Intuition and the Relative Truth Intuition. The first of these meets desideratum (*i*) given the broad current consensus that it is the most central intuition that should be captured in formulating relativism. It also meets desideratum (*ii*) insofar as the disagreement with which relativism would arise is metaphysically, not epistemically, irresolvable. And it seems to satisfy desideratum (*iii*) by invoking the second intuition: there is no violation of the principle of non-contradiction when the relativist holds that both parties to the disagreement are right because their respective claims

are true relative to different contexts. What is then wrong with the Disagreement Intuition? The main problem is that disagreements have a “distinctive normative significance,” which is that “the parties cannot both be right” (30). Therefore, the situations that are commonly portrayed as metaphysically irresolvable disagreements should not be described as irresolvable and do not qualify as disagreements: there is nothing to be resolved because both parties are right, and hence there is nothing that is in dispute. This leads us to the Alternatives Intuition, which satisfactorily accounts for the normative point that relativism involves some form of exclusion: the parties assess each other’s beliefs as true and yet refrain from embracing each other’s beliefs together with their own because they do not find any reason to critically reexamine their beliefs.

Chapter 2 defends the Alternatives Intuition as the central intuition to be captured in a satisfactory formulation of relativism. *Logically* speaking, alternatives are truths that cannot be embraced together, which means that some truth-value-bearers do not stand in any logical relations and are therefore normatively insulated from one another. Alternatives are truths that are neither inconsistent—and so they can both be true—nor consistent—and so they cannot be embraced together. *Metaphysically* speaking, if there are alternatives, then there is not one world (Unimundialism), but many worlds (Multimundialism). According to Unimundialism, logical relations “run everywhere among all truth-value-bearers,” so that “there is a *single, consistent, and comprehensive body of truths*,” which “amounts to a metaphysical commitment to the *oneness* of the world” (79). Multimundialism is then the view that denies each one of these claims. And *practically* speaking, if there are alternatives, then the truth-value-bearers that are outside of the boundaries of our world are not candidates for belief by us and have no normative force for us, and so we have nothing to teach, or to learn from, those who inhabit a different world. To live relativism then means that our inquiries take place within the boundaries of our world and that we are epistemically indifferent to the beliefs of those who occupy a different world. The formulation of relativism in terms of alternatives would then meet the four desiderata: the existence of alternatives is a central intuition about relativism; Multimundialism is a metaphysical commitment; the notion of an alternative can be elaborated without incoherence; and Multimundialism is a normative stance through which we can live relativism.

While Chapter 3 contends that relativism cannot be adopted in the domain of natural facts as these are investigated by science, Chapter 4 maintains that it can be adopted in the domain of moral values. Rovane defends the former claim mainly on the basis of what she calls “the Argument from Holism against Normative Insularity”: in the domain of scientific investigation, concepts and

beliefs are holistically interconnected, and since these interconnections rest on logical relations, there is no room for normative insularity. Even when scientists work in different theoretical paradigms, there is extensive background agreement among them on basic details and distinctions, and they have the common explanatory purpose of making systematic sense of those details and distinctions. Rovane cautiously remarks, however, that “even though we are constrained to function as Unimundialists in our scientific investigations, we cannot rule out the possibility that there may nevertheless be many worlds-to-be-investigated-by-someone” (129).

In the domain of moral values, by contrast, the above argument from holism cannot be applied because “history and culture have delivered a multiplicity of highly specific social conditions in which people live by completely different bodies of moral truth” (239). So it is not possible to claim, as the Unimundialist does, that “there is a complete set of things-to-be-valued, all of which stand in a single transitive ordering from worst to best” (219). Rovane recognizes that there are a few highly general moral platitudes—e.g., that, in general, killing and harming are bad—but contends that their meaning and content shift from one social context to another, each with its specific set of thick moral values. For such moral platitudes are too vague and generic for deliberation and action guidance except in conjunction with the thick moral values adopted within a given social context. Hence, those platitudes are not universal points of agreement, but have the function of establishing when we are concerned with the domain of morals. Rovane nonetheless maintains that we should refrain from taking either Multimundialism or Unimundialism as our default position when encountering moral attitudes and claims different from our own. We should rather adopt a position of suspension until we find out whether such attitudes and claims stand in logical relations to our own.

I would now like to make three set of remarks. First, Rovane may have a point in claiming that the situations to which the relativist calls attention are not best described as irresolvable disagreements from his point of view. But it is probable that those situations were first experienced by him as irresolvable (or unresolved) disagreements and hence that, to that extent, it is the experience of disagreements that set the prospective relativist on the road to relativism, even though those disagreements were later dissolved once he became aware that the rival claims were all true.

Second, at the end of the book, Rovane addresses the objection that Multimundialism fails to acknowledge that the concept of a person is a universal concept that extends across moral worlds and that holds a distinctive moral significance. She agrees that, if this were the case, relativism would entail an unacceptable moral cost. But, in her view, the very raising of the question of

which stance (the Unimundial or the Multimundial) one should adopt towards others is not possible without thereby recognizing that others are persons who can enter into distinctively interpersonal forms of engagement. I do not understand why such an objection would pose a *moral* problem for the relativist and hence why he would feel compelled to respond in the way Rovane does. Given that he claims that there are no universal moral truths, if he treated those who occupy a different moral world as mere things despite having raised the above question—thereby being hypocritical—this attitude would have a moral cost for him only if it ran counter to the thick moral values adopted in the moral world he happens to inhabit. Rovane's reply to the objection seems to inconsistently ascribe to the concept of a person a moral normative force that is universal.

Third, it is both remarkable and unfortunate that quite often Rovane does not mention who defends the specific views she discusses, and that she does not engage with a considerable part of the literature on moral relativism. In this latter regard, a notable omission is David Wong's pluralistic relativism, which denies that there is a single true morality, yet affirms that not all moralities are adequate, since there are objective limits on what may be deemed a true morality that are determined by universally valid criteria. Given Rovane's claim that those who occupy different moral worlds embrace incommensurable moral values, it would have been enlightening if she had discussed Wong's view that rival moral positions typically share basic values and differ in that they do not set the same priority or hierarchy among them. (See D. Wong, *Natural Moralities: A Defense of Pluralistic Relativism* (OUP, 2006).)

No doubt this original and challenging book will engage anyone working on moral relativism and moral disagreement as well as those interested in such authors as Davidson, Feyerabend, Kuhn, or Quine, whose views are extensively and penetratingly discussed.

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