RELATIVISM AND ABSOLUTISM: HOW BOTH CAN BE RIGHT

WOUTER VAN HAAFTEN

ABSTRACT: This paper makes a small point concerning the contraposition of relativism and absolutism. Relativism need not be vulnerable to the self-refutation argument; as for internal consistency both positions can be equally right. They are asymmetric, however, in that according to the absolutist only one of the two positions can be right, whereas from the relativist’s viewpoint they can both be right.

Perhaps one reason why the dispute between relativists and absolutists is so persistent, is that both positions can be right. I want very briefly to show how, or in what sense, this may be so.

The relativist says: (r) Truth, moral rightness, beauty, etc. are relative to conceptual systems of persons or communities of persons. However, conceptual systems may vary and it will not always be possible to choose between them as better or worse because there is no independent criterion. Relativism does not exclude partial or even considerable overlap of differing conceptual systems. Nor does it rule out universal acceptance of the laws of logic or other basic principles, or preclude striving for the broadest possible agreement. Yet it implies that, even if exceptionally, a proposition p might be true relative to S and false relative to T (with S and T standing for conceptual systems that different persons or communities employ; which is not to say that the possible truth of a proposition is dependent on the beliefs these people hold at any given time).

This position is not acceptable to the absolutist. The absolutist says: there is only one truth, truth cannot be dependent on persons or their conceptual systems; p must be either true or false, it cannot simultaneously be true (or true relative to S) and false (relative to T). In brief, the absolutist denies r.

The conclusion seems inescapable: we have here two fundamentally opposite positions. The relativist holds r; the absolutist holds a = ~r. One of them must be wrong. However, the situation is slightly more complex, as I hope to show.

Since Plato the objection to relativism has been that it must claim truth for its own position and hence cannot avoid inconsistency (e.g.,
Siegel 1987). But why should this be the case, if one does not presuppose the absolutist's point of view? And would it not be quite consistent for the relativist not to do so? Surely, the relativist who claims that the truth of every proposition is relative but at the same time makes an exception for the proposition \( r \) expressing his relativism, is inconsistent. The situation is different, however, for the relativist who admits the relativity of his own position (cf. Meiland 1980).

The latter does not defend his position with less fervour and his reasons for it need be no weaker. He does not think that propositions can only be true in a reduced sense, nor does he believe them to be only partly (non-universally) applicable. The consistent relativist (\( R \)) claims that universal propositions can be fully true—albeit always true relative to some conceptual system. Secondly, he believes that this can be the case for \( r \) as well. Thus the relativist claims \( r \) to be true and universal in scope.

The absolutist (\( A \)) may now point to the following inconsistency. \( R \), he says, wants to hold:
1) \( r \) is true; therefore \( a (= \neg r) \) is false;
2) \( r \) is true; which implies that (relative to \( A \), for instance) \( a (= \neg r) \) can be true.

Therefore, \( R \) is bound to accept that \( r \) and \( \neg r \) can be true at the same time.

To this \( R \) may reply: That would be inconsistent, indeed, on absolutist presuppositions. According to the absolutist a proposition \( p \) is just true or false. The relativist, however, claims that \( p \) is only true relative to some conceptual system (abbreviated: true(S)) and therefore that \( P \) might be true(S) and false(T). This is in no way, however, to abandon the condition of consistency and the possibility of criticism in terms of inconsistency. Surely any person holding \( p \) and \( \neg p \) at the same time would be inconsistent and could be rightly criticised for that reason. But that does not exclude that \( p \) can be true relative to \( S \) and not to \( T \).

So the alleged inconsistency should, according to \( R \), be read as:
1) \( r \) is true (\( R \)); therefore \( a (= \neg r) \) is false(\( R \));
2) \( r \) is true(\( R \)); which encompasses the possibility that \( a (= \neg r) \) is true(\( A \)).

Neither (1), nor (2), nor (1) and (2) combined are inconsistent (on presupposition of \( r \)).

It is in this sense that \( R \) claims \( r \) to be true, and universal in scope. That means that \( R \) considers \( r \) to be applicable to \( A \) as well [cf.(2)], though admitting perhaps that he does not expect \( A \) to agree on this. However, the point is not whether \( A \) is willing to agree or not, but that \( A \) should come up with an argument against \( R \) without in fact repeating his own (\( A \)'s) presuppositions at another level. For then \( R \) can, at each (meta)level, maintain his claim (including with regard to \( A \)). To him, \( A \)'s tenacity seems to fit well into his picture and rather to confirm it.

© The Metaphilosophy Foundation and Blackwell Publishers Ltd. 1996.
As yet, whilst A can be right on his (absolutist) presuppositions, R can be equally right on his (relativistic) presuppositions. Insofar, both can be right.

However, this is ambiguous; surely either may be right but can they be right both? Here the answer is different for the two parties. Distinguishing between persons or their positions cum presuppositions (e.g., the absolutist, or absolutism) and the propositions they hold true (e.g., a), we may conclude that according to the absolutist only one of the two positions can be right; whereas on the relativist’s view, although a and r are contradictory propositions, the two positions are not quite opposed and can be right simultaneously.

Faculty of Social Sciences
University of Nijmegen
P.O. Box 9104
6500 HE NIJMEGEN
The Netherlands

References