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The application of philosophical tools to the theme of relativity and relativism

This article initially describes a specific conception of philosophical tools — models of coherence at various levels and in different contexts of philosophical analysis. The overall purpose is to apply some of these tools to the theme of relativity and relativism. The first tool tested in this way will be the key formulas of philosophical discourse, with special reference to Derrida and deconstruction. Then the perspectives offered on the theme by various other tools will be explored. The article concludes with some remarks on spirituality and relativity, as well as the possibility of a future relativity.

Die toepassing van filosofiese denkgereedskap op die tema van relatiwiteit en relativisme

In hierdie artikel word 'n spesifieke konsepsie van filosofiese denkgereedskap beskryf, naamlik modelle van samehang op verskillende vlakke en in verskillende kontekste van filosofiese analise. Die oorkoepelende doelwit is die toepassing van hierdie gereedskap op die tema van relatiwiteit en relativisme. Die eerste instrument wat so getoets word, is die sleutelformules van filosofiese diskoers, met spesiale verwysing na Derrida en dekonstruksie. Vervolgens word verskeie ander analitiese instrumente aan die orde gestel. Die artikel sluit met opmerkings oor relatiwiteit en spiritualiteit, sowel as die moontlikheid van 'n toekomstige relatiwiteit waarna ons kan uitsien.

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I would like to approach the theme of relativity and relativism by bringing certain philosophical tools to bear on this subject. In so doing, it seems to me that such work is both similar and dissimilar to what most philosophers do when they work on a problem. It is similar because philosophers tend to have some kind of theory, framework or perspective, some way of thinking, which they bring to the subject of their exposition, even if this "way" consists only of a very loose, eclectic ensemble of viewpoints taken over from several favoured predecessors. It is dissimilar because very few philosophers today would share my own feeling that it is worthwhile to develop one's philosophical "way" into a more or less precisely explicated theory — a set of specialised, interacting analytical tools.

This is not the place to enter into a discussion as to why philosophers (in our "post-modern" era) should not turn their backs on "real" theory. However, in the course of this paper, I hope it will become clear that, though I would welcome the return of formal theory (perhaps in some neo- or post-philosophy of the future), I am also of the opinion that theory — whether formal or informal (even "poetic") — should in fact be strongly relativised from a broad philosophical perspective. Philosophy itself, within the confines of theoretical analysis, points us towards those worlds that transcend — and thus relativise — such analysis. Examples of such worlds are routine everyday experience, or our reflective encounters with works of art, or the realm of spiritual experience. Though we can certainly theorise about these realms, we cannot experience them as such in an objective-theoretical fashion.

Furthermore, I believe that the best type of philosophical theory consists of various interacting subtheories: the set of analytical "tools" referred to above. Here, too, there is thus an aspect of relativity to be noted — no single analytical tool is self-sufficient. The discourses that we study have various levels or layers, as it were, each differently constituted, and different tools are necessary to probe them.[1] These levels are obviously interrelated, hence the tools to analyse them also have to be designed so as to interact with one another. In this interaction,

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1   Think, for example, of the level at which origins or foundations are at issue, the level at which figurative language is deployed, the level at which language serves power, and so on.

they also relativise one another. Thus the analysis that each tool provides is of relative value. I think it is important to realise that this relativity in fact also applies to some of the major approaches (tools) developed by leading philosophers of our time: for example, deconstruction, communicative action theory, archaeology/genealogy.[2]

In what follows, I will not go into the formal theoretical structure of each of the tools that I will be introducing. Rather, I will merely sketch, informally and in the broadest outlines, the nature of these tools and how they may provide some useful (and systematically-cohering) perspectives on relativity and relativism. In this context, I think it can be shown that formal theory can also be relativised in this particular way: by its "translation" into communicatively or aesthetically effective (popularised) depictions — although evidently such a transformation cannot take place in the opposite direction.

In concluding these introductory remarks, I should like to return to a particular kind of analysis which I have already had occasion to refer to above, but will not develop further in what follows. This concerns the study of that "gallery" of predecessors who have decisively influenced a thinker in constructing his/her particular tools. For when we are analysing relativity, or analysing philosophical texts on relativity, it is of some "archaeological" importance also to understand the role of earlier texts and tools, which we in fact use as models — and which our favourite models use as models (with the accompanying "anxiety of influence" that is so typical of such indebtedness). In other words, we should also be aware of this particular kind of relativity in connection with any and every discussion of relativity.

1. Uniqueness and coherence

The first critical-analytical tool that I would like to introduce here is that of the basic distinction between what I shall call uniqueness and coherence. This is a rather special type of tool, in the sense that it really

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2   Speaking of these particular kinds of analysis, the ideal set of tools envisioned would probably contain modified versions of them or instruments that can perform similar tasks — certainly it will become apparent below that some of my own tools are used for a certain kind of "deconstruction" and a certain kind of Foucauldian "axis" contextualisation.

performs a kind of meta-philosophical function: it brings into a unifying perspective the way that other analytical tools deal with the specificity and individuality of things, as well as with the relationships and contexts within which such individuality is constituted.[3]

It is clear that an understanding of the way in which a given thing exists in coherence with — and thus in relation to — many other things relativises it in a fundamental way. It stands to reason that this kind of relativity would be one of the most basic facts about the world. Let us call it world-relativity.

On the other hand, we may link an understanding of the uniqueness or singularity of structures, things or events to the critique of relativism — if we interpret this as detracting in some way from their uniqueness. For instance, cultural relativism is often said to erase the distinctive characteristics of things like science or morality. This charge of relativism can be interpreted as implying that the unique features of science or morality (in the modern sense) are somehow compromised when they are regarded as being merely cultural artifacts on a par with culinary traditions or tribal customs.

From this perspective, it is rather ironic that poststructuralist philosophers, who are in fact so acutely aware of individuality and singularity, are regularly accused of relativism. This raises the question of whether relativism of this kind is indeed possible — if sensitivity to singularity can endorse not relativity but relativism. This is one of the questions to which the present article will attempt to provide some partial and provisional answers.

However, referring back to the example above, if uniqueness is linked to coherence in a kind of "ontological" structure, then it must of course also be acknowledged that things like science, morality and art are inescapably connected to the phenomenon of culture. One

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3   If the various tools introduced in this article, together with some other analytical instruments, are interpreted as constituting some kind of theory in a formal sense, then the uniqueness/coherence theme could feature as an overall guiding principle of sorts (possibly along with some other ideas, distinctions, subtheories or principles). It would have a sposition and function similar to that of the economic principle in Chomsky's minimalist programme for the analysis of syntax, for example.

may surmise that such a connection can be understated or overstated. In the first case, a kind of idealist metaphysics of say science (for example) seems to result; in the second, science may fall prey to cultural relativism.

Philosophers are forced to reckon with uniqueness/coherence in some way or other, and many philosophical analyses depend on invoking the coherence between the two — in some area or on some level, in some vocabulary or other. Often the analysis proceeds by showing (1) that some phenomenon is not as unitary as is supposed, but is in fact complex, comprising several different facets, and (2) that these are to be honoured in their characteristic differences, while (3) they are not susceptible to analysis in isolation from one another, or from an enclosing context. It is easy to see how each of these three intertwined levels of analysis provides its own critical perspective against the discourse of an opponent, and how such perspectives can combine into an argument focused on demonstrating relativity of some kind. Habermas's critique of one-sided techno-scientific rationality is an example of this kind of strategy.

From a historical perspective, it is interesting to note various models of non-trivial coherence that have appeared in philosophical discourse. One particular type of a strong version of coherence is what I shall call the "All in all" model, in which everything that exists (perhaps on some specific level of reality) is also present in all other things (in various possible ways). One finds versions of this model, for example, in Leibniz (the windowless monads); in Dooyeweerd (the modalities shared by everything, as well as the intra-modal analogies); in Habermas (with reference to the so-called value spheres and their presence in one another, cf Habermas 1996: 329). It is also present in Jewish mysticism's Kabbalah (a kind of precursor of Dooyeweerd's modal spheres) and in Buddhism (in the doctrine of interpenetration). It is striking that philosophies usually thought of as anti-relativistic (Habermas, Dooyeweerd) as well as those generally considered relativistic (Buddhism) all make use of this particular archetypal coherence model.

In the philosophical tools that I will be introducing below, uniqueness/coherence distinction (or structure) is a crucial feature. These tools will all be seen to make use of it on different levels so as to fully acknowledge relativities of various sorts as well as to subject relativistic claims of various kinds to critical analysis.

2. The key-formulas of philosophical discourse

We turn now to the function of philosophical "key-formulas" — in which some aspect of the world, like economic relations, or power, or physics/biology, or cultural context, is postulated to play an explanatory role for other domains of reality. This explanatory role involves some kind of governing relation that is established between what I will call the "key-factor" (power relations for example) and its "domain" (knowledge, morality and politics, for example). The kind of governing that is at stake might entail the key-factor causing, preceding, founding, unifying, or constituting its domain.

The tool metaphor can be applied in two senses here. On the one hand, the tool is given with our ability to find and analyse such key-formulas at the heart of philosophical discourse. On the other hand, these formulas themselves constitute the primary investigative tool of whichever philosopher we are studying. Furthermore, from the examples above, it is evident that this tool (in both senses) deals with uniqueness/coherence on a particular level of philosophical conceptualisation — but it is the critical analysis of postulated key-formulas (in the first sense) that provides us with a possible means of deconstructing them.

In terms of the theme of this article, the important issue is the way in which the promotion of some part of reality to "key-status" (key-factor) has immediate implications for the (cohering sets of) coherences we ascribe to the world (the relativity of things), as well as for the uniqueness we ascribe to their constituent elements. The logic of "key-promotion" implies that the privileged key-factor will in some way be withdrawn (conceptually) from the web of relativity in which it exists, so as to "operate" (a technical term for the governing relation) on the domain over which it is to rule (where it unites, grounds, structures, centres or encloses the elements). For example, when a key-formula such as "cultural context" totally encloses science, art and morality, the context that is cultural comes to be significantly separated from the other contexts: those that are scientific, or moral, or aesthetic. What is cultural comes to be interpreted as not just another context — in its conceptual separation from these other phenomena, it becomes a wholly different kind of context, one endowed with "operational power" (unifying, enclosing, etc). In this sense, the relativity of the key-factor is clearly

compromised.[4] At the same time, the uniqueness of each domain element is compromised, since in relation to culture they are nothing but parts of a specific culture, in principle within the range of something like cultural anthropology. Thus the domain of a key-formula is always conceptualised as relative to the key-factor (which loses its own relativity), and is strongly relativised by that key-factor. One could argue that such keys represent various kinds of relativism: cultural relativism, biological relativism, textual relativism, and so on.

Since it seems clear that the philosophical conceptualisations that human beings can accomplish are dependent upon the mental representations of key-formulas (whose structure must be carefully distinguished from their content), the question arises as to whether any philosophical thinking can escape the kind of absolutism and accompanying relativism sketched above. To my mind, the answer is to be found precisely in the givenness of relativity itself. What philosophers should realise is that the web of world-relativity is not to be breached (intentionally-conceptually) in reflecting upon ultimate "operations" (in the above sense); rather it is only this web of relativity itself, in its full complexity, that can be in charge of such key-operations. It is hard to see how this can really be said to constitute any kind of relativism.

Derridean deconstruction has claimed to be acutely aware of the problems of key-formulas (logocentric constructions) and to be able to dismantle the pretensions of such formulas by showing that they become enmeshed in tensions and contradictions, and with ceaselessly shifting and sliding meanings.[5] With reference to my sketch of the structure of key-formulas, one could, for example, attempt to show that the "higher" attributes (such as immutability or infinity, for example) thought to separate some or other key-factor from the "lower" attributes of the key's domain are in fact surreptitiously present on the domain side as well.[6]

4   Cultural context relativises radically, but is not itself to be relativised.
5   Besides Derrida, the only other philosophers who seem to attend to the nature and function of what I call key-formulas are Dooyeweerd and Heidegger. A more extensive analysis of key-formulas along the lines of the present discussion is presented in Visagie 2004.
6   To take an extremely simple example: in a given discourse, the posited differences between God and the world could be undermined by uncovering hidden implications of, say, creaturely infinity.

Though such deconstructionist critiques can indeed bring sharp immanent criticism to bear on the content of specific formulas, highlighting the (rhetorically suppressed) relativity of apparent grounds, centres, and origins, there are two basic problems with deconstructionism as it is usually practised. The first is the assumption that the hierarchical structure of (philosophical-) conceptual constructs (in which key-operations of some kind are conceptualised) or of theorising itself can and should be abandoned. But there is nothing in (cognitive) science and in what we know of the human mind's biologically based ability to reflect theoretically that gives us reason to believe this — indeed, quite the opposite. The second problem is that deconstructionist relativity is actually not relative enough. One can see how deconstructionists avail themselves of key-formulas in which some aspect of world-relativity is in fact withdrawn from the web of relativity and endowed with operational power: be it the flux of signifiers, the absent categories which haunt the identifying activity of pure and present analysis, or whatever.[7] In other words, the relativising of flux in its relation to constancy; of language and textuality in relation to nature and power; of individuality in relation to universality; of difference in relation to identity — are some of the relativities from which deconstruction on occasion seeks to disentangle itself. It does not wholly succeed, and this lends some substance to the charge of relativism.

Even when deconstructionism ingeniously seeks to escape the relativism of one-sided ontological loyalties, it only appears to relativise these commitments (to key-factors) by bringing their opposites into discursive play. Thus it would seem as if, for example, both flux and constancy, both freeplay and structure, both the "impossible" and the "possible" (and so on) are touched on, so as to avoid any kind of "centrism". But in reality such ostensibly relativising manoeuvres are launched from key-positions (in the technical sense) in which the anti-rationalist attraction to the first element in the above (and other similar) pairs is

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7   The following utterance by Derrida is a clear (even a classic) example of a key-construction: "Unconditional hospitality is transcendent with regard to the political, the juridical, perhaps even to the ethical" (Borradori 2003: 129). The notion of unconditional hospitality is one of Derrida's many experiments with key-factors; the domain here is constituted by three large ontological categories (signifying the power of the key-factor), and the relevant operator is the movement of transcendence.

realised. In this way one can, for example, make it seem that one continually moves back and forth between flux and constancy, and also away from any simple dialectical synthesis of the two, but the name of the game here is clearly a modified and dialectically sophisticated (second order) concept of (constant) flux. It is this dynamic and deconstructing movement, grounded in the flow of differences, that supposedly constitutes language and thought, that seemingly enables the deconstructor to keep his or her distance from any (fixed) theoretical identity or profile.[8] One of the central key-operations (in the technical sense) involved here is clearly transcendence.[9]

What I have sketched here as Derrida's key emphasis is borne out by the way in which semi-religious sentiments seem to attach to such privileged aspects. Andrea Hurst (2004: 17), for example, remarks on the fact that for Derrida the "aneconomic" moment (where "economy" is associated with structure and its attributes) points to the experience of the sacred. So, too, regarding the "impossible", the "other (in me)", Derrida says that it is announced to him (us), sweeping down upon him, preceding him and seizing him here and now, it comes from on high, in the form of an injunction that never leaves him in peace — it is what is most undeniably real (Borradori 2003: 134).[10]

Conceptual key-structures similar to the deconstructionist options described above also generate varieties of Buddhist philosophy, some of which have in fact been compared to Derrida's thinking. The "second

8   Compare Christopher Johnson's (1993: 51) struggling description of how Derrida seeks to escape from the categorical limits imposed by both the finite and the infinite — again a second-order conceptual movement finding its privileged point of departure in the infinite (as is to be expected; see the remarks at the end of the present section on the postmodern paradigm of "key attributes"): "What Derrida is describing here is a conception of the infinite that has become peculiarly his own […] This is a finite infinity […] something that is neither finite nor infinite, but literally, the infinite within the finite." One may expect Derrida to perform this kind of manoeuvre with all the attributes listed below in the text.

9   Another of Derrida's favourites is the operation whereby some key-factor precedes some domain.

10   This language is in fact reminiscent of Dooyweerd, for example, talking about the way in which a "religious ground-motive" comes to lay hold of one, and how he himself has been seized by the Biblical motive of "creation, fall and redemption", which he sees as the central impulse of his philosophy.

order" dialectical subtlety that is required here can be found, for example, in "non-centric" forms of Zen, and also in the relativistic discourses of the famous (second-century) Indian philosopher Nagarjuna on "emptiness" (cf for example Magliola 1984). Hinduism, on the other hand, incorporates key-conceptualisations in which changelessness displaces the Buddhist concern with incessant change. Strikingly, both philosophies/religions view the relation of the superficial to the real (the nature of existence) in totally opposite ways.

This does not mean to say that metaphysical (including religious) or modernist (whether rationalist or anti-rationalist) or postmodernist critiques of deconstructionism can present us with the correct solutions to Derrida's "key-problems". Take Habermas, for instance. His criticism of Derrida is dependent on his own key-formulas, one of which can be roughly modelled as follows: reason can only come to expression in society, ruling from the basis of language and communication, over science and technology, but also law and morality, and even art and aesthetics. Just like the deconstuctionists and contextualists whom he opposes, Habermas in fact also attempts to make an incision into the web of world-relativity, extracting from it the basic elements of (a somewhat rationalistic) rationality, society and communication. But this rationalistic relativisation of "value spheres" is threatened by other key-realities, such as nature (biology against sociology, for instance with regard to the constitution of the self) and lifestyle (which Habermas does not deem worthy of the philosophical-rational analysis accorded to "morality").

To close this section on the function of philosophical key-formulas, something more should be said about another part of their structure. What I want to highlight here is the role of certain attributes in such key-constructs. A few classic attributes appear to be regularly associated with the key-factor and its domain. They seem to have a certain binary structure. This special set of attributes includes the following pairs (serving as possible descriptions of the key-factor and its domain): unitary/multiple (or simple/complex); finite/infinite; constant (immutable)/changing; knowable/unknowable; universal/individual; necessary/contingent.[11] Various kinds of choices regarding this set of attributes are

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11   Technically, there is a category difference between constancy and immutability (cf Strauss 2004), but this is not relevant to our immediate concerns.

possible, and they tend to appear explicitly or implicitly in discourses in which key-constructs are at issue.[12] A structural characteristic of key-logic is that sometimes, in certain formulations, one of the favoured attributes of the key-factor can come to "stand in" for it. So we may find explicit or implicit statements to the effect that (historical) flux determines (whatever), or individuality of some kind transcends (all general categories), or contingency is at the root (of knowledge systems or whatever). Plainly, these are all attributive key-factors that may evoke charges of relativism.[13]

What is really remarkable is that these particular attribute pairs have featured as such a constant in philosophical conceptualisation from the Greeks up to post-modernism.[14] Furthermore, the possible choices seem to follow an associative pattern: choosing any of the first members of each pair above seems to predispose the user of a key (in many instances) to choosing other first members in these pairs. So, for example, we find the "first-member" options favoured as a set in classical Greek "form" philosophy (cf Strauss 2004). In post-modernism, the "second-member" options prevail. Another noteworthy aspect is a kind of rhetorical logic that comes into play with key-constructs: given that certain attributes qualify the key-factor, their opposites will often feature on the side of the domain governed by this factor. This serves to create the striking differences that (should) separate the ruler from the ruled. Compare, for example, a formula such as: individual historical eventuality transcends all universal scientific categories. Or one of its rationalistic opposites: unchanging economic laws underlie all social and cultural change. Obviously these are examples of the kind of key commitments that can typically be found in any conflict about relativism.[15]

12 One may imagine these attributes as the "links" of a "chain" attached to the golden key of knowledge.

13 Here, for example, is Rorty (1989: 22) singing the praises of contingency: "[This] line of thought […] suggests that we try to get to the point where we no longer worship anything, where we treat nothing as a quasi divinity, where we treat everything — our language, our conscience, our community — as a product of time and chance. To reach this point would be, in Freud's words, to 'treat chance as worthy of determining our fate'".

14 They also feature in the key-constructs found in Eastern philosophy.

15 A pair of attributes that falls outside the "classic" set to which I have been referring here is continuous/discontinuous. When the latter qualification is one-

Finally, the "key question" that confronts us at the end of these brief remarks on key attributes is whether we can really point to any philosophical discourse today in which each of these attributes gets "a square deal" (in terms of being allowed in the "full presence" of the illustrious key-factors that ground such discourses). I have indicated above why I think that even Derridean deconstruction, which is highly sensitive to these issues, does not quite come up to the standards of what I will call "attributive equality" (which translates into "attributive relativity"). But I cannot attempt to deconstruct deconstructionist privileges by referring to some philosophical discourse in which an ideal attributive balance actually exists, in which it is "alive and well" at a certain discursive address. Perhaps we should consider this lack as pointing towards a kind of regulative idea for philosophical thought.

3. An overview of other tools for other contexts of relativity

The analysis of key-formulas is one kind of analytical tool that can aid a critical-philosophical analysis of discourse. However, its usefulness is relative, since it requires various other analytical instruments to supplement its findings. Elements of some of these instruments already exist in various traditions and in various forms — but they can be further refined and modified to detect different kinds of one-sidedness, absolutism and imbalance. One may thus see these instruments as useful for determining the degree to which different kinds of relativity are recognised or suppressed. They analyse a certain field or set of phenomena, describing a number of elements in the field in their uniqueness and coherence, thereby illuminating the relativity of the elements, and warning (by means of models of interrelationships) against any unwarranted privileging of single elements or combinations of elements. Let me briefly list some of these tools and the kinds of relativity they exemplify:

sidedly applied to a key-factor such as knowledge, we get discourses that are sometimes labelled as relativistic, such as Foucault's early *epistèmè* archaeology, or Kuhn's early paradigm incommensurability.

3.1 Postures

First, there is a useful model of what I will call basic ethical postures related to the human condition. Such "postures" provide some answers (at a certain level) to the questions: What am I to do? What should I experience? and What will I experience? These postures include: (the experience of) meaninglessness, suffering, and guilt (on the negative side); ordinary everyday living amid work and relaxation; contemplative reflection and even ecstatic experiences; sacrificing; knowing humility; feeling joy; finding hope; caring for others, and so on (on the positive side). In philosophy, ethics and religion there is a tendency to privilege or emphasise one or more of these postures. There is, for example, the theology and philosophy of hope (Bloch, Moltmann); or the Buddhist understanding of life as suffering and redemption as contemplative experience; or ethical ideals centred on a retreat from the ordinary and the mundane, or the absolutising of the ethical relation to the "other" (Levinas). In existentialism the prominence of the "dark side" of the postural spectrum has given rise to accusations of ethical relativism. Finding "real" reality in mystical experience alone engenders another kind of relativism.

3.2 Root metaphors

Secondly, there is the model of root metaphors related to the self-images which philosophical key-formulas project.[16] This has to do with one's understanding in the light of what one perceives to be the "key answers" to existence. According to such images, to be human before the Origin, or God, or Being, or Scientific Truth, or whatever, means to stand in relation to this Origin as: a servant/worker, or a traveler, or a warrior, or a fully matured being, or a child, or a player, or a lover, and so forth. Of course, in any given discourse, one may also find a combination of these underlying models. Paradigmatic worldviews often tend to pri-

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16 This metaphor tool belongs to a larger set of interpretations dealing with figurative conceptualisation as such — hence the analysis of model, image, symbol, sign, and even narrative. A theory of figurative conceptualisation would have to generalise about all these elements. The well-known work of Paul Ricoeur, for example, illustrates some of the natural links that exist between them, in his progress from symbol to metaphor and to narrative.

vilege one or more of these metaphors, restricting their relativity. Compare, for instance, the Calvinist servant, the Lutheran child, the spiritualistically developed person (cf Berkhof 1973), the earlier techno-scientific ideal of the mature society, the Marxian worker, the Marcusian player, the postmodern traveller, and so on. Note that relativism is not to be associated with the traveller as such — the Christian motif of the pilgrim illustrates this, as does the Popperian scientific ideal of a quest for truth wherein one can indeed make continuous progress toward a unitary goal (without however actually "coming home"). One may contrast these two "transformations" of the traveller figure with the postmodern "nomad" or "vagabond" — metaphors of teleological relativisation, which some would call relativism (cf Bauman 1998). Against being a "slave" to scientific Truth, the Freedom-contemplating Paul Feyerabend (1981) propagates the story-telling wayfarer: an educator who will teach children that science is just another story, interesting but of only relative value. Of course, what the tool we are using here seems to indicate is that Feyerabend's relativism has an element of truth to it — but that his metaphors are themselves relative and in need of other metaphors to bring out the more "serious" aspects of science that are "played" down in Feyerabend's "story".

3.3 Ideological power

Thirdly, there is a model of ideological power relations that deals with various kinds of relativity in this particular context. It shows how the two spheres of discourse domination (for example, the cultural domination of techno-economic goals) and social (group) domination operate relative to each other. Ideology (or social and cultural) theorists tend either to negate one of the spheres (Dooyeweerd and Marx, for example), or to privilege one over the other (an accusation that has been levelled at Habermas, for example). This model also shows how various levels and varieties of discourses internal to the sphere of discourse domination relate to one another, as well as how various types of group domination exist and relate to one another and to certain dominating discourses. (For example, during apartheid, racist group dynamics was linked to a certain kind of ethno-nationalist discourse.) Again, theorists tend to target certain discourses (like techno-science and administrative rationality, for example, as found in Horkheimer/Adorno) or a

certain type of social domination (classically, class relations). One of the guiding assumptions of this ideology model is to deny that ideology critique can be practised from a vantage point that is itself immune to the effects of ideology. In this sense there is the implication of our inescapable (partial) entrapment in the ideological layers of culture and society. Hence a certain relativity attaches to all ideology critique.

3.4 Macro-themes

A fourth useful model deals with relativity on the level of what I shall call macro-themes. These are the grand themes of nature, power, knowledge, personhood, society, humanity, and perhaps one or two others. Throughout history and across cultures, these themes (and the awe-inspiring realities which they designate) have been in the forefront when it comes to "Original" aura and ultimate "key" power (in the sense defined earlier). Philosophers struggle to keep their balance here. Habermas and Charles Taylor, for example, privilege society over nature in the constitution of the self.[17] Foucault manages (remarkably) to move from knowledge to power and to personhood, but disregards nature (an attitude rather typical of post-modern approaches) while distancing self-created personhood from societal processes of formation. Chomsky reserves nature for knowledge, and society for power. Ultra-Darwinists reduce power (in the form of culture) and society to nature and evolution. Evidently, the themes of subjective personhood (as distinct from structured personhood), power, and society lend themselves particularly well to relativistic philosophies whereby everything is reduced to mere subjective, or power-driven (cultural) or contingent social origins. Foucault and Rorty, for example, have been interpreted in this way.[18]

17 Habermas's whole project of a theory of communicative action, as a paradigm shift away from the philosophy of the subject, also represents a certain privileging of the society motive over the personhood motive. Peter Dews (1999) has some interesting critical perspectives on this proposed shift.

18 With reference to the above section on key-analysis, it is easy to see how these macro-themes are special candidates for the positions of key-factors opening up specific domains.

3.5 Rationality

This fifth model attempts to explore the relatedness (and thus the relativity) of two different horizons of experience: the one enclosing structure, law, principle, norms, universality, generality, abstractness, and so on; the other enclosing subjectivity, factuality, processes, events, individuality, contextuality, concreteness, and so on. The relativity of the first horizon (its relation to, and coherence with, the second) is often de-relativised, giving rise to various forms of rationalism (as I understand the term in the present context). The same goes for the second horizon, giving rise to various forms of anti-rationalism, often labelled relativism in rationalist critiques.[19] Sometimes disciplines like mathematics, logic and science are typically associated with the first horizon, and art, literature and history with the second.[20] In any case, philosophical paradigms throughout history seem to be fundamentally divided on this issue of rationalism versus anti-rationalism.[21] It is important to note that the model of rationality intended here would distinguish between a perspectival interest in structure and universality (and so on) — which is after all the very nature of the scientific knowledge enterprise — and a systematic disregard for the "other" of this horizon, which would be detrimental to scientific theory. In this context it is perhaps

19 Thus, though the charge of "relativism" may be correct in a given case, it could be that the accusers have no real understanding of the relativity of their own stance.

20 Note, however, that a rationalist interest in literature, art or history — and consequently a one-sided concern with law and structure — is just as possible as anti-rationalistic treatments of these fields. With regard to history, the kind of historicism often associated with relativism may feature history as the key-factor in a typical key-formula; otherwise historicism in relation to the model of macro-themes will select and privilege power among these select themes (cf the analysis of Clouser 2004).

21 Linking this rationality model with the previous ideology model, and assuming that the latter provides for a sphere of theoretical-philosophical ideologies throughout history (the familiar -"isms" that operate with a variety of key-formulas), yields the perspective that modernity features rationalist (in the sense defined above) philosophies opposed by anti-rationalist philosophies (historicism, pragmatism, existentialism, and so on). So-called post-modernism (or, more accurately,, post-structuralism) is just the latest of these philosophies. Thus it would be a mistake to associate modernism and post-modernism with rationalism and the revolt against it.

worth remarking that Einstein's conception of relativity, forming part of a scientific theory, is directed towards formulating universality. This distinguishes it in principle from "post-modern relativity", which is constituted within the anti-rationalist paradigm's de-relativised horizon, in which individuality, contingency and change are on the agenda.[22] Also inherent in the rationality model I am proposing here is the relativising of rationality as such, in relation to other tools and other features of the world: rationality is not "large" enough to encompass love, or communication, or art, or justice, or even truth, as such — though it is related to all of them. Finally, with reference to the foregoing discussion of key-formulas, it is clear that both rationalist and anti-rationalist commitments will tend to dictate specific choices in terms of key-attributes (the latter commitment, for example, being typically tied to the "second member" of the given pairs).

3.6 Cultural learning processes

Sixthly, the model of cultural learning processes is in a sense a counterpart of the ideology model, and it is one of several tools that allow us to make normative assumptions, distinctions and analyses on the social and cultural level. For example, one such tool enables us to distinguish different social life-forms within the larger life-world, such as family, business, university, city, state, and so on, and to determine the characteristic norms, interests, communicative strategies, and so forth, of these (smaller) life-worlds. But what I want to focus on here is the presence in cultures and societies of what, after Habermas, I shall call learning processes. It is through such processes that progress is made in fields such as science and technology, but also in law and morality, and even in art and aesthetics. Think, for example, of the ongoing refinement of our understanding of human rights (often turning on new models and metaphors), linked to the historical dynamics of individualisation, differentiation and globalisation. To return to the theme of this article, the primary point that I want to make is that this kind of learning and development is certainly not to be associated with West-

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22 But it is true that science can pursue the ideal of universality in a rationalist way, not giving individual factuality its due. Quantum physics was a corrective in this sense, also with regard to Einstein's determinist cosmology.

ern civilisation *per se*. Furthermore, within Western culture, it is impossible to dissociate progress on all fronts from ideological contortions and distortions. Nevertheless, this kind of ideology-critical perspective on the possibility and the (broken) reality of cultural learning does not allow us to relativistically level the achievements of different cultures to merely differing but equal expressions of societal creativity. It also conflicts with the relativistic model's view of scientific paradigms as merely successive, without any notion of progress.

4. Confessing our pastoral-ideological relativisms

Let us take up the tool of ideology analysis again, considering (on the micro-level) the various "pastoral havens" (as I call them) to which we all turn for solace, consolation and sources of meaning — havens such as consumer indulgence, love, work, success, prestige, morality, art, or knowledge. My purpose here is to bring the theme of relativity, and the problems it causes somewhat "closer to home", so to speak. When promoted to ideological (pastoral) hypernorms — thus losing their relativity — these ordinary aspects of life come to dominate and one-sidedly relativise other goals, norms and values, robbing them of their functional validity in given contexts.[23]

Let us look briefly at the moral or ethical haven (shelter) as an example.[24] When this haven is activated in the lives of individuals, some moral or ethical ideal is promoted to hypernormative status, thereby not only relativising other norms and values, but dominating, infiltrating ("colonising") and distorting them. In an expanded sense of the term, we can perhaps think of this process — whatever pastoral haven is involved — as itself a kind of "relativism". For here we also have a kind of thought, and behaviour, that pushes certain traditionally honoured norms aside. In any case, hypernormative morality can take various forms, such as old-fashioned moral absolutism, for example, where on the one hand, moral relativity gets a raw deal, while, on the other, so-

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23 Although it is necessary to note that, even here, relativity forces itself upon us, because pastoral havens generally operate in alliances, in which they simultaneously reinforce and subvert one another.

24 For the purposes of this article, I will not distinguish between morality and ethics (as Habermas and others do).

cial norms such as unpretentious pleasantness or warm empathy are moralistically relativised. Another form is contemporary "selfism", in which self-discovery and self-creation can override or distort social, legal, educational, aesthetic, or other ethical norms.[25] Yet another form of this kind of morality induces people to work fanatically for some or other "just cause", elevating it to a goal that virtually negates the claims of all other aspects of life. The selfist "ethics of authenticity", in particular, has been attacked as relativistic in the familiar sense of the term. Charles Taylor (1991) has shown how values such as self-creation should be balanced by other concerns (such as dialogue and openness to "horizons of significance") in order to avoid the pitfalls of relativism.

Perhaps it is important to note here that ethical balance — or relativity — does not rule out the practice of establishing priorities, whether in personal life or in the existence of various social structures such as a family, a people, or a state. In this context, relativity in fact assumes a nuanced form corresponding to what Habermas calls "life-plans".

5. Spirituality and relativity

In a sense, spirituality is an exercise in relativisation. In the major religions, this can sometimes come to expression in a transformational ideal of personhood, of experiencing everything that one does through a kind of filter constituted by a continuous remembrance of certain spiritual truths.[26] Such truths can indeed fill our thoughts in moments of contemplative reflection (one of the existential "postures" referred to above). But it is an illusion (call it contemplativism) to think that one can somehow keep this meditative mindset when involved in the

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25 This happens, for example, when, at a social gathering, one person's interest in authentic self-expression causes him/her, in his/her conversation and behaviour, to bend or overrule the norms of social acceptability.

26 The macro-themes discussed above are — by their very nature — eminently susceptible to ideological interpretation. Think, for instance, of the way nature, knowledge/power and personhood are critically analysed by Dooyeweerd as constituting the "humanistic" ground-motive. In terms of personhood, the ideological form can be centred on structured personhood, subjective personhood, or transformed personhood — an ideal roughly comparable to Foucault's "technologies of the self". This ideal also figures in the work of Richard Rorty.

everyday routine of life (another postural setting). This ideal fails to come to grips with the relativity of the theoretical and spiritual-contemplative "worlds" in relation to the concrete lifeworld in which we are totally immersed in many activities and practices.

On the other hand, the way in which these ordinary activities and practices continuously succeed one another and keep us moving along the path of life has a salutary and healing effect upon our troubled existence in the world — it relativises things for us (sometimes even against our will). For example, sad thoughts (about some event) constantly occupying one's mind can suddenly and forcefully be displaced — for instance by an administrative task that has to be attended to now, and which literally (though only temporally and temporarily) saves me from despair. But, luckily, the concrete circumstances of our lives include other things beside administrative tasks — and many of these things are able to offer material moments of redemption. Defending the ordinary life-world from "colonisation" by the world of moral-spiritual "mindfulness" — as well as from the worlds of theory and art — is a consequence of using an analytical tool that lets us see these worlds in their uniqueness and coherence.

Another question that I would like to raise concerns the possible link between theoretical-analytical tools, as such, and spirituality. An affirmative answer to this question might attempt to show that such tools are in fact involved with a whole range of elements of the world, and that this same reality can also be experienced (at times) in a spiritual way. This can happen when we contemplate — or even experience — ourselves as embraced by, and at peace with, the awesome, vast web of cosmic relativity containing a myriad of structures in endless layers of universality and individuality. Such a view can be partially compared to Buddhism, which is, however, much more restricted in its understanding of relativity (due to the key absolutes indicated above, as well as to its contemplativist idealism). A comparison may also be drawn with Jewish Kabbalah mysticism, insofar as the elements constituted within the web of relativity (related to the scientific and philosophical tools we use) can be likened to the mystic's understanding of the divine aspects within which all of reality functions. However, the kind of spirituality I have in mind would be post-metaphysical in nature, and thus different from religion as the term is usually understood. Here, spiritual experience

would not involve access to another world that is essentially different from this world; it would just be a different kind of experience of this world.

Another way of establishing a link between theoretical and spiritual reality is to realise that theorised constructs such as narrative and metaphor, or precedence and transcendence, or ideology and communication (all of which have been referred to in the analyses above), can on occasion be transformed into spiritual realities when they become part of our boundary-experiences of light or darkness. In this way, we can experience being "saved" at some moment or other by a particular story (from the Bible or from a novel, for instance) or image, or by a longing for the Other, or by an overwhelming act of communication, and so forth — just as we can experience the stark and dark reality into which abstractly theorised ideology can suddenly be transformed (for example in the micro-ideologies that haunt our personal lives).

It should be noted, however, that such a framework for spirituality would not allow us to extract specifically privileged elements, like Derrida's Otherness or Habermas's Communication, from their embeddedness in the field of world-relativity, so as to link or compare them with traditional religious motives and semi-religious experiences (cf Derrida 2002; Caputo 1997; Habermas 2002). On the other hand, this framework does enable us to understand and acknowledge the spiritual "translations" of the primary motifs of their work that these two philosophers present. The same would apply to Foucauldian-Rortyan self-creation — which points to legitimate ethical concerns (in the context of model 3.1 above, as supplemented by a model of life-style ethics) beyond the ideology of transformational personhood (cf note 24). It is with the aid of our philosophical tools that we can focus on the larger realities within the field of world-relativity — realities that can all assume some kind of relative spiritual significance for us.

If we consider the very meaning of the term "spiritual", we find that it is usually associated with specific aspects of life, and with the special content that people attribute to these aspects. However, it might be useful to liberate the term, or a certain usage of it, from these constraints. What I mean is that spirituality in the broader sense can help us to relativise spirituality in the narrower sense. For this purpose, the relativising "postural" tool briefly introduced above (model 3.1), could be

useful. If we think of "spiritual" as designating a certain enlightened, open, sensitive, gracious, graceful, and above all authentically human way of bearing the "human condition" — as opposed to dark, destructive and inhuman ways — then this tool presents us with a sample of basic human postures that can "embody" the spectrum of such a comprehensive spirituality. For there is a spiritual way to endure suffering, guilt and meaninglessness; to take up work, play and everyday life; to relinquish dreams; to find joy, hope or compassion, and so on. At the same time, these postures as such reflect a spirituality that is inherent in being human. Of course, in the sketch above (model 3.1) the posture of contemplation (that is, periodically distancing oneself from total absorbedness in the everyday routine, for example, in religious acts or secular meditative practices) and even that of ecstatic experience was also listed. Spirituality generally tends to be identified with these two postures, but the postural perspective relativises them as being "nothing special": they are just particular parts of life, relativising other parts or postures, and being relativised in turn. Doubtless, some (spiritualists) would find this view relativistic.

6. Third-wave versus post-modernist relativity

It seems to me that modernity has not yet really succeeded in making philosophical peace with world-relativity. But post-modernism and post-structuralism, in their critique of modernity, have also made use of key-constructs that cannot be regarded as models of radical relativity (as I have tried to show), and in fact have sometimes laid themselves open to the charge of relativism. As a kind of regulative idea, I would propose an era "to come" — if it will come (Derrida): This would be the era of third-wave modernism: an era following upon the first-wave grand narratives and the second-wave grand incredulity towards them (Lyotard). It would thus be a time of (more fully) realised relativity. But, of course, the ideology tool predicts that such an era will not and cannot escape ideological fixations, even while it rejects modernist and post-modernist fascinations.

7. "Concluding" relativity

Finally, of course, another more special kind of relativity confronts us — the knowledge that everything contained in an article about relativity (such as this) is fundamentally relativised by the passage of time. This is something different from the ideological relativity of theory, noted above. What has been said in this article — and the tools that have been used here — will not withstand the test of time without being deconstructed (to varying degrees) by the new insights which will arise from new life-worlds. In this respect (and using this "exit tool": the imaginary unleashing of the "to come" upon theoretical "presence"), I have much empathy for Derrida's respectful reckoning with the Advent of Otherness.

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