



SPECIAL SECTION

Relativism in the Long Middle Ages

Crossing the ethical border with paganism

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Christians in the Long Middle Ages (ca. 200–ca. 1700 CE) in Western Europe often thought about paganism, especially that of the ancient Greeks and Romans, such as Aristotle and Virgil, who provided the foundations of their intellectual culture, but also contemporary pagans (that is to say, people who were neither Christians, Jews, nor Muslims), such as the Lithuanians, Mongols, and, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the “Indians,” both of America and of India itself, the Japanese, and the Chinese. This article will set out and explore one of the surprising features of these discussions, their use of relativistic approaches, which few would associate with medieval thought. With regard to pagan knowledge, in particular, that of the ancient pagans, some writers develop a strictly relativistic approach, which becomes one of the most important (and often hardly noticed) features of medieval intellectual life. With regard to the question of the virtues of pagans (both ancient and contemporary), the approach is also relativistic, but in more subtle and looser ways.

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This article begins with a selection of philosophical, theological, and literary texts written by Western European authors from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries—not the usual stuff of anthropology. But, as the editors explain in their introduction, their objective is to turn what has previously been “an ethical or methodological question for anthropologists . . . into an ethnographic one,” by asking “not how one culture ought to relate to another and to one another’s values, but how people in diverse times and places have formulated responses to that problem.” This is precisely what I aim to do. The “people in diverse times and places” are the writers from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries. The border which they are



concerned to cross ethically is that between Christianity, the belief shared by all these writers and the societies in which they lived, and paganism.¹ The border is, therefore, both chronological—between these centuries and the world of classical antiquity—and geographical—between Christian Europe and the world beyond Islam.² Despite the type difference between these two borders, and the very different character of those envisaged beyond them (Greek philosophers and Roman poets, by contrast with Mongol warlords, native Americans, and the Chinese), they were both the confines of what, in these writers' Christian scheme of things, was in an important respect the same region. These writers divided the world's inhabitants into Christians (the *fideles*—"faithful/believers") and non-Christians (*infideles*—nonbelievers). The non-Christians were themselves divided into the Jews, heretics (those who accepted some of Christian doctrine, but knowingly rejected other parts of it), Muslims (who were considered by educated writers to be rather like Christian heretics), and pagans. The pagans, whether they were from Greco-Roman antiquity or the further reaches of the writers' own world, posed very similar problems of cultural and ethical understanding—a complex of questions which I have labeled "the problem of paganism." The texts I examine here are all concerned with this problem, and although their authors may seem to be heterogeneous (a thirteenth-century philosopher, a fourteenth-century travel writer, a sixteenth-century missionary, etc.), they belong to what I have argued at length is a single discourse, the terms of which were set for twelve centuries by Augustine's version of Christian doctrine (rarely accepted at face value) and the view of Greco-Roman antiquity as a moral, cultural, and intellectual ideal.³

I concentrate on one type of answer made in response to them, in which the difficulties of crossing the border are negotiated by introducing some sort of relativism. These texts should be of particular interest to anthropologists, who are often inclined to think of relativism as largely absent from premodern thought and especially associated with their own discipline, as it has been practiced over the last century. Moreover, it will turn out that, although none of these earlier relativisms is of the egalitarian variety proposed by many more recent theorists, many of them illustrate very well a notion which the editors, looking at the collection as a whole, identify as "a frequent aspect of ethics across borders": what they call "incommensuration": "the process by which things are kept within different registers of judgment" in which "people strive to resist both assimilation and differentiation."

This article, then, treats medieval texts as ethnographic documents: as creative attempts to think about, query, and cross lines of difference. It is thus part of what

1. It is important to emphasize that the objects of ethnographic study in this chapter are *not* the pagans discussed by the writers from the period (although there is, in fact, far more fine ethnographic work, even from before 1500, than most anthropologists acknowledge), but the writers themselves.
2. "Beyond Islam" is a simplification. Much of Christian Europe was surrounded, for a large part of the Long Middle Ages, by Islam, and so there was no direct border. But there was a direct border, for example, in the north, where Lithuania remained pagan until the fourteenth century.
3. See Marenbon (2012) and, especially, Marenbon (2015) for a book-length exposition and justification of this view.



the editors in their introduction identify as a unifying goal in this collection: to recognize the inventiveness of those we study as they themselves conceptualize difference (see also Wagner 1975). The anthropological analysis of historical texts has been firmly established following a number of influential works (e.g., Geertz 1980; Mintz 1985; Messick 1996), and the relationship between anthropology and the various historical disciplines has been discussed extensively from a theoretical point of view (e.g., Evans-Pritchard 1950; Cohn 1990).⁴

Even if readers are now convinced that the material discussed here is relevant to their interests, and that it is (at least arguably) homogeneous, because it is all concerned with the problem of paganism, they may worry that it cuts across the divide between what are normally thought of as two distinct epochs: the Middle Ages (running to ca. 1500) and the early modern period. I have argued elsewhere that the usual period division, which makes a break around 1500, is a misleading one, and that we are better served by thinking of a Long Middle Ages, stretching from ca. 200 until ca. 1700: all the examples considered here come from the final third of this period (and I shall, accordingly, use the term “medieval” to refer to the writers I discuss).⁵ My position about the Long Middle Ages is a controversial one, but for the purposes of this article all that needs to be accepted is that, at least with regard to the problem of paganism, the years from 1200 to 1600 are a slice from a coherent period. And here, as I have argued, there is indeed a remarkable continuity, and the new contacts with pagans in America, China, and elsewhere do not, as might be expected, transform the discourse or even make it change direction, but merely amplify and nuance it.⁶

Readers may, however, still remain skeptical about whether any sort of relativism will be found in texts from the Long Middle Ages, especially those from before 1500. At the basis of their doubts will be their picture of the intellectual border at the time with paganism. In reality (in the intellectual life of the time, not the world of popular images or political action), this border was an open and mostly friendly one. The biggest problem posed by pagans was how to reconcile the acknowledged moral excellence and wisdom of many of them with their lack of Christian faith. But this is not how educated nonspecialists today conceive it. They imagine it to have been mainly closed and hostile, and they picture a monolithic Christianity in perpetual cold war with its Islamic near-neighbors and the pagans geographically beyond and chronologically before.

In part, this mistaken impression may be due to historical ignorance, but it is also the result of a failure in method—one which, as Michael Lambek argues in his article here, is of central concern to anthropologists. The failure consists in misconceiving the nature of traditions. It is exemplified by the most famous living philosopher to emphasize the notion of tradition, Alasdair MacIntyre, a writer who is little regarded by professional medievalists, but influential on anthropologists. According to Lambek, MacIntyre conceives traditions as tightly enclosed and monolithic,

4. I owe the references in this paragraph to the editors of the collection. I am also very grateful to them for all their help in the process of revising my essay.

5. See Marenbon (2011) and (forthcoming).

6. See part III of Marenbon (2015), which is designed to show the continuity of the problem of paganism up to the time of Leibniz.

both in themselves and in their membership: a person belongs to just one tradition. Lambek contends, by contrast, that not only are traditions themselves heterogeneous in content, and subject to fissures and fusions, but an individual may well inhabit a plurality of them.

MacIntyre's treatment of the Middle Ages, although not the particular object of Lambek's comments, provides a striking illustration of this methodological deficiency and how it limits understanding of the material. MacIntyre has gone to some trouble to learn about the Middle Ages, and he does not make the simple error of treating medieval culture as simple and unitary. Indeed, he declares that

Of all the mythological ways of thinking which have disguised the middle ages for us none is more misleading than that which portrays a unified and monolithic Christian culture and this is not just because the medieval achievement was also Jewish and Islamic. Medieval culture, insofar as it was a unity at all, was a fragile and complex balance of a variety of disparate and conflicting elements. (MacIntyre 1985: 165–66)

Yet, as the phrasing even here indicates, MacIntyre focuses on how the conflicting elements were brought together and unified. In his fullest treatment of the area (1990: 58–169), he tells the somewhat unlikely story of how the dominant conceptual scheme, Augustinianism, was challenged in the thirteenth century by Aristotelianism, and how the two were harmoniously reconciled in a higher but openended synthesis by Aquinas and, with regard to practice, by Dante, but, it seems, by no one else.⁷ MacIntyre declares (*ibid.*: 113–14) that these two conceptual schemes were incommensurable, although anyone belonging to just one will see understanding the other as purely a problem of translation and so fail to grasp the incommensurability. Only Aquinas, and perhaps Dante, who supposedly made a successful synthesis, are allowed by MacIntyre to inhabit both schemes. But what about the possibility that someone could inhabit both schemes without synthesizing them, and so arrive at a form of relativism? Given his methodology, MacIntyre cannot envisage it, but it is very clearly exemplified in a contemporary of Aquinas' whom he never mentions, Boethius of Dacia. Boethius develops his theoretical account of relativism in connection with truth, rather than goodness, but there is also, as will be seen, an ethical side to it.

Boethius of Dacia and the relativism of autonomy

Boethius was an arts master in the University of Paris in the period shortly after the arts curriculum had become an Aristotelian one, based around the study of his texts of logic, physics, ethics, and metaphysics. To a large extent, Aristotle wrote about matters not touched on in Christian doctrine, or what he said was compatible with Christian teaching or could be, and usually was, interpreted as being so. But there were a very few issues on which the difference between Aristotle's view and the teaching of the church was hard to deny. One of these was the eternity of

7. Useful queries about MacIntyre's accuracy in presenting medieval philosophy have been raised by Coleman (1994) and Porter (2003: 65–66).

the universe. Christians believe that the universe had a beginning, whereas it is fundamental to Aristotle's physics that the universe is eternal, and that there was never any first motion.⁸ Boethius wrote a short treatise *On the eternity of the world*, which treats the question both in itself and as a second-order problem for methodology.⁹ His answer to the first-order question is, in fact, exactly the same as Aquinas', in his even shorter treatise of the same name. It cannot be demonstrated—that is to say, shown by logical deduction from self-evident premises—either that the world had a beginning or that it did not. It did indeed have a beginning, but that can be known only through revelation. The second-order discussion (Boethius of Dacia 1976: 347:314–57:593) looks at the position of those who practice the Aristotelian sciences—arts masters like Boethius—in relation to this topic. Boethius considers the practitioners of three different disciplines, all of them part of the Aristotelian curriculum: mathematics (which included astronomy), metaphysics, and natural science. For the mathematician and the metaphysician, there is no serious methodological problem. Working within their disciplines, they cannot indeed show that the universe had a beginning, yet they can accept the fact that it had one as a truth which is beyond human reason and known by revelation. But the position for natural scientists (those arts masters specially concerned with Aristotle's *Physics* and related texts by him on the natural world) is different. They cannot follow this easy solution because it is a fundamental principle of (Aristotelian) natural science that there can have been no first change and so the universe is eternal, and practitioners of a discipline must deny whatever contradicts its principles. Yet these natural scientists are Christians, who accept the revealed truth that the world had a beginning.

It is the natural scientists' predicament which leads Boethius to adopt his explicitly relativist position:

It is compatible . . . that there was a first change and the universe had a beginning and that the natural scientist who denies that there was a first change and the universe had a beginning is speaking the truth, because the natural scientist is denying as a natural scientist that there was a first change and the universe had a beginning, and that means he is denying from natural principles that there was a first change and the universe had a beginning. Whatever the natural scientist denies or accepts, he denies or accepts from natural reasons (*ex causis*) and principles. And so the conclusion in which the natural scientist says that there was no beginning to the universe or change is false taken absolutely, but if it is referred to the reasons and principles from which he concludes it, it follows from them. (Boethius of Dacia 1976: 352:463–73)

Boethius is championing what might be called a “relativism of autonomy.” In order for natural scientists to pursue their discipline consistently, they need to be allowed

8. For a general introduction to the debate, see Michon (2004). There was, in fact, some doubt among medieval readers over whether even Aristotle himself held that the eternity of the universe could be demonstrated, because of a passage in the *Topics* (I.11; 104b15–16) which seems to say that there is no definitive answer about this matter.

9. Boethius of Dacia (1976: 335–66); there is a translation in Boethius of Dacia (1987).

to pursue it entirely on its own terms, disregarding the wider frame of Christian values to which, outside their profession, they subscribe. This relativism is by no means a merely superficial one. Michael Krausz, one of the leading philosophers in the area today, defines relativism (Krausz 2010: 13) as making a claim about a reference frame:

- (1) “Truth, goodness, or beauty is relative to a reference frame,”

along with one about no absolutes:

- (2) “No *absolute* overarching standards to *adjudicate* between competing reference frames exist.”

The reference frame claim is certainly found in Boethius. “The universe is eternal” is true, he says, relative to the frame of natural science. But does he not deny the no absolutes claim and invoke what Krausz calls “a single imperial meta-frame that is itself a frame without a competitor, a frame of all frames” (ibid.: 15) by admitting that what Christian faith holds is true without any sort of qualification? Were his discussion confined to the predicament of mathematicians and metaphysicians, this objection might have been just. For them, Christian faith provides a frame within which everything can be accounted for, and their particular disciplines fit within this superior frame, accounting for some things, unable to account for others. But the frame of natural science does not fit within it in this way: if it did, then the natural scientists could not go on denying the Christian truth that the universe had a beginning and so could not continue with their science. Rather, Boethius wishes to provide a way in which, from the frame of Christian faith, what natural scientists do within their discipline can be interpreted in an acceptable manner by others and even by themselves in their nonprofessional capacity, and which thus allows the natural scientists to continue working within their frame, which is itself incompatible with that of Christianity. He is giving them a space in which they can work as genuine natural scientists.

The situation Boethius addresses is not a strange, bygone one, confined to a few Parisian intellectuals three-quarters of a millennium ago. Imagine the case of Sarah, a present-day fundamentalist evangelical Christian. She was brought up and still lives in a fundamentalist community. But she is also a successful researcher in biology. As a biologist, she works with the same assumptions as her mainly secular scientific colleagues, and, implicitly, by the way she pursues her research and constructs her arguments, she is rejecting as false many beliefs (such as the literal truth of the Genesis creation story) which she holds as a fundamentalist Christian. Boethius’ type of relativism would provide her with a strategy for negotiating her difficult predicament.

The relativism of Boethius, like Sarah’s, satisfies both of Krausz’s criteria, the reference frame claim and the no absolutes one. But most contemporary discussion of relativism also assumes a third, egalitarian criterion, which is brought out explicitly by Maria Baghramian:

- (3) “It is impossible to rank judgements of truth or falsity, etc., or to privilege one over another, for all cultures, historical epochs or cognitive frameworks that give rise to such judgements have equal standing.” (Baghramian 2004: 5)



It is easy to confuse this egalitarian claim with (2), Krausz's no absolutes criterion, but they are importantly different, as the cases of Boethius and Sarah illustrate. The no absolutes rule demands that one cannot use the standards belonging to one frame of reference to judge what belongs to a different frame, but it does not forbid relativists to consider one of these incommensurate frames as being superior. Boethius and Sarah, who each espouse a relativism in which a person makes a declaration of the superiority of one frame of reference but continues to value another which cannot be brought into harmony with it, do not break the no absolutes rule, but they clearly do not pass Baghramian's egalitarian test. Baghramian's summary judgment (ibid.: 50) that "philosophy in the Middle Ages was marked by a background of Christian faith. . . . The cultural milieu of the period . . . militated against the development of relativistic currents of thought" is justified, given her egalitarian version of relativism. And most contemporary philosophical discussion of relativism, which is concerned either to vindicate or to deny the coherence of this sort of relativism in some or all domains, has very little connection with medieval thinking. But Boethius shows that there is a different, and perhaps more productive, way of thinking about the subject, where relativism is seen as a set of strategies used by those who face, in their lives or in their investigations, a real crossing of borders: strategies to make life livable, to understand what would otherwise be incomprehensible and value what seems at first worthless or hateful.

There are still two important facets of Boethius of Dacia's relativism to mention. First, although *On the eternity of the world* seems hardly to have been known in the Middle Ages, the type of relativism for which he had provided a theoretical justification had a large following among arts masters, right up to the sixteenth century. The fact that both Aquinas and the bishop of Paris had condemned it seemed to have made little difference.¹⁰ An arts master would feel himself free to follow a line of Aristotelian reasoning to conclusions patently unacceptable for Christians, but then to say that this conclusion is true according to human reasoning, but according to the faith, and without qualification, the opposite is true. To take one of the most famous examples, early in the sixteenth century Pietro Pomponazzi produced a set of powerful arguments that the human soul is mortal. Many of these arguments take the form of fundamental criticisms of Aquinas' defense of the Christian view of the soul's immortality—and yet Pomponazzi also insists that this view, which

10. Aquinas (*De unitate intellectus* 5.119; Aquinas 1997: 196—where there is a full commentary) caricatured the same methodological view as holding that a proposition p is at once necessarily true and against the faith, deliberately missing the point of the arts masters' relativism and making them either assert a logical contradiction (p is necessarily true and not- p is true) or else declare themselves heretics, by denying the truth of the faith. In the preface to his condemnation in 1277 of 219 articles—some of them clearly based on the arts masters' teaching, Étienne Tempier, bishop of Paris, put the point more crudely: "For they say that they are true according to philosophy, but not according to the Catholic faith, as if they were two contrary truths, and as if against the truth of holy scripture were the truth in what damned pagans have said" (Piché 1999: 74). The proponents of the condemned approach included both so-called Averroists (such as John of Jandun, d. 1328) and others, such as John Buridan (d. ca. 1360), the most famous Paris arts master of the fourteenth century (see Marenbon 2015 for further details).

he has done his best to discredit, is the true one.¹¹ Some scholars have depicted Pomponazzi as a free thinker, who had to make a pretense of orthodoxy to avoid censorship and condemnation for heresy.¹² But, in the light of his work as a whole, there is little reason not to take his professions of Christian faith at face value and to see him and his predecessors as using a relativism of the type explained by Boethius to let them work freely within a wholly naturalistic frame of reference, which they could not bring into harmony with the general frame which they and the society around them accepted for the conduct of life.

Second, this sort of relativism had an ethical dimension too. Boethius of Dacia wrote a treatise called *On the highest good*.¹³ It is a eulogy of the life of the philosopher – that is to say, of arts masters like Boethius himself and his students, who devote themselves to speculation using reason, cultivating their intellects and disregarding sensual pleasures. Boethius makes some extreme claims for the life philosophy. “The philosopher lives as it is innate for humans to live and according to the order of nature,” he says, adding later that whoever does not lead a philosopher’s life “does not have the right life” (Boethius of Dacia 1976: 375:165–66, 377:239–40). Were Boethius’ statement that only the life of philosophy is “right” to be intended absolutely, it would clearly be at odds with Christian doctrine, according to which cultivation of the intellect is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for the right way of life. But Boethius makes it clear that he is speaking relatively. He is inquiring about, not the highest good absolutely, but the highest good possible for humans (Boethius of Dacia 1976: 369:3–4). By “possible for humans,” he means, as shown by both his procedure of inquiry and the terms in which he presents his conclusions (living “according to the order of nature”), that of which humans, examined as purpose-directed products of nature, can be seen to be best capable. As with the natural scientist’s inquiries, so the philosopher’s treatment of goodness takes place within its own separate sphere. Many arts masters contemporary with Boethius and in succeeding generations write in a similar way about philosophy and the supreme good for humans (Gauthier 1984, 6; Bianchi 2005).

Weak, strong, and very strong relativism

The three criteria discussed above—(1) the reference frame claim, (2) the no absolutes claim, and (3) the egalitarian claim—can be used to classify weaker and stronger types of relativism: weak relativism satisfies only the first, reference frame claim; strong relativism, such as Boethius’, satisfies the first claim and the second no absolutes one; very strong relativism—as in the case of most contemporary relativisms—satisfies both of these and the egalitarian claim. In the following sections, I shall consider different varieties of weak relativism in the Middle Ages, showing

11. The Latin text (with facing German translation) is edited in Pomponazzi (1990); there is an English translation in Cassirer, Kristeller, and Randall (1948: 280–381).

12. This view is taken, for instance, in Pine (1986) and in the introduction to Pomponazzi (1990).

13. Boethius of Dacia (1976: 369–91); it is translated in Boethius of Dacia (1987).



how they served an important intellectual purpose, and then look at a variety of strong relativism, the relativism of exclusion, which is rather like a mirror image of the strong relativism used by Boethius of Dacia. In the final section, I shall try to classify the relativism of the one writer of the Long Middle Ages who has regularly been regarded by historians as a relativist, Montaigne.

Purely descriptive relativism

The weakest of the types of medieval relativism I shall discuss is what might be called “purely descriptive relativism.” Here the observer from society A recognizes that society B’s use of ethical vocabulary is at odds with that of his own society, but sees no reason to do more than note that this is so; he continues to follow his own society’s scheme of values in thinking about society B. Consider John of Piano Carpini, the elderly Franciscan sent by the Pope in the 1240s to gather information about the Mongols and meet their leader. John took the trouble to get to know the people, their customs, and their beliefs. His *History of the Mongols* is a remarkable piece of ethnography, dispassionately recording details of kinship structures, religious practice, and social and domestic arrangements.¹⁴ As a conscientious observer, he sees and records that, in many ways, the Mongols’ values are completely different from his own. He remarks that, on the one hand, there are certain actions they describe as “sins” and punish with death, such as touching fire with a knife, or touching the threshold of a leader’s dwelling or spitting out food, which, he says, are merely customs, whereas “to kill people, invade the land of others, take the things of others in whatever unjust way, fornicate, do injury to others and to act against God’s prohibitions and commandments is no sin among them” (III.7–8; John of Piano Carpini 1989: 239–40). Yet, as well as recording the judgments they make, he also engages in his own moral judgment, and feels confident in dividing the Mongols’ behavior into two main categories: their good ways, and their bad ways. Under the good ways he includes (IV.1–3; *ibid.*: 245–46) their obedience, the lack of arguments or quarrels, absence of theft, good humor in enduring hardships, lack of envy, community-mindedness, the chastity and modesty of the women, and the fact that, even when people are drunk, they do not become abusive or violent. As for their bad ways (IV.4–6; *ibid.*: 246–47), he observes that they despise all other races and are deceitful to foreigners, are easily angered, become drunk, throw up, and then go on drinking; they are greedy and avaricious; and they “count for nothing killing other men.” Both lists are presented in an entirely nonrelative way: the good ways are simply good, the bad ones evil.

Universalizing relativism

Perhaps, though, even in these comments, John is not a straightforward universalist. Looking at the usual descriptions of the Mongols in chronicles of the time, as semihuman savages, it must have required not merely openmindedness, but an ability to see beneath the particularities of daily actions to recognize that the

14. The best edition, with Italian translation and copious notes, is John of Piano Carpini (1989). There is a translation in Dawson 1955.

Mongols had a whole variety of good qualities.¹⁵ John is on the verge of relativism less weak than the descriptive variety, but still far from strict, which might, using an apparent oxymoron, be called “universalizing relativism.” It is also what some anthropologists, such as Richard Shweder (2012), distinguish from relativism, describing it as “moral pluralism.” Universalizing relativists accept, and often emphasize, that societies differ vastly from one another in the particular practices they value or condemn, and they encourage us to accept the valuations made in the societies themselves, although they may differ sharply from our own. To this extent they are relativists, but their relativism is not strict because they encourage us to accept these valuations by trying to show that they in fact are based ultimately on values which we and the other society share.

Perhaps the most striking exponent of universalizing relativism in the Long Middle Ages is the mid-fourteenth-century writer of *The Book of Sir John Mandeville*.¹⁶ The *Book* purports to recount Sir John’s journey from England to the Earthly Paradise and back, via the Holy Land and the wonder-filled countries beyond it. But the author clearly did not go beyond Palestine, and perhaps did not travel at all: most of his narrative is a reworking, or “overwriting,” as it has been called (Higgins 1997), of existing travel accounts. Unlike the writers of most of the sources he plundered, however, Mandeville generally esteems the practices of the strange peoples he encounters, even when they seem to go against all his and his readers’ accepted values. Where, for instance, his source—the genuine, but far more narrow-minded traveler Odoric of Pordenone (le Long 2010, 22:28–37)—ridicules people for worshiping a cow, the Mandeville author explains that they do so because of its simplicity, gentleness, and usefulness (chapter 18; Mandeville 2000: 321). And, even more strikingly, in his description of the killing and eating of family members when they are sick and seem to be dying, he turns this cannibalism into a sort of euthanasia:

When the flesh is too lean, the friends of the dead person say that they have done great wrong to have let him suffer so much pain for no reason. And when they find the flesh fat, they say that they have done well to send him to Paradise quickly and they have not let him suffer too much pain. (chapter 22; Mandeville 2000: 357)

This example shows why moral pluralism should be considered as a relativism, though of a universalizing sort. Universalizing relativism is only apparently an oxymoron because the universal norms in question significantly or, as here, vastly underdetermine what sorts of actions are good and bad. Mandeville certainly believes in universal norms, and he thinks that they are determinate enough to condemn

15. For the usual presentation of the Mongols, contrasted with John’s, see Klopprogge (1993).

16. The *Book* exists in a number of different French versions, as well as various translations. It has not been established with certainty which version was the original, nor whether the author was in fact called John Mandeville (see Higgins 1997 for an excellent account of the problems and possibilities offered by what he calls a “multi-text”). Mandeville (2000) gives an edition of the “Insular Version” of the French text, which is thought by many to be the original; there is a very good modern English translation in Mandeville (2011).



various types of behavior as wrong; one of the strategies in his *Book* is to criticize the behavior of his European, Christian contemporaries by showing how it falls short of these standards, which are upheld by Muslims and pagans. But he also shows that types of act, such as cannibalism, which are avoided in his own society because they are considered so wrong can reasonably be argued in another society to be, under certain circumstances, good deeds. He is not suggesting that his own countrymen should kill and eat the terminally ill, but he does seem to believe that they would have no grounds to condemn those who do. Since, although Christian beliefs enter into his discussion and narrative, they are carefully kept out of the discussion here, Mandeville is implicitly accepting that, even within the frame of universal norms, some types of act are right in one society and wrong in another.

Another writer of the Long Middle Ages who ended up by justifying in a distant society acts which were abhorrent in his own was Bartolomé de las Casas, who lived two centuries later. The relationship that Las Casas had to the distant societies he discussed differed markedly from the Mandeville author's: he spent a large part of his earlier adult life in America, first as a conquistador, then as a missionary and restless advocate for the native people and denouncer of the wrongs inflicted on them. One of the main aims of his *Apologética historia sumaria* was to show that the paganism of the native Americans was the best sort, worthy of far more esteem than that of the ancient Greek and Roman world. But the religion of some of these peoples, notably that of the Incas, included human sacrifice. Las Casas might have been expected, like almost every other sixteenth-century writer on the subject, to condemn the practice. Or, in principle, he might have adopted a very strict relativism, like that of some anthropologists today, and simply accepted it as a feature of the life and values of an alien society, which he could not judge. Instead—and it is here that he seems most like Mandeville—he developed an argument, based on universal norms, to show that human sacrifice was not merely consistent with, but a direct result of, the excellence of native American paganism.

At the basis of the argument (III.143, 183; Las Casas 1967: II, 43, 242–44) is Las Casas' belief that all humans have a natural power of reason, which enables them to know that God exists, and we should serve him, sacrificing to him whatever is most precious. It follows that the excellence of a people's conception of God can be judged by the value of what they choose to sacrifice to him. Peoples who sacrifice foods or plants or incense have a lowlier conception of God than those who sacrifice animals to him, and those who sacrifice humans, the things which we consider most precious, have the highest conception of all. Although the result of this argument—the justification of murder, as practiced by a distant culture—is similar to that of Mandeville's, it will now be clear the similarity between the two is superficial. Unlike Mandeville's, Las Casas' universal norm does not underdetermine the evaluation of given types of act. His argument shows that human sacrifice is simply better in the conception of God it shows than sacrifice of any other sort. Does it follow, then, that he and his fellow Christians should adopt the practice? It would, were it not that Las Casas' argument is contained within a wider view, which changes and qualifies the sort of relativism involved. The sacrifices which he compares are all part of idolatry, the form of worship general among pagans, and idolatry is not the direct expression of the instinct implanted in humans by God to worship him, but an unnatural distortion of it—one which, as a result of Original

Sin, is nearly inevitable for peoples outside Christianity (III.72; *ibid.*: I, 372–75).¹⁷ On the one side, then, Las Casas allows for a distinction between better and worse idolatry, according to the value of what the idolaters sacrifice. On the other side, he condemns idolatry entirely as a perversion, though one from which the native Americans only now, with the preaching of Christianity to them, have the chance to escape.

Is Las Casas therefore setting up a relativism of exclusion, a mirror image of the relativism of autonomy advocated by Boethius of Dacia and the arts masters? Boethius' relativism of autonomy aimed to set up a cognitive and ethical frame separate from that of Christian doctrine, so as to allow medieval Christians also to function professionally as consistent Aristotelians. A relativism of exclusion would judge real pagans according to an ethical frame which allows them to excel, but excludes them from the Christian frame, according to which they will be judged by God and be saved or damned. But Las Casas' exclusion of pagans from the Christian frame (before the coming of missionaries) is incomplete. Humans, even after the Fall, were not originally idolaters, but worshipers of the one true God. Idolatry began and spread after the Tower of Babel (III.74; *ibid.*: I, 383). And even after most people had succumbed, it remained possible to avoid idolatry and worship the true God, as was done, Las Casas believes, not only by Aristotle (III.71; *ibid.*: I, 371) but also by the Chinese and the Brahmans in India (III.99; *ibid.*: I, 631). For Las Casas, then, excluding pagans from the Christian frame enables him to make comparative ethical judgments and recognize the moral excellence of a practice, human sacrifice, which Christians consider repugnant. But, ultimately, the Christian frame is seen as all-encompassing and available, at least in a certain sense, universally.

Dante and the relativism of exclusion

The superstructure into which Las Casas inserts his account of human sacrifice was in fact a weakened version of an approach to pagan excellence common among late thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century theologians, such as Thomas Aquinas, Henry of Ghent, and Duns Scotus, in their treatment of the virtues of the ancient Greeks and Roman. Augustine had denied that the pagans had genuine virtues at all.¹⁸ By contrast, these later medieval theologians held that many people in antiquity were genuinely virtuous in just the same way as they and their Christian contemporaries might be: they were truly courageous, for instance, and temperate and just.¹⁹ William of Ockham even went so far as to allow that pagans could be heroically virtuous, acting in ways which went beyond ordinary human obliga-

17. On Las Casas and idolatry, see the illuminating discussion in Bernard and Gruzinski (1988: 41–121).

18. Augustine puts his position especially clearly in Book IV of his *Against Julianus*, especially in chapter 3, which was the text discussed by the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century theologians.

19. The most important texts are Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* IIaIIe, q. 23, a. 7; Henry of Ghent, *Quodlibet* 13, q. 10; Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio* III, d. 36, q. unica; William of Ockham, *De connexione virtutum*, q. 7, a. 2. For an overview, see Bejczy (2011: esp. 194–95).

tions and capacities (William of Ockham 1984: 336:152–337:180). But, for all these thinkers, there was a fundamental difference between a pagan acting virtuously and a Christian acting in the same way. The pagan's acts could not be meritorious (toward salvation), whereas the Christian's might be. As would be the case for Las Casas, the frame of ethical judgment turns out to be contained, as a part, within a wider frame, that of the norms for a Christian life, which involve the possession of specifically Christian virtues, infused by God, including those of faith, hope, and charity. And it is within the wider frame that the judgment is made which decides each individual's eternal destiny.

For these theologians, by contrast with Las Casas, it seems that the narrower frame within which pagans are judged morally is simply that of universal ethics. The wider Christian frame is not, then, an ethical one. For, if it were, then it would follow that the frame it contained was ethically deficient, through being partial, inadequate by the standards of a more universal ethics. But the frame which is contained is clearly presented as complete. The evaluation of the whole into which it fits is not ethical evaluation. Rather, it is evaluative in a more brute, and indeed brutal, fashion: there are certain things people must do in order to avoid the end they want to avoid, eternal suffering, and reach the end they desire, eternal happiness. They are right to do the things which lead to eternal happiness, but the rightness is not moral rightness: it is at once practical and metaphysical.

It would be wrong, however, to take Aquinas, Henry, Scotus, and such theologians as presenting a fully blown relativism of exclusion, even though their discussion of pagan virtues, taken in isolation, might suggest so. Although the Christian frame is not an ethical one, these writers, along with most medieval thinkers, held that it was accessible from the frame of universal ethics. They did so because they rejected the idea that God would allow the damnation of a pagan who acted as well ethically as he or she could. Christian doctrine ruled out the idea that they could be saved simply on account of their natural virtue, but it allowed, for pagans before Christ, that they could go to heaven because of an “implicit” faith, and for those after Christ, that they should receive special teaching about the basic truths of Christianity, through internal inspiration or through a messenger.²⁰ Although it was also thought that most pagans nevertheless remained outside Christianity, these possibilities meant the ethical frame, though distinct from the Christian one, was not isolated from it (in the way that Boethius of Dacia deliberately isolates the Aristotelian frame). The distinctness is enough to generate just a weak relativism, which allows the theologians temporarily to bracket Christian values and consider pagans as genuinely, and sometimes highly, virtuous.

There is, however, at least one medieval author who developed a full-blown relativism of exclusion: Dante. In the *Divine comedy*, pagans such as Dante's own

20. On medieval theories about the salvation of pagans, see Capéran (1934), Von Moos (2013), and Marenbon (2015). In the thirteenth century, implicit faith meant faith based on the direct faith of others—if you have faith in Christ, and I accept whatever you believe as true, then I have implicit faith in Christ. Later, a more nebulous meaning was given to implicit faith: it came to be thought of as vague, unspecified faith—in this sense, if I believe in a redeemer, I can be said to have implicit faith in Christ, because he is, in fact, the redeemer.

beloved guide, Virgil, Aristotle, and Plato are condemned to spend eternity on the threshold or “limbo” of hell. Dante makes it quite clear that they have lived completely virtuous lives, and their only fault is not to have had a faith which they could not have had, in the ordinary course of things, living when and where they did.²¹ Although they do not undergo physical punishment, they suffer terribly—Boccaccio says in his commentary that any living person who suffered so much would take his own life—through a *contrapasso* of almost diabolic cruelty, whereby they are specially given a longing to see God which they know will never be fulfilled.

Dante does indeed allow for a few exceptional cases where pagans are saved. He names three: Ripheus, a Trojan mentioned in the *Aeneid* because of his outstanding virtue; Cato, generally considered a paragon of pagan excellence; and the Emperor Trajan.²² But, unlike almost all his contemporaries, Dante explicitly resists the idea that God will be sure to save a pagan who does all he or she can to act well. He puts forward the case of a man “born on the banks of the Indus,” where there “is nobody there who speaks or teaches or writes about Christ” (*Paradiso* XIX: 70–78). All of this man’s “volitions and acts are good, so far as human reason sees—he is without sin in his life or speech.” How, asks Dante, when he dies unbaptized and without faith, can he be condemned to damnation? The usual theological response to this sort of story was to agree that God would not allow the man to be condemned, and to resort to the theory of special inspiration to explain how he is saved. By contrast, the authoritative answer given to Dante is that it is beyond humans to understand such things. In general, there is no ethical reason for the punishment that he might receive, and that other completely virtuous pagans, according to Dante, actually do receive. Dante even says explicitly that without faith we cannot understand why such people are damned.²³ The ways of Dante’s God are not bound by, or comprehensible in, the frame of universal ethics, and the wider Christian frame which explains them is not just cognitively, but practically, inaccessible from that of ethics. Dante is not a *very* strict relativist. He unhesitatingly accepts that the Christian frame is the absolute one, by which he should guide his understanding and his actions. But he envisages it as isolated from the frame of universal ethics, which it encompasses. Those who do not already have access to the Christian frame are

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21. The most important passages are *Inferno* IV: 33–42 and *Purgatorio* VII: 25–36. There is much debate about what Dante’s views about virtuous pagans really were, to which Foster (1977), Padoan (1977), and Corbett (2013) have made important contributions. My own views are set out in detail in chapter 10 of Marenbon (2015). They are by no means generally accepted ones, although this is an area of Dante interpretation where there is in any case little consensus: for a survey of different approaches, see O’Connell Baur (2007: 172–244).
 22. For Ripheus, see *Paradiso* XX: 68, 118–29; for Cato, see *Purgatorio* I: 28–108 (see line 75 for confirmation of his salvation); for Trajan, see *Paradiso* XX: 106–17.
 23. *Monarchia* II.7.4–5; Dante Alighieri (2012: 543): “There are some judgements of God which, although human reason cannot reach them by its own powers, it can however be raised to them with the help of faith in what is said to us in Holy Scripture—for instance, to this: that no one, if he has never heard anything of Christ, in however many moral and intellectual virtues, according to disposition and to activity, he is perfect, can be saved without faith.”



excluded from it: although some very rare exceptions are given access, there is no way in which people can move, through their own efforts and in the normal run of things, either cognitively or practically, from the frame of universal ethics to that of Christianity. Like Boethius of Dacia, then, but for opposite reasons, Dante accepts not just the reference frame claim, but also the no absolutes one: his is therefore a strong relativism. Of course, he would violently reject the third, egalitarian claim made by today's very strong relativists.

Montaigne's relativism

Unlike any of the figures discussed so far, Montaigne, whose *Essays* were first published in 1580, is recognized in many standard accounts of ethical relativism by philosophers and anthropologists as one of its founding fathers. The text which is cited especially is his essay *On cannibals* (Essay I.30), where he talks about the manners of the Tupí Indians of Brazil (on the basis, he claims, of an oral account he had heard, but in fact he also seems to have used two recently published eyewitness reports). Here he remarks that

there is nothing barbarous or savage in this nature, according to what I have been told about it, except that everyone calls “barbarous” what they are not accustomed to: for truly we have no criterion of truth or reason than the example and idea of the opinions and customs of the country where we are. (Montaigne 2007: 211)

Citing this passage, Baghranian (2004: 52) attributes to Montaigne the conclusion that, “given the diversity of moral, legal and religious behaviour, ethical relativism is the only possible position.” And, championing the cause of relativism as a bent “implicit” in anthropology, Clifford Geertz (1984: 264–65) quotes exactly this passage.²⁴ From the evidence of this passage, however, it is not clear that Montaigne is even a weak relativist: that he accepts at least the reference frame claim. When he says that “we have no criterion of truth or reason than the example and idea of the opinions and customs of the country where we are,” he might simply mean that this is the criterion which people in fact use (in which case he is not thereby endorsing the reference frame claim). Suppose, though, that he does mean that there *can* be no other criterion (and so he accepts the reference frame claim), does he also accept the no absolutes claim—and even, in addition, the egalitarian claim, which all the earlier thinkers examined here rejected? There is no reason to conclude so, since the passage could well be proposing a universalizing relativism (or moral pluralism): although there are absolute norms, they give rise to many different criteria in different times and places. The context of the passage supports this interpretation: Montaigne is arguing that the Tupí are not really barbarous, but just seem to be so when judged by our inappropriate local standards.

Two of the most prominent strands in this complex, multiply ironic essay also show Montaigne as a universalizing relativist. One of them is a critique of the savagery which was going on in Europe at the time as a result of the Wars of Religion.

24. Some writers, however, have rejected claims that Montaigne was a relativist: see Fricker (2013: 2–4) for a powerful statement of this view, along with details of the array of writers who have made the claim she believes to be mistaken.

He tells how the Tupí kill, cook, and eat their prisoners. He does not dissent from his readers' finding "barbarian horror" in such an act, but he goes on to point out that their and his countrymen are guilty of even more horrific acts, torturing and burning living people (Montaigne 2007: 216). By local French criteria, cannibalism is an act of unspeakable horror. But, Montaigne is pointing out, by the universal norms on which these criteria are based—respect for the human person, avoidance of causing pain—many sorts of behaviour at home which are condemned, but much less strongly, are in fact worse. Montaigne is not by any means accepting cannibalism as right for the Tupí (or for anyone else): he simply wants his readers to feel similar or greater revulsion toward the infliction of suffering on the victims of civil war at home. Another strand of the essay is the description and praise of the Tupí's virtues. Some, such as their courage, easily fit his readers' criteria. Others require explanation in the light of a universal norm. The Tupí were polygamous—something it would be natural for a sixteenth-century French observer to condemn: in his eyewitness account André Thevet (1997: 167) considers that it shows how, without divine illumination, they live like brutes. Montaigne, however, finds beauty in it, and especially in the way that the wives are not jealous, but they each want their husband to have many other wives, since it is a sign of their husband's excellence. This polygamy can be justified, although it goes against his readers' local norms, because it manifests universally accepted values of altruistic devotion.

Montaigne should not then be taken as an early advocate of the very strong relativism advocated or attacked today but, according to the classification proposed here, he is, like Mandeville two hundred or so years before, a weaker type of relativist—a universalizing one. Still, perhaps there is something distinctive about his relativism by comparison with earlier approaches to it. One feature that distinguishes contemporary discussions from the medieval treatments of relativism considered above is the importance, in the current debate, of the idea that, not only can what belongs to one frame of reference not be judged in terms of another, it cannot even be understood in terms of another. By contrast, medieval relativists are optimistic about understanding between frames. Even in the case of Dante's relativism of exclusion, where pagans cannot understand all the thinking which goes on in the Christian frame, this failure is merely contingent, since a pagan who miraculously received grace would be able to understand. Montaigne seems more pessimistic. He laments that the designers of ancient ideal constitutions, Plato and Lycurgus, did not know about the lives of the Tupí

because it seems to me that what we see by experience in these peoples over there surpasses not only all the depictions with which poetry has embellished the Golden Age, and all its capacity of invention in imagining a happy condition of humanity, but also the conception—and even the desire—of philosophy. They could not have imagined a naïvety as pure and simple as we see by experience, nor could they have believed that our society could be sustained with so little in the way of artifice or social ties. (Montaigne 2007: 212)

The suggestion here seems to be that the conceptual apparatus enshrined in our tradition of poetry and philosophy cannot properly comprehend the lives of the



Tupí. True, Montaigne claims that we now have these lives before us “by experience,” but it is experience, he implies, which we struggle to integrate with the view of the world we have inherited. Montaigne is hinting that relativism might extend, not to just to moral judgment and deciding on truth, but to the very business of understanding—an idea which, arguably, risks incoherence, but is an important element in many contemporary treatments of relativism.²⁵

Conclusion

It should now be clear how this discussion of material that is usually the concern of intellectual historians and historians of philosophy rather than anthropologists fits into the editors’ exploration of ethics across borders. The various approaches taken by medieval Christian authors to paganism, examined in the preceding paragraphs, are all examples of how people formulated their responses to the problem of “how one culture ought to relate to another and to one another’s values” (Mair and Evans, introduction to this collection). Although these discussions are literary, self-reflective, and, in some cases, argumentative, there is no reason why they cannot be taken as the raw material for ethnography—though another dimension (not explored here) is added by the fact that a number of these authors might be seen themselves as protoethnographers.

The editors distinguish between two main ways in which people from one culture (whether anthropologists or the subjects of anthropological study) approach other cultures and their ethics: either they take the universalist view, that there are some moral values which are shared by all cultures; or they adopt relativism, holding that moral values are the product of discrete cultures, so that ethics across borders is impossible. It might be expected that medieval writers, committed to the complete truth of Christianity, would be without exception universalists in their treatment of other cultures. This article, however, has looked at a whole series of different types of relativist approaches taken by medieval writers to pagan culture. In some cases, the relativism is superficial (Carpini, Mandeville, Las Casas, and, perhaps surprisingly, Montaigne)—simply the acknowledgment that the same underlying values are expressed by different practices in different cultures. In others (Boethius of Dacia and Dante), the relativism goes much deeper. Both Boethius and Dante would accept the claim that there are no absolute standards to adjudicate between competing reference frames. They each use their sophisticated relativism for very different purposes. For Boethius, it allows him to give space for those engaged in Aristotelian natural science to pursue it according to its own terms, even where it is in contradiction with Christianity. For Dante, it enables him to explain how morally impeccable pagans are damned. But, despite being like contemporary relativists in rejecting absolute standards for judging between frames, neither

25. See, for example, Palecek and Risjord (2012): because of their concern about the incoherence of this position, they attempt to found relativism within anthropology on something other than what they call “representationalism” (where, as they explain, cultures are treated as systems of belief that provide different perspectives on a single world) and so to escape his critique.

writer would accept the further claim, characteristic of relativists today, that all such frames, and so the judgments that issue from them, are of equal standing. Both accept the Christian frame as superior, but without believing that it provides absolute standards by which other frames can be judged. In the editors' terms, Boethius and Dante both carefully combine commensuration and incommensuration.

Dante, it turns out, does not so much compare different schemes of moral values as contrast the whole system of ethics with a scheme of nonmoral, Christian values, by which it is trumped. This juxtaposition is a difficult one for readers today to compass because they are inclined to regard moral values precisely (and often even by definition) as those that trump all others. Understanding Dante here—rather than insisting, as many interpreters wish, that his meaning must be different—poses its own problem of relativism, which is felt also, if less vividly, in the other authors examined in this article. Are medieval conceptions of the world too distant from ours for us to be able properly to grasp them? In making the implicit case for a qualifiedly negative answer, the paragraphs above emulate the combination of detachment and sympathetic identification found in the other, more straightforwardly ethnographic studies in this collection.

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Franchir la frontière éthique du paganisme: le relativisme au Moyen-Age

Résumé : Les chrétiens du long Moyen-Age (de 200 à 1700) en Europe occidentale pensaient souvent au paganisme, en particulier celui des Grecs et des Romains de l'antiquité, tels qu'Aristote et Virgile, tous deux pères fondateurs de la tradition intellectuelle d'alors ; mais ils songeaient également au paganisme de leur temps (c'est à dire, associé à ceux qui n'était ni chrétien, ni juif, ni musulman), tels que celui des lituaniens, des mongols et au seizième et dix-septième siècles, des « indiens » d'Amérique ou d'Inde, des Japonais, des Chinois. Cet article présente et explore une caractéristique surprenante de ces discussions : leur recours à des approches relativistes, que peu de chercheurs associent à la pensée médiévale. En ce qui concerne le paganisme, en particulier celui des païens de l'Antiquité, les écrivains adoptent une position strictement relativiste, qui devient une propriété majeure (et rarement mentionnée) de la vie intellectuelle médiévale. Au sujet des vertus des païens (antiques et contemporains), l'approche est également relativiste, mais de manière plus subtile et variable.

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