CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT DIALOGUE

MEDITATION ON RELATIVISM, ABSOLUTISM, AND BEYOND

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Michael Krausz's *Dialogues on Relativism, Absolutism, and Beyond: Four Days in India*[1] is a delightful and dialogical examination of the classical philosophical debate between relativism and absolutism about truth. The book is by far one of the best introductions to the debate for philosophers and non-philosophers. As a philosopher I was left wondering: why did 20th century philosophy ever leave the dialogue format as a way of conveying philosophy to the masses? Krausz's work reminded me of Arend Heyting's dialogue *Disputation*. In this dialogue Heyting introduces the intuitionist theory of mathematics. He does this through a character that is involved in a casual debate with other mathematicians at a bar. Each of the interlocutors represents a different position in the foundations of mathematics, such as Formalism and Logicism.

A great contribution of Krausz's dialogue is that it is cross-cultural. It engages ideas from well-known philosophers in both Western and Eastern philosophy. However, and to the benefit of non-philosophers, the book makes no name-wise reference to key philosophers from either tradition. Instead, the knowledgeable reader can see insights from Parmenides, Plato, Nagarjuna, Wittgenstein, Davidson, Putnam, Hinduism, and Buddhism all at play. While the novice reader is introduced to complex ideas, such as reference frame, universalism, foundationalism, absolute relativism, bivalence, and self-realization without the excess jargon and name-dropping that often makes presentation of these ideas inaccessible.

The work is ostensibly a dialogue between four discussants: Adam, Ronnie, Nina, and Barbara who all knew each other in college, and are meeting for a reunion in India on the banks of the Ganges River. The dialogue takes place over four days, each day being a continuation and further examination of the debate between relativism and absolutism about truth.

In what follows, I will give a short synopsis of the topics that are discussed on

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[1] Krausz (2011). Page references below are to this unless otherwise flagged.

each day, followed by a critical examination of the points made by some characters. The mode through which I will examine the views of the characters is by introducing a fifth character: Manjula. Manjula is not an advocate of any of the major positions examined in the work, although she is an advocate of some views familiar in contemporary philosophy, such as logical pluralism and virtue responsibilism about inquiry. She is also prone to a perspectival account of how relativism can be related to absolutism. In general, she has a fascination for examples from physics and art when she seeks to explain things. Most importantly, though, she is a critical discussant that seeks to reveal to others the presuppositions in their thought, as well as alternatives that are available in the space of inquiry. She aims to do this without undermining the authenticity of each person's thoughts and direction of inquiry.

DAY ONE

The first day's discussion takes as its point of departure a Hindu religious practice: the practice of cremating those that have lived impure lives, and burying in the Ganges River those that have lived pure lives. Most people fall into the former category. While the later category is reserved for Hindu sadhus, Buddhist monks, and newborn babies that have died prematurely. The fact under analysis is the belief, held by Hindus, and rejected by Non-Hindus, that the Ganges River is a holy river. From this point of departure, the topics to be discussed include: other examples of relativism, such as physical reality described in different ways, a definition of relativism, a clarification of what relativism is not, the difference between a reference frame and a fact of the matter, the role and possibility of an undifferentiated reality adjudicating between reference frames, and a puzzle concerning self-reference in the idea of relativism. The dialogue on the first day is centered on the differences between Adam, the absolutist, and Ronnie, the relativist.

On relativism, fallibilism, and reference frames

Ronnie (10): Relativism claims that truth, goodness, and beauty is relative to a reference frame, and that there are no absolute, overarching standards to adjudicate between competing references frames.

Manjula: As an initial definition of relativism this seems to be okay. But we should immediately look for an alternative definition, because there seems to be an asymmetry between truth, on the one hand, and goodness and beauty, on the other. Claims of truth can be said to be relative, but to say that goodness and beauty are relative just reduces to saying that claims about goodness and beauty are relative. So all we are talking about here are claims in various domains being either relative or absolute. To say that goodness is relative is to say that the truth of a claim, such as '*x* is good', is relative to something, such as a reference frame.

Ronnie (12): Fallibilism is the idea that, no matter what we believe, we could always be wrong. We can't believe anything with complete certainty because, after all, we are human.

Manjula: That sounds correct, as long as we are not talking about self-verifying claims, such as the claim that "I am here now". That appears to be a claim that is true, and knowable with certainty when one reflectively considers the thought and upon believing it and saying it sincerely comes to know it. In addition, the fact expressed by an utterance of it captures part of the human condition. Namely, that at every instant of time at which we exist, we are located at some place. No one can be wrong about that. So, we need to clarify fallibilism. It should mean that with respect to some domain in which we form beliefs, we couldn't be certain. For example, one might hold that we can never be certain that our beliefs about the future or the external world are true. For example, a skeptic might argue that I can never be certain about what will happen tomorrow, since the past does not give us certainty about the future; and that I can never be certain that what I am seeing now is actually the way the world is; since the true causes of my sense impressions of the external world are not transparent to me in my perceptions of the external world.

Nina (18): Maybe there's another snag with relativism. Ronnie, the second part of your definition mentions adjudication; that is, ranking between competing reference frames. But for reference frames to really compete with each other—rather than simply talking past each other—they would have to be talking about the same thing. If they don't talk about the same thing, then they can't compete.

Manjula: Nina that sounds far *too* strong. There are two problems here. First, it might just be false that a *necessary* condition on two frames competing is that they are talking about the same thing. Instead, it might be that they simply have to be talking about roughly the same thing. That is, they need only be pointing in the same general direction to a degree that both parties can coherently understand a disagreement. For example, two competing views can describe the fundamental nature of reality in two distinct ways, such as the difference between positing *strings* vs. *particles* as the fundamental elements of reality. Even though the two theories are talking about distinct things—strings vs. particles—because both are aiming to capture the same rough area—the fundamental elements of reality—they can be said to be competing with each other. Second, it might be false that two theories *need* to be talking about the same thing or roughly the same thing, since the two different frames can compete with one another without their being anything out there for them to be talking about. In factive domains there are facts of the matter that we are competing to get right, but in non-factive domains, we may want each other to adopt certain emotions towards things, without their being a fact of the matter that we are trying to capture correctly. When two parties argue that you ought to care about something, they might be trying to get you to adopt an emotion towards something or a way of seeing things. The arguments they offer compete in the sense that they compete over what attitudes you

should adopt. However, there may be no fact of the matter as to what attitudes or emotions you should adopt, such that we can talk of *competition* with respect to getting it right. It is simply that the systems of attitudes are competing to get you to choose a certain set of emotions.

Adam (22): By a fact of the matter, I mean facts that exist independent of any reference frame. Ultimately, a reality, as such, must exist independent of all reference frames. I'm disturbed by the idea of a world without facts of the matter.

Manjula: Adam there is something right about what you are saying, and yet also something troubling. On the one hand, I don't see how you could be wrong. To talk of a reference frame or a plurality of reference frames is to talk of a frame of reference *relative* to something that is *not* a frame of reference or at least something external to it. You might as well call the entities that are external to a given reference frame *matters of fact*. In general, frames of reference are frames *onto* something. But on the other hand, this just seems to be an artifact of the way the language we use forces us into thinking there is something there. Why can't it just be frames upon frames upon frames all the way down? I reminded here of the person who says there has to be a foundation to all knowledge, or there has to be a first cause, because there cannot be an infinite regress of justification or causes. To this I might say: Yes there can be, the constraint you impose is imagined. It is unintelligible to you how there can be an infinite regress of justification, or causes, or reference frames, but this is a limitation of your ability to imagine otherwise. And perhaps the failure of your ability to imagine is a mark that certain presuppositions you hold serve as criteria for determining what counts as being *coherent*. The mark, however, should only be taken to mark a boundary in your ability to think or imagine. But not to demarcate a joint about how things must be in reality or for others.

Nina (25): But Adam, this absolute stuff that you mention—this stuff that precedes our identifying any particular thing to be the thing that we take it to be—would have to be undifferentiated. At the same time, keeping in mind our definition of relativism that excludes absolutist standards for adjudication between reference frames, you would need differentiated facts of the matter to adjudicate between reference frames. Even if we had access to it, frame-independent undifferentiated stuff couldn't provide those standards necessary for adjudication.

Manjula: But Nina, I think the last part of what you said is a bit odd. Suppose someone or a group of people believe through their reference frame that there is only undifferentiated stuff. Couldn't we say that their reference frame gets it right, since they are tracking the undifferentiated stuff? The undifferentiated stuff doesn't provide standards for differentiating between *certain* kinds of reference frames, namely frames that are like the geocentric vs. heliocentric models of planetary motion because the undifferentiated stuff doesn't have an "Earth" and a "Sun" within it. But a frame of reference doesn't only have to be of that type. Sure, Ronnie is mostly

thinking about those kinds, but there are metaphysical frames of reference, and some of these might just say things like: there is a plurality of basic particulars, or there is only undifferentiated substance. If we widen the scope of what we think of as a reference frame, we might see that some reference frames get things right, and undifferentiated reality can play a role in adjudicating between certain reference frames.

Adam (34). I guess that, whether you accept the answer that [it is relative to our context, our culture, or our time in history], depends upon whether you find the idea of a reference frame to be coherent. As you know, I continue to have doubts about that.

On the notion of a frame of inquiry

Manjula: But wait Adam, Ronnie, Nina, and Barbara. I wonder whether we have been led in the direction we have been going by the examples we have taken so far. That is we should be careful as to whether our own investigation of this issue is an example of being relative to a frame. Our inquiry itself could be relative to a certain kind of frame, a special kind of frame that I like to think of as a *frame of inquiry*. We started by thinking about the Hindu practice of burying newborn babies in the Ganges, and moved on to the example of physical matter. Considering cases in that order we had a certain direction of investigation. But what if we had started with mathematical truths, such as a = a, or 1 + 1 = 2? Would our investigation have lingered so long on issues of relativism vs. absolutism in the way we were talking about it? Or would we have assumed right away that we really should have been talking about certain truths being *relative* in certain domains, and other truths being *absolute* in other domains? It seems to me that relativism is initially attractive in certain areas of discourse, such as moral discourse. And in other areas, such as mathematics, it is less attractive. Had we started with an area where it is not as plausible, such as arithmetic, we probably would have been led down a distinct trajectory of inquiry and discussion. That is, we may have been led down a thought trajectory that brought us immediately to the question of relativism vs. absolutism in a domain. In this way we should always try to be meta-critical about our investigation by reflecting on how our frame of inquiry effects our first-order investigation, whether it be in ethics, metaphysics, epistemology, or, in the case at hand, the debate over relativism and absolutism about truth.

DAY TWO

The second day's discussion is focused on the attempt to reconcile the difference between relativism and absolutism. The discussion focuses on two alternative views: *relative absolutism* and *absolute relativism*. The topics for the day include the distinction between *ontic* and *epistemic* absolutism and relativism, reconciliation by

values, bivalence, the distinction between domains and kinds, and relativism in morality and aesthetics.

Alternatives to absolutism and relativism

Barbara (36): Ok, then. How about this for reconciliation? How about a *relative absolutism*? Alternatively, how about an *absolute relativism*?

Nina (36): Those possibilities sound contradictory, but you have me intrigued.

Manjula: Barbara. There seems to be another option also. How about a *perspectival* account of the absolute and the relative?

Nina (insert): Manjula that sounds intriguing also. What could that be?

Manjula: Remember those interesting drawings we studied in art, psychology, and phenomenology class. The drawings where if you look at it one-way, you see one thing, and if you look at it another way, you see something else.

Barbara (insert): You mean something like the Duck-Rabbit drawing, and the Young Woman–Old Lady drawing? You mean Figure-Ground-Gestalt drawings.

Manjula: Exactly, you look at it one-way and you see the Duck, and then you look at it another way and you see the Rabbit. But when you are looking at the Duck, you don't see, and cannot see, the Rabbit. And when you are looking at the Rabbit you don't see, and cannot see, the Duck. And if you don't know that there are two distinct creatures there in the drawing, you may never see anything other than the one you first lock on to. However, they are both there to be seen. Why can't it be that relativism is one perspective on the way things are, and absolutism is another perspective on the way things are? And just like the Duck-Rabbit scenario this would explain why Adam and Ronnie think that both cannot be right. If I remember class correctly Ronnie saw the Duck first and Adam saw the Rabbit first. Maybe they both think they can't be right because they are locked into one perspective, and they cannot find the orientation for the other perspective. My point, Barbara, is that reconciliation does not need to come from combining absolutism and relativism through a logical move, it can also come from recognizing that both positions are perspectives from which to see the fundamental nature of reality. In fact we could say that they are *meta-reference frames*, frames for thinking about the ultimate nature of reality, from which we look at *first-order frames*, such as two distinct models of some phenomenon.

Barbara (39): Ok [as a case of absolute relativism], take the geometry case again. There's no fact of the matter whether the shortest distance between two points is a straight line independent of a given geometry. The shortest distance between two

points is a straight line in Euclidean geometry and it isn't in a non-Euclidean geometry, like Riemannian geometry. It depends on what you take as a first principle. There's your absolute relativism.

Manjula: Barbara that is a great example, I wish we had talked about it yesterday when we were first thinking about these issues. I have two points on this. First, given the way you describe it, I think it is right to say there is no fact of the matter. However, once I tell you that in fact we live in a curved space, there is a fact of the matter about what is the shortest distance between two points. Moreover, as long as we are looking just at systems, it will be true that each geometric system defines *shortest* distance in a distinct way. However, once we say how things are, then the other system just gets it wrong. These systems are systems that aim to capture something external to them.

My second point is that the example reveals another sense in which something can be absolute. For both Euclidean and Riemannian geometry to be kinds of *geometries* as opposed to sea plankton, there must be something in common. Sure they can differ over how they answer the question of what the shortest distance is between two points, but there must be something in common between all geometric systems for the systems to all count as being about *geometry*. For example, in the case at hand, the systems are all used to describe space. Can't we say that the thing in common is in fact the real absolute across all of these things? And that they just give different answers to specific questions, because they are, after all, different systems. The goal of these systems is to model something. They are systems that aim to get things right for certain purposes. That is, they are all absolutely geometric systems, but they all answer specific questions differently depending on other components of what the system says. More importantly, they answer things differently because the models maintain that things external to the system work differently.

Ronnie (40): You understand my position correctly, Adam. I believe that we never have access to the world, because any knowledge we do have is filtered through some reference frame, through some description of what there is. We can know the world only as conceptualized in one way or another. So, when we seek to compare a description of the world with the world itself, we are comparing a description with another description. All we can compare is one description with another description, not a description with the world-as-it-is-in-itself.

Manjula: I think your account of relativism here is coherent. But I have one problem with it Ronnie. Why use the term 'knowledge'? If you are going to deny that we have access to the world as it is, and knowledge of the world is knowledge of the world as it is, then it seems like we have no knowledge. It is fine if you want to change what we commonly mean by knowledge. But it appears that when Barbara says she knows she is hungry she is trying to say she knows how the world is. It is one in which there is a hungry Barbara. Likewise, when I say, "I know that California is west of New

York.", I know it only if California is west of New York. Can relativism of the sort you seek really have knowledge? What would knowledge be on such an account?

Alternatives to classical logic

Barbara (44): We typically assume that truth opposes falsity. It's the same thing with goodness and beauty. We typically mean to contrast good with bad, or beautiful with ugly. They appear to exclude one another.

Barbara (44) Here is the thing. The negation of each amounts to the affirmation of the other. When you negate true, you get false. When you negate good, you get bad. When you negate beautiful, you get ugly. They are like a standard on-off light switch.

Manjula: Barbara I know you don't really think that. Remember what that strange Indian logician, Anand, taught us in college. He told us about Polish, Australian, Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu logicians that had different ways of thinking about truth and falsity, if not also good and bad, and beautiful and ugly. He pointed out that in logic not everyone agrees with the views espoused by Aristotle and Frege. Western and Eastern philosophers have challenged what has come to be known as *classical logic*.

Nina (inserted): Manjula, I remember Anand. I know what you are getting at. Explain more for the others.

Manjula: In general, we should note that there are two principles that *classical* logics accept. One is the *Law of Excluded Middle*, which says that either P is true or P is false, and there is no third value. Another is the *Law of Non-Contradiction,* which says that P cannot be both true and false; that is, a proposition can have only one value. In Anand's class he pointed out that in addition to classical logics, there are non-classical logics, such as trivalent logics where P can either be true, false, or undetermined. And there are intuitionistic logics where the *Law of Excluded Middle* is rejected because the law allows for proofs by contradiction that some mathematicians don't accept. Finally, he also introduced us to paraconsistent logics where P can be both true and false. My favorite logical system is the Jain logical system, in which a statement can either be (i) true, (ii) false, (iii) true and false, (iv) unsayable, (v) true and unsayable, (vi) false and unsayable, and (vii) true, false and unsayable.

Moreover, it is important for us to examine how the logic of reasoning we assume in our inquiry determines the space of alternatives we consider and accept. The importance of taking note of these facts about our reasoning is that they allow us to see that we need to reflect on our frame of inquiry from a logical point of view. I believe that this is what Anand was trying to tell us. In his discussions of alternative logics he wasn't advocating for one view or the other. Rather, he was trying to help us see how our most basic assumptions about what counts as good and bad reasoning

plays a role in determining our path of inquiry. Being locked into a certain kind of reasoning is like being locked into a certain kind of moral framework. If I believe that only one species has a fundamental right to life, I am going to have a problem imagining or understanding how another species could have a fundamental right to life. Think of the debates about moral vegetarianism. Likewise, if I am locked into thinking that everything is either true or false, I may not be able to understand or imagine how something could be undetermined, or how contradictions could be true. I may fail to grasp a perspectival conception of reality.

Ronnie (inserted): Hey Manjula. Doesn't that show that our reasoning is also a frame of reference from which we proceed in inquiry?

Barbara (inserted): Wait I think Manjula is talking about absolute relativism. Given what system we accept for our reasoning certain answers will turn out to be intelligible, and others won't. If we accept the *Law of Non-contradiction*, maybe we cannot understand how absolutism and relativism can both be true. But if we accept some other view, then perhaps we can see how they could both be true.

Manjula: Yes that might be right Barbara. Maybe that is why the perspectivalism I offered earlier with the Duck-Rabbit drawing as an analogy for understanding absolutism and relativism made sense to me. I was operating under a frame of reasoning that allows for both positions to be true at the same time. The Duck-Rabbit drawing allows for me to conceive of how they can both be true at the same time. However, we should note that there are some differences between the Duck-Rabbit case and the relativism vs. absolutism case. Remember, the relativism vs. absolutism debate is about truth. So, the idea that both absolutism and relativism can be true in the way that there can both be a Duck and a Rabbit present in the Duck-Rabbit analogy needs to be thought through carefully. At present, it intrigues me as a possible way to find harmony in the standard opposition between the two positions.

On opposites

Barbara (insert): But what about good and bad, and beautiful and ugly? You said they work differently also.

Manjula: Yes! I think it is partially right to say that we commonly mean to use those words as opposites, but I don't think that is completely accurate. I don't think that the opposite of 'good' is 'bad'. It could be simply: *ok*. Suppose we go to the museum and I say to you, "that painting is *not* good." And you say to me well "it is not bad." We don't have to be disagreeing. We could both think that it is just *okay*, likewise with 'beautiful' and 'ugly'. The general point is the following. If you take the words and our uses of truth and falsity as being bivalent and then use them as a model for thinking about 'good' and 'bad' and 'beautiful' and 'ugly', you are likely to think of these pairs in the same way you think about truth and falsity. But if you open up your

mind to other examples, you will see something else. Lets return to the idea of a frame of inquiry and begin with the example of 'large' and 'small' to see how our frame of inquiry effects our trajectory in inquiry. If you say, "it is *not large*", it doesn't follow that "it is *small*"; you could mean that the thing in question is simply *medium* in size. And that seems to be a natural way to look at judgments of size. Now, if we had started with this example, and then moved on to the case of 'good' and 'bad', I think we would likely have seen, at least more quickly, that 'good' and 'bad' work like 'large' and 'small', rather than like 'true' and 'false'. However, we could even go further and use 'large' and 'small' as a model for 'true' and 'false'. This would lead us to the conclusion that perhaps there is a third option. The negation of true doesn't have to be false. It could be something else, such as *being undetermined*.

On lenses and filters

Nina (47): Well if our understanding is always filtered somehow, it seems that it's filtered regardless of what we look at. That suggests that if we're relativists, we have to be relativists across the board. Otherwise, we'd have to take off our glasses when we're looking at certain things and put them on when we're looking at other things. That would be strange.

Ronnie (47): But you know what? We all wear glasses all the time. We all have lenses in our eyes. In addition to that, the brain interprets what it receives from our optical nerves. We never can just see what is before us to start with.

Manjula: Nina and Ronnie I am puzzled by all of this talk of flittering and lenses. The point I don't get is this. You seem to be assuming that *if x is an interpretation of y via a filter or lens f, and then x cannot correctly capture y via f*. I don't get that. Sometimes filtering something out allows one to focus on something they want to get at—consider infrared glasses. Sometimes lenses and filters allow one to capture something that is desired. Think of a water filter. A water filter purifies water so that we can get what we really need—pure water. A magnifying lens helps us see things that are small.

Ronnie, even if we are wearing glasses all the time and interpreting things, that doesn't mean that we are *not* getting at reality through those lenses and interpretations or getting at what we want or need to get at. It might just mean that we cannot know that we are getting things right simply by looking through our glasses.

Nina, even if the glasses are on all the time, which you claim requires us to be relativists across the board, we need to recognize that sometimes the glasses may be getting things right, and sometimes it maybe getting things wrong, and like I just said, we just don't know it. For example, suppose we have glasses that turn everything red. When we are in a white room, we see red everywhere, and we don't see things correctly. However, when we step into a red room, we do get things right. We just don't know it, because we don't know that we have red glasses on. So, we could say

that in some cases things are relative to our red glasses because they look red but are not red; and in other cases things are red relative to our glasses, but that is also the way things are. Sometimes we mirror sometimes we distort. The point is that we might not be able to transcend our lenses, but that doesn't mean we don't get things right. Part of the problem is that we have been thinking about lenses and filters with negative imagery and association. If we change that imagery and association, it might not be the case that filters are a problem.

Nina (52): Ronnie, I see that you mean for your relativism to apply across the board – for all domains. So, how does it apply to the moral case?

Intervention and morality

Manjula: Ronnie, before you give your answer, I want you to also give us an answer for the case of logic and mathematics; and if you could, please compare you answer to what you have to say in the moral case. I often think it is easier to be a relativist in the case of morality and aesthetics than it is to be one in the case of logic and mathematics. As I said yesterday, I think there is a lot of insight into the debate we can gain by comparing relativism and its plausibility across different domains.

Ronnie (54): Some people might believe that, because our knowledge is frame-dependent, we shouldn't criticize or intervene in other cultures. I don't see it that way. Criticism and intervention can be important –critically important. The frame-dependence of our framework shouldn't silence us or keep us from intervening when necessary.

Manjula: Ronnie, I think you are right. But I would go further. I don't think that relativism or absolutism about moral truths either weakens or enhances our ability to intervene. What weakens or enhances our position for intervention is our theory of when it is right or wrong to intervene. Consider the following. If relativism is true, it could be the case that all moral codes relative to each culture say that the members of that culture should intervene on other cultures no matter how different the other codes are. If absolutism is true, the truth could be that we should never intervene, but simply recognize that others are doing wrong. The ultimate code could say that even if others are not following the moral code one should not intervene to make them do so because that involves harm. That is, other people's immorality is not one's own affair. What matters for a theory of intervention are those particular aspects of our moral theory that have to do with when it is appropriate to intervene. We tend to think that if something is absolutely wrong, then we are justified in intervening, but the part that is really doing the work is that we also think that the thing in question is wrong and we ought to alter those that do don't do what is correct. The part that says it is *absolutely* wrong is not as important as our thoughts about intervention.

DAY THREE

The third day's discussion focuses on an attempted refutation of relativism and a clarification of different kinds of relativism and absolutism that goes beyond the distinction between ontic and epistemic kinds discussed on the second day. Topics include: self-refutation, realism, universalism, foundationalism, moral cases, the value of human life, religion, and hard vs. soft absolutism and relativism. We begin with a discussion of whether and why relativism is thought to be self-refuting.

Relativism and self-refuting positions

Ronnie (63): Sure. [The argument for why relativism is self-refuting] goes something like this. Suppose that we say that relativism is true. Then you ask, well, if it's true, in what sense are you saying it's true? Is relativism true in an absolute sense or is it true in a relative sense? Clearly, if I say it's absolutely true, then I'd be contradicting myself. That's the first part of the argument. On the other hand, to avoid the contradiction, I might say, relativism is relatively true. Then you'd ask, relative to what? Then I'd say, relative to a reference frame. Then you'd say, well then your relativism wouldn't be very convincing to anyone who doesn't share your reference frame, would it? That's the second part of the argument. Right now, I'm mostly concerned with the first part of the argument.

Manjula: This argument reminds me of the classical refutation of the verification principle of meaning. Remember we learned about it in our History of 20th century philosophy class. The Logical Empiricists in the early part of the 20th century believed that the only kinds of sentences that had cognitive value / meaning were sentences that were verifiable. Their thesis was (V): A sentence S is cognitively valuable if and only if S is verifiable through observation. So, for example, the sentence 'There is a chair in this room.' is meaningful, if and only if, it is verifiable; and since we can verify it, it is meaningful. From this verification principle, they went on to argue that the sentence 'God exists.' is not meaningful, since it cannot be verified, but that the sentence, 'There are four moons on the largest planet in the next galaxy.' was meaningful, because in principle we could verify it, even if we didn't have the technology. One criticism of the verification principle is similar to what Ronnie is concerned about with respect to relativism being self-refuting. Consider the principle itself. Either V is meaningful or not? If V is meaningful, then by V, it is verifiable, but V is not, since we don't know how to verify all the possible sentences that can be constructed to see if the thesis is true. But V also appears to be meaningful, since we can understand it, so V must be false. So the principle, refutes itself when applied to itself, since it is meaningful yet unverifiable.

  I think that there is a general issue here we need to pay attention to. It is the issue of scope and self-application concerning principles. Is it possible for one to be a relativist about truth or a verificationist about meaning and to limit the scope of application of the principles? That is, can one say that the relativist and the

verificationist principles are meta-principles? Principles that tell us how things are, but are in a sense out of the scope of what they apply to. They tell us the rules of the game, but the rules they present don't apply to them. If we take this strategy, then we are out of the problem. Since we don't intend for the rules to apply to the rules. In general we should be worried about cases where we are talking about everything. Those cases often lead to paradox. It is best to limit the scope of application for the rules. Relativism and Verificationism could be true, if we limit the scope appropriately. On this account, they tell us about the nature of reality by being articulated as principles, but they are out of the scope of application.

Reality and the nature of questions and explanations

Barbara (67): But you could deny that there's an ultimate constituent out of which everything else is made. You could keep unpacking constituents indefinitely. You could ask, "What are electrons made of?" "What are photons made of?" and on and on. The question is always there, regardless of whether you've really gotten down to the ultimate constituent.

Nina (67): Yes. The foundationalist says that there is an ultimate constituent. The non-foundationalist says that there is no such thing as an ultimate constituent.

Manjula: This exchange is interesting. I think that Nina is right in asserting that there are at least two positions. However, there is also a third. The third position is that there are ultimate constituents and there are not ultimate constituents. It depends on how you look at it. The analogy I would give would use the example of light, which has a fundamental dual nature of being a *particle* and a *wave*. It is both a particle and a wave, and given that particles are not waves, to say it has this nature is to say that it is something that is both F and not-F. This dual nature is fundamental to it. Likewise, we could say that reality has a fundamental dual nature: *to have ultimate constituents* and to *not have fundamental constituents*.

But Barbara's argument also illuminates another interesting *cognitive trap*. Just because we can continue to apply a question-type to a specific answer to a question, it doesn't follow that the question still makes sense.

Adam (insert): The first point is an interesting option. That reality has and does not have fundamental constituents. But the second point I don't get. Can you explain Manjula?

Manjula: Sure Adam. As children we all figure out that we can always respond to an explanation of something with the question: why? Your parents tell you that clouds are the source of rain, you ask: why? Then they tell you because of the condensation of water…. And you ask: why? But eventually your parents get frustrated and tell you to stop. Now in some cases, you really want more, and there is more. But it is possible that explanations just come to an end, they hit *bedrock*, as Wittgenstein

would have said. However, when they do, it is important to notice that we can still ask: why? So, the mere fact that we can ask "why?" doesn't mean that we have not reached bottom. The fact that we can continue to ask why doesn't always signal that there is a further answer. It just illustrates a fact about how our language works. The fact that you can ask me why I am hungry, and I can just say because I am, might just be the end of it. It is not just that I don't know a further answer. It might just be that there is no further answer.

Compatibility and forcing

Nina (80): All right. My overriding point is that the very idea of absolutism comes in different strands –realism, universalism, and foundationalism. Whatever problems we might have with any single one of those strands, just negating it—as a relativist might do—won't result in a logical contradiction. You might disagree with realism or non-realism. You might disagree with universalism or non-universalism. You might disagree with foundationalism or non-foundationalism. But none of them are self-contradictory.

Manjula: Nina I think that you are absolutely right to force us to distinguish these things. And to bring to our attention that none of them are self-contradictory alone. But I think we have to add two points. All these different strands are distinct, but that doesn't mean they are all *compatible*. Let's assume bivalence for a moment, and distinguish between universalism, foundationalism, and realism. The first point is that a compatibilist will say that any combination of these is compatible, and an incompatibilist will say that some of them are incompatible. The second point is that if we go further and consider the theses as they apply to specific domains, such as the moral, aesthetic, religious, logical, and mathematical domains, we may find that when we accept one thesis in one domain, such as foundationalism about logic, we are forced to accept a certain position in a distinct domain, such as universalism about mathematics. Moreover, we need to be sensitive to the fact that distinguishing different strands doesn't always mean that the combinations thus made available are all compatible and plausible, and that accepting one thesis in one domain, may force or preclude accepting another thesis in another domain. And this again will be a function of the kind of reasoning we allow ourselves in our inquiry, bivalence vs. paraconsistency, for example.

DAY FOUR

The fourth day's discussion focuses on going beyond relativism and absolutism. The topics include: the supposed opposition between relativism and absolutism, the nature of argumentation and self-realization, dissolving distinctions, the nature of negation, suffering, intentionality, the notion of what can be said in words, meditation, and the nature of minds.

Argumentation

Nina (88): What other purposes might there be for giving reasons, other than convincing someone of the truth or falsity of a belief?

Barbara (88): When relativists offer reasons to the absolutist, they need not try to convince the absolutist. Relativist may give reasons or arguments just to present their views in an orderly way to promote a better understanding of their view. Without aiming to convince another person to embrace their view, relativists might seek to share their rationale for embracing their view.

Manjula: I agree with much of what Barbara says. However, I think there is another way to get at the point. We need to introduce the notion of the intended audience of the reasons-giving exercise and the notion of the purpose of the reasons-giving exercise. Some people are undecided about relativism and absolutism (or some debate in general). And when the relativist and the absolutist aim at the undecided they aim to give them reasons to embrace their view or understand their view, much as Barbara points out. These reasons in some sense gain traction because the undecided person is impartial and open-minded to hearing both sides. However, the nature of the reasons-giving exercise is different when the audience is the one who holds the opposing view. In that case we have to distinguish between *hardened debate* and *positioned-inquiry*. In hardened debate I think that Barbara is right, they are just screaming past each other and they cannot really change each other's point of view because they are not open minded. In some sense, in a hardened exchange each opponent represents a personality type. A good example of this is what you see in some political exchanges where hardened liberals and conservatives debate each other by largely using illicit moves of debate because they don't agree on much and have completely different value systems. But in positioned-inquiry each participant has a point of view, but is open-minded. They are open to changing their point of view because they realize that they may discover something in the exchange. When the purpose of the exchange is positioned-inquiry, I don't think that relativism and absolutism are playing different games with one another. For example, in positioned-inquiry an absolutist can convince a relativist to become an absolutist because the relativist did not see that his position, as Ronnie pointed out, is potentially self-refuting. Upon gaining the insight of the potential self-refuting nature of relativism, the relativist may switch sides. Likewise, an absolutist, who does not know that all perception is potentially filtered, may, upon realizing that component of the human condition, switch sides as well.

I think the key is that we need to understand what is going on in the exchange and the virtues of inquiry that are at play in the participants. Are they open-minded, curious, creative, courageous, and patient in their examination of the evidence and in their intellectual engagement? Or are they negligent in their examination of the evidence and in their intellectual engagement? We can all choose to be virtuous in our inquiry with one another. And that is very different from choosing to be hardened and agenda driven in our exchanges.

On what we seek

Nina (91): It's quite simple, really. It's something we all seek. We all seek freedom from suffering of old age and death. We all seek freedom from the anxieties associated with our mortality. Self-realization –realizing who we really are– alleviates us from the anxiety of our finitude. Who we really are is One, without limit. Who we really are is indivisible, infinite, eternal, and free. All of us are embodiments of the One.

Manjula: Nina, I for one want those things –at least freedom from suffering and my constant anxiety about my purpose in the world. But I feel uncomfortable saying that what I want is something that everyone wants or really seeks. It sounds paternalistic and a bit condescending. I feel uncomfortable saying that even if they say they don't want those things, they really want those things, and they just don't realize it. I feel like it is wrong to legislate to others what they really want and who they really are. It is a way of forcing them into thinking something is wrong with them if they don't want it or they don't see it after trying to understand it.
   Many people suffer in order to bring meaning to their moments of joy. We don't seek the complete alleviation of suffering, because we think it would rob us of our humanity. We affirm our humanity and the true human condition through our joint suffering. However, this is consistent with recognizing a spiritual self, and seeking cultivation of it, as well as desiring to avoid unnecessary pains that one does not chose to take on.

On the nature of Oneness and category mistakes

Nina (97): OK. Look at it this way. Your question reduced to the question, "What is the relation of Oneness—the realm of no relations—to the realm of differentiated, countable individuals and their relations?" By just asking that question, you're rejecting the idea that there could be a realm of no relations. In the realm of no relations, there's no question of the relation between it and the realm of relations. Your very question disallows the realm of no relations.

Manjula: I agree with you Nina, but I think the way you are explaining it might be confusing. Let's just return to the question we discussed earlier about fundamental vs. non-fundamental constituents of reality. In that discussion Barbara wanted to do the same thing she is doing here—inferring from the fact that a question makes perfect sense, that the question applies in a given case. What we need to make clear is that the question, "What relation does Oneness have to the realm of relations?" is a category mistake. Though it is grammatically correct. It is like asking, "Does 2 have parents from Mumbai?" Unless I mean something different by 'parents' and '2' then what is normally meant, this question ought to strike everyone as really odd. Likewise, although the question Barbara asks is grammatically well formed, and an application of a legitimate set of ideas, it doesn't apply, since ONENESS isn't the

kind of thing that has or bears relations, just like soup isn't the kind of thing that has a square root.

Barbara (101): Nina, you've said that what there ultimately is, is relative and absolute, but neither relative nor absolute. How can that be?

Manjula: Before Nina gives her explanation, I think it might be important to point out that the claim is that the ultimate, call it U, is both absolute, call it A, and relative, call it R, yet neither. So it would look like this:

    (1) [(U is A) & (U is R)].
    (2) [¬(U is A) & ¬(U is R)].

Which conjoined is:

    (3) {[(U is A) & (U is R)] & [¬(U is A) & ¬(U is R)]}

Now if A is the strict opposite of R, we can substitute in F for A, and ¬F for R, and reduce (3) to:

    (4) {[(U is F) & (U is ¬F)} & [¬(U is F) & ¬(U is ¬F)]}

But this is only a problem and confusing if we accept the *Law of Excluded Middle* (LCM): either P is true, or P is false; and the *Law of Non-Contradiction* (LNC): it is not the case that both P is true and P is false. What are the reasons for accepting these principles? I think Barbara is asking for an explanation from this background. I don't think we can satisfy that demand.

Rather, we might want to accept a form of *logical pluralism*, where we accept that in certain domains we ought to accept LCM and LNC, but that in other domains we ought not to. And I think Nina might be right to think that when we are thinking about the fundamental nature of reality being ONENESS, we ought to think of these principles as not applying. I would add, that when we are thinking about practical matters, such as how to get from Benares to Madras, we probably want to accept both principles. In general, the rules of how we reason may be dictated by the nature of the thing we are reasoning about. Practical reasoning about directions has one set of rules and reasoning about the fundamental nature of reality has a distinct set of rules. And yes there is a basic logical principle that tells us to use the appropriate kind of principles relative to the given domain of inquiry. However, each logical system is a true logic, and the appropriate means to good and effective reasoning in its respective domain.

On language and dissolving a debate

Barbara (116): Nina, you seem to think that the debate between Adam and Ronnie dissolves because language can't capture the way things are. You think that language is inherently limited because of its essentially dualistic nature. So, since both Adam and Ronnie's arguments—inevitably in a language—seek to capture how things are, they both must fail to do so.

Nina (116) Yes, that's pretty well it. The debate dissolves itself. It deconstructs itself. That's why I think we should move on and ask the deeper question, namely, what we really want. My answer is that we really want to eliminate or at least minimize suffering as individual human beings.

Manjula: Wait Nina. I agree—in that I also want to eliminate suffering. But I am confused by your answer to Barbara. Isn't there a difference between a natural language and a formal language, such as between English and a programming language, such as C++? Are you saying that every language has to be dualistic essentially, that there are no non-dualistic languages, and that a non-dualistic language could never be constructed? I find that hard to believe. We know that Sanskrit and Hopi are different languages, and we know that C++ and Java are different languages. With all the differences out there couldn't there already be or at least be constructed a language that served the function you are talking about. Couldn't we argue in a language where we don't distort reality? This seems to me to be the same point that I found to be odd about our earlier discussion concerning lenses and filters. It seems like we always think that because something may not capture everything, that it distorts or falsifies or doesn't allow us to get at things in some important way. But this comes about by imposing a negative meta-frame on the words 'lens', 'language', and 'filter'. These terms could also have positive readings, such as in *filtering out the impure, speaking the language of truth, or lenses for seeing the prism of light*.

On the nature of experience and shared mental states

Barbara (120): […] However beneficial meditation might be for each of us in different ways, I wonder whether we could really know whether what you will have experienced and what I will have experienced is the same, or whether it will have enabled us to grasp the ultimate reality. I wonder whether the Hindus, Buddhists, and visitors all might be in the same situation.

Manjula: I think this is a great question Barbara. But I think we need to be more critical. On the one hand, I would say that because the experiences are never strictly identical, it couldn't be the case that we know them to be strictly identical. My experience of red has me implicated in it, and your experience of red has you implicated in it. So, at the relative level, Nina speaks of, we cannot have the same experience, and at the ultimate level where we are not different there would be nothing to speak of. But staying at the relative level of individuality, I would say that we can have justified beliefs about what we are each experiencing because there are natural connections between our bodily and facial expressions and our internal states. Wincing in pain and smiling with joy can of logical possibility be inverted, but they cannot of natural normal animal development be inverted. At the natural relative level, our facial expressions allow us to see what is most likely going on inside. And though we can fake a smile, a keen eye can discern the fake from the real by taking

note of the relation between the curves of the lips, the top of the forehead, and the gaze in the eye. So, I would say the kind of knowledge you seek is impossible, but that the justified beliefs that we need for communication are available.

Adam (124): I'm so much looking forward to all of us reconnecting at our next reunion when we can discuss these things further.

Manjula: I am also. I think we all had a positioned inquiry, and even though none of us changed sides we learned valuable aspects of each other's position. I look forward to seeing how what I have learned here may, in another context and discussion, lead to a different unfolding of thoughts.

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