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THE CHIMERA OF RELATIVISM

A Tragicomedy

Barbara Herrnstein Smith

Whatever sort of thing relativism is taken to be—doctrine, thesis, crime or folly, insight or abyss—it is certainly, from the perspective of intellectual history, exceptionally elusive. Is there a single specifiable claim or denial, even a minimally describable “family” of them, shared by Protagoras, Montaigne, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Franz Boas, Paul Feyerabend, Jacques Derrida, Bruno Latour, and the majority of undergraduates on today’s college campuses? All these have been said to “embrace” or “espouse” relativism, or to have “slipped” or “fallen” into it, by reason of some utterance they have made or failed to make, some attitude they have displayed or failed to display.¹

Logicians suggest that we are in the presence of relativism when one or another self-evidently solid and important thing (for example, *truth, value, mean-*

1. See Rom Harré and Michael Krausz, *Varieties of Relativism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), for an effort to distinguish various types of relativism and “to extricate and examine the arguments, abstracted from sources ancient and modern, that have been offered for and against the main varieties” (1). See Maria Baghramian, *Relativism* (London: Routledge, 2004), for the idea, in the absence of any clear definition of the topic of her book, of a “family” of claims, positions, or doctrines. For an unhappy evocation of the moral relativism of contemporary college stu-

dents, see Judith Jarvis Thomson, *Goodness and Advice*, ed. Amy Gutman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001). For a “postmodern relativism” identified by a failure on the part of some scholars to offer certain emphases or raise certain questions in their work, see Satya Mohanty, *Literary Theory and the Claims of History: Postmodernism, Objectivity, Multicultural Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), esp. 130–31.

ing, or *reality*) has been said by some perverse or logically injudicious person to be “relative to” something soft or slippery (for example, *context*, *culture*, *language*, *conceptual scheme*, *individual perspective*, or *political interest*). But such X-is-relative-to-Y statements are almost always distortions of what has actually been said. What has often actually been said—as in the case of the figures I have mentioned, from Protagoras to Latour—are statements to the effect that human perceptions, interpretations, and judgments are not absolute, universal, or objective in the sense of being independent of all perspectives and/or invariant under all conditions; that what we take to be real, true, and good depends upon and varies with, among other things, our assumptions, expectations, categories, and existing beliefs as these are affected to one degree or another by, among other things, our particular experiences and situations, both past and ongoing; and that these in turn are affected to one degree or another by, among other things, our historically and otherwise particular social, cultural, and institutional environments, including the conceptual and verbal idioms prevailing in our communities.

These statements of variability and contingency have challenging implications for familiar ways of talking and thinking about truth, value, and reality; but they are not claims about any of these terms or concepts taken as autonomous entities or properties. Statements about the dependence of our perceptions, interpretations, and judgments on various more or less unpredictable and uncontrollable sets of conditions do not amount to denials of the existence of anything that could be called *truth* or to claims about the purely subjective, purely verbal, or purely social status of things such as stones, mountains, quarks, germs, or genes that we may take to be, in some unproblematic sense, real. Rather, statements of these kinds, often said to be relativistic, alert us to the relational aspects of seemingly autonomous entities and seemingly inherent properties and to the fact that the quite heterogeneous situations that we name *truth*, *fact*, *knowledge*, *science*, or *reality* are often quite complexly constituted and sustained. Such statements also alert us to the historicity and the often far-from-unproblematic meaning of such ideas as *objective truth* or *transcendent value* and to the deeply problematic nature of *reality* if it is understood as an autonomous, absolutely privileged realm of being.

The sorts of statements just described are not shallowly reductive, deterministic, or gloomy. They do not claim that human perspectives vary *only* historically or culturally; they do not require us to believe that the human mind is a blank slate; they do not commit us to the view that people from different eras or cultures have nothing in common, or that each culture or period is a distinct and isolated universe, or that the differences among our perceptions, interpretations, or judgments are always very large or very significant. I note all these negatives because the sorts of observation that I am describing here—observations of contingency, variability, and/or relationality, often labeled relativist or taken as

reflections of an implicit doctrine of relativism—are commonly paraphrased in just these ways or said to have just such dubious or unhappy implications.

I

In the human sciences, what often elicits the charge or label “relativism” is the display of certain attitudes, notably those of epistemic tolerance, or the recommendation of certain methodological principles—especially, in recent years, principles involving explanatory or evaluative symmetry. The two disciplines that have proved most generative of the attitudes and principles in question are history and anthropology or, more precisely, historiography and ethnography—the charting of other times and other people. Of course, the observation of human variety in travel, including time travel, does not always increase tolerance or chasten egotism. It can just as readily deepen misanthropy or ratify a sense of the perfect reasonableness and absolute propriety of one’s own views and practices. Nevertheless, reports of what seem to be other ways of being human have operated virtually from their beginning as a reservoir of counterexamples to standard views of what is natural, necessary, or inevitable for members of the species to do, feel, or think.

Along with more particular forms of sophistication arising from their work in the archives and the field, historians and anthropologists often develop a generally heightened consciousness of the variability of human practices, institutions, and individual responses. While a sharpened awareness of this kind may develop from everyday observation, as reflected in the prudential axioms of folk relativism (*different strokes for different folks* and so forth), of particular interest here is the explicit cultivation of such awareness in the pursuit of disciplinary aims as recommended by such influential early twentieth-century historians, anthropologists, and social theorists as Durkheim, Weber, Carl Becker, and Ludwik Fleck and, later in the century, by such important figures as Benjamin Lee Whorf, Thomas Kuhn, and David Bloor.² While not all of these figures described their views or programs as relativistic (and none of them proclaimed any doctrine under the label of “relativism”), all of them stressed the dependence of our ideas and practices on historically and culturally variable conditions and individual perspectives, and all emphasized the consequent need to cultivate a self-conscious wariness in their respective fields. These scholars and theorists made such points against what they saw as dubiously self-privileging aims, claims,

2. For more on these figures, Becker and Fleck in particular, see my contribution to a prior symposium here on relativism and its reception: Barbara Herrnstein Smith, “Relativism, Today and Yesterday,” *Common Knowledge* 13.2–3 (Spring–Fall 2007): 227–49, esp. 234–44.

and methods in their particular fields; and their remarks were directed more or less exclusively and explicitly to fellow practitioners. The principles in question were not, in other words, produced out of the blue, nor were they directed to humanity at large or intended to govern the general conduct of ethical or intellectual life.³ This last point requires special emphasis because it is routinely missed by commentators who, after plucking those recommended principles from their intellectual, institutional, and historical contexts and improperly absolutizing and universalizing them, go on to register outrage or alarm at the absurd, unwholesome, or debilitating implications that they thereupon derive from them—the implication, for example, that all beliefs and cultural practices are equally worthy of respect or that reasons cannot or should not count in our assessment of truth claims.⁴ Indeed, the obliteration of relevant historical, intellectual, and institutional contexts is crucial in the generation of the doctrines, “claims,” or “theses” that make up the chimerical beast—part straw man, part red herring—commonly evoked under the name “relativism.”

This chimera—or, as I have called it elsewhere, fantasy heresy—is not the product of dishonest or intellectually incompetent people. On the contrary, it is largely the issue of critical efforts by intelligent, sometimes ethically motivated, often exceptionally well-trained people. What must be added, however, is that they are trained in quite *particular* conceptual idioms. Such idioms may be well established in their own fields and serve their professional purposes satisfactorily in the domains of their customary disciplinary practices. Nevertheless, the concepts that are central to those idioms, and the conceptual syntax that is central to their deployment in descriptions, analyses, and arguments, are themselves historically contingent and local, not necessary or universal. Relativism-refuting scholars typically take for granted certain definitions, distinctions, and

3. These intentions are clear in the following passages by anthropologist Ruth Benedict and sociologist David Bloor):

Any scientific study requires that there be no preferential weighting of one or another of the items in the series it selects for its consideration. In all the less controversial fields like the study of cacti or termites or the nature of nebulae, the necessary method of study is to group the relevant material and to take note of all possible variant forms and conditions. . . . It is only in the study of man himself that the major social sciences have substituted the study of one local variation, that of Western civilization. (Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* [1934; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959], 3)

If [the sociologist’s] theories are to satisfy the requirement of maximum generality they will have to apply to both true and false beliefs. . . . The sociologist seeks theories which explain the beliefs which are in fact

found, regardless of how the investigator evaluates them. . . . The approaches that have just been sketched suggest that the sociology of scientific knowledge should adhere to the following four tenets. . . . (David Bloor, *Knowledge and Social Imagery* [1976; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991], 5, 7).

4. For the extraction of the latter implication from an improperly universalized paraphrase of Bloor’s four tenets for the sociology of scientific knowledge, see Paul Boghossian, “Constructivist and Relativist Conceptions of Knowledge in Contemporary (Anti-) Epistemology: A Reply to Barbara Herrnstein Smith,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101.1 (Winter 2002): 213–27; repeated in Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). See Smith, “Reply to an Analytic Philosopher,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101.1 (Winter 2002): 229–42, for discussion of these and related relativism-refuting moves.

conceptual relations that other scholars—precisely those whom they charge with embracing an absurd or appalling relativism—have come to view in crucially different ways. Because the former appeal in their arguments to those presupposed definitions, distinctions, and relations, their arguments appear, at least to those who share their conceptual idioms and syntax, to demonstrate that the alleged claims of the alleged relativists are indeed absurd or appalling.⁵ But, for the same reason—that is, because the relativism-refuters deploy and depend on the very concepts and relations that are at issue (concepts such as *truth* and *reason*, relations such as those between what are referred to as *facts* and *evidence*)—their arguments can have no intellectual force for the alleged relativists, who know themselves not to be saying the foolish things they are charged with saying and who do not and cannot take for granted the concepts, definitions, distinctions, and relations to which the relativism-refuters appeal. The result is pure nonengagement and perfect deadlock. The chimerical beast called Relativism lies always already slain, but—as one of “the philosophical undead,” it always walks again.⁶

There are signs that this tragicomic episode of intellectual history may have run its course. Most cultural anthropologists and historians of science abide by the now well-established methodological principles of their respective disciplines without giving them much thought or finding it necessary to explain or defend

5. A recent example of the significant operation of such presuppositions can be found in John Searle, “Why Should You Believe It?” *New York Review of Books* 56.14 (September 24, 2009): 88–92, where historically and otherwise particular discursive-conceptual deployments of the terms *statement*, *fact*, *evidence*, and *rationality*, along with the idea that certain logical entailments are “built into the fundamental structure of thought and language,” figure in a set of purportedly relativism-refuting arguments. Thus in discussing, for example, what a Native American might say about how his tribe came originally to occupy its lands, Searle—here summarizing and endorsing Paul Boghossian’s arguments against relativism in his book *Fear of Knowledge*—observes that it is a “requirement of rationality” that “anyone who makes such a statement is thereby committed to the existence of a fact,” and that this “commitment in turn carries a commitment to being able to answer such questions as . . . What is the evidence?” and that “only certain kinds of things can count as evidence.” For Searle, as for Boghossian, it is self-evident that the things that can count as evidence do not include traditional accounts transmitted in tribal legends. Accordingly, neither Searle nor Boghossian can understand—and both therefore regard as merely ideologically motivated—the empirical observation by an outsider (here, an anthropologist) to the effect that, in some communities, traditional accounts can and do count as evidence in the psychologically and socially significant sense of having conviction-affecting weight. Of course, Native American tribal leg-

ends do not count as evidence in United States courts, or in the arguments of Western philosophers, or when Western anthropologists address each other regarding factual claims. But the reasons they do not have evidentiary weight in these contexts have nothing to do with anything “built into the fundamental structure of [all?] thought and [any?] language.” Moreover, those reasons have little to do with “the requirement[s] of rationality” except insofar as *rationality* is itself defined in historically and otherwise quite particular ways that operate with intervalidating reference to systematically related definitions of terms like *statement*, *fact*, and *evidence*. For an analysis of the self-affirming circularity involved, see Smith, *Belief and Resistance*, 118–24. For discussion of the resultant question-begging structure of many arguments aimed at refuting relativism, see Smith, “Unloading the Self-Refutation Charge,” *Common Knowledge* 2.2 (Fall 1993): 81–95, reprinted in *Belief and Resistance*, 73–87.

6. See Joseph Rouse, “Vampires: Social Constructivism, Realism, and Other Philosophical Undead,” *History and Theory* 41.1 (2002): 60–78. For all the logical ink poured over their heads, none of the major thinkers thus putatively refuted—for example, Feyerabend, Foucault, Derrida, Rorty, or Latour—has acknowledged the alleged error of his or her thinking on the crucial issues.

them to anyone.⁷ At the same time, the scope, force, and interest of formal exposures and refutations of what is named “relativism” appear to be diminished in the current philosophical literature and elsewhere. Indeed, some younger logicians and philosophers now unapologetically detail and defend relativity-affirming theses as such, while, for better or worse, a genial folk-relativist ethos (*live and let live*) seems to prevail among students on many of our de facto multicultural campuses.⁸ Where full-throated formal denunciations of relativism continue to be voiced in contemporary discourse, they seem to issue primarily from protectors or would-be restorers of some threatened or faded orthodoxy—for example, positivist scientism, realist-rationalist epistemology, or Vatican infallibilism—and are clearly designed to discredit one or another currently significant challenge.⁹

In spite of these hopeful developments (hopeful, at least, from some perspectives), anxieties about the implications or consequences of what is identified as relativism linger, and there are also recent efforts to refute relativism on what are said to be scientific grounds. Two contemporary sites of antirelativist energy require special attention. The first centers on the claim that cultural relativism is refuted by the demonstrated existence of cognitive universals. The second involves the fear or charge that relativist convictions lead to politically debilitating neutrality in the face of oppression and other social ills.

II

According to an influential group of evolutionary psychologists and cognitive anthropologists, we now have evidence of what they refer to as “the psychic unity of mankind”—specifically, the existence of innate, evolved, universal mental mechanisms underlying all human thought, behavior, and culture.¹⁰

7. I refer here to such principles as historical and cultural contextualization, explanatory symmetry, and self-inclusive reflexivity, not to such hypertrophic views (where they are maintained) as the total uniqueness of every culture or the impossibility of any cross-cultural generalizations about human behavior or institutions.

8. For recent works attesting to the extent of linguistic relativity and to the historicity of such concepts as *science*, *knowledge*, and *objectivity*, see, e.g., John J. Gumperz and Stephen C. Levinson, eds., *Rethinking Linguistic Relativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Ronald N. Giere, *Scientific Perspectivism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Steven Shapin, *The Scientific Life: A Moral History of a Late Modern Vocation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). For a rigorous articulation of “epistemological relativism,” defended handily against a set of standard philosophical refutation-arguments, see Martin Kusch, *Knowledge by Agreement: The Programme of Communitarian Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). For other recent philosophical defenses of

what is explicitly named “relativism” and for a useful overview of current philosophical treatments of the issue, see Manuel García-Carpintero and Max Kölbel, eds., *Relative Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

9. See, e.g., versus “postmodern relativism,” E. O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (New York: Knopf, 1998), 182; versus “relativism and constructivism,” Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge*; versus a “dictatorship of relativism,” Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI), homily, “Pro Eligendo Romana Pontifice,” April 18, 2005 (www.vatican.va/gpII/documents/homily-pro-eligendo-pontifice_20050418_it.html), translated into English and discussed by various contributors in *Common Knowledge* 13.2–3 (Spring–Fall 2007).

10. For the general claim, see esp. John Tooby and Leda Cosmides, “The Psychological Foundations of Culture,” in *The Adapted Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and the Generation of Culture*, ed. Jerome H. Barkow et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 19–136.

Questions can be raised about the empirical basis and conceptual coherence of this view, which is by no means accepted by all psychologists or cognitive scientists. What concerns me here, however, is the attendant argument that the demonstrable existence of such universal mechanisms undercuts certain alleged “relativist” claims.

The argument just described appears in a recent book by cognitive anthropologist Scott Atran, who maintains that “there is a long-standing claim on the ‘relativist’ side of anthropology, psychology, and the philosophy and history of science to the effect that people who live in ‘traditional’ cultures . . . live in conceptual worlds that are profoundly and incommensurably different from our own world (and each other’s worlds).”¹¹ According to Atran, “this claim is mistaken in light of the following facts”:

1. There is considerable recurrence of symbolic content [of supernatural beliefs] across historically isolated cultures. . . .
2. This recurrence owes chiefly to universal cognitive mechanisms that process cultural input (information) in ways that are variously triggered but subsequently unaffected by the nature of the input.

After describing various other general features of supernatural beliefs, Atran continues:

The most striking support for cultural relativism is thought to come from those “primitive,” “exotic,” or “traditional” societies where, from a Western standpoint, natural and supernatural phenomena are so seemingly intermeshed that the people in those societies just live in “another world.”¹²

Atran then lists some beliefs recorded among the Itza’ Mayans of Mexico that “we” (contemporary educated Westerners, presumably) would find hard to believe or to restate in any way that made sense—for example, that a certain sorcerer transformed himself into a dog, that a person “ensouls” a house, and that a house has a soul.¹³ On such beliefs, he comments as follows:

11. Scott Atran, *In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 84.

12. Atran, *In Gods We Trust*, 84. Atran gives no sources for the views thus stated or for the phrases, here and below, that he puts in quotation marks.

13. Atran’s examples appear singularly ill chosen to make his point. Many readers and certainly many cultural anthropologists, self-described cultural relativists included, would find such beliefs readily recognizable and

have no trouble restating them in familiar, credible-enough terms. But his point here is already strained. The cultural relativism of most cultural anthropologists is not motivated by, and certainly does not depend on, their having found the beliefs of the people they study nonsensical—as distinct from significantly (and sometimes, as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro suggests, instructively) different from beliefs generally accepted by educated people in Western cultures.

From the foregoing we might conclude that we and the Itza' just live in conceptually different everyday worlds. That people abide such apparently different worlds may, in turn, be taken as support for the flexibility of the human mind, that is, a mind unconstrained by cognitive structures that are evolved . . . task-specific or innately determined and content-constraining. But this conclusion is wrong.¹⁴

The somewhat awkward phrasing here obscures the tenuousness and circularity of the argument. Atran speaks of a conclusion wrongly drawn, and an idea wrongly drawing support, from ethnographic data about the strange beliefs of other people. The conclusion is that people can live in conceptually different worlds; the idea is that the human mind is flexible. But *is* either of these wrong, and *are* they wrongly concluded? Is it not the case that people, even some who eat daily in the same faculty-club dining rooms, can live in conceptual worlds that are profoundly different—for example, as I suggest above, relativizing anthropologists and relativism-refuting philosophers? And is it wrong to conclude from, among other things, the wide variety of cosmologies encountered by ethnographers that “the human mind”—which of course names a range of capacities and activities—is flexible?

Two other questions may be asked here that are significant for the logical and rhetorical force of Atran's argument. One is whether the quite common, quite general observation that “the human mind is flexible” is properly glossed as the technically very particular (and incoherent as stated) claim that the mind is “unconstrained by cognitive structures that are evolved . . . task-specific or innately determined and content-constraining.”¹⁵ The second is what makes a “fact” out of Atran's cognitive-universals explanation for the cross-cultural recurrence of the thematic content of various supernatural beliefs. Atran claims that such recurrences are evidence for the existence of universal cognitive mechanisms, but the only basis he offers for *that* claim is his simultaneous insistence that the only thing that can explain such recurrences is the operation of such mechanisms. The universalist claim and the ethnographic evidence for it are bootstrapped onto each other, and the purported explanation-proof refutation is totally circular.

Contrary to Atran's contention, the widespread recurrence of various mythic and religious themes can be explained without recourse to the positing of highly specific, content-constraining universal cognitive mechanisms. One notes, for example, such widespread—indeed pancultural—conditions of human existence as sunrise and nightfall or the recurrence of such humanly salient objects,

14. Atran, *In Gods We Trust*, 86.

15. Atran's writing is careless. Presumably he would not bother to debate the manifestly incoherent claim that, as he puts it, the mind is “unconstrained by cognitive structures that are . . . content-constraining.”

events, and experiences as birds and snakes, journeys and warfare, illness and dreams. There are also important contemporary alternatives to the strongly innatist, adaptationist view of mind and cognition that Atran invokes here as factually established. Such alternative views do not, as he suggests, come down to the blank slate of classic empiricism or cultural-environmental determinism; they do not claim that the human mind is altogether unconstrained. What they indicate instead is that, although various specieswide (“universal”) cognitive capacities, traits, or tendencies may exist, they must, in their actual operations, interact continuously with our other more or less highly individuated traits and tendencies and also with the traces of our individual experiences in particular physical, social, and cultural worlds.¹⁶ The point is significant for the operation of any putative human or cognitive universal, from language ability to the currently popular “moral sense.”

Theorists and scientists proposing these alternative views of human cognitive or psychological development would reject Atran’s reductive and otherwise dubious account of the generation of supernatural concepts by highly specialized mental mechanisms. They would also reject the mind-as-blank-slate view that Atran refers to, somewhat oddly, as “relativism” and implies is the only major alternative to his own strongly mentalist account of cognition. The individual mind, however we understand the term, is shaped by multiple forces, and its operations and products are of course limited or “constrained” in many respects; *and* “the human mind,” taken either individually or as a species characteristic, is flexible. These are not mutually exclusive observations. To maintain that the mind is flexible, in the sense of being responsive and capable of ongoing modification, is not to deny the existence of constraining forces on cognitive processes and products, including forces arising from general features of human neurophysiology as shaped over evolutionary time. The conflict of views that Atran evokes here is spurious. If there are any pure cultural determinists remaining in anthropology or strict environmental determinists among behaviorists or Jesuits, none of them has much authority in the current intellectual world.¹⁷ There are real conflicts here, but they are not over whether Nature or Nurture, evolved neurophysiology or culturally contingent experience, is decisive in shaping the content of our beliefs. The conflicts are over the contested institutional dominance of different factions in the contemporary social sciences, with so-called cognitive approaches seeking not only to displace older and no doubt limited approaches but also seek-

16. For a more extensive examination of Atran’s argument and examples, as well as for discussion of relevant alternative views of human cognition, see Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Natural Reflections: Human Cognition at the Nexus of Science and Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 10–19, 62–64.

17. Behaviorists and Jesuits have famously spoken of the power of early conditioning or training to shape the minds of the young.

ing to hold their ground against newer and arguably more fertile developments.¹⁸ “Relativism” here, as often elsewhere, is a straw herring.

III

I turn now to the other current objection to relativism that I mentioned earlier. This is the fear or charge that relativistic convictions lead to ethically reprehensible neutrality or political passivity.¹⁹ One can understand how the charge or anxiety originates. As the theoretically described variability of human perceptions, interpretations, and judgments become consequential conflicts, and as those conflicts come closer to home, efforts by historians, anthropologists, and other scholars to maintain methodological symmetry and to treat all sides evenhandedly will appear improper and, from certain perspectives, objectionable. Moreover, efforts at neutrality under such conditions are likely to become strained for the scholars themselves. For example (quite close to home for Americans), an otherwise conscientiously impartial sociologist of science may find it hard to treat current, local promotions of biblical creationism symmetrically with efforts by biology teachers to present evolution without disclaimers in public high schools. Similarly, a Western-educated anthropologist may find it hard to report impartially on such exotic practices as female genital cutting. Under such conditions, the determinedly impartial sociologist of science or symmetry-maintaining anthropologist may be too involved in the outcome of such struggles, or too conscious of the effects of such practices on the lives of people he or she knows well (or can imagine vividly enough), to maintain an otherwise proper neutrality.

Where a conflict of views—perceptions, interpretations, or judgments—is neither hypothetical nor in the remote past, but actual, sharp, current, and caught up in one’s personal history or sense of personal identity, it is understandably difficult to be impartial. Where, moreover, the conflict involves people or communities to whom one has generally recognized obligations of kinship, friendship, membership, or alliance, it may be ethically improper—and, from some perspectives, politically culpable—for one to remain neutral. Thus, many sociologists of science were dismayed by their colleague Steve Fuller’s recondite account of

18. Prominent among the latter are Developmental Systems Theory (see Susan Oyama et al., eds., *Cycles of Contingency: Developmental Systems and Evolution* [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001]) and other views of cognitive processes that stress their dynamic, interactive features (see, e.g., Raphael Núñez and Walter J. Freeman, eds., *Reclaiming Cognition: The Primacy of Action, Intention, and Emotion* [Thorverton, U.K.: Imprint Academic, 1999]; Alva Noë, *Action in Perception* [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004]; Derek Melder, *The Act of Thinking* [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004]; Michael Wheeler, *Reconstructing the Cogni-*

tive World: The Next Step [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005]).

19. Related fears and charges of “quietism”—along with defenses of certain forms of it—are discussed in the extended symposium on these themes recently published in this journal. See “Apology for Quietism: A *Sotto Voce* Symposium,” *Common Knowledge* 15.1 (Winter 2009), 15.2 (Spring 2009), 15.3 (Fall 2009), 16.1 (Winter 2010), 16.2 (Spring 2010), 16.3 (Fall 2010).

the comparable scientific status of evolutionary theory and Intelligent Design during his testimony in a recent school-board trial in the United States.²⁰ Similarly, many feminist scholars were disturbed by anthropologist Saba Mahmood's representation of Muslim women's self-subjection to patriarchal teachings as a mode of personal agency comparable to forms of agency valued by Western feminists.²¹ There is, it might be said, a time for programmatic symmetry to be laid aside and for strong partisanship and explicit advocacy or critique to be taken up. I believe there *are* such times. But I also believe that they are not determinable in the abstract or in advance. Rather, I would say, those times are determined for each of us by the relevant particulars of our personal histories, identities, and obligations, and also by the relevant particulars of the conditions that present themselves. Here, as often elsewhere, the best—most ethically responsive and intellectually responsible—way to handle the apparent difficulties created by relativist commitments is to relativize even further—that is, to acknowledge the significance, for oneself as for others, of even broader ranges and more subtle forms of contingent circumstances.

It may be presumed that, in their public actions as scholars, both Fuller and Mahmood were responsive to the relevance of various contingent circumstances. There is room for argument, however, about their respective decisions and also reason to speculate about how they arrived at them. It is not clear, for example, that Fuller considered as carefully as he might have done the long-range intellectual, educational, and political consequences of his testimony, as a credentialed social scientist, on behalf of the crypto-creationist side in the school-board trial. Similarly, it is not clear that Mahmood presented all the crucially relevant features of the lives and situations of the Muslim women she studied—for example, the history or threat of physical violence under which they may have acted. One may also wonder to what extent Fuller's generally populist sentiments, directed against the science establishment, put him in ideological alignment with the promoters of Intelligent Design.²² And similarly, one may wonder to what extent Mahmood's strict neutrality in her representation of the Egyptian women's mosque movement reflected a degree of protectiveness toward Islam, which, as a Pakistani-born woman (and in view of ongoing displays of Western arrogance and condescension), she could share with her subjects. In short, it is not clear that

20. For an exchange between Fuller and his critics regarding his testimony in *Kitzmiller v. Dover*, see *Social Studies of Science* 36.6 (December 2006): 819–53. Fuller himself pointedly rejects the idea that the pursuit of sociology of science entails a refusal to offer judgments on public issues involving science.

21. Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

22. In a subsequent commentary on his participation in the Dover trial, Fuller explicitly disavows relativism and, noting that science-studies fields “have a weak public presence and a history of being treated as pawns by more powerful players,” observes: “Had I been more of a relativist, presumably I would have taken heed of these features of the situation and refrained from offering my services.” Steve Fuller, “Letter to the Editor,” *Isis* 100.1 (2009): 115–16.

these two seeming demonstrations of objectionable relativistic impartiality were actually so impartial. Indeed, what may disturb critics of relativism in such demonstrations is not politically objectionable neutrality but evidence of a relevant bias, muffled by a claim or show of fairness, for what is viewed as the wrong side of some current political struggle.

The preceding discussion acknowledges the genuine difficulties that may be presented in ethically and/or politically charged situations by a cultivated consciousness of the dependence of our perceptions, interpretations, and judgments on culturally and historically variable perspectives—or what are often called relativistic views. But I want to say something against the facile and, I think, fundamentally improper association of such a consciousness with ethically irresponsible or politically culpable quietism. Clearly, the ways we act politically, the forms taken by our partisanship and either advocacy or critiques, can be determined more rather than less thoughtfully and on the basis of information that is more rather than less extensive, accurate, and relevant. Political actions can also be determined with greater rather than lesser concern for possible consequences, for broader and longer-term rather than only immediate and local consequences, and for consequences for wider rather than narrower ranges of people. In all these respects, political actions can be judged better rather than worse in the sense of being more rather than less ethically responsive and more rather than less effective in achieving either the particular political ends sought or some more broadly shared social goals. For these reasons, relativistic views, in the senses I have evoked here, do not make ethical or political judgments impossible. Moreover, when political activities are described and assessed in terms of the broad ethical and pragmatic dimensions just described, it is clear that their energies are not diminished by what are called relativist convictions. On the contrary, it seems obvious that such convictions—that is, an acute consciousness of the historical and cultural contingency of human perceptions, interpretations, and judgments (including one's own) and of the sometimes significant variability of human interests and perspectives—would tend to make someone's activities both more ethically responsive than and also, in the long run, at least as politically effective as actions undertaken by someone with resolutely universalist, absolutist, and/or objectivist convictions regarding the Truth and the Way.

Relativistic considerations do not commonly paralyze personal agency. They may, however, affect the form of the actions one takes and the processes by which one arrives at them. For example, a strong consciousness of the possible relevance of unknown conditions and alternative perspectives may qualify the terms and tones in which one issues a denunciation or calls for an intervention. Such considerations may also make one hesitate—take more time, review a wider range of options—before one grabs a gun or gives an order to fire one. It is not clear, however, that these are politically undesirable effects. As the sorry history

of many political movements and interventions suggests, the contingencies we deny and the variability we overlook for the sake of solidarity or for a show of unshakable conviction commonly come back to hit us or haunt us.

When thoughtfully worked through and put into practice responsibly, relativist convictions—in the sense of a cultivated consciousness of the variability and contingency of what operates as the real, the true, or the good—are neither ethically nor politically compromising. But, of course, not all relativistic convictions *are* thoughtfully worked through or responsibly evoked. On the contrary, expressed in sloganized forms (*everybody has his own opinion, who's to say what's good or bad*, and so forth), such ideas can be voiced mindlessly, lazily, and often with very bad manners (for example, condescendingly) or with very base motives (for example, to justify otherwise objectionable self-serving policies or practices). This recognition brings me to some concluding observations.

IV

There are many reasons why the invocation of relativism, or even just reference to it as a topic, can be distasteful. For one thing, its exceptional elusiveness, as detailed earlier, makes relativism a genuine headache to think about, difficult to describe coherently, and almost impossible to argue about productively. Also the recurrent philosophical equation of relativism with foolish or crude positions, such as an everything-is-equal-to-everything-else egalitarianism or an anything-goes nihilism, operates as a distinct disincentive to introduction of the term, even where it would be descriptively apt.²³ Most significantly, perhaps, the mindless, lazy, or cynical voicing of relativist slogans, as just described, gives relativism an understandably bad name among intellectually and ethically scrupulous people and, for that reason and others, leads to its strenuous disavowal by thinkers whose views, given a range of familiar characterizations, might well be regarded as relativistic.²⁴ If we seek to dispel fire-breathing chimeras, these difficulties must be recognized.

23. For analysis of these dubious equations, see Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 150–54, and *Belief and Resistance*, 77–78. The strenuous rejection of relativism among philosophers may also involve its ancient association with the intellectually shaming charge—and, of course, sometimes quite valid exposure—of self-refutation. For discussion of this point, see Smith, “Unloading the Self-Refutation Charge.”

24. Such a disavowal occurs, for example, at the end of an analysis by Jacques Derrida of various contemporary proposals for responding to the use and/or abuse of drugs.

The analysis itself is thoroughly mindful of contingency and explicitly committed to methodological symmetry and evenhandedness:

Depending on the circumstance . . . the discourse of “interdiction” can be justified *just as well or just as badly* as the liberal discourse. . . . Since it is impossible to justify absolutely either the one or the other of these practices, one can never absolutely condemn them. In an emergency, this can only lead to equivocations, negotiations, and unstable compromises. And in any given, progressively evolving situation, these will need to be guided by a concern for the singularity of each individual experience and by a socio-political analysis

General observations to the effect that meanings and values are radically contingent, or that perceptions, interpretations, and judgments are essentially variable, have been articulated with a variety of affects and motives: earnestly, ironically, in good faith, in bad faith, despairingly, gleefully, to challenge dubious claims of objectivity or universality, to explain incomprehensible difference, to plead for tolerance, to justify neglect. But occasional or even frequent delivery with bad manners or base motives does not make such observations invalid. Nor does it oblige us to shore up or reaffirm otherwise dubious conceptions of objective truth, universal value, or transcendent criteria. Rather, when general ideas of variability or contingency are invoked and applied objectionably—for instance, where an ill-considered view is lazily excused as “just one man’s opinion” or an immediately consequential objectionable practice is shrugged off as “traditional in our/their culture”—then exposure and criticism are properly directed at the laziness, cynicism, or obscurantism involved, not at general observations of variability or contingency, or at that cloudy creature “relativism.”

Finally, the horror or embarrassment of relativism is, I suspect, the horror or humiliation of mortality. Observations of radical contingency and irreducible variability are disagreeable because they remind us that our achievements are fragile, that our meanings are not altogether under our control, and that there may not be truth at the end of our efforts or justice at the end of our struggles. They are disagreeable because they oblige us to recognize the limited significance of all that we hold important, the perishability of all that we cherish, and our own fickleness and faithlessness. Some people regard these reminders as pessimistic or nihilistic; others see them as useful in pursuit of a sensible and ethical life. It’s no doubt a matter of personal temperament. As folk-relativist wisdom has it, it takes all kinds to make a world and there’s no point arguing about tastes. Of course that would include intellectual worlds and philosophical tastes.

that is at once as broadly and as finely tuned as possible. I say this not to avoid the question any more than I do to argue for relativism.

Jacques Derrida, “The Rhetoric of Drugs,” in *Points . . . Interviews, 1974–1994*, ed. Elisabeth Weber (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 239. The passage is quoted by Martin Hägglund in his recent study, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 234. The quotation follows Hägglund’s sympathetic explication of a form of political thinking that he terms “hyperpoliticization”:

For a hyperpolitical thinking, nothing (no set of values, no principle, no demand or political struggle) can

be posited as good in itself. . . . Rather than having an ultimate legitimacy, it [any political order] can be challenged on the basis of what it does not include and must remain open to contestation because of its temporal constitution. To assert such a condition is not to give in to relativism” (184–85). These disavowals of an undefined relativism appended to exceptionally rigorous articulations of absolutism-rejecting views raise the question of what, in each case, *relativism* and either “argu[ing] for” or “giv[ing] in to” it are understood to mean. More generally, one might ask: on the basis of what specific considerations of intellectual history, or as the result of what individual experiences of usages of the term, are such disavowals thought necessary?