RELATIVISM AND WIDE REFLECTIVE EQUILIBRIUM

I

The method of appealing to considered judgments in Wide Reflective Equilibrium has been thought to have unwelcome relativistic or ethnocentric implications. This belief, which is widely held, is, I shall argue, mistaken. Wide Reflective equilibrium (Hereafter WRE) has no such untoward implications. I shall first specify what I am talking about in speaking of relativism, then generally characterize WRE, then deploy some central arguments for it and finally try to show that it has no relativistic implications.

"Relativism" has different uses and it is possible to think that it is a label for nothing that is clear. Rather than give a typology of the major relativisms I shall specify two types of relativism (later supplemented by a third) that may have at least some initial plausibility. There is a form of relativism, let us call it *ethical relativism*, which claims that what is right or good for one individual or society need not be right or good for another even when the situations involved are similar. The ethical relativist is making the moral claim that what is really right or good in the one case need not be so in the other. The other form of relativism I shall discuss, let us call it *meta-ethical relativism* (it has also been called moral skepticism), claims that there are no objectively sound procedures for justifying one moral code or one set of moral judgments as over against another. Two moral codes may be equally "sound" and two moral claims may be equally "justified" or "reasonable." There is no way of establishing what is "the true moral code" or the singly correct set of moral beliefs among conflicting sets of belief.

What is in common to these two forms of relativism is, of course, the denial of objectivity to moral belief. Two people or two groups can disagree morally without it being the case that either is mistaken or that it can be established that one person or group has a more adequate moral conception than the other. They both could very well be equally adequate. There just is nothing, if either of these forms of relativism is true, that gives moral beliefs objectivity: that shows that certain moral beliefs or a certain code must be accepted as the correct way to view the world morally yielding the right principles and practices in accordance with which we must act.

II

It is natural to believe that WRE has relativistic implications because WRE appeals, and essentially appeals, to considered judgments and considered judgments sometimes vary between individuals, classes, and cultures. Given that there are these differences in considered judgments and given the strategic role considered judgments play in WRE, relativism, the claim goes, is inescapable.

Before examining this claim we should see what WRE is and what its underlying rationale is. WRE is a holistic anti-foundationalist account of morality. There is, on such an account, no conception of basic or fundamental moral beliefs or principles which will provide an unchallengeable basis for moral belief. WRE sets aside any such quest for certainty, any such effort to discover or even construct moral foundations for moral beliefs in accordance with which we could provide a framework to assess extant moralities or judge the rationality of taking the moral point of view. For WRE there can be no such ahistorical, perfectly general, Archimedean point. Indeed the very idea of seeking an Archimedean point will be seen to be a mistake.

WRE instead, using a coherentist model, starts with our considered judgments given in the traditions which are a part of our culture. (The equilibrium we seek is clearly a social equilibrium.) It does not, with talk of desires, wants, preferences, or even considered preferences, try to "get behind" what in the life-world of which we are a part are our most firmly fixed considered judgments or convictions given to us in our traditions.[1] It does not try to show how these considered judgments, one by one, match with or answer to something more fundamental: some reality, natural or non-natural, that just makes moral judgments true. Even the considered judgments themselves, including the firmest of them, do not at all have some *sui generis* "ontological status" which would render them unchallengeable.

Starting with that, WRE seeks first to set out perspicuously what for a time are our most firmly fixed considered judgments, winnowing out those convictions which we would only have when we were fatigued, emotionally excited, drunk, caught up with an ideology, misinformed about the facts and the like. With such a cluster of considered convictions—that is, firmly held, winnowed, moral beliefs—WRE then seeks to match these considered judgments with more general moral principles consistent with them (which may themselves also be more abstract considered judgments), which also explain them and rationalize them (in this way show they have an underlying rationale) and in this distinctive way justify them.

However, WRE goes beyond that, for if it were to limit itself to such a rationalizing of considered convictions it would be, as some of its careless critics have maintained, a form of intuitionism or something rather like intuitionism: the matching of more specific moral judgments with more general ones, sometimes rejecting particular considered judgments which are not in accordance with the more abstract principles and sometimes modifying or even abandoning those abstract principles, say the principle of utility or perfectionist principles, which failed to match with a whole cluster of firmly held, more specific considered judgments.[2] The thing here, in a rational reconstruction of our considered judgments, is to get them into a coherent and consistent package. But this narrow or partially reflective equilibrium would never give us a *critical* morality.

What WRE seeks to do is to get beyond this rational reconstruction of narrow reflective equilibrium to a wide reflective equilibrium which not only will get specific considered convictions in equilibrium with abstract moral principles but gets both in a consistent whole with moral and social theories and with other scientific theories about the nature of human nature. We appeal in rationalizing and, in some instances, criticizing, specific considered judgments not only to abstract moral principles but as well to whole moral theories, empirical-cum-theoretical theories about the function(s) of morality in society, about social structure, the basis of solidarity in society, theories of social stratification, class, and gender, theories about ideology, human nature and the like. The thing is to get our considered convictions, jettisoning some along the way where they fit badly, into a coherent fit with such general moral principles and with those background social theories and so on. What we seek is a consistent and coherent equilibrium to which we, on reflection, would assent.

There are no moral foundations here, no underlying foundationalist moral epistemologies, no principles *à la* Bentham, Kant or Sidgwick, that we must just accept as self-evident intuitions or basic beliefs on which everything else rests. There is nothing in WRE that is basic or foundational. Instead we weave and unweave the fabric of our beliefs until we get, for a time, though only for a time, the most consistent and coherent package which best squares with everything we reasonably believe we know and to which we, on reflection, are most firmly committed. There are some extensively fixed points, points which we *may* always in fact obtain anywhere, anywhen, but they are still, logically speaking, provisional fixed points which are not, in theory at least, beyond question, if they turn out not to fit in with the web of our beliefs and reflective commitments, commitments which will not be extinguished when we take them to heart under conditions of undistorted discourse.

We start in WRE with an at least initially justificatory appeal to the considered convictions of whatever cultural traditions that happen to have been socialized into our very marrow. We first, reflecting back on them, seek, as I have already noted, to eliminate those considered convictions which would not jibe with a fair appraisal of the facts, would not be held in a cool hour and when we are not fatigued, drunk, under strain and the like. We seek, in trying to forge a critical morality, to get a consistent set of such considered judgments, eliminating one or another of whatever conflicting judgments remain by seeing which of them adheres best with our other considered judgments, with our background beliefs, more generalized factual assessments and the like. When, after such winnowing, we still have some remaining conflicting considered convictions, we should stick with the consistent subset of convictions that have the *strongest appeal* when we take them to heart and agonize over which to hold on to. These last considerations, of course, bring in the sentiments. But as David Hume and Adam Smith so well saw, it is folly to think that in the domain of the moral we should even try to bypass appeals to sentiment. But here sentiment is not the ultimate or final appeal. It is not that, when push comes to shove, we must simply appeal to our preferences. There is on a coherentist account no ultimate or final appeal. There are no foundational elements hidden or explicit. The sentiments are rather one element in a cluster of considerations that we seek to place in a coherent and consistent whole.

Getting such an initial set (perhaps cluster would be the better, less scientistic, word) we try to construct general principles or see if there is in our tradition already extant general principles which will account for our holding them and, as well, interpret them. (These principles may themselves be higher-level considered judgments.) But these principles will also have a justificatory role. (But they also will *not* be ultimate.) If there are considered judgments from our set of more concrete considered judgments which conflict among themselves but one is in accordance with these higher-order principles and the other is not, then, *ceteris paribus*, we should accept the more specific considered judgment that is in accordance with our higher-order moral principles and reject the other conflicting more specific considered judgment. It is also the case, as we have seen, that some considered judgments are more firmly assented to than others. They have a greater pull on our reflective sentiments. We should give that, in our reflections, some initial weight.

Consider now what we should do when we have half-considered judgments: judgments that we are tempted to hold on some grounds and to reject on others—judgments, that is, that we are less sure of than the more deeply embedded ones, though still judgments we are tempted to make. If

that half-considered judgment can be seen to conflict with a higher-order moral principle that squares with a lot of firmly held specific considered judgments and with other higher-order moral principles as well, then we have a very good reason to at least modify that half-considered judgment until it coheres with the rest, and, if we cannot get it in such a pattern of coherence, to reject it. However, if we have a higher-order moral principle that conflicts with a great mass of lower-level very deeply entrenched considered judgments, as perhaps the principle of utility does, then, again, *ceteris paribus*, we have a good reason to reject the higher-order principle.

We shuttle back and forth, as John Rawls puts it, until we get these various elements in an equilibrium with which we on reflection wish to stick.[3] We extend this to *wide* reflective equilibrium when we add various background theories and principles, standardly empirical-cum-theoretical theories such as theories about social structure, theories about social change, about the function(s) of morality, ideology or the economy, theories of the person and the like. We seek in a similar way to shuttle back and forth between considered judgments, moral principles, moral theories and social theories (and perhaps other theories as well) until we get a coherent package that would meet our reflective expectations and hopes: for a time, but only for a time, a stable reflective equilibrium in the unending dialectical process of weaving and unweaving the patterns of our belief in order to make sense of our lives, to see things as comprehensively and connectedly as we reasonably can, and to guide our conduct.

We start here from traditions and return to them. There can be no simple stepping out of our societies and traditions—the life-world that we are part of—to just be rational agents, moral agents, or political animals *überhaupt*. We will never be without our more or less local identities, though they need not ethnocentrically hobble us. The very idea of being just a representative of humanity is not merely utopian; it is incoherent. But we are not imprisoned by our traditions either. No belief is in principle immune to criticism and rejection and whole traditions, plank by plank, can be transformed as we repair and even rebuild the ship at sea.

III

An illustration of what we are doing might not be unhelpful. Serious social moral problems pervasively tend also to be political problems and we must come to seek the resolution of our historically determinate moral problems against the background of theories of social change and of possible epochal social development. Certain kinds of work relations, to take

an example, seem very wrong indeed, but the moral criticisms we would make of them cannot reasonably be independent of what work relations are possible in an industrial world and what they are and can be in turn cannot be answered independently of whether socialism and, if so, what kind of socialism, if any, is on our historical agenda. What we need to do is to display the possibilities—genuine causal possibilities—here and to try to make some reasonble judgment about which of the various possibilities are the most desirable.

It is in the doing of the latter that the method of wide reflective equilibrium is particularly important. Suppose that one of the possibilities is so to organize work that we have small worker-controlled and worker-owned firms often competing with one another. Another is to have large state owned and hierarchically controlled factories run by the state (i.e., by a bureaucracy of state managers) but where the wages are high, the workplace clean and safe, the hours reasonable and there is little in the way of responsibility required of the workers coupled with their having considerable security. Which, where these are our only feasible alternatives, is the more desirable future to try to make our own? In trying to come to a conclusion here we would try to trace out the probable life consequences of the various choices. We would need to make specific moral judgments about various work situations here and relate them to the more general values of our society such as the comparative value we would attach in conditions of moderate scarcity to security, autonomy, happiness, creativity and the like and, taking all these elements together, and others as well, we would try to get the most coherent package of considered judgments and policy recommendations that we would on reflection be prepared to accept. But this is just to use the method of wide reflective equilibrium, though, following Jürgen Habermas, we would seek, as an ideal, though often, perhaps always, only as a heuristic ideal, to carry out these deliberations under conditions of undistorted discourse where the ideas of discursive freedom and argumentational fairness obtained. To the extent that our deliberations about what is right or wrong, just or unjust, in seeking to attain a reflective equilibrium, are carried out under conditions approximating those of undistorted discourse, we can be more confident of their adequacy.

We have here with the use of wide reflective equilibrium a coherentist model of justification. A further desideratum is to get a consensus about when we are in such a state. The hope is, against post-modernist skepticism, to gain not only a consensus but a *rational* consensus. If we can approximate Habermasian conditions of undistorted discourse and, if, as well, we

have a consensus in moral belief rooted in a mutually recognized and accepted wide reflective equilibrium, then we have a rational consensus.

I say that under such a circumstance, we would have a rational consensus because our beliefs under such circumstances would not be ideologically distorted and would, as well, cohere together in the widest possible equilibrium: an equilibrium where our specific reflective considered judgments matched with our moral principles, principles that in turn best matched with, and were, as well, rationalized by, a moral theory that resulted from a comparison of the range of moral theories historically available or constructible by careful thought, where each theory, to facilitate the comparison, was in turn cast in the same role. It would also be the case, where we carried out this method, that both the considered judgments and the theories, where we had for a time attained reflective equilibrium, would match with what we know about the world, the best available human sciences and social theories, the best account we have of the role of morality in society and our best natural-science knowledge, including the cosmological claims that in that circumstance could most reasonably be made. (The latter are important where religious issues are likely to enter into our moral deliberations.)

The overarching aim is to get the best fit possible of all these diverse elements, elements which are themselves the best warranted elements in their respective domains. With such elements, taken together, we seek to forge a coherent package. When we have such coherence we have for a time attained wide reflective equilibrium, though, as our knowledge and understanding increases, we will get other and more adequate wide reflective equilibria. No ethical theory utilizing WRE can in its substantive claims be once-and-for-all, eternally fixed, though we can hope for a development analogous to the development of science. If a consensus rooted in such a wide reflective equilibrium is not a rational consensus what then would a rational consensus look like? It seems to me, though I am unsure how further to argue for it, that such a consensus is just what we would take a rational consensus in such domains to be. (This indeed may be an implicit but non-stipulative definition of what counts as "a rational consensus" in such contexts.)

In attaining such a wide equilibrium, we must include particular considered judgments given by our sense of justice and right operating in determinate contexts where particular moral problems arise. These judgments are in turn rationalized in the way the method of wide reflective equilibrium specifies. This rationalization, as we have seen, involves a shuttling back and forth between theories, principles and concrete moral judgments with a

mutual correction between them until we have, for a time, considering them together, the best fit. This is a method for coming to grips with determinate problems of human beings which could be utilized in social disputes and by people doing applied ethics and it answers to the interests of the pragmatists in a more determinate way than they were able to specify themselves. Moreover, wide reflective equilibrium provides a way of coherently appealing both to the general and the theoretical and, as well, to the particular and "the practical" in the attempt to provide an account of moral beliefs, practices, and even of whole theories. And this in turn fits nicely with Habermas's argument in *The Theory of Communicative Action* that the social scientist does not have a privileged position in social assessment, for she, like everyone else, must rely on a potential for critical reasoning which participants in the society with their different forms of discourse (theoretical, practical, and aesthetic) already possess, though typically not in a highly articulate form. Habermas's communicative model of social action attributes to people acting and speaking in the society "just as rich an interpretive competence as the observer himself." With this non-privileging of the observer's perspective, there is no suppression, as there is in scientistic modes of thought, of common-sense conceptions of what is good and bad, right and wrong, or fair and unfair, though this is not to suggest that these common-sense conceptions cannot be criticized or should not be criticized or that we cannot come to have more adequate moral beliefs than those given in common-sense. This also gives us a basis, and wide reflective equilibrium provides a rationale for it, of non-eclectically integrating ethnomethodological, phenomenological and hermeneutical conceptions of social action into a critical theory of society.

IV

I seek in a good Quinean way to set out beliefs, including our moral beliefs, into a coherent web of belief. Derridian deconstruction and dissemination, by contrast, seek to disrupt, to break our confidence and complacency by getting us to see, as David Hoy well puts it, our traditions, our forms of life, our webs of belief, "not as a harmonious, progressive whole, a cozy web of beliefs, but as a tissue of fabrications, a patchwork of remnants."[4] Indeed, Hans Gadamer, Peter Winch and Martin Heidegger are right in believing that we have come to be who and what we are through our own historical tradition—how else could we be socialized?—but that does not justify our accepting its *authority*. Hermeneutists such as Gadamer are mistaken (logocentric is Derrida's phrase) in assuming "that texts or the

'call of Being' have an authoritative say to which we must listen respectful-
ly."[5]

I think we should respond with both a Yes and No here. We have to say
"No" in the sense that unless we have an initiation into a culture or tradi-
tion we will have, except perhaps in some very, very rudimentary sense, no
understanding at all. For establishing for a culture what is intelligible and
for the norms with which we must start, there can be no avoiding such an in-
itiation, such a participant's understanding.[6] Traditional norms are in-
escapable and they cannot but have an *initial* authority. It is also reasonable
to see if we can put our various moral beliefs (some given by our tradition),
or at least a considerable cluster of them, widely felt to be particularly im-
portant, into a coherent package. There is at least no *a priori* reason why,
even if we are careful, we must fail or even that we should be expected to
fail. That is the "No" to the deconstructionist claim.

However, there is a "Yes" to be said here as well. Among our moral
beliefs there are surely likely to be some that are little better than supersti-
tions. There are others that become effectively "ours" through domination,
manipulation or from our having cosmological conceptions which are not
only outmoded but without rational warrant. In certain contexts, and par-
ticularly in the context of class divisions, with the depth and pervasiveness
of ideological indoctrination and mystification through the culture in-
dustry, it is important to come to recognize that some of our moral beliefs
(perhaps more than we ever expected) are at least in part fabrications, a
patchwork of remnants. We should be very wary indeed of getting these
beliefs into some reflective equilibrium and we should also beware, in seek-
ing equilibria, of too quick a closure here. This is something that should
make us wary of narrow reflective equilibrium and should make us seek a
very wide reflective equilibrium indeed.

Faced with the initial situation in which we are inescapably en-
culturated into a tradition, we then, even as our web of belief is stamped in
and developed, come to have, perhaps due to our big brains, something of
the capacity to question or at least in various ways to react against our en-
culturation.[7] Still, we need to have first been enculturated into some tradi-
tion even to be able to so react. For the human animal, tradition is the first
word. That notwithstnding, dissemination (the Derridian notion) is surely
important here; sometimes we do not want—or at least should not want—a
cozy web of belief; we need, instead, to shake up our beliefs, or even to
through-and-through undermine certain of them, and sometimes the ones
to be undermined are anything but peripheral beliefs for us. But this cannot
literally be all our beliefs *holus bolus*. For, if we rejected them all, we could

not even iconoclastically react to our fabrications, to our remnants, so as to be able to recognize them as fabrications or remnants that we might react against or reject as inappropriate to our lives. At any given time, some norms from our traditional cluster must stand fast at least initially. If that were not so, we would not even be able to be iconoclasts or to transvaluate values. However, we might be utterly baffled in a particular circumstance as to which moral beliefs are in for undermining, which are to be stood by, which modified and the like. We might not even begin to know enough in a particular situation to know how to get our beliefs into something even approximating reflective equilibrium. All we might have is a rather inchoate feeling that something is rotten in the state of Denmark.

I think we should be both wary of that feeling and respect it. It could be an irrational reaction but it also might be an inarticulate moral sensitivity that we should respect. It is rationalism gone wild to think we should just generally set aside such gut feelings. They may answer to something very important in us for which later we may come to find a more rationalized voice. To reject those feelings, to always, or even usually, set them aside or bracket them, particularly when they are dwelt on and persist in a cool hour, is a very questionable philosophical conservatism with possible consequences in the political domain which are also conservative. It is possibly a very irrational fear of what *may* turn out to be irrational. Such caution, such distrust of the sentiments, is, or so it seems to me, *not* an attitude which furthers human emancipation. We should not so monolithically and routinely set aside as irrational what we through-and-through feel morally even when we cannot, at some given time, or perhaps ever, adequately rationalize it. Sometimes in the roughness of our social world we can do little more than, sticking with our inchoate moral sense, resist the forces that oppress us and dominate us. Foucault has been of immeasurable help here. Sometimes, that is, we can only fight back with whatever resources we have against the forces that oppress us and sometimes, where our alienation is very deep, the task is to come to see *that* we are oppressed and something of how we are oppressed.

The task of the unmasker, say a Foucault or a Chomsky, is sometimes just to do this and to show the moral agent (Moore's plain man) that in so resisting there is nothing unreasonable in his behavior. And, of course, the moral philosopher or social theorist, in one of his or her roles, is also a moral agent. (After all she or he is not a blithe spirit.) Yet without reneging on her determination to resist and to trust her inchoate moral feelings, the moral agent, who is also a moral theorist and a moral critic, should do her utmost to find a rationale for those feelings—a rationale that would with-

stand reflective scrutiny—and, failing that, to try to see if there is not, after all, a "dark side" to those feelings which, if brought to light, would make them (or some of them) problematical, perhaps even so problematical that some would be good candidates for extinction. In such scrutinizing wide reflective equilibrium is an indispensible way of going about things.

<div align="center">V</div>

It should be evident that such an account is neither an ethical relativism nor a meta-ethical relativism. Indeed it is not in any plausible sense relativist. We must start, of course, by seeing things by our own lights—where else could we start?—and, though we can and indeed should venture far afield, we must return, when for some particular time we need a temporary closure (the only kind we will ever get), to seeing things by our own lights. This should be, though unfortunately it is not, seen to be the commonplace it is rather than as a source of nihilistic or relativistic jitters. It is not relativistic because, though we start from considered judgments and indeed at least *some* of them will be eccentric to a given culture, they are all correctable in the way specified by WRE. Indeed we appeal to them all along the line in utilizing WRE but in all those utilizations the considered judgments are criticizable, correctable and even replaceable. We have, that is, with a morality resulting from WRE or in accordance with it, a critical morality rather than a morality of received opinion.

A judgment for an individual or a group is not secure, is a questionable moral judgment (a poor candidate for a considered judgment), if it is made under coercive conditions, under conditions in which people are dominated, are under psychological strain, are poorly informed and the like. Considerations of this sort, some of which are not unlike considerations ideal-observer theories have called attention to, give us leverage to criticize culturally received considered judgments; they provide grounds for winnowing out some and keeping others. The consistency and coherence requirements provide further critical grounds for sorting out considered judgments. Moreover, there is the requirement of WRE that considered judgments and even abstract moral principles (which themselves may be considered judgments) be compatible with (a) what we know about the world (including the social world), (b) with the most adequate conceptions we have of the function(s) of morality and (c) with the most adequate social theories we have. This gives us further critical leverage in morality. By the time considered judgments have run that gauntlet they have become as well critical moral judgments clearly distinct from anything to be simply iden-

tified with "received opinion" or with simply what is found in part at least to differ from tribe to tribe and thus to provoke relativistic worries.[8]

We have with WRE a procedure in place for criticizing culturally received views. Meta-ethical relativists maintain that there are no objectively sound procedures for justifying one moral code as being superior to another. But wide reflective equilibrium has procedures for doing just that, though it does not guarantee that every time we compare moral codes we will be able to come up with an answer. *Sometimes* we may not know what to say. But even here there is no permanent block to inquiry. A resolute use of WRE may in the future yield an answer. We are not stuck in a situation in which we must believe that there is no way of establishing a set (cluster) of warrantedly assertable moral beliefs. Where moral code A is in WRE and B is not then A is a superior moral code to B. Where moral code C is closer to being in WRE than D, then C is superior to D and so on. We may not—indeed I think we do not—know what "*the* true moral code" is anymore than we know what "*the* truth" is. Indeed we do not even have any tolerably clear conception of what we are talking about here. But we have the capacity with that procedure to assess moral codes and that gives us a measure of objectivity that enables us to overcome meta-ethical relativism.

WRE overcomes ethical relativism as well. Ethical relativists tell us that even when the situation is identical—moral posturing aside—two sets of incompatible moral beliefs X and Z, both can be respectively right or equally justified for respectively the X believers and the Z believers, even though both have the same factual and theoretical non-moral beliefs. Moreover, there can be no objective grounds, ethical relativists believe, for saying the moral views of X believers are superior to the Z believers or the other way around and this can be generalized to all moral believers and all moral belief-systems. There can, as John Rawls stresses, be distinct equilibria and, ethical relativists would add, there can be no objective grounds for saying that one equilibrium is superior to the other. But there cannot be distinct *wide* reflective equilibria or, better put, where there are two or more conditions of wide reflective equilibrium, only one can be the widest and thus the most adequate reflective equilibrium. Where a situation obtains in which there are X believers and Z believers, as in the situation described above, there would not, with the conflicting beliefs of X and Z, be a WRE. Neither X nor Z beliefs could be in WRE. At least where the worlds are in any way in contact there can only be one WRE. Where we had two or more reflective equilibria we would not yet have attained WRE.

If WRE can be achieved for a time—remember fallibilism or even

historicism is not relativism—then both meta-ethical and normative ethical relativism have been defeated. Where it is approximatable both relativisms become less plausible. WRE does not rule out either relativism *a priori*. It might be the case that we cannot even achieve a good approximation of WRE. If that is so, relativism, in either or both forms, is firmly on the agenda and indeed it would perhaps in that eventuality be more reasonable to be relativists or at least relativists of the meta-ethical sort. But the moral of this is that just as relativism cannot be refuted by a transcendental turn so it cannot be established by a transcendental turn either. But that should not be in the least bit worrying. It is time we set aside such transcendentalist and foundationalist or quasi-foundationalist aspirations.

VI

It might be responded in turn that there is a deeper kind of relativism—let us call it conceptual relativism—which, while not specifically an ethical relativism, has important implications for morality. Conceptual relativism is the claim that different cultures see the world differently in certain crucial respects. It is the further claim that there can be no neutral or culturally ubiquitous way in which the world can be described against which these different and incommensurable conceptual systems or schemes can be assessed or measured. There is no one true description of the world; there is no right way of seeing the world or viewing the world. It is conceptual confusion or ethnocentric arrogance or both to assume that one's own society's understanding of things is the correct one or even firmly on the road to being the correct one. However, this is not to say that any other society is in or can be in either a better or worse position. We have no idea, conceptual relativists argue, what must obtain so that we could justifiably assert what it would be like for any given conceptual scheme to be the correct one: to be, that is, the scheme which would tell us—giving "the one true description and appraisal of the world"—what the world is like and how it is best to live. We do not even know what it would be like for one conceptual scheme to be the most adequate scheme among the various conceptual schemes extant and possible.

WRE is impossible if conceptual relativism is true. With conceptual relativism there could be various narrow conceptual-scheme-dependent reflective equilibria, mutually incommensurable; but with conceptual relativism there could be no WRE. This is so because there could be in such a circumstance no comparison across incommensurable conceptual schemes to determine which are the more adequate. Considered judgments, prin-

ciples, theories, descriptions of the world where they belong to different
conceptual schemes could not even in principle be compared, if conceptual
relativism were true, and thus, because we cannot make such comparisons,
we could not, even in principle, get our considered judgments into *wide*
reflective equilibrium.

However, this is not the powerful challenge to WRE that it appears to
be, for, for reasons Donald Davidson has brought to the fore, conceptual
relativism is incoherent.[9] Conceptual relativism—indeed the very idea of
it—depends on the dogma of conceptual scheme and content: a beguiling
but actually incoherent picture of the world in which there is an undifferen-
tiated reality (content) conceptualized in different ways by incommen-
surable totalizing and ubiquitous conceptual schemes.

Why should we say, or should we say, as Davidson does, that it makes
no sense to speak of alternative realities each with their own truths un-
translatable into another way of thinking? For starters there is no way to
display this; there is no way of getting beyond "pictorial meaning" here.
The literal meaning of sentences is given by their truth-conditions or at least
by their assertability-conditions. To know the truth-conditions of a
sentence, an utterance, thought or thought-event is to know the conditions
under which the sentence, etc. would be true or false; to know the
assertability-conditions of a sentence, utterance, etc. is to know the condi-
tions under which it would be assertable or deniable. I will stick with talk of
truth-conditions in the account that follows, but if one is more "positivist"
than Davidson one could make much the same point I am going to make by
utilizing truth-conditions by utilizing instead assertability-conditions,
though articulating the account would be a bit more cumbersome.

We come to understand the languages of others, including people from
very different cultures, with very different languages, in basically the same
way we come to understand our own language, namely by systematically
coming to understand the truth-conditions of the sentences in the language
in question. To understand the language of another is to follow a systematic
method for generating the truth-conditions of her declarative sentences. If I
am a field linguist I come to an understanding of the language of another
culture by matching their sentences with our truth-conditions. I understand
the German sentence "*Schnee ist weiss*" if I know it is true if and only if
snow is white. And I go on recursively to handle similar sentences in the
same way. What I am doing here, acting as a field linguist, is to propose in
our language an account of truth for their language by proposing a
systematic set of hypotheses, of which this hypothesis is simply one, con-
cerning the truth-conditions of the various sentences in their language. But,
it is natural to ask—or at least philosophers find it natural to ask—how can

we be confident, if the culture and language is very different form our own, that these people do not have a wholly alien scheme of thought from ours, a scheme untranslatable into our language? Moreover, if it is untranslatable, then we have incommensurable conceptual schemes and we have no way of saying which "stands closer to reality," which gives us the more adequate conception of how we are to live our lives.

Davidson, facing this query, responds by making a claim that initially at least sounds like a very problematic and a very dogmatic taking of a high *a priori* road. The claim is that we cannot intelligibly attribute a wholly *alien* scheme of thought to an *articulate* people. Is there a sound argument for such a surprising claim? I will make an argument in truncated form which is Davidsonian but not Davidson's. Moreover, it is not intended to be a transcendental argument though hopefully it is a sound argument. (I want to keep a very considerable distance from transcendental arguments.)

We should start by noting that, as different as people are in various culturally specific ways, it is perfectly evident that there is at a certain level of abstraction a common human nature. All peoples—to take a part of this claim about human nature—have beliefs and desires and have a language which they use. Given this core bit of common human nature, it is reasonable to attribute to people in other tribes a massive number of mundane beliefs and desires (and with them concerns) which run together with ours. Statistically normal people in all cultures, and at all times, see, as do we, the sun rising and hear the wind and feel the rain on them and the sun warming their skin. They also believe they need food to eat, water to drink and have a need for sleep; moreover, some will have young and they will recognize, as others do as well, that the young for a time need to be cared for to survive (even the Ik believed that); they will also believe that there is such a thing as it's getting dark and it's getting light and so on. We can list such commonplace beliefs in massive numbers and in an indefinitely extended number of ways. That these beliefs are true, that these things are so, is as plain as anything can be. They are far more certain than *any* philosophical proposition or theory. If we know anything at all we know these things, and that we do not know anything at all is, to put it minimally, vastly less evident than that we know these things. There is no room for any kind of doubt here.

If we do not assume such commonplaces about other tribes with radically different languages (as well as tribes nearer to home, including our own), we could not even understand what it is for them to have a language for us to interpret or understand, for if we did not make such assumptions we could not match their utterances with our truth-conditions. For the

literal meaning of an utterance is given by its truth-conditions. But we also need to note that our sentences are part of a web of sentences whose truth-conditions depend one on another. The identifying of truth-conditions doesn't simply go one by one. We will characteristically start, in acting as field linguists, by making a hypothesis about the truth-conditions of an utterance of a native from an alien culture whose language we do not understand. We may hit it lucky with that hypothesis or we may not. Where we do not we correct it by a coherentist method. We cannot give an exotic "reading" to all or even most of the utterances of the peoples of an alien culture such that they make no sense. It makes no sense to attribute a *wholly alien* scheme of thought to an *articulate* people. If we tried to we could not even identify it as "a scheme of thought" or as "a language." We can have no understanding of it such that we could say coherently even that it is alien, if all the utterances, or even the great mass of the utterances, were "translated" in ways that made no sense to us or did not run together with a not inconsiderable portion of the great mass of our commonplace beliefs. Given our common situation in the world, common human nature (being creatures who have beliefs, desires, intentions, needs and interests) we have the best of reasons for thinking the field linguist has mistranslated at least most of the utterances by giving them such exotic "readings." The idea that there could be a wholly untranslatable conceptual scheme radically distinct from ours which would conceptualize reality in a radically different way is an incoherent picture. Conceptual relativism, resting on such a scheme/content picture, is unintelligible and thus cannot pose a problem for the appeal to considered judgments in wide reflective equilibrium. It cannot (among other things) show that WRE is *inescapably* relativized. Even if there are conceptual schemes which, while being generally commensurable (not untranslatable), have, as proper parts within them, importantly different styles of reasoning, they, since they are generally commensurable, do not incapacitate WRE from assessing the comparative adequacy of these different styles of reasoning embedded in these different conceptual schemes. Only a thorough conceptual relativism would do that, and that conception is incoherent.

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NOTES

1. Kai Nielsen, "Searching for an Emancipatory Perspective" in Evan Simpson (ed.), *Anti-Foundationalism and Practical Reasoning* (Edmonton, Alberta: Academic Printing and Publishing, 1987), pp. 143-64.

2. Kai Nielsen, "In Defense of Wide Reflective Equilibrium" in Douglas Odegard (ed.), *Ethics and Justification* (Edmonton, Alberta: Academic Printing and Publishing, 1988), pp. 19-38.

3. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 19-21, 48-51.

4. David Hoy, "Jacques Derrida" in Quentin Skinner (ed.), *The Return of Grand Theory in the Human Sciences* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 61. See also David Hoy, *The Critical Circle* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982).

5. Hoy, "Jacques Derrida," p. 61.

6. Kai Nielsen, "Sociological Knowledge: Winch, Marxism and *Verstehen* Revisited," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* vol. XLII, no. 4 (June 1982), 465-91. See also my "Rationality and Relativism," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* vol. 4, no. 4 (December 1974), 313-32 and my "Rationality and Universality," *The Monist* vol. 59, no. 3 (July 1976), pp. 441-55.

7. This is something that both Charles Sanders Peirce and John Dewey fixed in our philosophical consciousness.

8. Kai Nielsen, *Marxism and the Moral Point of View* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1988).

9. Donald Davidson, *Inquiries Into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 183-98.