

Relativist Philosophy

Karel Pexidr

2016



UNIVERSITY
OF WEST BOHEMIA

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Acknowledgement

The author wishes to express his thanks to the translator Pavla Váňová. In fact, as a linguist, she has been a living example confirming one of his favourite theses: “*Philosophy need not be reserved to philosophers*”. Her full engagement has greatly contributed to the free flow of his ideas.

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(electronic edition)

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Reviewer: doc. PhDr. Zdeněk Pinc

Typesetting: Jakub Pokorný

Cover design: Iveta Hostašová

Published by the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen

Univerzitní 8, 306 14 Pilsen, Czech Republic

1st English edition

Number of publication: 2232, edition number: 55-023-16

Pilsen, 2016

ISBN 978-80-261-0632-6

ISBN 978-80-261-0614-2 (printed edition)

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Preface

Philosophy is expected to supply the broadest possible horizons of human knowledge, while creating such space for thought, as can relate with and touch anything in its unlimited universality. The purpose of this book resides in showing what options are opened up in this respect by the approach called relativistic philosophy.

The question of philosophical relativism, its pros and cons, appears to be a frequent topic of well founded philosophical discussions of the present day. However, quite a number of the argumentations seem to cover the field partially, relating to certain specific specialized philosophical branches, mostly touching rather single aspects or partial issues, whereas more extensive elucidation and assessment of the character of relativism tend to slip away from the epicentre of interest. Due to that relativism is often interpreted in a simplified way and classified in a standard position of a traditional philosophical system. Thus it ends up in a series of other habitual systems, being frequently branded as incompatible with the rest.

This study aims at providing the questions of relativism with an explanation in a comprehensive and systematic review. In my opinion it gives no sense to delimit and imprison relativism by some final verdict in a stiff table of philosophic systems. It appears to be by far more useful to show the relativist philosophy as a natural way of philosophic thought, and even as the way of any consistent mental activity at all. A total and rounded-off view of the relativist philosophy may indicate

that the relativist concept itself is something unlimited and borderless. Its important asset for the development of philosophy is, in the first instance, its capacity of a tool for dynamic thought. It pushes philosophy forward enabling any philosophic ideas (and, along with them, also principles, theses, dogma, axioms etc.) both to be retained and to be surpassed again and again.

It should be admitted that the mentioned lack of any borders of relativism tends to be objected to – and perhaps with some justification. The human spirit, namely, strives after some uncertain attainable truth, but also after stability and assuredness. This is certainly a reason requiring relativism to be appropriately anchored. A good offer comes from the side of science.

A discipline flanking philosophy and being very close to it is psychology. Actually, both used to be part of one science in the past. There are at least two essential reasons for which philosophy ought to search for permanent support in psychological investigation.

1. Only psychology deals with immaterial phenomena taking place on the basis of human consciousness and forming, in their outputs of thought, sources of the immense complexity and multiple meaning of philosophical ideas.
2. Nothing but psychology can show the sources of natural psychic modifications and variations that permanently impact upon the mental and sensual cognitive potential of man.

In addition to that, one psychological finding is of importance for the relativist philosophy, and namely the fact that all activities of thought can be seen as an uninterrupted and continuing process based upon alternating deductions of correlates and relations. (In a schematic expression: if there are given subjects of thought, a tendency appears to seek some relation between them; if a subject with a relation is given, a tendency arises to look for some further points corresponding with that relation.)

Similarly as the natural sciences reveal networks of lawful relations in the sphere of material reality, psychology enables the cognition and explanation of relations in the sphere founded or modified by the psyche. This is followed by theoretical differentiation between the “order of reality” and the “order of validity”, which is a sort of an invention of mine that will be described closer in chapter 7.

My rather comprehensive analytical study “Psychology and epistemology” tries to show that the originators of numerous substantial problems of philosophy are certain specific features of psychic sources and tools on which philosophy depends. Actually, I am convinced that exactly a targeted application of general psychological findings, together with relativistic approach, can elucidate or solve quite a number of philosophic problems, let alone supply proofs that the issues in question are not more than seeming problems.

The present condition of philosophy in the world is not satisfactory in certain respects. An excessive dissipation to great width and small immersion to the depths are seen to prevail. The traditional philosophic supports lose their authority, the respect to general human values weakens considerably. Human intelligence develops predominantly in the technical directions, lots of people lack a solid foundation of spiritual life (and along with that also full mental health).

Relativist philosophy – paradoxical as it may appear – can provide, just thanks to the offered plurality of philosophical viewpoints and approaches, the comparatively widest, the most consolidated and reliable platform of philosophical cognition, and namely cognition that can use the same basis for unlimited further development. Actually, the same purpose is sought also by this modest contribution of mine; it is written so as to be accessible not only to professional philosophers, but also to laymen without any deeper philosophic education.

Karel Pexidr

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*Philosophy is love of wisdom,
but how can we call the love of
philosophy?*

1 What do I expect philosophy to offer me

Everybody is a potential philosopher, under the prerequisite of being endowed with some thinking capacity. In spite of that many people tend to avoid philosophy: it appears to be too vague in their eyes, too far from the everyday rush of life and, actually, it does not seem to be needed, after all. Contemplative persons prefer the sciences in searching for information, whereas many inventive persons take relish in developing their talents by way of the technological focus.

In spite of the enormous boom of science and technology in the course of the recent two centuries and in spite of numerous drawbacks encountered by philosophy in the past, it still represents – even at the present day – the most far-reaching, the deepest and the highest level of knowledge that is open to the human spirit. Except for philosophy, nothing can encompass the whole cosmos in its general and summarizing view, often one single idea or a few sentences will do ...

However, there has always been a disquieting and startling controversy against which I found myself bouncing repeatedly, with a sort of stubborn persistence, when reading various philosophical works. On the one hand side, there is an ideal aim, the endeavour to achieve some sort of universal and full, true, irrefutable, all explaining philosophical cognizance, whereas, on the other hand side, we encounter splinters of diversified historical approaches, systems and schools in a historical kaleidoscope. In some way they can complement one another, but in other directions, on the contrary, their relationships make them basically

rule out and negate one another. Is philosophy not seen to fail, as early as at this point, concerning the possibility to achieve a generally truthful and incontestable philosophical cognition of the type that is acceptable, without any qualification, for all advocates of philosophy? Is an ideal of a certain universal image of the world not more than a futile and unattainable vision, some sort of a paradise myth that has been inverted in time?

In the first instance, every philosopher is a human being. His endeavours are limited by the general characteristics of human psychics and, in addition to that, by various individual traits (Fr. Nietzsche). I do not deny being subject to the same psychic limitations and, accordingly, also to the psychologically only too natural desire to arrive at some sort of ideal result via philosophical investigation and philosophical deliberations. My ideal aim (and dream as well) has been to convert philosophy so as to form a tool that is capable, once for all, to chase away the shades of irreparable discrepancies between different types of philosophical thought and approach with which philosophy has been wrestling down to the present day.

It is certainly an issue of general human consideration whether the fact that an ideal is out of reach may sufficiently justify leaving such ideal behind. I do not hide that I am not prone to be sceptical in this respect. A philosophical basis suggested by myself – I am convinced about that – has its good reason even under the mentioned controversial situation. Its main contribution does not consist in some new (or re-established) philosophical system, but in a new *philosophical approach*. The dissimilarity, as compared with the traditional types of philosophy, can be seen in particular in that

1. The differences of meaning that characterize the ideally postulated theses within the system are taken into consideration, as opposed to the meanings acquired by the same theses in various relationships outside of the system (thus making their ideal character relative);
2. All previous types of philosophy are acknowledged; the causes of their differences are revealed and ways are sought for

overcoming their incompatibility (through the help of making their counterpoints relative);

3. The creation of a certain all-encompassing system does not appear to be an aim in itself, but only a means stimulating consequential ideas and opening up ways to further free and limitless philosophical investigation.

Naturally, quite a lot of ideal expectation is present in such statement, but philosophy should really become an issue corresponding with its name: the love of wisdom. And does not human wisdom reside, among others, also in the postulate that nothing created and acquired by the human spirit may be regarded as thwarted and lost?

The open philosophical thought, whose advocate I am, is based upon patient, systematic and critical collection and evaluation of innumerable links and relations. The philosophy of this type is usually denoted as relativism. Irrespective of whether this name appertains to it or not, there is no doubt that relativistic approach and relativistic thought can play an important role that is not restricted to philosophy.

Especially during our times when pluralistic and liberalistic tendencies have, so to say, green light in the societal life, while all sorts of insurmountable ideological barriers with psychological or historical roots continue to exist, relativism can do a lot to bridge over the gaps and to remove issues separating people. If it becomes intellectual property of individuals who are endowed with goodwill and able to understand the necessary relationships broadly enough, it can launch an atmosphere of general understanding and tolerance, while contributing to the increasing human empathy and supporting the harmonization of the relations both between individuals and between different types of social structures. On the societal scale, accordingly, relativism can serve as a means for optimizing mutual harmony, in full accordance with the individuality of each person.

I find a similar situation in philosophy: the relativistic philosophy offers its followers the liberty to retain their preferred philosophy.

2 What relativism is not

In the course of its development the relativistic thought was not elaborated to the extent of being sufficiently resistant against all sorts of philosophical objections.

Relativism was mostly understood superficially and flatly, its radius was narrowed down, its concept was discredited.

The label of relativism was usually given to philosophic orientations refuting the absoluteness of anything, irrespective of further circumstances, just declaring that “everything is relative”. The epistemological relativism characterized by the sentence “each truth is relative” was usually interpreted as a try to annul any epistemological value, and labelled as epistemological nihilism and scepticism.

Due to similar considerations relativism was refused also in other disciplines.

The focus of criticisms was the actual content of the sentence “everything is relative”, this sentence being interpreted as an absolutely valid statement; then the critics pointed out that the absolute validity or truthfulness of this relativistic “basic thesis” proved the untruthfulness of its content. In other words relativism was reproached of the same drawback which it reprehended (and, eo ipso, unjustly reprehended) in the cases of other philosophies.

I wish to show that the sort of relativism ensuing solely from the basic prerequisite expressed by the thesis “everything is relative” is no

relativism in the true sense, and even no sufficiently workable philosophy at all.

The sentence “everything is relative” is a highly abstract schematic statement, and much like expressions “everything is existence”, “the world is material”, “there has always been something” etc., it is extremely vague and poor as to contents. In analogy with cognizance of the world that does not reside in just learning about its existence or materiality (since also material can have different meanings in different contexts), the sentence “everything is relative” does not supply any concrete information enabling us to learn the real nature and real features of the matter the sentence is about.

There is one thing that is of paramount importance for the relativistic approach and relativistic investigation, and namely *differentiated understanding of relativity*, as based upon the knowledge and evaluation of connections and relations; much the same as the cognizance of the material world and its laws is unthinkable without concrete scientific research revealing enormous amounts of specific material phenomena and links in the differentiated perspective of the natural sciences.

The sentence “everything is relative” is not untruthful, only deplorably incomplete and insufficient, without any value for further philosophic considerations. It does not comprise my postulate of relativistic approach and is in no regard applicable for methodological guidance.

The concept of relativism whose character ought to be aptly captured by the mentioned sentence does not meet the basic prerequisites of relativist philosophy. I must refuse any relativism of this type.

3 What preceded relativism

Each philosophy has its starting point, its sort of forerunner leaning against something lying outside of it. I do not mean to pretend that relativism can make an exception to the rule. Anyway, the problems of origin I am alluding to will be subject to more detailed analysis later.

The immensely complex structure of relations serving as foundation of relativism that participates, in its turn, in discovering and developing these grounds, has its natural roots in standard situations and phenomena in both *psychological* and *philosophical* respect.

It would be overdone to maintain that relativism is impacted by such phenomena in a strict sense, i. e. in a causal or logical one; it rather seems to be their natural continuation and application on the level of targeted mental activity. Be it one way or another, relativity and its corresponding relativist philosophy, either, is not any sort of speculative creation of spirit, being derived from objectively given facts that also represent a certain objective grounding of relational diversification that prepares the footing for differentiated application and assessment of relations in their various positions, qualities, functions and meanings.

General psychology shows that finding relations is a mental operation the absence of which would actually disable any consistent mental activity. All mental work, as far as perceptible by psychological means, consists in creating certain contents of thoughts and picking up the threads between them. The relations contribute to the creation

or completion of contents; thinking them over results in automatically evoking further relations and bringing them to being. The psychological vehicle of topical mental activity is *consciousness*, the vehicle serving to save mental means and relations is *memory*, whereas the form of grasping, expressing and communicative transfer of ideas and their elements is a system of signs, in the first instance *the speech*.

Cognition based upon mental activity can be founded either in the perception of certain facts (objects, events, orders etc.); as a rule it is not possible otherwise than jointly, in collaboration with sensual or empirical recognition, or in the perception (in realizing) the contents (the sense) of the mental contents and relations. This is called *understanding*.

All issues retained in the memory of an individual, and namely the complete contents of his consciousness (encompassing, together with his recollections and ideas, also contents of thought and relations), are subject to change. These variations are related both to the individual (ontogenetic) sphere and to the developmental (phylogenetic) one. The mental potential inducing these changes can be called *fantasy*, in a certain broader sense.

Fantasy acts in two opposing directions: either it broadens, enriches, multiplies, diversifies and complicates the psychic contents, or it can impoverish, flatten, curtail or reduce them or deprive them of concrete character. The second of these tendencies can be called the *abstraction capacity*.

Conforming to the psychological knowledge, the psychic contents are supposed to originate, primarily, thanks to the activity of sensual organs. In addition to that, the creation of mental contents depends upon the *abstraction capacity*.

At the same time the abstraction tendency is closely connected with mental procedures serving for generalisation, this bond being both psychological and logically systemic. Actually, these are two sides of one coin. The most general ideas (categories, statements systems) are always of highly abstract character.

The philosophical relativism complies with the natural need of the human spirit to think in relations. The relational character of thought, together with the abstraction capacity and the subjective features of human consciousness is the psychologically supporting backbone and condition of relativistic thinking.

Besides all that the field of the human psyche is marked by certain further specific furrows, probably originating upon the psychological law of compensation, while offering evidence that there is an omnipresent thirst of the human spirit, its eternal desire defying any real fulfilment. This is a tendency to apply at least internal changes of psychic contents in order to achieve some issues that are unattainable in the outer world. I call this trend the search of the absolute and idealization.

The absolutizing and idealizing transformation is based upon the simultaneous impoverishing and enriching of mental contents.

The impoverishing in the course of absolutization is manifested as doing away with, or “thinking away the relations”. This takes place by way of a certain abstraction above the limit, above the threshold; it serves the absolutized object in our thought to get rid of any links and connections to the other objects of the given universe. In compensation for the suppressed relations fantasy endows the absolutized object by novel properties, in particular an exclusivity that can be potentiated up to quantitatively or qualitatively understood endlessness.

Idealization is grounded – in contrast to absolutization – upon the suppression of the relations between the idealized object and the reality, aiming at abstraction (I understand reality, in this psychological perspective, as material, accessible to sensual perception and external experience). Also in this case fantasy is seen to participate, imputing new features to the idealized object: it acknowledges its self-sustained existence, some sort of own, supra-terrestrial and ideal life, independent of material reality, of space, time and events taking place within them. Escalated forms of idealization presume that the idealized objects may be endowed even with a higher form of reality than the one pertaining to material objects (Plato); ideas tend to be placed before the reality and