

CAN THE RELATIVIST AVOID REFUTING HERSELF?

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VALUE RELATIVISM IS ATTRACTIVE. Given the great diversity of human beings and their values, and the seemingly impossible task of unambiguously providing an objective standard applicable and agreeable to all of them, it is tempting to declare that no value judgment is inherently right or wrong; that nothing is good or bad in itself. It is tempting to believe that all values are animated by and get their meaning from the particular persons or groups holding them under contingent circumstances that are sure to change.

Barbara Herrnstein Smith, in her new book *Contingencies of Value*, subscribes to such a view: "Evaluation is always compromised because value is always in motion . . . it is constantly variable and eternally indeterminate."¹ Smith, who is a well-known editor of Shakespeare's sonnets and lately president of the Modern Language Association, is chiefly concerned with value judgments made about works of literature: "like all value, literary value is not the property of an object or of a subject but, rather, the product of the dynamics of a system" (p. 15).

This view is hardly novel. Relativism is appealing and has been adopted, in a wide variety of forms, for a very long time (beginning, at least, with the Greek sophists of the fifth century). The twist that Smith gives to her version of relativism is "economic." For her a value judgment is much like a market operation and deliberation is a cost-benefit analysis: a judgment of

"the value" of some entity—for example, an artwork, a work of literature, or any other kind of object, event, text, or utterance—cannot be a judgment of any independently determinate or, as we say, "objective" property of that entity . . . what it can be (and typically is) is a judgment of that entity's contingent value: that is, the speaker's observation or estimate of how the entity will figure in the economy of some limited population of subjects under some limited set of conditions. (p. 94)

As a consequence, the "competent and effective evaluators . . . operate in some ways very much like market analysts" (p. 103).

For Smith, evaluation is not a matter of discovering what is simply good or bad in a work of literature or a human action; it is a process of assigning value and then advertising it successfully. Evaluation is, in other words, strictly a matter of rhetoric. There is no Truth, no Good, built into the Nature of Things; there are only truths and goods and these vary as widely as the polyglot communities in which they circulate. I shall not dwell on Smith's "economic metaphors" (p. 114), although these of course merit thorough examination. Instead, I shall focus on a more fundamental argument of this book, one that I believe manifests the central problem surrounding any attempt to justify relativism.

Relativism is alluring. But it is always plagued with a decisive problem (one articulated as early as Plato's *Theaetetus*): how can it account for itself? If the value of all entities is relative to the person or group propounding these values, and if relativism as a theoretical position is an entity, then its value is relative. If this is the case, then relativism cannot coherently make any assertions about values in general; it cannot universalize itself. If, as Smith declares, there are no objective Truths, then she, good relativist that she claims to be, cannot coherently assert one.

One of the best features of *Contingencies of Value* is that Smith understands the centrality of this problem. Indeed, her last chapter, gravely titled, "Matters of Consequence," is devoted to overcoming it.² She is convinced that she has succeeded. " 'Relativism' in the sense of a conception of the world as continuously changing, irreducibly various, and multiply configurable does not conceive of itself as a logical deduction, or as an inescapable conclusion drawn either from personal experience or scientific experiment, or as an insight into the underlying nature of things. Rather, it conceives of its own conception of the world as a contingent product of many things" (p. 183). Smith is determined that her account does not refute itself, does not engage in precisely those

types of assertions that, according to the relativist credo, are vacuous. Therefore, she very self-consciously "advertises" her work: "Thus, my reply to the charge of self-refutation consists of everything I have already said here, from which my own saying of it is, of course, not exempt. Having designed this verbal/conceptual construct to be of value—interest, use, and perhaps even beauty—to the members of a certain community, I exhibit it here for sale, hoping that some of its readers will, as we say, 'buy it'" (p. 113).

Smith's cognizance of the fundamental problem of relativism is admirable; her attempt to overcome it is not. She hopes that by admitting the contingency of her own work, by declaring her book to be a commodity for sale rather than an assertion of the Truth, she has avoided self-refutation. Unfortunately, her declaration is only a wish; despite the labels she attaches to her work, this book contains as many assertions as does any more traditional text. She has, whether she likes it or not, refuted herself. Perhaps this is obvious from even the few citations given above. How can the words, "evaluation is constantly variable and eternally indeterminate," be interpreted as anything but a traditional assertion of the Truth? Smith believes that the objectivist, he who believes that there are rational standards immune from the vagaries of time, is just plain wrong. Despite her protests to the contrary, she believes she has had an insight into the Nature of Things: she has seen the flux and called it real. "There is no Judgment Day. There is no bottom bottom line anywhere" (p. 149). Although negative, these two sentences are as confidently assertive, and hence as liable to the relativist's attack, as their positive inversions.

I shall not harp on these rather obvious points. Instead, consider the following argument that Smith believes helps her overcome the charge of self-refutation: "Thus, when someone (an objectivist, for example) insists that I make truth-claims when I speak, he merely reasserts his inability to entertain any alternate structure of conceptions of what he calls 'truth.' It is equivalent to his saying that I can exist only under his description of me, and, specifically, that I can speak only under his (objectivist) description of language" (p. 113).

As Smith conceives of the debate between herself and the objectivist, the latter's charge of self-refutation made against her founders because it *begs the question*. The objectivist assumes, without proving, that there are objective standards and that language is meant to express them. Thus, when he charges the relativist with self-refutation he assumes that she is doing what he sees himself as doing, namely making objective

judgments. He foists his view on her by covertly forcing her to play his game. Smith believes that she does not refute herself because, given her self-description, she is not making objective claims. She claims that a "nonobjectivist by definition cannot be 'committed to' what the objectivist objects to in what he names 'relativism,' nor is she, then, behaving inconsistently when she acts in a way inconsistent with those alleged commitments" (p. 157).

"Begging the question" is a charge that Smith often wields against her opponents. With such a phrase she seems to mean assuming, rather than arguing for, the primary propositions that constitute a theoretical position. Hume's "natural standard," for example, "firmly" begs the question (p. 62). Hume simply asserts that some critics are "acknowledged by universal sentiment" to have superior judgment. In other words, he does not prove that relativism is false, he only repeats in various forms his conviction that it is. Kant does something similar. After examining the conditions of the possibility of objective aesthetic judgment, he concludes that they reside in a transcendental apparatus that is so "pure" that, by definition, it can only make universal judgments. His argument is thus "question-begging" (p. 66) and "transparently circular" (p. 72). Even Hilary Putnam begs the question by insisting that traditional notions such as justification and rational acceptability are required for normative judgments (p. 153). Since he defines the normative in "orthodox axiological" terms, he is of course led to the conclusion that the normative requires such notions.

Perhaps Smith is right in her analysis of these proponents of traditional "axiological" thought. The question, however, is this: what's wrong with "begging the question?"

For an objectivist, the answer is obvious. As a believer in the possibility and desirability of rationally certifying first principles, begging the question, simply assuming what one purports to prove, is a crime against reason. But why should begging the question be objectionable to a relativist like Smith? Indeed, the relativist's position implies that all positions beg the question. If all first principles are a matter of contingent circumstance, none can be fully defended. At some point in their expression their contingency must be acknowledged and they must be adopted without subsequent question. To go even further, for the relativist, the assertion of any value begs the question. For Smith, saying "X is good" means "X is good according to my particular beliefs which are held under a variety of mutable conditions. The goodness of X cannot be defended except by reference to my (and my audience's)

being implicated in those conditions." If someone presses harder and asks, "but what's so good about those conditions?" the question must be begged: there is no answer beyond that already given. If evaluation is radically contingent, then all evaluators beg the question. But if evaluation is radically contingent, there is nothing wrong with that.

This gets to the heart, not only of the problems besetting this book, but to any theoretical effort to justify relativism. Relativism is often compelling. Part of its attraction is that, in a certain sense, it cannot be refuted. Smith is quite right that her objectivist opponent begs the question. His animating belief is that there are objective standards and that the attempt to defend them rationally is good and reasonable. Because of these attempts he will inevitably invite the relativist into an argument. Entry in this argument (or debate, or game), however, is hardly a neutral act; its very rules are presuppositions. They demand, for example, that the participants ought to "play fairly," that is, be rational and not use force. Most important, they assume without proof that victory, namely rational adjudication of the debate, is possible and this implies that there is some standard that can measure the rational goodness of the competing positions.³ Thus, the invitation to argue begs the question: there is no argument that can, without assuming its own conclusions, certify the goodness of argumentation.

Smith is again quite right in identifying the charge of self-refutation as the objectivist's primary weapon in this debate: Once the relativist has agreed to argue, the objectivist will accuse her of engaging in precisely those activities that, according to her own position, are vacuous. But the relativist is under no compulsion to play the objectivist's game. She can simply opt out of the debate. The relativist can, and should, refuse to play by her opponent's rules. Instead of arguing, she should take responsibility for "the particularity of the perspective" from which she views the world (p. 160) and leave it at that. If she does more, if she accepts the objectivist's invitation to debate, to defend her first principles, she will indeed refute herself.⁴

To achieve coherence the relativist's assertions should themselves express continual awareness of their own particularity and contingency. In her explicit self-descriptions, Smith claims precisely this awareness for herself. But the vast majority of her assertions belie her claims. When she asserts that evaluation is "eternally indeterminate," she is saying something that demands the very sort of justification she believes ought to be eschewed. Despite her many denials, Smith believes she is

Right and her opponent Wrong. When she accuses her opponents of begging the question, she invokes a traditional standard of reason and has chosen to play the game she professes to despise.⁵

What I have said does not imply that relativism is Wrong and objectivism Right, for my discussion has been framed in strictly conditional terms. If the relativist chooses to argue, she agrees that the rules of the debate are acceptable. She agrees that she wants to win and that winning is thus a reasonable goal to pursue. If she makes this choice, she can legitimately be accused of self-refutation. By charging Hume and Kant of begging the question, Smith chooses to play the traditional game of rational argumentation.

What all of this seems to show is that if relativism is tempting, then objectivism is equally, if more quietly, so. This is because even the most hardened relativist rarely can resist the lure of making certain claims for herself and then objecting to those who disagree. Relativism can be made irrefutable: there is no argument that can prove, without begging the question, that the debate between these two fundamental options ought to be held. On these grounds the relativist can coherently opt out of what would be an exercise in self-defeat. However, once the relativist asserts that her position can best her opponent's in rational debate it is easily refuted. The solution for the relativist, then, is to resist the temptation of claim-making and to refuse the objectivist's invitations. Smith explicitly describes herself as doing just this. But she is wrong about herself. She has not totally abandoned the traditional project of argumentation. Her language is too traditional, too familiar. Indeed, it is too academic.

This is hardly surprising. What she says about canonical texts (whose authority she of course is out to undermine) would equally well describe a presidential address to the MLA: "they would not be found to please long and well if they were seen *radically* to undercut establishment interests or *effectively* to subvert the ideologies that support them" (p. 51). This sounds right. If so, then her views can hardly threaten the academic establishment. They must, then, be presented in a form that can be assimilated to traditional academic argumentation. Even given the current infatuation with Derrida's deconstruction, Rorty's pragmatism, and all the various academic relativisms, the journal articles still have to be written, the debates and elections still have to be held. Despite its many protests to the contrary, the academy is still beholden to most of its traditional tasks. For this reason Smith, the highly successful

academic, has refuted herself. She has not written an "advertisement" that celebrates its own contingency. She has written a book criticizing her opponents and defending herself.

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1. Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 9.
2. Actually, here she is more concerned with what she calls the "egalitarian fallacy," the belief that if all values are relative, then they are all equal (p. 152). This fallacy, however, is a version of the self-refutation problem. If the values of all theoretical positions are equal, then the value of relativism is equal to the value of its opposite, objectivism, and thus cancels itself.
3. What I am saying here is somewhat similar to Habermas's view of an ideal speech act which, in a scant two pages (pp. 110-11), Smith confidently dismisses as "empty" and "utopian."
4. In this sense, the first part of this book, where Smith recounts her own experiences with Shakespeare's sonnets, is its best.
5. It gets even worse when she claims her own position is non-question-begging (p. 153). Not only is she, I believe, wrong about the logical quality of her position, but even if she were right, she would be liable to the accusation of using the objectivist's standard to measure herself.