Review:

Relativism, Paul O’Grady

Stefano Mingarelli, Concordia University

McGill-Queen’s continue to impress with the quality and form of their philosophical series. In recent years, this combined University Press has promoted serious and innovative contributions to philosophical discourse by sponsoring two excellent series: the topical Central Problems of Philosophy and the area series Fundamentals of Philosophy both under the general editorship of John Shand. Shand has performed a tour de force in matching quality authors with their specialties, without forfeiting the need to ascertain the editorship’s signoff of a comprehensive, thought-provoking, clear, concise, and fair presentation of the theme.

The Press’s recent issue – Relativism - by Paul O’Grady, Lecturer at Trinity College, Dublin confirms Shand’s fine judgment and merit. Not only has Shand identified a segment within a niche that deserves immediate attention because of its prominent and mounting impact, but he has also given Paul O’Grady free-rein in offering to the newcomer a well-articulated introduction and survey to the literature while also engaging the sophisticate with well-informed and contentious positions on current debates.

O’Grady announces his project as an “attempt to examine relativism and evaluate the philosophical case for it” within the ‘analytic tradition.’ O’Grady situates the challenge within the postmodernist context in which the “acceptance of relativism”
with its absence of absolutes and foundations invites the thinker to “adapt and show others how to adapt to this shifting milieu.” O’Grady is quick to distinguish relativism from skepticism. He opposes to the skeptic the stance of underlying the “legitimate, fallible alternative conception(s) of reality” which, in turn, when “rationally acceptable” designate the “pluralist” position.

Although O’Grady is at odds with skepticism, he never dismisses it, with a sleight of hand, as he never dismisses relativism. O’Grady signposts a non-relativist position on truth, after developing his arguments forcefully against the literature. He organizes the debate well around Tarski, Quine and Swoyer to conclude that ultimately alethic relativism (relativism concerning truth) is, in fact, better dealt with as either ontological or epistemological relativism, leaving intact the universalism of truth. O’Grady is willing to concede that positions developed around Quine and Putnam (QP) offer reasonable warrant for entertaining ontological relativism, but is not willing to take up the challenge that this entails the “relativism of truth,” which entailment, according to O’Grady, is “incoherent.” In the same fashion, he concedes that following QP with added references to the work of Rorty and Stich, certain epistemological relativisms do offer valid positions able to deal with knowledge of “reality.” O’Grady is again convincingly honest in his concessions. His analysis of the literature is never skewed towards self-servicing his own position.

Yet, notwithstanding his relativist concessions to ontology and epistemology, O’Grady is much more demanding on “relativism about logic”, arguing that although there can be “legitimate alternative logical calculi useful for various purposes” (crediting Haack for the overview) they are “ultimately governed by a system adhering to the traditional laws of logic,” in particular, the law of non-contradiction. In this case,
O’Grady is somewhat generous in allowing a very restricted relativism of logic, especially if one considers it in the context of his later espousal of rationality. This last emphasis on non-contradiction underscores one of O’Grady’s four guiding principles that support his own position on the universalism of rationality against relativist proponents, such as Kuhn and Feyerabend.

Although O’Grady’s is an exciting and informative read, it is elegantly audacious in the late chapters where, after a provocative and dismantling discussion of the Barnes and Bloor position on relative rationalities, he softens Davidson’s counterarguments and views on translation and incommensurability against the relativists, drawing on Rescher’s insights into “interpretation” to conclude that a non-relativist conception of rationality, or a “core rationality”, best serves the interests of the debate without conflicting with or opposing ontological relativism.

O’Grady’s model of rationality requires two components: coherence and logical evidence. It establishes four principles that define its parameters: non-contradiction, coherence among beliefs, non-avoidance of available evidence and intellectual honesty. These principles are both substantive and methodological in character, and according to O’Grady allow philosophical and scientific discourse to proceed “with discipline” notwithstanding its “diversity.”

Most welcome is O’Grady’s reference to C. I. Lewis as an early proponent of relativism, and the richness his work possesses for the field. Just as refreshing is O’Grady’s signpost on the centrality of a logic of non-contradiction which one hopes will interestingly influence further explorations around the \textit{a priori}, to date tenaciously anchored by Katz, Bonjour and Casullo against traditional Quinean skepticism.
O’Grady’s *Relativism* is a splendid and illuminating balancing act written by a serious philosopher in a very strategic niche of contemporary thought. He invites the reader to take positions as he narrates and unravels the *enjeux*.

Well done by O’Grady, Shand and McGill-Queen’s.