3. PHILOSOPHERS AS PROFESSIONAL RELATIVISTS

I used to think that we should expect of presidents of philosophical associations that they offer us a few pithy comments on the nature of the universe. After all, I used to think, the universe, if it belongs to anyone, belongs to the philosophers, and they should know how to deal with it. I no longer have this expectation. Instead, my views coincide with those of Woody Allen, (1971, p. 27) who writes:

Can we actually ‘know’ the universe? My god, it’s hard enough finding your way around in Chinatown. The point, however, is: Is there anything out there? And why? And must they be so noisy? Finally, there can be no doubt that the one characteristic of ‘reality’ is that it lacks essence. That is not to say it has no essence, but merely lacks it. (The reality I speak of here is the same one Hobbes described, but a little smaller.)

Does this mean that Woody and I (along with Nelson Goodman and David Bloor) are relativists? Who can want to be a relativist (except perhaps on odd-numbered days)? It might be okay to be the kind of relativist who believes that there are many worlds, if any (and that they can differ in size, if any), but can a philosopher really accept that every belief has as much epistemic merit as any other? Can a philosopher take this stance? One wants to say: it all depends on what is at issue. This does not mean that stance depends only upon happenstance. In addition to context and occasion, there is purpose, and that can be fixed beforehand.

Once one has resolved one’s lover’s quarrel with metaphysics in favor of more modest philosophical expectations, the way out of Kant’s fixation with the a priori does seem to be acceptance that universes are versions, that acceptances are stances, and that something pragmatic drives the whole engine of constructive intellectual work - in science, in art, in philosophy, in all that we cherish as the best products of human effort. As philosophers, you may not tolerate my views and disagree with me. But then, as a philosopher, why should I tolerate your disagreement?
Why, after all, do we tolerate one another's disagreements? We don't tolerate one another's drinking and smoking habits (not all of the time, anyway); we don't tolerate racist stances; some of us don't tolerate fundamentalist stances on the beginnings of human life.

There is, I think, something of surpassing interest here. As philosophers, we learn to tolerate one another's differing, contradicting stances on philosophical matters, even if we take the stance of the other to be false, stupid, dangerous, tawdry, inconsequential. In a letter to A.H. Johnson published in Johnson (1983), Charles Hartshorne writes:

I recommend your essay for publication, little as I agree with your conclusions. You do a scholarly job of stating your case, which is one with which many will agree....
So I think you are in error, but deserve a hearing. You defend your case well.
I am for the essay. I trust it will be published. (p. 102)

In brief: 'you are wrong (although not all will agree with me), your scholarship is competent, your essay should be published.' In his reply, Johnson writes: "I greatly appreciate your attitude to my paper on Whitehead's categories as expressed in your letter and your recommendation to Farber. He has decided to publish it." In brief: 'thank you for praising my scholarship and for thinking I am wrong.' Can you imagine such an exchange taking place between two physicists?
Even if we make suitable allowance for the fact that the Hartshorne/Johnson age of philosophy was one of remarkable civility (the age of the philosopher as gentleman), their exchange is remarkable. Why recommend publication of views one thinks to be false? What merit can a piece of good scholarship have if its conclusions are in error? Can scholarship be good scholarship if its conclusions are in error? Referees of journal articles do often divorce considerations of truth from scholarly technical merit, and editors often take their advice. Some will think (but not philosophers) that there is a paradox here. Such a divorce separates what one might think to be epistemologically (or generally philosophically) correct, from what one might think to be professionally adequate, acceptable, even meritorious. Does such a divorce reveal a deep psychosis in the soul of the professional philosopher?

I may be wrong, but I would bet that very few philosophers are