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White

### Rorty and Epistemic Relativism

In *Realism With a Human Face* (hereafter RHF) Hilary Putnam accuses Richard Rorty of being a relativist, an accusation which Rorty denies. Rorty seeks to avoid the snares that a thorough-going relativism involves by christening himself an "ethnocentrism". However, I think that Rorty has not avoided the pitfalls of relativism, and after a brief explication of the debate between himself and Putnam, I will attempt to show that the view that Rorty commits himself to does not avoid the problems that plague the relativist.

In order to see why Rorty's point of view is problematic for Putnam it will first be necessary to show what exactly Putnam takes the problem with relativism to be. As early as 1981 Putnam explicated his view of the problem with relativism: The relativist must claim that justification (or truth or warrant or value) is (are) relative to a person (or culture). However,

Modern structuralists like Foucault write as if justification relative to a discourse is itself quite absolute--ie. not at all relative. But if statements of the form 'X is true (justified) relative to person P' are themselves true or false absolutely, then there is, after all, an absolute notion of truth (or of justification) (*Reason, Truth and History*, 121).

But, "A total relativist would have to say that whether or not X is true relative to P is itself relative. At this point our grasp on what the position even means breaks down" (121).

The above formulation by Putnam does, I think, capture something troubling about relativism. However, it seems a little imprecise. Specifically, what is it about relativism that

allows us to conclude that the relativist must claim that justification (or truth or value or warrant) is (are) relative to a person (or culture)? Further, there are many different topics about which one can claim to be a relativist, some of which no one would argue are improper to be relativist about (for instance the time: in Chicago it is 6pm, in London it is 6am). Certainly not all of these positions bring about the kind of paradox or inconsistency that Putnam says is a problem for the relativist". So we must be more specific about what Putnam thinks it is problematic to be relative about.

The problem with "Foucault and modern structuralists" in the above passage is that they take justification to be a certain way. Specifically, they want to hold that justification is "relative to a discourse" but also maintain that the fact that justification is discourse relative is something like an absolute fact. Because it deals with justification, let us call this kind of relativism epistemic relativism. This answers the question of what Putnam is arguing in the above passage it is problematic to be relativist about.

But what about the actual problem with relativism? What is it about the relativist that commits him or her to the paradox that Putnam points out above? Relativism, in order to maintain that it is relativism at all, must maintain that some thing (facts, truth, justification, value) is relative to some second thing (a person, a culture, a language, a conceptual scheme). In the case of epistemic relativism, justification is relative to either a conceptual scheme, a culture, a language or a person. In order to make clear the problems with this point of view, let me borrow a formulation of epistemic relativism and a formulation of the problem with relativism from Harvey Siegel:

For any knowledge-claim  $p$ ,  $p$  can be evaluated (assessed, established, etc.) only

according to (with reference to) one or another set of background principles and standards of evaluation  $s_1 \dots s_n$ ; and given a different set (or sets) of background principles and standards  $s'_1 \dots s'_n$  there is no neutral (that is, neutral with respect to the two (or more) alternative sets of principles and standards) way of choosing between the two (or more) alternative sets in evaluating  $p$  with respect to truth or rational justification.  $p$ 's truth and rational justifiability are relative to the standards used in evaluating  $p$ . (6)

This formulation Siegel entitles ER. But if ER is true then we can derive the following similar statement from it with regard to ER itself, since ER is a proposition and ER itself states that for any proposition it can be evaluated etc. . . . Thus we end up with the following formulation of ER:

ER can be evaluated (assessed, established, etc.) only according to (with reference to) one or another set of background principles and standards of evaluation  $s_1 \dots s_n$ ; and given a different set (or sets) of background principles and standards  $s'_1 \dots s'_n$  there is no neutral (that is, neutral with respect to the two (or more) alternative sets of principles and standards) way of choosing between the two (or more) alternative sets in evaluating ER with respect to truth or rational justification. ER's truth and rational justifiability are relative to the standards used in evaluating ER. (7)

Siegel names the formulation that results from the application of ER to itself ER'. The problem is that if ER is true then ER is "relative to alternative and equally legitimate sets of background principles" (7). But if this is true then whether someone is justified or warranted in holding ER is relative to the set of grounds or standards that they hold (8). But then it follows that if ER is

judged by some one, using her legitimate set of standards, to be false, then if ER is true, it is false (8). This problem seems to render ER incoherent and self refuting (8).

This argument against relativism makes clear, I think, the problem that Putnam was hinting at above. Specifically this argument shows that the epistemic relativist must take the justification of all statements, including the formulation of her own relativism, as relative to some standard, and that standard could legitimately rule out her relativism as not justified. But, then, according to the epistemic relativist the rejection of relativism would have to be true as well. As Putnam asks in *Reason Truth and History*, "if any point of view is as good as any other, then why isn't the point of view that relativism is false as good as any other?" (119).

However, the claim that relativism is self refuting is not the only thing that disturbs Putnam. Putnam also despises what he calls the "view from nowhere". Briefly, the view from nowhere is the attempt to claim to be able to stand outside of the position one occupies both cultural, historically and philosophically and look at what there is. "There is," he says, "no God's Eye point of view that we can know or usefully imagine; there are only the various points of view of actual persons reflecting various interests and purposes that their descriptions and theories subserve" (*Reason*, 50). More recently (in a passage cited by Rorty)

What I am saying, then, is that elements of what we call "language" or "mind" *penetrate so deeply into what we call "reality" that the very project of representing ourselves as being "mappers" of something "language independent" is fatally compromised from the very start. Like Relativism, but in a different way, Realism is an impossible attempt to*

view the world from Nowhere. (RHF, 28, Putnam's emphasis)<sup>1</sup>

The view from Nowhere that Putnam harps on here seems to be a problem that arises both from a realist's as well as from a relativist's point of view. Let us try now to get a little more clear about what Putnam means by "a view from Nowhere".

Putnam's concern here seems to be with the claim that, beyond our language and our schemes, in short beyond our methods of justifying beliefs or of ascribing truth, there is something we can have (or may not have) access to that makes our statements true or false. But why would this be a problem for the relativist? That this is a problem for realists (if it is a problem)<sup>2</sup> is obvious. However, this seems to be the very thesis that many epistemic relativist, along with their close cousins who are relativist about truth, seem to want to argue against. Let us turn again to Harvey Siegel for help.

If we are to have good reasons for holding ER, they must be reasons that are not "biased or non-neutral or arbitrary or idiosyncratic" (8). Presumably the reason for this is that if there were not such reasons then there would be no reason that anyone would need to feel compelled to hold them, and then relativism would lose its claim to be in any sense obligatory. If the view is not obligatory then, not only is there no reason to accept it, but just as in the argument

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<sup>1</sup>It may be tempting to think that Putnam himself suffers from relativism. After all he does seem to advocate abandoning the view that there is a mind or language independent reality. However consider the following the passage:

In this situation it is a temptation to say, "So we make the world," or "our language makes the world," or "our culture makes the world"; but this is just another form of the same mistake. If we succumb, once again we view the world--the only world we know-- as a product. One kind of philosopher views it as a product from a raw material: Unconceptualized Reality. The other views it as a creation ex nihilo. *But the world isn't a product. It's just the world.* (28 Putnam's emphasis)

If this view seems problematic (how can Putnam claim that there is nothing solid to ground our language, our beliefs etc. and still maintain that relativism isn't coherent?) you will have to refer to Putnam directly. My purposes here are not to defend Putnam, but to show that he is right in his attack of Rorty.

<sup>2</sup>Whether this actually is a problem or not is not the business of this paper.

presented earlier, if someone were to present grounds for denying it, the relativist must accept them as warranted. So, "if ER is rationally justifiable, there must be some non-relative, neutral . . . framework or ground from which we can make that judgement" (8). I take it, though, that Putnam is suspicious of "neutral" positions, and thinks that the relativist is trying to establish, from a "neutral" position that there is no neutral position.<sup>3</sup>

Beyond being part of Putnam's agenda to attack anyone with a view from Nowhere, this formulation, it should be obvious, results in a paradox as well. Epistemic relativism, it seems, requires a neutral point of view in order to establish that there is no neutral point of view, which seems inconsistent. Siegel writes "if ER is rationally justifiable, then it is false, for the rational defense of ER requires the sort of non-relativistic ground which ER itself denies" (8). Putnam echoes this sentiment in RHF. "Relativism," he says, "just as much as Realism, assumes that one can stand within one's language and outside it at the same time. In the case of Realism this is not an immediate contradiction . . . but in the case of Relativism it constitutes a self refutation" (23).

The problem with relativism, then, according to Putnam, is twofold. First, the relativist undercuts her own position. The claim that everything is relative (to a person or a culture or a conceptual scheme) is problematic because the relativist must either make her relativism an absolute claim (in which case it is not relativism) or else one can show the few is false by asserting that relative to her background relativism is false. The second problem is that Relativism claims to say something about the way that the world is apart from the way that we

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<sup>3</sup>Putnam thinks that he avoids the attacks he is leveling against Rorty because he thinks that there are better non-neutral positions, and his notion of what it is to be better is less relativistic than Rorty's. I am very suspicious of Putnam's reasoning here, but, again, this paper is meant to show that Rorty, not Putnam, is a Relativist.

view it. That is why it is a view from nowhere. But this problem is self refuting as well, in that relativism requires this so called "view from Nowhere" and yet tries to claim that there can be no such view.

Now that we have explicated what Putnam takes the problem with Relativism to be, we are ready to take a look at why it is that Putnam takes Rorty to be a relativist (of the cultural variety). As a matter of trying to get clear about the difference between his own view and Rorty's Putnam offers five principles that he takes to be true of warrant. The fifth of these reads:

V. Our norms and standards of *anything*--including warranted assertability--are capable of reform. There are better and worse norms and standards (RHF, 21).

Rorty's problem, according to Putnam, is his views on the second part--his construal of better and worse. Rorty construes better and worse "in a crucial place" as "that they come to seem clearly better than their predecessors" (cited in Putnam 23). Putnam takes this rejection as "a rejection, rather than a clarification, of the notion of "reforming" the ways we are doing and thinking invoked in my [Putnam's] fifth principle" (23). Putnam takes Rorty's attempted clarification as a rejection of his principle five for roughly this reason. If there is no more to "better" norms and standards than "coming to seem clearly better than their predecessors," then in the possible future world in which Nazi's take over, "dealing savagely with those terrible Jews, foreigners and communists" becomes what is better, while if "the forces of good" take over the opposite, presumably, will be the case. Better, then, is just a matter of where you stand, and so a relative matter.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>That Putnam has formulated this particular argument in terms of value relative notions should not fool the careful reader into thinking this argument is about moral relativism. The notion of seeming to be better is the crucial one in this passage, and that notion is surely epistemic. That is, what we are trying to clarify by a notion's seeming

Putnam does acknowledge that Rorty's views are more sophisticated and stronger than your average relativist (24). However, in the end he says, "I think, in short, that the attempt to say from a God's-Eye view there is no God's-Eye view is still there, under all that wrapping" (25).

Rorty, of course, is not willing to accept Putnam's interpretation of his point of view. In his response to Putnam in "Putnam and the Relativist Menace", Rorty tries to clarify his view so as to avoid Putnam's charges. The damning passage "come to seem clearly better than their predecessors he renders as "come to seem clearly better to *us* than to their predecessors" (453) where "us" turns out to be "language users whom we can recognize as better versions of ourselves" (454). He then glosses the "better" language users in this passage as "people who have come to hold different beliefs from ours by a process that we, *by our present notions* of the difference between rational persuasion and force, count as rational persuasion" (454, my emphasis). Better, then, on Rorty's analysis, means something that we in our present cultural/historical/ sociological situation would consider better when persuaded properly.

Rorty clearly thinks that this clarification should somehow show us that he has avoided Putnam's criticism. His reason for thinking this is, briefly, that his view seeks to "move everything over from epistemology and metaphysics to cultural politics, from claims about knowledge and appeals to self-evidence to suggestions about what we should try" (457). I am not sure why this is a solution to the problem raised by Putnam. I am not even sure why Rorty considers it to be such a solution. Suppose we do move everything over to cultural politics and

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better is not better values but better justification. Putnam is trying to clarify Rorty's notion of how claims (claims that just happen to be moral claims in this case) are considered better justified than others.

that we simply consider to be better what we at our best get convinced of in the future. It seems to me that the same relativism arises that Putnam used in his attack of Rorty in the first place.

Consider the following scenario: Let us consider ourselves generation  $G_0$ . We may, by Rorty's version of better, come to be persuaded by the succeeding generation  $G_1$ , that some doctrine or other that we subscribe to is false. However,  $G_1$  may be persuaded by  $G_2$  that the very doctrine originally in question is the way that we thought it was, rather than the way that they ( $G_1$ ) were persuaded. Which idea should be considered the "better" one? The idea that is defended furthest into the future? But that is the idea originally in question. To say that would be to claim that our idea was after all the right one. But we have been persuaded that it is not. Should it be the one that is our immediate successor? But our immediate successors were convinced that one was false. What, then, are we to take as the "better" idea by our present standards of persuasion? I do not think that Rorty can provide us with an easy answer to this question and if he cannot it is hard to see how he can avoid relativism since he will have to say that from our present point of view we may not or will certainly not be able to point to one or the other as better. If we cannot decide which is better from our point of view then I do not see how Rorty can handle this problem except to declare that we ( $G_0$ ) are right from our perspective, that  $G_1$  is right from  $G_1$ 's perspective and that  $G_2$  is right from  $G_2$ 's perspective. They each must appeal to their own norms and standards of warrant.

The problem that Rorty has raised for himself becomes clearer when we put this historical relativism into the ER formulation borrowed from Siegel above.

For any knowledge-claim  $p$ ,  $p$  can be assessed as better than some other knowledge claim  $p'$  only according to (with reference to) one or another set of background principles and

standards of evaluation that one or another generation currently holds,  $s_1 \dots s_n$ ; and given a another generation's set (or sets) of background principles and standards  $s'_1 \dots s'_n$  there is no neutral (that is, neutral with respect to the two (or more) generation's alternative sets of principles and standards) way of choosing between the two (or more) generation's alternative sets in evaluating  $p$  against  $p'$  with respect to truth or rational justification.  $p$ 's truth and rational justifiability are relative to one or another generation's standards for evaluating  $p$  over and against  $p'$ .

If this formulation is correct (call it RR) then a similar formulation to ER' can be set up in which the  $p$  in the above formulation is supplanted with RR itself to form RR'.

RR can be assessed as better than some other knowledge claim  $p'$  only according to (with reference to) one or another set of background principles and standards of evaluation that one or another generation currently holds,  $s_1 \dots s_n$ ; and given a another generation's set (or sets) of background principles and standards  $s'_1 \dots s'_n$  there is no neutral (that is, neutral with respect to the two (or more) generation's alternative sets of principles and standards) way of choosing between the two (or more) generation's alternative sets in evaluating RR against  $p'$  with respect to truth or rational justification. RR's truth and rational justifiability are relative to one or another generation's standards for evaluating RR over and against  $p'$ .

Then, just as the with the formulation above, we have a set of paradoxes. RR undercuts itself because there is no reason that the acceptance of RR itself should not be relative to some generation's norms and standards of rational acceptability. Further, the establishment of RR seems to require a non relative point of view from which to make the claim, as we saw above.

But again, that there is no such non relative point of view is the very claim that Rorty himself is trying to establish. So the paradoxes that the relativist falls into are not avoided by Rorty after all.

That we, from our current stance cannot see two generations into the future will not do as a response to the charge that Rorty is a relativist. We cannot see one generation into the future, yet Rorty is not uncomfortable suggesting hyperbolic clairvoyance as a metaphorical explanation of what we should consider better justified. Rorty, I take it, is making a point about the way our current notion of better and worse work. We apparently look at what we used to believe, think it not very warranted, and reject it. Presumably we will do the same thing in the future. But if we are to do the same thing in the future, and if there is no ideal conception of rational acceptability, then we must acknowledge the possibility that conflict about what will be considered "better" will be the result. But if that is the result, then, as we have seen, relativism follows.

Rorty will most probably claim that he has always claimed that we (us wet liberals (451)) must take our point of view as correct. We cannot get outside our conceptual scheme and look around. And so we cannot. What I have tried to show is that he is also committed to the claim that every other generation will be in the same position, and what, therefore they take as correct is what is *properly* considered correct for them. But this position is again subject to the charges of inconsistency made by Putnam above.

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