

CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT DIALOGUE

A REPLY TO VAIDYA

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I am grateful to Anand Vaidya for his thoughtful and enthusiastic review. In the spirit of constructive engagement, I reply to Vaidya's comments on my book, *Dialogues on Relativism, Absolutism, and Beyond: Four Days in India* ("RAB" for short). Vaidya's review continues the dialogical spirit of RAB by introducing a fifth fictional interlocutor, Manjula, to comment upon RAB's four fictional interlocutors. When I started to think about my own comments I was tempted to introduce a sixth, even a seventh interlocutor. But I concluded that would be unwieldy. So I have decided to come out from behind RAB's four characters and comment in my own voice on Manjula's comments about them. Given space limitations I will comment on some selected points, arranged in an order different from Vaidya's.

Since the publication of RAB, its sequel has appeared. Its title is *Oneness and the Displacement of Self: Dialogues on Self-Realization* ("ODS" for short). The four interlocutors in RAB continue their conversations in ODS. While the main themes of RAB concern relativism versus absolutism, ODS concentrates on Nina's Advaita view which is "beyond" relativism and absolutism. Readers of RAB may wish to consult ODS for a ramified discussion of Nina's views. Here then are my comments about Manjula's interventions.

Defining Relativism. I begin with Ronnie's definition of relativism. "Relativism claims that truth, goodness, or beauty is relative to a reference frame, and no absolute, overarching standards to adjudicate between competing references frames exist." (RAB, 10) Ronnie's definition allows that relativism may range over "truth, goodness or beauty"--not "truth, goodness and beauty." One reason for the "or" rather than the "and" is that it allows for either piecemeal or global treatments of relativism. Manjula capitalizes on the possibility of treating relativism in different ways in different domains.

In reference to RAB, 34, Manjula says that, "...relativism is initially attractive in

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certain areas of discourse, or what we might call domains.” Following a piecemeal strategy, she distributes relativism according to domains. That strategy accords with Ronnie’s definition of relativism. Yet there is an impediment in doing so. How should we characterize the pertinent domains and the joints that are supposed to separate them? Are their descriptions supposed to capture a frame-independent fact of the matter? Or are their descriptions meant to capture constructed cultural achievements? The construal of pertinent domains and their joints implicates relativist or absolutist predilections. Question-begging looms.

Similarly, in regard to RAB, 52, Manjula observes, “it is easier to be a relativist in the case of morality and aesthetics than it is in the case of logic and mathematics.” Quite so. Yet, such ease gets burdened when interlocutors raise questions about the nature of the domains in question. Indeed moral realists will object to characterizing morality in relativist terms. And mathematical, logical or scientific constructivists will object to characterizing mathematics, logic, or science in absolutist terms. (See Catherine Elgin, in Krausz, 2010a). The domains in question are themselves variously construed as regard their relativist or absolutist standing.

Ronnie’s definition of relativism captures a wide range of established usages. Alternative definitions may emphasize a supposed incommensurability between reference frames (See Richard Bernstein 1983, 8). Other definitions may emphasize multivalent rather than bi-valent truth-like values. (See Joseph Margolis 1976) Manjula provides an ample and useful discussion of multivalence. In regard to RAB, 44-45, one might wonder why Barbara raises the issue of multivalence in the first place. The reason is that bivalence is central to a version of relativism that diverges from, but is nonetheless compatible with, Ronnie’s starting definition. Barbara does so as a point of contrast with Ronnie’s definition. Focusing upon cultural phenomena, Margolis notes that interpreters of cultural phenomena characteristically invoke multivalent values—such as reasonableness, appropriateness, aptness, fittingness and their opposites—in contrast to the bivalent value of truth and its opposite. Accordingly, Margolis urges that opposing judgments that would be contradictory on a bivalent logic turn out not to be so on a multivalent logic. Opposing judgments on a multivalent logic would be incongruent rather than contradictory. To say that a Marxist interpretation of Vincent Van Gogh’s “Potato Eaters” is reasonable, for example, is not to say that a Christian interpretation of the same painting is unreasonable.

Self-Refutation of Relativism. In regard to RAB, 63-64, Ronnie rehearses the well-worn self-referential argument against relativism, namely “The assertion that relativism is absolutely true is self-contradictory.” Notice that Ronnie partly defines relativism in terms of the negation of absolutism. If we disentangle absolutism into three strands—namely realism, universalism or foundationalism—does the self-refuting argument against relativism still apply? On RAB, 65, Nina affirms that the charge of self-contradiction dissolves when absolutism is disentangled in this way. On RAB, 80, as Nina distinguishes between the three strands, she shows that their various combinations amount to harder or softer versions of absolutism. Consequently their relativist opposites amount to harder or softer relativisms.

Manjula seems to agree with all of this. Yet she goes further. She inquires whether the disentangled strands are compatible with each other. Of course, the hardest version of absolutism combines realism, universalism, and foundationalism. It may be instantiated by a moral realist, for example, who holds that moral facts exist independently of reference frames, that they apply to all human beings, and that they reflect values that reveal inherent features of what it is to be a human being. The plausibility of such a hard version of absolutism is another matter, beyond the scope of RAB.

Meta-Principles. In regard to RAB, 63, Manjula raises the question, “Is it possible for one to be a relativist about truth...and to limit the scope of application of the principles in question?” Can one say that the claim of relativism is a meta-principle that is outside the scope to which it applies? The point of doing so would allow one to say that, “All statements are relatively true except for the statement that says that all statements are relatively true.” This strategy seems arbitrary or ad hoc, invoked merely to avoid the self-referential argument. The reason why it seems to be so arises from an often assumed, perhaps unmentioned, meta-meta-principle, namely, “It is best to keep ‘meta’ principles consonant with object-level principles, unless there are good non-arbitrary reasons to make a particular object-principle an exception.” Such good reasons would need to overcome the fact that meta-principles might be infinitely generated. That is, a given meta-principle may become an object-principle with regard to a higher order meta-principle. Such a process can be generated infinitely. At some point, though, in order to save one from the charge of self-contradiction, one will have to stipulate that a given meta-principle is not relative. Where that point does come promises to be arbitrary. (See Paul Boghossian, in Krausz 2010a.)

Foundationalism. Manjula observes that Nina is right to say (RAB, 76) that “The foundationalist says that there is an ultimate [or foundational] constituent. The non-foundationalist says that there is no such thing as an ultimate constituent.” Manjula suggests a third possibility, namely, “that there are ultimate and there are no ultimate constituents.” But does her third possibility reduce to one of the first two? Here is the analogy Manjula adduces to make her point. “The analogy would be the example of light, which has a fundamental dual nature *particle* and *wave*. It is both a particle and wave, and given that particles are not waves, it is like saying that something 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 an ultimate constituent and to not have a fundamental constituent.” I presume that Manjula takes “ultimate” or “fundamental” to be synonymous with “foundational.” Now, it is one thing to say that light has the dual nature of both particles and waves, and another thing to say that that duality is foundational. Either that dual nature is taken to be foundational or it is not. Indeed, some physicists hold out the possibility that the apparent incompatibility between particle and wave will be overcome by the eventual discovery of a unifying wave-particle or “wavicle.” Yet whether the discovery of a wavicle is foundational is a separate and an open question. Affirming the dual or singular nature of light in itself commits us neither to foundationalism nor non-foundationalism.

A “*Third*” Attempt at Reconciliation. In reference to RAB, 36, Barbara seeks to reconcile relativism with absolutism. She attempts to do so by combining the term “relativism” with “absolutism” in order to generate “absolute relativism” or “relative absolutism.” Then she asks herself what ramified self-consistent view each of these compound phrases might generate.

Manjula proposes what she thinks is a further view that might reconcile relativism with absolutism. She calls it perspectivism. But is perspectivism a third view, one that is reducible to neither “absolute relativism” nor “relative absolutism?” Manjula asks, “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?” (RAB, 36) That question invites us to consider relativism as one reference frame and absolutism as another reference frame. It effectively invites us to relativize absolutism. But relativizing absolutism results in “absolute relativism,” one of the possibilities that the interlocutors have already considered.

Reasons. Barbara says (RAB, 88): “Without aiming to convince another person to embrace their view, relativists might seek to share their rationale for embracing their view.” In so doing relativists might offer what I have elsewhere called ampliative reasons in contrast to determinative reasons. (See Krausz 2007, 36-37) Ampliative reasons seek to promote an *understanding* as to why persons embrace the view that they do. Determinative reasons aim to demonstrate the superiority of one view over another. As such they aim to convince an opponent of the rightness of their view. In contrast, Manjula offers a different distinction. She says: “We have to distinguish between hardened debate and positioned-inquiry.” Hardened debaters “are not open minded...[while] in positioned-inquiry each participant has a point of view, but is open-minded.” To tell the difference we should ask, “Are they open-minded, curious, creative, courageous, and patient in their examination of the evidence and in their intellectual engagement? Or are they close-minded, blunt, cowardly, and negligent in their examination of the evidence and in their intellectual engagement?” The distinction between ampliative reasons and determinative reasons is not coextensive with the distinction between positioned-inquiry and hardened debate. When offering ampliative reasons one can be an open-minded fallibilist or a closed-minded dogmatist. And when offering determinative reasons one can also be an open-minded fallibilist or a closed-minded dogmatist. Accordingly, debaters about relativism versus absolutism can offer their reasons in either an ampliative or a determinative or way. Neither way *makes* them fallibilists or dogmatists.

Fallibilism. In regard to RAB, 12, Manjula expresses doubts about global fallibilism. She concedes that while one might be fallibilist with respect to some domains—say, beliefs about the future or the external world—one should not be fallibilist about self-verifying claims. She suggests that “I am here now” is immune from doubt. Of course, “I am here now” can be left unquestioned. But in principle it too is fallible. If we take seriously the Advaita view as embraced by Nina, for example, we can legitimately ask, “Is it I that is here?” “Where is here?” and “When is now?” Depending upon one’s answer to such questions, one could be wrong to say,

“I am here now.” The exemption of such self-verifying claims from global fallibilism is contentious.

Frames of Reference and Facts of the Matter. In response to Adam's sort of realism Manjula says (RAB, 22): “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. You might as well call these matters of fact.” Manjula is too casual when she says, “You might as well call these matters of fact.” For “facts of the matter”—as all the interlocutors use that phrase—designates frame-independence. So we should not force upon Ronnie “facts” in a realist sense. For Ronnie, facts exist, but they do so, ineliminably, within reference frames. (See Nelson Goodman, in Krausz 2010a.) Manjula does get the point right though when she says further, “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?” Manjula comes to see that it is a mistake just to assume that there must be some frame-independent *thing* that reference frames are *of*, that is, some stuff out there that they reflect. Here Manjula agrees with Ronnie.

In regard to RAB, 39, Manjula repeats Barbara's insight: “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 so in a non-Euclidean geometry.” Manjula continues, “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.” Once we distinguish between facts that are internal to reference frames and those that are external to reference frames, there is no disagreement. Both of these women agree that internal to Euclidean geometry it is a fact that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line, and it is not a fact in a Riemannian geometry. Yet Manjula presses the point that both of these geometries are still “about” something in common, namely space. As Manjula puts it, “there must be something in common between all geometric systems, for example that they are systems used to describe space. Can't we say that the thing in common is in fact the real absolute across all of these things?” Here Manjula commits the mistake she just warned us against. Commonality of what reference frames might be about does not entail a realist construal of what is common. Accordingly, getting things “right” need not be construed in realist terms.

Frames of Reference as Negative Filters. In regard to RAB, 47, Manjula says, “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*.” By “getting at things” Manjula presumably means, “getting closer to the truth.” Yet again question-beggingness looms. Relativist Ronnie can concede that lenses and the rest can help us get closer to the truth. But he need not unpack “getting closer to the truth” in a realist way. One who embraces a coherentist rather than a correspondist theory of truth can agree that lenses, language and filters can advance certain purposes and interests, but still disallow that we “get at things.” To put the

point in pragmatist terms, Barbara, for example, might urge that what is good for us to believe need not pretend to reflect the way a presumed world is. Lenses and the rest need not be taken to distort if nothing can be said about what is beyond them. The idea of “distortion” does not require a realist construal.

Sameness. Nina observes (RAB, 18) that, for reference frames to compete—rather than talk past each other—they would have to be talking about the same thing. Strangely, Manjula objects. She suggests, “it might just be false that a *necessary* condition on two frames competing is that they are talking about the same thing.” Yet sameness *is* a necessary condition. What is at issue is not whether sameness is a necessary condition for competition between reference frames. Rather, what is at issue is the *sense* of sameness that is necessary. Manjula herself confirms this point when she suggests that it is enough if competing reference frames address *roughly* the same thing. Indeed, both Adam and Ronnie can agree that competing reference frames need address roughly the same thing.

Knowledge of the World and Polymorphism. In regard to RAB, 40, Manjula questions whether the result of frame-dependent interpretations can constitute “knowledge.” Unless we place a realist construal on “knowledge,” no knowledge of “the world” would be possible. Ronnie could reply that, for the idea of “world,” we had best substitute the idea of “world-version.” He could go on to affirm a view that I have called “polymorphism.” (See Krausz 2010b, 25.) Polymorphism holds that no given level of description can be presumed to be ultimate or foundational. For example, if we describe the water in the glass before us as thirst quenching, we might take that description to reflect a truth about “the world.” Yet notice that thirst quenchingness is a property of water that applies at a certain level of description. As a middle-sized phenomenon, water affords certain satisfactions to middle-sized organisms. Yet when we redescribe what is before us in terms of electrons in empty space, the property of thirst-quenchingness does not apply. Polymorphism holds that what is taken to be a property of “the world” must be understood elliptically, that is, with an understanding of a certain level of description, or within a reference frame. Now apply the same polymorphic insight to Manjula's example. Manjula may truthfully know that she is hungry. Yet that knowledge depends upon her understanding herself as a middle-sized organism rather than as a collection of electrons in empty space. Were Manjula to understand herself as a collection of electron in empty space, the claim about her hunger would be inapplicable. Interestingly, this polymorphic view is shared with Tibetan Buddhists who hold that nothing exists inherently. That does not mean that nothing exists. It means that whatever does exist does so conventionally. One consequence of this Buddhist view is that the human self in empty of inherent existence.

Oneness and Adjudication. In contrast to the Tibetan Buddhist, Nina embraces the Advaita notion that ultimate reality is the inherent, undifferentiated, ineffable Atman or the One. She observes (RAB, 25) that the One could do no adjudicatory work, including adjudicating between reference frames. Even if we had access to it—perhaps via certain meditative practices—it could still do no adjudicatory work. After all, how could the One distinguish and adjudicate between metaphysical reference

frames when it is undifferentiated and ineffable? The One is beyond adjudication. This would be so despite the fact that the One is “understood” at the so-called “absolute” level of existence. Of course, what “absolute” means for Nina is quite different from what it does for Adam and Ronnie, namely frame-independence. Nina takes the absolute One to transcend both absolutism and relativism. Adam’s absolutism pertains to *individuated* phenomena, and the One is not that. The One is no absolute adjudicator. So, with Nina, one could embrace the One and still allow relativism as Ronnie defines it.

Anxiety About Death. In regard to RAB, 91, Nina says, “We all seek freedom from suffering of old age and death. We all seek freedom from the anxieties associated with our mortality.” Manjula objects to Nina’s universalist presumption that all persons suffer death anxiety and seek freedom from it. It *would* be wrong for Nina to assert, even to legislate, such a universality. The claim that all human beings suffer from death anxiety is too strong. Yet, it would be fair to say that human beings *characteristically* suffer a measure of anxiety associated with their mortality. The question how widespread that anxiety is is empirical. On this point I defer to the empirical work of psychotherapist Irvin Yalom in his perceptive book, *Staring at the Sun*. (See Irvin Yalom 2009.)

Limits of Language. In regard to RAB, 116, Barbara rehearses Nina’s view that “the debate between Adam and Ronnie dissolves because language can’t capture the way things are. You [Nina] think that language is inherently limited because of its essentially dualistic nature. So, since both Adam’s and Ronnie’s arguments—inevitably in a language—seek to capture how things are, they both must fail to do so.” In turn, Manjula questions whether all languages, including formal languages, have to be dualistic. I agree with Manjula that the possibility of non-dualistic languages—natural or artificial—remains open. In addition, for purposes of human expression there seems no reason why language, natural or artificial, should not suffice. Yet Nina could well have added that *any* duality, not just those in languages, can be drawn only at the relative level. She would insist that language could not capture the One, which is without limits. Yet saying *that*, even if dualistic language is incapable of capturing the ultimate way reality is, seems to presuppose that in some way we know how reality is in order to affirm that language is incapable of capturing it. (See Bimal Matilal 2001)

A Category Mistake and the Displacement of Self. In regard to RAB, 97, Nina considers the question, “What is the relation of Oneness—the realm of no relations—to the realm of differentiated, countable individuals [including individual reference frames] and their relations?” She rejects the question since it does not recognize that the One could have no relations to start with. Nina says: “In the realm of no relations, there’s no question of the relation between it and the realm of relations. Your [Barbara’s] very question disallows the realm of no relations.” Manjula also rejects the question, but her reason for doing so differs from Nina’s. Manjula suggests that it commits a “category mistake” rather like the question, “Does 2 have parents in Mumbai?” I agree with Manjula that such a question, while grammatically correct, commits a category mistake. Keeping in mind the mantric refrain, “Thou Art That,”

“Thou”—understood as an individuated person—is just *not the sort of being* that could qualify as being “That”—understood as the absolute One that Nina seeks to realize. But something deeper than a category mistake is going on here. It concerns Nina's project of self-realization. That project is encapsulated in the mantric refrain that Nina adopts. Its ritual repetition is meant to aid in altering one's consciousness. As “relative” individuals we may ask, “What is the relation between me, my individual personal self, and the One?” Yet, insofar as the One admits of no individuality, the question no longer arises. Ritual repetition of the mantric refrain is meant to displace the personal speaker as the subject, then to be replaced by the impersonal space of the One. (See Krausz 2013, section 6.) Whatever else one might want to say about Nina's conception of self-realization, noting that its mantric refrain exhibits a grammatical category mistake does not so easily dismiss it.

I look forward to further exchanges with Anand Vaidya about relativism, absolutism and beyond. For me, this engagement has been most constructive.

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