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Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* and Relativism

Abstract: One important strand in the contemporary debate over epistemological relativism focuses on the question whether, and to what extent, Wittgenstein in *On Certainty* (1969) leaned towards this position. This paper is a contribution to this strand. My discussion has four parts. I shall begin by outlining my interpretation of Wittgensteinian certainties. Subsequently I shall briefly introduce some central arguments for and against attributing epistemic relativism to *On Certainty*. This will be followed by a sketch of the cluster of ideas that – on my analysis – define important versions of the doctrine in question. And finally I shall give my own interpretation of *On Certainty* in relation to epistemic relativism.

1 *On Certainty* – A Brief Reminder

On Certainty describes as its central interest “cases in which I rightly say I cannot be making a mistake [...]” And the passage continues: “I can enumerate various typical cases, but not give any common characteristic.” (§ 674) In this section I shall offer a classification of these “various typical cases”. On my count these cases fall into five *epistemic categories*. These categories differ in how certainties relate to evidence, justification and knowledge.

Category I consists of beliefs for which we have evidence that is both overwhelming and (at least in good part) dialectically mute. There are eight types of such cases:

- (I.1) Perceptual/proprioceptive beliefs about one's own body (e.g. “[...] here is a hand.” § 1)
- (I.2) Perceptual beliefs about close familiar medium-size objects (e.g. “I believe there is an armchair over there.” § 193)
- (I.3) Introspective beliefs (e.g. “I am in pain.” § 178)
- (I.4) Memory beliefs of salient features of one's autobiography (e.g. “I have lived in this room for weeks past.” § 416)
- (I.5) Beliefs based on simple deductive reasoning; e.g. calculations (e.g. “ $12 \times 12 = 144$ ” § 43)
- (I.6) Simple inductive beliefs, e.g. about familiar simple objects (“After putting a book in a drawer, I assume it is there [...]” § 134)
- (I.7) Testimonial beliefs based on parents' or textbook testimony (“[...] textbooks of experimental physics [...] I trust them.” § 600)
- (I.8) Semantic beliefs (e.g. “My name is L.W.” § 425)

The epistemic status of category I cases – (I.1) to (I.8) – can be summed up as follows. The confidence with which we hold these beliefs is “empirically based” (Wright 2004, p. 36). I have, for instance, a lifelong experience of being called “Martin Kusch”. I also have a lengthy experience of the flat I live in. And I have a protracted experience of me being regarded as calculating reliably and reasoning competently both deductively and inductively. And yet, even though our evidence is overwhelming in these cases, much of it is not accessible. Most of it lies outside our present point of view; most of it is forgotten. And thus it cannot be disclosed and shared. This is the reason why I call it “dialectically mute”: we cannot marshal it against someone who denies our certainties of this category.

Category II is the class of mathematical propositions that have “officially been given the stamp of incontestability” (§ 655). As Wittgenstein explains at greater length in the *Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics*, mathematical propositions are based on the overwhelming empirical evidence of experiments: for example, the experiment showing that *two balls and two balls balances four balls*. We turn such initially empirical propositions into mathematical propositions by immunizing them against empirical refutation (Wittgenstein 1976, p. 98).

Category III cases are fundamental empirical-scientific beliefs (e.g. “The earth is round.” § 291; “Water boils at 100 °C.” § 293). Here too we have very strong and tractable evidence for the beliefs. And again we take the strength of the evidence as a reason to go further and immunize the beliefs. Other than in the case of mathematical propositions however, we do so not “once and for all” but only “for the time being”. In other words, our readiness to give up one of these beliefs is greater than with respect to *Category II*. Note that Wittgenstein is willing to say that certainties in *Category III* can be known:

291. We know that the earth is round. We have definitively ascertained that it is round. We shall stick to this opinion, unless our whole way of seeing nature changes.

Category IV embodies beliefs that constitute what we might call “domains of knowledge”. I mean certainties like “[...] the earth has existed for many years past” (§ 411), or “[...] the earth exists” (§ 209). These beliefs do not fit the model of “beliefs supported by strong empirical evidence transformed into certainties via immunization”. *Category IV* beliefs are beyond empirical confirmation. Or, put differently, only by presupposing them can we show them to be true.

Finally, *Category V* consists of fundamental religious beliefs, like “Jesus only had a human mother.” (§ 239) As Wittgenstein emphasises in the *Lectures on Religious Belief* of 1939: “Reasons [for religious beliefs] look entirely different from normal reasons. They are, in a way, quite inconclusive.” (Wittgenstein 1966,

p. 56; cf. Kusch 2011) There are reasons and evidence in this realm too, but they are of a different kind from the evidence in the other categories.

2 For and against epistemic relativism in *On Certainty*

The debate over the question whether *On Certainty* leans towards epistemic relativism is not new. And thus there already exist a number of arguments pro and contra. I now shall try to give a brief summary of these arguments. I begin with the “pro” case and shall focus on three authors, Paul Boghossian, Anthony Grayling and Rudolf Haller. All three base their argument on specific passages. Grayling and Haller cite the following paragraphs in evidence:

- 65. When language-games change, then there is a change in concepts, and with the concepts the meanings of words change.
- 95. The propositions describing this world-picture might be part of a kind of mythology.
- 99. And the bank of the river consists partly of hard rock, subject to no alteration or only to an imperceptible one, partly of sand, which now in one place now in another gets washed away, or deposited.
- 166. The difficulty is to realize the groundlessness of our believing.
- 256. On the other hand a language game does change with time.
- 336. But what men consider reasonable or unreasonable changes.

§§§ 65, 99, 256, and 336 all emphasize the occurrence of fundamental change: in language-games, concepts, word meaning, and rationality. This for Grayling is “classically strong relativism” since it “constitutes a claim that the framework within which claims to knowledge and challenges of doubt equally make sense is such that its change can reverse what counted as either” (2001, p. 308). §§§ 94, 95, and 166 in turn raise the question “what if the background – e.g. your picture of the world – [were] different?” (Haller 1995, p. 229) Does not Wittgenstein imply that there is nothing that can be said about such a scenario? At least nothing evaluative? It appears that “we remain without any ground for the decision between conflicting judgements based on different world pictures” (Haller 1995, p. 230).

Boghossian suggests that it is first and foremost paragraphs §§§ 609–612 that express a commitment to epistemic relativism (2006, p. 107):

- 609. Suppose we met people who [...] instead of the physicist [...] consult an oracle. [...] – If we call this ‘wrong’ aren’t we using our language-game as a base from which to combat theirs?

610. Are we right or wrong to combat it? Of course there are all sorts of slogans which will be used to support our proceedings.
611. Where two principles clash that cannot be reconciled with one another, then each man declares the other a fool and heretic.
612. I said I would ‘combat’ the other man,—but wouldn’t I give him reasons? Certainly; but [...] at the end of reasons comes persuasion. (Think what happens when missionaries convert natives.)

Boghossian’s take can be supported by the following considerations. § 609 suggests that our criticism of the tribe’s use of an oracle is based on the biased background of our own language-game. § 609 also hints that our negative response invariably has an unduly aggressive character: we are not just stating our view, we are “fighting” (*bekämpfen*) their central beliefs. § 610 leaves it open whether our fight is justified or not. Indeed, the “of course” (*freilich*) even raises the prospect that our attack may be supported by nothing else than “all sorts of slogans”. § 611 might be taken to say that there are no worldview- or system-independent considerations in virtue of which one knowledge system – our or the tribe’s – can be said to be more correct than any other, and that name-calling is the only option. And § 612 seems to capitalize on the limits of reasoning across cultural boundaries. The members of the tribe cannot be rationally convinced, they can only be persuaded or converted.

Authors opting for “contra” also often invoke specific passages in *On Certainty* to make their case. First, Michael Williams argues that Wittgenstein opposes relativism in § 286 of *On Certainty* (Williams 2007, p. 108):

286. We all believe that it isn’t possible to get to the moon; but there might be people who believe that that is possible and that it sometimes happens. We say: these people do not know a lot that we know. And, let them be never so sure of their belief – they are wrong and we know it.

If we compare our system of knowledge with theirs then theirs is evidently the poorer one by far.

Second, Williams also finds Wittgenstein opposing relativism in § 108 where it is claimed that we “should feel ourselves intellectually very distant from someone who said” that “it isn’t possible to get to the moon; but there might be people who believe that it is possible and that is sometimes happens” (Williams 2007, p. 108).

Third, Georg-Henrik von Wright (1982) believes that Wittgenstein rejects, or at least limits, relativism in § 92:

92. [...] Remember that one is sometimes convinced of the correctness of a view [here a world-view; MK] by its simplicity or symmetry, i.e., these are what induce one to go over to this point of view.

This passage seems to treat simplicity and symmetry as values that are valid across worldviews.

Fourth, a number of interpreters hold that Wittgenstein's talk of "persuasion" or "conversion" does not call for a relativistic rendering. These passages (§§§ 92, 612) are no more than reminders that the tribesmen need to learn a lot of physics. Even though, as a matter of fact, our scientific considerations are not recognized by the tribesmen, the latter *should* accept the former (Putnam 1992, p. 176; M. Williams 2007, p. 108).

The fifth argument insists that it is the very way in which Wittgenstein ties meaning to specific language-games that blocks the route to relativism. In order for the members of two cultures to disagree, they must be able to grasp the same thought or conceptual content. After all, relativism is often tied to the idea of "faultless disagreement". But for there to be a disagreement, there has to be a common content to disagree over. For instance, for you and me to disagree (faultlessly) over the taste of rhubarb, we must give conflicting answers to the question 'does rhubarb taste good?' As long as we are within the same culture, there is no problem. Alas, the situation changes once we talk about different cultures. As the second anti-relativistic argument has it, Wittgenstein's thinking on languages and language-games simply does not allow for the identity of conceptual content across cultures. And hence there is no space for cultural relativism (Dilman 2004, p. 176).

Sixth, epistemic relativists assume that there can be, and perhaps even are, fundamentally different epistemic systems or practices. But a number of interpreters of Wittgenstein deny that he allows for the possibility of such fundamental differences. This line goes back to Bernard Williams (1981) and Jonathan Lear (1984). More recently, Annalisa Coliva (2010a, p. 201; 2010b, p. 20) and Duncan Pritchard (2009) have claimed that at least some certainties have to be universal, and that disagreements between cultures can always be rationally resolved on that shared basis. And thus there is no space for epistemic relativism.

3 What is epistemic relativism?

In order to adjudicate the debate over epistemic relativism in *On Certainty* we need a more precise rendering of what this "ism" amounts to. In this section I propose such a rendering. I have arrived at this account by collecting definitions and characterisations of relativism from both friends and foes of the view, in-

cluding Barry Barnes and David Bloor (1982), Paul Boghossian (2006), Gilbert Harman (Harman and Thomson 1996), Gideon Rosen (2001), Frederick. F. Schmitt (2007), Bernard Williams (1981), and Michael Williams (2007). Wittgenstein's texts were not consulted. My aim was to have an independent and stable standard against which to measure Wittgenstein's position. The characterisation could of course be developed at much greater length than I have space for here.

(1) *Dependence*: A belief has an epistemic status (as epistemically justified or unjustified) only relative to an epistemic system or practice (=SP). (Cf. Williams 2007, p. 94).

I write “epistemic system or practice” (subsequently “SP”) in order to indicate that *Dependence* is compatible with both a “generalist” and “particularist” understanding of epistemology. *Dependence* also allows for a further choice regarding SPs. In saying that a belief has an epistemic status (as justified or unjustified) only relative to an SP, the relativist might refer to either the SP of the relevant believer, or to the SP of the attributor or evaluator. (Cf. White 2007; Williams 2007; Boghossian 2006, p. 72).

(2) *Plurality*: There are, have been, or could be, more than one such epistemic system or practice.

Given *Plurality*, relativism is compatible with the idea that our current SP is without an existing alternative. Moreover, *Plurality* permits the relativist to be highly selective in choosing those SPs with respect to which relativism applies. She might for example restrict her relativistic thesis to just two SPs. For instance, one can be a relativist about science and religion, considering each an SP in the sense of *Dependence*.

(3) *Exclusiveness*: SPs are exclusive of one another. This can take two forms:

(a) *Question-Centered Exclusiveness*: There are sets of yes/no questions to which SPs give opposite answers.

(b) *Practice-Centered Exclusiveness*: There are no yes/no questions to which SPs give opposite answers since their concepts and concerns are too different. SPs exclude each other in that the consequences of one SP include such actions or behaviors as are incompatible with the actions and behaviors that are consequences of other SPs. Users or members of one SP are not able to fully understand the actions and behaviors common in other SPs. (Williams 1981; 1985)

Exclusiveness tries to capture the sense in which – under a relativistic conception of their relationship – SPs have to conflict. This idea is in tension with the further assumption, made by some authors, that relativism concerns incommensurable SPs (here such incommensurability involves differences in categories that rule out an identity of propositional content across these SPs). The option of *Practice-Centered Exclusiveness* covers this eventuality. Two SPs can be compared, and can conflict, when they lead to, or require, incompatible forms of action and behavior in an

at least roughly specifiable area of human affairs. The requirement that the area of human affairs be specifiable safeguards that there is a certain degree of comparability. And the demand that the forms of action and behavior involved are incompatible, makes sure that the condition of conflict is met.

(4) *Notional Confrontation*: It is not possible for a group G holding an epistemic system or practice SP_1 , to go over to an epistemic system or practice SP_2 on the basis of a rational comparison between SP_1 and SP_2 . But G might be converted to SP_2 without losing its hold on reality. (B. Williams 1981, 1985)

A “notional” confrontation differs from a “real” confrontation; in the case of the latter a rationally motivated ‘switching’ is possible. A conversion is not an altogether irrational event. Being converted to a cause is not the same as being self-deceived, brainwashed or drugged. There is no assumption that a conversion is a phenomenon of psychological or social pathology. This idea is captured by the phrase “without losing its hold on reality” (Williams 1981, p. 139).

(5) *Symmetry*: Epistemic systems and practices must not be ranked.

Symmetry can take a number of different forms that are worth distinguishing.

(a) *Methodological Symmetry*: All SP s are on a par vis-à-vis social-scientific investigations.

The best-known version of *Methodological Symmetry* is perhaps the “Symmetry” or “Equivalence Postulate” of the “Strong Programme” in the “Sociology of Scientific Knowledge”: “... all beliefs are on a par with one another with respect to the causes of their credibility” (Barnes and Bloor 1982, p. 23). I generalize this “postulate” in order to detach it from the requirement that explanations must be causal.

(b) *Non-Neutrality*: There is no neutral way of evaluating different SP s.

Non-Neutrality is the main consideration usually invoked in defense of *Symmetry*. It does not preclude the possibility that some SP s agree on the standards by which their overall success should be judged. What *Non-Neutrality* denies is that such local agreement justifies the hope for a global or universal agreement.

(c) *Equality*: All SP s are equally correct.

Most characterizations of relativism – by friends and foes alike – take *Equality* to be the natural consequence of *Non-Neutrality* and thus the best way to spell out *Symmetry*. But *Equality* makes a stronger claim than *Non-Neutrality*. This becomes easy to appreciate once we remember the typical challenge to *Equality*: what is the point of view from which *Equality* is asserted? On the face of it, *Equality* appears to presuppose a neutral point of view from which we can somehow see that all SP s are equally correct. And this very claim jars with *Non-Neutrality*.

(d) *Non-Appraisal*: For a reflective person the question of appraisal of (at least some other) SP s does not arise.

Non-Appraisal seems to avoid the problems of *Equality*, while capturing the important core of *Non-Neutrality*. It is motivated by the thought of “intellectual

distance”: the idea that a reflective person holding one *SP* might come to the conclusion that her own “vocabulary of appraisal” simply does not get a proper grip on the judgments and actions of another *SP*. It is not that this vocabulary could not possibly be applied at all – it is rather that such application seems forced, artificial and contrived (Williams 1981, pp. 141–142).

Dependence, Plurality, Exclusiveness, Notional Confrontation and *Symmetry* are (in some version or other) essential features for relativism. The remaining four elements are not essential, though they are its very frequent, almost regular, bed-fellows. They are: *Contingency, Underdetermination, Groundlessness* and *Tolerance*.

(6) *Contingency*: Which epistemic system or practice a group *G* or individual finds itself holding is a question of historical contingency.

If the history of *G* had been different – for instance, if *G* had encountered certain other groups at certain points, or if *G* had lacked the means to engage in certain types of costly investigations – *G*’s current *SP* would be substantially, perhaps even radically, different from what it is now. The contingency might reach deep: even those beliefs that one ordinarily deems ‘self-evident’ or ‘completely certain’ can be discovered to be contingent. Becoming aware of the contingency of one’s views in this sense can, but need not, undermine the strength of one’s conviction (Rosen 2001).

(7) *Groundlessness*: There can be no non-circular epistemic justification of one’s own epistemic system or practice.

Groundlessness is rarely formulated as a distinct ingredient of epistemic relativism. But it is sometimes invoked in arguments meant to establish the truth of relativism. For instance, it is occasionally put forward that epistemic relativism results from the recognition that all *SPs* are on a par insofar as none of them is able to justify itself without moving in an (illegitimate) circle (cf. Williams 2007, p. 95). (Needless to say, it might well be possible to advocate a form of relativism that permits such circularity.)

(8) *Underdetermination*: Epistemic systems and practices are not determined by facts of nature.

Underdetermination is not to be confused with the thesis that the world has no causal impact on *SPs* at all. The relativist is not – or need not – be committed to the view that *SPs* are completely arbitrary. His point is rather that (many) more than one *SP* is compatible with the given causal impact of the world.

(9) *Tolerance*: Epistemic systems or practices other than one’s own, must be tolerated.

4 Relativistic themes in *On Certainty*

Having introduced above my interpretation of Wittgensteinian certainties, the arguments *pro* and *contra* a relativistic rendering of *On Certainty*, and my characterization of epistemic relativism, I can at last turn to my own assessment of whether Wittgenstein in his last notebooks sympathizes with this position. I take it to be a shortcoming of previous discussions of the issue, that they build a reading of *On Certainty* on the basis of just a few select passages. This jars with the fact that the book collects material for a “well-ordered synopsis” (*übersichtliche Darstellung*) (Wittgenstein 2001, § 122) of our – primarily Wittgenstein’s own – responses to people who deny, or who seem to deny, one or more of our certainties in different circumstances. The point of this well-ordered synopsis is to emphasise the variety of, and patterns in, our responses to such denials. Some of our responses are relativistic, others are not. It is easy to see that, if I am right about this, then it must be a mistake to count the book as a whole as either relativistic or anti-relativistic.

There are about thirty scenarios in *On Certainty* in which someone denies, or seems to deny, a certainty. Each of these requires a more detailed discussion. I offer such details in a book in progress. Here I have to confine myself to a brief summary of some of my central results. In order to do this most economically, I need to introduce the idea of varying cultural distance between Wittgenstein and the certainty-denying people he imagines encountering. The coarse-grained categorisation of distance Wittgenstein seems to work with can be captured in Figure 1.

The centre of the concentric circles is occupied by Wittgenstein himself. In the following rings around him, at increasing distance, are friends (e.g. G.E. Moore) in his own culture, strangers in his own culture, and children. The remaining rings are people outside of Wittgenstein’s culture. Ring **a** is for members of other cultures that Wittgenstein is willing to treat as *virtual members* of his own culture. The outmost ring **c** is for members of other cultures that are too distant to be counted as virtual members of Wittgenstein’s own culture, and that nevertheless are too intelligent to be dismissed. They are not properly appraisable. Finally, there are members of other cultures that have an ambiguous status (Ring **b**). Our interest is with the person in the centre. How does he or she respond to people at varying social-cultural distances that seem to deny what are certainties of various types for the him or her?

I will now give examples of Wittgenstein’s own responses. When a friend – e.g. Moore – straightforwardly denies a certainty then Wittgenstein is inclined to regard him as “demented” or “insane”.

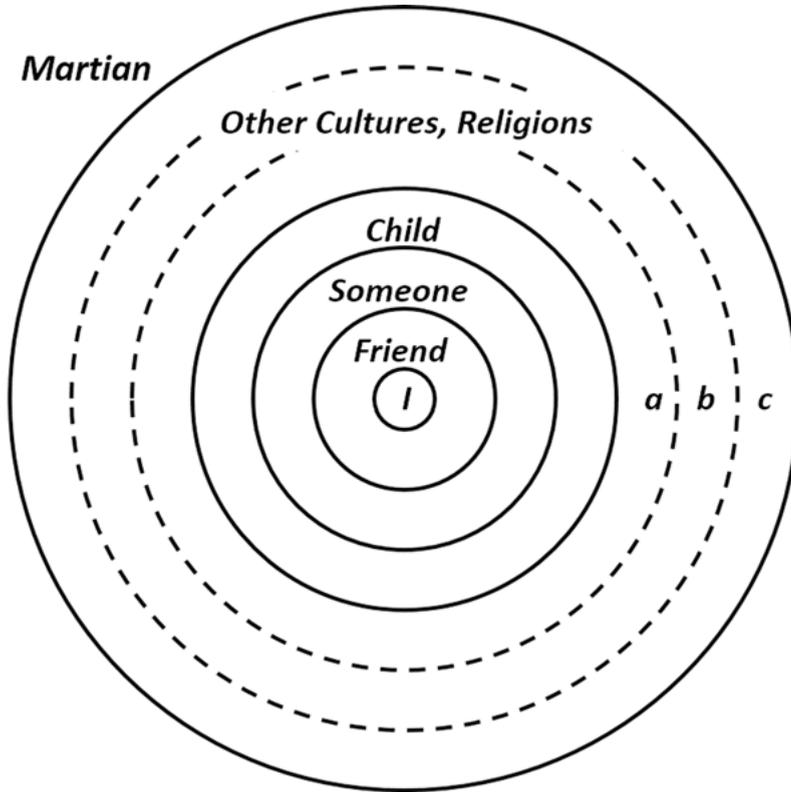


Figure 1

71. If my friend were to imagine one day that he had been living for a long time past in such and such a place, etc. etc. [where I know he has not lived; MK], I should not call this a *mis-take*, but rather a mental disturbance, perhaps a transient one.
155. [...] If Moore were to pronounce the opposite of those propositions which he declares certain, we should not just not share his opinion: we should regard him as demented.

Wittgenstein treats other adult members of his own culture similarly to how he treats friends.

217. If someone supposed that *all* our calculations were uncertain and that we could rely on none of them [...] perhaps we would say he was crazy.
257. If someone said to me that he doubted whether he had a body I should take him to be a half-wit. [...]

Children receive a more charitable treatment. In their case – at least regarding some categories of certainties – Wittgenstein is willing to offer arguments, explanations, criticism, and education.

310. A pupil and a teacher. The pupil will not let anything be explained to him, for he continually interrupts with doubts, for instance as to the existence of things, the meaning of words, etc. The teacher says “Stop interrupting me and do as I tell you. So far your doubts don’t make sense at all”.
322. What if the pupil refused to believe that this mountain had been there beyond human memory?

We should say that he had no *grounds* for this suspicion.

Moving further outwards in the system of concentric circles gives me an occasion to revisit some of the key paragraphs cited as evidence by advocates and opponents of relativistic readings of *On Certainty*.

I agree with Michael Williams that § 286 shows little inclination towards relativism. Wittgenstein clearly thinks that sometimes we are willing – or have no choice but – to dismiss member of other cultures as ignorant and as lacking in knowledge. Thus the tribesmen who in 1950 insist that someone has been to the Moon – and who thereby deny one of our fundamental empirical-scientific beliefs – are “people who do not know a lot that we know”.

Note however that the situation changes in a context in which the tribesmen’s statement does not deny one of our scientific certainties. These are contexts in which the statement belongs to the domains of religion or magic. Thus § 92 considers a king who has been told since childhood that “the earth has only existed ... since his own birth.” Wittgenstein likens the king’s belief to magical beliefs about one’s ability to make rain. This suggests to Elisabeth Anscombe (1976) that the king of § 92 is best thought of as a religious leader such as the Dalai Lama. Wittgenstein imagines Moore trying to convince the king of Moore’s certainty that the earth has existed since long before our birth. And he goes on:

92. [...] I do not say that Moore could not convert the king to his view, but it would be a conversion of a special kind; the king would be brought to look at the world in a different way.

Remember that one is sometimes convinced of the *correctness* of a view by its *simplicity* or *symmetry*, i.e., these are what induce one to go over to this point of view. One then simply says something like: “*That’s* how it must be.”

What is striking here is the absence of any “they are wrong and we know it” (§ 286). It is also noteworthy that “simplicity” and “symmetry” are not introduced as universal principles adjudicating between systems of belief. They

“sometimes” help to convince us, sometimes they do not. That makes it doubtful whether § 92 is an argument against relativism, as von Wright assumes.

This is confirmed by another passage in which someone like “the Dalai Lama” is at issue again:

238. I might therefore interrogate someone who said that the earth did not exist before his birth, in order to find out which of my convictions he was at odds with. And then it *might* be that he was contradicting my fundamental attitudes, and if that were how it was, I should have to put up with it.

To “put up with it” is to accept that our categories of evaluation do not get a proper grip on this system or practice. Our response is thus one of “Symmetry as Non-appraisal”, in line with Practice-centred Exclusiveness and Notional Confrontation.

Interestingly enough, having convinced himself that this is indeed the proper response to certain disagreements in the realm of magic and religion, Wittgenstein then goes on to draw an analogy between the disagreements between believers and unbelievers on the one hand, and our response to past periods with their different conceptions of the reasonable and the unreasonable, on the other hand:

336. But what men consider reasonable or unreasonable alters. At certain periods men find reasonable what at other periods they found unreasonable. And vice versa.
But is there no objective character here?
Very intelligent and well-educated people believe in the story of creation in the Bible, while others hold it as proven false, and the grounds of the latter are well known to the former.

Wittgenstein here seems to suggest that “Symmetry as Non-appraisal” might have application not just in our encounters with certain forms of religion and magic, but also in other areas, for instance in our relationship to past forms of science.

Recall that Michael Williams also cites § 108 as a piece of evidence against relativism in *On Certainty*. This is the section where Wittgenstein considers someone who claims to have been to the moon, but who cannot tell us how he managed to get there. Wittgenstein comments: “We should feel ourselves intellectually very distant from them.” I am unconvinced that this comment expresses opposition to relativism. The relativist too can feel “intellectually very distant” from someone who denies one of his certainties. Indeed, in light of the above, we could read the “we should feel ourselves intellectually very distant from them” as an expression of Symmetry as Non-appraisal rather than as a dismissal of relativism. We are dealing with a response based on unfamiliar principles of reasoning and we do not know how to evaluate the response or these principles.

This leaves the longish consideration stretching from § 608 until § 612. I am with Boghossian and others who find strong relativistic sentiments expressed in these paragraphs. I cannot see the strengths of Putnam's and Williams's suggestion according to which Wittgenstein means to insist that the tribesmen need to learn our science. If that is the upshot of these paragraphs then why didn't Wittgenstein say so explicitly? At the same time, I am willing to grant that these five sections do not all point one way: there is a dialogue going on here. One of the voices calls the tribesmen "primitive" for consulting oracles (§ 609) and declares itself willing to "combat" these men (§§§ 609–610). And yet, the conversation terminates in the thought that we can do no better than "persuade" (rather than *convince*) the natives. And this "persuasion" is compared to religious conversion (§ 612).

I also need to briefly comment on the two more general arguments against attributing relativism to *On Certainty*. One was that Wittgenstein cannot be advocating relativism since he denies identity of propositional content across language games (and thus cultures). I have three brief replies. First, it seems to me historically inaccurate to restrict relativism to the idea of a disagreement between two cultures (contexts, epistemic or moral systems) over one and the same propositional content. Many self-proclaimed relativists of the past were relativists in a wider sense that includes Practice-centred Exclusiveness. Second, in *On Certainty* Wittgenstein never emphasises that, say, "the earth has existed since long before my birth" expresses different propositions for him, or Moore and the king (or the Dalai Lama). And third, Wittgenstein is generally not comfortable with dilemmas of the form: either two sentences express the *same* proposition or they express *altogether different* ones. His general thought style in the *Philosophical Investigations* and *On Certainty* is to emphasise degrees and continuities rather than sharp boundaries.

Finally consider the argument that there is no space for relativism since we cannot make sense of alternative ways of "being minded", or of a culture that shares none of our certainties. I shall not here rerun Barry Stroud's (1984) familiar arguments against Bernard Williams (1971/1981). I therefore confine myself to a comment on Coliva and Pritchard. I agree with the idea that we would be unable to understand a culture that shared none of our certainties. But I do not see why this idea blocks anything but the most absurdly radical form of relativism. Relativist anthropologists, sociologists or philosophers have never denied that there may be, or indeed are, some contingent universals. But they have denied that these contingent universals suffice to determine which other certainties we ought to adopt. Coliva and Pritchard (as well as Boghossian 2006) assume that provided only that *some* certainties are shared, disagreements over other certainties cannot permanently persist amongst people who are willing to argue rationally. But why should this be so? We can agree that the earth exists

or that $2+2=4$. But why would agreement on these certainties help us negotiate our different certainties in the religious domain?

Details aside, what kind and strength of relativism is discernible in *On Certainty*? The most important lesson of the above is, I take it, that Wittgenstein is not trying to defend or develop a global or comprehensive form of epistemic relativism. Instead, he is trying to sensitive us to the variety of our responses in the variety of cases in which our certainties are, or seem to be, denied by others. Sometimes our response is dismissal. Sometimes our response is education. But there is also a space for epistemic relativism of a form in which Practice-centred Exclusiveness, Notional Confrontation and Symmetry as Non-appraisal loom large. Wittgenstein seems to think that this form of epistemic relativism is at least permissible when encountering disagreements at the borderline between current science on the one hand, and magic or religion, or fundamentally different conceptions of rationality, on the other hand.

To give this form of relativism a name, I propose calling it a “relativism of distance” – a term introduced by Bernard Williams in a different context (1981). Williams emphasizes two central elements in this type of relativism. First, the confrontation with the other culture is merely “notional”. That is to say, going over to the other side is not a real or “live” option for oneself. One cannot imagine adopting the view of the other side without making an endless number of changes to one’s system of beliefs or values. And second, one’s own “vocabulary of appraisal” seems out of place: “[...] for a reflective person the question of appraisal does not genuinely arise [...] in purely notional confrontation.” (1981, pp. 141–142) Take once more an encounter with a Dalai Lama who denies that the world has existed since long before his birth. This qualifies as a notional confrontation for me since to adopt his attitude towards the existence of the world would involve a complete reordering of what for me are now real options. It is hard for me to imagine what kind of argument could possibly incline me to accept this option. Moreover, my vocabulary of appraisal seems inappropriate in this encounter. I feel too distant to assess the Dalai Lama’s beliefs, and thus I have no real choice but to “put up” with his views.

5 Epistemic contingency and groundlessness

In the last section it emerged that versions of Dependence, Pluralism, Exclusiveness, Notional Confrontation, Symmetry, and Tolerance can all be found as elements of Wittgenstein’s relativism of distance. But I have not yet made reference to Contingency, Groundlessness and Underdetermination, and their relationship to the other elements of Wittgenstein’s relativism. In this section I turn to this task.

Note, first of all, that Underdetermination, Contingency and Groundlessness are central throughout Wittgenstein's writings from the 1930s onwards. Here are some striking paragraphs from *On Certainty*. §§§ 131 and 512 express Underdetermination, §§§ 94, 107, 166, and 336 Contingency and Groundlessness:

- 131. No, experience is not the ground of our game of judging. Nor is its outstanding success.
- 512. Isn't the question this: "What if you had to change your opinion even on these most fundamental things?" And to that the answer seems to me to be: "You don't *have* to change it. That is just what their being 'fundamental' is."
- 94. [...] my *Weltbild* [...] is the inherited background [...]
- 107. Isn't this [i. e. our commitments to certainties; MK] altogether like the way one can instruct a child to believe in a God, or that none exists, and it will accordingly be able to produce apparently telling grounds for the one or the other?
- 166. The difficulty is to realize the groundlessness of our believing.
- 336. But what men consider reasonable or unreasonable changes.

What role do these paragraphs and thus Underdetermination, Contingency and Groundlessness play in Wittgenstein's relativism? *On Certainty* does not say much about these connections but it seems plausible to suggest something like the following consideration.

The question is how we are affected by the realization that our epistemic system or practice is contingent, groundless and underdetermined: our common-sense certainties would have been different if history had been different; they are not justifiable as a whole; and they are not fixed by the way the world is. The discussion over the past few sections shows that Wittgenstein's answer to this question is not uniform. The effects of the realization of Contingency, Groundlessness and Underdetermination are different in different domains.

In the realm of science, it seems, the realization in question does not lead to relativism or skepticism. For instance, the thought that, had our upbringing or our circumstances been different, we would not now take it for granted that water boils at about 100C°, or that humans did not visit the moon before 1969, does nothing to weaken our readiness to believe both of these propositions. Nor does an encounter with another culture – past or present – a culture that seems to deny these certainties, lead us to think that these certainties are true-for-us (or justifiable-for-us) but false-for-them (or unjustifiable-for-them). Our natural instinctive response – the response we find ourselves compelled to give – is to credit ourselves with the *epistemic luck* that derives from having been exposed to the right kind of education needed for learning what it takes to appreciate the truth of modern science and its preconditions.

The effects of realizing that our religious (un-)believing is groundless, contingent and underdetermined are different. An atheist who recognizes that her

unbelief is groundless, contingent and underdetermined does not act irrationally if she draws the conclusion that the attitude of Non-Appraisal is a permissible intellectual response towards religious thought. This response will be particularly natural if, first, the atheist has every reason not to doubt the intellectual abilities of the believers, and second, if she feels that the way of seeing the world of the believers is not, or not fully, accessible to her. This is Wittgenstein's response in *Lectures on Religious Belief* and it also looms large in *On Certainty*.

It thus seems plausible to say that recognizing the force of *Contingency*, *Groundlessness* and *Underdetermination*, regarding our epistemic system or practice, leads Wittgenstein to a kind of relativism with respect to religion and magic. But Wittgenstein is not tempted by a relativism that extends to natural science and competing ways of explaining natural events. With respect to these areas he accepts at most a form of methodological or heuristic relativism: not to appraise, and to treat as equally correct, might be the best way of identifying what is specific about such practices.

This is still not quite the full story, however. Over the past three paragraphs I have explained that for Wittgenstein we somehow *cannot help* taking an anti-relativistic stance in the case of natural science, but that we are able to choose the option of non-appraisal in the case of a confrontation with religion or magic. The idea is that ultimately our “nature” – social and natural – will not allow for relativism when it comes to questions to do with empirical investigation of natural phenomena. Putting the point in this way ought to sound familiar. It recalls Sir Peter Strawson's one-time explanation of Wittgenstein's allegedly Humean argument against epistemic skepticism:

According to Hume the naturalist, skeptical doubts are not to be met by argument. They are simply to be neglected [...]. They are to be neglected because they are *idle*; powerless against the force of nature, of our naturally implanted disposition to belief. (1985, p. 13)

[...] In spite of the greater complication of Wittgenstein's position, we can, I think, at least as far as the general skeptical questions are concerned, discern a profound community between him and Hume. (1985, p. 19)

I am not here concerned with the question whether Strawson's interpretation of Wittgenstein's anti-skeptical argument is correct. I am rather interested in the criticism that has sometimes been levelled against this proposal. I mean the criticism according to which Strawson's idea in fact “concedes the sceptic's theoretical invulnerability” (M. Williams 1988, p. 416; cf. M. Williams 1986; Sosa 1998). By insisting that the sceptic can be defeated only on the practical ground of our de-facto inability to live skepticism, Strawson concedes that the sceptic wins the theoretical argument. As far as rational arguments go, skepticism stands undefeated.

The issue for us is not skepticism, but relativism. But the parallel should be clear. There is nothing but our (social) nature that stands between us and the sceptic (says Strawson). There is nothing but our (social) nature that stands between us and a relativistic substantive attitude towards natural science and its competitors. There is no non-circular rational argument in favor of our attitude; there is only “something animal” (§ 359), “instinct” (§ 475), “the favor of Nature” (§ 505), and “our life” (§ 559). Relativism is not defeated by a theoretical-rational argument.

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