

tional relativist ultimately makes any possibility replaceable by another: instead of an irreducible singularity, she produces a common and exchangeable singularity, she founds universal equivalence, which allows her to say that anything goes, in a certain sense.

Thus the relational relativist is unable to fulfil her ethical promise: it is precisely in the name of singularity that she destroys it. And this is, I think, the weakness of relativism, its counter-productive character: pretending to respect the singularity of everyone, it assimilates everyone to anyone. It absolutizes the relation and makes the terms of the relation replaceable. The relativist remains the same, regardless of the position she faces; and she loses what she claims to make us gain: the recognition of the uniqueness of each thing.

I believe that the most effective way to challenge relativism is to separate equality and equivalence, to think that what is equal is not equivalent, so that equality is never achieved by relation. One has to think that the singularity of a thing, that which makes it what it is, is certainly not its relation with other things; on the contrary, one thing is something quite apart from its relation with other things. When this is something, nothing else is. There is always only one thing at a time. As the thing is what can be neither more nor less, equality is achieved in solitude: things are never equal, they are equal because each is only the exclusion of others. When things are equal, they are not together: they are absolutely not equivalent, since we can not compare them and, a fortiori, we cannot substitute one for the other.

Equality is distributive and exclusive; equivalence is collective and common. Relativism, which is a realism of relations, treats its entities as if they were equal and therefore equivalent. Instead, I argue in *Form and Object* that everything is equal in the precise sense that anything is something, and there is no order or relation of things, so that nothing is comparable. Each entity has its own luck. Everything is equal, nothing is equivalent: this is the only magic formula that enables one to avoid a relativism that threatens both anti-realism and realism.

Interview with Lee Braver

1) The words “realism” and “anti-realism” are ancient words, almost as old as the history of Western philosophy itself. Yet these are empty concepts if they are not contextualized: one has to specify the classes of objects to which these words refer. So, can you explain on what basis you use different approaches depending on the class of objects under consideration?

Yes, they are somewhat tricky terms which have meant different things at different times. In my first book, *A Thing of This World: A History of Continental Anti-Realism* (Northwestern University Press, 2007), I constructed a matrix of six ideas, derived largely from analytic philosophers,

to capture the various aspects of realism. These were: mind-independence, correspondence theory of truth, commitment to a single description of reality, truth bivalence, the subject's passive copying of reality in knowing it, and the unchanging structure of the subject's mind. Anti-realism consists in the denial of some sub-set of these. I then plotted a number of continental figures onto this matrix to see which ideas each took up and how they adapted them. This provided a fine-grained analysis of each thinker's position that plotted how they related to each other with some precision.

I think this approach is important because, while the independence of reality from the mind is perhaps the central idea of realism, many other notions naturally accrue to it. Anti-realism is similarly complex, for one may reject some of these theses but accept others, or alter them significantly.

Another way to specify the movement is, as you note, by denoting particular subject matters one is realist or anti-realist about. One might, for example, be a realist about the past but an anti-realist about math if one thinks that the past exists independently of us whereas math is just a set of practices we have created that doesn't track a separate realm of entities. Traditionally, most continental philosophers have been global anti-realists in my opinion, meaning that they have not made this kind of limited application; analytic philosophers are more prone to do so.

2) Relativism has often been treated as an extreme and necessary outcome of antirealism. Is that so? And, if not, what is the difference between relativism and antirealism?

Realism generally prevents relativism. If the good is determined by a set of objects or properties that don't change, then values cannot differ. Of course this solution leads to problems of its own. For instance, what does it mean to say that there is a *thing* that is goodness? How can an object be a value? Doesn't this conflate ought and is? Wouldn't such objects be what Mackie calls "metaphysically queer?" Also, there's no guarantee that these external anchors of value cannot change and if they do, then a realist ethics would be relativist as good and bad would change with them.

Furthermore, there is the problem of connecting such abstract, transcendent objects to daily life. Human actions are good by participating in or corresponding to the Good on this theory, but this participation or instantiation muddies and compromises the purity of the Good in itself. If it must be integrated, necessarily partially and imperfectly, into behaviour, then interpretation enters: one must figure out how the transcendent Good applies to one's present situation and, since this cannot be done perfectly, it opens the backdoor to relativism. There are many ways to approximate the Good, none of which may be the clear winner.

Ironically, it is the very separation from us, which is supposed to ensure its objectivity, that lets in relativism. It's like with stereos. They strive for fidelity, but to what? The only way to hear music is in specific situations through particular equipment, each of which affects the sound. There is no music-in-itself, at least none that we can access; we can only hear music as played through particular equipment in specific places. Hence, music can sound better and worse, but not right or wrong. These qualities cannot get purchase on the various instantiations of music.

3) Relativism is particularly hard to refute in ethics. What can be the consequences of adopting a realist perspective, from this point of view?

Plato would be an excellent example of an ethical realist: good things and actions are good by virtue of the Forms, which exist entirely independently of us. This move confers objectivity onto ethical judgments and prevents relativism since the Good never changes.

To be an anti-realist about ethics, on the other hand, is to claim that there is no set of objects or properties external to us and independent of our judgments and practices that determines right and wrong answers about what is right and wrong. Goodness, on this view, depends upon us.

Now, relativism follows from anti-realism if we can legitimately vary in our evaluative

practices. For instance, I think that Nietzsche is a value anti-realist—"Whatever has *value* in our world now does not have value in itself, according to its nature—nature is always value-less, but has been *given* value at some time, as a present—and it was *we* who gave and bestowed it" (*Gay Science* §301)—and he is also an ethical relativist, at least most of the time, because we who value are constantly changing—"we ourselves keep growing, keep changing, we shed our old bark, we shed our skins every spring" (*ibid.* §371). Since values come from us and we change, values change, hence what is good will differ depending on various factors, in particular the psychological make-up of the valuer. Kant, on the other hand, is able to preserve a universal ethics by keeping all reason the same, hence the importance of the 6th thesis of my matrix: the unchanging subject. (Just to confuse matters, there is a reading of Nietzsche according to which he bases values on life which has some unchanging characteristics, making ethics non-relativistic. Deleuze and Heidegger give versions of this reading).

Therefore, relativism is not a necessary outcome of anti-realism; it depends on other facets of one's commitments. This is why we must recognize the nuances of the topic.

4) Why is it that new realism is essentially continental? Is it true that, as Quentin Meillassoux put it, "in analytic philosophy there is so much realism that they can't be amazed by the capacity of realism"?

And, if it is true, what distinguishes analytic realism from continental realism?

It's not true, as is sometimes stated, that analytic philosophy simply is realist whereas continental philosophy is anti-realist (this is not what Meillassoux is saying here). There have been many quite prominent anti-realists in analytic philosophy: Putnam in his middle period, Goodman, Dummett, later Wittgenstein on some readings (including mine), Davidson on some readings. However, realism is far more prevalent in analytic philosophy, to the point of being the default position, I think. Continental philosophy, in my opinion, has been largely anti-realist, which does indeed make realism more exotic for continental thinkers rather than the humdrum self-evident position it holds for many analytics.

Analytic philosophy inherited, primarily from Russell and Moore, a strong sense of common sense. They are the ones holding onto plain, simple truths unlike those wacky continentals who cultivate the absurd. In Russell's day that position was held primarily by Hegel and the British Idealists, but others have held it since then—Heidegger and Derrida perhaps most prominently. Continental philosophers have, I think, drawn more surprising and counter-intuitive implications from realism whereas analytic thinkers often use it as a bulwark to defend more common sense ideas. This has led some, such as Searle, to portray the division as one between those committed to truth, justice, and civilization versus those

who want to tear down everything good and righteous in this world.

5) What is, in your opinion, the (possible or yet-to-come) relationship between speculative realism and aesthetics, understood both as a theory of perception – à la Baumgarten – and as a philosophy of art?

Well, speculative realism is committed to the existence of a reality wholly independent of us. This does not commit one to its unintelligibility à la Kant, but it does commit one to the *possibility* that it operates according to rules that we cannot fathom, that simply don't fit into human-shaped heads. This is called "non-epistemic truth" in analytic philosophy—the idea is that truth has nothing to do with our epistemic practices, i.e., what we find intelligible; it is denied by people like Rorty and Dummett. Now if this is a genuine possibility then we have to ask how we can approach or describe this unknowable, insensible world. I believe, and am currently exploring the idea in what I am calling "transgressive realism," that art may be better at intimating the unintelligible than science or philosophy. Heidegger, for example, in his later work, was very interested in what surpasses our ability to grasp, and he frequently says that assertions are worse at indicating it than poetry.
