

RELATIVISM: A CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

Vittorio Villa

RESUMEN

En este trabajo primero trataré de formular una *definición conceptual* de relativismo con el propósito de identificar los elementos básicos comunes a las concepciones relativistas más relevantes. Calificaré de “relativistas” todas las concepciones en las que *todos* o *una parte relevante* de sus criterios y creencias *dependen necesariamente* de un contexto dado. Luego trataré algunas observaciones críticas contra el relativismo. Desde este punto de vista, se genera un problema del hecho de que muchos relativistas desearían poder expresar algunos juicios *objetivos*. Finalmente, propondré una concepción relativista: una que aun sin incorporar elementos absolutistas podría explicar la presencia de un núcleo común de criterios y creencias en todos nuestros esquemas y creencias. Aquí, son importantes dos distinciones: primera, entre *esquemas conceptuales locales* y *marcos de referencia de largo plazo*, y segunda, entre *entorno* y *mundo*. Esta última distinción hace posible hablar de la existencia de una realidad objetiva, incluso al interior de una concepción epistemológica relativista coherente.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Relativismo, realidad objetiva, criterios, entorno, mundo.

ABSTRACT

In this paper, first, I will try to give a *conceptual definition* of relativism, with the aim of singling out the basic elements common to the most relevant relativist conceptions. I will qualify as “relativistic” all conceptions in which *all* or *a relevant part* of its criteria and beliefs *necessarily depend* on a given context. Secondly, I will deal with some critical observations against relativism. From this point of view, a problem arises from the fact that many relativists would like to have the chance of expressing some *objective* judgments. Lastly, I will propose a relativistic conception: one that doesn’t incorporate absolutist elements at all and nevertheless could be able to explain the presence of a common core of criteria and beliefs in all our conceptual schemes and beliefs. Two distinctions are important here: first, *local conceptual schemes* and *long term frameworks*, and second, *environment* and *world*. This last distinction makes possible to speak, even inside a coherent relativist epistemological conception, of the existence of an objective reality.

KEYWORDS

Relativism, objective reality, criteria, environment, world.

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RELATIVISM: A CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

Vittorio Villa*

Università degli Studi di Palermo

«Relativism, like scepticism, is one of those doctrines that have by now been refuted a number of times too often. Nothing is perhaps a surer sign that a doctrine embodies some not-to-be-neglected truth than that in the course of history of philosophy it should have been refuted again and again. Genuinely refutable doctrines only need to be refuted once »
MacIntyre, (1985, p. 22).

THE CURRENT DEBATE ON RELATIVISM

Today the theme of relativism is at the centre of attention not only in the philosophical sphere —and more particularly, which most interests us here, in contemporary analytical philosophy— but also in our public debate, in press organs, party offices, ecclesiastical hierarchies, etcetera.

In Italy (but the matter also concerns other western countries, as for instance the United States) for some time an intense press campaign has been going on within which the expression *relativism*, in its meta-ethical sense, has been used as a political weapon to discredit secular culture and the political forces that appeal to it — actually very weakly. *Being relativists* is in actual fact considered a sort of defamatory accusation, not only for those who make it but also for those who receive it and awkwardly endeavour to ward it off without ever entering into the content of the accusations.

The most serious thing, nevertheless, at least for those who ardently desire our public debate to move along tracks of

* villa@unipa.it

correctness and transparency, is that in throwing out these attacks people entirely omit to specify the meaning attributed to the expression involved. The result of the ideological use made of it is to determine a more or less interested semantic overlap with other notions that are undoubtedly different (*skepticism, nihilism, subjectivism, pluralism*).

The discussion on relativism takes a rather different course if instead we look at philosophical culture in the English language, with reference above all to the area of analytical philosophy, which will be the privileged field of reference in this paper. What is certain is that the debate on relativism is receiving a great deal of attention today, while previously there was a long period, from the 1950s to the 1970s, in which it was taken for granted that relativism had been refuted once and for all. Caricature versions of relativistic positions were offered, presented in a totally pejorative and disparaging key, so much so that that few philosophers endeavoured to work out an explicit defence of relativism. Most of the people that expounded theses that might have had relativistic implications occupied a large part of their time in trying to avoid these consequences and defending themselves against this accusation¹.

Until the 1960s, among scholars in the analytical area there was widespread awareness that cognitive relativism, at least in its most radical version, had been refuted once and for all by the most sophisticated versions of the traditional *argument from self-refutation*. I will return to this point subsequently. Here I am concerned with stressing that in the 1950s and 1960s the pathway of *cognitive relativism* having become an impossible one, it seemed to most people that the only acceptable version of relativism was the ethical one, specifically meaning *meta-ethical relativism*. From this point of view, there was awareness that this version could only flourish as a *specific* and absolutely *limited* form of relativism, sustainable insofar as it rested firmly on epistemological conceptions of an absolutistic and objectivistic type. The central

¹This situation is well described by Swoyer (1982, p. 84).

idea, typical of the epistemological conception prevailing in those years (a sophisticated version of neo-positivism), was that fact-judgements were *objective*, and represented a reality in themselves, while value-judgements were *subjective*, and were projections of emotions about and attitudes to reality². Hence on the basis of the sharing of this dichotomous opposition between *objective fact-judgements* and *subjective value-judgements* it was possible to maintain that *meta-ethical relativism* furnished a plausible characterization of the *subjectivity* of ethical judgments, while *metaphysical realism*³ represented the basic framework inside which to justify the *objectivity* of fact-judgements.

Things started to change in the late 1970s. Studies began to appear, especially in the 1980s, which showed that relativism can rather easily avoid the attempts at refutation, to which end there is more than one argumentative strategy available. Secondly, at the same time *constructivist* and *anti-realistic* conceptions of knowledge began to develop, which in one way or another incorporated elements of a relativistic character. Through these developments, the relationship between meta-ethical relativism and the other more radical forms of relativism (cognitive and/or cultural) changed signs: cognitive and/or cultural relativism ended up representing the philosophical basis on which to found new versions of meta-ethical relativism, which were alternatives to those expressed in *emotivist* terms.

In more recent years relativism has tended to be placed, as I have already said, at the centre of discussions within analytical philosophy, especially in the disciplinary areas of epistemology, philosophy of language, cultural anthropology, cognitive sciences and moral philosophy. Some highly interesting monographs on this theme have recently appeared;⁴ and there are also positions,

²This thesis is central to my *Costruttivismo e teorie del diritto* (1999), to which the reader is referred for further details.

³The phrase was coined, as is well known, by Putnam (1985, p. 57).

⁴I refer in particular to the volumes by Baghranian (2004); O'Grady (2002); and Harré & Krausz (1996).

at an epistemological level, expressing very radical relativism in a complete and consistent form⁵. Today relativism, regardless of whether or not one adheres to it, represents an essential challenge for absolutist and objectivist positions, which have been greatly refined in the critical confrontation with it. Moreover, there are some conceptions that seek to present themselves as being halfway between relativism and absolutism, and in doing so end up encompassing elements of a relativistic character⁶.

Hence it seems that things are going very well for relativism. So is all well? I am inclined to doubt this. The fact is that, in contrast with the preceding period, in which there was a *deflationary* situation concerning definitions, now instead, we are faced with an *inflationary* situation: that is to say, there is an *excess of definitions*, some uselessly *complicated*, others too *generic*, yet others too *specific*. Anyone who wants to undertake the invidious task of investigating relativism risks in short, losing the thread of the skein and not reaching an adequate overall vision. Today, in effect, relativism appears like a galaxy of conceptions that are projected into different spheres, and it proves rather difficult to trace the connections between these conceptions and establish their confines.

In this paper first of all I have to set myself a task of conceptual simplification, seeking to grasp, at one and the same time, both the elements of unity and the elements of differentiation of the various relativistic conceptions. I will now explain how I will proceed in doing this. In the second section I will try to offer a *conceptual definition of relativism*, afterwards deriving its principal articulations (the *conceptions*), keeping in mind above all the various spheres in which these conceptions are present.

In the third section I will deal with some of the main difficulties that relativism comes up against, and therefore also with the criticisms made against it in the area of analytical philosophy.

⁵I am thinking, for example, of the works of Stich (1996), and Margolis (1991).

⁶Of the various in-between positions, here it is important to mention the one expressed by Putnam, at least in *Verità, ragione e storia*; and the one expressed by Toulmin (1972).

Lastly, in the fourth section I will endeavour to answer the criticisms from my personal point of view and in doing so I will be concerned to present a *moderate version of relativism*.

To conclude this introductory section, it seems important to me to stress that an investigation of relativism is extremely important, at least indirectly, for the theme of the conference too. The fact is that if a relativistic perspective is adopted, then it will inevitably be necessary to reject the idea that a whole series of important notions within practical philosophy (for instance the notion of *person*, that of *the person's rights*, that of *rule of law*, etcetera, as they have been worked out in cultural contexts of the western type) can be justified in absolute and universal terms, outside the contexts in which they arose. This naturally does not mean that we do not have, first of all, to defend them and present them in their *best light*; and, secondly, to try to present them in contexts different from our own, even though in the form of inter-cultural dialogue and not of coercive imposition. In my opinion all this requires that the dialogue be concerned to show that these notions can also be considered important acquisitions from the point of view of cultural schemes that are different from our own.

A DEFINITION OF RELATIVISM

As we have seen, relativism today appears as a very complex and ramified notion, which is proposed, moreover, in many different versions (*strong* and *weak*) and can be applied in various spheres. We find both very specific formulations of relativism and very general and comprehensive conceptions. Therefore it happens that one can be a relativist in a given sphere and not in others; and moreover that attempts are made to blend relativism and absolutism, giving rise to more or less successful *hybrids*.

The fact that relativism is such a complex notion, one of those that are usually defined as *essentially contested concepts*,⁷ must not

⁷For this notion the *locus classicus* is the paper by Gallie, "Essentially Contested

however induce us to stop using it, as is suggested by Rorty (1999, p. XIV), who believes that it lacks any sufficiently unitary character to be able to perform any explanatory or reconstructive function. I believe, on the contrary, that once it is appropriately redefined, this term captures something important that is common to a vast set of conceptions, and therefore can perform a useful clarifying function.

How can one proceed in the attempt to give a definition of it? Well, in all cases in which the *definiendum* is constituted by *essentially contested concepts*, some time ago I worked out and applied a model of definition that I have called *conceptual definition* (see my previous papers⁸). This is based on the scheme *concept / conceptions*, whose purpose, *minimal* but no less important, is —if any exist— to identify the *common conceptual basis*, the shared assumptions (*deemed certain*) by various conceptions, different from or even alternative to one another, concerning the same object. An important element of this definition is that of its ability to describe, at one and the same time, both the shared elements (the *concept*) and the elements of differentiation (namely, the *conceptions* as interpretations of the same concept) of an *essentially disputable* notion. This is a characteristic that proves very useful to us in speaking of relativism.

However, before proceeding to the definition it is useful to clarify a point. I said before that relativism has many faces and can express several conceptions. The reason for this is actually that relativism, rather than expressing —or being identified with— a single conception, is a *salient characteristic* of a group of conceptions that can differ in content or disciplinary sphere. These are, however, conceptions that are classifiable as *relativistic* in that they possess that particular characteristic. In this sense, the objective of the conceptual definition of *relativism* that I am about to propose is precisely to identify this characteristic; and it is a characteristic that concerns the way in which affirmations, beliefs

Concepts" (1955-1956, p. 167-198). But another important reference point is Hurley's essay, "Objectivity and Disagreement" (1985, pp. 66-73, 81-91).

⁸ See in particular *Il positivismo giuridico: metodi teorie e giudizi di valore* (Villa, 2004, pp. 18-20).

and criteria considered as *relative* have to be justified or validated. According to this definition we should consider as relativistic all those conceptions according to which

all the (*strong versions*) or at least a significant and large part (*weak versions*) of the criteria and beliefs of a cognitive, cultural, semantic, ethical or aesthetic, etc. character (according to the sphere referred to) depend on —and therefore are related to— a context (which can be a paradigm, a culture, a language, et cetera) chosen each time as a reference point; and this means that there is no position, point of view or parameter *outside any context* making it possible to effect a completely neutral evaluation of these elements, and therefore to make any affirmations in *absolute* terms⁹.

From this definition it is clear that precisely *absolutism* is the conception that is opposed to relativism; and here *absolutism* is taken to mean «that characteristic possessed by all those conceptions that deem it necessary to admit that a large part of the beliefs and the criteria mentioned above are valid independently of reference to a context».

This definition, although it is truly *minimal*, is however already able to provide some suitable tools for distinguishing relativism from all those notions (*skepticism, nihilism, anarchism, subjectivism, pluralism*) that are frequently confused with it.

There is not sufficient space for a more thorough analytical examination of the various notions and their relationships; therefore I will proceed in a very schematic way. First of all relativism, thus defined, is clearly distinguished from *skepticism*,¹⁰ that is to say from all those positions that strategically cast doubt on the *truth* or the *guaranteed assertibility* of affirmations or beliefs, in the

⁹This definition derives from an elaboration of those provided by Baghramian (2004, p. 1), and Krausz (1989, p. 1). Also partially convergent are the definitions given by Mandelbaum, (1982, p. 35).

¹⁰This definition, which appears very clear to me, is not adequately taken into account by Giovanni Jervis, who it seems to me sometimes tends to confuse the two notions (Cf. Jervis, 2005, pp. 35-36).

various fields in which they are expressed. The latter positions are actually parasitical on absolutistic conceptions (Cf. Giorello, 2006, p. 230.), and do not express any points of view *in a positive sense* (Cf. Margolis, 1991, p. 7); from the epistemic point of view they serve to show that no genuine knowledge is given (Cf. O'Grady, 2002, pp. 91-92). None of all this happens with relativism: it always expresses some positions *in a positive sense*, and it is convinced that genuine knowledge, even though relative, can be expressed.

Secondly, relativism is distinguished from *nihilism* and *anarchism*, i.e. from the positions according to which, since there are no strong and objective criteria for choosing among beliefs, theories and evaluative options, then *anything goes*, in the sense that any criterion can be used, even in the absence of its being justified; in this way one would be unable to distinguish good cognitive strategies from bad ones. Relativism, by contrast, recognizes the presence of constraints and criteria that genuinely guide choices; it is simply that these are criteria belonging to a system of coordinates¹¹.

In the third place, relativism is distinguished just as clearly from *subjectivism* (ethical), i.e. from all those meta-ethical positions that maintain that the source of validity of moral judgements lies in the last analysis in some characteristics of moral agents, taken individually. On this subject it must be said not only that relativistic conceptions do not logically imply any choice of a subjectivist character, but also that it is very difficult to construct a subjectivist version of relativism. For this would mean assuming that the context relative to has to be that of individual subject.

Lastly, relativism is distinguished from *pluralism* (ethical), i.e. from meta-ethical conceptions according to which the ultimate values of ethics are *plural*, and therefore irreducible to a single value, and can potentially be ordered in a hierarchical scale (in the *weak pluralism* version), or are not reducible to a common axiological

¹¹ Among scholars that clearly distinguish between anarchism and relativism I would like to mention Stich (1996, pp. 43-44).

hierarchy (in the *strong pluralism* version)¹². In this case too there is no relationship of logical implication between the two conceptions. The relativist can perfectly well be a pluralist from the meta-ethical point of view (indeed it is likely that this will be the case), and the pluralist can perfectly well be a relativist. The difference is that the pluralist can be an absolutist¹³, i.e. can believe that values belonging to different vital spheres are in any case absolute, while the relativist certainly cannot be one.

Starting from the conceptual definition illustrated above it is then possible to derive a varied series of conceptions, all of which can in some way be characterised as relativistic, precisely because they share the characteristic mentioned above. The task of making a detailed taxonomy of all the various positions that can be labelled in this way is extremely arduous, because the *trunk of relativism* has become highly ramified, and from the *principal branches* there have promptly developed *sprigs* that are even smaller. Here it is not possible to give an account of this complex network of distinctions and sub-distinctions. I will simply make a few brief considerations.

Possibly the best-known taxonomic scheme is the one introduced by Susan Haack (1996, pp. 297-315), according to which for purposes of classification the various versions of relativism derive from the juxtaposition of two selection criteria, relating to:

1. *What is relativized* (reference meaning, truth, forms of ontology, reality, epistemic criteria, moral values, et cetera).

2. *The context with reference to which the relativization is carried out* (language, conceptual scheme, theory, version of the world, culture, et cetera). The result is an excessively complicated chart, which besides does not adequately take into account the fact that many elements of the first series of criteria can be relativized to more than one element of the second series. Secondly, many

¹²I borrow these definitions of *pluralism* from Barberis (2004, pp. 4-17).

¹³For example, the conception of Bruno Celano is at once *objectivistic* (there are objective ethical values) and *pluralistic* (there exists an irreducible plurality of values) (Cf. Celano, 2005, pp. 161-183).

distinctions within the two criteria are not at all clear: for instance, the distinction between language and conceptual schemes, reality and ontology, and so forth¹⁴.

This being the case, to me it certainly seems simpler and more economic, in particular for the purposes of this paper, to make first of all a distinction that separates two big spheres in which relativistic positions can be placed, and then to identify, within them, some more specific spheres, within which to identify the various expressions of relativism.

The *first big sphere* is the *cognitive* one, which comprises all those conceptions that in any way have to do with the vast field of knowledge. Correlatively, *cognitive* relativism comprises all those theses that maintain, depending on the single cases (and following a descending order that goes from the strongest versions to the weakest ones, that do not logically imply one another), that the criteria concerning rationality of beliefs (*relativism about rationality*), the existence of objects (*ontological relativism*), the truth of affirmations (*relativism about truth*), epistemic evaluation of theories (*epistemic relativism*), the criteria of meaning of utterances (*semantic relativism*), et cetera, are always related to some system of coordinates, without there being an external standard of judgement allowing completely neutral comparison of any other with any other.

The *second big sphere* is the *evaluative* one, comprising all those conceptions that in any way have to do with the criteria to which our practical life is oriented. Correlatively, *evaluative* relativism comprises all those theses that maintain that the criteria presiding over the evaluation of *what is right or wrong* from the ethical point of view (*meta-ethical relativism*), or the evaluation of *what is beautiful or ugly* from the aesthetic point of view (*aesthetic relativism*), et cetera, are always related to some system of coordinates, without there ever existing a completely objective and neutral standard of evaluation in relation to competing evaluation criteria. On the

¹⁴Here I quote the criticisms of Baghramian (2004, pp. 6-7).

subject of the ethical version of evaluative relativism it must be stressed, in agreement with the conceptual definition proposed above, that it identifies in relativism not a specific conception, but rather a characteristic relating to the mode of justification of beliefs and criteria. This type of relativism can only have a *meta-ethical* character, and therefore must necessarily concern not the *content* of the beliefs or the moral criteria but *the way of justifying them*.

To the various versions of relativism presented above we then have to add that of *cultural relativism*, which does not fit into the preceding scheme, in that, if taken in its fullest and most radical form, it encompasses both versions. Indeed, if cultural relativism is accepted in a strong sense, then all beliefs and criteria, of whatever type, are to be considered as relative to a given culture.

DIFFICULTIES ABOUT RELATIVISM

In this section I will deal with the most serious difficulties that relativistic conceptions have come up against – and still come up against. These difficulties are immediately highlighted by the criticisms made by *absolutist* adversaries. I will limit my analysis, as I have already said, to the area of analytical philosophy.

The most radical criticism, and historically the most salient, that has been made of relativism and still continues to be made, even though it has several times proved to be a blunt weapon, is that it is *self-refuting*¹⁵.

It is not possible here, in the space of this essay, to give a detailed account of the innumerable versions in which this argument has been developed. The variety of these versions is enhanced on account of the modifications that relativists have adopted to their conceptions in response to the various attempts at refutation¹⁶. Moreover, relativistic conceptions have not presented

¹⁵One of the most recent and sophisticated attempts to develop this argument is by Siegel, *Relativism Refuted: a Critique of Contemporary Epistemological Relativism* (1987).

¹⁶Krausz (1989, p. 2) insists on this point.

themselves as a homogeneous block. Nevertheless, the argument has to be briefly considered, because of a rather serious difficulty for relativism that it brings to light. This becomes clear from the discussion that develops between relativists and their critics, on the subject of these accusations of inconsistency and/or contradiction. It is a difficulty that perhaps constitutes the main philosophical source of all the criticisms, and that in my opinion is not satisfactorily resolved by the *standard* strategies that the relativists bring into play in response to the attempts at refutation.

For my present purposes it is sufficient to mention the fundamental structure of the argument¹⁷, which simply copies that of the *liar paradox*. The *absolutist* conceptions point out that, when the relativist expresses his fundamental conviction regarding the necessary contextual dependence of criteria and beliefs, this affirmation can be interpreted in two ways: either it is true in all contexts, in which case the relativist's assertion is *self-refuting*; or it is only true in a relative way, and therefore it would be false from the point of view of the absolutist, and consequently the relativist would have no ground on which to attack absolutism.

In working out their strategies for responding to the various versions of this argument, the relativists have lingered on both horns of the dilemma, trying to find *in a positive sense*, within one or the other of the two alternatives, ways out of the impasse.

A *first type of solution* takes the second alternative seriously, attending to the fact that the relativist, consistently with the premises of his argument, should consider his thesis as *internal* to the conceptual scheme adopted by those who share it or to the cultural context of which it is a part. Accordingly it is itself a thesis that is also *relative to* that framework. In this sense, we would be talking about *second order relativism*¹⁸. Such relativism defends a thesis that is *self-referential* but not *self-refuting*: a thesis that would

¹⁷For a more in-depth discussion, see the works by Mandelbaum (1982, pp. 34-61), Baghramian (2004, pp. 132-136), and Harré & M. Krausz (1996, pp. 26-28).

¹⁸Baghramian (2004, p. 9) characterises this position in this way.

have nothing to oppose to the arguments of the absolutist, except the fact of constituting a defining proposal, alternative to that of the absolutist. The proposal applies to a whole series of key notions (*knowledge, truth, epistemic criterion, etcetera*), and it is considered to be true or at least rationally acceptable within a determined context¹⁹.

The *second type of solution* attends to the first alternative, but not, obviously, in the sense of reaffirming the absolute truth of the *thesis on relativity*, which once again would come up against the accusation of being a *self-refuting* affirmation. Rather, it does so in the sense of trying to identify, while remaining within a relativistic outlook, some affirmations that would be, in some sense, *true in all contexts*. In short, from this point of view, it would be a matter of constructing a *weaker version* of relativism that recognizes the need to incorporate some elements of an absolutist character in relativistic conceptions, and thus avoids the accusation of self-contradiction.

There are a great number of conceptions that have tried to break away from the *most radical* forms of relativism, to work out *more moderate* versions of it. But the biggest problem, for anyone attempting to trace out a map of them, is that such conceptions have done it in the most diverse ways, making reference each time to a disparate series of elements (of a structural, logical, anthropological, biological, et cetera, character) to be considered in some sense as *absolute*, or at any rate not *relative*.

It is obvious that here I cannot examine all these variations. These attempts, nevertheless, are extremely important for me, because they endeavour to face a real and profound philosophical difficulty about relativism, far beyond those of a logical character. It is a difficulty that the first type of solution fails to resolve, precisely because it chooses to shut itself up in a *quietistic manner*, and

¹⁹For example, this is the proposal of the *strong programme* on sociology of knowledge developed in the last few decades by Barry Barnes & David Bloor (1982, pp. 21-47). This answer is then further elaborated, in more sophisticated terms, by Hesse (1980, pp. 29-60).

sometimes also in a sectarian manner²⁰, inside its own conceptual scheme (in the case of different schemes present in the same culture) or inside its own culture, seen as a kind of *unscratchable monolith*²¹. This type of solution never tries to defend its own positions *on the outside* and to insert criteria of evaluation that would allow comparative judgements.

It should instead be possible, for a relativistic conception to defend its positions beyond its own boundaries and to find new followers. Thus it could dispose of a terrain that is—in some sense— *neutral*. Then it would be able to express its theses in a language that can then be comprehensible in—and translatable into—the various cultural contexts and the various conceptual scenarios in which this thesis can get a hearing²². In relation to this, one would also like it to be possible, for the relativist too, to express, in ways and forms to be determined, judgments on what is *right* or *wrong* from the ethical point of view, at least in relation to behaviours of people belonging to different cultures than our own, or at any rate having different conceptions than our own. It should also be possible to pass judgements in terms of *greater or lesser explanatory correctness*, if one really does not want to use the word *truth*, as concerns conceptual schemes, theories and visions of the world different than our own. And one would like to be able to do this, even limiting oneself to some fundamental points, without undermining the fundamental premises of a picture that would substantially be relativistic.

I am personally convinced that the moderate versions do well to highlight the seriousness of this problem, and also to list a series of elements that it is objectively difficult to consider as *radically relative* to specific contexts. My opinion, nevertheless, is that if

²⁰The accusation is formulated by Jervis (2005, pp. 115 ff).

²¹The expression was coined by Aime (2006, pp. 76 ff), who very appropriately points out this difficulty.

²²The need to possess a *form of thought not relativised to our specific system of beliefs* is very well expressed by Williams (1982, p. 184). See also Harré & Krausz (1996, 26-27).

these elements were identified as real *absolutes*, then the relativistic conceptions would fatally turn into absolutist conceptions and nothing more. They would thus lose the consistency, the explanatory force, and I would also say the provocative vivacity of the original formulations. They degenerate into what is — sometimes— a sort of confused mixture in which relativistic affirmations would end up sounding banal and obvious.

I believe, however, that fortunately there is an alternative way to consider these elements assumed to be absolutes while remaining within a relativistic position, which I will try to show in the next section. For the moment it is appropriate to start from examination of these elements as they are configured by the moderate versions of relativism. To simplify a picture that is extremely complex, I will try very briefly to isolate three types of characteristics that according to the moderate relativistic theories constitute true *universals*. These amount to a sort of *common core*²³ made up of elements that we have to suppose to be shared by all schemes or all cultures²⁴. It is a *common core*, we must be careful to specify, that is then combined in various ways with differences, even very big ones, linked to the reference contexts.

The *first characteristic* concerns elements that we could call *structural*, because they do not concern contents, but on the contrary *the principles, the forms and the criteria of reasoning*. Many scholars have striven to isolate these elements, in different ways and forms, making reference each time, alternatively or cumulatively, to the fields of formal logic, theories of truth and theories of rationality. A particularly perspicuous way to express this moderate form of

²³This expression, actually very much in vogue in the jargon of linguists and anthropologists, is correctly used to distinguish positions that, precisely, are convinced of the presence of these universals. From this point of view a major influence has been exerted by the use made of it by Horton (1982, pp. 256-257).

²⁴Actually there is an even more minimal version than the one I will now examine of the position that inserts universalistic elements in a relativistic picture. It is the version graphically represented by Robert Nozick through the figure of the *relaxed relativist*. According to him, the only non-relative assertion that he is willing to recognize is precisely that *all truths are relative* (Cf. Nozick, 2001, pp. 15-16).

relativism is to say that there are some universal principles that represent a *core conception* of rationality, a sort of *minimal theory of universal rationality* (O’Grady, 2002, pp. 128, 140). They comprise at least the *principle of non-contradiction*, the *principle of consistency between beliefs* (and therefore of the search for inferential connections between them), and the *principle of the search for proof or evidence* (of whatever type they may be) to support their own beliefs (O’Grady, 2002, pp. 140-142). Others add further aspects to the picture like, for instance, “the use of theories in the explanation, prediction and control of events” (Horton, 1982, pp. 256-257).

The *second characteristic* concerns some *ontological* aspects, and hence some aspects of the world, as we represent it to ourselves. The controlled versions maintain that this “relationship with the world” necessarily implies some stable elements of the objects that make it up, without which it would be totally impossible to interact with – and to get our bearings on – the world itself. It implies, for instance, that objects are persistent and recurrent, of different types and of different kinds (Hampshire, 1960, pp. 15-18); it also implies that the objects most familiar to us are solid, lasting, of average size, connected in a chance fashion, and spatially identifiable, human beings included²⁵.

The *third characteristic* concerns some *bio-anthropological* aspects that the moderate versions affirm to be common to all human beings, to whatever community they belong. From this point of view it is stressed that human beings *share the same biological make up* (Baghrmian, 2004, p. 262), and more specifically share elements of a genetic, biological and psychological character, which help to trace out their *common animality* (Baghrmian, 2004, p. 267). These elements concern the phenomenon of mortality, experiences of pleasure and pain, the ability to love and to hate, etc. (Baghrmian, 2004, p. 288), phenomena that, I will add, can

²⁵To these elements of an ontological character there is supposed to correspond, at a theoretical-linguistic level, a sort of *primary theory* which would be substantially identical in all cultures (Cf. Horton, 1982, p. 228).

also very well constitute the *naturalistic basis of ethics*. From a strictly epistemological point of view, however, there is a preference to highlight the fact that at all historical and geographical latitudes, human beings have the same cerebral organs and the same sense organs and manifest substantial uniformity as regards the working of these same organs. This would constitute a rather strong constraint against excessive proliferation of very different beliefs²⁶. An important feature of this uniformity in our working organisms, which some particularly stress²⁷, is that there seems to be a sort of *innate sense of comparative similarity*, probably acquired on an evolutionary base, without which we could not learn any type of language or develop processes of induction and prediction.

**AN ALTERNATIVE SOLUTION TO THE DIFFICULTIES:
FRAMEWORKS AND ENVIRONMENT**

It is not possible here, if only for reasons of space, to enter into the merit of these —presumed— *logical, ontological and bio-anthropological universals*, in order to verify whether they really are such. Personally I doubt that some of them are, even assuming that one start from the perspective of those people that recognize them as such (one can consider, for instance, the element of the *use of theories in explanation...*). But that is not the important point to stress. For the fact is that it is not at all clear, in many of the authors that maintain moderate relativistic positions or in-between positions, whether they hold these elements to be *necessarily* absolute and universal elements, with *objective* value, or consider them as elements within schemes or cultures but *contingently* common to them all. If first hypothesis holds good, then the difference between absolutism and relativism would collapse. We would be faced with

²⁶I discuss this *biological constraint* in my *Costruttivismo e teorie del diritto* (Villa, 1999, pp.116-117).

²⁷Cf. in particular Willard van Orman Quine, who uses this element to maintain that the problem of the indeterminacy of radical translation can in practice be overcome (Cf. Quine, 1984, pp. 293-296).

forms of disguised absolutism. Let us remember that a fundamental assumption, making it possible to characterize a position as relativistic, is that one cannot make any type of affirmation that is wholly un-contextual. Saying the same thing with the words of the constructivists, it is not possible to get outside one's own schemes, and to speak about the world independently of a scheme of description (Goodman, 1988, pp. 3-8).

The alternative hypothesis is that these elements are internal to some reference context. On that hypothesis it would still be possible to label these positions as relativistic, but it would be necessary to clarify better the nature and the scope of these common elements. There is more promising position available, that rigorously remains inside relativistic coordinates, and that enables one to produce a sketch of an anti-absolutist explanation of the common presence of these elements. They are, after all, elements whose presence it seems to be impossible to deny.

The position that I am about to present has for the moment an absolutely embryonic form, but it is one which I believe to be worth developing further. It seeks to satisfy two demands: i) The first demand is to explain that the elements shared by all schemes have an *internal* character, that is the character of materials that have to be interpreted in the light of some reference picture, of a part of these elements shared by all schemes. ii) The second demand is that one clarify in what sense it is possible to speak, in a relativistic picture, of a reality which is—in some sense—*objective*, serving as a common basis for all schemes.

The *first demand* is satisfied by postulating a distinction between *single schemes or cultures* on one side and *long-term background frameworks* on the other. This is a distinction that seems very important to me, but which has not yet been sufficiently echoed in relativistic conceptions²⁸. Single schemes and specific cultures

²⁸Some mention of a position of the kind can be found in Harré & Krausz (1996, pp. 28, 64-65), where, however, reference is made to «introducing absolute elements» (p. 67).

are the ordinary reference contexts for specifically local and in a sense *idiosyncratic* beliefs (those that, for instance, help to determine ethical conceptions—even competing ones—prevailing in a certain cultural context). As these beliefs or convictions become more and more general and shared in more than one community (for instance, those relating to a certain liberal conception of the human person, or of democracy, those relating to some very general ethical principles, such as *prohibition of torture*, or to the recognition of some fundamental human rights, et cetera), the schemes and the local cultures progressively tend to lean on broader conceptual pictures (*frameworks*). These frameworks can belong to several schemes and cultures. A broader framework of this kind, for instance, is represented by what can conventionally be defined as *western culture*, which certainly encompasses a very big variety of schemes or more specific cultures, but also has some common coordinates. Subsequently the frameworks tend to broaden, to the extent that they encompass in the extreme case, *all humanity* or, one might also say, *the history of civilized man*. This is so in cases in which reference is made to the demands and characteristics that we know to be most stable and most fundamental in human beings, which are the ones characterized above, improperly, as *logical universals* and as *bio-anthropological universals*.

It should be clarified that, postulating the existence of these frameworks, we have not foregone any of the essential aspects of relativism. The elements mentioned above do not belong to a sort of *reality in itself*, the outfit of a metaphysically structured human nature which we simply take stock of. They are always the result of an interpretative and selective action of ours on the world, which is wholly unaware²⁹ as regards the most stable and fundamental elements. For these are the fruit of the categories that are incorporated in learning our first language; and our

²⁹ In this sense I really cannot understand why Paul Boghossian, in criticizing constructivist conceptions, insists that according to these positions reality is socially constructed in an *always intentional way* (Boghossian, 2006, p. 16).

language, starting from ordinary language, is never neutral. It always incorporates theories³⁰ whose common presuppositions (certain standardized ways of configuring the *furniture of the world*, for example in the terms of *objects of average size, manageable, et cetera*) also depend on components of our nervous system. They are transmitted in an evolutionary way (and have been preserved because they have been successful), and are suitable *through innatism* for representing the world in the way which is most appropriate to our needs³¹.

These frameworks are always in the background of our schemes and our local cultures, often in a wholly unacknowledged way. One must explain this using the following analogy. To adopt a scheme or share a culture is like selecting an icon in our computer, and thereby working on a specific program, but on a hard disk on which there are many other programs, and above all on which there is a single operating system.

The relationship between schemes and frameworks is not static, but dynamic, and it permits a whole series of operations, for instance criticism of our own and other people's schemes and our own and other people's cultures, which are not available for the radical relativist. The fact is that the contents of the single schemes or the single cultures can be examined and criticized by having recourse to elements taken from the broadest frameworks. One can think about the background ideas of *person* and *democracy* present in a framework, in that they are used as elements for critically examining the way in which the single schemes or single cultures are concretely used. It is a *holistic* process, for the understanding of which (but it is only a suggestion) the model of *imperfect reflective equilibrium*³² could be very useful.

³⁰On the constructive role of the categories of our earliest speech some fundamental pages were written by Whorf (1993, pp. 211-221).

³¹The thesis of the evolutionary character and basic innatism of some components of our central nervous system is very persuasively developed by Horton (1982, pp. 232-236).

³²I particularly refer here to the sophisticated version of the model of *imperfect*

The *second demand* that we would need to safeguard concerns the possibility of maintaining the idea of a reality that is in some sense *objective* within a rigorously relativistic context. This becomes possible by developing another distinction that I consider as important as the previous one, between *environment* and *world*³³. The first of the two terms refers to what can be considered for all human beings as the *common source of sensory inputs* and the *common reference point of non verbal transactions and interactions*. According to this first meaning it is correct to say, even for a relativist, that an environment only exists in a *pre-linguistic* sense (and therefore is logically prior to every type of interpretation).

The second term refers to *the world as an object of linguistic and / or theoretical representation*. According to this first meaning it is correct to say, from a relativistic and constructivist point of view, that *several worlds exist*, and more exactly as many versions of the world as there prove to be after our conceptual schemes begin to work³⁴.

It is important to notice that through this type of distinction relativistic conceptions can recover an acceptable, though *minimal*³⁵, sense of realism, which can be characterised as *practical*³⁶ or *pragmatic*³⁷ realism.

I would have liked, at this point, to develop a last part, which would have concerned the possible uses and applications of relativistic theses —seen in a sympathetic way— in the sphere of

reflexive equilibrium worked out by Elgin (1996, pp. 102-128).

³³ I develop this distinction more at length in my *Costruttivismo e teorie del diritto* (Villa, 1999, pp. 125-131), to which the reader is referred for further details.

³⁴ A distinction of the kind is hinted at by Harré and Krausz when they differentiate the *modest* conception of *single barrelled realism*, according to which the *world as it is* plays an essential role in the genesis of knowledge, though not as an *object of representation*, but only in a *regulative* key (research implies that there is an independent material world) from the conception of *double barrelled realism*, that is to say that of the *world to which our affirmations correspond*, a notion that is used instead in a *criteriological* key. The authors naturally opt for the first notion (Cf. Harré & Krausz, 1996, pp. 101-102, 125-126).

³⁵ This expression is used by Margolis (1986, pp. 93, 101-103, 158, 175, 201-202).

³⁶ *Practical realism* is discussed by Hacking (1987, pp. 32-33).

³⁷ *Pragmatic realism* is discussed by Putnam (1988, pp. 113-114).

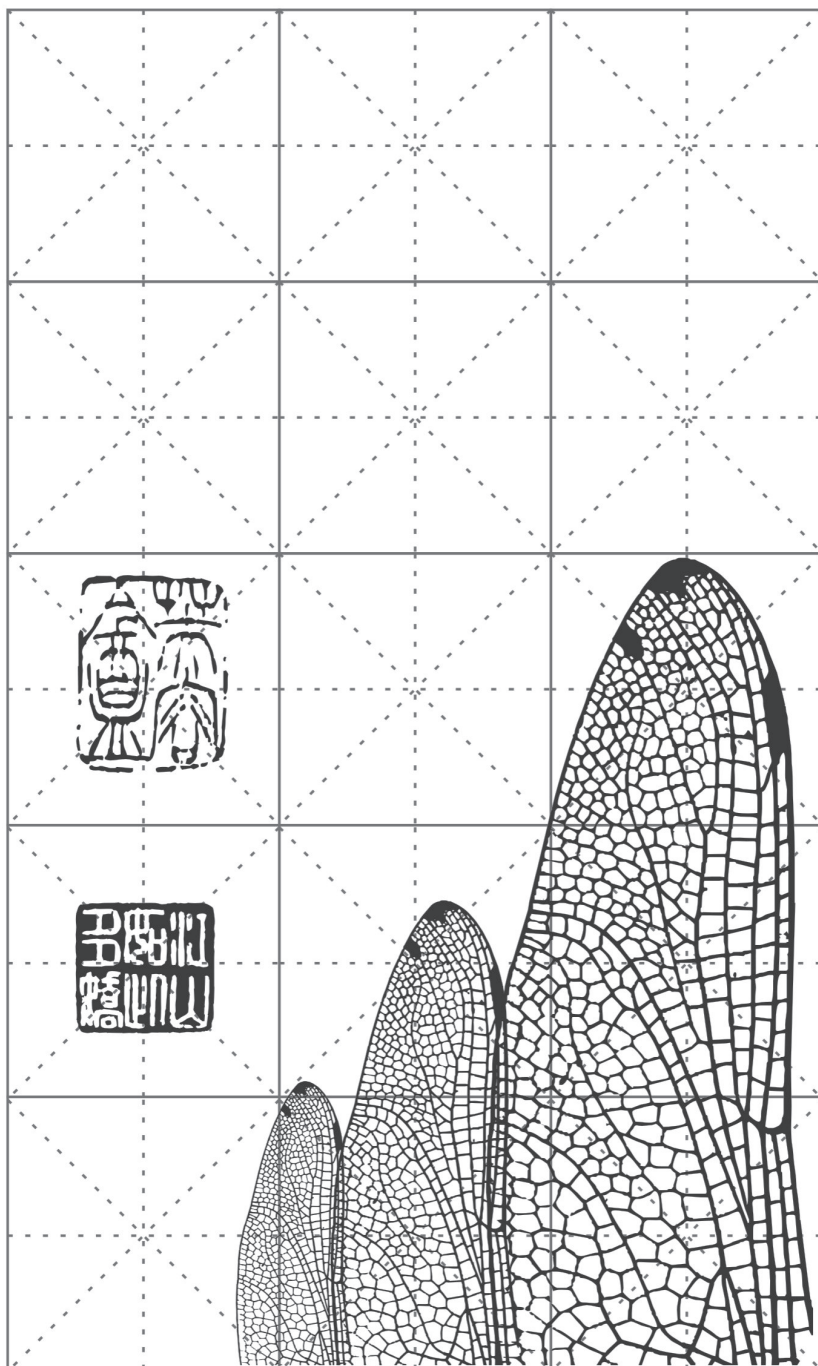
legal and political philosophy. Unfortunately there is not time to do this. In any case, a project of the kind would have at least to touch on the points of the *relativistic ethical justification of legal positivism*, the *relationship between relativism and democracy*, and the *particularism of human rights*³⁸, if they are interpreted in a relativistic key.

³⁸“Particularism of rights” is discussed by Baccelli (1999).

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