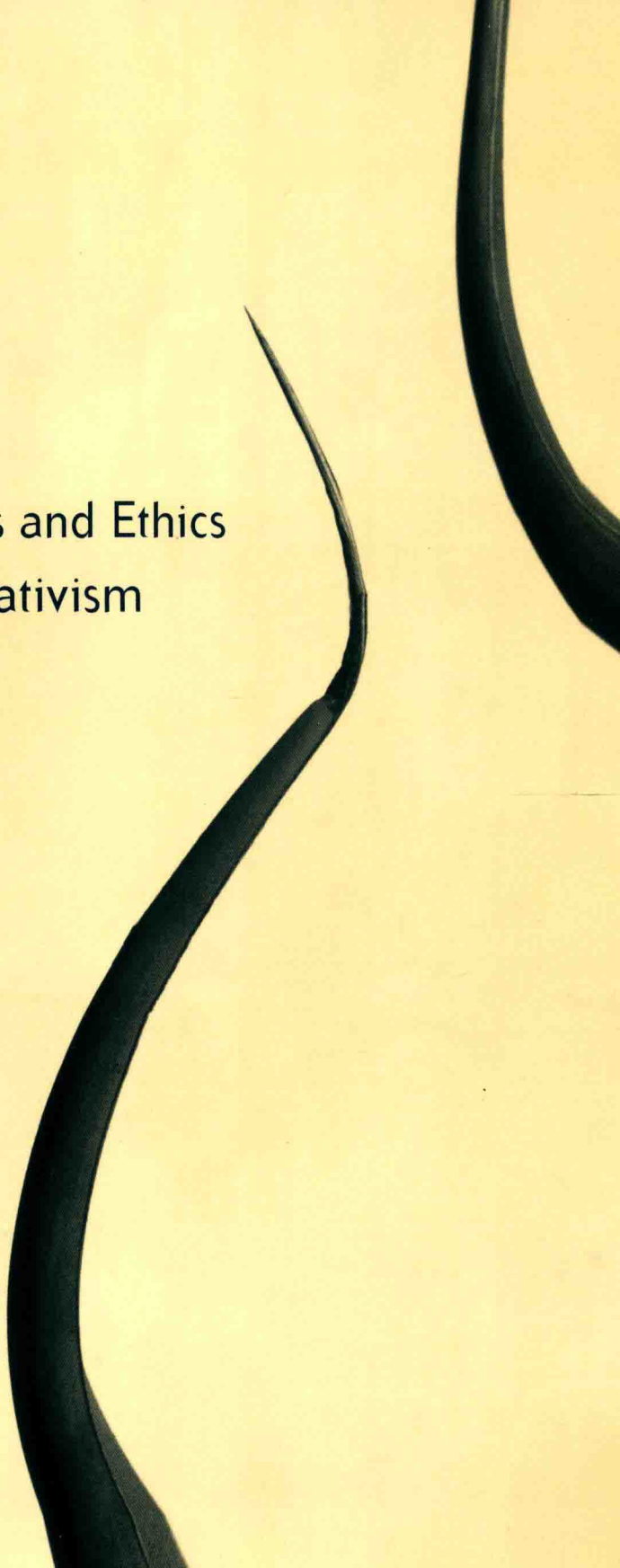


The Metaphysics and Ethics
of Relativism

CAROL ROVANE



The **METAPHYSICS**
and **ETHICS**
of **RELATIVISM**



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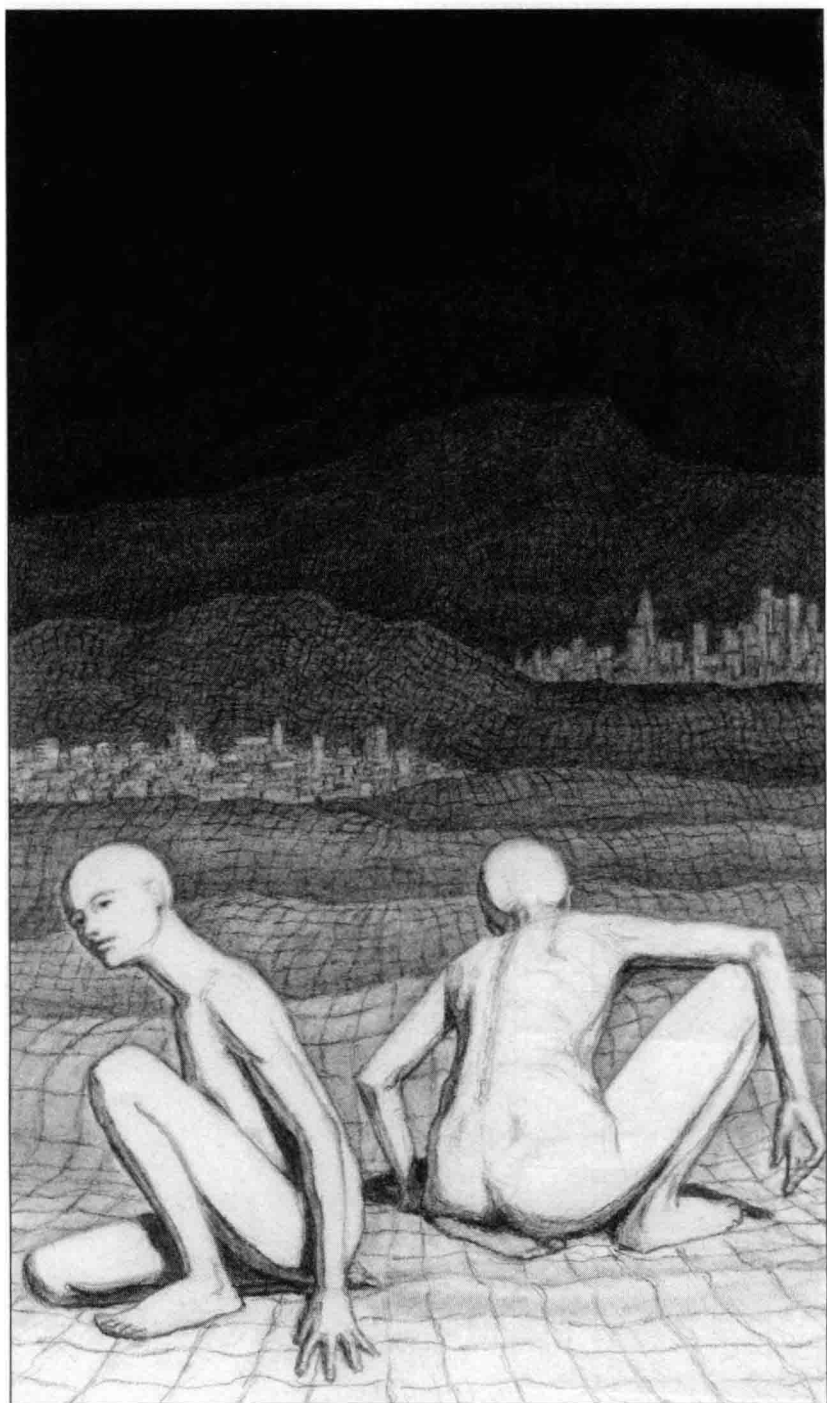
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*For Akeel,
my own true love*

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Introduction

When philosophers argue against a metaphysical doctrine, they do not usually rest with the charge of mere falsity. They tend to register the much more radical charge of incoherence. In the case of relativism they have tended to go further yet, to say that the doctrine cannot so much as be formulated in a satisfactory way. As a result, contemporary defenders of relativism are well advised to concern themselves primarily not with establishing its truth but with clarifying its content. In setting out to write this book, I have administered this eminently sound advice to myself, seeking such a clarification, and asking: What would we be establishing the truth *of*, if we were able to establish the truth of relativism, and what sorts of considerations would we look for in seeking to establish its truth?

As I attempt to answer these questions, I will be guided by four desiderata that I think any satisfactory formulation of the doctrine should meet: (1) It should capture a central and important *intuition* about its content; (2) it should attribute to the relativist a distinctive *metaphysical commitment* that is at once controversial and yet nevertheless

worth taking seriously; (3) it should contain the resources to allow the relativist to *avoid the charge of incoherence* that is so often levied against her; and (4) it should show how we could meaningfully *live* in accord with the doctrine. In this book I develop and defend a particular formulation that satisfies these desiderata, and then I evaluate various arguments for and against relativism in two domains—the domain of natural facts that are appropriate objects of scientific investigation and the domain of moral values.

I will devote the remainder of these introductory remarks to three tasks: motivating the four desiderata; introducing three intuitive conceptions of relativism that seem to me to merit particular attention; and saying just a bit about the direction of my arguments to come.

The first and third desiderata require little defense. It is obvious that a satisfactory formulation of the doctrine of relativism must capture a central and important intuition about its content, and that it must portray the doctrine in a coherent way. The motivation for the second desideratum is perhaps less obvious. There is a significant variety of philosophical stances and themes that we associate with the word “relativism,” and not all of them are metaphysical, and indeed some of them are avowedly *antimetaphysical*. So why is it desirable to formulate the doctrine as a metaphysical one? And if that is what we desire, why does it not speak against the fourth desideratum, that our formulation show how we could meaningfully *live* relativism, since so little metaphysics has practical import?

Only a pragmatist would lay it down as a general desideratum that *all* metaphysical doctrines be formulated in such a way that they emerge as having practical import. Although I do have pragmatist leanings, it is certainly not my aim to formulate the doctrine of relativism in a way that only a pragmatist would find satisfactory. My aim is to formulate what has been at issue in recent debates about relativism, where by “recent” I mean both the current debates and also the main twentieth-century debates from which the current ones descend. The following intellectual movements and projects in the last century were all regarded as having potentially relativistic implications: one conspicuous understanding of logical positivism, certain strands in cultural anthropology, certain developments in the philosophy of sci-

ence, and some forms of pragmatism. Although it was not always clear exactly what the “threat”—or perhaps I should say, more neutrally, the “prospect”—of relativism is, it was generally taken for granted it would have real consequences for the conduct of inquiry and interpersonal relations. While the current debates have taken a somewhat more technical turn than their twentieth-century precursors, focusing mainly on certain issues in formal semantics, they too generally conceive the doctrine of relativism as holding practical significance. It is this recent tradition of thought about relativism in the last hundred or so years to which I want to do justice in my formulation—in which the issue of relativism has seemed to be worth arguing about in part because it is not just an academic exercise, but might bear on life.

Thus, I am not making any claim of greater generality than I need to. I am not demanding that all of metaphysics have practical import, but only a certain metaphysical conception of relativism that has come down to us from the major debates of the twentieth century. The question remains, however: Why should we conceive the issue being debated as a metaphysical one at all, especially since by the end of the last century some self-described “relativists” claimed to be *against* metaphysics, or at least to have *dispensed* with it?

It will be useful to distinguish two different antimetaphysical stances that are commonly thought of as relativist.

One involves a generalized hostility to all forms of, or claims to, “objectivity”—as we find when the relativist is portrayed as claiming that *there is nothing more to truth than mere opinion*. Young college students are prone to take up this position at least for the sake of argument, and it may be that some postmodernists are prepared to take it up more seriously. But regardless of whether we should or should not take this position seriously, it is not the one that I aim to formulate in this book. I aim to formulate a doctrine of relativism that does not already go by another name, and it seems to me that this one should really be called “nihilism.”

Richard Rorty had a more nuanced antimetaphysical stance, the point of which was not to renounce all notions of objectivity, but to renounce a particular philosophical project, which first raises and then attempts to solve an alleged problem about the “mind-world

relation”—the problem being to explain how the mind is able to “represent” things “outside” it. This problem came to the fore in the modern period and was successively addressed by Descartes, Leibniz, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, and Kant, and it continues to have a grip on the philosophical imagination. But we might well join Rorty in eschewing the problem without necessarily being against metaphysics in the broad sense I have in mind when I wish to portray the doctrine of relativism as carrying a distinctive metaphysical commitment. As I will be using the term “metaphysics,” it refers to any inquiry into the most general aspects of what there is, or how things are, or the nature of the things that are.

I should clarify that on my broad understanding of what falls within metaphysics, the important contrast is not the one that Kant emphasized, between metaphysics and science—where metaphysics employs a traditional philosophical methodology of a priori argumentation from first principles while science employs methods of induction and confirmation. On my understanding, when science addresses the most general aspects of nature it is every bit as “metaphysical” as a priori philosophizing. The contrast that matters for my purposes is between metaphysics and epistemology—the topic of a metaphysical inquiry is, as I have said, the most general aspects of what there is, or how things are, or the nature of things, whereas epistemology is concerned with what we can or cannot *know* about these things, or, indeed, about anything at all.

Accordingly, when I say that I aim to capture a metaphysical doctrine of relativism, I am saying that I aim to capture something that goes beyond what might be called “epistemic relativism.” Epistemic relativists hold that justification is always relative to a standard of justification, and moreover, that there is more than one such standard, and there is no neutral basis on which to comparatively evaluate those standards or to settle disagreements about them. These difficulties that arise under the heading of epistemic relativism are really skeptical difficulties, and they have held a prominent place in the longer history of philosophical debate about relativism extending back to the ancient Greeks. But as I have said, I do not aspire to formulate a doctrine of relativism that already goes by another name. Just as I do not

attempt to formulate a doctrine that might as well be called “nihilism,” I also do not attempt to formulate a doctrine that might just as well be called “skepticism.” It seems clear to me that something *else* has been at issue in the more recent debates about relativism, which is not a skeptical issue, but a metaphysical one. It is in order to ensure that my formulation of relativism captures what this issue is that I have imposed my second desideratum.

Let me expound this metaphysical dimension of the doctrine of relativism in a preliminary way, by briefly surveying three intuitive conceptions of its content—all of which I will be exploring in much greater depth in Chapters 1 and 2.

There is one intuitive conception that predominates in the current debates, according to which relativism arises with a certain kind of disagreement that is said to be *irresoluble*. Call this the *Disagreement Intuition*. It is natural to suppose that what makes a disagreement irresoluble is the fact that the parties involved cannot figure out which of them is mistaken and which of them (if either) is right. On this supposition, the Disagreement Intuition tracks an epistemic and not a metaphysical doctrine of relativism. But most current advocates of the Disagreement Intuition have a different understanding what would render a disagreement irresoluble, which is that neither party is mistaken, or to put it positively, *both parties are right*. This is not a claim about what the parties to a disagreement can or cannot *know* about their situation, but a claim about *what is the case* in their situation, and so on my broad construal of metaphysics it counts as a metaphysical claim.

In the very recent literature, some philosophers who work in formal semantics have invoked a second intuitive conception of the doctrine’s content, according to which the relativist holds that truth is relative to context. Call this the *Relative Truth Intuition*. Although the Relative Truth Intuition is almost irresistibly suggested by the very name of the doctrine of relativism, its current advocates do not see it as standing on its own; for them, its primary interest lies in whether it can help us to elaborate the Disagreement Intuition in a coherent way. I do not think it can. But regardless of whether I am right, what I want to underscore now is that if we portray *truth* as relative, and not merely justification

as I described above in connection with epistemic relativism, the resulting relativism would indeed be a metaphysical doctrine. (It bears mentioning that not every advocate of the Disagreement Intuition sees the Relative Truth Intuition as required, or even helpful.)

If these two intuitions about the doctrine's content are in themselves metaphysical intuitions, they also incorporate a further background assumption about the doctrine's metaphysical significance, which is that *relativism and realism are mutually opposed doctrines*. Advocates of the Disagreement Intuition are quite explicit that relativism-inducing disagreements can arise only in domains where antirealism holds on the following grounds: they take it that there is no more to truth in domains where antirealism holds than what suitably well-informed subjects judge to be true, and they take it to follow that if such suitably well-informed subjects were to disagree, then there would be no metaphysical basis on which to say that either of them was mistaken, and so their disagreement would be relativism-inducing; whereas, they think there would be such a basis in domains where realism holds, for then there would be more to the truth than what the disagreeing parties judge to be true. When the Disagreement Intuition is supported by the Relative Truth Intuition, the truth of the parties' claims is portrayed as relative to the different standards of justification by virtue of which their claims count as true (when they are suitably well informed); this preserves the assumption that relativism arises only in domains where antirealism holds, because it is assumed that where realism holds, truth is not relative in this way.

It is striking that neither of the intuitive conceptions that are now so central figured much at all in the main twentieth-century debates about relativism. They were guided by a third intuitive conception of relativism, which I will call the *Alternatives Intuition*. It is fair to say that the meaning of the word "alternative" has never been satisfactorily elucidated—though it was closely associated with another word whose meaning was also never made entirely clear, namely, "incommensurable." Yet however obscure the idea of an alternative may be, there is no denying that it figured centrally in the main twentieth-century debates. That is why, when Davidson set out to refute relativism in his 1974 address to the American Philosophical Association, he took aim

at *the very idea* of a conceptual scheme. He thought that by undermining that idea he could also undermine what he took to be the relativist's central commitment, which is that there are *alternative* conceptual schemes.

Although the twentieth-century debates were guided by a different intuitive conception of relativism than the current debates are, they nevertheless shared the same background metaphysical assumption that relativism and realism are mutually opposed doctrines. For them, an important source of the assumption—and indeed their whole argumentative strategy in favor of relativism—was to be found in Kant. He argued (in the very philosophical spirit that Rorty had counseled against) that we cannot make sense of the possibility of knowledge within a realist metaphysics that portrays the objects of knowledge as radically mind-independent, because it follows from such a realism—which he called “transcendental realism”—that we could not come to know objects without transcending the conditions of our own subjectivity—something he claimed to be impossible. As he put it, we can coherently aspire to know things, not as they are in themselves, but only as they appear to us through the forms of our sensibility and understanding. Many contemporary realists retain the aspiration that Kant rejected, though they are somewhat divided about where it leads. Scientific realists have an optimistic vision, on which the history of science has brought us progressively closer to an objective form of knowledge that successfully corrects for the distortions imposed by our own subjectivity, so as to get at how things really are; whereas skeptics argue that we can never transcend the conditions of our subjectivity so as to verify that what we think corresponds to how things really are. These views share a realist assumption but draw different epistemological conclusions. Kant came to his own positive view with a pathbreaking move—a “Copernican revolution” that would cease to define knowledge in terms of objects but would instead define objects in terms of knowledge. The result was “transcendental idealism,” the doctrine that defines the world as the knowable world and, accordingly, as subjectively conditioned. Although Kant did not present his Copernican move as a first step on the path to relativism, that is how it appeared to many twentieth-century philosophers. This trajectory is

utterly familiar to both philosophers and intellectual historians, but it is worth traversing it in its bare rudiments so as to situate the arguments and claims of the chapters to come.

In the various movements and projects of the twentieth century that I described above as holding potentially relativistic implications, arguments for relativism generally followed a roughly Kantian pattern: First it was claimed that if the world is to be known at all, it must meet the conditions in which subjects are able to know it; then it was argued that there is more than one kind of knowing subject, each of which imposes different subjective conditions that the world would have to meet in order to be knowable; from all this, it was concluded that there are as many worlds as there are kinds of subjects, and subjective conditions through which a world might be known. So, for example, Carnap held that if the world is to confer truth on our claims, it must provide empirical confirmation of them; but he argued that such empirical confirmation is possible only in the context of a particular linguistic framework that supplies a vocabulary and a logic in which to frame empirical claims; and, according to him, it lies within our power to devise many such linguistic frameworks, each generating its own particular form of empirical objectivity. Goodman agreed with Carnap that we can devise many different languages, and claimed that in doing so we literally construct different worlds. Whorf and other anthropologists who flirted with relativism made a similar claim, suggesting that inhabitants of different cultures who speak different languages are thereby put in touch with different forms of reality. Kuhn described scientists who work within different scientific paradigms as inhabiting different worlds. Although Rorty stood somewhat apart, because he eschewed metaphysical debates for and against realism, even he argued for a plurality of different “conversational practices” that condition our thought. What I want to underscore is that, *overall*, the common pattern was to argue that there is a plurality of different subjective conditions on which reality might be said to depend, and that there is no objective basis on which to say that any one set of subjective conditions is more or less valid than another. In contrast, realists contend that their conception of reality as mind-independent provides a standard by the light of which it would in principle be intelligible

to evaluate whole systems of logic, thought, and language as more or less apt for capturing the facts *as they are*. On the realists' view, that is the form of objectivity to which we should aspire, namely, knowledge of the facts as they are in themselves, conceived as independent of our particular forms of subjectivity; and in their view, to embrace this aspiration is to oppose relativism.

One surprising conclusion that will emerge in the longer course of my arguments in this book is that the longstanding assumption that relativism and realism are mutually opposed doctrines does not stand up to critical scrutiny.

Another, perhaps less surprising, conclusion is that the two intuitive conceptions of relativism that govern the current debates—the Disagreement Intuition and the Relative Truth Intuition—also do not stand up to critical scrutiny. I say this is a less surprising conclusion only because some others—mainly opponents of relativism—have already argued for it. But their arguments are substantially different from mine. The reason is that their underlying aim in making their arguments is also different from mine. Their aim is a wholly negative one, which is to show that there is a difficulty in formulating or making sense of the doctrine of relativism at all, whereas my aim is not entirely negative. When I argue against the Disagreement Intuition and the Relative Truth Intuition, I shall be drawing lessons about how else we might intuitively conceive the content of the doctrine of relativism, so that we can ultimately arrive at a satisfactory formulation of it.

This will be the work of Chapter 1, whose negative arguments against the two intuitions that now predominate will lead us back to the Alternatives Intuition that informed the twentieth-century debates, and a new way of developing and making sense of it.

In Chapter 2 I will go on to elaborate three related ways of conceiving what alternativeness amounts to: logical, metaphysical, and practical.

Logically speaking, alternatives are *truths that cannot be embraced together*; or equivalently, alternatives are *truths that are not universal*, in the sense of being truths for everyone. It will be my claim that when this is so, logical relations do not hold among all truth-value-bearers, but