Reply to Ronald H. McKinney


Dr McKinney declares that ‘Relativism, for him, implies that two cultures of people have nothing in common at all and thus are unable to understand each other.’¹ I do not wish to say that all relativism is as extreme as that. Relativism, for me, is a doctrine according to which the values embodied in a given vision or form of life, in particular of entire societies, are not merely incompatible, but are such that the motives for holding them, for living in the light of such values, are seen as totally arbitrary, or, at best, opaque, although not necessarily unintelligible. Pluralism, on the contrary, for me means that I can imaginatively enter into the situation, outlook, motives, constellation of values, ways of life, of societies not my own. Every society and individual lives in the light of a hierarchy of values, or alternatively of equally demanding claims of sometimes compatible, sometimes incompatible, values, which, in the end are, of course, individual and personal to those societies and individuals. I am bound, given my general view, to deny the possibility of some overarching criterion which objectively determines what, in a given situation, all men at all times in all places are required to pursue. In that sense I am neither a Platonist nor a seventeenth-century rationalist, nor a philosophe, nor a Kantian, nor a Utilitarian, nor a believer in any other objectivist doctrine. But I believe that a good many ultimate values have been pursued in common by a great many people in very many places, over very long periods of time; and that is these alone that we call human values. But that is nevertheless an empirical fact, basic, but still only empirical. The condition of recognising ultimate values, whether my own or those of other cultures or

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persons, is that I must be able to imagine myself in a situation in which I could myself pursue them, even though they may in fact repel me, and I may be prepared to resist them with all the means I have at my command. In other words, I understand how one might be in such a frame of mind, or a member of such a civilisation, or in pursuit of such a set of ultimate values or ends, conceived, it may be, as absolute and eternal by such persons or communities, whether or not I or we (that is, the society with which and with whose conceptual framework I am bound up) happen to sympathise with such an outlook.

Further on I am asked whether I would be able to understand ‘someone who promotes a sado-masochistic lifestyle’ or would I regard this as beyond ‘the human horizon’. This is part of the charge that I am, perhaps unconsciously, still Platonic enough to accept objective criteria. My answer to that is that, of course, I understand – I have imagination enough to understand – someone who is able to take pleasure in cruelty, in the infliction of pain upon himself or others. Byronic heroes can be of such a kind. So is the outlaw who rejects the, to him, conventional morality of his society, and allows himself to commit violent crimes, which he may or may not call crimes, but which in any case he declines to judge in terms of his society’s value system, which he rejects, and declines to formulate some other value system in terms of which such acts are justified, and rejects the very notion of justification. One can conceive of extreme Romantics of that type, who go beyond Nietzsche, and live and act as they do, not bound by any system of values that can be coherently formulated; and naturally such persons endanger, and are likely to cause immense harm to, the many forms of life which men have led, one of which I and my society pursue; and for that reason I am justified, in terms of my own values and those of most other cultures (but not necessarily of all), to resist this. I may try to heal such psychologically – to me, somewhat deranged – persons, or simply prevent them from acting as they do, by force if need be. But from this it does not follow that I cannot understand what it would be like to be in that kind of condition – otherwise I should not understand the works of literature in which they occur, or the genius of some of those who have described, or even glorified, them.
On the previous page, I do not think that I believe that ‘every proposed solution to any problem necessarily breeds new problems’. I think they do. I think that it is unlikely that they won’t breed such problems – that has certainly been the history of solutions that human beings have brought into existence to cure given problems. But I do not think that this is necessarily so. Some of them may, and some may not. But this is a minor point; in general, this paragraph is a fair summary of my views.

In the next paragraph there is an acuter problem, for me or for anyone who accepts my general premisses. I do indeed think it ‘our first duty to avoid “extremes of suffering”’, and promote compromises to prevent the occurrence of intolerable choices. But if someone takes a Nietzschean, tragic-Romantic view of life, and says ‘I do not mind whether my society survives or not – I do not mind whether pain or intolerable suffering occurs in it or not, but I prefer a society in which there is heroism, violence, inequality, unfairness, war, insolence, ruthless self-assertion, to a peaceful, harmonious, compromise-addicted “decent” society, which seems to me grey and dull and intolerable’, I have nothing to say to such a man, save that his values (which, I repeat, I understand, even though I may detest them) are such that I shall resist his efforts to subvert my society by every possible means open to me. If you ask, is it an objective duty to do this? – not objective in some Platonic or Kantian sense, but such as arises from my conception of the minimal degree of decency with which human life should be lived, and, indeed, my desire to preserve human society as such, since I believe that the adoption of constant collisions or the promotion of intolerable choices cannot preserve a society for long: if you ask this, then I answer yes, it is such a duty, and one which I am ready to preach and (I hope) practice. That is my view, my conviction, and that of the people I live with and among, and in my opinion that of the great majority of the cultures the world has known; I cannot, of course, say of all. What I mean by ‘the human horizon’ is a horizon which for the most part, at a great many times in a great many places, has been what human beings have consciously or unconsciously lived under, against which values, conduct, life in all its aspects, have appeared to them. But I cannot guarantee that this will go on for ever, or has never been

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absent or altered in the past – I can only say that not only am I for it, but that the great bulk of mankind, whatever its differences and conflicts, do, in fact, accept this as a minimum required by human solidarity – in terms of which human beings tend to recognise each other as such. This is not Platonism, it is an empirical, undemonstrable, de facto acceptance of what, it seems to me, human experience provides. My reason for saying that the variety of values that human beings are able to pursue and have pursued and are likely to pursue is limited, and not, even in theory, infinitely great, is that I believe that it is a matter of empirical fact that in so far as communication between human beings is possible, across time and space as well as within single communities, this is based on a common human nature (or outlook) which alone makes this possible. This is, for me, an empirical generalisation of the factors that make human intercourse possible. It is not an a priori, metaphysical Platonic truth. For that reason I do not feel guilty of crypto-Platonism, smuggled into my empirical pluralism, as charged in this article – I do not see the “profound ambiguities” which are perceived in my ‘outline of post-modern ethics’, as it is called.

I do indeed say that there are a ‘minimum’ of such values ‘without which societies could scarcely survive’. That is an empirical fact – if people were allowed to murder each other indiscriminately, or if truth were never observed in people’s statements, or if the means of human subsistence or security were destroyed, and the like, human society would not be able to survive. That also is an empirical fact of very wide application. But it does not follow that someone could not reject them, and doom human societies to perdition, or at any rate try to do so – that would certainly place someone attempting to do it beyond the horizon of common human values. Hume’s example of the man who prefers to destroy the world in order to stop the pain in his little finger, is a man whose motives we find it virtually impossible to understand; and therefore he stands beyond the horizon that I have spoken of. I therefore wish to rebut, as courteously as I can, the charge ‘self-reflective inconsistency’. I also am bound to admit that the notion of one civilisation provoked by and likely to destroy another – a view you attribute to Mr Caputo – also seems

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to me not consistent with a world of a minimum of common values, and so beyond what might be called the normal range of choices that are available if human society is to be able to continue.

Let me as a final example – for I have no more to say – illustrate what I regard as behaviour which puts a man engaged in it beyond intelligibility – i.e., outside the horizon of available, chooseable, ultimate values. Supposing that I meet a man who pushes pins into human beings, and I ask him why he does it, is it ‘in order to cause pain’? (a perfectly intelligible, if regrettable, human inclination). If he answers ‘No’, says that this is not his motive, he just likes doing it, I then ask him whether, since obviously people suffer as a result, they might resist and try and push pins into him, by way of retaliation; to which he answers ‘I should not like that; but since I am stronger than they, I could prevent them.’ If, then, somewhat puzzled, I ask him ‘What is it that you like about pin-pushing?’, and he replies, ‘I like pushing pins into resilient surfaces’, and I then ask, ‘But would not tennis balls equally answer your need?’, to which he answers, ‘Yes, of course, they would do just as well’, I then ask, ‘Do you see no difference between pushing pins into tennis balls and into human bodies?’ and he replies, ‘I simply do not know what you are after; it is all one to me.’ Then I think I would regard him as ‘beyond the horizon’; his thought processes, if one may call them that, are unintelligible; no communication can occur; and this, therefore, would identify the fence that encloses the plural values, all of which can be called human. That is why we call such people mad, and commit them to asylums rather than to prisons for committing crimes for intelligible motives.

I do hope I have made my position clearer than it was.

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