

Reconciling Relativism and Cultural Realism

Joseph MARGOLIS

I

I cannot see the point to theorizing about the nature of artworks without reflecting on the common and variable attributes of cultural phenomena in general; and I cannot see the point of theorizing about the latter without considering the similarities and differences between nature and culture. When, therefore, I advocate admitting the advantages of a relativistic logic in the context of interpreting artworks, I do so with an eye to its advantage in the world at large. For example, I feel quite sure that Thomas Kuhn, who, in my opinion, introduced the single most promising fresh intuition into English-language philosophy of science that the last half-century has seen, would have been well served if he had only brought his reading of the realism of the sciences into accord with a frank constructivism (that is, a constructivist form of realism, not an abandonment of realism) *and* had brought that constructivism into accord with a relativistic logic (or something very close to it). Instead, Kuhn faltered badly. His opponents realized that he could not find his way to what was needed (to what he himself needed if his theory was to survive); and, under an entirely appropriate (but distinctly misguided) questioning, Kuhn's opponents persuaded themselves to ignore thereafter Kuhn's extraordinary prescience. Unfortunately, Kuhn fell back exhausted to a form of platonism that betrayed his own work.¹⁾

I draw a number of pointed warnings from this example. First of all, constructivism is *not* (or need not be) an abandonment of realism. Rather, I believe, there can be no viable realisms that are not also constructivisms; no other strategy (the realisms Kuhn opposed, for instance) can escape incoherence and unacceptable paradox. This is as true of the natural world as it is of the cultural. Secondly, constructivism is *not* as such (that is, does not entail) any form of relativism at all; on the contrary, if it has any validity, it constrains relativism's opponents as much as it does the relativists. And, thirdly, the defense of relativism—as with the defense of such very different matters as the theory of universals or of realism or a would-be analysis of knowledge, is hardly precluded from being judged “true” (in whatever sense these other sorts of theory may be true): surely a theory of the probabilistic nature of the laws of nature is not obliged to present itself as probabilistic in the same sense. Quite simply put, a relativistic logic is entirely compatible with a bivalent logic, so long as the judgments governed by each are suitably segregated on grounds of relevance so that formal paradoxes may be avoided. The denial of that scruple might well be tagged a form of the pathetic fallacy.

1) See Thomas S. Kuhn, “Afterwords,” in Paul Horwich (ed.), *World Changes: Thomas Kuhn and the Nature of Science* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993); also, Joseph Margolis, “The Meaning of Thomas Kuhn's ‘Different Worlds’,” in K. Govroglu *et al.* (eds.), *Science, Mind and Art* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1995).

These seem to be very reasonable doctrines, but they are all strenuously opposed in the philosophical literature—not of course restricted in any way to the artworld. I think it impossible, however, to get clear about any large questions in philosophy without getting clear about what we should pertinently understand by “realism” and “truth.” Getting clear about these two notions helps enormously in getting clear about the prospects of relativism in the artworld and in cultural matters in general and, more pointedly, about their bearing on the objectivity of interpretation in the arts, history, action, conversation, the law, sacred texts, and scientific theories.

Surely, as a starter, we should admit that it does not make sense to claim that natural languages are *real* in any way that is said to be entirely independent of the discursive and interpretive activities of a society of apt speakers. Natural languages are real “in spite of” any such dependence. They are, we may say, idealizations of some sort projected from the aggregated utterances of such societies. They *cannot* be “detached” as independent entities, though of course they may be treated objectively, described and analyzed as the distinctive phenomena they are. But, surely, what is true of language in this regard is also true of artworks.

I don’t mean by that that Linear A or Linear B could not have been a script for an extinct language; for extinct languages are languages that can in principle be reclaimed (as the use of the Rosetta Stone makes eminently clear in the recovery of the language of ancient Egypt). But if languages are real if spoken (or written) by apt speakers, then, plainly, *any* realism that claimed unconditionally that whatever *is* real *is* “fully constituted, autonomous and independent of any interpretive activity” must mean at least that language and artworks are not real at all! I borrow the formulation of the puzzle from Michael Krausz, though Krausz offers it by way of summarizing a conviction on the part of others.²⁾

In the philosophy of art, the idea is perhaps most readily associated with Monroe Beardsley’s objectivism, which treats the meanings of literary texts as if they were properties that behaved (for logical and epistemic purposes) very much like physical properties vis-à-vis physical objects.³⁾ But, of course, they cannot possibly be that. In any case, the doctrine produces a well-known paradox: for it signifies either that we know in some original sense that the world is unaffected by our seeming knowledge of it, that is, from a source that is not colored by our cognizing presumptions; or that we know that that is so, despite the fact that we cannot know it by our actual cognizing powers. May I suggest that that is the master puzzle of Descartes’s theory of knowledge, which, judging by Krausz’s definition of realism, is very much with us still.

I am not entirely sure of Krausz’s position on the matter. For Krausz does say that it is quite possible to reconcile his own or another version of “multiplism” regarding the interpretation of artworks with realism (as just defined) as well as with “constructivism,” which

2) Michael Krausz, “The Interpretation of Art: Comments on Multiplism and Relativism,” *JTLA* (Journal of the Faculty of Letters, the University of Tokyo, Aesthetics), XXII (1997), p.33

3) See Monroe C. Beardsley, *The Possibility of Criticism* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1970).

seems not to be (for him) a form of realism at all (because, of course, it denies what the realist affirms).⁴⁾

Krausz favors the “constructivist” strategy himself. But anyone’s adopting realism as Krausz defines it would signify—disastrously—that whatever objectivity one wished to assign the interpretation of artworks would in principle be deprived of any valid claim based on the supposed realist standing of those same artworks. The objectivity of interpretation would lose its conceptual moorings. I judge the difficulty to be non-negotiable. In fact, Krausz affirms that “the controversy between singularism and multiplism [his primary concern] is logically detachable from the controversy between realism and constructivism, which, by its very formulation, is clearly meant to advance an exclusive if not exhaustive disjunction.”⁵⁾ This cannot be true. The idea, apparently, is that, on grounds of coherence and viability, there are no antecedent reasons for disallowing either of each paired contrast to be joined with either member or the other pair in fashioning the entire range of possible—potentially viable, even defensible—theories of objective interpretation.

I cannot agree. For, if constructivism is not a realism *of any sort*, then I see no way of providing *any* ground for a reasoned choice between singularism and multiplism in constructivism’s favor, no matter how those doctrines are meant to be sorted and disciplined. And if we are left with realism (as defined), then our choices will be hopelessly impoverished, for, as already argued, language and the arts would then cease to be real at all. The prospect is not a good one.

It is, therefore, preposterous to suppose, on the strength of the realist’s say-so, that the entire range of cultural phenomena are simply not real in any ontically serious sense—or, not real to the extent that they are *not merely physical*. I take this extraordinary thesis to be, for instance, the actual nerve of Arthur Danto’s philosophy of art although that may not be believed. (Krausz, I’m afraid, is not a little tempted by it.⁶⁾ But, of course, *if we ourselves* are, as encultured beings, selves, formed by internalizing (in infancy) the linguistic and allied competences of a society of apt selves, if we are, so to say, “born” a second time as Herder had already conjectured more than two centuries ago,⁷⁾ then the realist thesis would deny our own existence and constructivism would be unable to restore it!

I press these themes at some risk, I must confess, because I have no wish to descend to small quarrels, particularly with a view like Krausz’s, which is meant (in some good measure)

4) See Michael Krausz, *Rightness and Reasons: Interpretation in Cultural Practices* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 8-9. Krausz repeats the point in “The Interpretation of Art,” p.38.

5) Krausz, “The Interpretation of Art,” p. 38.

6) See, further, Joseph Margolis, “Farewell to Danto and Goodman,” *British Journal of Aesthetics*, XXXVIII (1998). Krausz pertinently remarks in this connection: “However interpretively independent the cultural object may be—and there are important respects in which it is, for instance, its sheer physicality—it is made more determinate in various ways by interpretive, that is, intentional activity,” “The Interpretation of Art,” p. 36. But the formula requires an inseparable continuum of some sort that includes the “*physical*” and the “*cultural*,” and “*realism*,” as Krausz defines it, rules that out.

7) I have benefited here from Heinz Paetzold. “Kulturelle Differenz und Multikulturalität. Ein Kernproblem der Kulturphilosophie,” *JTLA*, vol. XXII (1997), p. 48, reviewing Herder’s tract, “*Ideen zur philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*.” I find Herder’s phrasing remarkably prescient. If I’m not mistaken, the theme is nowhere mentioned or explored in Isaiah Berlin’s essay “Herder and the Enlightenment,” *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas* (New York: Viking, 1976), on which Paetzold draws.

to be an ally of my own and which (I think Krausz would agree) is partly influenced by my own vies. I must speak frankly, however, if I am to make clear what, finally, is at stake and what I take to be the specific strengths and advantages of my position—how, in particular, to avoid its being conflated or too easily reconciled with another, like Krausz's, which is actually very different though it may not appear to be.

The single most important weakness that I find in Krausz's theory, which bears directly on my own ontology and (therefore) its role in my defense of relativism, lies with the surprising fact that Krausz nowhere makes provision for the realist standing of (what I call) Intentional properties.⁸⁾ Neglecting that, he neglects the *sine qua non* of the entire argument. It's true that he pursues the question of the objective interpretation of artworks (which implicates Intentional properties); but, on the argument already offered, the "realist" cannot address such properties *objectively*, because, for him, there *are* no such properties, their admission violates the realist's minimal constraints. Presumably, they can be admitted "in some sense" by the "constructivist" (Krausz's sort of constructivist); but the constructivist (as Krausz characterizes him) can do so only within the *non*-realist terms of his own account, and that's not good enough.

In short, if I understand Krausz rightly, he divides the "ontological" question between the realist and the constructivist and holds (in effect) that Intentional properties do not conform with the qualifications the realist imposes on what *is real* and that the constructivist (somehow) "admits" Intentional properties within the span of objective attribution but *not as real*, since realism precludes constructivism. For my part, I simply insist that if Intentional properties are not real in any epistemically pertinent sense, then the question of their objective attribution has no standing at all; and if they are accorded objective standing, then they must be real in some suitably robust sense. If this is correct, then I'm afraid Krausz's "ontological" options cannot be relevantly brought to bear on the question whether, objectively, the interpretation of artworks is, as he has it, singularist or multiplist.⁹⁾ The question simply collapses.

Another way of putting the same point is this: if interpretations take truth-values, in the sense in which they may be tested by consulting the real properties of artworks, then both realism and constructivism (as Krausz defines them) must be untenable; and if we are assured that there is nevertheless some objective ground on which their being ascribed to artworks can be rightly tested, whatever truth-values or truth-like values (or other values) we invoke, then we should be entirely within our rights to demand an accounting of what that ground might be. That is the whole of my purpose here.

II

It is in this sense that I claim there can be no viable realism that is not also a constructivism; because, of course, the cultural world comprises entities that are culturally constituted, and because we ourselves are similarly constituted by the enculturating powers of an existing society of selves. But there is a third, a deeper reason that takes us back to the resolution of the

8) See Joseph Margolis, "Relativism and Cultural Relativity," *JTLA*, Vol. XXII (1997).

9) Look again at Krausz, *Rightness and Reasons*, pp. 8-9, where the schema of his argument is made explicit.

fundamental Cartesian threat of skepticism (already noted), that lies at the root of “realism” (or objectivism) read in Krausz’s way. The reason is this: it’s perfectly all right to treat the physical world as independent of human inquiry and interpretation; but it is *not* possible to make sense of doing so without conceding that it— and every would-be determinate truth *about that world*—is epistemically constructed in accord with our cognitive abilities. The very idea that the *apparent* physical world is not constituted epistemically by the conditions of human understanding (certainly the reverse of Kant’s transcendental thesis) is pointedly impossible to confirm by any process that is not itself already qualified by conditions endogenous to human inquiry. But if so, then what (we may ask) is the relationship between the real and the apparent?

This is, in fact, the well-known fatal weakness of the early history of philosophy spanning Descartes and Kant. The only coherent theory of the independence of the real world admits: (a) that the *ontic* independence of the natural world is a posit of our *epistemic* constructions—noumena need not apply; (b) that the world of human culture is, therefore, as much entitled to realist standing, though it cannot be independent in the sense of (a); (c) that the realist standing of the natural world entails and presupposes the realist standing of the cultural world, particularly the standing of selves or persons (ourselves); and (d) that ontic and epistemic questions are inherently inseparable, or meaningless if separated, though they are not the same. Conditions (a)-(d) are not in any way partial to relativism; and the epistemic dependence of the independent physical world (that is, the dependence of that world’s being determinately thus or thus on the mind’s cognizing powers) is not a contradiction or a paradox *or* a concession to idealism.

Once we reach this conceptual plateau, an entirely new set of difficulties arises that affects the fortunes of the running argument. Bear with me, please. I make out at least three nested issues on which I personally hold strong views—without resolving which, I claim, we cannot possibly legitimate the objectivity of interpretation. One requires distinguishing sharply between the “number” and “nature” of would-be entities; hence, secondly, isolating the conditions for denoting, individuating, identifying, and reidentifying one particular entity from another, whether natural or cultural. To this end, I recommend, thirdly, that we treat “entity” in a very lax way: allowing, as an “entity,” anything that we are prepared to say exists as an individuated *denotatum*, about which predicative claims can be made and validated. These three notions constitute a fair pass at the minimal sense of “realism.”

The bearing of all this on what has gone before is this: first, it confirms the sense in which the analyses of “realism” and “truth” go hand in hand, but in a way benignly indifferent to differences between natural and cultural entities; second, it requires a clear distinction between denotative and predicative claims, again without prejudice to pertinent differences between natural and cultural entities; and third, it confirms that whatever we make of the objectivity of interpretive claims will depend on what we judge the “nature” of artworks (or other cultural entities) to be.

R. G. Collingwood, whom Krausz cites approvingly, commits two serious blunders regarding this second tier of distinctions. For one, he garbles the distinction between

denotation and predication.¹⁰ Since self-identity is a necessary (perhaps a “conditionally necessary”) truth wherever numerical identity holds, and since predication is never more than a partial abstraction from a well-formed assertion that includes a similar referential or denotative abstraction, the self-identity of a history (Collingwood’s example) or of an artwork (or of a stone, for that matter) cannot be said, coherently, to be altered merely as a result of particular predications. I insist on the point, because many critics of relativism suppose that the relativist *shifts the identity of what interpretation addresses* in order to make out a plausible case.¹¹ That is certainly not my intention—nor Krausz’s, I believe. But the correction is definitely put at enormous risk by Collingwood’s laxity and by anyone who would adopt his view.

I must add, however, that, although the interpretation of a history or artwork or sentence cannot, for reasons of conceptual coherence, alter the identity of any *denotatum*, the interpretation of Intentionally qualified entities *can* indeed alter the “nature” of what may be thereafter interpreted. I have no doubt, for instance, that the “nature” of Goethe’s *Faust* has been affected by the reception of Romanticism and what has replaced Romanticism. But my reasons are drawn from the metaphysics of Intentionality and the difference between number and nature. In short, on a constructivist reading of realism, we must abandon any pretense that artworks belong to “natural kinds” or possess “essences” in virtue of which (in an Aristotelian sense) we might suppose ourselves obliged to hold that a particular *denotatum* must have been individuated as a particular of a certain essential kind. I don’t subscribe to any such view, and I see no necessity in it. All we require is a careful distinction between the predicative oddities of artworks and their denotative fixity.

Furthermore, since Krausz does not insist on a realist treatment of artworks, it is hard to say precisely what he means by the numerical identity and reidentifiability of a particular artwork—apt for rival interpretive predications. I don’t find this satisfactorily explained in Krausz.¹² It seems to slip in Collingwood’s direction.

Collingwood’s other mistake is more subtle, but not separable from the first. It suggests again the troubling question of just what Krausz might mean by the objectivity of interpretive imputations to artworks. In this second mistake, Collingwood opposes (quite correctly) the “realism” championed by a contemporary of his, Cook Wilson—a realism that is plainly in accord with Krausz’s definition. Collingwood would defeat all such realisms¹³ by way of a

10) See R. G. Collingwood, “The Decay of Realism,” *An Autobiography* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978), pp. 97-98; cited by Krausz. I myself think the mistake is clearer if you compare p. 98 with p. 111. See, also, Krausz, “The Interpretation of Art,” p. 39, where Krausz speaks approvingly of Collingwood’s “processual view” of the nature of “cultural objects.” I’m afraid I take Collingwood’s view to be technically incoherent.

11) The most recent example that I know of appears in Robert Stecker, “The Constructivist’s Dilemma,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Arti Critivism*, LV (1997). Stecker applies the charge to Krausz’s *Rightness and Reasons*—mistakenly I believe; but any yielding on Krausz’s part in the direction of Collingwood would lend color to Stecker’s charge.

12) Compare Krausz, “The Interpretation of Art,” pp. 36-37.

13) See Collingwood, “The Decay of Realism,” p. 44. The most recent, up-to-date version of this sort of realism appears in Michael Devitt, *Realism and Truth*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). Devitt’s doctrine fails, as does Cook Wilson’s; but that hardly shows that the “independence” of the real physical world cannot be sustained as an epistemic artifact of a constructive realism (a constructivism) which, to that extent, is no idealism.

reductio, which Krausz reports. He means to expose the noumenal pretensions of Cook Wilson's "realism" and with it the pretensions of "realism" *tout court*. He is right about the first (the noumenal pretension) but wrong about the second (confusing the epistemic dependence of the independent world with the ineluctability of idealism). Krausz is right to remark that Collingwood's maneuver does not preclude the recovery of "realism"; but Krausz himself fails to notice (I submit) that such a recovery would require a fundamental change in the definition of realism.¹⁴ The ulterior point remains the same. The formal distinction between reference and predication affords no epistemic license for believing that the interpretation of cultural entities (no matter how labile) affects in any way the "number" or self-identity of the real entities that are being interpreted. Collingwood scants or confuses the matter, possibly as a result of his idealism: he utterly confounds the question of interpretive objectivity.

This is the same issue on which Krausz seems to me to be insufficiently explicit. It requires the formal distinction already mentioned. But it requires another as well, namely, that cultural entities are indissolubly complex: insofar as they exist, they cannot fail to be inseparably embodied in physical entities (*not* through identity), and any realism that conceded their Intentional "natures" could not be captured by Krausz's distinction between realism and constructivism. I urge that, without such a theory, there is no point in speaking of the objectivity of interpretation *or* of choosing between singularism and multiplism (in Krausz's terms) or of justifying a relativistic reading of interpretation (in my own). For the moment, I insist only on the argument's scruple. But I trust you will see that the standing of a relativistic theory of interpretation is inseparable from the realist standing of Intentional properties.

Nothing so far said entails or drives us to adopt any form of relativism. I claim only that any theory that ignores the metaphysical question is plainly irrelevant. On the issues already raised, I offer a few pronouncements. For one thing, without prejudice to parsing the world by way of alternative *denotata*,¹⁵ it appears that there is general agreement, in interpreting artworks, about how we individuate and reidentify the particular works we interpret. The fact is, the quarrels relativism engenders tend to center on predicative rather than denotative matters. In the artworld, they feature interpretive efforts overwhelmingly. I therefore waive all quarrels about whether we might conceivably treat reference relativistically. To insist on the

14) See, for instance, Krausz, "The Interpretation of Art," p. 39. Krausz's remark to the effect that "Collingwood's argument does not actually show the falsity of realism, only that one cannot know it to be true" misses the essential point (against the Cartesian tendency in early modern philosophy and in Cook Wilson and in Collingwood's attack on Cook Wilson) and clearly risks the incoherence of admitting that "realism" might be true though it might be impossible ever to know that it was true! I cannot see that this is not itself a version of the very doctrine Collingwood correctly attacks.

15) In *Word and Object* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960), W. V. Quine offers the most extreme version of this kind of metaphysical tolerance at the denotative (or referential) level—what he calls "the indeterminacy of translation." To be perfectly frank, I find Quine's theory to be incoherent—also, to be incompatible with other of his well-known doctrines (the rejection of the analytic/synthetic distinction particularly). The reason is worth bearing in mind: although distinct, reference and predication are conceptually inseparable; there are no free-floating predicables that are not identified relative to an open set of eligible *denotata*; predicables and *denotata* are more or less matched in natural-language discourse.

possibility here would risk muddying the local question of the logic and metaphysics of interpretation. It has its bona fides, all right, and I shouldn't care to slight its importance. On the contrary, to view it seriously would, I believe, return us to the deeper question of the flux that Protagoras first had in mind in advancing the ancient form of relativism.¹⁶⁾ But I must leave that topic for another occasion.

I turn instead to a second small pronouncement: viz., that, since no one has ever shown how Platonism or the realist treatment of universals could possibly be invoked in criterial or cognitive terms, the objective use of *predicates* effectively conforms with something like Wittgenstein's notion of a *lebensformlich* practice: that is, proceeds in a way that can be consensually tolerated (without relying on prior criteria) by the spontaneous predicative practices of one or another society of apt native speakers. Wittgenstein's extraordinarily perceptive finding warns us that if you look carefully at predicative practices you will find that—as among what we call “games”—there is no “one thread” that runs through all the proper applications of the term but rather “many [overlapping] fibres”¹⁷⁾ and that that practice is perfectly viable. It is possible of course to build, on such a “foundation,” a theory of more powerful theoretical or nomological regularities, as in science's search for “natural kinds.” But any such improvement, I should say, cannot fail to rest on the first and, when empirically construed, always implicates the first. This is not always rightly perceived.¹⁸⁾

I draw two lessons from this: one, that predicative objectivity is intrinsically informal and cannot, except by the fiat of one or another convention, be made to fit an exceptionless bivalent logic; the other; that there is no defensible realist account of predicables except one that is frankly constructivist and refuses to concede any principled disjunction between cognizing subjects and cognized objects. I emphasize the gain this way, so that we cannot fail to see that objective predication cannot be altogether inhospitable to the relativistic alternative, whether we are speaking of Intentional or non-Intentional attributes, though it does not commit us to relativism. It is worth noting that the argument does not turn on the distinction between natural and cultural predicables: predication as such is incompatible with the realist doctrine Krausz defines—once Platonism has been independently rejected. That is an important gain gained at a very small cost.

I should perhaps add that this second lesson explains the sense in which there is no principled priority or neutrality that can be assigned so-called “logical” or “semantic” analyses over “epistemological” and “metaphysical” ones: on my view, the first are nothing but versions of the second pursued “by other means.” The entire tradition of analytic philosophy ranging, say, from Frege to Dummett (and including Quine and Carnap) goes completely against the idea, but I believe such priorities are arbitrary and cannot possibly be vindicated.¹⁹⁾ It's for this

16) I should add that I associate the issue with the relativism of the early Buddhist philosopher, Nāgārjuna, whom I very much admire. It raises a larger question than the one I am prepared to answer here.

17) See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953), Pt. I, §§66-67.

18) For one, Jerry Fodor's theory of concepts does not come to terms satisfactorily with this decisive constraint. See Jerry A. Fodor, *Concepts: Where Cognitive Science Went Wrong* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), Chs. 6-7

19) For a particularly transparent example of what I am opposing, see Michael Dummett, *The Logical Basis of Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), Introduction. Krausz may well have been influenced along related lines by the views of Karl Popper.

reason that I treat the analysis of reference and predication as already possessing ontic and epistemic import—as being not entitled to set prior constraints in any way on admissible contributions to the other. Only if there were demonstrable logical and semantic constraints that were both substantive and necessarily indefeasible could the claim survive. But there are no such priorities—for instance, none regarding noncontradiction, bivalence, excluded middle, *tertium non datur*, identity, nomologicality, sufficient reason. It's the failure of all such modal notions that turns us in Wittgenstein's direction. But to see that is to see that the *lebensformlich* consensus of our discursive practices is the *medium* of human life, *not* any particular criterion or criterially determined finding (or any approximation of same) within its scope.²⁰⁾

The denial of “absolutist” (or singularist) views of uniquely correct (true) descriptions or interpretations of artworks (or of anything else, for that matter) is not to be confused with relativism at all: all viable epistemologies are constrained in the same way if any are. It is, I'm afraid, a serious mistake to hold that the denial of “absolutism” is tantamount to espousing relativism, or that the denial that there are “objective standards . . . independent of any historical or cultural contexts” is tantamount to relativism, or that the adoption of a logic other than an exceptionless bivalence is tantamount to relativism.²¹⁾ I oppose all such maneuvers. They lose sight of a crucial distinction. Relativism, in my view, is compatible with a bivalent logic (suitably constrained), and non-relativists often subscribe to three-valued or many-valued logics, which are not relativistic at all.

The specific mark of a relativistic logic is that, among the many-valued values that it admits, it admits, as valid, incongruent judgments, that is, judgments or claim (interpretations) that on a bivalent logic but not now would be contradictory or incompatible. The motivation for favoring this distinction depends, as I say, on the metaphysics of cultural entities, on their interpretable natures, and on the bearing of both on the conditions of objective interpretation.

III

Enough is now in place to make adding the final third leg of my account the natural capstone of the gathering argument. For all the reasons already given—in particular, the difference between nature and culture; the artifactual and *sui generis* condition of cultural entities; the inescapably constructivist reading of predication and realism; the recognition that human selves are socially constituted in the same way other cultural phenomena are, where the latter are themselves nothing but the “utterances” of individual and aggregated selves; and the unique metaphysics of Intentional properties, whether with regard to selves or their utterances—cannot, I maintain, be convincingly defended in any way that would preclude the eligibility, very likely the preferability, of relativism as I have defined it. There's the slimmest version of the thesis I am prepared to defend.

Many who offer theories of interpretation, whether cast in general terms or specifically keyed to literature or painting or history, confidently affirm (without success) that they avoid all metaphysical entanglements. They cannot be right. I single out Krausz's account as an

20) Krausz may have missed the tone of the point. See, for instance, Krausz, “The Interpretation of Art,” p.42.

21) See Krausz, “The Interpretation of Art,” p. 40.

obvious specimen, but the tendency is the dominant one in philosophies of art and history. Krausz wishes to remain “agnostic” on the ontology of cultural entities, in particular, on the ontology of “objects-of-interpretation” (the “objects” we interpret). But we cannot claim to be neutral, there, *if* we also mean to secure interpretation’s objectivity. For, of course, if interpretive objectivity *depends* on the nature of Intentional properties and on whether they *are* significantly different from the non-Intentional physical properties of natural things, then the disclaimer will count for very little. “I shall adapt an agnostic attitude,” Krausz advises, “with respect to whether there are practice-independent objects . . . and I shall argue that pertinent ‘ontological’ issues are logically detachable from the praxial considerations central to the debate between the singularist and multiplist positions.”²²⁾ (By “praxial,” Krausz means that interpretive objectivity *does* depend on established practices.)

This won’t do, I’m afraid, and I’m bound to say why. Krausz introduces the term “object-of-interpretation” to designate the “object” we admittedly interpret; but he acknowledges such *denotata* only in a sense, he says, that is neutral to ontological issues, that is, to questions about the “realist” standing of such “objects.” Since, however, he’s restricted the term “realist” in the way we have seen, *any* favorable reading of the objective standing of interpretation that admits that its objects are not “practice-independent” must either be contradictory or deficient: for objectivity must depend in some suitably validated way on the properties of just such practices; and *that* is tantamount to favoring an alternative conception of realism. Otherwise, objectivity hangs in the air, lacks any confirmatory grounds at all. Krausz’s question about the relative strengths of singularism and multiplism now have no point.

Merely to treat “objects-of-interpretation” *as* “objects” *apt* for objective interpretation (though “practice-dependent”) shows that we still need an accommodating realism. Practices must have realist standing if we ourselves are real. Furthermore, *if* we can determine the objective standing of competing interpretations of would-be “objects-of-interpretation” (that is, *denotata* *not* viewed as separable from pertinent social practices but individuable and reidentifiable nonetheless), then we *have* already fixed the realist standing of such *denotata*. What other considerations could there be? Krausz worries about the following difficulties: (a) whether the disjunction between realism and constructivism must be an all-or-nothing affair:²³⁾ the answer is No; (b) whether Intentional (or culturally interpretable) properties are or must be determinate in the same sense physical properties are said to be:²⁴⁾ the answer is No, as far as realism is concerned; (c) whether, at least by inference from (a) and (b), the “indeterminacy” of “objects-of-interpretation” signifies that their properties cannot have realist standing, in spite of being “objectively” interpretable:²⁵⁾ the answer is No, the question is a non-starter; and (d) whether the interpretive “completion” or “concretization” or “determination” of an inherently indeterminate object could turn one particular *denotatum* into another:²⁶⁾ the answer is No, the

22) Krausz, *Rightness and Reasons*, pp. 7-8.

23) See Krausz, *Rightness and Reasons*, p 5.

24) See Krausz, *Rightness and Reasons*, Ch. 7.

25) See Krausz, *Rightness and Reasons*, pp. 156-158.

See, also, E. M. Zemach, *Types: Essays in Metaphysics* (Leyden: E. J. Brill, 1992), which Krausz cites and which introduces the idea of indeterminacy in (speaking of) nature.

26) See Krausz, *Rightness and Reasons*, p. 146.

question is self-defeating.

None of these worries need delay us. It may indeed be argued that, in some very special sense, possibly akin to that of Quine's indeterminacy thesis,²⁷⁾ the very choice of an ontology is "indeterminate," logically arbitrary. But this is not the issue here. In interpretive contexts, any such indeterminacy will have already been resolved: even Quine would agree. We should already have identified the "object-of-interpretation." The puzzle lies elsewhere. Surely it rests with the logical peculiarity of Intentional properties. And, there, artworks and other cultural entities *are not indeterminate* at all. They are, rather, numerically *determinate* in the same sense physical objects are and predicatively *determinable sui generis*, in a sense not captured by the usual "determinate"/"determinable" distinction appropriate to physical or merely natural attributes. There's our final quarry.

Every predicable (or predicate) is general, by which we mean two things: one, that if it may be rightly predicated of any particular *denotatum*, then in principle it may, without alteration, be predicated of other *denotata*; the other, that there is no infimate predicable in any order of determinable predicables that is so completely determinate that it is incapable in principle of being more finely specified by further determinate alternatives. Intentional predicables are, of course, general in this double sense. But, *qua* Intentional, they differ from other predicables in being inherently interpretable. They are inherently significative, semiotic linguistic, representational, expressive, historical. They are *determinable* for that reason in a potentially puzzling way: they are made determinate by way of interpretation and they remain interpretively determinable by further alternative interpretations. They are *not* simply indeterminate; and artworks possessing such properties are not thereby rendered inherently "incomplete"—as the phenomenologists are fond of saying: Roman Ingarden for instance.²⁸⁾

I respect and share Ingarden's puzzle, but I cannot endorse his bizarre solutions. They are a kind of Cartesian excess. The barest admission of artworks, histories, selves as real or existent *denotata* defeats every would-be realism that first postulates and then recovers—or ingenuously replaces (as the phenomenologists do)—the impossible Cartesian dream of coming to know what is unknowable: viz., real entities so independent of the conditions of human knowledge that any appeal to knowledge contaminates the realist project; or, entities so completely determinate that invoking any merely human predicates necessarily falsifies their independent nature. There are no such entities."²⁹⁾ There is no realism that is humanly inaccessible; there are no denotative or predicative resources that we cannot understand. Every meaningful realism must be cognitively effective—must (to be that) join inseparably (against

27) See W. V. Quine, *The Pursuit of Truth*, 2nd ed. rev. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

28) See Bogdan Dziemidok, "Can We and Should We Overcome Cultural Relativism in the Theory of Aesthetic and Moral Values?" *JTLA*, Vol. 22 (1997). Dziemidok's discussion of Ingarden (if I understand it rightly) shows that Ingarden was unable to reconcile, as objectively valid, alternative interpretations (aesthetic "concretizations") of one and the same artwork. He evidently worried (in a way not unlike Collingwood's worry about "encapsulation") that different aesthetic responses would signify that they referred to different *denotata*. That is precisely what I am bent on remedying. Intentionality is the key.

29) Two leading specimens of a revived Cartesian realism of the analytic sort are provided by Michael Devitt, *Realism and Truth* and John A. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1995)

the Cartesian vision) every ontic and epistemic inquiry. There is no such doctrine that is not also a constructivism.

Furthermore, whatever remains puzzling about Intentional properties can always be coherently admitted within its space and resolved there—if it is resolvable at all. For the puzzle of what is intrinsically interpretable in art and history is nothing more than what is distinctive of the encultured existence of human societies: of their self-interpretation by way of the interpretation of their stable “utterances”—actions, deeds, histories, texts, sentences, artworks, careers, institutions. It is only the vestiges of the Cartesian myth that distracts us from the distinctive reality of human culture. (I find compensating impulses of the Cartesian sort in Ingarden’s and Collingwood’s and Krausz’s very different undertakings.) In a way, the relativism I propose is hardly more than a natural corollary of having rejected the deepest claims of Cartesian realism, while avoiding an excessive idealism and honoring the formal constraints of reference and predication.

IV

But we are concerned here with realism’s bearing on the logic of interpretation. The argument rests on a single pivot. Give up Cartesian realism: you thereby free the metaphysics of objective claims of every sort from First Philosophy, foundationalism, cognitive privilege, necessities *de re* and *de cogitatione*, the exceptionless closure of bivalence, transcendentalism, and similar extravagances. Philosophy becomes “empirical,” piecemeal, carpentered in the sense of fitting the saliences we find we cannot avoid within our inquiries.

Admit that, and you admit that a viable realism must be a constructivism: the confirmation of any claim (whether first- or second-order) cannot but be *lebensformlich* and historicized—ultimately consensual but not criterial. To admit all that is to admit that ontic and epistemic and interpreted fixities are artifacts of our contingent practices. Cultural relativity—in particular, the sheer divergence and diversity of human inquiries is simply the inclusive datum that Cartesianism claims to override but cannot. Its admission is so bland by now that it counts as common ground for Cartesian, Kantian, and phenomenological certitudes and for their rejection. That is as neutral as one can be.

We may, of course, choose to “protect” cultural diversity and make that a normative principle of its own.³⁰⁾ I say only that such a concept is nowhere risked by admitting relativism. Here, I single out two sources of misunderstanding. One, the first, may be completely resolved by grasping that it does not follow from “cultural relativity”³¹⁾ that the very meaning of truth and knowledge and reality must also be relativized—or

30) This may be one of the reasons Ken-ichi Sasaki offers for opposing my reading of “cultural relativity” as a first-order datum. See Ken-ichi Sasaki, “Who’s Afraid of Joseph Margolis?—Cultural Relativity vs. Relativism,” *JTLA*, Vol. XXII (1997). But, if so, the two claims are hardly incompatible or addressed to the same question. For example, whether “relativity” supports or requires a deeper uniformity in nature or culture or both is itself an issue that, as I see the matter, presupposes something close to my “first-order” reading. But Sasaki has other objections.

31) See Margolis, “Cultural Relativity and Relativism.”

“relationalized”—in terms of any favored specimens of “cultural relativity.” On my reading, cultural relativity is no more than a first-order datum. It has as such no second-order significance.

Furthermore, if bilingualism = biculturalism and if inter- and intra-societal divergences are of the same kind, then the very perception of “cultural relativity” belongs intrinsically to the cognitive competence of every encultured self. That is the sense in which such relativity is a first-order datum, a datum marked as such before we ever speculate about how to bring it to bear on contentious philosophical claims. In this sense (correcting Ken-ichi Sasaki’s reading of my view), relativity does not entail or presuppose relativism. On the contrary, it is entirely compatible with the rejection of relativism! Also, of course, if selves are the sites of encultured competences, then “relativity” affects the description of nature as much as the interpretation of art. Also, true to the distinction between first- and second-order questions, the admission of cultural relativity cannot claim to disqualify universalisms of any sort—transcendentalisms, forms of cognitive privilege, modal necessities that some claim we cannot override. *Relativism*, however, *is* incompatible with universalism.

Once Cartesian realism is rejected, constructivism is bound to assign that datum (cultural relativity) another meaning. It’s in this sense that the *sui generis* determinability of Intentional predicables suggests the advantages of relativism. But to admit only that goes no distance toward endorsing another, the second source of misunderstanding: namely, that if first-order *claims* are indeed relativized to the resources of diverse practices (“cultural relativity”), then the second-order *concepts* of truth and knowledge and reality must also be formally “relationalized,” cast in explicitly culture-relative terms. That would be a complete *non sequitur*, a pernicious—and, indeed, an incoherent—doctrine. Certainly, every consistent relativist would reject the argument. It would yield an unacceptable finding: viz., that “true” means “true-for-*x*” or some such thing, which is precisely what (on the standard reading) Socrates anciently charged Protagoras with proposing³²) (Here “*x*” signifies a particular person or “perspective.”) “Relationalism,” the doctrine in question, yields the fatal consequence that it becomes impossible for different speakers ever to share the same operative notion of truth.

I must say I find it bewildering to testify again and again to just how strenuously and carelessly and with what unrelenting ardor relativism is opposed. Its history is hardly inspiring. It may be the one ancient topic we have whose treatment has remained almost completely unchanged since its original incarnation, More’s the pity, since Protagoras’s defeat at Socrates’s hands was a completely gratuitous victory. I have proceeded, therefore, by proposing a fresh reading of a would-be relativistic logic, one that is consistent and coherent, compatible with the use of bivalence, invoked in various well-defined sectors of inquiry (notably, in interpretive contexts), well suited to defending Protagoras, and never given to heroic conceptual measures. I am not interested in rejecting bivalence *tout court*, or in denying obvious logical and methodological differences in different inquiries. Not at all.

My effort is meant to show (i) that a pertinent relativism *is* coherent, capable of being

32) For a fuller account, see Joseph Margolis, *The Truth about Relativism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991).

applied with as much rigor as a bivalent logic, and, arguably, better fitted for certain inquiries than an unyielding bivalence; (ii) that the defeat of Cartesian realism, First Philosophy, cognitive privilege, modal necessities, transcendentalism, and the like provides a favorable ground on which relativism may thrive; (iii) that relativistic and non-relativistic claims are reconcilable and often work together; and (iv) that the defense of (i)-(iii) does not itself require a relativistic argument. I admit I am drawn to more radical possibilities. But I see no reason to burden those who might concede the force of (i)-(iv) to join me in any more extreme conjectures.

The pivot of the argument has never been more than this: that cultural phenomena must have realist standing; that admitting that is admitting the metaphysical peculiarities of Intentional properties; and that admitting that is tantamount to admitting the distinctly good fit between a relativistic logic and the requirements of interpretive objectivity. In this sense, I view relativism as a very moderate solution to certain well-known problems, not as a fixed first principle of its own. Roughly: with the rejection of Cartesian realism, objectivity cannot fail to be *lebensformlich* or *sittlich* or constructivist in a sense akin to Wittgenstein's and Hegel's claims but obviously *not* actually theirs. I mean that our cognitive practices are broadly consensual, competent without being grounded in foundational propositions or fixed criteria.³³⁾ The argument applies in the natural sciences as well as in the interpretation of art and history.

I risk my entire brief on the logical informality of reference, predication, context, meaning, evidence, and the like. These are not relativistic concessions of any sort: they are simply entailed by defeating Cartesian realism and its allies. They therefore form the basis of every constructivist version of realism, whether relativistic or not. The logical informality of which I speak is a deeper claim than that of the aptness of relativism in interpretive contexts: it makes constructivism inescapable, confirms that bivalence has application (wherever it does) in constructivist terms; hence, that bivalence and relativism rely on the same consensual grounds. But if you admit all that, you cannot then disallow a constructivist fit between relativism and interpretive objectivity. Q.E.D. Furthermore, if you review the arguments of the most recent opponents of relativism, you will see that they claim that even if you grant that relativism is self-consistent it must violate some dictum of Cartesian realism or they claim metaphysics has no particular bearing on what should count as an objective inquiry or that relativism cannot improve on the resources bivalence already affords. Beardsley and Krausz favor the first two options; Robert Stecker and Stephen Davies, the third.³⁴⁾

Furthermore, once you take the constructivist theme to heart, you see the blunder of supposing that the following two formulations are equivalent:

(a) every cognitive claim is, cannot but be, relativized to our contingent conceptual and evidentiary resources.

(b) every cognitive claim confirmed in accord with (a) necessarily holds that "true" = "true-for-*x*" (and so on, for all other pertinent epistemic notions).

The confusion between (a) and (b) I take to be the confusion between cultural relativity and

33) See Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Pt. I, §481.

34) See Stephen Davies, "Relativism in Interpretation," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. II (1995).

philosophical relativism: (a) is tautological or trivial; (b) is the incoherent “relationalist” reading of relativism. My own claim is that (a) would be vacuous even if Cartesianism were true!

What is not idle is the claim that, read in accord with the defeat of Cartesianism, cultural relativity leads promisingly to the second-order findings I collected a moment ago. Those do not follow from the bare datum of cultural relativity and therefore do not, as such, bear on any normative policies we might wish to favor regarding the protection of cultural diversity. Furthermore, relativism hardly depends in any narrow way on the diversity of different societies. The reason is of course that there is no principled demarcation between inter- and intra-societal differences and that whatever the problem of objectivity is, it is the same in both settings.

Beyond that, it remains to be said that the “meanings” of human “utterances,” whether in art or history or speech, cannot possibly be fixed, cannot be impervious to interpretive change, walled off from the historicized formation and transformation of our own interpretive “competence.” For there is no principled division between understanding ourselves and understanding our “utterances”; whatever competence we may claim in either setting cannot be more than an artifact of our *lebensformlich* practices. But that is the essential “double hermeneutic” of which theorists like Hans-Georg Gadamer regularly speak: the consensual objectivity of human “utterances” (texts, artworks, speech acts, actions) and the consensual objectivity of our interpretive competence to fix their pertinent properties. How radical a relativism we should adopt will depend finally on how labile we find the fluxive nature of Intentional properties. There is no rule there.

Temple University