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Flogging a Unicorn

Timothy Williamson, *Tetralogue: I'm Right, You're Wrong*, Oxford University Press, 2015, 153pp.

Dialogue is not a popular form of philosophical writing today. It is therefore surprising to come upon a “tetralogue” by one of the currently most influential voices in epistemology and logic. Timothy Williamson is Wykeham Professor in Logic at the University of Oxford. To date almost all of his studies were written in forbidding technical prose. The book under review thus opens up a new chapter in Williamson’s oeuvre: to address a wider audience, and to teach philosophical arguments and skills to non-philosophers.

Most of the book is a criticism of “relativism”. Consider morality. The moral relativist is impressed by the fact that moral judgements vary from one group or culture to another. Typically each group is able to justify their respective judgements in light of their different moral standards. And all too often neither side is able to convince the other. In at least some such cases the relativist is willing to conclude that each side is relatively right – relative right with respect to their system of standards – and that no sense can be made of being right absolutely.

Williamson’s tetralogue is situated on a present-day train. The conversation begins with a debate between Bob, a believer in witchcraft, and Sarah, an enthusiast about science. Sarah is unable to convince Bob that there is no evidence to support his witchcraft-beliefs. Enter Zac, the postmodern nemesis of good arguments. He offers a relativistic way to think of Sarah’s and Bob’s disagreement as “faultless”: both of them are right from their respective points of view. Bob and Sarah are not convinced. One problem is that Zac is unwilling to consult witches himself. Does he, after all, think Bob wrong – absolutely wrong? Another difficulty is that, whenever one of his claims is contested, Zac responds with “this is only my point of view”. But what happens when we challenge the relativized claim? Will Zac then introduce a further “this is only my point of view”? Moreover, Zac allows that even relativism itself is true only from his point of view. Does that not leave space for someone else being entitled to deny relativism?

Enter Roxana, the no-nonsense defender of “absolutism” (i.e. the opposite of relativism). She teaches Sarah that we should not exaggerate the possibility of being in error. For instance, it is impossible to think that we could be in error about “ $5+7=12$ ”. And Roxana has more basic lessons in store. For instance, to favour truth over falsehood is just the obvious preference for telling things as they are over telling things as they are not.

Subsequently Bob, Roxana and Sarah join forces and attack Zac’s appeals to the authority of Foucault, Nietzsche, or Wittgenstein. They ridicule “knowledge is power” with the remark that this would make the U.S. president the most knowledgeable person in the world. Nietzsche’s “truths are illusions one has forgotten are illusions” is dismissed as interesting only to “those untrained in logic”. In the case of Wittgenstein the target is the claim that the word “God” has a different meaning for scientists and believers. It is said to

be based on the idea that the two groups use different methods to determine whether God exists. The two women disagree: the meaning of “murderer” does not differ for those who accept DNA tests in murder trials, and those who don’t.

However much Sarah opposes Zac’s views, she is still willing to endorse moral relativism. She wishes to prefix her moral judgements with “From my point of view ...” and refuses to call any moral judgement “true” or “false”. Again Williamson has Roxana straighten Sarah out. Do we not make unqualified moral judgements all the time? Is it not true that slavery is wrong (absolutely)? And anyway, is there even such a thing as faultless disagreement over moral issues? Is there ever a disagreement where both sides are right – at least relatively? Zac snaps at the bait and offers two templates to make sense of the last-mentioned idea.

A first template concerns burps. Assume that in culture A, but not in culture B, burps are regarded as rude. Do the two cultures not faultlessly disagree over the rudeness of burps? Roxana will have none of it. If we go with the location of the one who burps, then John’s burping in A is rude, and his burping in B is not. Members of both cultures can agree on that. Generalizations like “Burping is rude” or “Burping is not rude”, when meant to apply to all cultures, are simply false. Finally, consider Jones saying in A: “Burping is rude”, and Smith saying in B: “Burping is not rude.” Here too there is no disagreement: Jones talks about what is “rude-in-A”, Smith about what is “rude-in-B”.

Zac’s second template for faultless moral disagreement is the difference between interesting and boring. Take a talk on accountancy. By accountants’ standards, the talk is interesting. By soccer fans’ standards, the talk is boring. The two sides disagree, but insofar as each side abides by its standards, they are not at fault. Sarah demurs. The two sides do not disagree: both agree that the talk is interesting-in-the-context-of-accountancy, and boring-in-the-context-of-soccer-fans. Nor does it help Zac’s case if we put accountants and soccer fans in a shared context. To claim that the talk was interesting in such context is to posit (implicitly or explicitly) a group of people whose views count. And the (absolute) truth or falsity of the claim then depends on these people’s reactions.

At this stage Sarah confesses to moral scepticism: How can we have moral knowledge when wrong actions do not fall into simple observational patterns? In reply Roxana offers a comparison. Checkmate too comes in many different forms, and yet Sarah trusts her ability to recognize it. But, Sarah retorts, what reason is there to think that our moral beliefs are at least roughly correct? Roxana has an answer based on a further parallel. Scientific theories can rarely be tested in isolation from each other. And yet, when scientific predictions fail, scientists are often able to determine which theoretical component is in trouble. Our moral beliefs are one part of our total system of decision-making. The other part consists of practical considerations. We cannot “test” the parts in isolation. But we can evaluate our decisions morally. And we can draw conclusions about which parts of our total system of decision-making need improving. Sarah is convinced, and concludes that there can be progress in morality, too. – *Exeunt omnes*.

Tetralogue is a noteworthy and important contribution to the genre “refutations of relativism addressed to non-specialists”. Williamson tries hard to present, in an accessible way, a strong case against relativism. For this he deserves thanks and praise. It is good to have his views on relativism out in the open. Other anti-relativists can check whether Williamson’s arguments help their case, and relativists will welcome the challenge to take on such a well-known philosopher.

Since my own sympathies lie with the relativist camp, my subsequent comments will be critical. A book like Williamson’s *Tetralogue* can be assessed along more than one dimension. I shall focus on literary quality, pedagogy, and philosophical substance.

I begin with literary quality. It might seem unfair to demand such quality from a book that has primarily a pedagogical purpose. And yet, to be pedagogically successful a text has to be a good read. And in this respect Williamson’s book is uneven. The conversation does not flow easily and naturally; and three of the four characters remain flat and psychologically implausible. For today’s readers, Bob’s advocacy of witchcraft is difficult to relate to. Zac is overburdened with everything that Williamson abhors: from Nietzsche to Wittgenstein, Foucault to the postmodern critique of science, sociology of philosophy to “new wave” relativism. No wonder the poor man has to shift his position on every second page! This hotchpotch of ideas does not make for a plausible or even intelligible character. Roxana is always right, arrogant and sanctimonious. She sounds more like a philosopher’s superego than a human being. Sarah is the only one of the four who at times comes alive: she is passionate about her values; considerate and understanding towards others; or willing to change her position when confronted with a good argument.

How good is the pedagogy of Williamson’s book? Introductory texts in philosophy should motivate the students to think for themselves; present them with interesting problems or puzzles; outline a number of different solutions; indicate some of the difficulties in adjudicating between them; and finally, explain why the author nevertheless, on balance, and tentatively, prefers one over the others. *Tetralogue* does present an interesting problem, and does outline different solutions. But it conveys no sensitivity for the difficulties in adjudication, and no sense of the tentative. The key lesson is that relativism is never an appropriate response to seemingly intractable disagreements, and that thinkers like Foucault, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein stumble over the simplest of argumentative challenges. “Roxana Williamson” teaches how things are from an absolutist point of view. And whoever does not follow, is ridiculed as a fool.

I finally turn to philosophical substance. Limitations of space force me to confine myself to a few telegraphic comments.

First, it is difficult to assess Williamson’s case against global relativism since Zac holds so many different positions simultaneously (for the aficionados: relativism, scepticism, expressivism, infallibilism). The form of relativism first introduced – every individual is right from his or her own point of view – is an extreme brand that some textbooks attribute to Protagoras, though much important scholarship disagrees. Here Williamson is flogging a unicorn.

Second, it is unfortunate that Williamson does not consider some of the reasons or motivations various authors have put forward in defence of relativism over the last thirty years. For instance, sociologists have advocated a relativistic study of the history of science. That is to say, they have tried to explain both true and false scientific beliefs in the same general non-evaluative kind of way. Some have seen the success of this project as inductive support for relativism itself. The sociologist David Bloor has argued further that relativism flows directly from the denial of “supernaturalism”: the belief that there is something beyond the empirical natural world, and that we have the cognitive means to learn about it. On Bloor’s rendering, Zac and Sarah should be allies! Other authors – especially in ethics – have focused on phenomena of “ambivalence” or “intellectual distance”. David Wong writes about the ambivalence we experience in certain fundamental disagreement over the rationality and justification of beliefs: we recognize that our interlocutor on the other side has—from her perspective—perfectly legitimate and rational reasons for her judgements and we appreciate that we can argue for the superiority of our position only by begging the question against her. This does not mean that we abandon our own judgements, rather it means that we come to see them in a new light: as relative to our system of morals. And Bernard Williams has studied the “intellectual distance” we sometimes feel in thinking about another culture and moral values: think of the culture of the Samurai warriors in Japan. In such cases our “vocabulary of appraisal” does not get a grip on the actions in that culture. And this naturally leads towards a relativistic position. -- These ideas of these authors are not difficult to understand and letting them play a role in *Tetralogue* would have made for a much better discussion.

Third and finally, the only relativistic body of literature that gets a real hearing in *Tetralogue* are the recent studies by Max Kölbel, John McFarlane and others that try to find simple relativistic templates. I have summarized above Williamson’s reasons for rejecting these attempts. Here I can only comment on one point. Consider again the burps, especially the case where Jones in A (the anti-burping culture) consents to “Burping is rude”, and Smith in B (the pro-burping culture) disagrees with “Burping is rude.” Williamson denies that there is a disagreement here. His idea is that for Jones and Smith “Burping is rude” expresses two different thoughts: “Burping is rude-in-A” for Jones and “Burping is rude-in-B” for Smith. But Kölbel and McFarlane find another reading of the situation more plausible. As they have it, Jones and Smith understand “Burping is rude” in the same way; they both have the same thought. This re-establishes a disagreement between them. And yet, this disagreement is faultless if Jones and Smith evaluate “burping is rude” in light of two different standards of rudeness. -- I am not saying Williamson is wrong and Kölbel or McFarlane are right. I am saying that this important option should have been mentioned and discussed.

As the above makes perhaps all too clear, philosophers with relativistic leanings do not find much to agree with in Williamson’s *Tetralogue*. Hence they end up writing humourless, demanding and stern reviews. -- There is that much Roxana even in relativists.