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Leo Strauss and the Threat of Moral Relativism

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Abstract

Relativism generally, and moral relativism in particular, continue to be topics of philosophical controversy. The controversy arises over general questions about the **semantics, epistemology, and logic of the relativist's position.** With regard to moral relativism, there are also disagreements about whether moral relativism does not undermine the force of moral claims. Some of these disputes are due to the fact that the disputants differ in the ways they define or understand relativism. Since much of the current controversy about moral relativism has roots in earlier discussions that took place in the twentieth century which have been presented in the works of **Leo Strauss, a critical analysis of some of Strauss's views is presented.** Relativism was an issue of paramount importance for Strauss, who nevertheless refused to define the object of his concern. Strauss argues that relativism is self-defeating in a manner designated here as the enfeeblement peritrope. Finally, a sketch of how equivocation on the issue of relativism can be avoided by distinguishing the value relativity from parameter parity. It is the latter that is responsible for the **enfeeblement that is Strauss's target.**

Keywords: Leo Strauss, Moral Relativism, Enfeeblement Peritrope.

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Introduction

Even before his emigration to the United States in 1937, Leo Strauss (1899-1973) published several articles that warn against relativism. In one of the articles published in the fifties, he offers a version of the claim that relativism is self-refuting (“**Humanism and the Social Sciences**”, in: **Strauss, 1989, pp. 3-12**). This style of argument is called the peritrope, from Greek for turning the tables. There are many peritropic arguments against relativism; and scholars disagree about exactly which of them was used by Plato to refute Protagoras. Strauss argues that liberal relativists are eager to be open to different points of view, and so they hold that each view is right or true relative to some perspective or point of view. However, that would mean that they should also be open to absolutist points of view, like that of Plato. Liberals, however, consider absolutist points of view to be unacceptably closed minded and prejudiced, and so they reject them, despite the fact that the vast majority of moral and political philosophies in the course of history have been absolutist. Goals and values are the results of personal choices toward which liberalism declares its neutrality while it cannot remain neutral with regard to values opposed to liberalism without opening the way to its own defeat.

The argument that liberalism is so permissive that it defeats itself by permitting its own enemies to establish themselves is one that conservatives have used on numerous occasions when their intolerance is questioned. If everything is to be tolerated except intolerance, then in principle exceptions must be admitted to **liberalism’s indifference** toward values. This kind of peritrope is found in several **versions in Strauss’s works. The application of this kind of argument to relativism** yields what we may call *the enfeeblement peritrope*: the relativist’s claim that whatever is true or valuable is so only relative to some parameter, a framework, culture, or perspective, enfeebles the relativist, for whatever truths and values are affirmed by the relativist could be denied from an equally valid but opposing perspective.

The arguments against relativism (and historicism) were continued after Strauss by Allan Bloom (1930-1992), who studied with Strauss at the University of Chicago and later taught there, in his best seller, *The Closing of the American Mind* (**Bloom, 1987**). Following Strauss, Bloom traces relativistic value neutrality in the social sciences to Max Weber and in philosophy, Strauss and Bloom both credit **Nietzsche with exposing modernity’s inability to provide a satisfactory foundation**

for values through rationality; but unlike Strauss, Bloom is given to ranting about the ills of pop culture and the immorality of the sixties, which he incredibly blames on the influence of German thinkers, especially Heidegger, in America!

Bloom also faults relativism for the weakness of the Weimar Republic and its **inability to prevent Hitler's accession to power. He draws ominous sounding** parallels between American and Weimar decadence. Historicism and relativism weakened those who were not given to communist or fascist fanaticism so that they were unable to effectively oppose the extremists. This view has several faults: it is over simplistic, it ignores the complexities of German politics of the Weimar period, and it posits philosophical ideas with undue social and political influence. The myth, however, is often repeated, although not by Strauss.

Strauss provides a brief sketch of the weaknesses of the Weimar republic in the **preface to the English translation of his Spinoza's Critique of Religion without** mentioning liberalism or relativism (Strauss, 1965, pp. 1-3). Nevertheless, many of **Strauss's interpreters have stated that it was the failures of Weimar liberalism that** turned Strauss against it; and these failures are usually attributed to the philosophical ascendancy of relativism and historicism. Thus, for example, Steven **B. Smith informs us in his sketch of Strauss's life:**

For particular historical reasons, the liberal solution to the theologico-political problem was weaker in Germany than in other European nations. The Weimar Republic was regarded by many intellectuals of Strauss's generation as a foreign import without roots in the German tradition. Furthermore, it was a symbol of Anglo-French domination that could be traced back to the French Revolution. The very weakness of Weimar was made manifest in its failure to provide safety and protection to its Jewish citizens.... It was the very weakness and fragility of liberal democracy, its susceptibility to demagoguery of both the Left and the Right, that would become a central problem of Strauss's life's work (Smith, 2009, pp. 17-18).

The form of the enfeeblement peritrope with which Bloom refutes relativism is not given in any formal argument, although the idea is clear enough: relativism is enervating. Value relativism robs a culture of its potency because relativists cannot stand up for their own values or cultures. A liberalism that refuses to take sides in value disputes, because values are relative, will be unable to defend its own liberal values.

While Bloom denied that he was a conservative, neoconservatives appreciated

his polemics with positive reviews. Another author associated with the neoconservatives who expresses dismay at the widespread relativism in modern culture is Francis Fukuyama, who was a student of Allan Bloom. The following quotation from Fukuyama is fairly typical of the way in which relativism is alleged to be self-defeating in political culture.

[T]he rise of relativism has made it impossible for postmodern people to assert positive values for which they stand, and therefore the kinds of shared beliefs they demand as a condition for citizenship. Postmodern societies, particularly those in Europe, feel that they have evolved past identities defined by religion and nation and have arrived at a superior place. But aside from their celebration of endless diversity and tolerance, postmodern people find it difficult to agree on the substance of the good life to which they aspire in common (Fukuyama, 2006, pp. 19-20).

Sometimes the term “the paradox of democracy” is used to describe this problem; it is also a version of the “paradox of liberalism” or one of the “antinomies of liberalism”. In international relations, the paradox takes the form of the promotion of individual rights and free markets while at the same time allowing nation states a high degree of regimented bureaucratic control over their populations and the regulation of markets to promote growth and competitiveness.

The issue of modernity’s value neutrality and the associated relativism, skepticism, and nihilism occupied Strauss throughout his life. But it never became clear in his writings exactly what relativism was supposed to be, and whether it was a consequence of modern value neutrality or a cause of it. One will search through his works in vain for a clear formulation and logical analysis of the enfeeblement peritrope.

The condemnation of relativism as responsible for a crisis of culture was not invented by Strauss. Johannes Steizinger provides both documentation and historical insight into the widespread anxieties about relativism among German intellectuals prior to World War II, including Nazi intellectuals.¹

Although Strauss and others saw the relativism that was widespread in the Weimar period as opening the way to political extremism, because more moderate forces were enfeebled by their inability to take a strong stand in defense of their values, Steizinger shows that it is a mistake to conclude that the ideology of the

1. (Steizinger, 2019). The entire volume in which this appears provides valuable historical background to the manner in which relativism came to be understood in Germany.

Nazis included any simple endorsement of relativism.

At the end of the article, “Social Science and Humanism”, Strauss tacitly admits that his objections only apply to a rather extreme form of relativism. He ends his article as follows:

Many humanistic social scientists are aware of the inadequacy of relativism, but they hesitate to turn to what is called “absolutism”. They may be said to adhere to a qualified relativism. Whether this qualified relativism has a solid basis appears to me to be the most pressing question for social science today (Strauss, 1989, p. 12).

This is an important concession. The rejection of relativism to which Strauss invites his readers is not to be followed by a return to absolutism, for the most promising alternative is a moderate or *qualified relativism*. Despite the capital importance Strauss attaches to relativism, he refuses to define it. This is not just a matter of inattention or sloppiness; rather, it is a self-conscious principled decision. Strauss opens his “Relativism” (1961) as follows:

“Relativism” has many meanings. In order not to become confused by the “blind scholastic pedantry” that exhausts itself and its audience in the “clarification of meanings” so that it never meets the nonverbal issues, I shall work my way into our subject by examining the recent statement of a famous contemporary about “the cardinal issue,” the fundamental political problem of our time. As a fundamental problem it is theoretical; it is not the problem of particular policies, but the problem of the spirit that should inform particular policies. That problem is identified by Isaiah Berlin as the problem of freedom (Strauss, 1989, p. 13).¹

“Relativism” in Strauss’s work is always a nebulous enemy. Without a definition of relativism, it is very difficult to see what the relation is to *the problem of freedom*, “the fundamental political problem of our time”. So, we have to begin reading Strauss as detectives. Our first clue about how Strauss understands *relativism* is that he sees it as importantly related to the political problem of freedom.

1. Strauss against Berlin

In his essay “Relativism”, Strauss begins with a critique of the famous essay, “Two Concepts of Liberty” (Berlin, 2002, pp. 166-217), by Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997), which distinguished negative freedom, freedom from interference, from positive

1. Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty”, 1958, p. 51; cf. p. 4.

freedom, freedom to attain a goal (Strauss, 1989, pp. 13-26). **Berlin's essay was based on a lecture delivered in 1958; Strauss's criticism came three years later in an anthology on relativism.** Strauss explains that negative freedom roughly corresponds to freedom for the empirical self, the self we ordinarily experience, including its lower inclinations. Positive freedom is freedom of the true self, the higher self, the self-governed by reason. Berlin favors negative freedom because it protects the individual from interference by the state. Positive freedom is paternalistic and can be used as an excuse for totalitarianism.

Berlin rejects the traditional idea that there is a harmonious hierarchy of ends. **He finds this idea to be based on "dogmatic and a priori certainty" and on "the metaphysical view of politics" which he takes to be "demonstrably false" since it is opposed to an empirical view of man.** Instead of some ideal harmony, what experience demonstrates is an irreconcilable plurality of values. According to Berlin, empiricists and liberals, such as J. S. Mill, hold all human purposes to be equal, while rationalists, like Kant, require a ranking of values. For liberals, governmental interference is to be allowed only to coordinate social behavior in such a manner so as to minimize conflicts as citizens pursue their own incompatible ends. **So, there are limits or "frontiers" to the negative freedom of the individual.** The citizen must not be permitted to act in such a manner so as to create havoc in **the society; and the excuse of the pursuit of one's own values cannot be allowed to justify the violation of these limits or trespass beyond these frontiers.** Here Strauss invokes the *peritrope*:

Those frontiers must be "sacred" (ibid., p. 57). They must be "absolute": "Genuine belief in the inviolability of a minimum extent of individual **liberty entails some ... absolute stand**" (ibid., p. 50). **"Relativism," or the assertion that all ends are relative to the chooser and hence equal, seems to require some kind of "absolutism". ... Liberalism, as Berlin understands it, cannot live without an absolute basis and cannot live with an absolute basis** (Strauss, 1989, 15-16).¹

Strauss then mounts another attack on Berlin's liberalism focusing on empiricism. If the absolute frontiers needed to protect society from chaos are known through experience, then since experience is changing, we can expect those frontiers to be challenged as new experience is gained. Since there is no peak

1. This quotation contains references to Berlin quoted by Strauss.

experience that can be taken as an absolute foundation for all time, Berlin must hold that not only are ultimate values relative, but also that the absolute limits that regulate the pursuit of diverse goals must also be relative. Yet Berlin divides civilized people from barbarians on the basis of respect for the frontiers of tolerable behavior. Berlin, therefore, does not see it as being subject to revision. But if it is **only supported by historical experience, Berlin's self-proclaimed empiricism** would require him to admit the possibility of revision.

Next comes Strauss's third volley. Since Berlin divides the civilized from the barbarians on the basis of the principles of liberalism, he should count Plato and **Kant as barbarians while an ordinary "hack", a dull unimaginative person, if he** held and abided by liberal principles would count as civilized. This is absurd. **Hence, the basis for Berlin's division must be rejected.**

All three of these arguments turn on what we might call the problem of distinguishing variations from violations. The liberal must allow for variations in values while maintaining intolerance for violations of basic rights and duties or fundamentals. Failure to do so results in enfeeblement. There are a number of ways that the distinction might be made; for rationalists as well as empiricists. Rationalists will hold that some systems of values are inconsistent, in theory or in application, and, hence, that they are condemnable on the basis of universally accepted norms of reason. Moral intuitionism could take an empiricist form by allowing for variations when reasonable people have different moral intuitions but holding the line against views that conflict with consensus or near consensus, where it is admitted that this division will be a changing one. It is simply an empirical fact that in any given society some moral norms are a matter of differing opinions while others are well entrenched. The division is not absolute. Some norms are held more strictly than others and the degree of tolerance for variations on norms also changes over time. As a matter of contingent fact, however, we are not left with a moral chaos, but, rather, a fairly clear, if somewhat vague, division between variations and violations.

2. Strauss against Positivism

Strauss assumes that some such empiricist position was taken by the logical positivists; and he admits that with it they would be able to avoid the *peritrope*.

Logical positivists might fault Berlin for trying to make the principles of liberalism sacred and absolute. They would advocate a more thorough relativism. Every culture divides civilization from barbarism by its own principles, none of which is any better than another. **The flaw in Berlin's liberalism was to take two elements as *a priori* and absolute:** (1) the equality of different value systems, as long as they are in conformity with the basic principles of liberalism; and (2) the correctness of liberal doctrine. Strauss, in effect, concedes that the *peritrope* can be avoided if one allows that ranking of perspectives takes place from within each perspective without pretending to pass judgment about the division between the civilized and the barbarian from a transcendent and absolute vantage point.

Strauss is not satisfied with the "positivist" way out, however, and he offers four arguments that explain his opposition. First, he faults positivism for its limitation of (practical) rationality to *instrumental rationality*. If no end or ultimate value is more rational than any other, then the miser whose sole end is to hoard wealth would be no less rational than the greatest benefactor to humanity. This is obviously wrong; so positivism should be rejected.

Strauss's second attack on positivism is that since positivism recognizes only instrumental rationality, any choice of ends cannot be rational. But all action requires a choice of ends. Hence, no action is completely rational. This is absurd, **so we should reject positivism's limitation of the rational to the instrumentally rational.**

Strauss's third attack is that the positivists have no way to reject as irrational the choice of a person to be irrational! If one chooses an irrational life as an ultimate goal, since ultimate goals are all equal, the irrational life is no worse than the rational life. Absurd!

A fourth attack on positivism focuses on the idea of a relativistic social science. Such a science attempts to find causes for social structures and trends. But the positivists have no reason to believe in the principle of causality. Hence positivist science is a self-defeating enterprise.

These arguments are simplistic, and no logical empiricist or positivist worth his salt would have trouble formulating rebuttals. With regard to the hoarder and the philanthropist, Humeans and positivists could argue that both may be equally *rational*, even if one is disapproved of and the other praised according to the moral

norms governing virtually all human societies. The Humean will also deny the absurdity of the view that a choice of ultimate ends can be instrumentally rational. Such a choice might be supposed by the Humean to be based on desires or preferences or even ideal preferences. If the Humean/positivist/empiricist holds that practical rationality is limited to instrumental rationality, and holds that there are ultimate choices of values, these choices may still be *theoretically rational* in the sense of being free from **conflict with the agent's other choices and commitments**. The third argument hardly deserves comment. The view that choices of ultimate goals are not practically rational since practical rationality must be instrumental is perfectly consistent with a rejection of goals that are self-defeating, inconsistent with other accepted goals, or in some other way theoretically defective.

Strauss's attack on positivist social science is based on the assumptions that the social sciences require a metaphysically well-founded concept of causation and that such a concept is unavailable to the positivists. Both assumptions are debatable. Russell and Quine, for example, were both skeptical about the concept of causation; but both thought that science could carry on perfectly well though the use of statistical correlations without any need for causation. Other empiricists, e.g. J. L. Mackie and many others, have argued that a workable concept of causality can be formulated in a manner consistent with empiricist strictures.

3. Strauss against Marxism

Strauss interrupts his critique of the positivists to examine the criticism of Max Weber (1864-1920) offered by the Hungarian Marxist György (Georg) Lukács (1885-1971), whose *Die Zerstörung der Vernunft* (*The Destruction of Reason*) was published in Berlin in 1954. Weber had sought to develop a positivistic social science, Lukács explains; but science requires a selection of facts, otherwise the scientist would be swamped in a surfeit of facts, many of which would be irrelevant to effective theory construction. The selection of relevant facts, however, requires value judgments. Hence, there can be no completely value-free science. (Notice that this argument, if sound, applies to mathematics and the natural sciences as much as it does to the social sciences). After debunking positivistic social science, Lukács claims that the relevant facts to be selected for social science depends upon

a view of the whole course of history, and he claims that the best such view is provided by Marxist historical and dialectical materialism. So, Hegel is accused of thinking that the course of history has reached culmination in his own philosophy, while Marxism is supposed to hold the advantage of viewing history as still evolving. It is here that Strauss pounces with the objection that if history is still evolving, the Marxist cannot claim to have the vision of the whole that Lukács tells us is needed for a proper selection of facts. Strauss complains:

Besides, Marx does not admit transhistorical or natural ends with reference to which change can be diagnosed as progress or regress. It is therefore a question whether by turning from Western relativism to Marxism one escapes relativism (Strauss, 1989, p. 20).

Strauss quotes Lukács on the application of Marxist theory to itself:

Yet this application of materialist method to materialism does not lead to complete relativism; it does not lead to the consequence that historical materialism is not the right method. The substantive truths of Marxism are of the same quality as the truths of classical economics according to Marx's interpretation of those truths. They are truths within a certain order of society and production. As such, but only as such, they possess absolute validity. This does not exclude the emergence of societies in which other categories, other connections of truth, will be valid as a consequence of the essential structure of these societies. (Lukács, 1971, p. 228).¹

Strauss is not satisfied. As he sees it, Lukács is still in the grip of relativism, for Lukács himself has admitted that Marxism may be true only relative to his time or his society, in which case the ranking by which Marxists hold one economic system to be more advanced than another and the ultimate hope for a classless society will also **depend on, be relative to, one's time and society. The Marxist, however, could take this in stride and point out that in this regard Marxist theory is no worse off than other scientific theories: in the course of time, they change, and hopes based on them can also be expected to change. Instead of considering this, Strauss delivers a rhetorical coup de grace by scolding: "it may prove to be the delusion that gave the proletariat the power and the spirit to overthrow the capitalist system, whereas in fact the proletariat finds itself afterwards enslaved, no longer indeed by capital, but by an ironclad military bureaucracy" (Strauss, 1989, p. 21). By the end of his life, at least, Lukács admits the same point about how Stalinist bureaucracy**

1. Georg Lukács, *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein*, 1923, pp. 234-35.

“suffocated” society (Marcus & Tarr, 1989, p. 215). Regardless of whatever position Lukács held at any point about Stalinism, the horrors of Stalinism are no refutation of the kind of relativism Lukács accepted. Social development can only be assessed from a limited perspective. Theories and decisions generated on the basis of such a perspective may turn out to be terribly wrong. That does not mean that we should stop relying on the best evidence available to us in full recognition that the future course of events will bring countervailing evidence that will require retractions and revisions.

Strauss goes on to ridicule the Marxist ideal as illusory and as undesirable, even if it were not as unrealistic as it is, because Marxist liberation threatens the necessity that, according to Machiavelli, is needed to drive human hands and **tongues to excellence. Strauss finishes up with the comment: “the jump from the realm of necessity into the realm of freedom will be the inglorious death of the very possibility of human excellence” (Strauss, 1989, p. 21).** It is pointless to look for any cogent argument here. Although Marxism has generated views that may well deserve the kind of invective Strauss puts on display, none of this helps further our understanding of what is supposed to be wrong with relativism.

4. Hempel and Strauss on the Value of Science

After thus dismissing Marxism, Strauss returns to positivism. Although positivism has roots in the empiricism of David Hume (1711-1776), it differs in two important ways. First, for Hume, to understand science, one must understand its psychological genesis. Concepts, such as causality, are given psychological explanations. For the Logical Positivists, on the other hand, what is important is a proper analysis of scientific theorizing, and this is independent of questions of the psychological genesis of its theories and concepts. Second, Hume was also a political philosopher concerned with the search for universal principles of justice **as natural law. The positivists, however, reject both Kant’s a priori principles and Hume’s psychology. What they are left with, Strauss observes, is merely the observation of man as a social animal.** So, at both of the points where positivism differs from Hume, it differs to its discredit.

With regard to the replacement of scientific theorizing for Humean psychology, Strauss questions how the positivists could understand the point of doing science

at all. Strauss finds the naturalistic view taken by the positivists unsatisfying. For Strauss, science must be more than just something human animals do in order to be more efficient in prediction and control. Here Strauss appears to be jousting with his own caricature of positivism rather than with actually defended views. Although members of the Vienna Circle did emphasize prediction and control, they also discussed the nature of scientific explanation and understanding, and the relation between science and values. A good example of such discussion that was **current just prior to Strauss's "Relativism" would be Carl Hempel's "Science and Human Values", first published in 1960.** Hempel's answer to the question of why we should do science at all, from a logical empiricist perspective, is stated quite clearly. It is not just a matter of prediction and control, but understanding. **According to Hempel, in addition to "giving us an ever increasing measure of control over the forces of nature and the minds of men", science and technology "have enormously broadened our knowledge and deepened our understanding of the world we live in and of our fellow men" (Hempel, 1965, p. 81).** On the practical side, Hempel observes that we value science because it has helped reduce the threat of famine and pestilence, increased the standard of living, and enabled the realization of various aspirations. The value here does not rest on an *a priori* absolute, but on what is contingently valued by most people. If this is a form of value relativism, it is certainly not an arbitrary form of relativism that endorses whatever anyone fancies.

Strauss objects that given the fact that science has also made possible nuclear weapons, science cannot be so easily justified on pragmatic grounds. It may prove to be more harmful than anyone ever imagined. Interestingly enough, Hempel addresses precisely this same worry:

The control of nuclear fission has brought us not only the comforting prospect of a vast new reservoir of energy, but also the constant threat of the atom bomb and of grave damage, to the present and to future generations, from the radioactive by-products of the fission process, even in its peaceful uses (Hempel, 1965, pp. 81-82).

Hempel argues at length that while it may be tempting to look to science itself for a solution to such problems, the issue is a moral one for which science by itself can provide no solution. This is not, Hempel shows, because science is completely value-free. **It isn't. Science presupposes the value of such things as knowledge and**

understanding, free inquiry, and honest research, not to mention such theoretical virtues as simplicity and elegance. Nevertheless, the empirical sciences cannot be expected to settle issues of moral value or to teach human beings how to use the knowledge they acquire in a responsible way.

Categorical judgments of value, then, are not amenable to scientific test and confirmation or disconfirmation; for they do not express assertions but rather standards or norms for conduct. It was Max Weber, I believe, who expressed essentially the same idea by remarking that science is like a map: it can tell us how to get to a given place, but it cannot tell us where to go (Hempel, 1965, p. 86).

Strauss objects that the positivists assume the usual harmony between scientific progress and social progress, but since they view science as completely value free, they have no right to this assumption. Strauss does not make clear exactly which positivists he has in mind here, but the remarks certainly do not apply to Hempel. Finally, Strauss insists again that there is no basis in positivism for the great value the positivists give to science:

Positivism treats science in the way in which it would have to be treated if science were "the very highest power of man," the power by which man transcends the merely human; yet positivism cannot maintain this "Platonic" understanding of science. The question of the human context of science, which positivism fails and refuses to raise, is taken up by its most powerful present-day opponent in the West, radical historicism, or, to use the better-known name, existentialism (Strauss, 1989, p. 24).

Once again, Strauss's criticism misses the mark. Not only Hempel, but many philosophers of science have reflected in detail upon the human context of science. Strauss seems to be preoccupied with a popular caricature of positivism rather than with the views of the actual people whose writings he would cast aside. Furthermore, the attention and respect given to the sciences by those trained in them by no means requires any kind of Platonism or idea of human self-transcendence. **Strauss's problem appears to** be that in the absence of some such metaphysical backing, he cannot find *any* point to theorizing or human values. The real threat from relativism, the reason why it seems so debilitating, is the dubious idea that it is only with unfalsifiable knowledge of the absolute that self-confidence **is possible and one's steps will be resolute.**

5. Strauss and Existentialism

The direction toward which Strauss points us, existentialism, does not offer a satisfactory way to avoid an excessive relativism, for existentialism is based on the idea of the ultimacy of free choice for which no reason can be given. Nevertheless, **Strauss thinks that existentialism, particularly that of Heidegger, to whom “alone existentialism owes its dignity”,**¹ is the only way to overcome the problems of relativism and the foundations of morality. This is an incredible statement. If, as his commentators suggest, Strauss was motivated to find an answer to the problems of relativism and liberalism because of his experience of the weakness of the Weimar Republic in confrontation with the Nazis, Heidegger, who never renounced his membership in the Nazi Party, the NSDAP (Cf., Fuchs, 2016, pp. 32-33), would not be a likely source of inspiration.² Additionally, Strauss himself remarks (whether rightly or not) that Heidegger thought that ethics was not possible. This would be an unlikely place to look for a solution to the problems of the loss of faith and indecisiveness that worry Strauss. There is also some controversy over whether Heidegger himself was a relativist of some sort.³

In short, Strauss credits Nietzsche with the recognition of the failure of modern philosophy to provide a credible foundation for moral values and the need to revalue all values. Although Strauss calls Nietzsche *the* philosopher of relativism, he also credits Nietzsche with pointing to the way in which relativism can be overcome. Unfortunately, it is never made clear how this is to be done.

Relativism, Strauss informs us, was an issue for Nietzsche in the form of a “decayed Hegelianism”, a form of historicism. Recall that Strauss considers existentialism to be a form of historicism as well, radical historicism, the opponent of positivism. The decayed or Hegelian form of historicism is one that sees human ideals and identity as products of the time in which they take form. Hegel is able to escape the conclusion that his own thought is merely an evanescent product of his

1. *Ibid.* It should be noted that Heidegger explicitly rejected existentialism (Heidegger, 1998, pp. 264-267). For a book length study of Heidegger’s relation to existentialism and French phenomenology (see: Rockmore, 1995). For a nice short description, see chapter 3 of (Flynn, 2006). Strauss considers Heidegger to have broken with existentialism only after having initiated it (see: Strauss, 1989, p. 37).

2. Strauss is well aware of the problem Heidegger’s politics makes for him (See: Strauss, 1989, pp. 30-31).

3. On this issue see (Golob, 2019), in which it is argued that Heidegger was not a relativist, and opposing views are discussed.

own time only by asserting that Hegel's time was special, an absolute moment, and subsequent Hegelians were optimistic that from the absolute moment onward there would be infinite progress. Here Strauss returns to his version of the **enfeeblement peritrope**. He writes, “History becomes a spectacle that for the superficial is exciting and for the serious is enervating. It teaches a truth that is **deadly**” (Strauss, 1989, p. 25).

The deadly truth of history is confronted by Nietzsche with the decision to make new values of his own. Strauss faults Nietzsche for trying to ground the decision in a metaphysics of the will to power **or in recourse to one's own nature; and he sees** existentialism as the next step forward; but in the existentialist though he surveys, the most that can be found is an ethics of authenticity, which, Strauss admits, is not much to build on.

Despite Strauss's **enthusiasm with Heidegger, he faults him for his neglect of** ethics, and even claims that Heidegger thought that ethics is not possible (Strauss, 1989, p. 36). This is no negligible oversight, since, for Strauss, the crisis of relativism is essentially a moral and political one. If we are to learn from Nietzsche that we have to revalue all values, and from Heidegger we learn that this is to be done only by facing the abyss of our own mortality, the question of moral value cannot be left hanging.

Strauss is looking for a dedication to principles that must be immune from criticism or doubt, although he recognizes that nothing in the modern world enjoys such immunity. Strauss considers a fictionalist approach to the problem, a self-conscious myth-making; but he recognizes that no amount of self-deception is going to restore the kind of certainty that has been lost.

“The true solution comes to sight once one realizes the essential limitation of objective history or of **objective knowledge in general,**” Strauss concludes; and the conclusion would be endorsed by Hempel, too. But if Strauss thinks that once the limitations of objectifying inquiry are recognized, we are free to make decisions without having reasons for them, so that the ultimate principles of thought and action may be expressions of authentic subjectivity, this would return us to the relativism from which Strauss was trying so earnestly to escape.

Strauss's relation to Heidegger, however, is complicated. Although there are

passages in which Strauss clearly admires Heidegger, and might even consider him a kind of intellectual savior figure, Strauss also expresses dissatisfaction with Heidegger precisely with regard to the question of relativism. Strauss differentiates **his thinking from Heidegger's** by virtue of his own affirmation of absolute norms. But for Heidegger, too, moral laws are not binding unless they are tasks assigned to man by Being (*Seyn*) itself, which would also give them an absolute status. The only problem is that Being, according to Heidegger, has not issued any moral commandments. This is what opens the way, according to Strauss, to a deeper form **of relativism, and to Heidegger's support for the National Socialists. One** might perversely find **authenticity in the affirmation of one's own race. Strauss's own way,** to the contrary, led to a Socratic questioning, to the admission that we do know that we are ignorant, and that we must resist the forces of tyranny that pretend otherwise. The ultimate absolute, for Strauss, according to the persuasive exposition of Richard Velkley (Velkley 2011), is openness to questioning.

6. Turning the Tables on the Enfeeblement Peritrope

Strauss accuses liberals, positivists, Marxists, and others of what we have dubbed *the enfeeblement peritrope*. The allegation expresses a diagnosis that society is suffering from relativism, which weakens it. Relativism supposedly robs a culture of its potency because relativists cannot stand up for their own values or cultures. A liberalism that refuses to take sides in value disputes, because values are relative, will be unable to defend its own liberal values. If one set of norms is as good as another, then the outcome will be apathy. The charge that relativism implies moral apathy or indifference, however, has been neatly debunked by Sharon Street (Street 2016). She argues that if we were invaded by intelligent creatures from another galaxy who eat people, we would not defend ourselves any less upon learning that **eating people is morally permitted in the aliens' morality.** Even if someone is morally right from their perspective to do something we consider wrong, that does not give us any cause for indifference.

Relativism will only lead to the deadly weakness of indifference in those whose expectations were misplaced from the start. It is only the disappointment that comes with the recognition of transcendental illusion in one who clings to the idea of some unattainable guarantee of truth and correctness that results in the feeling that one has looked into the abyss. But the abyss will serve no better as a

metaphysical ultimate than did the Platonic forms.

Strauss recovers from the loss of an objective truth to guarantee ultimate values **and principles with the realization that “values have always been human creations; they owed their being to a free human project that formed the horizon within which a culture was possible.” He continues by advising: “What man did in the past unconsciously and under the delusion of submitting to what is independent of his creative act, he must now do consciously” (Strauss, 1989, p. 26).**

The mistake here is the false dichotomy between what is forced upon one by the results of objectifying inquiry and an arbitrarily creative act. Moral realists are forever seeking some Platonic reality independent of human choices to sanction values and principles, for without the metaphysical support of realism, it is feared that everything will be up for grabs. Opposition to moral constructivism sometimes takes this course.

Consider, for a moment, something generally accepted to be a matter of arbitrary social convention, such as the rituals of greeting and departing that differ in many societies. Suppose Smith was unaware that bowing was a form of greeting ritual in some societies. Smith thinks that it is *natural* to greet people by shaking hands and cannot imagine greetings being performed in any other way. When Smith learns of Japanese culture and becomes aware of the relativity of the greeting rituals, the result is *not* that Smith is no longer motivated to shake hands with people in his own culture when greeting them. Later Smith learns that some forms of bowing greetings used to be standard in his own European culture many years ago, and he comes to recognize the possibility that at some time in the future, the convention might change. None of this can be expected to result in indifference or lack of motivation to carry out the rituals in a locally appropriate way. Why does the relativity fail to produce some kind of nausea or ennui in Smith? Because Smith was never under the illusion that without its grounding in nature there would be no reason for the observance of any ritual. In the cultures in which existentialism found a foothold, on the other hand, it had been imagined that without a metaphysical basis to determine a unique morality, there would be no reason at all to respect moral principles.

The tradition of thought running through Nietzsche and Heidegger to Strauss follows one error with another. First, there is the error of thinking that values were

binding in the past only because they were believed to have been given to us independently of any human choices; this is followed by the second error of thinking that once we realize that this belief is false, we are free to create values however we please. **However, the moral norms of one's society are binding upon one**, in the sense that one will be judged in the society according to these standards, whether or not one is motivated to govern oneself by them. The standards are given by the society independent of **any given individual's personal choice, and yet the social standards are not independent of individual choices**. Norms are emergent. One must still decide for oneself whether the norms are valid or worthy of respect. The mere fact that there are individuals or even societies with different norms is no reason to reject our own. The fact that at some time in the future we might find better norms is no more reason to reject our current norms today than the fact that current quantum theory might be supplanted by something better in the future is reason to reject the best theory currently in our possession. It is certainly no reason to think that we must abandon physical science or abandon the values we find ourselves with and make up new ones by sheer strength of will.

Strauss holds that all previous values must be rejected because their objective validity cannot be demonstrated. Maybe some values, like the value of health, *can* be demonstrated to have objective validity. Nevertheless, it must be granted that at least some important values cannot be objectively validated. Instead of rejecting such values, as Strauss says we must when we mistakenly thought they were objectively valid, it would be more reasonable to reject the claim that all our values require objective validity. The absence of objective validity is no license for us to make a new creation of values, regardless of the extent to which this is done authentically or with what degree of intellectual probity. Strauss would protest that if we retain values that we recognize to have lost their objective status, we will be unable to do so with full commitment. The recognition of the relativity of our values is enfeebling.

Strauss is unable to make any systematic advance in the area of his concern precisely because of his conviction that pedantry is to be avoided and with it any attempt to make precise what relativism is. In order to gain some precision, we would need to specify what is supposed to be relative to what. The dependent variable is usually taken to be a value assignment, such as the truth value of an

assertion, or the moral value of an action, or the justification of a belief. Call that to which the value is to be applied (the assertion, action, or belief) the *item*. The independent variable or variables is the parameters with respect to which the attribution of the value in question to a given item is to be judged. Typically these parameters include or refer to standards or norms that may be held by individuals or groups of individuals, such as societies, cultures, or nations. The parameters could also be specified as contexts in which an individual or group appeals to some explicit or implicit standards to issue a judgment about the attribution of the value in question to an item on some occasion or in a context. Sometimes what is meant by *relativism* is simply the view that what makes a value attribution correct is the standards or norms in accordance with which the item is judged to have the value. Call this *value relativism*. It is fairly common, however, to hold that relativism considers all parameters to be equal. No set of standards or norms is better than any other. Call this *parameter parity*. Although often confused, value relativism and parameter parity are logically independent.

The next point of clarification that would be needed for an evaluation of the issues that concern Strauss would be scope. Is relativism supposed to be completely universal? This question can be split into two. With regard to value relativism, we may ask whether all attributions of value are correct or incorrect relative to some standards or norms. With regard to parameter parity we may ask whether all standards and norms are to be considered equal, even those that are flawed by logical incoherence, or those that no human being would ever endorse.

Third, with regard to parameter parity, the question of how the assignment of equal values to all parameters will have to be raised. If relativism is defined in such a manner as to imply that the parity of parameters is perspective independent, although all assignments of values are subject to value relativism, then relativism will be inconsistent, regardless of the *peritrope*.

Once these issues are straightened out, an examination may be made of the *enfeblement paeritrope*. What is it about relativism that is supposed to take the **wind out of one's sails? It is not the mere fact that our most deeply held convictions** are only valid relative to some standards or norms. Value relativism is not the culprit. What prevents a Weimar liberal from standing up against a Nazi is not the mere recognition that the liberal and the Nazi are operating according to different

sets of standards. That should be clear enough to everyone. Enfeeblement only results in the liberal if he takes the Nazi standards to be on a par with his own, and adopts the principle that one must be indifferent toward differences of judgment derived from different standards that are equally valid. Enfeeblement should be resisted with a rejection of the idea that there is something that compels us to view standards that are metaethically on a par as normatively equal no matter how evil according to the moral standards that we recognize.



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