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The Faces of Pluralism

Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning; that there is always another dawn risen on mid-noon, and under every deep a lower deep opens.

Emerson

1.1 The Problem

Metaphysics is often defined as the search for the ultimate truth about reality. This definition reflects an ambiguity within metaphysics itself, for truths can be “ultimate” in two senses. They can be ultimate by being basic and fundamental—first principles; or they can be ultimate in that they take us beyond the appearances—beyond human misconceptions, prejudices, and frailties to the real nature of the world.

It is in this second sense that metaphysics is said to be capable of bringing us into contact with *absolute* truths. Just what these truths may be is a matter of debate, but regardless of whether the world is entirely material or immaterial, in perpetual change or constantly static, composed of many substances or just one, the traditional metaphysician believes that there is a single absolute nature of reality—the way the world is in itself. In short, there is a significant strain of *absolutism* in metaphysics. Metaphysical absolutism is the view, as William James once put it, that reality “stands ready-made and complete,” leaving our intellects to “supervene with the one simple duty of describing it as it is already” (1910, 123). It is the idea that there are absolute facts about ultimate reality, facts that are as they are independently of our conceptual contributions.

The durability of absolutism as a bedrock assumption of philosophical inquiry is due to its intuitive force. Most of us believe that there are at least some questions that have only one right answer. Once we clarify the meanings of the words by which a question is expressed, the answer is not up to us but rather is dictated by how the world is “in itself.” Extend this intuition to the questions of metaphysics and we have not only the position of Aristotle, Leibniz, and Spinoza but also of Russell, Lewis, and Kripke. Contemporary metaphysicians, no less than their historical counterparts, see metaphysics as the attempt to discover the one true nature of the world. The only way to do that is by coming up with a theory, which, any ontologist would admit, probably won’t be completely right. Yet, hypothetically at least, there is a theory waiting “out there” that *is* completely right, and the search for that theory is the point of metaphysical inquiry.

Medieval scholastics, for example, believed that the world was a divine artifact, its structure and contents products of God’s will. The true theory of the world would be the one that most accurately represented that structure, the one that (perhaps literally!) reads the mind of God. In like fashion, many philosophers and scientists today believe that science in general, and physics in particular, will reveal to us the ultimate and unique structure of the universe. As the physicist Stephen Hawking remarks, “The eventual goal of science is to provide a single theory that describes the whole universe” (1988, 10). This is the view known as “materialism”—everything is a physical thing or composed of physical things.¹ If materialism is true, then a completely successful physical science will explain everything—not only quantum phenomena and a cure for AIDS but also consciousness and the abstract objects of mathematics. Of course, materialists typically do not believe that this unique physical structure of the world was divinely created, nor that discovering its nature is discovering divine intentions, but they do share two beliefs with their medieval counterparts: the world stands “ready-made,” and, hypothetically at least, we can give one true account of the nature of that world.

Yet since the inception of metaphysics, absolutism has been balanced by the equally strong intuition that the world is tolerant of *more* than a single description of its nature. This is metaphysical pluralism, the idea that there can be more than one true metaphysic, that there can be a

plurality of incompatible, but equally acceptable, conceptual schemes. These conceptual schemes are ways of dividing reality into objects and kinds of objects; they are ways of categorizing the world. The pluralist intuition is that the world does not dictate to us which of these ways of categorizing is the best, the most correct, or the way the world really is “in itself.” The pluralist denies that there are any absolute facts about ultimate reality; the facts themselves reflect our conceptual points of view.

In its contemporary form, metaphysical pluralism has one of its roots in Kant, and in particular, in the Kantian insight that our knowledge of the world, and hence “the world as it is for us,” is in some sense constructed.² For Kant, experience did not simply write on the blank slates of the mind. A person’s conceptual scheme, what Kant would have called the “forms of intuition” and the “categories,” shapes raw sensory experience into knowledge. On the Kantian view, to even perceive an object is to conceptualize experience in a certain way. And according to Kant, at least, this means that we cannot consider an object as it is independently of our conceptualizations. We can only consider objects as they appear to us. The result is a type of *internalism*: All thought and talk about the world is internal to our conceptual scheme. Your thought and experience is literally *informed* by concepts, just as your visual field is structured and limited by your eyesight and position.

Kant, however, was no pluralist. For him, there was *one and only one* set of categorical and formal concepts, which together were the form of all possible experience. So if one of the roots of pluralism is the now familiar point that experience and thought is perspectival in character, a second is the idea that there can be more than one such perspective: there is no unique set of concepts we must use to think about the world.³ Apply this intuition to our basic metaphysical concepts, and the result is metaphysical pluralism, according to which there can be more than one true account of ultimate reality.

A common reason for taking metaphysical pluralism seriously is the apparent intractability of metaphysical disputes. This is a familiar consideration in morality, art, and religion: it is often thought (rightly or wrongly) that there is no neutral ground from which to adjudicate moral, aesthetic, or religious disputes. Different views about what is good, beautiful, or sacred can be radically divergent, even logically inconsistent, and

yet at the same time seem to fit the agreed-upon facts equally well. A familiar conclusion is that there is no objective basis for choosing between such perspectives, and therefore, that what is good, beautiful, or sacred is not absolute but relative to the perspectives themselves. The same intuitions can also find a grip in metaphysics. Most philosophers, even those who are absolutists, can remember feeling frustrated by the apparent intractability of one metaphysical debate or other. And certainly (as students of philosophy are continually reminding us) the “ordinary” person is often nonplussed by the underdetermination of metaphysical facts by the evidence. There just doesn’t appear to be any objective way to resolve some metaphysical disputes. Take the debate between the global materialist and immaterialist. One says that the world is entirely material or physical; the other declares that it is entirely immaterial or nonphysical. If we assume that both views are internally consistent and that (as each theorist will allege) each is consistent with how the world appears to us, how are we to adjudicate the dispute? In the face of such underdetermination, the pluralist intuition is not to insist on the absolute truth of just one metaphysical view but to admit more than one answer to such questions.

The obvious problem with metaphysical pluralism is that it threatens a loss of objectivity. If there is a plurality of correct perspectives, it seems that we cannot say that any are mistaken. In short, the chief problem for pluralism is truth. If the facts are relative or internal to conceptual schemes, it would seem that truth must be as well. Surprisingly, there is widespread agreement between pluralists and absolutists on this point. Most pluralist philosophers implicitly or explicitly concede that metaphysical pluralism is incompatible with a realist theory of truth. *Realism* about truth is the view that a proposition is true just when the world is as that proposition says that it is. Truth is not a matter of what we think about the world but about the way the world is. Yet by claiming that facts about the nature of reality are relative in some way, the pluralist seems committed to an antirealism about truth. The metaphysical pluralist, it would appear, must believe that the concept of truth is either subjectively relative, as Richard Rorty and Nelson Goodman sometimes seem to think, or that truth is epistemic in character, as Hilary Putnam has argued.⁴ Both the literature and common sense indicate that if the facts are soft, so too must be our concept of truth.⁵

The thesis of this book is that this assumption is mistaken. Metaphysical pluralism is compatible with a realist theory of truth. The upshot of combining these two views is a sort of *relativized Kantianism*, according to which all thought and fact is internal to one among a possible plurality of conceptual schemes, and yet truth is a relation between our thought and the world. Such a view denies that there can be a cosmic exile, God's-eye point of view, or Archimedean standpoint from which to state the one true story of the universe. My view is therefore antimetaphysical insofar as metaphysics is the search for ultimate, *absolute* truth. But truths can also be "ultimate" by being basic, and metaphysics can be seen as the search for, and creation of, these first principles. It is in this sense that relativistic Kantianism is itself a metaphysical view.

1.2 Faces of Absolutism

Metaphysical pluralism and absolutism are both two-faced. Each view has two aspects, the one representational, concerning propositional content, the other metaphysical, concerning fact. In short, absolutism is the view that there are absolute propositions and facts, and pluralism is the denial of both.

Bernard Williams implicitly illustrates the dual nature of absolutism when he says,

Reflecting on the world that is there *anyway*, independent of our experience, we must concentrate not in the first instance on what our beliefs are about, but on how they represent what they are about. We can select among our beliefs and features of our world picture some that we can reasonably claim to represent the world in a way to the maximum degree independent of our perspective and its peculiarities. (1985, 138–39)

The result is what Williams calls the "absolute conception of the world," which "might be arrived at by any investigators, even if they are very different from us" (1985, 138–139). His point is that ontological claims, claims that the world is some way "in itself," imply that the absolute conception of the world contains a description of the world being that way. For Williams, the notion of an absolute conception of the world gives substantive content to the idea of the world as it is in itself. Of course, Williams believes not that we currently possess such a conception,

or even that we will ever have one, but only that there exists such a conception of the world in logical space, toward which our efforts at knowledge aim.

The implication is that there are two aspects of the absolutist view. Relying on a bit of technical jargon, I shall call the representational aspect of the view, *content absolutism*. The content of an assertion, utterance, or belief is *what* is asserted, uttered, or believed; it is the proposition expressed by that assertion.⁶ Content absolutism is the view that what we say or think on some occasion—the proposition we express—is not relative to any worldview, perspective, or conceptual scheme. Now a natural way of individuating propositions is by their *truth-conditions*, the conditions in virtue of which they are true. So, to say that propositions are nonrelative is to say that the conditions in virtue of which they are true (or false) are determinate independently of the context, broadly conceived, in which they were expressed. We might say that propositions are absolute when the conditions under which they are true are *external* to any worldview or human perspective.

Here is an intuitive way of understanding what this means. Imagine a list of every true proposition in the entire universe—or at least the longest such list possible—including such unassuming propositions as *Water is a liquid*, *The desk is cluttered*, and *The Earth has one moon*. Content absolutism about this list would be the view that, as a matter of metaphysical necessity, the propositions on the list, save those about minds, perspectives, or those things uncontroversially dependent upon them, will have no intrinsic connection to any mind or perspective.⁷ The list is consistent without any relativistic qualification or connection to conceptual perspectives or schemes. It is unique in that there can be no other list of true propositions that is not included within, or identical to, the original list.⁸

So content absolutism implies that at best there can be only one true account of some subject matter. Of course, the absolutist needn't believe that anyone (or any group, for that matter) has ever *considered* this account. Nor must she hold that the one true account of the world be given in only one language. Nor does absolutism require that the one list of true propositions be complete, which would fly in the face of certain logical paradoxes.⁹ The key point is that content is absolute; prop-

ositions are determinate independently of perspectives or conceptual schemes.

The second aspect of the absolutist position I shall call *fact absolutism*. Again, the general idea here can be explained by appeal to the hypothetical totality of facts. According to fact absolutism, the totality of facts, should it exist, is necessarily unique and nonrelative. Facts are external to worldviews. Necessarily (in the strongest, most metaphysical sense of that word), there can be one and only one totality of facts; there is one and only one way the world is. As James says, the world comes “ready-made.” I take a fact to be a way the world is, or what we might call an obtaining state of affairs. That is, lemons being sour, the actual state of affairs of lemons being sour, is one and the same thing as the fact that lemons are sour. But I offer no theory of either facts or states of affairs: I take absolutism to be consistent with whatever they turn out to be (abstract objects Russellian composite, spatially located objects, etc.)¹⁰

Fact and content absolutism are two sides of one view because each one naturally leads to the other. It is fairly obvious that content absolutism leads to an absolutism about fact. If there can only be one true account of the world, there must be only one way the world is. But the implication works the other way around as well: if there can be only one way the world is, then there can be only one true account of the world.

Let me spell this out. Instances of the following principle are clearly true a priori (where “*p*” stands for some proposition):

T-SCHEMA *The proposition that p is true if, and only if, p.*

The two sides of the schema here are intuitively and necessarily connected. The proposition that grass is green *could not* be true if grass were not green, in virtue of what we mean by “true.” And just as obviously, if it were false that grass is green, then grass would not, and could not, be green. In the same way, the following is also true a priori:

F-SCHEMA *It is a fact that p if, and only if, p.*

Hence the following is also true a priori: the proposition that *p* is true if, and only if, it is a fact that *p*. Thus, together with the unique list of true propositions, there must also be a set or “list” of states of affairs, facts, or ways in which the world is. And if there is one unique way (or ways) in which the world is, then there will be a corresponding totality

of true propositions. In particular, if one of the obtaining states of affairs is the state of affairs that minds are nonphysical, then the proposition that minds are nonphysical will be true, and hence will be one of the propositions in the true account of the world.

There is no requirement that one be an absolutist about everything. One might simply be a local absolutist, believing, for instance, that there is one true account of the physical facts, while leaving it open whether there may be a plurality of facts about, e.g., morality. Indeed, such intermediate positions are quite popular. But when one reads the fine print of such views, it usually turns out that the facts about what ultimately exists—the “real facts,” in other words—are absolute, and the “facts” that admit of a plurality are relegated to second-class citizenship. Mixed positions generally give priority to those facts considered absolute. For this reason, throughout the book I will concentrate on *metaphysical* absolutism and pluralism, on facts about ultimate or basic reality. In my general description of both views, however, I shall be sketching absolutism and pluralism as they would apply to any fact or proposition.

1.3 The Move to Pluralism

Metaphysical pluralism is often seen as a consequence of a particular theory of truth. For example, advocates of epistemic theories of truth, such as the coherence and pragmatist theories, often take their views to entail some sort of pluralism. If the truth of a proposition consisted in its pragmatic consequences, then seemingly conflicting views could both be true if they happened to have the same practical consequences for our everyday lives. But since the goal of this book is to show how a robust pluralism is consistent with a *nonepistemic* theory of truth, I shall not be concentrating on epistemic theories of truth as ways of motivating a pluralist perspective.

Once we put issues relating to truth on one side, the most common motivation for metaphysical pluralism is the peculiar intractability of metaphysical debate. As I noted above, this sort of intuition pump is familiar to us from debates over morality or aesthetics. I am not interested in convincing anyone that any particular metaphysical debate is perverse. Rather, I want only to explain how these sorts of debates can provide

motivation for metaphysical pluralism. Whether that motivation is or should be compelling for everyone is a different issue, although I suspect it isn't and never will be (the existence of disagreement on these matters is part of the point, after all). In any event, examples are not difficult to find, since questions about the ultimate nature of the world are as numerous as its contents.

Consider problems of personal identity, for instance.¹¹ It is possible to split the hemispheres of the human brain without killing the patient. We also know that people can survive with just one half of their brain intact. Suppose that we could split your brain and, while keeping the hemispheres intact and operational, transplant each half into another body. Let us imagine (plausibly) that each of the resulting people has your character as well as apparent memories of your life. How many people are there now, and what has happened to you? One theory might maintain that you have died, to be replaced by two new people (but if people can survive with half of their brain intact, why can't you survive with both halves intact?). Another theory might claim that you survive as one of the people (but which one?). Yet another theory might claim that you survive as both (but how could one person be two people?). A fourth theory maintains that in fact, prior to the operation, your body housed two "coincident" people that have only now separated. The theories agree on all the facts about the operation and other perceived events but disagree about how many people have survived the operation.

As an example of Hilary Putnam's illustrates, ontologies have consequences for even the most mundane questions.¹² Imagine that I ask a friend how many objects are in my study. After counting the books, computer, desk, chair, and whatnot, she announces that there are exactly one hundred objects in the room. One sort of philosopher might claim that even though my friend's answer is acceptable loosely speaking, *strictly* speaking she is incorrect because she has forgotten to count the molecules and atoms in the room. Or consider the mereologist, who believes that every part of an object is itself an object, and that for every pair of objects, there is an object that has each member of that pair as parts. He will insist that we also count the "mereological sums" of the various macro and micro objects in the room, such as the object made up of the sum of the tip of my nose and my keyboard. If either of these philosophers

is right, it would seem that the number of objects in the room is much larger than what my friend believes.

Another (and historically more important) example is the debate over substance. Roughly speaking, a substance is basic or fundamental in that it *has* properties but is itself not a property of something else. According to a philosopher like Aristotle, many substances and types of substances exist, all of which endure through time, have identity conditions, possess properties both accidentally and essentially, etc. A particular person, on the Aristotelian view, is just one of these substances. But to a monist like Spinoza, persons are not basic enough to be substances. According to Spinoza, there is ultimately only *one* substance—the universe as a whole. He calls this one substance both “God” and “Nature.” Of course, it may *appear* to us that trees and humans are different substances, but ultimately, trees, persons, and mountains are just different modes or properties of the one *underlying* substance. Individual persons exist, of course, but they are “substances” only loosely speaking; strictly speaking, there is only the one substance, and a person such as yourself is simply a mode of that substance, a way in which it is at a particular time.

For a fourth type of example, we can turn to mathematics and logic. Consider numbers. Are they to be identified with the all too perishable scratches we make on a blackboard or the ideas we have when making those marks or something altogether different, as Plato thought, existing outside of space and time? Surely, it seems, they must be *something*. Or take points on a Euclidean plane. Points can be taken to be basic abstract particulars, sets of convergent spheres, composed of intersecting lines, or logical constructions out of volumes.¹³ Every one of these answers would seem to be in conflict with the others: to say that points are particulars, for instance, is meant to rule out that they are “really” intersecting lines. Similar debates can take place over the ontological status of sets, functions, propositions, possible worlds, and properties. We can even ask these questions about a piece of music, such as Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony. The symphony exists, of course, but what is it? Is it a repeatable pattern of sound made by instruments (and if so, *where* is this pattern?) or the actual sounds themselves (meaning that Beethoven’s symphony doesn’t exist when no one is playing it)? Or is the answer something else altogether?

The perplexity that we feel when faced with this and similar examples arises because, on the one hand, the competing answers seem straightforwardly incompatible: they appear to describe the world in radically different ways. For surely (we might think) there are exactly one hundred items in the room or there are exactly some other number of items. But on the other hand, the theories are also frustratingly equivalent in a certain sense. They are equivalent in that which theory we employ will make no difference to our predictions, (nonmetaphysical) explanations, and scientific practices in general.¹⁴ As far as our everyday lives are concerned (and here I include our scientific lives), it is simply irrelevant whether there are “really” mereological sums in my study or whether propositions are sets of possible worlds or possible worlds sets of propositions. Of course, it *would* be news if a philosopher could convince us, with arguments to the effect that they don’t exist, to stop even *appearing* to refer to, e.g., numbers or physical objects or other items we normally appeal to in our everyday lives. But most philosophers who deny the existence of such objects do *not* believe that their theories force a cultural change. Rather, like Berkeley, they are prone to argue that their radical ontological views either capture, or are consistent with, our ordinary beliefs. The contemporary ontologist can even employ various semantic techniques that allow him to maintain his thesis without revising the truth values of our ordinary talk about tables, chairs, and whatnot. One contemporary ontologist, for instance, maintains that he can consistently deny that there are any tables, chairs, and “middle-sized dry-goods” in general without thereby contradicting anything that the ordinary person believes or says.¹⁵

So the intuition that these debates are incapable of being absolutely resolved is not simply due to the fact that there is wide disagreement. Rather, it is the *nature of the disagreement* that fosters the relativist intuition: the metaphysical concepts themselves seem to be responsible for the suspicion that there is no absolute way to resolve the dispute.

I stress that you can have pluralist intuitions without having any allegiance to verificationism. According to classical verificationism, propositions that cannot be empirically verified are meaningless. What the typical verificationist and the pluralist share in common is the belief that metaphysical debates are unsolvable in any absolute sense. But that is where the similarity stops. Unlike the verificationist, the pluralist does not

conclude that metaphysical propositions are meaningless because they cannot be verified. Rather, pluralism is the view that there can be more than one true answer to these questions—not that every answer is meaningless.

1.4 Metaphysical Pluralism

Like its opposite, metaphysical pluralism has two sides: one representational (concerning content), the other concerning fact. These views are usefully characterized as *relativist*, but the reader is urged not to place undue weight on this term. “Relativism,” besides having become a dirty word in some circles, can be highly misleading, since wildly different views often bear the title. Most important, I stress that the following principles are slogans. They are the initial characterizations of a pluralist view whose heart is far more complex than concentration on them alone would make it seem. Nonetheless, slogans have their place, in philosophy as well as in politics. Here they are useful because they allow me to speak generally about the most important consequences of pluralism.

A central point of the last section was that pluralism can be motivated by the perplexing nature of certain metaphysical debates. What does it mean to say that there are more than ten objects in the room, or that the world contains many substances, or that numbers and symphonies exist? It is tempting to hold that the metaphysical content of these assertions is simply indeterminate absent any appeal to a wider context. This is precisely the intuition behind *content relativism* with regard to metaphysics. Just as there appears to be no objective way of settling the disputes discussed in the last section, so there is no external fact, independent of my conceptual scheme, that determines the truth conditions for my claim about, e.g., the number of objects. The proposition that I am expressing, what I am saying about the nature of reality, can be understood only by appealing to a scheme. As Hilary Putnam has claimed, “It is characteristic of [my] view to hold that *What objects does the world consist of?* is a question which only makes sense to ask *within* a theory or description” (Putnam 1981, 49). That this question makes sense *only within* a conceptual scheme implies that any answer to it must be relative, in some way or other, to a way of dividing up the world. And since there can be more

than one way to do that, there can be more than one true answer to our questions about ultimate reality.

On my understanding, the underlying position here is that the content of an assertion is intrinsically related to a conceptual scheme. (We will see later that conceptual schemes are themselves parts of an organic whole that I call a “worldview,” but such details are better left off for the moment.) Again, one can distinguish propositions by their truth conditions; so another way of putting the point would be to say that truth conditions are determinate only within a conceptual scheme. There are no determinate propositions independent of schemes; content is internal. In effect, propositions, true or false, are implicitly *indexed* to some conceptual scheme or schemes. This intrinsic connection between scheme and content means that the proposition that there is more than one object is, in a sense, underdescribed. It should be understood as the proposition that there is more than one object relative to *C*. I don’t mean to imply that the ordinary person knows that the contents of her beliefs are relative or that she intends to express propositions that are.¹⁶ Content relativism is a theory about the propositions we express, not about our intentions. In sum, content relativism about some domain is the view that if one were to give a complete and comprehensive analysis of a proposition in that domain, one would have to refer in that analysis to the conceptual scheme in which that proposition is expressed.

It may be helpful to quickly compare the debate over content relativism and content absolutism with a somewhat analogous debate between spatial relativism and spatial absolutism. The spatial relativist holds that all the facts about motion and location are facts about how objects are spatially related. Thus a proposition about the motion of some object is true or false only relative to a material frame of reference. The spatial absolutist, on the other hand, believes that there are also absolute facts about motion. The absolute facts about motion and location concern how objects are moving and located relative to absolute space. According to the spatial relativist, there is no proposition expressed by the sentence “The truck is moving” considered independently of any frame of reference. As uttered by someone on the sidewalk, for instance, the proposition that sentence will express could be the proposition that the truck is moving relative to the sidewalk. The metaphysical pluralist makes a similar claim:

there are no propositions independent of conceptual frameworks. So we can think of the pluralist's notion of content relativity as being in some ways an analogous extension of the spatial relativist's belief in the relativity of all propositions about motion. The spatial relativist claims that the content of the statement "The truck is moving" is relative to a particular material frame of reference; the metaphysical pluralist holds that the proposition that there is only one substance is relative to a conceptual scheme. Both claim that content is relative.

Yet we shouldn't overdo the analogy. The relativism of the spatial relativist is far more limited than the relativism involved in metaphysical pluralism. Metaphysical pluralism is a relativism about ultimate ontology, and as such it arguably entails a much more global pluralism. As we shall see throughout this book, the dramatically wider scope of metaphysical pluralism raises numerous problems—problems about self-reference, for instance—that spatial relativism does not.¹⁷

The second face of metaphysical pluralism is embraced by Hilary Putnam when he says, "To talk of 'facts' without specifying the language to be used is to talk of nothing" (1989, 114). Facts are *internal* to conceptual schemes, or ways of dividing the world into objects, among which there can be equally acceptable alternatives. Indeed, for the pluralist, every state of affairs, whether it obtains or not in the actual world, is internally related or relative to some conceptual scheme. Yet since facts concern us more than nonfacts (or states of affairs that don't obtain), I shall for the most part ignore the distinction and simply call the second face of pluralism *fact relativism*. The view can be stated in several different ways; since I am assuming an ontologically innocent sense of "fact," there is no reason to state "fact relativism" in terms of facts. I can make the same point by saying that every obtaining state of affairs obtains only within a scheme, or that objects exist and have properties only relative to schemes. As Putnam famously declares, "Objects do not exist independently of conceptual schemes. We cut up the world into objects when we introduce one or another form of description" (1981, 52). Once this relativity is acknowledged, the pluralist's view that there can be irreducibly different but equally true perspectives on reality begins to take on more shape. For now we can say (from within a certain scheme, of course) that relative to an Aristotelian scheme, there is more than one substance, but relative

to a Spinozistic scheme, there is only one. Or, from one standpoint there are one hundred objects in my study, while from another (the mereologist's) there are millions more.

One might think that what the pluralist is advocating here is simply a radical extension of something everyone recognizes in other circumstances. All of us believe that you and I aren't really disagreeing if you, using one system of measurement, report the temperature to be 0 and I, using a different system of measurement, report it to be 32. If we don't realize that we are using different systems, we might think we disagree. But once we realize that we are using different schemes of measurement, we can see that we are actually reporting on the same thermal state of affairs. It is tempting to say that the pluralist's point, then, is that ontological disputes are analogous to the "thermal dispute" just described. Yet again, the analogy is only so helpful. In the example, we take it for granted that there is a neutral standpoint, an absolute point of reference by which we can judge the situation. For the metaphysical pluralist, there is no such point of reference; *every* reporting of an ontological fact is done within a conceptual scheme or metaphysical perspective. There is no scheme-neutral way of making a report about the world. It would be a mistake to search for the scheme that tells it like it "really" is—there is no such thing.

My laying out these issues clearly owes much to the work of Hilary Putnam, the most prominent of contemporary pluralists. Yet it is important not to overstate the similarities between the views discussed here and the positions Putnam labels "metaphysical realism" and "internal realism." According to Putnam, metaphysical realism is comprised of three views:

The world consists of some fixed totality of mind-independent objects. There is exactly one and only one true description of "the way the world is." Truth involves some sort of correspondence relation between words and thought-signs and external things and sets of things. (1981, 49)

The first of the three criteria suggests that a main difference between metaphysical realism and Putnam's internal realism concerns the existence of mind-independent objects. As we shall see in chapter 4, there are senses of "mind-independent" according to which this difference is also present in the pluralism/absolutism debate, but there are other, perhaps

more important, senses in which it is not. What I've been calling content absolutism is essentially the second component of Putnam's metaphysical realism: there is exactly one and only one true account of the world. Putnam's third component of metaphysical realism, however, is not part of my description of absolutism. The thesis that absolutism is logically distinct from the "correspondence theory of truth" is essentially the flip-side of the main thesis of this book, namely that pluralism is consistent with realism with regard to truth.

1.5 Facts and Content

Just as the two faces of absolutism are connected, the two sides of pluralism, fact and content relativism, are best seen as two aspects of one view. Indeed, there is a strong case to be made for thinking that, given a few innocuous premises, each aspect of pluralism logically entails the other. Strictly speaking, their logical connection is not needed for the main claim of the book, namely that metaphysical pluralism is consistent with realism about truth. To accept *this* claim, and the arguments I shall marshal on its behalf, one need only accept that pluralism is committed to a relativity of *both* fact and content. Nonetheless, the argument for their connection is of more than technical interest. It demonstrates the depth to which the pluralist believes that the world and content are interwoven, and furthermore, it suggests a helpful strategy for presenting the details of pluralism itself.

The less controversial direction of the connection goes from fact relativism to content relativism. Suppose fact relativism is true: there are no facts independent of conceptual schemes. The fact that grass is green is relative to *C*. If so, then the proposition that grass is green must also be relative to *C*. The connecting premise is again the T-schema, or the truism that the content of a statement determines the necessary and sufficient conditions under which it is true. If facts are relative, it follows that when I state the fact that grass is green in *C*, what I am saying, the proposition I am expressing, is that grass is green in *C*. Intuitively, if facts are relative, then whatever truths I express must also be relative as well. Content relativism follows naturally from fact relativism.¹⁸

The more controversial point is that content relativism also leads to fact relativism. Many philosophers are inclined to accept the former but

deny the latter. After all, one might say, it is one thing to acknowledge that our *representations* of the world intrinsically depend on conceptual schemes, but another matter entirely to believe that this requires that the world itself be relative in some way. Even if our thoughts about objects are relative to conceptual schemes, this doesn't entail that "objects do not exist independently of our conceptual scheme" (Putnam 1981, 52). Or as Paul Moser has recently claimed,

Saying and asking are, naturally enough, "relative to some background language," but it does not follow that the objects about which one says or asks something are similarly relative. . . . Linguistic relativity of the notions and statements of an ontology does not entail linguistic relativity of what those notions and statements are about. (1993, 37)

Similar claims, most of which are directed against Hilary Putnam's "internal realism," run throughout the literature.¹⁹ Our judgments, propositions, and concepts may be relative, the story goes, but the world is not.²⁰

The argument for the contrary opinion is straightforward. Assume content relativism with regard to the proposition that grass is green. We can summarize this by saying that the proposition that grass is green is the proposition that grass is green relative to *C*. Now assume, harmlessly, that this proposition is true. If so, then the following instance of the T-schema must be true a priori:

The proposition that grass is green relative to *C* is true if, and only if, grass is green relative to *C*.

The content of my statement, in other words, necessarily determines the conditions under which it is true. And the conditions under which it is true that grass is green relative to *C* are when grass is green relative to *C*. If so, then the relevant instance of the F-schema is also true a priori:

Grass is green relative to *C* if, and only if, it is a fact that grass is green relative to *C*.

It follows from the transitivity of the biconditional that

The proposition that grass is green relative to *C* is true if, and only if, it is a fact that grass is green relative to *C*.

From this, of course, we can deduce that it is a fact that grass is green relative to *C*. The existence of a true relative proposition entails a relative fact.

I'll call the above argument the *T-argument*. The T-argument is persuasive in part because it is so simple. To show a connection between the two faces of pluralism or absolutism, we need only rely on three additional premises: the truth of some of what we say, and instances of the T and F schemata. And as I noted earlier, instances of the T and F schemata are as plausible candidates for necessary truths as any statements one might imagine. These principles mark out our concepts of truth and fact; hence instances of the T and F schemata are *intensional*, as opposed to extensional, truths. This distinguishes the T-schema from Tarski's Convention T, or what is sometimes called the "disquotational schema." The main difference is that instances of what I am calling the T-schema are necessary, a priori, truths. It *couldn't* be true that grass is green unless grass *is* green and vice versa, and it can't be a fact that grass is green unless grass is really green and conversely.²¹

No particular theory of truth or fact needs to be assumed in order for the T-argument to go through. To demonstrate the argument's neutrality with regard to truth, propositions, and facts alike, let's suppose (for demonstration purposes only) that, following Davidson (1967) and Field (1972), the concept of truth for natural languages can be understood through a Tarskian recursive definition. On this view, it is interpreted sentence tokens that are true. Roughly speaking, sentences of the form "*x* is *F*" are true in virtue of the fact that there exists an object that "*x*" designates and that is among the objects to which "*F*" applies. On this theory, the content or meaning of a sentence in a language is determined by its extensional interpretation, while talk about facts is understood as talk about objects having particular properties (or being members of certain classes). Truth is the relationship (the correspondence) between the component parts of an interpreted sentence and certain objects and properties in the world. Under this line of thought, then, fact relativism amounts to saying that objects have the properties they do only relative to a conceptual scheme.²² Similarly, content relativism is the view that sentential *interpretations* are relative to conceptual schemes. This isn't simply to repeat the point that the content or meaning of a sentence depends on its interpretation within a language. On that both the pluralist and the absolutist can agree. Rather, it means that there are no scheme-independent facts that determine interpretations. As Putnam sometimes

puts it, the world does not interpret sentences for us; independent of conceptual schemes there is literally no fact of the matter about the references of our terms. (1987, 32–33). Now suppose that we understand the sentence token “Grass is green” under an interpretation that takes it to mean that grass is green. The content relativist will hold this interpretation to be relative to a particular conceptual scheme. If so, then the sentence “Grass is green” (under the *C*-relative interpretation) will be true just when “grass” refers to grass *relative to C*, and “green” to greenness *relative to C*, and grass actually is green *relative to C*. Think of it this way. The content, or meaning, of a sentence token or utterance specifies the conditions under which that token is true. When the content is relative, the truth conditions must be relative. If the claim in question is “*x* exists” and its content is “*x* exists relative to *C*,” then the conditions for its truth are that *x* exists relative to *C*. The statement is true when that scheme-relative state of affairs obtains, and false otherwise. For the pluralist, this means that it is possible that *x* exists relative to *C* but *not* relative to *D* and, furthermore, that there is no scheme-independent fact of the matter about who is right. Once we assume content relativism and take it that some of what we say is true, we must embrace fact relativism as well. As Putnam says, “To talk of ‘facts’ without specifying the language to be used is to talk of nothing” (Putnam 1989, 114).

The T-argument provides a strong case for thinking that fact and content relativism plausibly stand or fall together. At the very least, it provides a significant challenge to those who would accept the relativity of representations while denying the relativity of what is represented. Furthermore, the logical connection between the two faces of pluralism suggests a way of tackling the details of the pluralist view. If we can explain pluralism’s relativistic view of propositional content, an understanding of fact relativism will follow in train. In effect, this will be my strategy for the next two chapters.

1.6 Three Objections

If pluralism were obviously incoherent, then an argument for its consistency with anything would be of little value. So I will spend some time examining the arguments that imply that the view is hopelessly confused

(or not even a distinct philosophical view at all). As it turns out, I believe these to be the most powerful objections to pluralism anyway. And lest the reader think I am blissfully ignorant of the difficulty of my task, I think it best to describe these problems at the start.

As a whole, this essay could be taken as a refutation of what is perhaps the most popular objection to pluralism. That objection is that metaphysical pluralism implies an incoherent epistemic or relativist concept of truth. Since I think that pluralism is consistent with realism about the concept of truth, I obviously disagree. But as I noted in the first section, even most pluralists take their view to imply an antirealist theory of truth. Putnam, for instance, has denied that pluralism entails a relativist account of truth but he has argued that pluralism does imply an epistemic account of the concept, that is, one which defines truth in terms of justification:

If objects are, at least when you get small enough, or large enough, or theoretical enough, theory-dependent, then the whole idea of truth being defined or explained in terms of “correspondence” between items in a language and items in a fixed theory-independent reality has to be given up. The picture I propose instead is . . . that truth comes to no more than idealized rational acceptability. (Putnam 1990, 41)

There are reasons to think that Putnam has now abandoned an overtly epistemic theory of truth (1994b). Nonetheless, claims such as the above have been common in most of Putnam’s work since 1980.²³ Further, Putnam’s view that his pluralist metaphysics commits him to an epistemic account of truth is, as far as I know, not questioned by his critics.²⁴ And if one believes that such a view is incoherent, then obviously pluralism is incoherent as well.

A second common criticism of metaphysical pluralism alleges that the view is really just a disguised form of idealism—the doctrine that everything is either mental or dependent on minds in some way. The reasoning behind this suspicion is easy to see. I have said that fact relativism involves the relativity of facts to conceptual schemes, and I have noted that this thesis can be expressed in terms of objects and their properties being relative to schemes. Thus, according to pluralism what exists does so only relative to conceptual schemes. So it seems that the pluralist must acknowledge that without conceptual schemes, the world would cease to exist.

A third objection is even more troubling, and will accordingly be more difficult to solve. Rather than concentrating on the alleged implications of metaphysical pluralism, it raises the possibility that no such position is in fact possible. I'll call this objection the *consistency dilemma*. Like pluralism itself, the consistency dilemma has two aspects: one aimed at content or representation, the other involving facts and the world.

The pluralist alleges that there can be more than one true account of the world. Now consider two such metaphysical perspectives, *A* and *B* that meet whatever criteria the pluralist requires for perspectives to be "equally" true. Either these perspectives are consistent with each other, or they are not. If not, then by virtue of her statement that *A* and *B* are equally true, the pluralist is in danger of being committed to the truth of contradictions. Now as we've seen, the metaphysical pluralist avoids this latter problem by relativization. On her view, facts and content are relative: *A* can be the case relative to C_1 , and $\sim A$ relative to C_2 without contradiction. But the point of the present objection is that this move fails to get the pluralist off the hook. The real problem for pluralism is not the *inconsistency* but the *consistency of schemes*. In other words, given the consistency between *A* and *B* that the relativization of fact apparently implies, the pluralist must explain how it is legitimate to talk about *incompatible* but equally true schemes in the first place. Specifically, if *A* and *B* are consistent, then either (1) *A* and *B* are expressing the same absolute truths in different languages (they are "notational variants") or (2) *A* and *B* are simply concerned with different subject matters altogether. But even the most hard-headed absolutist could grant either possibility, for both (1) and (2) are consistent with absolutism! The upshot of the consistency dilemma is that metaphysical pluralism does not succeed in presenting a distinct philosophical position.

The ontological face of the consistency dilemma could just as well be called the *many-worlds problem*. It arises in exactly the same way. Following Wittgenstein, we could say that the world is everything that is the case. That is, the world is the sum of all the facts. Now according to the pluralist, all facts are relative to conceptual schemes. Hence the pluralist is committed either to the existence of many worlds of facts—one world for each conceptual scheme—or to the existence of one world of facts that all conceptual perspectives are perspectives of. If the former is the

case, if there is one world for each conceptual scheme, then not only has the pluralist adopted a bizarre ontology on which worlds are like bubbles insulated from each other by the fragile barriers of concepts, she has apparently committed herself to absolutism. On such a picture, there will be one true story (an absolutely true account) of each individual world. (And the conjunction of those stories will be an absolute account of every world.) On the other hand, if the pluralist holds that there is only one world that all schemes represent, then presumably there will also be one true account of that world. And again, pluralism disappears as a distinct philosophical view.

These objections are not the only criticisms one might raise against pluralism, but they are the most prominent and compelling. As I noted, the objection from truth will be answered by the core thesis of this book. But the idealism objection, consistency dilemma, and its ontological face, the many-worlds problem, are no less important. If metaphysical pluralism cannot effectively answer these objections, then the conjunction of realism about truth and pluralism (what I called in the introduction relativistic Kantianism) becomes a less interesting philosophical position.

The next step, therefore, is to delve deeper into the details of pluralism, particularly into the notion of content relativism. Only after I have laid out these details will the answers to the objections above become clear. I'll begin by examining what propositions and facts are relative to: conceptual schemes.