

# The Abhorrent Relativism We Do Not Profess

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Postmodern relativism invades us. This is at least often claimed, with horror and disgust. Some, however, would rather celebrate such an invasion. One would ask, is there really so much to be afraid of – and thus find horrific – or indeed to cherish? Perhaps the time has come to relativise relativism itself. This is my present aim. I will proceed by pointing out, that although many take a strong position *against* relativism, relativising and deconstructive traits are not only important, but in fact indispensable in scientific and intellectual work. Any academic enterprise must be relativistic in some way – or so I argue. That is, I will tell *my* story about relativism, well aware that the story is mine, but nonetheless claiming that it has some general interest.<sup>1</sup>

## Take This Horrific Thing Away

It is rather obvious that many find it extremely important to refute relativism, along with postmodernism and deconstructivism, and to do so

<sup>1</sup> In some respect Alasdair MacIntyre's work on ethics has a similar approach; see Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007) and elsewhere. For appraisals of MacIntyre's work see for instance Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004), 118-139, and a communication delivered by Marc Boss at the Colloquium 'Relativism,' Höör 7-9 May 2010.

strongly and definitely. Let me list a few examples.

When Professor Roger Trigg revised his book *Ideas of Human Nature* in 1999 (first published in 1988), he apparently felt compelled to speak clearly about the dangers of postmodernism, and its corollary relativism. In postmodernism and relativism we are facing the end of rationality itself, Trigg says.<sup>2</sup> In a way, relativism *has to* repudiate rationality, as it is self-defeating, Trigg continues: '[...] it destroys itself when applied to itself. It can claim neither rational grounding nor truth for itself, since it denies that such things are possible.'<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, following Trigg, relativism is not only self-defeating, it is also paradoxical, as it wants to underline the *historical* aspect of our thinking, but by making anything outside the given context strange and incomprehensible it holds that we are also cut off from understanding history.<sup>4</sup> As a matter of fact, postmodernism is a deep black hole, denying us any possibility to know anything, Trigg states rather bluntly.<sup>5</sup> And this is surely related to the fact that postmodernism does not consider it possible to be mistaken, Trigg ends his lamenta-

<sup>2</sup> Roger Trigg, *Ideas of Human Nature. An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 186.

<sup>3</sup> Trigg, 189

<sup>4</sup> Trigg, 189.

<sup>5</sup> Trigg, 193.

tions.<sup>6</sup> In Trigg's own words: 'Relativists in effect give up when faced with alternative positions. They are content to accept that different people think and behave differently.'<sup>7</sup>

To me, it seems significant that this kind of books, i.e. introductory books addressing academic newcomers, consider relativism to be of such great importance, and furthermore that relativism has to be cut off by its ankles. A second example is James Rachels *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*. Here it is specifically 'cultural relativism' that is under attack. Of course, no one can stop you from adhering to cultural relativism, Rachels seems to say, but you should at least consider the disastrous consequences of such a choice. According to Rachels, Cultural Relativism means that right and wrong is decided by the folkways; whatever is, is right. Suppose we took this seriously, Rachels says, that would be a disaster.<sup>8</sup> Rachels goes on to a description of the disasters; there would be no possibility to criticise other people, and other cultures.<sup>9</sup> It would prevent us from criticising our own culture.<sup>10</sup> No progress in moral matters is possible to imagine following Cultural Relativism, Rachels says. And nothing done in history can be seen as morally erroneous.<sup>11</sup>

A striking thing in these examples is the strong, and often simplistic, manner of refutation with few – if any – nuances. Now, this could of course be attributed to the *genre*; introductory books *have* to be a bit simplistic, and they *cannot* be very nuanced at every single point. This may well be so, but the off-hand dismissal of relativism appears in other contexts as well, in texts written for a more qualified audience.

Umberto Eco has a scornful touch when making fun – albeit rather indirectly – of Jacques Derrida, who, according to Eco, claims that all meaning is floating, but is even himself unable to maintain this theory in real life:

Some years ago Derrida wrote me a letter to inform me that he and other people were establishing in Paris the Collège International de Philosophie and to ask me for a letter of support. I bet Derrida was assuming that (i) I had to assume that he was telling the truth; (ii) I had to read his program as a univocal discourse as far as both the actual situation and his project were concerned; (iii) my signature requested at the end of my letter would have been taken more seriously than Derrida's at the end of 'Signature, événement, contexte.' Naturally, according to my *Erwartungshorizont*, Derrida's letter could have assumed for me many other additional meanings, even the most contradictory ones, and could have elicited many additional inferences about its 'intended meaning;' nevertheless, any additional inference ought to be based on its first layer of allegedly literal meaning.<sup>12</sup>

Many have deep concerns regarding 'relativism.' Such concerns are sometimes transformed into militant campaigns against relativism.<sup>13</sup> Even though it is somehow thought unnecessary to seriously *discuss* and *reason* about relativism, every effort is made to ridicule it. Let me give yet another example from Umberto Eco's pen. In the Introduction to *The Limits of Interpretation*, Eco mocks those who claim to be relativists. Eco tells a history of a basket of 30 figs apparently sent as a gift, accompanied by a letter. This

<sup>12</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990), 54.

<sup>13</sup> See e.g. Inger Enkvist, "Dårskapens lov", 38-40 in *Axess* (2008), or Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Truth* (London, Pimlico, 2006), 19-21. Another neighbouring example could be found in Harald Schöndorf, "Ist die Wahrheit intolerant?", 125-135 in *Stimmen der Zeit* (2009). Hægerstam argues according to similar lines about the slippery slope in Glenn Hægerstam, "Det sluttande planet och en flytande värdegrund" 35-39 in *Signum* (2009). In theology too, one finds easily clear stands against the plea of relativism. See for example Cardinal Ratzinger quoted in John Hick, *Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 149-156, and Harold Netland in Harold Netland, *Dissonant Voices. Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1997). A similar stance, but much more indirect, can be found in Paul F. Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions. Multifaith Dialogue and Global Responsibility* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), 73-74 and 185-186 note 1.

<sup>6</sup> Trigg, 193.

<sup>7</sup> Trigg, 195.

<sup>8</sup> James Rachels and Stuart Rachels. *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2007), 21.

<sup>9</sup> Rachels, 22.

<sup>10</sup> Rachels, 22.

<sup>11</sup> Rachels, 22-23.

package of figs and letter lays open to interpretation, as the sender is not there, nor the receiver, nor the messenger. In such case, Eco says, it can be read

...by a more sophisticate student in linguistics, hermeneutics, or semiotics. As smart as he or she is, such a new accidental addressee can make lots of more elaborate hypotheses [...] The message is a coded one, where basket stands for "army, fig for 1,000 soldiers", and present for "help," so that the intended meaning of the letter is that the sender is sending an army of 30,000 soldiers for helping the addressee.<sup>14</sup>

The Swedish linguist, novelist and literary theorist Björn Larsson picks up this Ecoian thread in a text glimmering with disdain. Here the ones under attack are the 'pathological deconstructivists' who, according to Larsson, would be able to see a word having *any* meaning, as the meaning has to be re-negotiated *at every single moment*. To manage that, one has to be super-talented, Larsson remarks sarcastically.<sup>15</sup> This super-talented deconstructivist is of course both naïve and preposterous, Larsson goes on, as it is evident that not everything can be used for anything; one can play football with a tennis ball, but not with a cannon ball – or only with some difficulty and some pain.<sup>16</sup>

Similar mockery can be found elsewhere. Larsson argues that if one supposes that *all* form of text is deformed, and that it *in no case* is capable of transferring meaning, there would be no reason at all to read anything whatsoever.<sup>17</sup> His attack is directed against some anonymous theorists who, according to Larsson, would claim that a literary text couldn't have any stable and intersubjective meaning. Larsson therefore con-

cludes, that according to such theorists the content and the meaning of a given text could be anything and everything.<sup>18</sup>

### This Horrific Thing is in Our Heart, in Our Mouth and on Our Forehead

The American philosopher John R. Searle is a seminal figure in linguistics and philosophy. He is of particular interest in this context, I believe. In his work, Searle has developed the notion 'brute facts,' and is using 'literal meaning' as a key concept. Searle argues intensely for what he calls realism. Derrida has been one specific target for Searle.<sup>19</sup> I claim that Searle's thinking is an illustrative example of a paradox. Searle argues at length for the necessity of some stable ground – *brute facts, literal meaning* – but also, and that is the interesting point, for the necessity of context and other modifications that, in my view, in the end cannot be said to do anything but relativising the 'stable grounds.'

According to Searle, the ultimate foundations of reality are 'brute facts.' Analogously, there would be a literal linguistic meaning constituting the stable foundation for the understanding of spoken and written texts.<sup>20</sup> Searle has a rather strong position regarding the literal meaning; such a meaning is not only identifiable, there *has to be* such a literal meaning that is unchangeable, immutable. Such a literal meaning is not ambiguous or polyvalent concerning its *semantic* contents, Searle claims.<sup>21</sup> What is interesting, however, is that Searle also makes thorough

<sup>14</sup> Eco, 4-5.

<sup>15</sup> Björn Larsson, "A mon avis la vue des crocodiles rend nerveux", 247-255 in *Mélanges plurilingues offerts à Suzanne Schlyter à l'occasion de son 65ème anniversaire* (eds P. Bernardini, V. Egerland and J. Granfeldt; Lund: Språk- och litteraturcentrum Lunds universitet, 2009), 251.

<sup>16</sup> Larsson, "A mon avis", 255.

<sup>17</sup> Björn Larsson, *Le bon sens commun. Remarques sur le rôle de la (re)cognition intersubjective dans l'épistémologie et l'ontologie du sens* (Lund: Lund UP, 1997), 34.

<sup>18</sup> Larsson, *Le bon sens commun*, 56.

<sup>19</sup> See John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (London: Penguin, 1996), for the first, and John R. Searle, "Reiterating the Differences. A Reply to Derrida", 198-208 in *Glyph* (1977), and John R. Searle, "The World Turned Upside Down", 74-79 in *The New York Review of Books* (1983), for the second aspect.

<sup>20</sup> Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*, 27, 130.

<sup>21</sup> John R. Searle, *Intentionality. An Essay on the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983), 145-146; John R. Searle, "The Background of Meaning", 221-232 in *Speech Act Theory and Pragmatics* (eds J. R. Searle, F. Kiefer and M. Bierwisch; Dordrecht: Reidel, 1980), 222-227.

analyses of the role ‘intentionality’ and ‘background’ plays. In other words, on the one hand Searle has a very firm starting point and a staunch argument regarding ‘brute facts’ and ‘literal meaning’ as stable grounds. On the other hand, he is compelled to modify this position.

Thus, according to Searle, it is the literal meaning of a phrase, or a word, that determines its truth conditions. Concurrently, Searle claims that this holds only ‘given a set of background practices and assumptions.’ Globally speaking, background and context are necessary to understanding. No literal meaning is context-free. After all, it is the Background that makes possible the linguistic interpretation, as well as interpretation of reality, according to Searle.<sup>22</sup> Searle maintains, in other words, that without a background, meaning cannot appear.<sup>23</sup> For instance, in each use of the verb ‘cut’ (‘Sally cut the cake;’ ‘Bill cut the grass;’ and ‘The tailor cut the cloth’) we understand the verb differently, in spite of the fact that its literal meaning is constant; the reason to this is, Searle claims, that in each case our interpretation depends on our Background abilities.<sup>24</sup> Searle continues ‘[...] the Background enables linguistic interpretation to take place [...] the Background enables perceptual interpretation to take place.’<sup>25</sup> Hence, Background is necessary, according to Searle.<sup>26</sup>

One could notice that Searle doesn’t even consider arithmetic or simple sentences like ‘Snow is white’ as unaffected by the importance of background.<sup>27</sup> The interesting thing is, I think, that in spite of his declared point of departure in ‘brute facts’ and literal and semantic meaning, Searle does a considerable work to qualify these. This means, I hold, that he wisely enough *relativises* the stable grounds he started with.

## ...And That for Good Reasons

There are certainly good reasons for what I call Searle’s relativisation. Björn Larsson may shed some light on this issue. It is not possible, Larsson claims, to establish the meaning of a linguistic entity on one’s own.<sup>28</sup> The importance of a context, and of an intersubjective community, is exemplified by Larsson; there is sometimes a highly efficient communication between members of a particular guild – say philosophers – even though it is based on stipulative definitions. But what is understood between them within the group is always meaning.<sup>29</sup>

A particular difficulty with establishing meaning comes to the fore though in a text discussing the role of prototype in semantics. Linguist Suzanne Schlyter has cleverly suggested an idea of prototype, Larsson says, and such a prototype has the advantage of not necessarily being described in words; a picture would do the job. Schlyter uses the category cup as an example, and she draws a picture of a cup. Now an interesting complication appears; there ought to be a method for verifying the type character of this picture with something that shows that we are facing a prototype.<sup>30</sup> In so doing, one is confronted with the fact that what seemed to be a prototype is dependent on the cultural experience of the interlocutors.<sup>31</sup>

This is related to what Larsson says about humanly produced objects, namely that they can never be uniquely defined through some essence – through what they *are*.<sup>32</sup> For instance, a hammer can be used as a weapon, as well as a hammering tool, because there is no simple ‘hammer essence’ that would univoqually determine what it *is*.<sup>33</sup> This points, Larsson claims, to an important trait in any human context; human beings

<sup>22</sup> Searle, *Intentionality*, 142-146; Searle, “The Background of Meaning”, 221-230; Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*, 130-132.

<sup>23</sup> Searle, “The Background of Meaning”, 221; Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*, 130.

<sup>24</sup> Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*, 130-131

<sup>25</sup> Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*, 132

<sup>26</sup> Searle, “The Background of Meaning”, 227.

<sup>27</sup> Searle, “The Background of Meaning”, 229-230.

<sup>28</sup> Larsson, “A mon avis”, 250.

<sup>29</sup> Larsson, *Le bon sens commun*, 90, note 8.

<sup>30</sup> Larsson, “A mon avis”, 252.

<sup>31</sup> Larsson, “A mon avis”, 253. Cf. Derrida’s work for example in Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Éditions de minuit, 1967). See also discussions in Patrik Fridlund, *Mobile Performances. Linguistic Undecidability as Possibility and Problem in the Theology of Religions* (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2011), 65-73.

<sup>32</sup> Larsson, “A mon avis”, 253.

<sup>33</sup> Larsson, “A mon avis”, 253.

have the ability to use things in a way that goes beyond their 'essence' or beyond what they were 'meant for.' There is an amount of *freedom* in human behaviour.<sup>34</sup> Such freedom is not absolute, not limitless. Of course, there is a history behind the coming into being of something. This means that although an idea of *essence* cannot be employed, Larsson affirms, one must take into account the intention behind the production of certain objects, or the arrangements and uses of other objects, in order to see that there are limits to their use.<sup>35</sup>

Larsson is here almost echoing the French philosopher Michel Foucault when the latter claims that certain descriptions – and not others – are possible due to a given framework and given rules.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, this implies that it is not possible to say just anything, just anytime about just everything.<sup>37</sup> Larsson seems also to be following Jacques Derrida when speaking about language use:

... there is always a police and a tribunal ready to intervene each time that a rule (constitutive or regulative, verical or not) is invoked in a case<sup>38</sup>

and

Such stabilization is relative, even if it is sometimes so great as to seem immutable and permanent<sup>39</sup>

and of course

... there is a 'right track' (*une 'bonne voie'*), a better way [---] the value of truth (and all those values associated with it) is never contested or destroyed in my writings, but only reinscribed in more powerful, larger, more stratified contexts. And that within interpretative contexts [...] that are relatively stable, sometimes almost unshakeable, it should be possible to invoke rules of com-

petence, criteria of discussion and of consensus...<sup>40</sup>

One may add that Larsson follows Searle's line of thought when holding that natural objects exist outside and untouched by human creativity, but also that as soon as it is about non-natural objects, the discourse is different.<sup>41</sup>

Now it can be argued, of course, that there are few 'natural objects' or even that there are no such thing as a 'natural object' if it has any interesting or meaningful meaning to us. Are there any 'natural objects' not 'used' by human beings if we take into account that we describe them, talk about them etc? Philosopher of science Ronald N. Giere discusses such issues using colour as one example:

Why should a surface with a given surface spectral reflectance be called 'yellow'? Without reference to the particular characteristics of the human visual system, there is no physical basis whatsoever for this identification.<sup>42</sup>

Giere follows that argument when he points out that in science there is a distinction between various *isotopes* when elements have the same atomic number and yet different atomic weight; there is however no name for isotopes if the number of *neutrons* is the same, and that simply because such variation does not entail any interesting properties, hence they are not interesting to human beings.<sup>43</sup> Yet, it is supposed that determining objective natural kinds is made independently of human interests, Giere says, and that is a bit peculiar.<sup>44</sup>

The point Giere wants to make is that there is a vital *human* component in the inquiries and in the analyses, as well as in the categorisation. Human beings do typically experience the world as coloured, which shows that human beings have a human perspective on the world, but it is

<sup>34</sup> Larsson, "A mon avis", 254, note 8.

<sup>35</sup> Larsson, "A mon avis", 255.

<sup>36</sup> Michel Foucault, *L'archéologie du savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 48.

<sup>37</sup> Foucault, *L'archéologie du savoir*, 61.

<sup>38</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1988), 105.

<sup>39</sup> Derrida, *Limited Inc*, 145.

<sup>40</sup> Derrida, *Limited Inc*, 146.

<sup>41</sup> Larsson, "A mon avis", 255; Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*, passim.

<sup>42</sup> Ronald N. Giere, *Scientific Perspectivism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 27.

<sup>43</sup> Giere, 86.

<sup>44</sup> Giere, 86.

not necessarily the other way round – the world does not have a particular perspective on us.<sup>45</sup>

A conclusion that I draw is that, whether we like it or not, whether that is our aim or not, *some sort of* relativisation is not only an unavoidable but also indispensable<sup>46</sup> trait of our thinking; this not the least in any academic or intellectual enterprise.

Giere emphasises that this demonstrates how scientists create perspectives from which the world is seen, observed and studied.<sup>47</sup> For example, when similarities are identified and generalizations are made, such things do not come by themselves. Most things are similar to all other things in numerous ways. When a descriptive model is constructed, the scientist picks out certain traits that are considered useful and which are employed in the construction of the model. The point is that the choices made are made by the investigator, the inquirer, the observer – i.e. by the scientist – not by reality itself.<sup>48</sup> There is simply ‘no representation without representers.’<sup>49</sup>

## Conclusions

Now, one could ask whether all this talk about relativism is not, in truth, much ado about nothing. In a way, I would think so. However, in my view there is nonetheless an important point to be made here: Much of what is labelled relativism, postmodernism or deconstructivism has a particular concern. This concern, I claim, is to point out, make visible, and thematize, the fact that whatever is held to be stable, absolute, central, fundamental etc. can be questioned, and must be so at times. This implies a confrontation with those arguing that there is, and must be, a single and definitely given centre governing all the rest. I claim, however, that any such idea must be seen as an obsolete and untenable ideal-

istic dream.<sup>50</sup> The frontier between centre and periphery is not absolute; there are several centres, or provisional ones; from a human point of view nothing can be taken for granted – definitely.<sup>51</sup>

As Giere points out, such lack of any absolute stability should not be especially shocking to the philosophising community. Generally speaking, Logical Empirism and Analytical Philosophy, for instance, had for a long time a doctrine saying that scientific claims always are related to a particular language – they are relative. The idea was that one first had to choose a language, and then make claims that were judged true or false. The choice of language, on the other hand, was not about true/false; it was a pragmatic choice.<sup>52</sup> Nor should a relativising approach be alien to theology and religious studies, in my view. Every articulation of religion appears to be made in relation to specific questions or specific needs, and articulation seems to be required in order to be manifest. This interaction between needs, environment and articulation makes a religious discourse relative, and there is nothing odd or peculiar about that.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Giere, 32.

<sup>46</sup> I am indebted to Pierre-Yves Ruff who helped me see the distinction between ‘inevitable’ and ‘indispensable’ in this context.

<sup>47</sup> Giere, 59.

<sup>48</sup> Giere, 63-34.

<sup>49</sup> Giere, 128, note 13.

<sup>50</sup> Fridlund, *Mobile Performances*, 71-73; Patrik Fridlund, “Clash of Religions–Diversity of Readings”, 8-10 in *New Routes. A Journal of Peace Research and Action* 13 (2008).

<sup>51</sup> Jacques Derrida and Antoine Spire, *Au-delà des apparences* (Latresne: Bord de l'eau, 2002). See also Fridlund, *Mobile Performances*, 75-93.

<sup>52</sup> Giere, 81-82.

<sup>53</sup> Fridlund, *Mobile Performances*, 151. See also John B. Cobb Jr, “Multiple Religious Belonging and Reconciliation”, 20-28 in *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity* (ed. C. Cornille, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002); Larry Poston, “American Ijtihad: The Influence of Western Converts upon Contemporary Islamic Theology and Praxis”, 11-22 in *Towards a New Understanding of Conversion* (ed. U. Görman; Lund: Teologiska institutionen, 1999); Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985); Carl Sundberg, *Conversion and Contextual Conceptions of Christ. A Missiological Study Among Young Converts in Brazzaville, Republic of Congo* (Uppsala: Swedish Institute of Missionary Research, 2000); Jan van Bragt, “Multiple Religious Belonging of the Japanese People”, 7-19 in *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious*

If we return to the general discussion, it is perhaps no surprise that Searle agrees with Giere on this very point; the idea of conceptual relativity is correct according to Searle, as 'any system of representation at all is conventional, and to that extent arbitrary [---] we can always imagine alternative systems of classification.'<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, 'any true description is always made relative to some system of concepts that we have more or less arbitrarily selected for describing the world.'<sup>55</sup>

The conflicting issue is to be found elsewhere. One could easily see, Searle maintains, that there is a neat difference between the world 'out there' being what it is entirely independent of any concepts and totally independent of human representation and alike on the one hand, and human descriptions of this world 'out there' on the other hand.<sup>56</sup>

Conceptual relativism is about how human terms are connected to reality. Searle continues; it is 'an account for how we fix the application of our terms: What counts as a correct application of the term 'cat' [---] is up to us to decide and is to that extent arbitrary.'<sup>57</sup> Conceptual relativism does not change the real world however, Searle maintains:

*...once we have fixed the meaning of such terms in our vocabulary by arbitrary definitions, it is no longer a matter of any kind of relativism or arbitrariness whether representation-independent features of the world satisfy or fail to satisfy those definitions, because the features of the world that satisfy or fail to satisfy the definitions exist independently of those or any other definition. (Italics in the original.)<sup>58</sup>*

The point of division is perhaps an issue of the level of the claims, the *Ansprüche*, that can legitimately be made, and on what level stability can, ought to or should be established as a necessary condition.

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*Belonging and Christian Identity* (ed. C. Cornille, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002).

<sup>54</sup> Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*, 160.

<sup>55</sup> Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*, 161.

<sup>56</sup> Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*, 164.

<sup>57</sup> Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*, 166.

<sup>58</sup> Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*, 166.

I claim that one thing that can be learnt is that scientific and intellectual work *in some sense* cannot be but relativistic. If investigations, or inquiries are made, it is of course necessary to have some kind of centre – a central point, a kernel, and a starting point. Not everything can float and be relative all the time. That would be unbearable. Any such centre is however much more mobile than what it may seem to be.<sup>59</sup>

One point I want to make in the present article is that relativising must not necessarily be connected to various post-theories – post-colonialism, post-modernism – or any other particular theory. Another point that can be made is that the demarcation line between various antagonists many times is subtler, and may be drawn elsewhere, than what is often assumed. This leads on to my second conclusion.

It appears that if there are any actual relativists (or 'deconstructivists', or 'postmodernists', or even 'constructivists'), and not simply phantoms and spectres, they seem to be rather reluctant to accept slogans like *anything goes* in any unqualified sense.<sup>60</sup> Even if or when relativising is thematized, and seen as something indispensable, it does not necessarily open for relativism in the sense of subjective arbitrariness, and if so, perhaps only in a limited number of situations or cases.<sup>61</sup>

If I hold a position, if I defend a perspective and if I make certain claims, they must in some way be supported in order to have any value. Judgements made by other people, external signs, some indications, proofs or evidences are required if my interpretations and claims are to be considered correct; some support is needed.<sup>62</sup> It is perhaps true that several different readings are possible, and various interpretations. That does not imply that *any* reading is as good as any

<sup>59</sup> See Fridlund, *Mobile Performances*, 50-53.

<sup>60</sup> See for instance Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method. Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge* (London: Verso, 2010).

<sup>61</sup> Karin Nordström in a paper delivered at the Colloquium "Relativism", Höör, 7-9 May 2010.

<sup>62</sup> Fridlund, *Mobile Performances*, 153-155; Derrida, *Limited Inc*, 105-107; Ruth Sonderegger, "A Critique of Pure Meaning: Wittgenstein and Derrida", 183-209 in *European Journal of Philosophy* 5 (1997).

other reading, or that *all* interpretations have the same weight.<sup>63</sup>

It seems quite obvious that other people react against overly crazy interpretations or ideas. One could perhaps make reference to some accumulated experience, lessons learned from historical mistakes and collective learning processes.<sup>64</sup> Even someone who argues that no definite stable foundation can be counted on, would still be justified in claiming that better can be distinguished from worse, good from bad, right from wrong. The point is though, that such distinctions are made against certain criteria, which have a *history*. The point of division is thus rather whether there is something *behind* or *beyond* and what weight or position this *beyond* should have.<sup>65</sup>

To Searle, for instance, it seems important that there is *one* world that is ordered and organised in *one particular way*; it seems also important that this world is described by a language in which the semantic basis – the literal meaning – at the end of the day is *stable*. If this is correct – if Searle is essentially claiming order – this is perhaps a general thread in many arguments against relativism. It is said that relativism would imply that nobody is right and nobody is wrong, and that in turn entails that the world would lack order and structure.<sup>66</sup>

Now, it could be argued that such metaphysical foundations are not necessary – they seem even to be of some hindrance. Giere maintains that it is not at all necessary to claim the oneness of the world as a metaphysical doctrine – it may as well be a methodological assumption. When

doing scientific work, we *presuppose* that there is a unique causal structure, but Giere argues that such a presupposition does not have to be justified. It is not a requisite for reasoning. It is a ground for our acting, and justified only insofar it can be seen afterwards that it unites seemingly different perspectives.<sup>67</sup>

## Concluding Remarks

Relativism is often mixed with postmodernism and deconstructivism, and whatever brand is preferred it is also frequently rebuked. It is described as a plea that has to be fought. It appears, nonetheless, that the aspect of *relativising*, putting into *perspective*, or saying that things are dependent on *background*, is generally emphasised in descriptions of academic undertakings – i.e. in descriptions of scientific or philosophical work, as well as in theology and religious studies. There are good grounds for this being so: anything that is related to the human world is also exposed to human freedom and human limitations. As it is difficult indeed to see how anything that is examined by science, analysed in philosophy and talked about in theology could be held *not* to be human related in such respect, the conclusion is that some type of relativising is inevitable and indispensable. So it has to be. It is impossible to keep a non-human reality intact, observe it, analyse it, describe it, use it, talk about it... and still refer to it as a reality untouched by 'the human,' and keeping it as an 'outside point of reference.' From a human perspective, which is the one available to us in academic dealings (in which arguments have to be reasonably understandable by others) everything that is said has to be relativisable.<sup>68</sup> There is, I maintain, nothing peculiar with that.

<sup>63</sup> Fridlund, *Mobile Performances*, 153-155; Paul Ricoeur, *Du texte à l'action. Essais d'herméneutique II* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1986), 216-217, 226-227.

<sup>64</sup> Fridlund, *Mobile Performances*, 155-156; Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge UP, 1989), 165-166; Ricoeur, 200-229; Sonderegger; Derrida, *Limited Inc*, 105-107.

<sup>65</sup> Henrik Lundberg, *Filosofisociologi. Ett sociologiskt perspektiv på filosofiskt tänkande* (Lund: Lunds universitet, 2007), 20. Cf. Grace M. Jantzen, "Conspicuous Sanctity and Religious Belief", 121-140 in *The Rationality of Religious Belief. Essays in Honour of Basil Mitchell* (eds W. J. Abraham and S. W. Holtzer; Oxford: Clarendon, 1987).

<sup>66</sup> Lundberg, 74-75.

<sup>67</sup> Giere, 34.

<sup>68</sup> Patrik Fridlund, "Konstruktiva religionsstudier", 212-216 in *Svensk kyrkotidning* (2005); Patrik Fridlund, "Le dialogue entre les religions et ses defies", 45-58 in *Théolib. Revue trimestrielle du libéralisme théologique* (2003).



*Summary*

Perhaps the time has come to relativise relativism? That is the aim of the present article. Although many take a strong position *against* relativism, relativising and deconstructive traits are important and indispensable in scientific and intellectual work. The aspect of *relativising*, putting into *perspective*, or saying that things are dependent on *background*, is generally emphasised in descriptions of academic undertakings - i.e. in descriptions of scientific or philosophical work, as well as in theology and religious studies. There are good grounds: anything that is related to the human world is also exposed to human freedom and human limitations. Even when relativising is thematized and seen as something indispensable, it does not necessarily open for relativism in the sense of subjective arbitrariness. When making certain claims, they must in some way be supported if they should have any value. Judgements made by other people, external signs, some indications, proofs or evidences are required if such interpretations and claims should be considered correct; some support is needed.