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DISCUSSION

RELATIVISM REVISITED

In a recent issue of this journal, Joseph Wayne Smith offers a rejoinder to my defence of anti-realist relativism.¹ According to anti-realist relativism a sentence is true if and only if it is warranted by a correct theory. Contrary to what the realist believes, sentences are not determined as true (or false) by reality. In my original essay I did not argue for anti-realist relativism. I simply maintained that Hilary Putnam and William Newton-Smith (amongst others) fail to show that this position is self-refuting or otherwise incoherent. Smith apparently accepts that I was successful in this endeavour but presents three new arguments against anti-realist relativism. Smith's arguments, I argue, are no more successful than those of other realists. Anti-realist relativism is a possibility that will continue to haunt the realist.

Before presenting his objections Smith raises an important question about the nature of anti-realist relativism. In "Relatively Speaking" I characterised this theory as the view that a sentence is true if and only if warranted by a correct theory. (Originally I used a conditional, not the biconditional (correctly) used here.) I made, however, no effort to say what counts as a correct theory. Smith is quite right to seek clarification of this point. Relativists can characterise a correct theory in a number of ways but some of them play into the realist's hand. Rela-

tivists might suggest that a correct theory is any consistent set of sentences. No one, however, wants to say that a sentence is true merely because it is supported by a consistent but fictitious story. For example, it is not literally true that

- (1) Louisa Musgrove visited Lyme Regis

even though Jane Austen wrote a consistent story. On the other hand, relativists must avoid an account of a correct theory that presupposes realism. It is tempting to say that the reason that (1) is not true is that the theory that warrants it does not stand in some appropriate relationship to reality. The same temptation suggests that the sentence

- (2) Jane Austen visited Lyme Regis

is true because it is warranted by a correct theory, that is, a theory composed of sentences determined true by reality. Obviously anti-realist relativists must resist this temptation.

Relativists must somehow identify the correct theories which warrant true sentences and do so without presupposing realism. This is easily done when we remember that true sentences are warranted by *theories* and not by arbitrary but consistent collections of sentences. A theory is not merely a collection of sentences. It is a collection of sentences held to be true by some community. A theory is correct if it is currently adopted by some community. On this account of a correct theory, not just any sentence is true. A sentence such as (1) is not true because it is not warranted by a theory held by any community. On the other hand (2) is true because warranted by a theory adopted by our community.

Having dealt with this preliminary question, I turn to Smith's first objection. He holds that

(3) There are objects in the universe

is true. Next he claims that (3) is warranted by any number of theories. But, says Smith, relativism is the view that a sentence is true if (and only if) warranted by *a* theory. He takes 'a theory' to mean 'a unique theory' and concludes that relativism is mistaken. Smith unfortunately provides no reason for interpreting 'a theory' as he does rather than as 'some theory (or other)'. Any sensible relativist would opt for the latter interpretation and avoid Smith's objection. Some community may believe that the universe contains only material objects. Another could maintain that only mental entities exist. Since both communities hold that if objects of a certain type exist, then objects exist, but communities can agree that (3) is warranted and true. It is not clear why Smith thinks that the relativist must think that this is in the least problematic.

In his second objection, Smith holds that there are what he calls "brute facts". These are facts that cannot be explained. The fact that, say, electrons have negative charge is an example of such a fact. Electrons have negative charge but science cannot say why they do. (There must always be some brute facts, that is, facts in terms of which others are explained. As Hume remarks, the most perfect natural philosophy merely staves off ignorance a little longer). Now, Smith reasons, if there are brute facts, there are truths warranted by no theory. He concludes that there are truths warranted by no theory and relativism (as he interprets it) is wrong. Unfortunately for Smith the existence of brute facts provides no grounds for thinking that there are unwarrantable truths. Suppose it is a brute fact that electrons have negative charge. The sentence

(4) Electrons have negative charge

is still warranted by contemporary physics and, according to relativism, true. Perhaps this is not the sort of case Smith has in mind. If not, I encourage him to give an example of a brute fact that requires an unwarrantable truth.

In his third objection, Smith tries to drive a wedge between what is true and what is justified or warranted by a theory. Smith invokes the brain in a vat hypothesis in an effort to find his wedge. The sentence

(5) We are embodied creatures in a material world

is warranted. Nevertheless, Smith holds, it is *possible* that we are actually brains in a vat and misled by evil scientists. If this is possible, Smith reasons, (5) may be false even though it is warranted. He concludes that a sentence may be warranted but not true and that relativism is false. The trouble with this argument is that it presupposes that relativism is correct. Smith admits that (5) is warranted by present theories. Relativists will say that this is all they need to know: it must then be true. They may admit that the brain in a vat hypothesis is possibly true, by which they mean that it could possibly be warranted. This bare possibility does not change the fact that (5) is warranted and true. Remember, according to the relativist, truth depends only on what is warranted. It does not depend on what is or may be. Only because realists presuppose that truth depends on what is real does the possibility that we are brains in a vat seem to reinforce their position.

Realist intuitions die hard and, like so many other writers, Smith cannot avoid employing them in his arguments against relativism. Those with realist intuitions find relativism a threatening and obscure spectre. This being the case, it is hardly

surprising that they should represent relativism in unflattering terms. The result is that realists frequently beg the question or attack straw men. It is, perhaps, a little ironic that relativism, a position that might be expected to foster tolerance, should be an object of such horror.

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NOTE

1. "Young on the Coherence of Anti-realist Relativism," *Indian Philosophical Quarterly*, 16 (1989), 61-65. He is replying to my "Relatively Speaking: The Coherence of Anti-Relist Realativism", *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 16 (1986), 503-509.

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