

## Forthcoming in *Common Knowledge*

### LITTLE REVIEWS

Martin Kusch, Katherina Kinzel, Johannes Steizinger, and Niels Wildschut, eds., *The Emergence of Relativism: German Thought from the Enlightenment to National Socialism* (London: Routledge, 2019), 258 pp.

Relativism, most philosophers seem to agree, is an elusive and frustrating doctrine, difficult to define and, despite the efforts of the best philosophical minds for over two thousand years, evidently impossible to eradicate. Perhaps, as with other elusive entities, like the Loch Ness Monster or extraterrestrials, attention would be more fruitfully turned on its alleged sightings. Where and when is it observed? By whom? With what discernible provocations and possible motives or interests? What is wanted, perhaps, are not more precise definitions, discriminating classifications, or rigorous logical analyses but historical, sociological, and even political investigations—perhaps even, where specific texts are invoked, close readings and rhetorical analyses. The editors of this volume, all associated with a long-term project of relativism-inquiry pursued in the philosophy department at the University of Vienna, evidently sought to provide such an alternative approach. Consisting of thirteen articles by an international group of scholars and a set of introductory essays by the editors, *The Emergence of Relativism* offers a range of perspectives on how “the problem of relativism” was framed in German intellectual discourses over the course of the long nineteenth century. It also yields some perspectives on the problems of philosophy, both across the period examined and in our own.

The volume is at odds with itself in several ways. What becomes clear from early chapters on is that the relativism that exercised German thought was not the set of wooden claims characterized, in the editors’ general introduction, as what “the relativist” “holds.” Rather, along with nihilism, historicism, psychologism, and, later, scientism, it was an alarming but spectral doctrine evoked, largely in writings by holders of chairs in philosophy, by new ideas and methods arising from the natural and social sciences. The distress was often professional as well as intellectual. In an illuminating essay, Kinzel writes: “When Troeltsch [a neo-Kantian

theologian] worries that ‘historicism’ leads to the ‘anarchy of values,’ he does so in a situation in which the ‘historicization’ of philosophy and theology has seemingly rendered these disciplines incapable of defending a consistent and convincing worldview.” Accordingly, much intellectual energy was devoted to affirming and defending both the traditional views and the traditional role of philosophy in articulating and justifying them. Such worries also provoked a range of more inventive efforts that sought to give empirical methods and naturalistic explanations due recognition while minimizing their feared intellectual and societal consequences, commonly by subordinating evident particulars and dependencies to new or newly emphasized universals or by attempting, through new methods of transcendence, to reground familiar absolutes seen as necessary for intellectual, moral, and political order.

Of course, not everyone found relativism a problem. For many historians, scientists, and philosopher-theorists working in empirical fields, relativistic views were, as Kusch writes, “an obvious consequence of natural-scientific attitudes and theorizing.” Notable among those in the later period were Georg Simmel and Karl Mannheim, whose ideas are sympathetically described here by Kusch, and (as detailed by Richard Staley in an especially rich chapter) both Einstein and Ernst Mach, both of whom, contrary to a later practice of protective distinction, understood the concept of “relativity” expansively. Other notable and, here, perhaps surprising exceptions include Marx and Engels. At the end of his canny close reading of their early manuscripts, Terrell Carver, alluding to the relativistic ideas discernible therein (the chapter is titled “Socializing Knowledge and Historicizing Society”), writes: “Transcending the epistemological framing of conventional ontologies—both materialisms and idealisms—and indeed formulating an anti-philosophy, as they did, rendered the problem of relativism—from the perspective of their ‘outlook’ or ‘conception’—redundant.” While the volume’s arresting title may suggest a familiar narrative of consequence and/or consummation, the final chapter tells a different story. In a patient if clearly dismayed account, Steizinger describes the attractions of National Socialism for established German philosophers and their contributions to its ultimate doctrine—at once quasi-relativist, antirelativist, and absolutist—that each people and race has a culture “suited to” it and that one is absolutely superior to all others.

Authors of the chapters described above treat *relativism* as a term with multiple, shifting meanings, invoked under various conditions to serve a range of conceptual, ideological, or polemical purposes. Their contributions trace its usage by members of various communities

across a particular period of time. For a second group, the term designates a timeless folly situated in a fixed logical landscape. Accordingly, they undertake the task of determining whether it is discernible in the thought of one or another eminent German philosopher. As it happens, all those examined are acquitted, the price of their exoneration being, in most cases, the reduction of richly elaborated and arguably revolutionary ideas to a handful of pieties and platitudes. Herder's suspicious embrace of human and cultural variety is seen as offset by his theologically grounded conviction of the ultimate harmony of all differences. Nietzsche's remarks on perspective in *Genealogy of Morals III*, regarded by many scholars as epistemologically radical or at least interesting, are said to amount only to the "banal point" (conspicuously unNietzschean in idiom and, one may think, in conception) that the more perspectives we have, "the more truths about the world we will know." Husserl's "singularly consistent critique of relativism" is rehearsed along with appreciative notice of his "recognition" of the societal and spiritual ills allegedly attending "psychologism." A chapter on Heidegger argues that, far from being a relativist or anything else philosophically or otherwise untoward, he was a Christian Kantian phenomenologist whose positions in *Being and Time* can be plausibly read as "a straightforward realism." Towards the end of the volume (in which chronology is scrambled in favor of a division into four poorly explained sections), Herder is exonerated a second time, here by a laborious demonstration of how different his views are from those of sociologist of science David Bloor, the latter now evidently, after Protagoras, the exemplary relativist for due analytic refutations.

The aims described in the volume's introduction are spacious, but consideration of the broader historical implications and effects of the ideas discussed is limited, and so too is the extent of any sociological, much less rhetorical, analysis. This is disappointing but not surprising: most of the contributors are academic philosophers, typically trained, at least where analytic principles prevail, to examine the logical structure of claims, not the social or cultural contexts of ideas or their intellectual contexts outside academic philosophy itself. One may hope, therefore, for continued inquiry into these topics, at the University of Vienna or elsewhere, with participants from other fields who would raise other questions and explore relevant areas not examined here. Where else, for example, did relativism emerge as a problem, and, if it emerged only or especially in the German states, why there? How did the views and concerns described here play out in succeeding years in Germany and elsewhere? Given the volume's extensive

account of the ferocious antirelativism brought to Harvard by German American psychologist Hugo Münsterberg, one misses any mention of the genial relativism brought to Columbia by anthropologist Franz Boas. Indeed, especially interesting might be explorations of the role of these and other twentieth-century German and Austrian expatriates in elaborating relativisms and perpetuating relativism-anxieties that continue to inspire and provoke theoretical energies, nominally philosophical and other, in our own era.

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