

## RELATIVISM, TRUTH, AND INCOHERENCE

The doctrine of epistemological relativism – the view that knowledge is relative, either to time, to place, to society, to historical circumstance, to culture, to conceptual framework, or to personal training or conviction – has been defended by a variety of thinkers stretching back at least as far as Protagoras. For just as long, however, others have thought the doctrine to be incoherent. The last few decades have witnessed a revival of epistemological relativism. An obvious question is whether the charge of incoherence has been laid to rest.

In what follows I shall, after reviewing the debate between Plato and Protagoras regarding relativism and incoherence, consider a series of more recent defenses of epistemological relativism. A central focus will be the role that the notion of relative truth plays in the various arguments for relativism, both ancient and contemporary. However, a defense of relativism that eschews that notion, developed by Hartry Field, will also be considered. I shall argue that, like Protagoras, the recent defenders fail to meet the challenge posed by the incoherence charge, and that the doctrine of epistemological relativism remains untenable because incoherent.

### PROTAGOREAN RELATIVISM AND THE SOCRATIC ARGUMENTS FOR INCOHERENCE

In the *Theaetetus*, Protagoras is portrayed as holding that “man is the measure of all things”, and that any given thing “is to me such as it appears to me, and is to you such as it appears to you”.<sup>1</sup> In considering *Theaetetus*’ suggestion that knowledge is perception, Socrates concludes that it is equivalent to Protagoras’ view: “Then my perception is true for me, for its object at any moment is my reality, and I am, as Protagoras says, a judge of what is for me, that it is, and of what is not, that it is not”.<sup>2</sup> Protagoras holds, according to Socrates, that

Each one of us is a measure of what is and of what is not. . . . To the sick man his food appears sour and is so; to the healthy man it is and appears the opposite. Now there is no

call to represent either of the two as wiser – that cannot be – nor is the sick man to be pronounced unwise because he thinks as he does, or the healthy man wise because he thinks differently. . . . In this way it is true . . . that no one thinks falsely.<sup>3</sup>

Socrates encapsulates Protagoras' relativism as consisting in the view that "what seems true to anyone is true for him to whom it seems so".<sup>4</sup>

Protagoras' view is an extreme version of relativism: knowledge and truth are relative to the person contemplating the proposition in question. *p* is true (for me) if it so seems; false (for me)<sup>5</sup> if it so seems. Since the final arbiter of truth and knowledge is the individual, Protagoras' view denies the existence of any standard or criterion higher than the individual by which claims to truth and knowledge can be adjudicated.

Socrates offers several arguments against the Protagorean view. Two in particular will be of interest here.<sup>6</sup> The first questions the justifiability of Protagoras' sophistical activity, given his doctrine:

If what every man believes as a result of perception is indeed to be true for him; if, just as no one is to be a better judge of what another experiences, so no one is better entitled to consider whether what another thinks is true or false, and . . . every man is to have his own beliefs for himself alone and they are all right and true – then . . . where is the wisdom of Protagoras, to justify his setting up to teach others and to be handsomely paid for it, and where is our comparative ignorance or the need for us to go and sit at his feet, when each of us is himself the measure of his own wisdom? . . . to set about overhauling and testing one another's notions and opinions when those of each and every one are right, is a tedious and monstrous display of folly, if the Truth of Protagoras is really truthful. . . .<sup>7</sup>

Here Socrates levels the first version of the incoherence charge. Protagoras is involved in the project of "overhauling and testing one another's notions and opinions". That is, he is engaged in the epistemological task of assessing the warrant and justification of knowledge-claims. However, his thesis undermines that very project, since if his thesis is right, then there is no chance of any thesis failing a test of adequacy, or being judged unjustified or unwarranted, because the rival theses "of each and every one are right". If knowledge is relative, then the task of judging claims to knowledge is pointless. If Protagoras' thesis is right, it cannot be right, for it undermines the very notion of rightness. Protagorean relativism is thus self-defeating – if it is right, it cannot be right – and so is incoherent. Let us call this first argument for the incoherence charge the 'undermines the very notion of rightness' (henceforth *UVNR*) argument.

The second argument for the incoherence charge focuses on the

Protagorean view that all opinions are true for those who believe them, and concomitantly that no sincerely held opinion is false (“that no one thinks falsely”). Socrates argues that this thesis cannot be correct, and in fact is self-defeating, for if true, some beliefs will be false – contrary to the thesis. Socrates’ argument<sup>8</sup> centers on the phenomenon of conflicting opinion. Suppose *A* believes *p*, and *B* believes not-*p*. *p* is true for *A*, according to Protagoras, yet false for *B*. Then *p* is true for some, and false for others. Now, suppose that *p* is a statement expressing Protagorean relativism. Then Protagorean relativism is false for all those who do not believe it: it is false for all if no one believes it; and true only to the extent that some number of people (perhaps only Protagoras himself) believe it:

Supposing that not even he [i.e., Protagoras] believed in man being the measure and the world in general did not believe it either – as in fact it doesn’t – then this *Truth* which he wrote would not be true for anyone. If, on the other hand, he did believe it, but the mass of mankind does not agree with him, then, you see, it is more false than true by just so much as the unbelievers outnumber the believers.<sup>9</sup>

In fact, Socrates argues, the situation is even worse for Protagoras than that. For Protagoras seems to have to acknowledge, given his doctrine, that his opponents’ view that he is wrong is itself right:

[Moreover,] Protagoras, for his part, admitting as he does that everybody’s opinion is true, must acknowledge the truth of his opponents’ belief about his own belief, where they think he is wrong.<sup>10</sup>

Protagoras would be forced, Socrates argues, to:

acknowledge his own belief to be false, if he admits that the belief of those who think him wrong is true . . . [for he] admits that this opinion of theirs is as true as any other.<sup>11</sup>

So, Socrates argues, Protagoras is bound by his own lights to grant the truth of his opponents’ beliefs, even in the case where their belief is that Protagorean relativism is false. And since their opinion is true, according to the Protagorean doctrine, and their opinion is that that doctrine is false, then that doctrine is false – even for Protagoras himself.<sup>12</sup> Thus Protagorean relativism is self-defeating in a second way. If opinions conflict, and the doctrine holds that all opinions are true, then some opinions cannot be true. In particular, if opinions conflict about the truth of Protagorean relativism, then the Protagorean relativist must acknowledge the truth of the opinion that that doctrine is false. Thus, if it is true, then (as long as there is one who holds that it is false) it is false.

Hence the doctrine is self-defeating, and so incoherent. Let us call this second argument for the incoherence charge the 'necessarily some beliefs are false' (henceforth *NSBF*) argument.

We have seen thus far two independent arguments for the incoherence of Protagorean relativism.<sup>13</sup> The *UVNR* argument concludes that such relativism is incoherent because, if right, its rightness cannot be established, because the very notion of rightness is undermined – so that, if right, it cannot be right. The *NSBF* argument concludes that Protagorean relativism is incoherent because, if true, then it is false (so long as at least one person is of the opinion that it is false), because the Protagorean relativist is bound by her doctrine to regard all opinions as true, including the opinion that that doctrine is false. Our question is: Are these arguments conclusive? Is Protagorean relativism incoherent? Several recent writers have argued that it is not; their defenses of the doctrine, or of some related version of epistemological relativism, will be the focus of attention during most of the remainder of this paper. First, however, it will be helpful to consider more contemporary, and more generalized, versions of the Protagorean doctrine and the Socratic arguments for its incoherence.

#### EPISTEMOLOGICAL RELATIVISM AND THE INCOHERENCE CHARGE IN THEIR MODERN DRESSES

Epistemological relativism may, without violence to Protagoras or more recent defenders, be characterized as follows:<sup>14</sup>

*ER:* For any knowledge-claim  $p$ ,  $p$  can be evaluated (assessed, established, etc.) only according to (with reference to) one or another set of background principles and standards of evaluation  $s_1, \dots, s_n$ ; and, given a different set (or sets) of background principles and standards  $s'_1, \dots, s'_n$ , there is no neutral (that is, neutral with respect to the two or more alternative sets of principles and standards) way of choosing between the two (or more) alternative sets in evaluating  $p$  with respect to truth or rational justification.  $p$ 's truth and rational justifiability are relative to the standards utilized in evaluating  $p$ .

The Protagorean relativist will assent to *ER*, since it captures the intuition that knowledge and truth are relative to each individual

thinker: if  $p$  is true (or a genuine item of knowledge) according to my standards, then it is true (for me), and there is no other standard by which my individual judgments and standards may themselves be neutrally evaluated. *ER* is more general than Protagorean relativism, however, for it places the source of relativism at the level of standards rather than the level of personal opinion or perception, and as such aptly characterizes more recent relativisms such as those of Kuhn, Young, Bloor, Barnes, Winch, Wittgenstein, and others.<sup>15</sup>

It immediately follows from *ER* that if  $p$  is evaluated differently according to two different sets of principles and standards, for example, if  $p$  is true (probably true, highly confirmed, etc.) according to  $s_1, \dots, s_n$ , but false (probably false, poorly confirmed, etc.) according to  $s'_1, \dots, s'_n$ , there is no way to evaluate these conflicting evaluations.  $p$  is true relative to  $s_1, \dots, s_n$ , and false relative to  $s'_1, \dots, s'_n$ . Since there is no neutral way of evaluating the rival sets of standards, there is no neutral way of evaluating conflicting evaluations of  $p$ . Such evaluations can be carried out only relative to one or another set of principles and criteria of evaluation. Given my set of standards, opinions, and convictions,  $p$ 's epistemic status is as I judge it to be.

If *ER* effectively characterizes epistemological relativism, how can we reformulate, with respect to *ER*, Socrates' arguments against Protagorean relativism? The second (*NSBF*) argument is easily recast. Instantiating *ER* in the original formulation yields:

*ER'*: *ER* can be evaluated (assessed, established, etc.) only according to (with reference to) one or another set of background principles and standards of evaluation  $s_1, \dots, s_n$ ; and, given a different set (or sets) of background principles and standards of evaluation  $s'_1, \dots, s'_n$ , there is no neutral (that is, neutral with respect to the two (or more) alternative sets of principles and standards) way of choosing between the two (or more) alternative sets in evaluating *ER* with respect to truth or rational justification. *ER*'s truth and rational justifiability are relative to the standards utilized in evaluating *ER*.

If *ER* is true, then, as *ER'* states, *ER* is itself relative to alternative, and equally legitimate, sets of background principles and standards of evaluation. Since these alternative sets will suggest differing evaluations of *ER*, and since there is no way neutrally to pick one evaluation

over and against any others, it follows that, if *ER* is true, then *ER*'s truth will vary according to the principles and criteria by which *ER* is evaluated. In particular, it follows that, if according to some set of standards  $s_1, \dots, s_n$  *ER* is judged to be false, then, if *ER* is true, (at least according to that set of standards  $s_1, \dots, s_n$ ) *ER* is false.<sup>16</sup> (This neatly mirrors the Socratic argument according to which Protagoras is bound by his own principles to recognize the falsity of Protagorean relativism, so long as someone is of the opinion that it is false.) In this way, *ER* is self-refuting, and so incoherent.

Socrates' first (*UVNR*) argument has it that Protagorean relativism is self-refuting in that, if it is right, it undermines the very idea of rightness, and so cannot be right. Another way to put this point is that the notion of rightness is intelligible only when understood non-relativistically. "Relative rightness" is not rightness at all. For the relativist wants to argue that relativism is right (or true, or cognitively superior) and that nonrelativism is wrong (or false, or cognitively inferior), or less adequate philosophically, than nonrelativism. To make this claim nonrelativistically, however, is to give up relativism; conversely, to make the claim only relatively is not to make it at all.

Put in terms of *ER*, the *UVNR* argument can be cast as follows. Assume *ER* to be a rationally justifiable position. Then there are good reasons for holding *ER*. But good reasons cannot be biased or nonneutral or arbitrary or idiosyncratic (by definition of 'good reason' – this point will be pursued further below). Therefore, if *ER* is rationally justifiable, there must be some nonrelative, neutral (with respect to the presuppositions of relativists and nonrelativists) framework from which we can make that judgment. Thus *ER*, which denies the possibility of such a framework, is incorrect. In short, if relativism is rationally justifiable, it must have a nonrelativistic ground, which possibility it denies. Thus *ER*, if true, is not rationally justifiable, since if *ER* is true there is no neutral ground from which to assess the rational justifiability of any claim, including *ER* itself. Moreover, if *ER* is (true and) rationally justifiable, then it is false, for the rational defense of *ER* requires the sort of nonrelativistic ground which *ER* itself denies. Thus *ER* is either not rationally justifiable, or false. The assertion and defense of *ER* is thus self-refuting, and so incoherent.

This argument points out what Socrates' first argument points out: namely, that the relativist must appeal to nonrelativistic criteria, and assert relativism nonrelativistically, in order to make the case for

relativism. This is self-defeating for the relativist. But to fail to assert and defend relativism in this (nonrelativistic) way is to fail to join the issue with the nonrelativist who asserts that relativism is false (or incoherent). So the relativist can defend relativism only by rendering it incoherent. Conversely, to defend relativism relativistically is to fail to defend it at all. For if relativism is right, the very notion of rightness, and indeed that of rational defense, is given up, and so it cannot coherently be claimed that relativism is right or rationally defensible. In short, to defend relativism is to defend it nonrelativistically, which is to give it up; to 'defend' it relativistically is not to *defend* it at all. And this is precisely the lesson of Socrates' first argument.<sup>17</sup>

#### DO THE INCOHERENCE ARGUMENTS BEG THE QUESTION? A RELATIVIST CONCEPTION OF TRUTH

Several recent writers have sought to defend relativism from the charge of incoherence. The first major line of defense to be considered is that which holds that the incoherence arguments beg the question by assuming an absolutist conception of knowledge or truth.

Harold I. Brown, for example, writes, with respect to the *NSBF* argument, that

...this argument has no force against any consistent relativism, even the extreme relativism of Protagoras. Its apparent cogency derives from a tacit acceptance of the absolutist assumption that we are justified in making a knowledge claim only if it is based on an unquestionable foundation. Given this assumption, once we admit the possibility of knowledge claims contrary to but as well founded as our own, our own knowledge claims become illegitimate. But the acceptability of this thesis is the central issue in dispute between relativism and absolutism.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, Brown concludes, the absolutist begs the question against the relativist by assuming absolutism.

The problem with Brown's argument against the absolutist is that it confuses absolutism with foundationalism. If relativism is the view that knowledge and truth are relative to framework, conceptual scheme, paradigm, culture, personal predilection, etc., and there are no criteria or standards by which claims put forth by rival positions can be fairly, neutrally, or objectively judged, then absolutism should be understood as the (contrary) view that such claims can be evaluated in a nonquestion-begging way, and that objective comparison of rival claims is possible. But absolutism so construed is not at all tantamount to

foundationalism, that is, to the epistemological thesis that “knowledge requires an indubitable foundation and that knowledge is developed by building on that foundation”.<sup>19</sup> One can hold that knowledge is absolute in the sense that claims to knowledge can be fairly, nonquestion-beggingly assessed without holding further that knowledge “requires an indubitable foundation”. Brown here confuses absolutism with foundationalism; he similarly confuses relativism with *fallibilism*:

The main thesis of relativist epistemology is that knowledge can be constructed on a fallible foundation. Relativism affirms my right to hold my own presuppositions in spite of their fallibility, to proceed on the basis of these presuppositions, and to reject competing sets of presuppositions as false.<sup>20</sup>

But these rights are affirmed, not by relativism, but by fallibilism. One needn't be a relativist to affirm the first two rights Brown mentions; moreover, it is not clear (as we shall see below) that the relativist can consistently affirm the third right. Relativism's commitment to the nonexistence of neutral standards aligns it, not with fallibilism, but with *arbitrariness*. It is this arbitrariness which makes relativism the radical and potentially destructive doctrine that it is perceived to be by its critics. In any case, one can consistently espouse a fallibilist absolutism, that is, one can consistently hold that knowledge is fallible, and not certain or indubitable, and also that claims to knowledge can be neutrally and objectively evaluated and assessed.<sup>21</sup>

A more systematic attempt to discredit the incoherence arguments and to develop a positive case for epistemological relativism is that of Jack W. Meiland. In a series of articles,<sup>22</sup> Meiland denies that relativism is self-refuting, and he has developed an analysis of relative truth which, he argues, stands as a legitimate alternative to an absolutist conception of truth. In fact, these two efforts are connected in Meiland's work, for it is by establishing a viable conception of relative truth, according to Meiland, that relativism escapes the self-refutation problem:

That relativism is self-refuting . . . is a myth which must be laid to rest. It *would* be inconsistent for the relativist to say both that all doctrines are relatively true and that relativism is not relatively true but instead is absolutely true. However, the careful relativist would not and need not say this. He would either say that all doctrines except relativism (and perhaps its competitors on the meta-level) are relatively true or false, or else he would say that his own doctrine of relativism is relatively true too. And saying that relativism is only relatively true does not produce inconsistency.<sup>23</sup>

The first alternative Meiland mentions is unhelpful for the relativist, in



the absence of an argument which reasonably distinguishes between relativism (and perhaps its competitors on the meta-level) and all other doctrines and claims with respect to truth such that the former, but not the latter, can properly be regarded as either true or false absolutely. Meiland has furnished no such argument; nor is it easy to see on what consideration such an argument might be based.<sup>24</sup> It is Meiland's second alternative – that the self-refutation charge can be avoided by holding that the doctrine of relativism is itself only relatively true – that is worth scrutiny here. And this alternative clearly rests on the coherence of the notion of relative truth. It is no surprise, therefore, that Meiland seeks to establish the tenability of that notion.

Meiland's discussion of relative truth hinges on his claim that relative truth can be understood independently of the concept of absolute truth – for, as he rightly acknowledges, relativism would not escape the self-refutation problem if it denied the legitimacy of absolute truth by affirming a concept of relative truth which itself depended on or appealed to the absolute conception.<sup>25</sup> Meiland offers an analysis of absolute and relative truth which he suggests is such that the latter does not depend on the former. In this analysis, absolute truth is a two-term relation, while relative truth is a three-term relation:

- (1) The concept of absolute truth seems to be a concept of a *two*-term relation between statements (or perhaps propositions) on the one hand and facts (or states of affairs) on the other. But the concept of relative truth, as used by some relativists, seems to be a concept of a *three*-term relation between statements, the world, and a third term which is either persons, world views, or historical and cultural situations.
- (2) The relation denoted by the expression 'absolute truth' is often said to be that of correspondence. The relativist can make use of this type of notion and say that "*P* is true relative to *W*" means something like "*P* corresponds to the facts from the point of view of *W*" (where *W* is a person, a set of leading principles, a world view, or a situation).<sup>26</sup>

Meiland acknowledges that the analysis of the concept of relative truth here offered "is very incomplete and raises more questions than it answers".<sup>27</sup> He puts it forward, nonetheless, for the following purpose:

My point in putting this suggestion forward is to begin to show that . . . absolutists are making a great mistake by assuming that relative truth must be either nothing at all or else a variety of absolute truth.<sup>28</sup>

And Meiland summarizes what he takes to be the significance of his

analysis as follows:

When we use expressions of the form ' $\emptyset$  is true for  $W$ ', it seems legitimate to ask the question "What does 'true' mean in this expression?" . . . . The correct relativist answer to this question is: "It means that  $\emptyset$  is true-for- $W$ ." The hyphens in this answer are extremely important. For they show that the relativist is not talking about truth but instead about truth-for- $W$ . Thus, one can no more reasonably ask what 'true' means in the expression 'true-for- $W$ ' than one can ask what 'cat' means in the word 'cattle'. 'True-for- $W$ ' denotes a special three-term relation which does not include the two-term relation of absolute truth as a distinct part.<sup>29</sup>

Meiland offers his analysis for two (related) purposes: he wants to establish the concept of relative truth as a viable, coherent concept which the relativist can appeal to as an alternative to the concept of absolute truth; and he wants to show that relative truth, once shown to be viable, enables the relativist to escape the problem of self-refutation. Unfortunately, neither of these ends are achieved by the analysis offered. I consider them in turn.

#### THE VIABILITY OF THE CONCEPT OF RELATIVE TRUTH

Consider first Meiland's analysis of relative truth as a "three-term relation between statements, the world, and a third term which is either persons, world views, or historical and cultural situations". To be a genuine three-term relation, it must be possible to individuate each relata and to distinguish each from the other two. On a conception of absolute truth, this condition (as Meiland recognizes) is easily met: the world, however difficult to apprehend directly, is clearly distinguishable from statements about it. What, however, is the status of the world on the three-term conception? It is clearly distinguishable from the other two relata? Unfortunately, the answer is no. On the relativist conception, the world is not distinguishable from the third relata (either persons, world views, or historical and cultural situations). What are related by the alleged three-term relation are statements and the-world-relative-to- $W$  (where  $W$  is a person, a set of leading principles, a world view, or a situation – in short, where  $W$  is the third relata). On the relativist conception, the world cannot be conceived as independent of  $W$ ; if it is so conceived, the relativist conception collapses into an absolutist one, for it is granted that there is a way the world is, independent of statements and of  $W$ 's. This is precisely what the relativist must deny, however.<sup>30</sup> So Meiland's three-term relation

collapses into a two-term relation, between statements and the-world-relative-to- $W$ , or, in Goodman's terminology, between statements and world-versions.<sup>31</sup> This point can be seen in Meiland's remarks about the relativist's ability to utilize the notion of relations of correspondence. Meiland writes that the relativist "can make use of this type of notion and say that ' $P$  is true relative to  $W$ ' means something like ' $P$  corresponds to the facts from the point of view of  $W$ '".<sup>32</sup> Grant Meiland the use of relations of correspondence: what correspond are not statements, independent facts, and some  $W$ , but rather statements and facts-from-the-point-of-view-of- $W$ . Thus Meiland's three-term relation turns out upon inspection to be a two-term relation.

Now this point by itself is not very damaging to Meiland's position. He can still argue that the two-term relativist conception of truth is distinct from the two-term absolutist conception – the former relates statements and facts-relative-to- $W$ , while the latter relates statements and facts (which are not relative to any  $W$ ) – and that the relativist conception does not appeal to, incorporate, or rely upon the absolutist conception. And this last point is the point Meiland is most concerned to make:

'True-for- $W$ ' denotes a special...relation which does not include the...relation of absolute truth as a distinct part.<sup>33</sup>

This point is important for Meiland because, if it can be sustained, it rescues the relativist from the charge that she relies on the notion of absolute truth in holding a concept of relative truth, thereby refuting her own position by relying on a concept she expressly rejects. Is it the case, however, that the relativist conception does avoid reliance on the absolute conception? It is not clear that it does. Consider Meiland's reasoning here. He writes that the hyphens in 'true-for- $W$ '

are extremely important. For they show that the relativist is not talking about truth but instead about truth-for- $W$ . Thus, one can no more reasonably ask what 'true' means in the expression 'true-for- $W$ ' than one can ask what 'cat' means in the word 'cattle'.<sup>34</sup>

There are two points to make here. The first is that Meiland's conclusion does not follow, for 'true' is not related to 'true-for- $W$ ' as 'cat' is related to 'cattle'. 'Cattle' is made up of the concatenation of the letters 'c', 'a', 't', 't', 'l', and 'e'; 'cat' is no more a meaningful part of 'cattle' than is 'ca', 'catt', 'cattl', etc. 'True-for- $W$ ', on the other hand, is made up of the hyphenization of distinct concepts which are in-

dependently meaningful.<sup>35</sup> The occurrence of 'true' in 'true-for- W' is *not* like the occurrence of 'tru' or 'ru' in 'true-for- W'. In fact, if the role of 'true' in 'true-for- W' is analogous to that of 'cat' in 'cattle', it is difficult to understand why Meiland would bother with his discussion. For it is, after all, a conception of relative *truth* he is concerned to articulate. The hyphens in 'true-for- W' show that on the relativist conception truth is always to be regarded as relative to some *W*; that it is never to be conceived of as independent of any *W*. But it does not follow that the hyphenized phrase "does not include the concept of absolute truth as a distinct part".<sup>36</sup> If it did, it would be difficult to see why the hyphenized phrase constituted a conception of relative *truth* at all. Adding the hyphens does not eliminate the concept of truth from the hyphenized phrase – as well it shouldn't, if the aim of the relativist's project is to articulate a conception of truth. 'True' in 'true-for- W' is not analogous to 'cat' in 'cattle'; a better analogy is with 'action' in 'action-at-a-distance'. The latter phrase is to be distinguished from contiguous, mechanically connected action; it is still a conception, nonetheless, of *action*. Similarly, 'true-for- W' is to be distinguished from absolute truth, i.e., truth that is not relative to any *W*; it is still a conception, nonetheless, of *truth*.<sup>37</sup>

The immediate upshot of the above discussion is that Meiland has not shown that his conception of relative truth avoids reliance on the absolute conception, and so he has not shown that his analysis avoids the self-refutation problem it is designed to avoid. There is a further point to note. Meiland wants to establish the coherence and tenability of the notion of relative truth. Grant for the sake of argument what I have just argued should not be granted, namely that 'true-for- W' does not include the concept of absolute truth as a distinct part. What, then, does 'true-for- W' mean? If we grant Meiland his point, all that follows is that he has developed a string of symbols which is not to be understood as containing the concept of absolute truth as a distinct part. He has provided no hint about what the string does mean or refer to. Consequently, his analysis, even if accepted, does not help to establish the meaningfulness, coherence or tenability of the concept of relative truth. For we have only been told what the concept of relative truth is not; we have not been told what it is to be 'true-for- W'.

This latter point deserves additional comment. The task the relativist faces is that of establishing the coherence or tenability of the concept of relative truth. To accomplish this task the relativist must establish a

meaning for the concept which does not rely on or collapse into the concept of absolute truth. But, for the concept of relative truth to be established it must also, if it is to accomplish the relativist's task, avoid collapsing into 'mere belief'. That is, '*P* is true-for-*W*' must come to something different than '*W* believes that *P*' (if *W* is a person), or 'A person in *W* believes that *P*' (if *W* is a historical or cultural situation), or 'A person of *W* believes that *P*' (if *W* is a perspective, conceptual scheme, world view, or set of leading principles), etc. Otherwise all the relativist's talk about relative truth amounts merely to the trivial thesis that persons have different beliefs – hardly a challenging epistemological doctrine, since it in no way precludes the posing of the absolutist question regarding the truth of the various beliefs.<sup>38</sup> In short, the task of the relativist is to establish a meaning for the concept of relative truth according to which '*P* is true-for-*W*' is distinct both from '*W* believes that *P*' and from '*P* is (absolutely) true for *W*'.

Meiland seeks to establish such a meaning in the course of a discussion of the anti-relativist charge that the concept of relative truth cannot be coherently articulated without appealing to an absolutist conception of truth.<sup>39</sup> The charge is easily stated: Relativism holds that a person *X*'s believing that *p* is true entails that *p* is true for *X*. But, as Meiland articulates the charge:

When we talk about what Jones believes, we are presumably talking about what Jones believes *to be true* – and, apparently, about what Jones believes to be *absolutely* true. So it appears that his [i.e., Protagoras'] variety of relativism cannot even be stated without recourse to a concept of absolute truth. . . . Relativism is supposed to eschew absolute truth entirely and it allegedly cannot succeed in doing this.<sup>40</sup>

Meiland attempts to circumvent the problem by distinguishing between *p*'s *being* absolutely true and *X*'s *believing* that *p* is absolutely true:

The relativist can certainly admit that someone *believes* a statement to be absolutely true. The relativist will merely deny that this belief is itself absolutely true (although it may be relatively true – true for the person who believes it) and hence will also deny that the statement which is the object of that belief is itself absolutely true. The important point here is that in stating his position, the Protagorean relativist is not saying that anything is absolutely true; he is only allowing that some people believe that various statements are absolutely true.<sup>41</sup>

The point is well taken. We should not expect the relativist to pretend she has never heard of absolute truth. However, Meiland's response raises a further problem for the relativist, one at least as serious as the

one the response is designed to circumvent. As the most recent quotation suggests, all that is required for  $p$  to be relatively true is that  $X$  believe it:  $X$ 's belief that  $p$  is true (absolutely or relatively) entails that  $p$  is relatively true, i.e., true-for- $X$ . Belief is a sufficient condition for relative truth; ' $p$  is true-for- $X$ ' amounts simply to ' $X$  believes that  $p$ '.

But, as noted above, the relativist project of demonstrating the coherence and tenability of the concept of relative truth is not accomplished by the above analysis. For if relative truth amounts simply to belief, then the relativists thesis is trivialized, and we are left wondering what the fuss is all about. That there exist rival, incompatible truths reduces to the innocuous observation that there exist differences of opinion, i.e., rival, incompatible beliefs. Moreover, if relative truth amounts merely to belief, then the obvious question about the criticizability and justifiability of alternative beliefs is not spoken to; the relativist must be seen as making no claims about the immunity of relative truths from neutral or objective criticism. But of course a robust and epistemologically interesting relativism must make such claims. In short, epistemological relativism, if it is to be worth attending to, must say more of relative truth than that it comes down to mere belief. Meiland himself, in another context, recognizes the point:

To say that some belief or practice is true or right for a society or an individual is to say more than simply that that society or that individual holds that belief or practices that practice. If all that was meant by saying a belief is true for Jones is that Jones holds that belief, then every belief that Jones holds would be true for Jones. But the relativist rejects this notion of relative truth; he or she takes the notion of relative truth more seriously than this.<sup>42</sup>

The problem on the table is that Meiland's discussion of the charge that the notion of relative truth cannot be coherently articulated seems to depend upon taking the notion of relative truth in just this unserious way.

Meiland acknowledges the problem; he does not want ' $\emptyset$  is true for  $X$ ' simply to mean that  $X$  believes that  $\emptyset$ . Rather, he suggests that ' $X$  believes that  $\emptyset$  is true' is to be taken as the *criterion* for saying that  $\emptyset$  is true for  $X$ , but that such belief "is not what is meant by saying that  $\emptyset$  is true for him".<sup>43</sup> To the obvious next question, "if ' $\emptyset$  is true-for- $X$ ' does not mean ' $X$  believes that  $\emptyset$ ', what does it mean?", Meiland offers the following answer: "...the statement  $\emptyset$  is true for Jones *means* ' $\emptyset$  corresponds to reality for Jones'".<sup>44</sup> But this answer does not help, for ' $\emptyset$  corresponds to reality for Jones' is opaque unless it means 'Jones

believes that  $\emptyset$  corresponds to reality'. In other words, Meiland's answer fails to provide an alternative to the unhelpful view that relative truth amounts merely to belief.

Meiland is aware of the unhelpfulness of the phrase 'corresponds with reality for Jones'. Rather than try to explicate it, or to show that it does not simply collapse into a claim about Jones' belief, however, Meiland contents himself with arguing that the relativist is in no worse a position on this score than the absolutist:

... if the relativist is asked the embarrassing question "what do you mean by 'corresponds with reality for Jones'?", we need only point out that although this question is embarrassing in the sense that it is difficult for the relativist to give any useful answer to it, nevertheless the relativist is in no worse a position than the absolutist at this point. Often, when the absolutist is asked to explain what he means by 'true', he does so in terms of correspondence with reality. And the absolutist who responds in this way owes us an account of what correspondence with reality consists in. Absolutists have not been able to say anything at all satisfactory on this score. Thus, relativism is not to be faulted for being unable to give an account of that which the absolutist cannot give an account of in his own position either.<sup>45</sup>

Meiland is here admitting that his notion of 'correspondence with reality for  $X$ ' is unhelpful; it does not further his positive account of relativism at all to note that the absolutist faces a parallel problem. But Meiland's situation here is even worse than he realizes, for it is not the case that the absolutist and the relativist are on equally difficult ground here. The absolutist faces the hoary philosophical problem of accounting for a reality which cannot be directly perceived or known. But this is a problem which is independent of the absolutism/relativism controversy. For the purposes of her debate with the relativist, all the absolutist needs is a distinction between reality and her conception of that reality. One can acknowledge that distinction while accepting that reality as such is known to us only through our perceptions, concepts, etc. The relativist, however, needs more than the distinction between reality and our conception of it. The relativist also needs an account of what it is to be 'reality-for-a-person', where that phrase must denote neither reality as such (i.e., independently of any conception of reality) *nor* a person's beliefs concerning or conception of that reality – the latter alternative reduces, as we have seen, simply to belief. Thus the notion of 'correspondence-with-reality-for- $X$ ' is *more* troublesome than the notion of 'correspondence-with-reality'; it is not the case, as Meiland claims, that the relativist is no worse off than the absolutist here.

The upshot is that Meiland has not shown that his development of the concept of relative truth is able to distinguish that concept from mere belief, so that ' $p$  is true for  $X$ ' is anything more than ' $X$  believes that  $p$ '. Earlier we saw that Meiland also failed to establish that the concept of relative truth does not in the end presuppose or rely on an absolutist conception of truth. And since, for the concept of relative truth to be coherent, tenable, and philosophically interesting, it must have a definite meaning which is distinct from mere belief and which does not presuppose an absolutist conception, we may conclude that Meiland's analysis of the concept of relative truth fails to establish that concept's coherence or tenability.<sup>46</sup>

#### RELATIVE TRUTH AND SELF-REFUTATION

As noted earlier, one of the classical objections to epistemological relativism is that the concept of relative truth, on which the doctrine of relativism seems to depend, is incoherent. Meiland's analysis has given us no reason to doubt the cogency of the classical objection. However, there is still a deeper problem. For even if it could be shown that the concept of relative truth is coherent, that by itself would not establish the cogency of epistemological relativism. I now want to argue that, even if some conception of relative truth were to be shown to be coherent, the doctrine of epistemological relativism would nevertheless remain unworthy of our embrace, for it would still fail to avoid the problem of self-refutation. Specifically, a coherent conception of relative truth fails to enable the relativist to avoid the perils of the *UVNR* argument for the incoherence of relativism discussed above.<sup>47</sup>

Recall that the *UVNR* argument has it that relativism is self-refuting in that, if relativism is right, it undermines the very idea of rightness. For to say that relativism is *right* is to presuppose the existence of nonrelative criteria of rightness by which the judgment that relativism is right can be made. But relativism denies the existence of any such criteria. Thus, if relativism is right, it undermines the very notion of rightness, by denying the very criteria necessary for the judgment of its rightness to have cognitive or epistemic force.

Now, if the relativist embraces the concept of relative truth, she embraces the thesis that any claim is true for those who believe it. (Meiland says that while ' $\emptyset$  is true-for- $X$ ' does not *mean* ' $X$  believes that  $\emptyset$ ', nevertheless such belief is the *criterion* for relative truth.) To



embrace this thesis, however, is to accept that the establishment of a claim or proposition or belief  $p$  as relatively true is not in any way an establishment of the epistemic worthiness of  $p$ . If  $p$  is relatively true, according to the relativist, then  $p$  is believed by the person for whom it is true; it corresponds with that person's conception of reality. The relative truth of  $p$  thus renders  $p$  no more worthy of belief than the equally (relatively) true not- $p$  or arbitrary belief  $q$ . The relativist conception of truth commits one to the view that relative truths are not in any way cognitively superior or preferable to their contradictories, to relative falsehoods, or to alternative relative truths. It is not much of an accomplishment, in short, for a statement to achieve the status of relative truth; the cognitive preferability the absolutist claims for truths over falsehoods is lost for the relativist. To label  $p$  relatively true is not in any way to praise it or to acknowledge it to be cognitively preferable to rival propositions; it is only to register that someone believes it.<sup>48</sup>

What then of relativism? Meiland seeks to develop a tenable conception of relative truth, and to defend relativism as itself relatively true. But, granting for the moment the tenability of the concept, Meiland's thesis comes simply to the claim that he believes it; relativism corresponds-to-reality-for-Meiland. Let us grant as well this thesis. Does it follow that relativism is enhanced in cognitive status, or that absolutism suffers? Not in the least. If relativism is only relatively true, then by its own lights it is no better than its alternatives. Meiland is seeking to defend relativism, but the very notion of rational defense is given up by the relativist, for the relativist has rejected the possibility of nonrelative criteria by which rival claims or hypotheses can be evaluated. Thus to hold that relativism is relatively true is not in any way to suggest that there is good reason for being a relativist, nor is it to discredit absolutism. Defending relativism as relatively true is not *defending* it at all; nor is it asserting anything about the *rightness* of relativism. Even if we grant the relativist the coherence of the concept of relative truth, then, this concept does not avoid the self-refutation problem. The UVNR argument remains a powerful argument for the incoherence of relativism: one cannot embrace relativism as right without giving up the very notion of rightness; to defend relativism as relatively true or right is not to defend it at all. The problem here is not with the *formulation* of the concept of relative truth, but rather, with the impossibility of the *defense* of a relativism which depends upon that concept.

## THE IMPOTENCE OF RELATIVISM

These considerations show, I think, the inability of relativism to sanction significant judgments, to recognize or do justice to the notions of warrant and justification with respect to beliefs and knowledge-claims, or to offer direction with respect to action. This inability may be thought of as the *impotence* of relativism. Since to say of  $p$  that it is relatively true is not to praise  $p$  or claim it to be more worthy of belief than rival claims not- $p$  or  $q$ , and since the relativist recognizes this feature of relativism – it is true for her, since, being a relativist, she believes that truth is relative – then the relativist must realize, from her own relativistic point of view, that  $p$ 's being true-for-her in no way warrants belief in  $p$  or establishes  $p$  as in any way more worthy of belief than not- $p$  or  $q$ . For the relativist must realize that not- $p$  and  $q$  are also relatively true, and so  $p$  has no claim to cognitive superiority or worthiness of belief on grounds of *its* relative truth. Moreover, the relativist must realize the thrust of the *UVNR* argument, which (in this context) comes to the view that the very notion of cognitive worthiness or superiority is given up with the adoption of relative truth.

Consequently, the relativist cannot say "I should adopt the belief  $p$ ", or " $p$  is justified for me, because  $p$  is true for me", because  $p$ 's relative truth in no way – from the relativist's own point of view – sanctions  $p$  or affords  $p$  epistemic warrant of any sort. Thus the relativist cannot regard her beliefs, or her relative truths, as warranted or worthy of belief. Similarly for action. The relativist is thus left in the position of being unable to recognize relative merits of propositions, knowledge-claims, or actions – all are as worthy as the rest, and the very notion of worthiness has been jettisoned – and therefore cannot rationally prefer any relative truth to any other. Warranted adoption of belief and of action is impossible for the relativist.

Of course the relativist can respond by claiming that  $p$ 's being true-for-her makes it, though only relatively true, more worthy of belief for her than a rival proposition  $q$ , which, while relatively true, is true-for-someone-else. But unless the relativist can say why a relative truth which is true-for-her is superior to or more worthy of belief than a relative truth which is true-for-someone-else – which she can't, since, in embracing relativism, she has given up the very notion of worthiness of belief – then adoption of one relative truth over another on the grounds that the adopted truth is true for the person doing the adopting is

arbitrary. *p*'s truth-for-Jones is not in any way superior to not-*p*'s truth-for-Smith – even for Jones. Thus the relativist can adopt beliefs (and act) only arbitrarily. Arbitrariness or impotence are the sole options of the relativist.<sup>49</sup>

#### RELATIVISM AND ARGUMENT

Another response Meiland can make to the *UVNR* argument is to claim that, in 'defending' relativism and the coherence of the concept of relative truth, he is not *defending* relativism or *arguing* for it at all, but rather is attempting simply to articulate his view, present it in a logically ordered way, or meet some purpose other than that of rational persuasion. Meiland actually does offer this response.

Maurice Mandelbaum argues that epistemological relativism is 'self-limiting'; i.e., that "acceptance of relativism in the theory of knowledge frequently – and perhaps always – involves a prior commitment to nonrelativistic interpretations of at least *some* judgments concerning matters of fact".<sup>50</sup> Mandelbaum's argument centers on the point that, in order for the relativist to defend or argue for relativism, she must regard her evidence nonrelativistically. If she does not, Mandelbaum suggests, her evidence need not be regarded *as evidence* by the nonrelativist; consequently, the evidence will not carry the cognitive force of evidence, and so will not effectively persuade the nonrelativist of the rightness of relativism.

In considering Mandelbaum's argument, Meiland writes:

Mandelbaum's basic objection is that the relativist offers arguments to support his position and, in doing so, presupposes some statements to be absolutely true . . . throughout this discussion so far, an assumption has been made – namely that when the relativist gives arguments to the nonrelativist, he is trying to convince the nonrelativist. Persuasion may be the nonrelativist's purpose in giving arguments, but it need not be the relativist's purpose. The giving of arguments can have many purposes. For example, the relativist may use the argumentative form in order to present his view in a logically ordered way so that his audience will better understand that view.

To insist that the relativist should have the same purposes in argument as the nonrelativist might have is misguided. It is an example of a practice often followed by absolutist objectors to relativism – the practice of requiring the relativist to adopt ends and to satisfy standards which are appropriate to absolutism and then declaring relativism refuted when relativism fails to live up to the mark. Relativism may be more appropriately considered as a world-view which generates its own goals and standards.<sup>51</sup>

Meiland does not actually deny that his many arguments offered in

support of relativism and in opposition to absolutism are meant to provide reasons for adopting the former and rejecting the latter, but the implication of the passage is clear. Meiland is suggesting that he is not trying to provide nonrelative reasons in support of relativism, or to defend relativism as right or as cognitively superior to absolutism. In this way Meiland seems to meet Mandelbaum's argument – the relativist is not contradicting herself in adducing 'evidence' for relativism, for her arguments and her evidence are not to be regarded as efforts at rational justification of relativism which are intended to be cognitively forceful for the absolutist as for the relativist. Similarly, Meiland seems to be speaking to the *UVNR* objection as well, since he seems to be claiming that he is not engaged in the project of establishing the *rightness* of relativism.

Unfortunately, this approach will not rescue Meiland from the difficulties delineated thus far. For one thing, it belies Meiland's own arguments, which he seemingly offers (contrary to the suggestion now being considered) not for the purpose of articulation or some other purpose, but for the purpose of convincing or rationally persuading the reader of the rightness of his views. When Meiland writes, for example, that "the relativist's position is surprisingly strong and is not touched by the usual accusations of incoherence, infinite regress, and begging of the question",<sup>52</sup> or when he summarizes an article by writing that he has tried "to *show* that the relativist has answers to [critical] points . . . [and he has] tried to *show* that the charge of self-vitiation against relativism is much harder to substantiate than the critics seem to have thought",<sup>53</sup> or when he summarizes another article by claiming that the discussion therein suffices to *refute* the charge of self-refutation,<sup>54</sup> it is difficult to interpret these remarks, and Meiland's argumentative efforts, in any other way than as remarks and efforts aimed at rationally establishing and persuading the reader of the cogency of relativism and the failure of criticisms of relativism. He is engaged in the project of providing evidence for, and reason for adopting relativism (or at least not rejecting it for what he thinks he has shown are spurious reasons). Thus despite his remarks about relativistic purposes of argument other than that of establishing evidence and persuasive cases, his own arguments undoubtedly are intended to satisfy these 'absolutist' purposes of argument. Consequently, Meiland's arguments *do* open themselves up to the challenges posed by Mandelbaum's self-limitation argument and the *UVNR* argument. Moreover, it is difficult to know what

argument comes to if it does not involve the effort to establish a conclusion on the basis of reasons – which is to say, to make a persuasive case for the rightness of some conclusion. It is not clear why discussions without this cognitive aim should be regarded as *arguments* at all. The relativist who is not seeking with her arguments to establish the rightness of relativism simply is not engaging the issue. So Meiland's suggestion that the relativist should not be seen as engaged in the project of defending relativism or advancing arguments with the purpose of establishing reasons for embracing or making rationally compelling cases for relativism fails to rescue the relativist either from Mandelbaum's self-limiting argument or from the *UVNR* argument.

#### DID SOCRATES BEG THE QUESTION?

If the points made thus far are correct, the relativist has failed to secure for the concept of relative truth a modicum of intelligibility, and has failed to meet the challenge of the arguments for the incoherence of relativism. Because these arguments trace their lineage to Socrates' discussion of Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*, it is important to consider the charge, put forward by several defenders of relativism, that Socrates' arguments beg the question against the relativist and so fail to demonstrate the untenability of relativism. We must consider both whether Socrates' arguments so beg the question, and also whether more recent formulations of the arguments for self-refutation do so.

It has long been recognized in the literature that Socrates' arguments seem to beg the question, by dropping the relativizing phrase 'for . . . ' when discussing truth, thus collapsing the Protagorean notion of relative truth into the standard absolutist one. Thus Meiland writes that

Plato's own attempt, in the *Thaetetus* to show Protagorean relativism to be self-refuting appears to be radically defective due to Plato's dropping of the relativistic qualifier (the "for me" in "true for me") at crucial points.<sup>55</sup>

Cris Swoyer similarly concludes that

such criticisms beg the question against relativism in their implicit reliance upon an absolute theory of truth.<sup>56</sup>

James N. Jordan also argues that, in response to Socrates' arguments, Protagoras would doubtless reply, and rightly, that this leaves him untouched, that in fact

it begs the question. . . . "For . . ." is an addendum whose power Socrates has misjudged, if, indeed, he has not entirely overlooked it.<sup>57</sup>

M. F. Burnyeat similarly recognizes a problem for Socrates here.<sup>58</sup>

It is undeniable that Socrates does drop the qualifier 'for . . .' in several passages in his response to Protagoras. The crucial question is, to what extent does this deletion vitiate his criticisms of Protagorean relativism? The answer, I think, is that the deletions do not in the end limit the force of his critique, or of the present reconstruction of it.

First, it must be noted that the Socratic argument can itself be analyzed in such a way that a portion of the argument includes a demonstration of Protagoras' commitment to the reliance upon the notion of absolute truth, and consequently of the incoherence of his concept of relative truth.<sup>59</sup> If Socrates' argument shows this, then it does not beg the question against Protagoras by deleting the qualifier 'for . . .', but rather deletes it for the very good reason that the expression 'true for' is only intelligible when taken to be equivalent to 'true (simpliciter)'.<sup>60</sup>

But whether the arguments in the *Theaetetus* can be shown to be compelling, the reconstructions of them offered here clearly can. The *UVNR* argument has not been satisfactorily fended off, either by Protagoras or by the contemporary relativists considered thus far; similarly, the *NSBF* argument stands as a powerful refutation of relativism. For, as we have seen, the relativist cannot coherently assert relativism only relatively: to argue that relativism is only correct for the relativist is to fail to join the issue with the opponent of relativism; it is to fail to assert the correctness or cognitive superiority of relativism. But to defend or assert relativism nonrelativistically is to acknowledge the cognitive force of criteria or principles of reasoning by which the relativistic thesis can itself be assessed, and this acknowledgement constitutes a rejection of the relativistic thesis (which rejects the force of such criteria or principles) which is purportedly being defended. Thus the relativist cannot coherently defend or assert relativism either relatively or nonrelatively. And, as the *NSBF* argument illustrates this dilemma for the relativist, if the relativist defends relativism relativistically, she recognizes the equal cognitive legitimacy of absolutism (and the standards by which absolutism is (relatively) established as superior to relativism) and thus the nonsuperiority of relativism and the arbitrariness of her commitment to it; while if she defends relativism

nonrelativistically she gives up the very doctrine she is attempting to defend.<sup>61</sup> Both the *UVNR* and *NSBF* arguments proceed without a commitment to absolute truth, but rather portend trouble for the relativist whatever conception of truth she adopts, and therefore these arguments do not beg the question against the relativist.<sup>62</sup>

The final telling point against the charge that the absolutist (Socrates) begs the question against the relativist (Protagoras) by assuming a notion of absolute truth (deleting the qualifier 'for...') is that the qualified, relativistic concept of truth has yet to be made sense of. Neither Protagoras nor the contemporary relativists considered above have offered an analysis of the concept of relative truth (or the qualifier 'for...') which renders that concept intelligible, except by trivializing it by reducing it to 'mere belief' (so that '*p* is true for *X*' just comes to '*X* believes that *p*') or rejecting it by demonstrating its reliance on the concept of absolute truth (so that '*p* is true for *X*' comes to '*p* is (absolutely) true for *X*'). But if the concept of relative truth is either incoherent, trivial, or reliant on the concept of absolute truth, it is hardly a powerful criticism of the absolutist (Socrates) that she fails to acknowledge the legitimacy of the concept of relative truth and utilizes an absolutist concept (drops the qualifier 'for...') in analyzing the relativist's position. In this circumstance, the absolutist can hardly be seen as begging the question against the relativist. On the contrary, she must be seen as doing her opponent a favor. The force of the question-begging charge, in short, depends on the coherence of the concept of relative truth; and we have been given no reason to regard that concept as coherent except in the special cases in which it is trivial or parasitic upon the absolutist conception. For these reasons, it seems appropriate to conclude that the question-begging charge does not constitute a major difficulty for the absolutist.

#### RELATIVISM WITHOUT RELATIVE TRUTH

Up to this point we have been concerned mainly with the difficulties attending versions of epistemological relativism which incorporate or rely upon the concept of relative truth. A very different sort of relativism is that which eschews that concept. In this section I will briefly consider a recent defense of relativism which explicitly rejects relative truth, that of Hartry Field.

Field's discussion of relativism takes place in the context of his

critique of Hilary Putnam's recent work.<sup>63</sup> As is well known, Putnam has recently given up his earlier embrace of 'metaphysical' realism, and has embraced what he calls 'internal' realism. In the course of his discussion of realism, Putnam forcefully rejects epistemological relativism as incoherent.<sup>64</sup> Field seeks to defend metaphysical realism from Putnam's critique; in addition he offers a conception of epistemological relativism which he believes shows relativism to be "a coherent and palatable doctrine".<sup>65</sup> The relativism Field defends "is a relativism as to values only, not to facts".<sup>66</sup> Being a physicalist and a metaphysical realist, Field regards truth as factual and thus nonrelative; there is therefore no sanction of relative truth in Field's relativism. There is, however, relativism about values, including especially *epistemic* values: "to say that a belief is justified is to evaluate it".<sup>67</sup> Field articulates his view further as follows:

I understand it [epistemological relativism] as the doctrine that the basic epistemological properties are not such properties as that of belief *B being justified*, but rather such relativized properties as that of belief *B being justified relative to* evidential system *E*. (An *evidential system* is, roughly, a bunch of rules for determining under what conditions one is to believe various things; a belief is justified relative to an evidential system in certain circumstances if the rules license the belief under those circumstances.)<sup>68</sup>

Field is quick to point out that, while relativism so conceived allows the relativist to say that *B* is justified relative to *E*<sub>1</sub>, or not-*B* relative to *E*<sub>2</sub>, she cannot say that *B* is justified *simpliciter*, or to *the true* evidential system, for these notions of justification are unrelativized and so are not available to the relativist. Field's relativist can say that *B* is true 'absolutely', but that *B* is justified only relatively to some *E*.

The obvious question to be put to Field's brand of relativism is: can rival, incompatible evidential systems themselves be nonrelatively or objectively or rationally evaluated? For if they can, so that we can say that *E*<sub>1</sub> is a better or superior or more justified evidential system than *E*<sub>2</sub> absolutely or nonrelatively, then the relativism Field offers is not very relativistic. For while two relativists who hold different *E*'s can claim that their incompatible beliefs *B* and not-*B* are justified relative to their respective *E*'s, we can nevertheless judge (say) that *B* should not be believed since it is justified only relative to *E*<sub>1</sub>, which we can argue is inferior to, or less adequate than, *E*<sub>2</sub>. This would reduce Field's relativism to a species of absolutism, and seems in any case to be incompatible with Field's view that epistemic values are relative. On the other hand, if rival, incompatible *E*'s cannot be nonrelatively



evaluated, then it is difficult to see how any belief, no matter how bizarre, can be ruled out or evaluated negatively, for some *E* which will sanction it could always be constructed. Consequently, the relative evaluation of beliefs will be empty: *all* beliefs will be justified relative to some *E*'s, unjustified relative to others, and the notion of epistemic justification will be not simply relativized, but trivialized. To say that a belief is justified will be not to praise it at all. The impotence noted earlier with respect to relative truth resurfaces in full force with respect to relative epistemic evaluation.

Field might bite the bullet at this point and accept the impotence attending his thesis of relative epistemic evaluation. But in fact he takes the opposite course, and, in a crucial passage which draws upon his distinction between relative evaluation and nonrelative facts, argues that on his conception the relativist is not so impotent with respect to epistemic judgment as she appears to be:

The idea that a relativist can do nothing more than say things like "*B* is justified relative to my evidential system but not to yours" is the basis for one of Putnam's main complaints against relativism. (Cf. 119/20.) In fact, however, an epistemological relativist is not nearly so limited. For evidential systems have lots of factual properties besides the properties of being adequate idealizations of the epistemic behavior of particular people, and the relativist can use such further factual properties of evidential systems in his epistemological remarks. For instance, one factual property that an evidential system may have is *reliability*, i.e., the property of tending to lead to a high proportion to truth over falsity in the long run. This talk of reliability is vague; but, vagueness aside, it is talk that the epistemological relativist is free to indulge in, for it does not involve unrelativized epistemological notions. In particular, an epistemological relativist can want, and presumably will want, to bring his belief-forming behavior into accordance with some reliable evidential system. Consequently the highest epistemological praise will not be "is justified relative to my evidential system"; if there is any "highest epistemological praise" it will be something like "is justified relative to some highly reliable evidential system" (or "is justified relative to all highly reliable evidential systems," or some such thing). This isn't really an adequate formulation of what "the highest epistemological praise" (if there is such a thing) would be, for (among other things) reliability is not the only feature we want our evidential systems to have; but it gives the general flavor.

The above remarks should make clear that (contra Putnam) an epistemological relativist will not hold that all evidential systems are equally good. . . .<sup>69</sup>

Grant Field that epistemic systems have factual properties, and that in his conception of relativism the relativist is free to appeal to such properties. Does it follow that the relativist "will not hold that all evidential systems are equally good"? No. Consider Field's example: as a matter of fact, some *E*'s will be more reliable than others. Suppose

that  $E_1$  and  $E_2$  are similar with respect to most factual properties; they differ only in that  $E_1$  is more reliable than  $E_2$ . Must the relativist regard  $E_1$  as better than  $E_2$ ? No. For, whatever the factual properties of  $E_1$  and  $E_2$ , the relativist is free to *evaluate* those factual properties in whatever fashion she wishes (or, strictly speaking, in accordance with her evidential 'meta-system' for evaluating evidential systems). Reliability may be a factual property of an evidential system, but *valuing* reliability is not factual, but evaluative;<sup>70</sup> and by Field's own lights the relativist's evaluations are relative to her evidential system (or, again, her meta-system for evaluating first-order systems). Thus there is no reason to suppose that the relativist would value a reliable system more than, say, a system which was unreliable, or which regularly produced a good laugh. When Field says that the relativist "presumably *will* want to bring his belief-forming behavior into accordance with some reliable evidential system",<sup>71</sup> he is presuming that the relativist values reliability. However, such a presumption is precisely what is ruled out by the view that epistemological evaluations are relative. Some (meta-) systems will value reliability, others will not; and a consistent epistemological relativism with respect to values must not prejudge the evaluations of alternative (meta-) systems; nor can it evaluate those evaluations. Judgments of the goodness of evidential systems are epistemological evaluations, and these are relative to evidential (meta-) systems; therefore Field's relativist, who holds that epistemological evaluations are relative, must hold that judgments of evidential systems, which are epistemological evaluations, must likewise be relative, and that rival evidential meta-systems will evaluate rival evidential systems differently (and that these evaluations are themselves relative to 'meta-meta-systems' and so cannot be judged 'absolutely', etc.). Consequently, the epistemological relativist *will* hold, indeed *must* hold, contra Field, that "all evidential systems are equally good". On Field's position there is no room for *any* sort of 'epistemological praise', for the very notion of epistemic worth is trivialized (by being relativized). The evaluation of evidential systems is just as much a matter of epistemological evaluation as the evaluation of beliefs; the relativism Field extends to the latter must be extended to the former as well. But to evaluate systems as Field does in the cited passage (with respect to reliability) is to evaluate systems nonrelatively, and this is just what the relativist cannot do. Thus Field has not defused Putnam's complaint, which is tantamount to the charge of impotence noted earlier. Field's

version of relativism is open to the *UVNR* argument as well, since there are no restraints on the valuations of rightness of alternative incompatible evidential systems (or meta-systems). Consequently, relativism without relative truth seems to be just as untenable as the more typical sort of relativism which incorporates some conception of relative truth. So long as evidential systems cannot themselves be neutrally or non-relatively evaluated,<sup>72</sup> the incoherence problems attending relative-truth versions of relativism apply to Field's physicalist, absolute-truth version as well. On the other hand, were Field to hold that evidential systems are capable of nonrelative evaluation,<sup>73</sup> he would be in effect giving up relativism altogether. In this respect as well, Field's absolute-truth version of relativism fares no better than its relative-truth cousins.

Field has suggested<sup>74</sup> that I have blurred a crucial distinction which, if respected, would overcome the criticism of his version of relativism just adumbrated. This distinction is between (relative) *evaluation* and (nonrelative) *preference*. While epistemological judgments (concerning, e.g., the justification of beliefs) are relative, on Field's view, to evidential systems, our judgments concerning evidential systems themselves are not evaluations, but rather are preferences which reflect our epistemic goals. If my epistemic goals include (say) reliability, and evidential system *E* has the property of reliability, then I may prefer *E* to alternative systems which do not have that property (or have it to a lesser degree). In this case my epistemological judgments are relative to *E*, but my adopting *E* is not a matter of evaluation of rival systems, but rather a reflection of my preference, which is itself a function of my epistemic goals. (Preferring *E* involves believing that *E* best achieves one's epistemic goals. This ability to achieve epistemic goals is objective and factual, so one might be wrong about (say) *E*'s being more reliable than *E'*, and one might disagree with one's opponent regarding evidential systems despite agreement about goals. But often disputes about evidential systems reflect disputes about epistemic goals.)

I do not see that the distinction between evaluation and preference helps Field's relativism. Consider the case of rival, incompatible epistemic goals. In Field's view, one's preference for an evidential system with a high degree of reliability is not an evaluation which is relative to one's evidential (meta-) system; it is simply an expression of one's epistemic goals. Suppose Smith's and Jones' epistemic goals differ, so that Smith adopts evidential system *E*, which (she thinks) best

reflects her nonrelative preferences, while Jones adopts  $E'$ , which (she thinks) best reflects *her* preferences. Can we evaluate or assess these preferences? If we can, then those preferences are subject to evaluation by means of some evidential system, and so on Field's view are relative. If we cannot, then the preferences must be seen as unsupported, unjustified, and unfounded – you have your preferences, I have mine – and a relativism of the most crass sort ensues. Preferences on this view are objective, in the sense that it is either true or false that Smith has preference  $P$ ; but they are surely relative nonetheless – not because they are epistemological evaluations which are relative to one's evidential system, but because they are relative to one's personal predilections and are in no way supported or defended as appropriate or reasonable.

The crucial question is: (how) can one evaluate preferences for evidential systems which reflect epistemic goals? Field's distinction between evaluation and preference does not show (how or) that one can evaluate preferences, in which case epistemological judgments are relative to systems which reflect unsupported preferences and goals. And this is just the sort of relativism criticized in the text.

Lest one suppose that it is somehow meaningless or inappropriate to evaluate preferences or epistemological goals, I hasten to point out that it is not only meaningful to do so, but that it is often of prime epistemological concern. Consider, for example, Ronald, a follower of Ptolemy who believes that the earth is at the center of the solar system, which belief is licensed by his evidential system  $E$ .  $E$  is embraced by Ronald because it reflects his epistemological goals, which include those of preserving the data provided by ordinary (naïve realist) perception (e.g., that the sun moves across the sky; that the earth does not move; etc.), and of maintaining a worldview which places humans at the center of God's universe. Confronted with Ronald, we have two choices: say that his beliefs are as (relatively) justified as our own, because they are licensed by his evidential system, which reflects his epistemological goals and preferences; or else challenge those beliefs by challenging the  $E$  and the set of goals and preferences which license those beliefs. If we opt for the former, we embrace relativism; if we opt for the latter, we hold that epistemic goals and preferences are themselves capable of epistemological evaluation and assessment. Either way Field's distinction between evaluation and preference does not save his position. In the former case, preferences are not evaluated

with reference to evidential systems, and relativism reigns but is open to the criticisms developed above. In the latter case preferences and epistemological goals are themselves open to evaluation and so are not relevantly distinguishable from evaluations.

### CONCLUSION

There are many contemporary sources and defenders of epistemological relativism which have not been considered thus far. I have, for example, barely touched on the voluminous literature regarding frameworks, conceptual schemes, and Wittgensteinian forms of life. Davidson's challenge to the scheme/content distinction and thereby to conceptual relativism, Rorty's acceptance of the Davidsonian argument and his use of it to defend a relativistic position, Winchian and other sociological and anthropological arguments for relativism, recent work in the sociology of science, and Goodman's novel articulation of a relativism of worlds and of worldmaking, to mention just some of the contemporary loci of debate, all need to be addressed.<sup>75</sup> So also do the plethora of relativistic arguments spawned by Kuhn and related literature in recent philosophy of science.<sup>76</sup> Therefore, it cannot be said that there is no more to be said on behalf of epistemological relativism. Moreover, the positive task of delineating a defensible version of absolutism remains to be accomplished.

Nevertheless, the defenses of relativism considered above do seem to have been successfully undercut. More specifically, the arguments for the incoherence of relativism are as compelling as ever, and have manifestly not been laid to rest by contemporary relativists. The basic Socratic insight that relativism is self-refuting, and so incoherent, remains a fundamental difficulty for those who would resuscitate and defend the ancient Protagorean doctrine or a modern variant of it.<sup>77</sup>

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Plato: *Theaetetus*, 152a. All references to this dialogue are taken from the translation of F. M. Cornford which appears in Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (eds.), *The Collected Dialogues of Plato* (Bollingen Series, Pantheon Books, 1961), pp. 845–919.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 160c.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 166d–167d.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 170a.

<sup>5</sup> Much of what follows is concerned with the status of this relativizing phrase.

<sup>6</sup> Thus I will not be considering the entire range of Socrates' arguments against Protagoras. For a fuller discussion cf. M. F. Burnyeat: 1976, 'Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Plato's Theaetetus', *The Philosophical Review* **85**, 172–195; and Burnyeat: 1976, 'Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Later Greek Philosophy', *The Philosophical Review* **85**, 44–69. Of particular note is Burnyeat's "triple-sequence" analysis of the Socratic response to Protagoras.

<sup>7</sup> *Theaetetus*, 162a.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 169d–171c. Socrates raises an additional problem for Protagoras here in his pointing out an apparent inconsistency between Protagoras holding both that some are wiser than others and that no one thinks falsely. (Cf. esp. 169d, with reference to 167b–c.) But I shall forego consideration of this problem, since the Protagorean relativist could relinquish the former claim. The problem therefore does not count against the Protagorean relativist as such.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 170e–171a.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 171a. Here begins a famous difficulty for the Socratic argument. Socrates deletes the relativizing phrase 'for ...' after 'true', thus unfairly characterizing Protagoras' position. This opens the door to the charge that Socrates has begged the question against Protagoras by assuming an 'absolute' conception of truth, according to which a claim's truth is independent of a person's belief in its truth, which the relativist rejects. The Protagorean counter-argument, which denies the intelligibility or rightness of the absolute conception and offers instead a relative conception of truth, as well as the question-begging charge, will be considered in detail in the following sections.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 171b. Cf. also 179b.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 171c.

<sup>13</sup> Socrates also objects to the Protagorean doctrine on the grounds that the truth values of certain propositions, e.g., those which make assertions about the future, are independent of opinions held prior to the future event or state-of-affairs. If *A* believes that it will rain in Katmandu on January 1, 1990, and *B* believes the contrary, their opinions are not both true, as Protagorean relativism holds, but one of them is false; furthermore, their truth values depend not on the beliefs but on the weather in that place at that time. In such cases, at least, man is not the measure of all things. While this argument does seem to show that the truth values of at least some propositions are independent of persons' beliefs – and so, that Protagorean relativism is false – it does not make any claims regarding the incoherence of that doctrine, and so will not be considered further here.

<sup>14</sup> The following discussion borrows heavily from my 'Epistemological Relativism in its Latest Form', *Inquiry* **23** (1980), 107–117; and my 'Relativism Refuted', *Educational Philosophy and Theory* **14** (1982), 47–50.

<sup>15</sup> In addition to the papers cited in note 14, cf. also my 'Objectivity, Rationality, Incommensurability, and More', *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* **31** (1980), 359–375, regarding Kuhnian relativism; and my 'Rationality, Talking Dogs, and Forms of Life', *Educational Theory* **30** (1980), 135–148, regarding Wittgensteinian relativism.

<sup>16</sup> This follows only if we interpret truth absolutely, so that the consequent of this conditional reads: "then, if *ER* is absolutely true, (at least according to that set of standards  $S_1, \dots, S_n$ ) *ER* is false." This of course will not be accepted by the Protagorean relativist who denies the viability of the notion of absolute truth, and who consequently accuses the absolutist (Socrates) of begging the question. This move is considered in some detail below. I thank Ed Erwin, Bill Sewell and Catherine Elgin for their comments on this point.

<sup>17</sup> A very similar point is made by Edward Beach: 1984, 'The Paradox of Cognitive Relativism Revisited', *Metaphilosophy* **15**, 15.

As should be clear from the text, this argument does not show that *ER* is itself self-contradictory or incoherent. It could be true that claims admit only of relative evaluation. What is incoherent is the effort to *defend ER*, i.e., the conjunction of *ER* and the thesis that *ER* is rationally justifiable. (For rational defense requires appeal to nonrelative reasons.) Thus I am not claiming, with my reconstruction of Socrates' argument, that *ER* is itself incoherent or necessarily false. Rather, as will become clear below, I am claiming that relativism is *impotent* in the sense that defense of it necessarily involves self-contradiction. I am grateful to Ed Erwin for discussion of this point.

In fact some "defenders" of relativism do seek to defend relativism only relativistically, and claim that so doing does not trivialize their doctrine. I consider this claim below.

<sup>18</sup> Harold I. Brown: 1977, 'For a Modest Historicism', *The Monist* **60**, 540–555. Cited passage is from pp. 549–550.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 541.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 550.

<sup>21</sup> It is perhaps worth noting that Brown's confusion in the article presently under consideration carries over into some of his other writings. In his recent book *Perception, Theory and Commitment: The New Philosophy of Science*, Precedent Publishing Inc., Chicago, 1977, Brown encounters similar difficulties in his analyses of knowledge, fallibilism, relativism, truth, and certainty. Cf. my review of Brown's book, 'Brown on Epistemology and the New Philosophy of Science', *Synthese* **56** (1983), 61–89, and Brown's response in the same issue.

<sup>22</sup> Jack W. Meiland: 1979, 'Is Protagorean Relativism Self-Refuting?', *Grazer Philosophische Studien* **9**, 51–68; Meiland: 1977, 'Concepts of Relative Truth', *The Monist* **60**, 568–582; Meiland: 1980, 'On the Paradox of Cognitive Relativism', *Metaphilosophy* **11**, 115–126; and Meiland: 1973, 'Cognitive Relativism: Popper and the Argument From Language', *Philosophical Forum* **4**, 406–421. Cf. also Jack W. Meiland and Michael Krausz (eds.): 1982, *Relativism: Cognitive and Moral*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame.

<sup>23</sup> Meiland: 'On the Paradox of Cognitive Relativism', p. 121, emphasis in original. Cf. in this regard James N. Jordan: 1971, 'Protagoras and Relativism: Criticisms Bad and Good', *Southwestern Journal of Philosophy* **2**, 7–29.

<sup>24</sup> And in any case this is a move which is contrary to the spirit of relativism, and makes that doctrine less challenging and interesting – as Meiland notes, 'On the Paradox of Cognitive Relativism', p. 119.

<sup>25</sup> 'Concepts of Relative Truth', p. 571. Note that it is possible to develop a coherent concept of relative truth that is not independent of the concept of absolute truth – much as it is possible to define relative space in terms of absolute space. The point here is not that the concept of relative truth is necessarily incoherent if it relies on the concept of absolute truth; it is rather that such a concept could not be used in an effort to establish relativism, which denies the legitimacy of the concept of absolute truth. For the relativist cannot rely on the concept of absolute truth in order to deny the legitimacy of that concept. So it is not that a concept of relative truth which relies on the concept of absolute truth is automatically, because of that reliance, incoherent; it is rather that such a concept cannot do the work the relativist wants it to do. I am grateful here for discussions with Ted Lockhart and Donald Provence.

<sup>26</sup> Meiland: 'Concepts of Relative Truth', op. cit., p. 571, emphasis in original.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 571.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp. 571–572.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 574.

<sup>30</sup> Actually this is not quite right. The *metaphysical* relativist must deny that there is a way the world is, independent of statements and *W*'s; the *epistemological* relativist must deny only that one can *know* the way the world is, independent of statements and of *W*'s. This distinction between metaphysical and epistemological relativism is an important one that deserves more attention than I can give it here. I am grateful to Bruce Suttle, Bill Sewell, and Harold I. Brown for pointing out to me its relevance in the present context. I should like to note, however, that it does not affect the issue being treated in the text. The argument that Meiland's three-term relation collapses into a two-term relation still goes through.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Nelson Goodman: 1978, *Ways of Worldmaking*, Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., Indianapolis. I consider Goodman's unique brand of relativism in 'Goodmanian Relativism', *The Monist* 67 (1984), 359–375.

<sup>32</sup> Meiland: 'Concepts of Relative Truth', p. 571.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 574.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Recall that *W* is not just a letter here; it is a placeholder for persons, world-views, situations, etc.

<sup>36</sup> To paraphrase Meiland, Ibid., p. 574.

<sup>37</sup> Meiland recognizes this point is another context when he writes: "'Relative truth' is a form of truth; the expression 'relative truth' is not a name for something bearing little relation to our ordinary conception of truth." 'Introduction', in Meiland and Krausz (eds.), *Relativism*, p. 4.

<sup>38</sup> As Passmore writes, taking '*p* is true for *X*' as '*X* thinks *p* is true' "at once raises the question whether it is true." John Passmore: 1961, *Philosophical Reasoning*, London, p. 67.

<sup>39</sup> Meiland's discussion focuses on the charge as it is developed by Roger Trigg: 1973, *Reason and Commitment*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. The discussion occurs in 'Concepts of Relative Truth', pp. 577–580. Many other writers have considered this charge as well. For further discussion cf. e.g., Chris Swoyer: 'True For', in Meiland and Krausz (eds.), *Relativism*, pp. 85, 94; and Burnyeat: 'Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Plato's Theaetetus', p. 174.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 578, emphasis in original. It is worth pointing out that Plato raises this objection as well. Cf. *Theaetetus*, 183b.

<sup>41</sup> 'Concepts of Relative Truth', p. 579, emphasis in original.

<sup>42</sup> 'Introduction', in Meiland and Krausz (eds.), *Relativism*, p. 4. Cf. also p. 82. But see Meiland's opposite reading of the Measure Doctrine, 'Is Protagorean Relativism Self-Refuting?', p. 58.

<sup>43</sup> 'Concepts of Relative Truth', p. 579.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 580.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Chris Swoyer: 'True For', in Meiland and Krausz (eds.), *Relativism*, pp. 88–108, also discusses relative truth. While space forbids detailed consideration of Swoyer's provocative paper here, I wish briefly to point out one weakness. On Swoyer's account, *p*'s relative truth amounts simply to *p*'s correspondence to the facts as constituted by a



framework *F*. This avoids relative truth's collapse into mere belief, but relative truth does collapse, analogously, into mere correspondence with the facts as constituted in *F*. There is, on Swoyer's account, no room for *F* to be mistaken, nor is there any way to assess or criticize *F*'s construal of the world. Consequently *F*'s verdict is sufficient to establish *p*'s relative truth (falsity). Swoyer's account thus substitutes the arbitrariness of judgments by a framework for that of beliefs by an individual or group. Relative truth comes simply to "what a framework holds."

<sup>47</sup> Below I argue that a coherent concept of relative truth fails to avoid the *NSBF* argument for relativism's incoherence as well.

<sup>48</sup> I ignore here the troublesome (for the relativist) point that even this notion of registering a belief as a belief seems to demand a rejection of relativism. Is it, after all, only relatively true that (for example) Reagan believes in the legitimacy of prayer in the public school? Is this not true even for those who do not believe that Reagan believes this?

<sup>49</sup> Here we see why Brown is mistaken in claiming that relativism "affirms my right to reject competing sets of presuppositions as false". (Cf. text accompanying note 20 above.) All relativism affirms is the right to regard competing sets of presuppositions as *relatively* false. And since the relativist cannot claim that her own presuppositions are, in being true-for-her (and so, relatively true), cognitively or epistemically superior or more worthy of belief than competing sets of presuppositions which are false-for-her but true-for-someone-else (and so also relatively true), relativism does not affirm the right Brown claims. Here again is the penalty exacted by relativism's impotence.

<sup>50</sup> Maurice Mandelbaum: 1979, 'Subjective, Objective, and Conceptual Relativisms', *The Monist* 62, 403–428. Cited passage is from p. 403, emphasis in original. Mandelbaum's thesis of the self-limitation of relativism is weaker than the thesis of self-refutation (although Meiland regards them as equivalent), but his case is powerfully made, and his argument that relativism is self-limiting because the evidence adduced to support relativism must be regarded nonrelativistically in order to be properly regarded *as evidence* offers additional reason for taking relativism to be incoherent. It is related to, or is a version of, the argument advanced above that relativism must be defended nonrelativistically, and that a "relative defense" is no defense at all. Mandelbaum's article is reprinted in Meiland and Krausz (eds.), *Relativism*, pp. 34–61.

<sup>51</sup> This passage is taken from the editors' introduction to Mandelbaum's 'Subjective, Objective, and Conceptual Relativisms', in Meiland and Krausz (eds.), *Relativism*, p. 32. I am grateful to Roy Mash for calling this passage to my attention. Cf. also 'On the Paradox of Cognitive Relativism', pp. 125–126, and 'Is Protagorean Relativism Self-Refuting?', p. 68.

<sup>52</sup> 'Concepts of Relative Truth', p. 580.

<sup>53</sup> 'On the Paradox of Cognitive Relativism', p. 126, emphasis added, I take the word "show" in these passages to be tantamount to "rationally establish."

<sup>54</sup> 'Is Protagorean Relativism Self-Refuting?', p. 68.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>56</sup> Swoyer: 'True For', p. 95.

<sup>57</sup> Jordan: 'Protagoras and Relativism: Criticisms Bad and Good', pp. 10–11. Cf. also pp. 14, 15. It should be noted that Jordan ultimately argues for relativism's incoherence, but on grounds he regards as different from Socrates'.

<sup>58</sup> Burnyeat: 'Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Plato's Theaetetus', pp. 174–175 and

throughout. Burnyeat cites several other critics of Socrates' dropping of the qualifier "for . . .", esp. Vlastos, in these pages and in his footnote 4 on p. 174. But it must be pointed out that Burnyeat offers an analysis of the Socratic response to Protagoras which does not conclude that Socrates begs the question, but rather that Protagorean relativism is indeed incoherent, and that Socrates' arguments are ultimately grounded appropriately:

No amount of maneuvering with his relativizing qualifiers will extricate Protagoras from the commitment to truth absolute which is bound up with the very act of assertion. To assert is to assert that  $p$  – as Passmore puts it, that something is the case – and if  $p$ , indeed if and only if  $p$ , then  $p$  is true (period). This principle, which relativism attempts to circumvent, must be acknowledged by any speaker. How clearly Plato saw that, I hesitate to say. But at some level it is surely what he is reacting to (p. 195).

This suggestion, that the very act of assertion of relativism commits the relativist to absolute truth, is a familiar one, and is related to the argument advanced earlier that relativism cannot be defended relativistically. In addition to Burnyeat's discussion, cf. that of Passmore, referred to by Burnyeat, and Jordan: 'Protagoras and Relativism: Criticisms Bad and Good'.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Burnyeat's compelling analysis, the conclusion of which is cited in note 58 above. But note Meiland's rebuttal, in 'Is Protagorean Relativism Self-Refuting?', pp. 56–63.

<sup>60</sup> It is perhaps worth noting that Meiland finds Burnyeat's interpretation of Plato "very persuasive as an interpretation of what Plato actually meant." ('Is Protagorean Relativism Self-Refuting?', footnote 13, pp. 56–57.)

<sup>61</sup> Thus the *NSBF* argument, as well as the *UVNR* argument, gives rise to the difficulty the relativist faces regarding the defense of relativism.

<sup>62</sup> And in any case it must be recognized that the charge of question-begging has only been leveled at (Socrates' version of) the *NSBF* argument; the *UVNR* argument is entirely unscathed by this charge. The relativist could try to extend the charge to the latter argument by claiming that that argument assumes a notion of 'absolute rightness', but the charge is forceful only if the relativist, in making the charge, assumes the very same thing (that is, that it is right (absolutely or *simpliciter*) that the absolutist makes the assumption in question).

<sup>63</sup> Hartry Field: 1982, 'Realism and Relativism', *The Journal of Philosophy* **79**, 553–567.

<sup>64</sup> Hilary Putnam: 1981, *Reason, Truth and History*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. Putnam's discussion of relativism occurs at pp. 119–124; cf. also pp. 157, 161–162. Putnam also criticizes relativism in his second Howison Lecture, 'Why Reason Can't be Naturalized', *Synthese* **52** (1982), 3–23. Cf. pp. 7–14.

As several writers have pointed out, it is not clear that the positive view of internal realism Putnam defends is not itself relativistic, and thus inconsistent with his rejection of relativism. (Cf. in this regard Field: 'Realism and Relativism', p. 563, note 12; also Eric Matthews' review of *Reason, Truth and History*, *Philosophical Books* **24** (1983), esp. 115–116.) I believe that this is indeed a serious difficulty for Putnam, but space forbids detailed consideration of the point here.

<sup>65</sup> Field: 'Realism and Relativism', p. 562.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 562. Field argues that this distinguishes his version of relativism from Protagoras', which Field agrees is incoherent.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 563.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., emphasis in original. Note that this version of epistemological relativism neatly matches the characterization, *ER*, given earlier in this paper, at least with respect to justification.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 564, emphasis in original.

<sup>70</sup> Field of course accepts this distinction and utilizes it throughout his argument for relativism.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 564, emphasis added.

<sup>72</sup> And Field explicitly denies that they can, Ibid., p. 566.

<sup>73</sup> This, incidentally, is all that the absolutist need maintain – not, as Field intimates, that there must be a *true* evidential system (Ibid., p. 563). Cf. my ‘Brown on Epistemology and the New Philosophy of Science’, *op. cit.*, pp. 81–82.

<sup>74</sup> Personal communication.

<sup>75</sup> For consideration of Goodman, cf. my ‘Goodmanian Relativism’, *op. cit.*

<sup>76</sup> Cf. my ‘Objectivity, Rationality, Incommensurability, and More’, *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* **31** (1980), 359–375.

<sup>77</sup> I am grateful to Harold I. Brown, Nicholas Burbules, Catherine Elgin, Hartry Field, Sophie Haroutunian, Roy Mash, Denis Phillips, Donald Provenge, Bruce Suttle, and especially to Edward Erwin, Ted Lockhart and Bill Sewell, for insightful criticism and helpful suggestions. A shorter version of this paper, under the title ‘The Impotence of Relativism’, was presented at the March 1984 Pacific Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association. I am indebted to my commentator at that session, Frederick F. Schmitt, for his helpful commentary.

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