Ars Disputandi
Volume 6 (2006)
ISSN: 1566–5399

Aaron Z. Zimmerman
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
SANTA BARBARA, USA

Relativism

By Maria Baghramian

London: Routledge, 2004; 384 pp.; hb. £ 65.00, pb. £ 18.99; ISBN: 0-415-16149-5/0-415-16150-9.

[1] Maria Baghramian's *Relativism* is a well-researched, thorough exploration of a variety of philosophical doctrines that have been dubbed 'relativistic' (if only by their critics). Starting with Protagoras' claim that man is the measure of all things, Baghramian discusses in some detail the skepticism of Montaigne; the anti-Enlightenment romanticism of Vico and Hamann; Hegel's idealism; the perspectivalism of Nietzsche; the ethics of inter-cultural tolerance advanced by many anthropologists; Wittgenstein's talk of distinct language games and forms of life; the varieties of conceptual incommensurability advocated by Whorf and Kuhn; the postmodern thought of Foucault and Derrida; Quine's doctrine of ontological relativity; Rorty's case against traditional conceptions of truth; Putnam's internal realism; Harman's moral relativism; and the critique of classical conceptions of logic and rationality mounted by intuitionists and feminist epistemologists. The list of philosophers whose works are described in response is just as impressive, ranging, as it does, from Aristotle to Davidson.

[2] Inevitably, the enormous scope of this project forces Baghramian to largely omit the kind of involved argumentation that helps distinguish philosophy from intellectual history; it also compromises the book's coherence to some degree. We don't get a general characterization of relativism, a demonstration of how each of the historically important views discussed instantiates this formulation, and then a set of arguments for or against taking a relativistic perspective. Instead, the reader is largely left to assimilate the several debates on his own and to thereby piece together Baghramian's varied criticisms into a coherent case against relativistic theories of truth, thought, reason and morality so as to evaluate it against both 'realism' and the author's preferred 'pluralistic' alternative. Thus, while *Relativism* is a fine introduction to the subject and points the beginning reader toward interesting philosophical terrain, it is somewhat less successful in advancing the author's own views.

[3] What is relativism? Clearly, the relativist says of some x and y that x is relative to y, but not just any x and y will do. One's distance from New York is relative to one's location, but to admit this banality is surely not to advocate relativism of any sort. In the book's introduction, Baghramian introduces a chart delineating the many varieties of relativism, but the resulting scheme of classification fails to unearth an interesting common core. For instance, the taxonomy is supposed to include 'cultural relativists' who preach toleration for the rituals and

practices of distant societies. But to preach toleration is to advance the absolutist claim that everyone (or, at least, everyone to whom one is preaching) should respect the traditions of others. A genuine relativist would instead assert that it is true for some societies that, say, polygamy is morally permissible but that this proposition is false for us, and since it is false for us, we are surely justified in denouncing polygamous practices. Baghramian notes this point quite clearly (pp. 275–6), but she fails to conclude, as she should, that an ethics of toleration is really no form of relativism at all. Something similar holds of Feyerabend's suggestion, 'For every statement, theory, point of view believed (to be true) with good reason there exist arguments showing a conflicting alternative to be at least as good or even better' (quoted on p. 191). To argue that we should withhold assent in the face of ubiquitous conflicting evidence is to council agnosticism or skepticism, not relativism.

[4] In several passages, Baghramian suggests that all relativism reduces to the alethic variety. 'Alethic relativism is at once the most radical and most general of all relativistic positions, for other varieties of cognitive relativism, even moral relativism are reducible to it' (p. 121; cf. p. 43). This seems right, but the author fails to note that alethic relativism must claim that the truth of a *proposition* (qua object of assertion and belief) is relative to a culture, belief system or psychological make-up; the relative truth of a sentence won't do it. For example, suppose that as there are just three bottles of beer in the refrigerator you say, 'There are exactly three things in the refrigerator,' whereas the mereologist discussed by Putnam (pp. 237–8) who counts all 'sums' of things as things in their own right says, 'There are exactly seven things in the refrigerator.' Does this prove the relativistic thesis that the proposition that there are precisely three things in the refrigerator is true for you and false for the mereologist? 'No,' says the contextualist. Instead, we interpret the mereologist by varying the domain of the quantificational expression 'there are'. What you assert is (absolutely) true just in case there are three (and only three) things from the domain of normal (or 'simple') objects in the refrigerator, but what the mereologist asserts is true just in case there are seven (and only seven) things from the larger domain of simples and sums in that location. This difference in truth conditions removes the appearance of conflict between these utterances because it entails that compatible propositions have been asserted. The problem here is that Baghramian consistently fails to distinguish relativism from the contextualist thesis that a given sentence expresses different propositions in different contexts.

[5] These worries are particularly pressing when we turn to the author's defense of pluralism. We are told that, 'For the pluralist, in many domains and situations, there can be more than one correct context-independent evaluation and description' (p. 9). Pluralism, as opposed to monism, 'claims that for many questions in the domains of metaphysics, aesthetics, ethics and even science, there could be more than one appropriate or correct answer.' (p. 304). Of course, there is a trivial sense in which every question has more than one correct answer and every event has more than one correct description. If you ask me who won the last US presidential election I can correctly answer, 'The eldest son of George H. W.

Bush,' or 'The former governor of Texas who owned the Houston Astros.' While both of these distinct answers are correct and the two non-equivalent descriptions pick out the same man, surely neither relativism nor pluralism is to be found in these observations. Similarly, pluralism is characterized as the view that there are many different 'ends' of equal value so that the best life for you may not be the best life for me (pp. 295–6). But this also admits of a weak reading. You are handsome but humorless whereas I am funny but ugly. Is there any relativism entailed in our admitting that the life of a comedian is best for me whereas the life of a TV news anchorman is best for you? Famously, there is no reason why Buridan's ass should favor one of the qualitatively identical bales of hay before him over the other, but surely he should choose one of them rather than starve. Does the fact that reason does not tell the donkey which of the two bales to pick undercut a 'realist' view of practical reason? Does it entail relativism or pluralism of some sort? It is hard to see why. Baghramian answers the charge of triviality by arguing that the differences and indeterminacies posited by pluralism are 'deeper' than these, but she never provides a detailed enough specification of the doctrine for the reader to assess this response.

[6] What does pluralism have to say about hard cases? A man in a Muslim country marries his second wife. A relativist will say that the proposition that the man's act is morally impermissible is true for us and false for the members of the religious society; any argument between the two parties would therefore be pointless. Absolutists (or realists) of different stripes will instead allow us to meaningfully debate the proposition. One might say the act is immoral because the first wife is not in a position to consent or dissent from what should be a cooperative enterprise. Another might object by citing the large sizes of families necessitated by the economic structure of the society in question. Once such a structure is in place, polygamous arrangements allow for a distribution of domestic labor that serves to promote the happiness or flourishing of every member of the household. As the debate continues the participants will realize that several empirical theses are relevant to its outcome. Though the husband legally didn't need consent, did he nevertheless consult with the first wife? Did the second wife willingly enter into this marriage? Does polygamy promote jealousy or detract from intimacy? Does it really promote economic wellbeing in these conditions? In the end, the debating absolutists may agree on the (absolute) truth of a fairly complex conditional claim: if consent is present and the arrangement has economic benefits that (in some sense) outweigh the psychological costs (if there are any) the marriage is morally permissible. Moreover, their agreement on this complex proposition may rest on certain shared simple principles stating the value of happiness, autonomy, and companionship that (because of their generality) are extremely difficult to apply. So long as the truth about what is or is not morally permissible in this case is grounded in truths that do not contain reference to particular places, times or persons, their complexity hardly supports an abandonment of realism. Indeed, allowing that certain moral facts are so intricate as to be practically unknowable is a hallmark of the realist conception. Unfortunately, the conclusion of *Relativism* leaves it unclear whether its author's pluralism is compatible with a sophisticated absolutism of this variety.