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Relativism Relativized: A Review of *Relativism and Post-Truth in Contemporary Society: Possibilities and Challenges*

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*Relativism and Post-Truth in Contemporary Society: Possibilities and Challenges*  
Edited by Mikael Stenmark, Steve Fuller, and Ulf Zackariasson  
Palgrave Macmillan, 2018  
199 pp.

As I commit my thoughts to ink on paper, I hear a fly buzzing around my ear. The fly happened to fly from a workshop about relativism, and its varieties, as it occurs in today's society. Needless to say, I attempted to chase the fly out the window of my attic, where I sit perspiring in hot summer days and freezing on cold winter days, penning my philosophical investigations. However, the fly was persistent and had a philosophical air about it: it advised me that the essays in this book that I am attempting to review objectively and fairly were essays developed from the heated and penetrating discussions among the leading edge thinkers in attendance at an invited only workshop. No one had a hammer or paintbrush, the fly advised me. It was a workshop where one hammers out thoughts, and paints intellectual scenarios, but only with words.

Soon it dawned on me that I was inventing a philosophical fiction: the fly does not speak, and if it did I would not understand it; because fly-language has its own form of life, and all meaning and understanding is relative to forms of life, frameworks, conceptual systems, cultures, linguistic systems. Moreover, I am using a computer where everything on the screen is ephemeral, and even when saved to a local or cloud drive, the bits and bytes are subject to the delete button. Further, as reality punctures the balloon of my philosophical fantasy, I realize I am in a strange paradoxical situation: On one side, my thoughts about the essays in this book are relative to my education, physical and social conditions, and especially to my philosophical biases. On the other side, there is a reality, a situation that is objective and that is presumed even by this book about relativism: the objective social and technological reality, even if it is “socially constructed”. It is a situation that is universally socially constructed for everyone alive on earth at this moment in history; not just today, but at least since the end of the Cold War until this moment when almost everyone is tied to the world through the intermediary of smart devices. Where even leading edge thinkers about relativism in workshops have tablets on their desk, smart devices in hand, or poking out of pockets, and are checking their tweets and email. I wasn't there, but the fly told me that.

My point is that relativism (of perspective) is ironically an absolute, a universal condition of our global electronic village where everyone can blog, tweet, email their relative perspective to everyone else; but have no acknowledgment of their relative perspective for longer than ten minutes, relatively speaking. (Apologies to McLuhan and Warhol.)

### **Relativism and Current Reality**

Now someone might wonder, while reading my words so far, have I left my philosophical fantasy behind me, and have I now become real. I owe this patient reader who has so far borne with me in my philosophical musings, not only my gratitude, but honesty, as far as one can be honest given that we all work from specific perspectives and are caught, as Ulf Zacariasson states, in his introductory essay, in the “*dynamic of relativization*” (2, italics in

original). That is to say, I now out myself as an anti-relativist and anti-post-truthist, as theories or ideologies or philosophies: the material conditions of our global socio-technical world are real, and if they are ignored, as they have already been mostly ignored, the real world will continue to hit all of us on earth. As we have begun to lose, we will continue to completely lose our identity as humans, whether we are post-human, transhuman, or just human. We are on the verge of becoming peripheral devices. (Embedded advertisement for my forthcoming book.) In other words, philosophical relativism, in all its philosophical variations, misses the target of how to work with our current reality of the socio-technical condition of our world today. That is my bias, and I find it hard to take seriously the philosophical discussions and philosophical understandings of relativism, not for philosophical reasons, but for real world reasons. I feel obligated to admit that I may be wrong, because I am a skeptic and a fallibilist, according to the definitions kindly provided in the essay, by Mikael Stenmark:

a skeptic would say: "Truth is not to be had by us"..  
a fallibilist would say: "One cannot be certain that what one believes to be (obviously) true is true"... (188)

One can treat skepticism and fallibilism, not as epistemological or philosophical theories, but as *analytic* or *methodological* concepts, to borrow the terminology used by Mattias Gardell, in his essay (161 ff.) when he discusses how relativism is used by anthropologists: "Cultural relativism...was not a theory, nor an ideology, but an *analytical perspective*, a *method*, and quite simply, an *empirical observation* of cultural diversity." (163-164, italics in original). So, when relativism is used as a philosophical theory as opposed to either an observational approach for describing cultures, or a methodology for interpreting cultures, relativism becomes cognitively empty and merely emotionally resonant both for the proponents and antagonists of the theory and ideology of relativism. Does that critique of relativism as a theory, including those who recognize the relativity of alternative theories of relativism, cut across virtually every essay in this book other than Gardell's essay?

The answer to my own question is, No. The essay by Morteza Hashemi and Amir R. Bagherpour discusses the critical-religious philosophy of Abdolkarim Soroush, "a prominent figure in religious intellectualism, which is an important intellectual movement in post-revolutionary Iran" (71). I haven't read Soroush or even heard of Soroush prior to reading this essay. I will just quote the sentences that relativize relativism to an absolute that according to Hashemi and Bagherpour is how Soroush contrasts "religious knowledge" with "sacred law":

... religion per se is created by God but religious knowledge is human made. The sacred law is divinely created but its understanding is a human enterprise. His [Soroush's] proposed analogy is to the natural sciences: nature is God-created but its knowledge is ultimately an evolving product of the human mind. Sciences such as physics and mathematics are not divine, and hence are inherently incomplete (77).

Interestingly, the position of Soroush (as I understand what Hashemi and Bagherpour are saying about Soroush), echoes what Mikael Stenmark, in his essay, is saying about Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI): the core of Catholicism as Ratzinger sees it is true and

absolute: “His [Ratzinger's] basic stance is that there is a truth, valid and binding within history itself, in the figure of Jesus Christ and in the faith of the Church” (190). Though, Stenmark sees Ratzinger's absolutism as problematic: “the real challenge for the Catholic Church might be whether it can offer a valid criticism of relativism without, at the same time, falling prey to the forms of unquestionable religious absolutism which seem to have haunted the Catholic Church for too long” (195).

The point of the contrast I am making between Hashemi and Bagherpour on Soroush, and Stenmark on Ratzinger, is that Ratzinger, according to Stenmark fails to relativize relativism, but outright rejects relativism in toto; whereas, Soroush, according to Hashemi and Bagherpour, relativizes relativism of the human sciences to the absolute laws of Islamic religion. As far as I can tell, the two authors of the essay discussing Soroush do not disagree with Soroush's relativization of relativism to an absolute truth; whereas, the author of the essay discussing Ratzinger disagrees with Ratzinger's stance that Catholicism is founded on an absolute truth.

### **Relativizing Relativism**

Another essay that relativizes relativism with respect to an absolute, is Elena Namli's essay on rights. I am compelled to give only a brief and simplified summary of her complex, layered, and multifaceted argument about moral standards, cultural tolerance, and multiculturalism. Namli is saying that we need to use the concept of universal rights to avoid entrenching inequalities, to avoid minority exclusionism, and to avoid perpetuating injustices against the less powerful in society. We avoid such injustices not by treating rights as obviously universal, but rather treating our theories of universal rights as fallible and correctable, and as a necessary means to getting closer to the ideal of absolute universal rights. Indeed, Namli is an absolutist towards the goal of working to achieve universal human rights, while keeping our fallibility and actual failures in mind.

Namli wants us to relativize what we think is our universal right to the ideal world of universal human rights: “What, then, can be described as the universal substance of human rights? In my [Namli's] view, it is the radical and practical recognition of the humanity inherent in every individual. This principle of equal respect for human dignity is a pure ethical principle that cannot be fully realized by any particular set of institutions. Neither law, nor politics, nor conventional morality can ever live up to this radical norm. Yet, the principle of equal respect for human dignity remains crucial in order to create, sustain, and improve institutions for the protection of human beings” (137).

The situation so far in this review is: following Gardell, we can regard relativity, not as a theory nor as an ideology, but as a method, an “analytical process”; and, following Namli, we can relativize relativity towards, not a known absolute, but an unknown absolute. The relativization of relativity is realized in the process of the critical discussion of attempts to achieve universal moral standards and universal truths as unknown absolutes. The relativization of relativity with respect to an unknowable reality of absolutes, is a heuristic principle: a guideline, or a system of guidelines and rules of thumb used for systematic search and research. Let me now do a relativized relativist (relativity as a heuristic principle for

critical but non-judgmental discussion, where criticism involves, error-detection but not appraisal or judgment) review of the rest of the essays. My purpose in discussing those essays that advocate relativism and its varieties as a theory, is to give the reader glimpses into how the entire book as a workshop compendium looks from a bird's eye view (or philosophical fly's multifaceted eyes).

Steve Fuller's historical essay aims to show how the relativism of today differs from the relativism of the past. All varieties of relativism vary in meanings along with the meanings of absolutism and universalism to which the varieties of relativism are variously contrasted.

Raphael Sassower's comparison of various forms and philosophies of relativism among feminists, postmodernists, and Sir Karl Popper, hinge on their relation to pluralism, democratic discussion, democratic institutions, and democratic political systems. According to Sassower, the more pluralism, the more relativism, the more democracy.

Michael Sawyer's discussion of social media and Trump discusses the question how did Trump who is master of the media become the master of the post-truth condition? For Trump and his squad, reality-checks have been overridden by the power principle, even more so than by the pleasure principle. (Apologies to Freud.)

Benat Gustafsson asks how Einstein could suffer so much at the hands of relativity-theory deniers? By the way, Gustafsson thinks Derrida understood Einstein's space-time theory correctly. This tacitly calls for a discussion of the question, why was it so hard for scientists to understand Derrida's comments on Einstein correctly?

Valerie DeMarinis asks a very important question right in the title of her essay: "Mental Health Diagnosis: Is it Relative or Universal in Relation to Culture"? This hints for a discussion that DeMarinis does not address of two questions asked by various critics of the medical model: is mental health/disease based on the medical model, a social construction relative to the culture of psychiatry? (Thomas Szasz) Is the medical model of the lack of health (non-optimal functioning) as illness/disease, in general, a social construction relative to the culture of medicine? (Susan Sontag) I would be remiss not to mention that DeMarinis's discussion of the role of the increasingly improved understanding of the role of culture in psychiatric conditions, is replete with nuance. But bluntly and simplistically put, DeMarinis's thesis is that culture can make one psychotic, or at least contribute to psychosis.

Stephen LeDrew makes the point that the scientism of the New Atheists (no mention that F.A. Hayek reinvented the term scientism, and thoroughly hung scientism out to dry) has become the new fundamentalism. Is relativism needed to combat scientism? LeDrew says, Yes. (My guess is, No: just need to reread Hayek, but I didn't say that. I overheard the philosophical fly still buzzing my ear, say that.)

### **The Burning Castle**

The philosophical fly returned, and begs me to rest my pen, and let him/her/it out. I'll do my best, but the bottle of relativism is hard to escape and intellectual workshops are closed and isolated from the burning house across the street from Academia U.

There is a Midrash, a classical Rabbinical gloss on the Bible passage where Avram is told to leave his natal home and land, and travel forth: Avram runs across a castle on fire. He asks, who owns this castle on fire, and the Lord of the castle pops his head out the window, and tells him that he, the Lord of the castle, does. I don't know whether Avram wondered why the Lord of the castle did not attempt to put out the flames: was the Lord of the castle a fire denier? Did the Lord of the castle think that the observation of the fire and whether or not it should be put out is relative to one's position with respect to the castle? Or did the Lord of the castle and the philosophical members of his court, also known as court jesters, deem Avram to be too anxious? Did they also deem Avram to have suffered the illusion of seeing a fire where everything is an illusion, a social construction? Did they also deem Avram to have failed in understanding that when everything is relative, it is no more real than everything else, unless the Lord of the burning castle and his court jesters will it to become part of post-truth reality?