DISCUSSION

YOUNG AND OLD ARGUMENTS ABOUT GLOBAL ANTI-REALIST RELATIVISM ABOUT TRUTH

Relativisms of various sorts (about truth, knowledge, standards, meaning, morals *etc.*) have managed to retain their interest for many thinkers (including philosophers, not just sociologists of knowledge and anthropologists) despite two millenia of (putative?) refutations[1]. My interest in relativism is in relativism about truth, a thesis which has been called 'the Achilles heel of relativism'[2] for it would seem, on the face of it, absurd to challenge the objectivity and absoluteness of truth. This may be, however, merely because one is surreptitiously building in some sort of naive realist, or correspondence, theory of truth such that any claim that the truth of statements (or sentences *etc.*[3]) varies with theory (or belief systems, or conceptual scheme, or culture, or whatever)[4] seems to give to those theories etc. literal world making power such that one is stuck with the odd situation that different theorists literally occupy different universes, a view fraught with difficulty[5].

More promising, it would seem, would be to embrace in some way something more like a coherentist conception of truth, for with its likely disengagement of truth from reality, the relativisation of truth to various belief systems, or whatever, would seem possible without literal multiple realities as a distasteful corollary of truth relativism.

In a series of papers over the last few years (including one in this journal)[6], a Canadian philosopher, James Young, has suggested an extreme form of relativism based on anit-realist/coherentist theories of meaning and of truth/justification. Young's self-set task in his papers is to establish that what I shall call 'global anti-realist relativism about

truth' is 'at worst, a defensible position'[7] To this end he both clarifies just what the position amounts to and defends it against standard criticism. He doesn't claim to show the view to be correct but, I shall argue, even the minimal aim he has for his papers is too sanguine.

The starting point for Young's thesis is an anti-realist construal of meaning.

Young says that, of the two major motivations for anti-realism, one of them, the reductionist tendency to give the meaning of the members of some class of sentences by sentences in another class to which the first is reduced, can be ruled out *a priori* as a line of argument that will support global anti-realism because, as Colin McGinn has pointed out,[8] though it can eliminate a (straight forward) realist understanding of the "reduced away" sentences, one must always have at least one class of sentences in terms of which to do the reducing[9].

The other major motivation for anti-realism, the rejection of standard truth conditional meaning theories, is, in Young's view, more promising as route to *global* anti-realism[11]. Young investigates the promise of viewing the understanding of sentences to reside in a grasp of the conditions which would warrant them to and notes, correctly, that 'not just any conception of warrant will serve the purposes of global anit-realists'[11]. What's needed is 'a conception of warrant which does not presuppose the realist treatment of some sentences'[12].

Promising enough in this regard for his purposes, thinks Young, is a theory of meaning which takes a coherentist conception of warraning conditions, one in which 'a sentence is warranted if it coheres with the other sentences which speakers have assented to as true'[13].

So, Young's idea of sentence meaning is an anti-realist coherentist one in which one's understanding of a sentence is constituted by one's understanding of the conditions in which it would be warranted. Part of one's theory dictates what those warranting conditions are, that is, what bunch of other sentences would, were they to be assented to, warrant also assenting to the sentence in question. So much for meaning, what of truth? For a sentence to be true is simply for these warranting conditions to have received assent, for their assertion also to form part of a correct theory, that is, one endorsed by the community of cognitive agents[11].

But this is, in a way, to collapse truth and mere belief, contrary to Young's explicit intent[15]. To be sure, some sentence, S say, won't be deemed true just because someone (or even some community) believes it. As Young remarks, S 'is true if and only if it is warranted by theory and quite independently of whether anynoe believes it (S) to be true'[16]. However, this leaves unsettled what the status of the theory which so warrants S is. As Young notes in response to Joseph Wayne Smith, if S is true because warranted by a *correct*[17] theory, the anti-realist does owe us an account of what counts as a correct theory. Young denies having a correct theory amount to just *any* consistent set of sentences, noting that a sentence from a novel (he draws his example from Jane Austen's *Persuasion)* though part of a consistent set, is not true on this account. Why? Because the novel doesn't constitue anyone's theory. So, at least a neccessary constraint on something being a correct theory is that it is 'adopted by some community'[18]. Smith, or in any event, I, would respond to this by querying what counts as a set of sentences being *adopted* by some community. If 'adopted', as I've assumed, just means 'believed', then, as Young notes Putnam to object, 'truth is relative to what someone believes'[19]. It is just that the relevant object of belief will not be S but a set of sentences. If 'adopted' does not just mean 'believed' then it seems to me that I (and Smith) would be 'quite right to seek clarification'[20] beyond that given.

Let me allow that something could be done here by Young, such that his view does not collapse truth into mere belief. However, further objections to his views remain. Note that the relativism in Young's view comes from the possibility that various communities might adopt various theories. Thus S might be understood differently (differ in meaning) from community A to community B because that part of A's theory which stipulates the conditions under which S is warranted might be different to its counterpart in B's theory. Thus meaning is theory relative (and thus community relative)[21]. And so is truth. Other parts of a community's theory will give the sentences actually assented to by that community and should they include those constitutive of the warranting conditions of S then S is true. Thus the truth of S is also relative to theory on this view.

Now, Young notes and responds to an objection to relativism by Willian Newton-Smith to the effect that, on Young's view, a sentence

might be true relative to one theory and false relative to another[22]. Newton-Smith considers truth-conditions to be bound up with the meaning of a sentence such that two sentences with different truth-conditions could not count as sentences of the same type (or as synonymous)[23]. But, he continues, if sentences have the same truth-conditions how can they end up with different truth values? So, put another way, Newton-Smith's view is that no sentence can be true relative to one theory and false relative to another, contrary to the relativist's claim.

Young responds[24] by saying that Newton-Smith presupposes a realist conception of truth for, if truth-conditions are *intra*-theory, then one sentence, S_1, might be true relative to one theory, T_1, and its assented to sentences (including those setting out the truth-conditions of S_1) and another sentence, S_2, false relative to another theory, T_2, and its assented to sentences. Thus, says Young, 'anti-realists can preclude situations where two sentences with the same truth-conditions have different truth values[25].

He goes on to point out that it's not as if S_1 and S_2 truth conditions are set by T_1 and these differ from those set by T_2 for S_2. Thus, S_1 and S_2 are different in truth-conditions (and meanning) and are not the same sentence.

In this last response, Young ignores the other prong of Newton-Smith's thrust against the relativist. Newton-Smith is quite willing to allow that the same sequence of marks might have two meanning, and thus truth conditions, one set of which might be satisfied and one not. Such a situation he dubs 'trivial semantic relativism'[26]. His charge against the truth relativist is that her view is either trivial (if *two* sentences not meaning the same are involved) or incoherent (if somehow the *same* sentence is supposed to be both true and false). As the name suggests, *trivial* semantic relativism seems an uninteresting form of the thesis yet that seems to be what Young admits to.

It might be, however, that Young gives away too much to Newton-Smith and that his view is not as trivial as I have suggested Newton-Smith would deem it. Much depends on how holistically we are to construe the semantic operations of a theory to be. In outlining Young's views earlier, I was at pains to have it that, say, S_1's truth

conditions were laid down by some (meaning setting) sentences of T_1 and that it would be an extra move, appealing to S_1's coherence with other sentences of T_1, that would determine whether S_1 was warrantably assertible (was true). The picture imagined is something like that S_1's meaning is constituted by its relationship to, say, S_2 and S_3, as stipulated by the metasentence Ms1 : 'S_1 is true if S_2 and S_3'. Now whether S_2 and S_3 are assented to, or not, I took to depend on whether or not some further sentences, say, S_4 and S_5, had already been assented to. Thus, when Young says: 'a sentence is true if and only if warranted by a correct theory'[27], I've taken this to allow for two cognitive agents within a community sharing Ms_1 and thus meaning the same by S_1 yet not agreeing about S_4 and S_5 and thus not agreeing that S_1 is warranted.

It seems to me that some such limitation upon seamless holism is needed to allow for substantive disagreement, that not just based on two agents being "at cross purposes" in their attempt at mutual communication. Yet, if we do allow this distinction, then it does seem possible for two agents (or two communities[28]) to share an understanding of a sentence yet for that sentence to be true relative to the relevant body of assented to sentences of one but not the other.

Mind you, though this seems to rescue Young's anti-realist relativism about truth from Newton-Smith's charge of triviality without opening it back up to the charge of incoherence, it's not clear just how palatable a position we're left with.

'Truth' would be univocal; and sentence meaning for a community a matter of the truth conditions associated with that sentence by that community. Yet not all within the community[29] might have a similar enough assenting history to make the same truth valuations of sentences of which they have a shared understanding. Weird, perhaps, but not incoherent and, maybe we ought not be overly surprised to see relativism being as peculiar as it promised to be. After all, despite his talk of his view of truth conditions as being "independent of the whims of individuals'[30] through being associated with a correct theory, the intra-theoretic nature of this notion of "objectivity" and the subjective construal of correctness has obvious potential for relativistic oddness.

So, though it might escape Newton-Smith's dilemma, it is still not clear whether Young's anti-realism is coherent; it is, however, odd.

Further problems occur due to Young's unusual advocacy of the view as viably *global* in its scope[31], a theory of truth for all sentences.

The first difficulty this seems to cause relates to the standards by appeal to which some sentence S is deemed warrented by, or coherent with, say, sentences X, Y and Z which have already been assented to. These standards, C say, can themselves be asserted in a sentence, say, 'standards of coherence C are correct standards for judging the warrantedness of sentences'. And this meta-sentence's warrantedness is presumably also to be judged by seeing if it coheres with (and is thus warranted by) some further, already assented to, sentences; and such judgements of coherence presumably appeal to some standard of coherence deemed apt for such meta-sentences. There's a whiff of a vicious regress here and the global anti-realist owes us further elucidation of the position.

Moreover, as has been noted in many places, beginning with Plato's *Theaetetus*, if the statement of global anti-realist relativism doesn't fall within its own scope then it constitutes its own counter-example yet, if it does fall within its own scope, which is Young's stance,[32] whether or not a given community understands Young's thesis is presumably a matter of them sharing an understanding of the truth conditions of global anti-realist relativism (the conditions in which it would be warranted to assert it). This doesn't seem problematic but it does seem a weakness of the view that, though two communities/ theoriests might share an understanding of the thesis' truth conditions, they might not share views about whether or not the sentences stipulating the thesis's truth conditions are warrantedly assertable. This is presumably because of a different assenting history concerning the sentences epistemically linked to these truth condition ones or to differing epistemic criteria concerning the warranting of these truth condition claims, or whatever. The point is that a realist/absolutist, though sharing Young's understanding of global anti-realist relativism might have that thesis false relative to her theory even though relative to Young's theory it might be true.

The relativist, then, would seem unable to go beyond saying that, though relativism is true-for-him it might not be true-for-everybody; absolutism might be true-for-somebody. That relativism is just true-for-some is not necessarily disturbing and, as Young is at pains

to insist[33], not incoherent. That absolutism is true-for-somebody is
perhaps not incoherent, but it is weird and deserving of further
exploration and explication.[34]

One could try to insulate anti-realist relativism from each of
the preceding two objections by making it less global but whatever the
merits of this path might be[35] it is not one that Young wishes to tread
and it is *global* anti-realist relativism that is of concern here.

A further objection of a rather different sort concerns Young's
conception of the correctness of a theory as being temporally tied to
the time of inquiry: 'a theory is correct if it is currently adopted by
some community.'[36] Truth is relativised to a *current* theory and thus
seems relativised to the fleeting present. So, even though 'the earth
is flat' , as asserted in 600 B.C. in Ionia, say, might have been true
relative to the beliefs of some then existing community, it is no longer
true, even for them. Time has, so to speak, passed that truth by (unless
a *current* community with the same understanding of that sentence is
warranted in endorsing it by their own theory). The difficulty this time
is that it's hard to see why Young isn's *more* relativistic than this. He
would seem to be committed to saying that though it used to be true-
for such Ionians that the earth was flat it is no logner true[37] *even for*
them (or relative to their theory) because they are no longer around
to do the requisite assenting.

But this is odd, why would Young hold this? One could still, •
to take up one of his concerns, draw a distinction between a correct
theory, apt for sentence warranting, and a fictional novel[38] by having
a correct theory being one held at some time or other such that it is
true (tenselessly) relative to the theory of those Ionians, that the earth
is flat though not true that Lousia Musgrove visited Lyme Regis[39]. Why
the temporal parochialims?

Reflection upon the case of fiction generates the noting of another
oddity in Young's account of the status of some set of sentences as
a correct theory. What makes something a correct theory is simply that
'it is currently adopted by some community'[40], so, if, for some strange
reason,[41] some community came to believe Jane Austen's *Persuasion*
then it would be true that Louisa Musgrove visited Lyme Regis. And
if they become disabused of belief in the set of sentences comprising
Persuasion then it would become false again. This is at least odd, though

not, perhaps, incoherent (and thus not, perhaps, a point against Young's main concern with these papers).

As another worry, it's not clear that Young's can be a *global* account of warrantedness, except for eternal beings. Presumably there must be some sentence, X, say, which is an agent's initially assented to sentence yet this can't be warranted as there are no prior-assented-to sentences to form the reference class for such a warrantedness decision. So, warranting cannot get started. Nor can X be understandable for there is not yet in palce a standard of coherence in terms of which to grasp 'which other sentences would have to be true[42] if the sentence is to be warranted'[43] yet that is Young's proposed account of understandability. Can understanding get started?

So far, my remarks have been concerned to query whether we have, indeed, been offered a conceivable candidate for 'a theory of meaning which would entail global anti-realism'[44]. Now I'd like to raise a more general query about the notion of warranted assertability, or, more particularly, that of assertability.[45] What is it to assert something? I take it that whatever account is given by the anti-realist had better not, on Young's view, appeal to any realist notions yet it is hard to see how this can be avoided. To assert 'snow is white' would, on the face of it, be naively considered to be understood as a claim about snow. It seems, that is object-linguistic. Yet on the global anti-realist's view it seems, rather, to be metalinguistic. On that view, the understanding of any sentence consists in a grasp of the coherence relations between it and other *sentences* to which speakers have assented. Somehow the world has been lost as the focus for assertion[46]. Similarly, one can wonder what the act of assent amounts to. If realist construals are to be avoided. then an account of the phrase 'assented to as true'[47] has to be analysed in terms of warranted assertability and the focus for assent is metalinguistic. Without any grounding of these sentences to the world (via. say, perception)[48] it's difficult to comprehend them as anything but empty symbol schemata, ones anything but understandable in anything but a formal way. Hence, perhaps, the tendencey for most anit-realists not be global in the scope of their theory.

Young is aware that he has not shown global anti-realism to be correct, he does claim, however, that, when based upon a coherentist account of warrant and a warranted assertability theory of meaning,

it 'is, at worst, a defensible position'[49]. I hope to have shown him to
have been too sanguine.

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NOTES

1.   for a recent, fairly comprehensive work see Harvey Siegel's Relativism Refuted
      (Dordrecht, D. Reidel, 1987).

2.   By Chris Swoyer, see his 'True for' in J. Meiland and M. Krausz, eds., *Relativism:
      Cognitive and Moral* (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1982) 84-108.
      An even more vulnerable looking thesis is ontological relativism: whether this is
      held to be merely the other side of the coin of truth realism or not depends on one's
      conception of ruth-a matter which is a concern of this paper.

3.   As will emerge, it is more than usually enjoined upon those thinking about these
      issues to be carefully explicit about what they take to be "truth-vehicles".

4.   Which of these one relativises truth to can make quite a difference to one's chances
      of making out a case for coherent relativism about truth. Taking there to be something
      like an analytic/synthetic distinction (*pace* quineans) and appealing to conceptual
      schemes (*pace* the neo-verificationist tendencies of Donald Davidson's 'On the
      very Idea of Conceptual Scheme' *Proceedings and Addresses of the American
      Philosophical Association*, 47. 1973/74, 5-20) as our relativisation relatum allows
      some sort to be made of truth relativism even within a correspondence/realist notion
      of truth. The idea is being pursued by me as a development of one of Jack Meiland's
      ideas (see his 'Concepts of Relative Truth'. *The Monist*, 60, 568-582). Failing to
      make a conceptual scheme/substantive theory distinction and trying to make sense
      of truth relativism within a correspondence conception of trut h is decidedly
      difficult,; see Steven Edwards' monograph *Relativism, Conceptual Schemes and
      Categorial Frameworks* (Aldershot, Avebury, 1990).

5.   For a sequenced dialogue on this see W. Newton-Smith, *The Rationality of Science*
      (Boston, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981) 34-37; Frank White, "On a Proposed
      Refutation of Relativism'. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 64. (1986). 331-
      334; Peter Davson-Galle, "Relativism about Truth", *Metascience*, 6, (1988). 54-
      56; Frank White. "Comments on Relativism about Truth". *Metascience*. 7, (1989).
      2-5; and Peter Davson-Galle, "Truth and White 'Lies'- a Frank Response".
      Metascience. 7. (1989). 6-7.

6.   Relatively Speaking: the Coherence of Anti-realist Relativism", *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 16, (1989), 503-510; "Global Anti-realism", *Philosophy & Phenomenological Research*, XLVII, (1987), 641-647; " Meaning & Metaphysical Realism", *Philosophy*, 63, (1988). 114-118; and "Relativism Revisited", *Indian Philosophical Quarterly*, XVII, (1990), 374-37 7 (respectively, I shall refer to these by 'R.S.' 'G.A.R.'. 'M.M.R.' & 'R.R.')

7.   G.A.R.. p. 647.

8.   Colin McGinn. "An A Priori Argument for Realism", *The Journal of Philosophy*, 76, (1979). 113-133.

9.   As a passing remark. Young slides from the correct claim that any reductionist thesis requires that at least one class be understood in a non-reductionist fashion to the not correct claim that any reductionist thesis requires that there is at least one class which is understood in a realist fashion (G.G.R. 643). I see no reason to rule out, *a priori* a non-realist account of the meanning of the "reducing" class(es) together with a reductionist account of the reduced sentences. One can adopt, for instance, a non-standard theory of meaning employing warranting conditions for the "reducing" class in much the way that Young suggests for all sentences. The point is not that reductionism entails realism about the "reducing" (class(es) but that it can't. entail anti-realism about that class.

10.   G.A.R.. 643.

11.   M.M.R.. 116.

12.   G.A.R.. 644. Such a presupposition was. it will be recalled. Young's objection to reductionist motivations for anti-realism (but see note 3).

13.   G.A. R.. 645.

14.   R.R.. 374 and R.S.. 504 I am not sure quite what counts as a community here but have allowed it to be a bit schizoid in that people who share meaning-determining bits of theory might not share truth-determining bits of theory. It seems to me that for present purposes the more important way to classify people into a community is in virtue of their shared meaning/understanding, not these shared substantive commitments.

15.   R.S. 505.

16.   R. S. 506.

17.   R.R. p. 373 and R.S.. pp. 503-505. Note that it is a correct theory, not the correct theory; hence the relativistic element of the Youngian thesis. Smith's article is " Young on the Coherence of Anti-Realist Relativism", *Indian Philosophical Quarterly*. 16, (1989), 61-65.

18.   R.R. 374.

19.   R.S.. 506.

20. R.R. 373, Mind you it seems clear from Young's remarks here and there that he *does* mean 'believe'. See, for instance, G.A.R., 645.

21. More strictly, I take in that meaning is not so much theory-relative as the-menaing-determining-*part*-of theory-relative.

22. See R.S., 507.

23. Though Newton-Smith's understanding of 'truth-conditions' is not Young's coherentist rendering.

24. R.S., 508.

25. R.S. *Ibid.*,

26. William Newton-Smith. *The Rationality of Science* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981.), 35.

27. R.R., 373.

28. I am not clear whether the notion of a community here is tied just to shared meanings or also to shared truths.

29. Or not all communities; see note 28.

30. R.S., 506.

31. See G.A.R. in particular, where Young distingushes his view from those of more cautious anti-realists, among whom he numbers "founding father" Michael Dummett.

32. R.S., 505.

33. R.S., 505. I have myself been at pains to point this out; see my "The Strong Programme and Reflexive Incoherence: *Metascience* 7, 2 (1989), 99-100.

34. The tenor of these remarks could be carried across to other aspects of the anti-realists' theory. The status of their remarks about language learning and sentence understanding, about the dependence of warrants on previously assented to sentences, about the link between truth and warrantedness is up for query yet Young's thesis rests on these claims. See R.S. 646 and 647.

35. I have, in the past, argued that the relativist about truth restrict her thesis to being one about object-linguistic claims and thus (as the thesis is meta-linguistic) avoid reflexive incoherence problems. See my 'Can Relativism About Truth Avoid Self-Refutation?', *Metaphilosophy* 22, Nos. 1 & 2, (1991), pp. 175-178. I have since resiled from this view, deeming the object/meta-language distinction unviable in this context; see may 'Weak Neo-Meilandian Relativism About Truth', unpublished.

36. R.R. 374.

37. At least for Young this meta-claim is true-; it might not be for some variety of relativist.

38. Recall R.R., 374.

39.   This was Young's example from the novel *Persuasion* see R.R. 374.

40.   R.R. 374.

41   Or, assuming for a moment that there's a distinction, perhaps for some strange cause like, for instance, being hypnotised to believe it (or a wider set of sentences including those of *Persuasion*).

42.   As we will see below, the use of 'true' might be problematic.

43.   G.A.R., 645.

44.   G.A.R., *Ibid.*,

45.   Compare what I take to be remarks in a similar spirit in Hilary Putnam's *Reason, Truth & History* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981), 124.

46.   I don't think that this is to be swept aside with an 'of course, I *said* that I was an anti-realist!'. It's of interest to note in this context that not all of those who construe themselves as anti-realists are as happy as Young to sever a firm tie between truth (and assertion) and reality. See, for instance, Michael Hand's paper, in part in commentary upon Young's M.M.R., 'Anti-realism and Holes in the World', *Philosophy* 65, 1990, 218-224.

47.   G.A.R. 645.

48.   Young discusses perception reports in G.A.R., 645.

49.   G.A.R., 647.

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