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INTERPRETATION AND ITS OBJECTS

Studies in the Philosophy of
Michael Krausz

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Seventeen

RELATIVISM AND THE LIMITS OF HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS

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1. Toward Krausz

Until recently relativism, like skepticism, was a handy whipping boy to nearly all realists, idealists and scientific philosophers. Among the writers who have recently made significant contributions to secure a philosophically respectable place for relativism, Michael Krausz deserves special mention. His works, authored and edited, have broadened and deepened our understanding of the different aspects of the relations among relativism, realism, constructivism, interpretation, and truth.¹ This is an extremely difficult area of philosophy because of the complexity of the issues involved and the competing and competent views on the issues and their interrelationships. Krausz has taken immense pains and shown admirable analytic acumen and ingenuity in assessing the views and arguments of others and in offering his own conclusions on the pro-relativistic ideas of interpretations and indicating their limits. His studies in different types of realism and their relation with constructivism have helped him to arrive at his own carefully worked out conclusion. Where his views and mine agree and where they differ will be clear from what follows.

Criticism or acceptance of relativism is not of much philosophical interest. Unless why you criticize or reject relativism is spelled out, the issue remains uninformative. Somewhat similarly, speaking in support of relativism without indicating its proclaimed reasons does not mean much either. Without detailing the kind of relativism that you propose to attack or defend if an attempt is undertaken to state the case for or against relativism in a very general way, that does not enlighten about the problematic or the thematic character of it. I do not intend to suggest that no general formulation of relativism is possible. Instead, the critic's uneasiness lies mainly in the abundance of general formulations. Unfortunately, most of those formulations of relativism are found to be too weak or indefinite or vague to be pointedly criticized or substantiated. Who will care to waste time and labor to rebut a weak global or all-encompassing relativism? What is the point in trying to achieve a pyrrhic victory against a weak opponent?

We learn from historical and contemporary philosophy of science that there have been and still are too many scientific theories addressed to the

same set of problems, physical, biological, psychological, or socio-logical. The issues of what Krausz calls singularist and multiplist interpretations are encountered at every level of epistemic inquiry, from the natural to the cultural, from the empirical to the transcendental. Every singular object, even at the physical level, has its multiple facets; but every multifaceted cultural object has its referential singularity and identity. Besides the levels explicitly mentioned as a matter of convention in epistemological discourse, many objects that are candidates for interpretation exist in other borderline levels. In fact, the gradualist tells us, within each of these levels we find several sub-levels of objects. Careful scrutiny shows that what is pre-analytically called object and the synthetic-epistemic act of objectification, though analytically distinguishable, cannot be epistemologically disentangled. Even the distinction between levels is partly a matter of construction. The emergence of disciplines such as biophysics, biochemistry, physiological psychology, and sociolinguistics makes the point evident. It may sound unbelievable today that alchemy and chemistry, astrology and astronomy were not demarcated for many centuries. Before the days of Antoine-Laurent Lavoisier (1743–1794), Humphry Davy (1778–1829), and Michael Faraday (1791–1867), even chemistry did not have the dignity of independent existence as a scientific discipline.

2. Finding and Fabricating or Fictionalizing Fact

To move from the metaphysical ways of discussing relativism to the pro-scientific approaches to relativism that are currently influential is instructive. Many writers, formerly committed to full-blooded realism marked by essentialism, have recently been coming round to “internal realism,” if not a cautious version of pragmatism. In this connection, the name that comes readily to my mind is Hilary Putnam. Another very insightful version of relativism is found in Nelson Goodman’s later works, such as *Ways of Worldmaking*. In spite of its distance from Goodman’s earlier works, such as *The Structure of Appearance*, their affinity and continuity are unmistakable to the discerning reader. His views and arguments purport to show, in brief, that nominalism and realism, mythic, scientific, and metaphysical worldviews are not necessarily antagonistic. In other words, the supposed unity of “the real world” and its multiple versions are not always incompatible. Intriguingly enough, neo-Kantians like Ernst Cassirer, naturalist-cum-phenomenalists like Goodman, and internal realists like Putnam are often found to sail in the same boat carrying the cargoes of different varieties of realism and relativism. The fact that Richard Rorty, who has been often accused of defending one of the most radical versions of relativism, never disowns his indebtedness to Putnam’s version of realism and the (Tarskian correspondence-mediated) version of objectivism of Donald Davidson, is even more intriguing.

“Fact,” “object,” “thing,” and other similar words are interesting and problematic. We often hear some utterances such as “scientists are concerned with hard facts.” What is left unsaid but clearly indicated is this: fiction, fictitious objects and things have no place in science. Those scientists and philosophers of science who believe in the primacy of theory are never tired of speaking of the theory-ladenness of all facts, scientific or artistic. In the arena of science two very extreme approaches, fact-fetishism and theory-intoxication, easily meet without entering into conflict. We might rightly affirm that fact is theory-laden and theory is fact-laden. Theories or hypotheses or fictions, like myths and metaphysics, are intended to relate and interpret facts and make them intelligible (and even repeatable in a way). Well-established hypotheses are said to be fact and are accorded the dignity of proven truth. In ordinary discourse fiction is given a low status. But in the legal discourse, for example, fiction has operational significance creating concrete rights. When, after the passage of a stipulated period of time, the ripening of *de facto* into *de jure* rights is explained in terms of one or another fiction, the practical importance of the latter becomes clear.

When we speak of ways of finding fact, we often remain unaware of how easily we interpret the concerned fact or facts. If interpretation is believed to be inherent in our fact-finding operations, denying that these operations are destined to fabricate the concerned facts in some way is difficult. The supposed distinction between finding facts and fabricating them, on scrutiny, is found to be untenable. This so-called faithful representation of fact in the human mind can hardly be free from the varying effects of fabrication, interpretation, and construction. We may safely say that physical fact, perceptual fact, and linguistic fact are various versions, variously interpreted versions, of the “same” identifiable facts.

The supposed gap between “the actual” and “the possible” may also be substantially narrowed down. The spatio-temporal segment of the world in which I am now actually situated was very much in the realm of possibility an hour before. “The possible” transcends in a way the “actual” but remains also traceably related to it. If we break or deny this relation, the world of possibility will unbelievably inflate and the entities, objects, and the like will propagate endlessly in an epistemologically unmanageable manner. The actualist’s position and the possibilist’s position do not differ in kind but only in degree of cognitive availability or in terms of relative transcendence. Also the specific identity of the cognizer is centrally relevant to the issue. The point has been argued by Goodman, among others, in many of his works.² Modal realists such as Saul Kripke also emphasize the non-mysterious close relation between the actual worlds and the possible ones.³ Philosophers of language such as Ludwig Wittgenstein, W. V. O. Quine, Goodman, and Davidson, have shown why the supposed distinction between “relations of ideas” and “matters of fact,” between “questions of language” and “questions of fact,” on

analysis, turn out to be thin, if not nonexistent. Excessive attention to natural science and little or no attention to fine arts have made many philosophers forgetful of the importance of ordinary language, personal communication, and roles of analogy and metaphor in all kinds of discourse, from mathematical and physical to poetic and musical. Most of us are unconscious of various and subtle ways that physical and even mathematical objects are filtered by our ordinary language.⁴ Many aspects of this important point have been brought to our notice, for example, by Wittgenstein.⁵

Whether relativism and realism, actualism and possibilism, and the comparable cognates are compatible or not depends much upon how we take and spell them out. Goodman takes pains to show that realism and relativism go together and are not incompatible with the idea of possible world. The "real world," to him, is without kinds or patterns in it. To the physicist it appears in one way. To the artist it does appear differently. Even different kinds of artists "represent" the world in different ways. Pressing them to tell us definitely which of these versions are "really true" is idle. Goodman thinks that

For the man-in-the street, most versions from science, art and perception depart in some ways from the familiar serviceable world . . . this world, indeed, is the one most often taken as real; for reality in a world, like realism in a picture, is largely a matter of habit. . . . [O]ur passion for *one* world is satisfied, at different times and for different purposes, in many different ways.⁶

These liberal and alternative versions of relativism are not necessarily antagonistic to the spirit of realism. This important point may be illustrated by referring to the writings of William James, Goodman himself, and Putnam who has traveled a long way from his early (pro-Kripkean) essentialism to the later pro-Jamesian pragmatism. For the proper understanding of a particular philosopher's version of the relation between realism and relativism we are required to know his changing identity and traditional (philosophically traditional) affiliation. Recognizing the limits of "fabrication" of facts, the bounds of interpretation, and the difference between a right interpretation and a wrong interpretation within a given discourse, is crucial. Goodman writes: "My outline of the facts concerning the fabrication of facts is of course itself a fabrication; but as I have cautioned more than once, recognition of multiple alternative world-versions betokens no policy of *laissez-faire*."⁷ Recognition of the limitations of versions are due to no unique concept of truth—correspondence, coherence, or pragmatism. For each one of these concepts has lent itself to numerous interpretations. This is clearly illustrated from the departure of Wittgenstein's later view on truth from Wittgenstein's early view on the subject, Popper's retreat from his early Tarskian commitment to corre-

spondence (as truth) to the notion of verisimilitude or truth-likeness, and Davidson's late leanings toward coherence, a marked departure from his early pro-Tarskian position.⁸ A comparable trend is evident in the later writings of Putnam.⁹ My reference to these writings is not intended to underrate their repeatedly professed commitment to realism or (its old but weaker ally) objectivism.

I emphasize: no grand project of a universal methodology or epistemology ensuring cognitive availability of unquestionable truth seems workable. In a way it summarizes the changing history of Euro-American epistemology during the second half of the twentieth century. If Immanuel Kant has brought down metaphysics from the height of heavens to the depth of the earth, from things-in-themselves to the metaphysic of experience, the strongly pro-scientific theorists of knowledge, in their self-critical and reflective mood, have been increasingly realizing the necessity of austere relativism, alternative versions of what is "really there," and unarrestable (but limited) multiplicity of interpretations. For example, in *The Many Faces of Realism*, Putnam rejects the dichotomies between "things-in-themselves" and "things-as-they appear" and between "truth-conditional semantics" and "assertibility-conditional semantics" and tells us that the division of the mundane reality into a "scientific image" and the "manifest image" is untenable. He rightly recognizes that our "real world" has in it sensible objects such as tables and chairs and theoretical objects such as quarks and gravitational fields. You can easily add music and painting to this-worldly population. In our description of the world, our interests and choices enter silently but in an unmistakable manner.¹⁰

Relativism is no longer a tolerated enemy but, surprisingly enough, a respected ally to many of us. Those who have followed Rorty's line of thought and reasoning since the 1970s have never been in doubt about the depth of his main thesis that scientific knowledge is not really going to discover a "true" and "objective reality," independent of mind and language. He has been painstakingly arguing that independently of our mind and language we cannot have a view of reality that is out there in space and time and available only to the privileged scientist and robust (epistemological) realist. In effect our ways of knowing the world, manifest or scientific, are unavoidably interwoven with our habits and actions and means of coping with the same. Thought, detached from practice, does not provide a reliable access to the world we live in. Our situatedness in the world, affiliation to this or that culture, and its web of beliefs invariably enter into our world-view. Rorty's understanding of objectivity, relativism, and truth, though admittedly anti-representationist, is not definitely hostile to the spirit of realism. If we remember that several varieties of representationist and anti-representationist realism exist, showing that Rorty's ethnocentric or (what I call) anthropological objectivism is compatible with sober realism is not difficult.¹¹ The proclaimed affinity of his epistemological

ideas with those of Davidson and Putnam deserve to be taken and studied seriously.

Fortunately, the blind and unstudied anti-relativism of yesteryear has, of late, become so weak and empty that the robust anti-relativists have to invent a straw man called “metaphysical realist” or “uncritical defender of things-in-themselves.” Since finding a practicing philosopher who defends “metaphysical realism” is difficult, some imaginary Rortys, Kuhns, and Feyerabends are singled out for unstudied denunciation and summary rejection. When a serious philosopher of science and erudite scholar such as Paul Feyerabend writes *Against Method* or speaks of “anything goes,” he should be studied in his own proclaimed context, for he is rightly against making scientific method or epistemology a fetish against serious self-critical examination that is the avowed aim of philosophy. In fact Feyerabend, initially influenced by Karl Popper, has been trying to point out that science has no special and magic method of its own in terms of which a sharp line of demarcation between science and non-science could be drawn. It was a frontal attack against Popper’s doctrine of falsifiability as a criterion of demarcation between the so-called science and so-called metaphysics. He rightly observes: “[I]f we want to understand nature, if we master our physical surroundings, then we must use *all* ideas, *all* methods, and not just a small selection of them.”¹² Neither Feyerabend, nor Imre Lakatos is anti-scientific or subjectivist in their temper and approach. Their strong criticism against methodological and ideological tyranny of a particular variety earned for them the highly questionable tag of bad relativism. Both of them have persuasively argued in favor of their chosen versions of realism, objectivism and relativism.¹³ Sadly, F. A. von Hayek’s early warning against the counter-revolutionary role of science or “abuse of reason” went largely unstudied and unheeded.¹⁴

3. Return to Krausz

It will be perhaps advisable to turn our attention to the sort of relativism defended by Krausz and some other like-minded writers. Remarkably free from traditional varieties of realism and idealism, perceptively responsive to different cultures and disciplines, and studiously committed to hermeneutics, Krausz has worked out his critical version of relativism. His central thesis as it appears to me is that before we try to discuss and criticize relativism we must situate the discourse within a field of identifiable objects—scientific, cultural, aesthetic, or religious. To speak of relativism *in abstracto* is likely to mislead us to the extremes of indefensible singularism and unjustifiable multiplism. Singularism and multiplism may each be right in their legitimate areas. When the limits of those areas are transgressed, wittingly or unwittingly, relativism turns out to be misleading, if not totally directionless and pointless.

While in the light of many-valued logic Krausz may grudgingly tolerate incongruence between different interpretations of an identifiably same object, he insists on the condition of their non-exclusivity.¹⁵ On this issue he is likely to remind us of the Jain Logic of *anekāntavāda*, many-sidedness of truth, referred to before. The cautious variety of relativism he defends is compatible with realism and constructivism and takes due note of Putnam’s internal realism and its Popperian variant espoused by Chhanda Gupta. A streak of neo-Kantian metaphysics appears to be necessary in his scheme of thought, particularly in the context of explication of cultural objects.¹⁶ A relatively stronger streak of realism also seems to be acceptable to him on the ground that, unless we metaphysically assume that our natural environment has law-like structures and substructures hidden or discoverable within it, our scientific investigation as a serious undertaking will appear without even its *prima facie* justification. To say that science has its own aim or even to recognize the definite aim of a particular practicing scientist does not entail that that aim will be necessarily realizable or that (hypothetically) aimed-at structures or substructures are essential furniture or constitute unalterable features of nature. That the supposedly same structures of nature lend themselves to different, not necessarily alternative in all respects, constructions and interpretations is evident from the history of revolutionary and normal science. Nature is not always obliging and does not fulfill many of our aims, including the scientist’s ones. And that accounts for, among other things, endless modification or refutation of scientific theories. It has to be recognized that nature always nests within its (hitherto) known structures many unknown but (in principle) knowable substructures, which are not necessarily replicative or isomorphic. The working scientist experiences an element of surprise during the course of an investigation. In other words, nature is not marked by uniformity or by limited variety. The man in the street and the professional scientist, notwithstanding his or her long experience, are open to negative experience or evidence.

Fallibilism is a part of singularist and also of multiplist relativism. This important point has not apparently received due attention from Krausz. Though I am raising the question in the context of natural sciences, the question is relevant to the context of cultural studies as well. The bridge that can, and in fact, continuously does connect natural sciences with such other sciences as anthropology, history, law, and even literature is language, the language of interpretation.

The classical scientists such as Isaac Newton, taking cues from Francis Bacon, wrongly concluded that the sure way to scientific truth lies in disengagement of the knowing human mind from its study of the text of nature. The book of nature, contrary to Bacon’s belief, is closed (not open), and for “reading” or disclosing its hidden truths, to purge the human mind of all the so-called idols is not easy. Thinkers such as Wilhelm Dilthey have critically tried

to point out the mistake of this proclaimed detached or purely objective study of nature. They wanted to point out that the true interpretation of nature and that of culture are both required to be drawn out of the matrix of the lived life. Phenomenologists such as Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger tried to highlight the importance of history and language to broaden and deepen the horizon of the lifeworld referred to by Dilthey, trying to make it play the role of connecting cultural sciences with natural sciences.¹⁷

This large and ambitious project could not be successful without assigning a central role to the language of interpretation. The words "language" and "interpretation" are to be taken in right earnest. Neither interpretation nor language knows any terminal point of its journey of ceaseless disclosure of truth. No text, scientific, cultural, legal, or religious, can unilaterally foreclose its future and multiple interpretability. This truth-seeking force is inherent in the very nature of language, be it Sanskrit or Greek or their various modern descendants. Language is endlessly (and yet questionably) expressive and disclosive. This quality accounts for the perpetual open-endedness and many-sidedness of possible interpretations of a text.

Central to this issue is the presence of the human being situated within language and using it to express his or her understanding of nature and culture as texts presented by the creative (and occasionally destructive) course of history. Human beings are in effect simultaneously consumer and producer of history and language. By assimilating history they create history and by using language they create language. Questionability, fallibility, and incompleteness of human interpretation of nature and culture are no indication of interpretation's estrangement from truth. On the contrary, the very fact that every text, natural or cultural, lends itself to many interpretations, singular or multiple, shows its ability to enlarge the truth and inexhaustible many-sidedness. Our pressing practical or pragmatic inclinations lead us to concentrate our attention only on the few selective views of these possible interpretations, depending on our time, station, and aim in life.

While I focus my attention on the enlarging and many-sided characteristics of truth and allow our aim of life and pragmatic considerations to have a very important say on the issue of relativism, several other relativists, in addition to Krausz, highlight the necessity of limiting the bounds of different versions of relativism. In the process they are required to introduce concepts, including singularism and multiplism, constructivism and realism, ascription and description and their cognates, which narrow down their widely supposed differences. The achievement of Krausz lies particularly in pointing out finely graded varieties of singularism, multiplism, realism, and constructivism.

Much of the logical space for these fine differentiations has been secured by his notion of singularism as "the view that which is interpreted should always answer to one and only one ideally admissible interpretation" and that of multiplism as "the view that which is interpreted need not always

answer to one and only one fully congruent ideally admissible interpretation." The singularist position is apparently weakened and made unduly vulnerable by this restrictive definition. But the insertion of the "ideally admissible" condition, a rear-guard action, cancels much of the initially suggested restriction put on "singularism." Every singular object lends itself to many, but not an infinite number of, ideally admissible interpretations. To make the case of singular object logically plausible its ascertainable identity has to be secured. In his bid to detach his version of singularism and multiplism from the contest between realism and (even) constructivism, Krausz is obliged to fall back upon some kind of metaphysics. But the very notion of the contest between singularism and multiplism makes no sense in his scheme of thought unless they are addressed to common objects. The establishment of common identity of the object is sought in terms of some properties of familial resemblance.

From a careful perusal of Krausz's impressive survey of literature on the subject, referring pointedly to the views of Rom Harré (external constructivism), Joseph Margolis (internal constructivism), Paul Thom, Bernard Harrison and Patricia Hanna (on practice-independent materia), Putnam and Chhanda Gupta (descriptive language-relative notions of dependence and independence) you get the clear impression that he is unwilling to tie his boat of singular objective interpretation to any one of these cited versions of relativism. Yet his relativistic sympathy objectively gives him an appreciative proximity to each one of these views. At times the said proximity amounts to affinity.

Krausz's strong orientation toward multiplism is evident from (a) his rejection of David Norton's insistence that cultural objects answer singularist condition, (b) the proclaimed detachability of singularism and multiplism from the contest between realism and constructivism, and (c) special emphasis on the relation between ideals of interpretation of pertinent objects with ideals of life, paths, and objects. Even if you bear his caveats and refinements of the central notions deployed to demarcate the hermeneutic domain of singularism from that of multiplism and to delimit their myriad scopes, you are likely to end up with the conclusion that he associates singularism primarily with the scientific discourse and pluralism with the humanistic discourse. I can well imagine that Krausz, passionately attached to the ideal of endless refinement, may not accept my reading of his liberal and rational theory of interpretation.

Krausz's perceptive program to bring singularism and multiplism, constructivism, and realism and other such paired views of interpretation, indicating simultaneously their range and limits of admissibility, reminds me of what I have called elsewhere anthropological rationalism detached from essentialism and a God's-eye-view of the World. That the changing acts of human interpretations are deeply rooted in an "inner necessity" or, to vary the term, anthropological rationality, is clearly admitted by Krausz. This changing of

inner necessity accounts for and accords well with the changing values and projects of our life.

NOTES

1. Michael Krausz, ed., *Relativism: Interpretation and Confrontation* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1989); Michael Krausz, *Rightness and Reasons: Interpretation in Cultural Practices* (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993); Michael Krausz, *Limits of Rightness* (LR) (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).
2. Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1978), pp. 93–97.
3. Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1980); see also David Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 92–93.
4. D. P. Chattopadhyaya, "Models and Metaphors in Arts, Science and Mathematics" in *Mind, Language and Necessity*, eds. P. K. Sen and D. P. Chattopadhyaya (Delhi: Macmillan, 1981).
5. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (London: Basil Blackwell, 1967), pp. 49–53.
6. Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, p. 20.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 107.
8. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe. New York: Macmillan, 1953), pp. 135, 136, 223, 226; Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), 2.1, 2.12, 2.15, 2.1511, 2.1514; Karl R. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), pp. 232 ff, 391 ff, and 399–404; Donald Davidson, "The Folly of Trying to Define Truth" *Realism: Responses and Reactions*, ed. D. P. Chattopadhyaya (New Delhi: Indian Council of Philosophical Research, 2000), pp. 170–186; Hilary Putnam, *Representation and Reality* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), chapters 4, 7.
9. Hilary Putnam, *The Many Faces of Realism* (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1987), pp. 34–38.
10. D. P. Chattopadhyaya, *Individuals and Worlds: Essays in Anthropological Rationalism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1976); D. P. Chattopadhyaya, *Knowledge Freedom and Language* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1989).
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12. Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method* (London: New Left Books (NLB), 1975), p. 306.
13. P. K. Feyerabend, *Realism, Rationalism and Scientific Method: Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Imre Lakatos, *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes: Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).
14. F. A. von Hayek, *The Counter-Revolution of Science: Or Abuse of Reason* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1952).
15. Krausz, *Limits of Rightness*, p. 149.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 150.

17. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), pp. 210 ff, 297 ff, 411 ff.

EXTENSIONS AND APPLICATIONS