APPENDIX 2

"Strong" and "Weak" Relativism

In an influential article, Richard Bett argued that there is no "strong" sense of relativism evident among fifth-century sophists, barring, provisionally, Protagoras. Instead, much or all that is defined as relativism is "weak" ethical relativism and "uninteresting."[1] In making his case, Bett defines strong relativism as entailing that a statement is correct or incorrect relative to a given framework. Pointedly, this framework precludes any Archimedean vantage point. As an example, tattooing may be immoral in one culture but moral for another, with no superior standard according to which these positions can be adjudicated. Alternatively, weak relativism is situational. It dictates what is good, virtuous, bad, or shameful, and so on, according to the situation. That is, giving assistance to a friend may be noble when they are in their right mind but shameful when they are mad. As Bett concedes, "these arguments admittedly have to do with a kind of relativity; they assert that one cannot say what is good, just or virtuous without qualification, but only in relation to specific circumstances. However, this is . . . only superficially relativistic."[2] They are superficially relativistic in part because weak relativism is still hypothetically compatible with a god's-eye or objective point of view. For example, one might assert that it is objectively noble to help friends in their right minds and shameful if they are mad. This would then suggest an objective concept of justice underlies both positions. Bett's position has found wide acceptance among those working on the sophists; however, in its focus on these fragmentary figures, it neglected the additional contexts in which relativism was debated in the fifth century. The conclusion that sophistic relativism is

[1] Bett (1989), 141. Accepted by Barney (2006), 87. For a provisional acceptance of Bett's argument, see Lee (2005), 9–10.

[2] Bett (1989), 146–7. There is doubtless a situational relativism found among the philosophers, cf. Gorgias, as recorded in Arist. *Pol.* 1260a, and the *Dissoi Logoi*, e.g., 1.1–10, 2.1–8.

weak can, I submit, be challenged by attending to passages that fall outside of the "sophists" proper.

In Euripides' *Phoenissae*, there is evidence for strong relativism in the words of Eteocles:[3]

> εἰ πᾶσι ταὐτὸν καλὸν ἔφυ σοφόν θ' ἅμα | οὐκ ἦν ἂν ἀμφίλεκτος ἀνθρώποις ἔρις | νῦν δ' οὔθ' ὅμοιον οὐδὲν οὔτ' ἴσον βροτοῖς | πλὴν ὀνόμασιν: τὸ δ' ἔργον οὐκ ἔστιν τόδε.
>
> If to all the same thing were by nature noble and wise, there would be no strife talking out of both sides of its mouth among humans: but as it is nothing is similar or equal for mortals except for names – but this is not the thing itself.

Eteocles' words are a nimble response to his brother, who had closed his own speech by affirming that he avoided deceitful rhetoric in preference to what is "just to the wise" (495–6). To discount the claim, Eteocles shifts to the abstract values of nobility and justice and the fact that language (ὀνόμασιν) captures in a single term what in reality (ἔργον) has no stable determinant. The strife that arises from this between men is literally "spoken on two sides" (ἀμφίλεκτος); it is a polyphonic struggle for meaning. It is possible that the statement should be interpreted as another instance of situational relativism, but if so, what precisely are the situational parameters for determining what is noble and wise? Eteocles does not offer any. Beyond the absence of an explicit situational framework, there is an additional problem for interpreting this as a case of weak relativism: Eteocles claims that *nothing* is similar or equal for men. This makes the case for a situational standard of behavior operative behind Eteocles' words even more difficult to maintain, since the human values of nobility and wisdom are expressed in language with referents that vary according to the individual, not according to the situation in which individuals find themselves. Further, the evaluative framework for this disagreement is explicitly "mortals" (βροτοῖς), which recalls Protagoras' man-measure doctrine. What of the potential for an objective point of view? In making his case against the sophists, Bett maintains that their formulations do "not deny that there might be some objectively correct general definition of goodness, justice, or whatever the evaluative concept under scrutiny."[4] Yet, the impossibility of objectivity in identifying

[3] L-M 'Dramatic Appendix' T 68 = *Phoen*. 499–502. For discussion, see pp. 46–7.
[4] Bett (1989), 147.

nobility and wisdom is precisely what is at stake in Eteocles' words. For man, these concepts share only names, not what underlies them.

The opposition of language and reality and the reference to values such as wisdom and nobility having a "nature" (ἔφυ) put the passage squarely in the sphere of the "correctness of language" debate, one that Protagoras was known to have been closely associated with from the title of his lost work, *Orthoepeia* (Pl. *Phdr*. 267c). Eteocles rejects the potential for natural correctness in naming, establishing a rift between language and its referents, a position that implicitly relies upon convention, a rickety foundation for any objective sense to be present behind these terms.[5] Much like Hermogenes in Plato's *Cratylus*, Eteocles points to the absence of an objective relation between language and the world.[6] As the ability to discuss values is mediated by language, there is no objective path to process these terms. And since Bett identified strong relativism as statements made correctly or incorrectly relative to a given framework, the severance of language from reality provides the foundation for individual humans to serve as the framework for determining that statements are correct or incorrect, with no possibility of an independent vantage point.

In addition to the subjectivism of the individual, there is also debate in the fifth century on the status of *nomoi* as relative to a given society. The strong form of relativism for such a conception would be as follows, according to Bett:[7]

> It makes no sense to talk of things being right or wrong *physei*. Rather, there are merely various sets of *nomoi* in various different communities; and rightness and wrongness, in any given community, is relative to the *nomoi* prevalent in that community.

Such strong relativism is rejected on the grounds that there is no evidence for this position among the sophists. This too can be countered. Chapter 2 argued for relativism in Herodotus' narration of the actions of Cambyses (3.38), who mocked the religious observances of his own and other peoples. The passage clearly answers the question "what constitutes right and wrong behaviour," as strong ethical relativism requires. In it, individual cultures are the framework relative to which all *nomoi* are noble or otherwise. That there is no possible objective view on these observances is made clear by the hypothetical experiment in which peoples are asked to

[5] Cf. Pl. *Cra*. 384d, for naming as conventional.
[6] Bett (1989), 156, on Hermogenes' position as non-relativistic on the basis that he does not accept Protagoras' philosophical position, which need not entail a rejection of relativism writ large.
[7] Bett (1989), 162.

select the best customs out of a pile of all human customs. The fact that each group would return with its own speaks to the tenacity of a people's relative sense of what is best. The concluding lyric from Pindar, that *nomos* is "king of all," further bolsters the claim that this is strong and not situational relativism. It posits that there is no standard higher than convention to serve as a stable foundation for an objective perspective on whether a given *nomos* is laughable or laudable.

Examples of strong relativism can be identified in philosophical texts as well. The *Dissoi Logoi* lists varying human cultural practices with a running commentary on their status as noble or shameful according to the individual culture. The Lydians, for example, find it seemly to prostitute their daughters and acquire dowries for them in this way, whereas in Greece such conduct would be shameful (2.16). There is no sense in which one cultural position is morally superior. As the philosopher concludes, "not all men observe the same things" (2.18: οὐ γὰρ πάντες ταὐτὰ νομίζοντι). Depending on the evaluative framework of a given culture, human beings consider differing moral predicates valid. To resist the conclusion that the *Dissoi Logoi* contains examples of strong relativism, Betts argues that those instances in which ethical frameworks are made relative to differing societies are "superficial."[8] His evidence for this is a fragment of an unknown poem that the *Dissoi Logoi* cites as a capstone to the entire argument – not the sections on cultural relativism alone. In it, ὁ καιρός, "opportunity," changes the value of what is seemly and shameful for differing humans. The introduction of *kairos* commits the author, for Betts, to a situational framework that would be objectively right for each group, given their own needs. This is to say, since *kairos* is a feature of circumstantial difference, it cannot rule out an objective viewpoint. On this reading, the point is not that the author of the *Dissoi Logoi* is exploring the potential for basic differences in the conception of what is seemly and shameful in the absence of any objective vantage point – but the situational differences between populations that give rise to objectively correct moral behaviors, given the circumstances.

It is certainly the case that there are instances of situational relativism in the *Dissoi Logoi*. These instances nonetheless fulfill the aim of the treatise in this part to create an identity between what is seemly and shameful in "reality" (2.1: τὸ σῶμα). So it is seemly for a woman to have sex with her husband indoors but unseemly out of doors. A single frame of reference, "for a woman," and single action, "sex," create a reality according to which

[8] Bett (1989), 148 n. 14.

"sex" is subject to opposing moral predicates because of the variation in circumstance. It is impossible to imagine the philosopher being able to make the argument that to the same woman, sex with her husband is both shameful and seemly in the same way, and so the alteration in circumstance creates the possibility according to which the single action and both predicates overlap. Still, it should be understood that there is a correct moral action dependent on circumstance and that this is an example of weak relativism.

The *Dissoi Logoi*'s transition to communities and cultures maintains the opposition between language (two terms, "seemly" and "shameful") and reality (a single action). The action that sustains both moral predicates, however, no longer relies on situational differences and "weak" relativism. Consider the first case study, on the difference between Greek peoples in terms of women's exercise and dress: "for the Spartans it is seemly that girls engage in athletics <and> appear in public without sleeves or tunics, but for the Ionians it is unseemly" (2.9). The single frame of reference is now women's athletic and dress codes, but there is no need to specify differing circumstances to create an overlap between both predicates and the frame of reference, since there is now a division in qualifiers, "for Spartans" and "for Ionians." For Bett, there is an unexpressed understanding of the polis of the Spartans or the peoples of Ionia turning to their objectively correct *nomos* on the basis of unique historical conditions. These historical conditions further imply an iron law of objectively correct values for the shameful and the seemly. But unlike the prior example, there is no situational qualification parallel to "indoors" and "out of doors." That is, no historical explanation is given to support a situational relativism that is underpinned by objective reasons for Spartan and Ionian *nomoi*. The plausible inference for this omission (which is shared by each example that follows) is that *nomoi* in fact cannot be assessed objectively by the referents "shameful" and "seemly," which aligns it with strong relativism. This is supported by the parallels in the *Histories*, where no historical events explain cultural difference as objectively valid due to a supra-principle.[9]

It is also supported by the fifth-century Hippocratic treatise, *On the Sacred Disease*, a speech advertising the author's superiority over his

[9] Pl. *Leg.* 637c–d hypothesizes that accusations of immorality that city-states lodge against one another can all be countered with, "Don't be astonished, friend; this is our *nomos*, perhaps among you there is another *nomos* about these things" (μὴ θαύμαζε, ὦ ξένε· νόμος ἔσθ' ἡμῖν οὗτος, ἴσως δ' ὑμῖν περὶ αὐτῶν τούτων ἕτερος). No objective standard above *nomos* is supplied for variability in the cultural practices of drunkenness and the license given to women.

contemporaries.[10] In a discussion of the brain's governance of human emotion and perception of "what is unseemly and seemly, base and good, pleasant and unpleasant" (*Morb.* 14: τά τε αἰσχρὰ καὶ τὰ καλὰ καὶ τὰ κακὰ καὶ ἀγαθὰ καὶ ἡδέα καὶ ἀηδέα), the author divides the brain's critical faculties to process these concepts into those that are judged by *nomos* and those perceived by advantage (τὰ μὲν νόμῳ διακρίνοντες, τὰ δὲ τῷ ξυμφέροντι αἰσθανόμενοι). Because the seemly and the shameful are measured according to convention *or* individual advantage, there is no single objective viewpoint that obtains and that can be superimposed over these factors. The treatise goes on to state that the same things do not satisfy humans because we "discern what is pleasurable or unpleasurable according to context (τοῖσι καιροῖσι)." This implies a framework specific to the individual but not one that is objectively right for each individual.

On a final note, these values are treated in the *Dissoi Logoi* as being applicable only by convention (*nomos*), rather than nature (*physis*). In the quotation that closes the section, the unknown poet asserts that there is a *nomos* (2.19) for mortals and that, according to it, nothing is noble or shameful in every respect. If there were an objective concept superior to these values, aligning it with nature over convention, then *physis* would have been a more rhetorically effective choice. As the text stands, all human *nomoi* regarding the seemly and the shameful are governed only by another contingent convention, *nomos*.

The above passages draw attention to the presence of arguments for strong relativism outside of Protagoras. If these passages are accepted as evidence, they constitute a claim for the wider reception of Protagorean relativism. They may equally point the way toward a reassessment of Bett's influential argument.

[10] Laskaris (2002), 73–124, argues for the speech's sophistic influence. Alternatively, for Thomas (2000), 246, it is "not particularly 'sophistic' in its rhetorical style."