



Christ without Absolutes: A Study of the Christology of Ernst Troeltsch

Sarah Coakley

<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198263746.001.0001>

Published: 17 November 1994

Online ISBN: 9780191682643

Print ISBN: 9780198263746

Search in this book

CHAPTER

1 The Nature of Troeltsch's Relativism

Sarah Coakley

<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198263746.003.0002> Pages 5–44

Published: November 1994

Abstract

This chapter provides an analytical account of the nature of Troeltsch's relativism. It analyses with precision the full development of his thinking on relativism, enabling one to see how his own position changed over time, and how it compares with various forms of relativism being canvassed today in a different philosophical milieu. The chapter delineates the precise nature of Troeltsch's position, and uses this scheme to judge the nature and coherence of the claims canvassed by Troeltsch at different times.

Keywords: [historical relativism](#), [Christian belief](#), [Historismus](#), [Christology](#)

Subject: [Christian Theology](#), [Theology](#)

Collection: [Oxford Scholarship Online](#)

TROELTSCH'S work has come to be regarded by theologians as a kind of symbol of serious engagement with problems of history, and especially those of 'historical relativism'. The 'shadow of Ernst Troeltsch' has justly been said to haunt all contemporary attempts to clarify the relation between Christian belief and history (Harvey 1967, 3 ff.). It is certainly true that the problem of 'historical relativism' was the dominating intellectual interest of Troeltsch's career, and any treatment of a particular aspect of his thought must take this interest into account. Thus at the outset of this book an overview and analysis of Troeltsch's understanding of this vexed problem will be provided. Later, in Chapter 4, it will be demonstrated how the shape of Troeltsch's Christology was deeply affected by his 'relativism'.

But 'relativism' is a highly ambiguous word: what, for instance, are the precise meanings of 'historical relativism', 'cultural relativism', 'historicism', and so on, and how are they logically interconnected? Since all these terms have themselves been used in a variety of ways, there are no agreed definitions with which to proceed, and the picture is confused. Further complexities arise in Troeltsch's case, and for two reasons: firstly because Troeltsch developed and changed his position in the course of his career; and secondly because he himself failed on occasions (as we shall show) to separate types of relativism which are logically distinct.

The object of this chapter is none the less to try to delineate the precise nature of Troeltsch's position. This will be attempted first by developing a scheme of distinguishable types of relativism, and second by using this scheme to judge the nature and coherence of the claims canvassed by Troeltsch at different times. What will not be attempted here, however, is any definitive conclusion about the 'success' or 'failure' of Troeltsch's programme *in toto*; such conclusions are a commonplace of Troeltsch research,¹ but very often judgement is passed without clear ↪ analytical reflection on the nature of Troeltsch's views. Even the literature in English is fairly liberally dotted with reiterations of the language and arguments of *Der Historismus und seine Probleme* (GS iii. 1922), some good, some bad.² But what they all lack, unfortunately, is the propensity to step back from Troeltsch's own mode of expression to a position where a precise philosophical analysis of what is being claimed can be made. The provision of that sort of analysis is the (relatively modest) aim of this chapter. The broader claim, going on from there, is that it is only against this backdrop that the major constraints and influences on Troeltsch's Christology can be assessed adequately.

Before embarking on any of this, however, it is only fair to set Troeltsch in his own historical context by noting something of the variety of meanings already ascribed to the encompassing term *Historismus* in the period in which Troeltsch himself wrote on the subject. A considerable amount of research has been done on this recently by intellectual historians, and the results need only be summarized here. It is clear from the examples given by Georg Iggers,³ among others,⁴ that the word *Historismus* could apply to at least four distinct areas, not always clearly distinguished: it could connote a particular *methodology* for historical work; it could suggest something about the possibility of knowledge in general (an *epistemological* thesis); it could make a variety of *metaphysical* claims; or it could consist primarily of an *ethical* viewpoint. We may cite just a few examples. Meinecke's use, for instance, focuses primarily on a methodological issue. *Historismus* implies an 'individualizing' rather than a 'generalizing' approach to history: it rejects the positivist attempt to subsume historical data under scientific laws of regularity. But as such, according to Meinecke, it represents 'one of the greatest intellectual revolutions that has ever taken place in Western thought'.⁵ As Meinecke was perhaps more aware than others, what might start ↪ as a methodology for historians could easily be taken to imply much more far-reaching consequences. A methodological view could spill over, for instance, into a metaphysical one (Meinecke 1972, xlix–1). Iggers cites an unusually early example (from 1848) of a definition of *Historismus*, as a purely metaphysical position: *Historismus*, according to Braniss, is the view that rejects the thesis of an unchanging 'Being' as the essence of reality.⁶ But *Historismus* could later also be used to describe a great variety of metaphysical theses: it could simply mean that everything (unrestrictedly) was subject to change, or it could imply with that that everything in history was 'individual' or 'unique' in some sense;⁷ it could further mean that, despite the appearance of flux and change in history, general 'ideas' could be seen to be knitting the process together.⁸ But the optimistic interpretation could be challenged by a very different, and rival, one, which introduced the specifically ethical definition of *Historismus*. Iggers gives an early citation from Eugen Dühring (1866) in which *Historismus* is attacked as renouncing all 'convictions and principles'. This is a form of ethical relativism. Perhaps not surprisingly, it has been shown that this pessimistic definition was canvassed far more widely in the period following the Great War of 1914–18, and this no doubt partly explains why the subject has often since then been approached with a mixture of contempt and fear.

Merely these few brief examples will make it clear that the four areas I have distinguished (those of historical method, metaphysics, ethics, and epistemology) were far from being kept separate in the minds of nineteenth-century protagonists of *Historismus*. Metaphysical themes lurk in what appear to be attitudes merely to historical method or ethics. Further, the failure to spell out the precise epistemological consequence of the various understandings of *Historismus* is the most striking feature of all. Let us take a preliminary look at Troeltsch's own (most explicit) definition of *Historismus* as an example. *Historismus*, he says, is ↪ 'the fundamental historicizing (*Historisierung*) of all our thoughts about man, his culture, and his values' (GS iii. 102), or again, 'the fundamental historicizing of our knowledge and thought' (ibid. 9). This is clearly intended as the definition of a quite general attitude to the world (*Weltanschauung*); but what epistemological claim is it making, and how does the epistemological stance connect with the ethical claim about the 'historicizing' of

p. 6

p. 7

p. 8

values? Troeltsch's vagueness, as we have seen, was characteristic of most of his contemporaries' conceptions of *Historismus*, so we cannot chide him too strongly. None the less, in order to lay the groundwork for an assessment of Troeltsch's relativism today it is crucial to press for more clarity in the epistemological area; and to aid this we shall now suggest a schema of different possible kinds of 'relativism', giving particular attention to relativism as an epistemological thesis, and providing some illustrations from current exponents of relativism in its various forms.⁹

I

What would clearly be impractical would be to try to list every conceivable kind of relativism. The alternative, and more manageable, procedure that I offer here is that of noting five areas of possible variation for any thesis of relativism. Thus I aim to provide five tests by which we, as interpreters, may discover what sort of relativism is being canvassed in any given case.

1. The first area of variation is the most crucial, because, among other things, it enables us to distinguish between true cases of relativism and only apparent cases. Let me call this the variable concerning the *status* of any given form of 'relativism'. First here I want to note (and then set on one side) certain positions which are commonly assumed to be forms of relativism, but which on closer inspection turn out to be something different and indeed not worthy of further philosophical concern. An off-the-cuff, ↯ or popular, definition of 'relativism', for instance, might well be that it is the view that 'truth is relative to a context'. But this is vastly ambiguous. What different sorts of claims might shelter under this (umbrella) definition, and what differing status might they have? Some may turn out, on closer inspection, to be something quite innocuous, in the sense of philosophically uncontroversial; let me call this different, and uncontroversial, thing 'relationism'.¹⁰

Consider, under this heading, three truisms. There is, first, the truism that certain propositions that are true today, or true here in Lancaster, may not be true tomorrow or indeed true today in Gretna Green (or where you will). Let me, for the sake of a tag, call this the 'truism of context'. At the moment it is true, for instance, that there are more white people in the United Kingdom than black. But it is quite conceivable that that position may not hold in two hundred years' time. Truths about population *relate to* different circumstances; but this is indisputable and clearly no thesis of relativism is implied. A second truism that might however be more easily confused with relativism is this: circumstances often lead people to make statements which they believe to be true at the time, but which later turn out to be erroneous. The mistake can often partly, or even wholly, be explained in terms of the *relationship* between the errant belief and the prevailing circumstances. But again no thesis of relativism follows. Let me call this the 'truism of the development of knowledge'. Maurice Wiles, for example, to take a case from current British theology, seems to be more of a 'relationist' in this sense about Christian doctrinal truths than a relativist proper. For he argues in *The Making of Christian Doctrine*, for instance, that the early Fathers made mistakes (albeit understandable ones, in their cultural and philosophical milieu) and that we are now in a better position to see the truth about the doctrine of the Trinity, for example, than they were.¹¹ Thus, however much Wiles is ↯ sympathetically aware of the cultural restraints which made the Fathers argue as they did, he is not necessarily a relativist. He is simply stating how the Fathers' errant beliefs were *related to* their particular frameworks.

A final truism, which again does not involve relativism, I shall call the 'truism of relatedness'. This is just the obvious fact that all truths are related to some sort of context or another. It is true, for instance, that I live near the gasworks, and this is related (among many other things) to the fact that I earn only a modest salary as a junior lecturer. Everything is related to something. But this, again, is indisputable and must not be confused with the (much disputed) thesis of relativism.

Further, and finally, we must be careful not to confuse a particular *methodology* commonly espoused in the social sciences with relativism proper. This is what I shall choose to call the 'methodology of relationism',

although I am aware that this position is quite commonly (and to my mind confusingly) dubbed ‘relativism’. This methodology is founded on the insistence that social or historical or religious phenomena be studied at least in the first instance in their own terms. What follows from this is the stricture that we should not, for instance, rush in with Frazerian arrogance and denounce ‘primitive’ societies’ belief in magic before we have looked to see what *they* think magic is; or again, that we should not assume when doing sociological analyses of religion that religious beliefs are fundamentally erroneous and reducible to instances of social pressure of one sort or another.¹² Now it is crucial to note that what we are discussing here is a methodological point; it is the demand for sympathetic understanding of alien material. It is what Dilthey was after in his doctrines of *Verstehen* and *Nacherleben* (Dilthey 1927, 191 ff.); it is what Collingwood more questionably required in his insistence that the historian should actually ‘re-enact’ the thought of the past figure he studies (Collingwood 1946, 282 ff.); and it is similar again to the suggestion of Ninian Smart (following Husserl and van der Leeuw) that value judgements be ‘bracketed’ in the phenomenological study of religion (Smart 1973, 32 ff., 56 ff.). But none of these methodological stances inexorably leads to relativism proper, although it must be admitted that practitioners ↵ of a relationist method such as this often find themselves lured towards relativism.

p. 11

Thus, although we have seen that all these forms of ‘relationism’ as just described could subscribe to the vague proposition, offered above, that ‘truth is relative to a context’, I propose that we reserve the title ‘relativism’ itself for something more controversial. What then is ‘relativism proper’?

In its epistemological form, this more controversial position, which I suggest we call ‘epistemological relativism’ (i.e. relativism about knowledge), has the following logical structure: ‘proposition *p* is actually “true”¹³ (not, note, merely thought true) relative to, or in virtue of, framework *f*. The crucial defining characteristic here is the idea that (for the epistemological relativist) truths are to one degree or another actively *constituted* by the prevailing framework, context, or paradigm; and that is what truths are on this view: intra-theoretic truths. It is not just (as in the case of ‘the truism of relatedness’) that truths are arrived at against a particular backcloth; nor is it (as in ‘the truism of the development of knowledge’) that certain things are—perhaps wrongly—thought true because of the prevailing context. Rather truth is, actually and constitutively, relative to a framework; and since the relativist does not believe that all can share the same framework, nor that there is any privileged position available from which absolute truth may be surveyed (because relativistic truths *are* intra-theoretic), it follows that there is the possibility, though not the strict necessity, that truths from different frameworks may be disjunctive or contradictory. This then is ‘epistemological relativism’ on my definition.

Some examples will help to give this substance. Peter Winch, I would argue, is an example of one who in the realm of social science has slid into ‘epistemological relativism’ as a result of his commitment to what I have called the ‘methodology of relationism’. Thus in his *The Idea of a Social Science* his primary concern is methodological:

A psychoanalyst who wished to give an account of...neuroses amongst...the Trobriand Islanders could not just apply without further reflection the concepts developed by Freud for situations arising in our own ↵ society. He would have first to investigate such things as the idea of fatherhood amongst the islanders and take into account any relevant aspects in which their idea differed from that current in his own society. (Winch 1958, 90).

p. 12

So far so good. But Winch makes a move into a different position when he declares that the social scientist should at no point obtrude his own conception of truth on to the alien material he interprets,¹⁴ The material will have its own inherent concept of truth or rationality, he argues, and that the interpreter must abide by, even if it is not his own. The latter position (made most explicit in his essay ‘Understanding a Primitive Society’) is a form of ‘epistemological relativism’. The classic case here is Zande magic. Zande magic, or so Winch implies, is ‘true’ for the Azande,¹⁵ and the European observer is in no position to declare it untrue by misapplying his alien notion of scientific truth.

Let us take one more example of epistemological relativism, this time from the realm of philosophy of science. T. S. Kuhn and P. Feyerabend, for instance, argue that scientific truths are ‘paradigm-dependent’, that is, that truths established in scientific activity are ‘true’ only in virtue of the paradigmatic assumptions on which the particular research is conducted. There is, according to these two exponents, no ‘neutral observation language’ by which one may win over a scientist from one paradigm to another on objective rational grounds. Going from one paradigm to another is more like a conversion experience; and thus, as Kuhn puts it, ‘If I am right, then “truth” may, like “proof” be a term with only intra-theoretic applications’ (ed. Lakatos and Musgrave 1970, 226).

p. 13 Such then is what I mean by ‘epistemological relativism’, something to be clearly distinguished from the truisms we have ↵ considered under the heading ‘relationism’. But also to be distinguished from it (and this is our last point under this first heading of relativism’s status) are various *metaphysical* theses which sometimes also shelter under the title of ‘relativism’. One such metaphysical thesis (which does not necessarily imply a concomitant commitment to epistemological relativism) is the view that all historical occurrences are irreducibly unique and individual. Troeltsch, as we shall shortly see, held this view, and in the earlier part of his career called it ‘relativity’. But the thesis of ‘relativity’, in this rather specific, metaphysical sense, should not be confused with the epistemological thesis of relativism; and although many commentators assume, in Troeltsch’s case, that the two must have always gone together, we shall show in due course that there is reason to doubt this.

Another metaphysical theory, finally, which is sometimes, but not always, held alongside epistemological relativism may be called ‘perspectivism’. When used to undergird a concomitant form of relativism, perspectivism is a metaphysical substructure designed to explain how truths from different frameworks (which may well be disjunctive) fit together. One form of the theory is well evoked (though not without some ambiguity) by the story of seven blind Indians all grasping different bits of an elephant. Each of the seven claims about the elephant is, as it turns out, true. Each is true about an aspect, or *perspective*, of the elephant’s anatomy. But if you happen to be one of the blind men, then your bit of ‘truth’ about the elephant is at least in *prima-facie* contradiction with your fellow blind men’s constructions. What is true about the tail is not (apparently) true about the left tusk, but both claims turn out to a sighted person to be true perspectives of the elephant as a whole.

p. 14 But not every form of perspectivism assumes that different parts of reality (or, in this case, of the elephant) are being grasped from different perspectives; a distinction gleaned from Nicholas Rescher (see Rescher 1978, 233 ff.) is useful here. What he calls the ‘complex reality view’ (a subset of perspectivism in our terms) does indeed see reality as consisting of parts, and then claims that the different truths (from different frameworks) give access to different parts of reality. Another possible form of perspectivism, however, is what Rescher calls the ‘perspectival reality view’. On this view different truths (again from different frameworks) are ↵ seen as truths not just about a part of reality, but about the whole of reality. On this view, then, each perspective is a perspective on the whole of reality, and—it is claimed—‘everybody...is right from the perspective of his own methodological approach’ (Rescher 1978, 235). Now in practical terms what distinguishes the epistemological relativist who does not adopt a form of perspectivism from one who does is the degree to which he is tolerant of truths forged in other, competing, frameworks. It is often assumed that all relativists are by definition committed to open-minded tolerance of diverse views; but this does not necessarily follow. Only the relativist who also (implicitly or explicitly) holds to some sort of theory of perspectivism is so committed, as will now be clear: it is peculiarly the view of the perspectivist that *all* (relative) truths are in some sense ultimately true.

We have now seen how crucial it is both to be able to distinguish true from only apparent forms of epistemological relativism, and also to recognize various kinds of metaphysical thesis which may be masquerading under the same tide. This first, and complex, question of the status of different types of ‘relativism’ is by far the most tangled of the five variables I wish to expound. We can deal with the four others rather more summarily.

2. The second variable for relativists is this: we must ask in what *sphere*, or realm of discussion, the relativism is deemed to apply. We have so far only discussed the broad logical form of epistemological relativism; now we need to press the relativist further: which truths are you saying are relative? Some examples might be: true historical judgements, truths about human nature, religious truths, hermeneutical or literary truths, or (more radically) truths about perceptions and logic. The last two cases are particularly controversial. The perceptual relativist argues that what is visually true for me may not be for you (or for a New Guinean tribesman, for example). The logical relativist argues that even the most basic laws of logic are intra-theoretic. These particular forms of epistemological relativism may indeed be especially difficult to defend:¹⁶ my point, however, is that not all epistemological relativists may be committed to them: ↪ relativism, I suggest, need not be an all-or-nothing affair. We need to beware, then, of anti-relativist critics like Roger Trigg who try to herd all relativists into one category, mistakenly insisting that all relativists must be perceptual relativists and hence (so Trigg argues) committed to ultimately indefensible positions (see Trigg 1973, 14–26, esp. 25). A blanket rejection such as Trigg's rests, of course, on the (Kantian) assumption that all our knowing is structured by, and filtered through, the same fundamental epistemic process; yet it is precisely this contention that the relativist begs to question, and the issue is one that calls for debate: it cannot simply be prejudged in favour of what Rorty has called 'mainstream' or 'systematic' Western philosophy, with its slavish commitment to the 'Kantian grid'.¹⁷

p. 15

Likewise, we need to note that, alongside epistemological relativism of various kinds, types of ethical and aesthetic relativism may also be canvassed in a similar logical form (what is ethical (or beautiful) is so in virtue of, or relative to, framework *f*), and it may be that here, too, one form of relativism may be favoured without commitment to others. A recent example of this is provided by Steven Lukes (Lukes 1974, 165–89), who has made out a case for ethical relativism (for in the sphere of morality he says he can find no 'Archimedean point' from which to detect absolute value), but at the same time argues strenuously against a particular form of epistemological relativism.¹⁸ He himself finds a certain *prima-facie* tension in this disjunction of views (*ibid.* 185 ff.), but I think he is right to say there is no logical contradiction involved.

Whether ethical relativism is seen merely as a variation on, or subset of, epistemological relativism will of course depend on one's meta-ethical theory. If ethical questions are ultimately questions of fact, then ethical relativism is really just a form of epistemological relativism; whereas if one holds a non-cognitivist view of ethics, then we are talking about a completely different ↪ range of application.¹⁹ The range of application involved becomes particularly difficult to assess, however, in the case of relativism applied to the more general category of 'Value', at least as the word was used by German exponents of *Historismus* in the last century. We may perhaps say, though, that 'value relativism' constitutes a more inclusive (and therefore more vague) form of 'ethical relativism' as we have defined it. For a 'Value', at least as Troeltsch and some of his forebears and contemporaries in his German tradition of historiography understood it, could be simply or primarily an ethical proposition; but it could in addition, it seems, connote any viewpoint or proposition or activity of potential cultural importance or significance.²⁰ Talk about 'values' is thus a slippery business; in Troeltsch's case, the sense is often the first, more restricted one, although there are examples too of the more inclusive connotation.²¹ But at the least the *logical* form of 'value relativism' is clear enough: 'value *v* is actually ethical/important/significant relative to, or in virtue of, framework *f*'.

p. 16

3. We have argued that it is not intrinsically incoherent for the relativist to restrict his relativism to particular spheres of application. Our third variable now involves some further distinctions within the category of epistemological relativism. For relativism about knowledge can be applied not only to different spheres of study, but also—I would argue—can come in different *strengths*. ↪ Consider first a weak version of epistemological relativism (let us call it 'plain epistemological relativism'). Here the relativist argues that what is true is true in virtue of a framework *f*, but he does not commit himself to saying that even the criteria for truth are so relative. Certain types of 'historical relativism' (though this is another slippery term) fall into this category. Thus, to take a contemporary theologian as an example here, Wolfhart Pannenberg argues that, as the

p. 17

process of history broadens out, historical judgements have continually to be reformulated from new perspectives or frameworks.²² On these assumptions one might argue, then, that what is true about the French Revolution today is significantly different from what was (actually) true about it in, say, 1790, before some of the further ramifications of its significance could be assessed. Now we notice that this sort of relativism need not imply a different set of *criteria* for detecting historical truth from the different perspectives.

A stronger form of epistemological relativism, then, is one which insists that even the criteria for 'truth', indeed even perhaps the very notions of 'truth' and 'reality' themselves, are internal to the framework or context. To return to Peter Winch, this appears to be his position when he argues in 'Understanding a Primitive Society' that 'what is real and what is unreal shows itself *in* the sense [a particular] language has. Further, both the distinction between the real and the unreal and the concept of agreement with reality themselves belong to our language' (ed. Wilson 1970, 82). Now let us call this stronger position 'criterial epistemological relativism'.²³

p. 18 But we must go further and note that yet a stronger version of epistemological relativism sometimes appears to be canvassed by relativists, and this is commonly known as 'incommensurability'. This is the view that certain frameworks have such different notions of truth or rationality that they cannot even understand each other. They are rendered incommunicado, as it were, by the failure of their different languages or concepts to mesh with each other in *any* sense.²⁴ Let us however note two significant things about 'incommensurability': (a) it is in the interests of anti-relativists to imply that all relativists hold this thesis, because then they are in a good position to denounce relativism *in toto* as patently absurd (see again, for instance, Trigg 1973, 14–16, 24–5, 152, 165, etc.); and (b) it is perfectly true that 'criterial epistemological relativists' such as Winch, Kuhn, and Feyerabend, and even I think D. Z. Phillips in the sphere of religious truth, on occasions appear to be propounding this form of 'incommensurability';²⁵ but on closer inspection it becomes obvious that none of them can keep it up, even if they want to.²⁶ Why? Because this position, as I have defined it, is absurd. No two frameworks or paradigms are so bounded that *no* communication or understanding can take place. If that were the case, then presumably we would not even know that the alien framework existed, because it would, literally, be 'beyond our ken'.

p. 19

Here, then, is a form of relativism which is admittedly indefensible: total incommensurability between frameworks is a nonsense; but this is not to say that we have necessarily dismissed 'criterial epistemological relativism' of some sort. In the sphere of linguistic relativism, for instance, George Steiner's *After Babel* seems to me to score some very telling points against Chomsky in its illustrations of a certain indeterminacy between different languages (see Steiner 1975, esp. 105 ff.). Everyone who has learnt a foreign language knows that some words or concepts will not adequately translate into English. But this remaining 'lack of fit' need not, of course, result in complete mutual incomprehension. Likewise, Quine has discussed in *Word and Object* (Quine 1960, 51 ff.) the putative case of an English-speaker confronting a native whose language he knows not a word of, and attempting communication. This does turn out to be possible, because both can reidentify the same object (a 'rabbit' to us, but 'Gavagai' to the native); none the less we are left uncertain, says Quine, whether the native is actually seeing the same thing. There may be an area of remaining indeterminacy here, despite the fact that some sort of communication is clearly possible. (And indeterminacy, on my terms, would count as a form of 'criterial' relativism.)

4. Our fourth variable concerns the understanding of *truth* being proposed in any case of relativism, and this, as we shall see shortly, is particularly important for a clear understanding of the nature of Troeltsch's position. Let us distinguish here, first, between 'the Truth' (in the sense of an external state of affairs—for clarity's sake I shall here capitalize the 'T') and 'truth' or 'truths' in the sense of true statements enunciated by the knowing subject. When the epistemological relativist talks of 'truth being relative to a framework', it is truth in the latter sense that is in question. But this truth may be understood in a number of ways.

p. 20 The relativist may, for instance, adopt some sort of 'pragmatist' theory of truth (meaning by 'true' valid, or fruitful, or meaningful, or useful); or he may, instead or in addition, apply a 'coherence' theory of truth

(designating as 'true' that which coheres with other 'truths' already accepted). S. J. Tambiah's approach to the anthropologists' debate about magic is a nice instance here (in ed. Horton and Finnegan 1973, 199–229). Magic in 'primitive' societies, he argues, is not to be construed as misplaced pre-scientific activity. Rather, it is *valid* for the participants because (so Tambiah postulates) magical acts are actually equivalent to what J. L. Austin called 'performative' or 'illocutionary' utterances (see Austin 1962). In other words, we are not dealing in the sphere of magic with propositions about states of affairs, because 'Magical acts are ritual acts and ritual acts are in turn performative acts whose positive and creative meaning is missed and whose persuasive validity is misjudged if they are subject to that kind of empirical verification associated with scientific activity' (ed. Horton and Finnegan 1973, 199).

Some types of relativism, then, by appealing to pragmatist or coherence understandings of truth, may circumvent the question of Truth as an external state of affairs altogether.²⁷ But we should not suppose that this is necessarily the case for all forms of relativism, despite assertions by such as Trigg that relativists are inexorably committed to abandoning any understanding of truth as corresponding to an external state of affairs (see Trigg 1973, 24–6, 162 ff.). For once again Trigg scores only by recourse to caricature. He is certainly right, in my view, to question the viability of a form of relativism in which no distinction at all between 'the world and experience of it' is maintained in any sphere of application, thereby forcing the relativist into a defeated solipsism when challenged to justify his beliefs (see *ibid.* 165–6). This we can indeed isolate as another extreme, and indefensible, construal of the relativistic option.

p. 21 But in fact many epistemological relativists do operate with a (modified) form of the correspondence theory of truth, whereby what is true for them is true in virtue of an external state of affairs, but mediated through and constitutively affected by the particular 'framework' concerned. On this view it is maintained that there is a three-way relation between the knower, the known, and ↯ the 'framework', and that it is only in virtue of the 'framework' (in this case not a universal one as in Kant's epistemology but a variable one) that Truth may to any degree be assimilated and 'truths' thereby constituted. This position, indeed, appears to be that of even quite extreme criterial relativists such as Kuhn and Feyerabend in the vexed area of debate over scientific theory; for it is noticeable that they still make reference to some sort of givenness (albeit inchoate) with which the scientist has to do.²⁸ In some areas of discourse this approach seems to be at least worthy of serious consideration, and will also, as we shall see, be found useful in analysing Troeltsch's position.

A final point to be made under this heading will also be applicable in Troeltsch's case. We should note that for the relativist (and perspectivist likewise) who does entertain some form of correspondence theory of truth along the lines suggested, the position may be further complicated by larger metaphysical assumptions. That is, it may be asserted that the (external) Truth in question is itself in a process of change and development. This then of course involves the idea of change and variation occurring at two levels—the level of ontology (the developing or changing Truth) and the level of epistemology (the changing or variable 'frameworks').

p. 22 5. Finally, the fifth variable in this schema for distinguishing types of relativism concerns the notion of *framework* itself. This is perhaps the nub of the problem for any relativist, for it would at least appear reasonable to expect him to provide some clear and convincing account of the 'framework' deemed to be in operation, and thus to distinguish his position, logically from the innocuous forms of 'relationism' which simply allow for the contextualization of all apprehension of truths, morality, and beauty.²⁹ Again, we are entitled to press the relativist: if you say truth is ↯ relative to a framework, then what exactly is this 'framework'? Is it, say, a language, a scientific theory or paradigm, a temporal horizon, a set of national or cultural characteristics, or perhaps even a collection of personal prejudices? One could go on multiplying possibilities here; but let me just suggest one or two systematic alternatives which are particularly important. First, we should ask who has the 'framework' being discussed: is it a framework built into the mental apparatus of individuals (in which case, which individuals?) or is it a set of social or cultural assumptions (in which case, who, again, is involved?)? Second, is the framework deemed to be a bounded one with clear-cut edges? Or is it open-ended, capable of change and modification, such that one framework may flow into, or overlap with, its successor? Third, is the

framework consciously embraced, or is it supposed to be operating at some deeply unconscious level? And fourth (and connectedly), is the framework thought to be freely (as well as consciously) adopted, or is it in some sense deterministically imposed?

Now it is not at all clear, as we shall detect, that Troeltsch answers all these questions adequately.³⁰ But one response he does not give, to his credit, is to support the deterministic option just alluded to; for to suggest that a prevailing 'cultural' framework entirely determines the thoughts and actions of that culture surely denies the very existence of freedom (unthinkable for Troeltsch) and reduces individuals to cultural automata. Assuming that this does involve a *reductio ad absurdum*, we may identify it as a further, indefensible, form of relativism. Yet of course not all relativists need be committed to this extreme and deterministic understanding of a cultural framework.

I have now completed my task of preparatory definition. My primary intention has been to provide a means of analysing and distinguishing different types of relativism, some of which may be sensible, others not; but I have alluded along the way to at least three such types which are definitely suspect: the strong thesis of 'incommensurability'; the solipsistic sort of relativism that allows ↪ no notion of the 'given' at all; and the crassly deterministic understanding of a cultural framework. As we turn now to an analysis of Troeltsch's relativism we should note that he is lured into none of these traps. And in general it may be a surprise to find how weak a form his relativism takes.

II

For these purposes we shall examine the status of Troeltsch's relativism in three different phases of his career, picking out illustrative passages from his books and more significant articles, and attempting in each case to distinguish between methodological, epistemological, metaphysical, and ethical propositions. For the first phase we shall give attention to Troeltsch's early articles 'Geschichte und Metaphysik' (ZTK 1898) and 'Über historische und dogmatische Methode der Theologie' (TA 1900),³¹ and also his lectures on *The Absoluteness of Christianity* (1902; 2nd revised edition 1912).

Troeltsch's essay on 'historical and dogmatic method' has been given a lot of prominence in recent discussion and is often referred to as a statement of his 'historical relativism'. It is true that Troeltsch does use the verb *relativieren* frequently in the article; and he describes his own position as involving *Relativierung* and *Relativität*.³² But it should be noted that he explicitly denounces the suggestion that he is espousing *Relativismus*; and one can infer from the context that by this latter term Troeltsch means ethical or value 'scepticism', probably what we would classify as 'criterial' relativism of some sort (TA 1900, 103 = GS ii. 747). This rejection of *Relativismus* should not surprise us if we take into account an important, but brief, passage in the slightly earlier essay 'Geschichte und Metaphysik'. In the closing pages of that article Troeltsch had implied a distinction between *Historismus* and *Relativismus* (ZTK 1898, 68–9). The former, described only vaguely at this stage as seeing the 'ideals of all times...as historically conditioned (*bedingte*)' can lead to the ↪ distinctly dangerous conclusion of the latter, which is described as suffocating all 'productivity' and leading to the undermining of 'simple faith in generally valid norms' (ibid. 68). Again Troeltsch here seems to be primarily worried about ethical paralysis, and is concerned to combat that at all costs. Certainly, then, Troeltsch is not a value relativist at the time of writing these two articles. He does admit in the later essay that there are great empirical difficulties in gaining agreement on 'a scale of values', but he believes that 'ultimately the essential uniformity of human nature provides a foundation for consensus in recognizing supreme standards of value and...because of this foundation, the consensus will prevail' (TA 1900, 102 = GS ii. 745–6). There is no doubt, then, that at this period Troeltsch rejects 'value relativism'.

What then is thought so significant or controversial about 'Über historische und dogmatische Methode der Theologie'? As we might expect, Troeltsch's position here involves not just methodological considerations (as

his tide would imply) but a mixture too of epistemological and metaphysical claims, which we must attempt to unravel. The core of his argument in this essay, as is well known,³³ is his statement of three principles of historical method: first, the ‘principle of criticism’ (historical work yields only judgements of varying degrees of probability, not of absolute certainty); second, the ‘principle of analogy’ (historical events are not radically dissimilar from one another),³⁴ and third, the ‘principle of correlation’ (historical events take place in contexts, which condition them, and which they themselves in turn affect). Is there any sense in which one who espouses these principles could be called a ‘relativist’? Perhaps it will be useful to distinguish three points here.

1. Troeltsch’s ‘principle of criticism’ certainly implies that historical judgements are subject to revision when new evidence comes up, or when the trustworthiness of old testimony is reexamined (see *TA* 1900, 89 = *GS* ii. 731–2). However, this is a non-controversial point about the method and procedure of historians, and does not imply relativism in the sense that we have defined it.

2. The ‘principle of criticism’ could, however, also be read as involving one form of ‘epistemological relativism’ as defined above: some judgements might be subject to revision not simply because of the re-evaluation of testimony, but because from new perspectives or ‘frameworks’ new truths might be grasped. When Troeltsch states the ‘principle of criticism’ at the beginning of his article, this further proposition is not made evident. However, the Hegelian metaphysic which he later espouses (‘it is indispensable to believe in reason as operative in history and as progressively revealing itself’³⁵) suggests that it might be appropriate to infer such a conclusion. For if one believes that Truth of a certain sort is only progressively available through history (a metaphysical proposition) then the correctness of judgements about such Truth will likewise be relative to a historical context (an epistemological proposition). What is not completely clear here, however, is whether these judgements are constitutively affected by the historical perspective or ‘framework’ in which they are assimilated (this would, on my terms, involve true epistemological relativism), or whether they simply occur against the backcloth of varying historical contexts (in which case this would simply be a form of ‘relationism’). On the whole, from what hints we get, I am inclined to favour the former interpretation.³⁶ But it should be underlined that the ‘truths’ considered in this article are apparently restricted to the religious sphere. Troeltsch does not here (or indeed ever) make a *general* statement of epistemological relativism. Indeed, one of the ways of understanding his ‘principle of analogy’ in the present article suggests that truths about the natural world at least (that is, natural laws) are constant and not subject to revision. And certainly, as we have already seen, he here believes ‘human nature’ to have universal and constant characteristics. If then Troeltsch is here making a case for epistemological relativism, it is neither a very strong nor a very conscious one, and it is restricted in application.

3. What then does Troeltsch mean when he says that the historical method ‘relativizes all truths by showing their mutual interdependence’ (*TA* 1900, 98 = *GS* ii. 741)? This is the point where Troeltsch’s methodological prescriptions fade into metaphysical propositions, as is illustrated by the principles of ‘analogy’ and ‘correlation’. Taken together they assert both ‘a basic consistency of the human spirit’ and also the ‘inter-action of all phenomena in the history of civilization’ (*TA* 1900, 90 = *GS* ii. 733). Troeltsch himself admits rather late on in the essay that these principles issue from ‘the *metaphysical* assumption that all things, including the activities of the human mind, are totally interconnected’ (*TA* 1900, 99 = *GS* ii. 742, my italics). The form of this statement is unhelpfully vague (what is meant by ‘totally interconnected?’), but its intent, taken in context, is clear. All that Troeltsch wishes to combat by appeal to this metaphysic is the particular sort of ‘supernaturalism’ espoused by his opponent here, Friedrich Niebergall. According to Troeltsch, Niebergall’s ploy is to fence off certain central Christian ‘facts’ and make them independent from, and unconditioned by, the ordinary flow of history. Thus, when Troeltsch says that historical method ‘relativizes all truths’ he simply wishes to discount this particular way of artificially (or ‘dogmatically’) guaranteeing the ‘suprahistorical core’ of Christian origins. His metaphysic, in contrast, visualizes history as a ‘web of mutually interacting activities of the human spirit, which are never independent...but always interrelated’ (*TA* 1900, 92 = *GS* ii. 734).

This then is a metaphysical point about the nature of history, made in a polemical context. It is not, however, a thesis of relativism in our sense.

So far, then, Troeltsch's 'relativism' seems extraordinarily mild: he is not a value relativist, and if he is an epistemological relativist, it is only in a weak sense restricted to specifically religious truths. Moreover, his position changes only slightly in *The Absoluteness of Christianity*, as we shall now see. Again, three points need to be distinguished.

1. First it should be mentioned briefly that Troeltsch makes some further methodological statements. At the beginning of the book, for instance, he underlines that historians must set aside any 'naïve' or 'dogmatic' theological conceptions they might harbour; they must develop skills in 'sympathetic understanding'; and they must concern themselves not with laws and predictions but with the unique and individual (Abs. 47 ff., 63). All this is equivalent to what we have called the 'methodology of relationism'; no relativism is implied.

2. Further, no relativism (in the way we have defined it) follows from the *metaphysical* thesis that Troeltsch here (as before) calls 'relativity' (*Relativität*).³⁷ Now, however, he provides a more explicit definition: 'Relativity', he says, 'simply means that all historical phenomena are unique, individual configurations...' (Abs. 89), and again: 'The modern idea of history...knows only concrete individual phenomena, always conditioned by their context' (ibid. 66). Thus 'the historical and the relative are identical' (ibid. 85). This position is not too different from that of 'Über historische und dogmatische Methode', although it does emphasize more strongly the individuality of all historical events. Yet it also balances this new tendency with a more explicit appeal to an 'Absolute' that acts as the unifying force in history. It is claimed that 'absolute, unchanging value...exists not within but beyond history' (ibid. 90); none the less the 'universally valid...works teleologically within history', and so 'in the relative [i.e. in individual historical events] we...find a token [*Anbahnung*] of the absolute that transcends history' (ibid. 106). This metaphysic adds up to what James Luther Adams has called a 'relativized Hegelianism' (ibid. 13). On Troeltsch's reading of Hegel, the latter errs in subordinating history to a 'law-structured' universal principle (see ibid. 66). History is not for Troeltsch predetermined by an irreversible plan of development; none the less he believes that there is here a teleological development which may be discerned with the eyes of 'faith' (ibid. 90).³⁸

3. The difficulties for the interpreter become severe when it is asked what ramifications this metaphysical construct has for *epistemology* and *valuation*. As so often is the case, Troeltsch himself is not concerned to separate these categories. However, the following statement makes it clear that he is certainly not an unbridled epistemological relativist: 'universal structures of law', he says, do hold 'in the form of physical and anthropological conditions, on the one hand, and in the form of basic psychological drives and sociological laws on the other',³⁹ Although this is once again somewhat vague, it is obvious that at least some core truths about human nature and the natural world are deemed constant and of universal applicability.

The main subject under discussion, however, is whether religious truths (and the 'values' that Troeltsch here uses almost as a synonym for such truths) are constant, or instead relative to a context. Does Troeltsch hold a form of epistemological and value relativism here? Unfortunately a clear answer to this cannot be given, largely because the same ambiguity is created by Troeltsch's teleological metaphysic as was found in 'Über historische und dogmatische Methode'. For Troeltsch here, the 'Absolute' (or God) is the repository of all ultimate religious Truth and Value (here conceived as metaphysical states of affairs external to the knowing or valuing subject); but if this religious Truth and Value is only available up to a point at a given time, as Troeltsch claims, then knowledge and value judgements would indeed seem to be relativized by the particular context: one could know a truth or recognize a value only partially or restrictedly in any given context or 'framework'. On the other hand, if the partial truth that is grasped is none the less one aspect (or 'token') of an evolving Truth, and if that Truth is itself developing self-consistently (as the teleological metaphysic implies), then it is less clear whether epistemological relativism would be implied. It might be, that is, that a form of metaphysical perspectivism could be held here that did not imply a concomitant thesis of relativism. Deciding on this is

made yet more difficult, however, by Troeltsch's insistence that religious truth and value are not exactly known, but rather intuited or grasped in 'faith'.

One may trace the oscillation to and from relativism in Troeltsch's own statements.⁴⁰ In the earlier part of the book he appears to hint at at least a form of *value* relativism ('Absolute, unchanging value...exists not within history, and can be perceived only in presentiment and faith' (ibid. 90)) and perhaps even to push as far as *criterial* value relativism ('a criterion [for evaluating the religions] is...a matter of personal conviction and is in the last analysis admittedly subjective' (ibid. 96)). Statements such as these are a far cry from the confident claim in his earlier article that 'consensus' will prevail on matters of values. But in the latter part of the book a different mood takes over. Troeltsch can confidently conclude that 'The "ab soluteness" [of Christianity] to which this inquiry has led us is simply the highest value discernible in history and the certainty of having found the way that leads to perfect truth' (ibid. 117–18). Moreover, the suggestion of criterial value relativism is banished when Troeltsch announces that Christianity is the highest religion because it 'represents the only complete break with the limits and conditions of nature religion', and so on.⁴¹ Here he assumes that there are public and universally agreed criteria by which to judge the relative merits and truth of the world religions.

p. 30 Granted this confusion—even contradiction—evident in *The Absoluteness of Christianity* (which, despite criticism on this score, Troeltsch made even more vexed in the course of his revision for the second edition⁴²), one cannot conclude as easily as Runzo does of the book (1986, 66) that 'It is readily clear that... Troeltsch is not a conceptual relativist' and that 'in the absence of any clear or consistent expression of value relativism, it would appear...Troeltsch is also not a relativist about value'. Instead, the picture is simply confused: some statements suggest that Troeltsch is moving towards both epistemological and value relativism, at least in the sphere of religious truths and values, while others just as quickly dispel such a suggestion. On balance, though, the whole tenor of the conclusions of the book suggests that proper relativism is not wholeheartedly being espoused here, and that is therefore the predominant impression with which one is left.

In what we may (for these purposes) call Troeltsch's 'middle period', however (roughly up to his move to Berlin in 1915), a more radical approach gradually emerges. We shall not here attempt a comprehensive survey, but focus simply on an important shift in Troeltsch's attitude to (intra-Christian) doctrinal truth during this time.

In 1903 Troeltsch had written a long serialized article for *Die christliche Welt* entitled 'Was heißt, "Wesen des Christentums"?' which was a response in the main to Harnack's very influential lectures on the essence of Christianity (*Das Wesen des Christentums*, 1900; Harnack 1901 in ET). For his second volume of *Gesammelte Schriften*, which appeared in 1913, Troeltsch revised this article. And, almost at the same time, he wrote another essay, 'The Dogmatics of the "Religionsgeschichtliche Schule"' (published in English translation in *the American Journal of Theology* for January 1913), which also discussed the question of the 'essence of Christianity'. What we shall here be concerned to do is extract the most radical statements of relativism from these two articles, and to note, once again, how the clarity of Troeltsch's position is ill affected by a confusion of metaphysical and epistemological statements.

p. 31 Particularly after Troeltsch's seventy-odd revisions,⁴³ the 1913 edition of 'Was heißt, "Wesen des Christentums"?' is a fascinating expose of Troeltsch's indecision. Should he move to a consistent espousal of epistemological relativism in the case of doctrinal truth, admitting that this might, in principle, lead to a range of disjunctive 'truths'; or should he still attempt to ward off that particular possibility by a continued appeal to a unified teleological metaphysic? The dilemma is the one already familiar from *The Absoluteness of Christianity* but now made all the more acute: either Troeltsch could simply admit that what is (actually) doctrinally true at any time or place is relative to that particular conceptual framework or context, and risk a plethora of mutually incompatible versions of that truth; or he could soften the relativistic blow by appealing to a Rankean 'idea' or 'force' working its way out, self-consistently, within the development of Christianity. Put yet another way, either there are successive 'essences' of Christianity, not necessarily closely similar, let alone identical, but

merely in a relationship of 'family resemblance' (to use Wittgensteinian language⁴⁴); or there is, in addition, the appeal to *one* 'essence' of Christianity, albeit a shadowy metaphysical force, which is working its way out in the process of history's development and in some sense unifying all the successive 'essences'.

p. 32 In fact Troeltsch chose the latter course, and in so doing opted (in our terms) for a form of epistemological relativism complemented by a thesis of metaphysical perspectivism. The combination is not, however, a very comfortable one. On the one hand the essay is full of confident metaphysical assertions such as 'history is ceaselessly striving to realise values which have an objective, inner necessity' ('Essence' 143); and thus, in Christianity's case, 'It has to be possible for us to think of all the manifestations of Christianity as arising in series on the strength of a force or law of development inherent in the basic idea' (ibid. 137–8). On the other hand, there are strong indications of the full acceptance of epistemological relativism where doctrinal truth is concerned. Doctrinal work, as Troeltsch asserted even in the first edition of this article, takes place in a context which constitutively $\hookrightarrow$ affects the outcome; and thus 'to define the essence [of Christianity] is to shape it afresh' (ibid. 162). Even in 1903 he realized what the implications of this might be, admitting that 'the formula for the essence of Christianity can by no means be a simple concept.

...It can only be a complex idea...It is necessary...to indicate the tension between the elements' (ibid. 154). However, by the time Troeltsch revised this article in 1913 his work for the mammoth *Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* was complete, and he had become all the more aware that such 'essence' definition might produce radically disjunctive results from different standpoints. Thus he now has to assert, for instance, that:

The protestant standpoint as opposed to the catholic, the ecclesiastical as opposed to the individualistic, the sectarian as opposed to the ecclesiastical, the synthesis which views church, sect, and mysticism together: all of these [are] conceptions of the essence...from a particular standpoint, (ibid. 141.)

p. 33 What is happening here, as we see, is the complementation of epistemological relativism with what seems to be perspectivism of the 'complex reality view' type. That is, Troeltsch is making the (metaphysical) assertion that all the varying 'essence' formulations somehow 'correspond to' (see ibid. 141) the real 'essence' of Christianity, which is itself in process of teleological development. The implication seems to be that this correspondence may only be to an *aspect* of the external reality (hence my classification of this as the 'complex reality view'),⁴⁵ since, as Troeltsch himself puts it, the external reality is itself very complex, and different apprehensions of it may only grasp it 'one-sidedly' (see ibid. 153–5). However, Troeltsch is adamant about this perspectivism in the 1913 edition: he even adds the sentence '*all those accommodations and appropriations...belong to the essence*' (ibid. 155, my italics) to underline the point. But there are, too, signs of strain and embarrassment at the attempt to hold to this perspectivism alongside an admittedly disjunctive form of epistemological $\hookrightarrow$ relativism. (The 'essence' of Christianity, he admits, 'must go so far as to bear opposites and tensions within itself', ibid. 153.)

What happens, then, in the *American Journal of Theology* article of the same year, at least in its English form, is that Troeltsch quietly drops the metaphysical perspectivism of 'Was heißt, "Wesen des Christentums"?' and now simply holds to the epistemological relativism alone.⁴⁶ In so doing, he tacitly admits that there is no point in searching for some one (externally given) 'essence' of Christianity; rather, each appropriation of Christianity has a truth relative to its context:

*the essence of Christianity differs in different epochs...This, and not simply the Bible or an ecclesiastical confession must be the conception of essential Christianity underlying modern dogmatics. But this essence is actually the subjective, personal interpretation and synthesis which present thinking derives from the entire situation with reference to actual living issues and for the purpose of directing future activity. Thus there is involved a general historical feeling and understanding, but also a subjective and creative interpretation and construction. (AJT 1913, 13, my italics.)*⁴⁷

Implicit in this quotation is another point that might be made here, and which also runs through ‘Was heißt, “Wesen des Christentums”?’: it becomes obvious that for Troeltsch, epistemological and ‘value’ relativism belong together in the sphere of Christian doctrine. In ‘Was heißt, “Wesen des Christentums”?’ he had already described in detail the procedure for deciding on ‘essential’ Christianity. Detailed and careful historical study (a veritable immersion in all the range of Christian history) must precede evaluation of what is ‘essential’ today. Moreover, that evaluation must be informed in turn by thoughtful reflection on the contemporary ‘living issues’. In short, the method seeks to combine assessments of historical fact ↵ with judgements of value. Conclusions about states of affairs (both past and present) lead inexorably to practical application. Doctrinal work embraces both these activities; truth and value cannot ultimately be held apart, although the distinction must be maintained in principle.⁴⁸

p. 34

We also now see that on this view criteria for ‘essential’ Christianity in any given context remain constant: the requirements of historical work on the one hand, and of an assessment of present challenges on the other, have to form the basis for value judgements. But the facts to be accounted for in any given case, and the value judgements made in the light of those facts, will vary according to context. Christianity will therefore have many ‘essences’, many different accounts of doctrinal truth.⁴⁹

Up till now we have detected only traces of epistemological and value relativism in Troeltsch. And these last citations represent a mixed form of epistemological and value relativism which is quite weak: it does not imply the relativity of criteria for evaluating truth or value, and so far our reflections have been restricted to the sphere of doctrinal discussion. As we turn now to the last period of Troeltsch’s career, we shall see that at least two, more radical, moves have occurred.⁵⁰ First, Troeltsch has developed a general thesis of value relativism (i.e. one not restricted to doctrinal decisions); and second, we find him flirting briefly with a strong form of epistemological relativism, implying not only ‘criterial’ relativism, but even ‘incommensurability’. We shall consider these two developments in turn.

- p. 35 1. ↵ We have already cited Troeltsch’s definitions of *Historismus* in his large-scale work *Der Historismus und seine Probleme* (1922). What we now must decide is what forms of epistemological or value relativism, if any, are implied by the inclusive statement that ‘all thought and knowledge’ about ‘man, his culture and his values’ are ‘fundamentally historicized’. It is quite possible, of course, to read this as a mere underlining of what we have called the ‘truisms’ of ‘context’ and ‘the development of knowledge’. For of course, in these senses, all thought and knowledge are ‘historicized’: what is true in one historical situation is not true in another, and likewise, what is thought true at one time will be seen as erroneous at another. But from the argument of the book as a whole, it is readily apparent that what concerns Troeltsch primarily is the question of value relativism. The ‘crisis’ he is considering is one of ‘historical values’ (GS iii. 4; see also *ibid.* 1–11 in general); and the position he wishes to combat is that of ‘unlimited relativism’ or ‘wretched’ (*schlecht*) *Historismus*, as he calls it (*ibid.* 68; see also 102). It appears that by this he means, in our terminology, ‘criterial value relativism’: at any rate, it implies the removal of all agreed criteria for arriving at value judgements.⁵¹

Troeltsch’s own response to the ‘crisis’ set out in *Der Historismus und seine Probleme* has been more than adequately documented in recent secondary literature,⁵² and here we shall merely summarize. Put simply, the method already espoused by Troeltsch for identifying the essence of Christianity is here expanded to include all ‘cultural values’. Historical study, according to Troeltsch, shows that there are no constant values, or ‘principles’ of value (*Chr. Th.* 47 ff.), so value relativism must now inevitably be the result. On the other hand, there are criteria for arriving at appropriate value judgements in any given context—for constructing the new ‘cultural synthesis’, as Troeltsch puts it (GS iii. 164 ff. and *passim*). These criteria are upheld by following the method of basing value judgements on historical ↵ investigation. Subjectivity and moral scepticism can only be avoided by making informed decisions, rooted in a thorough grasp of the historical developments that have moulded European culture up to the present (see esp. *ibid.* 111–18, 703–30). What then Troeltsch is concerned with, as he puts it in his preface, is the ‘*formation of a contemporary synthesis of culture out of historical heirlooms*’ (*ibid.* ix, my italics). The legacy of European traditions must always be accounted for. But in each new

p. 36

situation, a fresh ethical decision has to be made. Values are not simply ‘there’ (*da*) but in an important sense also ‘have to be created’ (ibid. 211).

Troeltsch admits the apparent subjectivity⁵³ of even such an informed approach to ethical judgements; but his attempt to avoid the conclusion that it is nothing but subjective rests on two postulates. On the one hand he appeals to the human faculty of conscience: it is a formal characteristic only (*Chr. Th.* 79)—that is, it does not provide ready-made standards of value—but it is the means whereby an act of decision may be made. Such a decision, according to Troeltsch,

is always and in every case an act which differs according to situation and circumstance...It is a relative act, which only realises absolute standards as far as possible, and *bears in its bosom its own absolute quality only in the form of decision by the personal conscience and resolution*, (ibid. 66, my italics.)

p. 37 Secondly, as may not surprise us, Troeltsch undergirds his value relativism with a metaphysic, and one on the whole remarkably unchanged from that presented in *The Absoluteness of Christianity*. He describes it as a ‘metalogic’: a form of ‘Leibnizian monadology’. The supposition is that each individual finite spirit ‘participates intuitively’ in the life of the divine spirit (GS iii. 677, and see 673–9m general). This identity between the Absolute and the finite is entirely mysterious,⁵⁴ and the metaphysical claim *in toto* is a leap of faith.⁵⁵ But only by means of it can an ultimate value be said to be infused into individual value judgements; only by means of this ‘myth’ (which could turn out to be misguided, Troeltsch admits⁵⁶) can fragmented ethical decisions be seen as grounded in the transcendent. What we thus see in *Der Historismus und seine Probleme* is a definite statement of value relativism (though not of criterial value relativism) undergirded and supported by a form of metaphysical perspectivism, a perspectivism however held entirely as an act of faith.

2. In the same book, however, Troeltsch is already moving towards a new form of epistemological relativism, and such as might perhaps suggest the strong thesis of ‘incommensurability’. In the last chapter he discusses the problem of how wide a range of application any ‘cultural values’ can be deemed to have. His conclusion is that ‘There is for us only a world history of Europe. The old idea of world history must accept new and more moderate form’ (GS iii. 708). Even deciding on how European culture should develop is itself a mammoth task, and it is the most expansive one possible for us, since ‘we know only ourselves and understand only our own being’ (ibid. 709). On the face of it, this might be taken as a statement of ‘incommensurability’, indicating the impossibility even of meaningful communication between European and other cultures. Does Troeltsch really mean this?

In one of his last essays, ‘The Place of Christianity among the World Religions’ (*Chr. Th.* 3–35), Troeltsch expands on this theme, but now—as the title suggests—with specific reference to the truth claims of the world religions. His conclusion, in conscious contradiction of his earlier stance in *The Absoluteness of Christianity*, is that Christianity can only be said to be true ‘for us’:

It is God’s countenance as revealed to us; it is the way in which, being what we are, we receive, and react to, the revelation of God...It is final and unconditional for us, because we have nothing else, and because in what we have we can recognise the accents of the divine voice, (ibid. 26.)

p. 38 This is, first, a clear statement of epistemological relativism: Christianity is ‘truth for us’ (ibid. 34), that is, for the European context. But further Troeltsch goes on to imply at one point that no criteria can be found to judge between the truth and value claims (which again we notice are taken together) of the world religions:

The question of their several relative values will never be capable of objective determination, since every proof thereof will presuppose the special characteristics of the civilization in which it arises, (ibid. 33.)

Indeed, it seems that Troeltsch may even be retreating to the thesis of 'incommensurability' when he continues:

The conception of personality itself is, for instance, different in the east and in the west, hence arguments starting from it will lead to different conclusions in the two cases. Yet there is *no other concept which could furnish a basis for argument* concerning practical values and truths save this concept of personality, (ibid. 33–4, my italics.)

This might be taken to imply, surely, that there is no remaining bridgehead of communication to save the religions from mutual incomprehension. Yet the consistency of Troeltsch's position must be challenged. For on his own premisses, I shall claim, both 'criterial' relativism and 'incommensurability' are inadmissible. The latter threat can already be dismissed because, as Troeltsch himself remarks in the course of his essay, people (in general) do have a 'capacity for mutual *understanding*' (ibid. 23, my italics). The same point is again conceded by Troeltsch in his excursus into metaphysics at the end of *Der Historismus und seine Probleme*. As Troeltsch here presents it, his 'Leibnizian monadology' is developed first and foremost for an epistemological purpose. It is intended to guarantee that knowledge and understanding of the 'unfamiliar' (*das Fremdseelische*) is really possible. For our knowledge of other cultures and epochs is possible, says Troeltsch, if and only if we dare to believe that all history has an ultimate metaphysical point of unity and identity (GS iii. 684; see also ibid. 673). But if this is the case (as Troeltsch here more asserts than argues), and if mutual understanding on a universal scale is deemed possible by him, then surely he himself rules out the thesis of 'incommensurability'.

p. 39 But so, I think, on his own admission, does he rule out any form of 'criterial' relativism. For he lets slip the remark in his late essay on the world religions that 'I found Buddhism and Brahminism...to be really *humane* and *spiritual* religions, capable of appealing in precisely the same way to the inner certitude and devotion of their followers as Christianity...' (ibid. 23, my italics).⁵⁷ In short, Troeltsch allows here that there might still be appropriately universal criteria for comparing the truth and value claims of the world religions. And if we refer back to *Der Historismus*, we find that it is primarily practical difficulties, not logical ones, that keep Troeltsch from advocating an attempt at 'value syntheses' that apply to a larger context than Europe.⁵⁸ Indeed, he stresses most strongly that the drive towards doing 'universal history' is a necessary and inevitable assumption of philosophers of history, at least in theory.⁵⁹ At the time of writing *Der Historismus*, however, Troeltsch certainly insisted on a concentration on the European heritage, both because it (then, at least) represented a fairly unified and coherent tradition with relatively little influence from outside, and also because the practical difficulties of attempting a more universal coverage seemed daunting. None the less, what is empirically very difficult (as value and truth comparisons across cultural boundaries must inevitably be) need not be logically impossible. It does not seem then that Troeltsch is really committed to 'criterial relativism'.

p. 40 So far we have seen that in 'The Place of Christianity among the World Religions', Troeltsch makes the following moves. He reaffirms the value relativism espoused in *Der Historismus*, and he extends this to an epistemological relativism where the truth of the world religions is concerned. What is (actually) religiously true and a value 'for us' may not be so for 'other racial groups, living under entirely different cultural conditions' (*Chr. Th.* 26). Secondly, he occasionally appears to be espousing both 'criterial relativism' and 'incommensurability'. But other statements belie this; on his own premisses Troeltsch need not retreat to these stronger forms of relativism. However, we have not yet got the whole picture. We must mention that Troeltsch again reaffirms the metaphysic sketched in *Der Historismus* in the strongest terms, expressing his view that all the religions may perhaps have a 'common ground in the Divine Spirit', and all may be 'tending in the same direction' (ibid. 32). This is, however, very much a religious postulate of faith, hope and love: 'In our earthly experience the Divine Life is not One, but Many. But to apprehend the One in the Many constitutes the special character of love' (ibid. 35).

In our terminology this position seems to be the form of metaphysical perspectivism that we dubbed the 'perspectival reality view'. That is, each religion is a perspective on the whole of reality; it does not claim only to

represent a part. But, according to Troeltsch, all these perspectives ultimately (and mysteriously) correspond to a transcendent metaphysical state of affairs (the 'Divine Life'). It should be noted, then, that the understanding of 'relative truth' espoused here does not do away with the notion of correspondence to an external state of affairs. The perspectivism maintains that. On the other hand, what is noticeable in this article is that Troeltsch does also add a strong appeal to 'truth' in the sense of pragmatic efficacy, or practical validity. It is through Christianity that we have 'become what we are', he says, and no one can deny the 'fruits' of European culture (see *ibid.* 24–6). This is a significant move, and an important addition to Troeltsch's already complex notion of religious 'truth'.

Have we now accounted for all aspects of Troeltsch's relativism? So far we have noted that by the end of his career Troeltsch held:

1. a value relativism of general applicability (but not, as far as we can see, criterial value relativism);
2. a mixed form of value and epistemological relativism as applied to the sphere of Christian doctrine; and likewise
3. a mixed form of value and epistemological relativism as applied to the sphere of the claims of the world religions.

p. 41

In neither (2) nor (3) do 'criterial' relativism or 'incommensurability' appear to be involved, although, as we have seen, the evidence in the case of (3) is somewhat ambiguous. To this list we must now add three extra items for discussion, all less clearly emphasized by Troeltsch, and thrown out somewhat *en passant* in *Der Historismus und seine Probleme* and *Christian Thought*. All three suggest the possibility of an extra sphere of relativism, but present problems of interpretation.

1. A form of epistemological relativism might seem, at least, to apply for Troeltsch to the truth of historians' judgements. What he says is that a historical object (*Gegenstand*) remains constant, but one can think of 'penetrating it deeper or from different sides' (*GS* iii. 43). I take this to mean that every new historical perspective may reveal a different (true) aspect of a past event; clearly, then, perspectivism is being canvassed here, and of the 'complex reality view' type. What is less unambiguously clear is whether epistemological relativism is also implied. Is it that the historian's conclusions are true only in virtue of (a degree of) correspondence to the external state of affairs (the historical *Gegenstand*); or is it that the framework or perspective also constitutively affects the 'truth' of the historian's judgements? One suspects the latter; but I am not sure that this point is entirely clarified in *Der Historismus*, so anxious is Troeltsch in this context to avoid the charge of complete 'subjectivism'.⁶⁰
2. In *Der Historismus* Troeltsch also drops his earlier claims both for an 'essential uniformity of human nature', and for universally applicable laws of psychology and sociology. He still holds that it is appropriate to draw up such laws; but he underlines that these laws are open to change, precisely because their subject matter, human nature, is itself open to historical change and development. Thus 'it is the historian who shows the prime phenomena of history to the psychologist and sociologist, not the other way round' (*ibid.* 45–6; see also 35–6, 60, 705–6). Does this loss of a sense of universal truths about anthropology, psychology, and sociology imply any form of relativism? In itself, I think not: it is simply a form of the 'truism of context', stressing the mutability of truths about human nature. This is of course a highly significant change of mind for Troeltsch. But it does not, as far as I can see, involve him in any additional form of epistemological relativism as we have defined it.
3. Finally, the discerning reader will notice in *Christian Thought* Troeltsch's casual remark that 'even the validity of science and logic seemed to exhibit, under different skies and upon different soil, strong individual differences' (*Chr. Th.* 23). Is *this* perhaps a statement of epistemological relativism? If it were, the relativizing of logic, at least, might be claimed to lead to a very strong form of epistemological

p. 42

relativism, even implying ‘incommensurability’. For it has been argued, for instance, that if two conceptual systems disagreed about the most basic law of logic (that ‘the truth of *p* excludes the truth of not *p*’) then ‘incommensurability’ would ensue (Lukes in ed. Wilson 1970, 208 f.). But in fact I think this interpretation of Troeltsch must be discounted. First, where scientific paradigms are concerned, Troeltsch so often refers in his writings to the Copernican revolution, for instance, as the discounting of a previously misguided view of the universe, that we must conclude that a statement of ‘relationism’, not relativism proper, is here being made.⁶¹ (It is fair, I think, to add that Troeltsch himself did not sufficiently distinguish relationism from epistemological relativism.) Likewise, in the case of logic, had Troeltsch thought that even the most basic of our laws of logic might be denied in some contexts (such indeed as might lead to ‘incommensurability’ between vying systems) he could hardly have had the faith, expressed in his ‘metalogic’, that the unfamiliar *can* always be known and understood. Admittedly, it is hard to know exactly where Troeltsch would have stood on this; but in the absence of further expansion on the point, we may conclude that his main aim here is to stress that some societies have developed systems of logic more subtle and complex than have others. That, of course, is a truism. If, however, Troeltsch does intend a statement of epistemological relativism (i.e. ‘what is logically valid in one context is not so in another’), then at least it cannot, on his own premisses, be so strong a form as to lead to ‘incommensurability’.

p. 43

We have now concluded our survey of the nature of Troeltsch’s relativism. We have argued that by the last phase of his career Troeltsch was a value relativist, and an epistemological relativist as regards various specific spheres of truth (Christian doctrinal truth, inter-religious truth, and perhaps historical truth). At the same time he maintained more than one form of metaphysical ↪ perspectivism, designed to underpin his relativism and to rescue it from the charge of ‘subjectivism’. Having clarified this, I would like to underline, in closing this rather lengthy chapter, some implications that Troeltsch’s form of relativism does not entail. First, as we have seen, it does not imply any form of ‘incommensurability’, and thus is a much weaker (and indeed less controversial) form of relativism than that which has sometimes been suggested in contemporary debate by (for instance) D. Z. Phillips, P. K. Feyerabend, or Peter Winch, in their various fields of expertise. Second, and connectedly, the form of epistemological relativism canvassed by Troeltsch is not unrestricted in application. It does not apply, for instance, to perceptions. And it certainly does not deny the existence of objects in an outside world, as some critics assume all ‘relativists’ do deny (so Trigg 1983, 2). Therefore, third, it does not reject (a form of) ‘correspondence’ doctrine of truth. Relative truths do, according to Troeltsch, correspond to an external state of affairs (whether metaphysical or historical) even though it may be a mystery quite how they do so.

The results of our discussion in this chapter, then, show that religious truth on Troeltsch’s account is an exceedingly complex and subtle phenomenon. At one level, and to some degree, what is religiously or doctrinally ‘true’ is true in virtue of its correspondence to an external state of affairs, whether metaphysical (the ‘Divine Life’) or historical. But its truth is also constitutively affected by the framework, perspective, or context in which it is enunciated (Christianity is true for Christians; defining the essence (for framework *f*) is shaping it afresh). Other more pragmatic criteria for religious truth occasionally offered by Troeltsch are those of creativity, constructiveness (see *AJT* 1913, 13), and to some extent firmness of conviction (see ‘Essence’ 166). There is also the generalized appeal to ‘fruits’ that becomes most explicit in ‘The Place of Christianity among the World Religions’. In short, we have here a number of criteria for religious ‘truth’ which Troeltsch himself deliberately mixes, but never clearly lays out and analyses.

p. 44

This complicated survey of the nature of Troeltsch’s relativism has now set the scene for our discussion of his Christology. How was Troeltsch’s Christological position affected by his continuing reflection on the problems of *Historismus*? We shall enumerate the ↪ precise ways in which Troeltsch’s relativism coloured and shaped his mature Christology in Chapter 4. But for the mean time we must turn back next to a discussion of Troeltsch’s early theological writings, and to the hints we get there of the beginnings of his Christological development.

Notes

- 1 See e.g. Bodenstein 1959, esp. 206–9; Reist 1966, 197–201; Klapwijk 1970, esp. 443–9.
- 2 The best (unfortunately unpublished) is Dyson 1968. Also useful and clear, but briefer, are Ogletree 1965; and sections in Iggers 1968, and Dyson 1969 and 1974. Reist 1966 is probably better known but dreadfully unclear at points.
- 3 See Iggers 1968, *passim* but esp. 287–90; and id. 1973.
- 4 e.g. in English: Dyson 1968, 32–68; Lee and Beck 1953–4; Rand 1964; Meyerhoff 1959, esp. 1–25; and Richardson 1964, 104 n. 3, who distinguishes eight possible meanings of ‘historicism’. The most recent, and comprehensive, survey of the meanings of ‘historicism’ is however in Dutch: Klapwijk 1970, 1–50, esp. 45–50.
- 5 Meinecke 1972, liv–lv.
- 6 Cited in Iggers 1973, 456–7. Iggers makes a point of refuting the common assumption that the term *Historismus* originated only in the late 19th cent: ‘In fact the term is considerably older and was well established in Germany by the middle of the nineteenth century.’
- 7 See the citations in Lee and Beck 1953–4, 571.
- 8 An early example of *Historismus* so defined is again given in Iggers 1973, 457: in 1850 I. H. Fichte (the son of the philosopher) described ‘true historicism’ as seeking ‘the practical ideas which operate everywhere in human consciousness’.
- 9 The classificatory exercise which follows owes much to discussion and correspondence with Jack W. Meiland and Joseph Runzo, whose influence and help I gratefully acknowledge (and whose recent work, ed. Meiland and Krausz 1982, and Runzo 1986, may also serve as excellent introductions to the problems of relativism). This section of the chapter originally appeared as part of my article ‘Theology and Cultural Relativism: What is the Problem?’ (Coakley 1979, see 224–36), which goes on to apply these tools of analysis to various confusions about relativism in recent British theology.
- 10 It will be clear, I hope, that I am using the term ‘relationism’ differently from Karl Mannheim’s use in *Ideology and Utopia* (Mannheim 1936, esp. 78 f.).
- 11 See Wiles 1967, 159: ‘...I have suggested a number of points at which the reasoning used [by the Fathers] seems to me to be open to serious criticism...few will, I imagine, be prepared to claim that the reasoning of the Fathers in these matters is wholly free from blemish.’ Wiles’s position is not without ambiguity, however, because there are occasions when he can sound like a relativist proper, e.g. *ibid.* 158: ‘To suggest that it represents a failure in thought is to suggest that the Fathers should have been other people than they were or indeed could have been.’
- 12 See Hamnett 1973, who urges this point against much current sociology of religion.
- 13 I retain inverted commas here because (as we shall discuss below) ‘truth’ may be understood in a variety of ways by the relativist.
- 14 See Winch 1958, 87, for example, which appears to make this move. More explicitly, see Winch’s essay ‘Understanding a Primitive Society’ in ed. Wilson 1970, esp. 89, 91.
- 15 Winch’s position here is not without ambiguities. On my analysis, he appears to be juggling with three possible relativistic notions of truth: (a) a coherence theory, which leaves no room for checking with an external reality; see Winch 1958, 15, and his later reply to I. C. Jarvie in ed. Borger and Cioffi 1970, 257–8; (b) a modified form of the correspondence theory of truth, whereby a society’s concepts significantly *structure* the input from outside, but a form of checking is possible; see ed. Wilson 1970, esp. 81, 82, 83, 90, 94; and (c) truth (especially in the case of magic) as practical *efficacy*; see *ibid.* 103 ff. On this last view magic is not a hypothesis about a state of affairs (*ibid.* 103), but a ‘form of expression’ to help one make ‘sense of human life’ (*ibid.* 106).
- 16 This point is argued with some cogency by Lukes in ed. Wilson 1970, 194–213, esp. 208 ff.
- 17 See Rorty 1980, 367, 364. (Rorty’s position, however, more radically calls for the rejection of *any* notion of a ‘framework’ or filter through which knowledge is processed.)
- 18 He in fact calls it ‘cognitive relativism’: see Lukes 1974, 168 ff. However, his reasons for rejecting it (‘I claim that there are conditions of truth, rules of logic and criteria of rationality which are universal and fundamental’, *ibid.* 171) only score against forms of epistemological relativism which (a) extend as far as the spheres of logic and perceptions, and (b) deny *any* form of correspondence theory of truth.
- 19 This point is made by Runzo 1986, 74 n. 35, drawing on Frankena’s distinction between ‘definist’, ‘intuitionist’, and ‘non-cognitivist’ meta-ethical theories (in Frankena 1973).
- 20 See Iggers 1968, for useful citations on the various usages of the word ‘value’ by e.g. Dilthey (140 f.), Rickert (152 ff.), Weber (160), and Troeltsch himself (178 ff.). The inclusive sense is particularly obvious in the case of Rickert, who goes so far as to say that ‘Every cultural event (*Kulturvorgänge*) embodies some value recognized by men, for the sake of which it was either brought about or, if it had already come about, is cultivated’ (cited in Iggers 1968, 154, my italics).
- 21 For examples of the more strictly ethical sense in Troeltsch see e.g. art. ‘Historiography’ in *ERE* vi. 722 ^a (‘We must

- interpret history by the degree in which it approximates to ethical values, and at the same time we must derive these ethical values from history') and GS iv. 13 ('a theory of cultural values or of ethics'). In contrast, the more inclusive sense is used throughout *The Absoluteness of Christianity* (during a period when Troeltsch was self-admittedly under a strong influence from Rickert). See e.g. *Abs.* 88–90, where it is clear not only that the term 'value' subsumes and includes *religious* truth, but also (*ibid.* 89) that 'values' are deemed to have an independent existence of their own and to operate as metaphysical forces. For another inclusive use of the term 'value' see 'Essence' 64, where the 'value...of Christianity' is taken to mean anything from the history of Christianity 'which is *of importance* for the present and the future' (my italics).
- 22 Pannenberg urges that it is necessarily part of the historian's task to evaluate the events he studies; hence there is no such thing as a 'brute fact'. See his remarks in ed. Robinson and Cobb 1967, 126–7, and also Pannenberg 1970, 98–100.
- 23 Of course the issues about 'criteria for truth' might be taken in more than one way: either as 'what it is to be true' or as 'how to establish what is the case'. Either alternative, if deemed to be 'relative to a framework', would constitute a case of 'criterial relativism'. (It should be noted that Runzo 1986 terms *this* form of relativism 'epistemological relativism', and what I have called 'epistemological relativism' he calls 'cognitive', or 'conceptual', relativism. The distinction is the same, although the terminology is different.)
- 24 It is only fair to point out that the term 'incommensurability' is used by some to mean something slightly less strong than my definition: 'failure of complete translatability' is then their meaning. This appears to be what Kuhn means by it, for instance (see ed. Lakatos and Musgrave 1970, esp. 266–8), and sometimes Feyerabend, who hovers between the weaker and stronger meanings (see *ibid.* 219–20, 227–8).
- 25 For suggestions of 'incommensurability' in Winch, see ed. Wilson 1970, 8 ('we might well be able to make predictions of great accuracy...and still not be able to claim any real understanding of what those people were doing') and *ibid.* 83 ('what are we to make of the possibility of understanding primitive social institutions...? I do not claim to be able to give a satisfactory answer to [this] question.') For (the earlier) Kuhn, see Kuhn 1962, 149 ('in a sense that I am unable to explicate further, the proponents of competing paradigms practise their trade in different worlds'). For Feyerabend, see again ed. Lakatos and Musgrave 1970, 219 ('succeeding paradigms can be evaluated only with difficulty and...may be altogether incomparable'), and also Feyerabend 1975, 271 ff., esp. 284. D. Z. Phillips also occasionally comes close to the thesis of incommensurability: see Phillips 1970, 4 ('the criteria of meaningfulness cannot be found *outside* religion'), and Phillips 1976, 183 ('To say, "There is no God" is more like rejecting a whole mode of discourse than expressing an opposite view within one. In saying this...questions arise as to whether, if a whole mode of discourse is said to be rejected, a person can be said to understand what he rejects.').
- 26 Only Feyerabend, I think, wants to (see again n n. 24, 25), but even he can talk of comparing paradigms in some sense, because it is clear that he thinks it possible for a scientist to understand and weigh the merits of two conflicting theories on a rational basis, even if the theories 'do not share a single statement'. (See his 'Problems of Empiricism', in ed. Colodny 1965, 214). In Kuhn's case, shared goals are provided for competing paradigms, and these obviously provide at least a bridgehead of commensurability between theories (see ed. Lakatos and Musgrave 1970, 261). Winch talks of the importance of the anthropologist 'learning from' other cultures, and making their 'beliefs and practices intelligible to himself and his readers' (ed. Wilson 1970, 106, 78), and this I believe is more truly characteristic of Winch than his occasional flirtations with 'incommensurability'. Likewise, D. Z. Phillips's whole approach is committed to the task of *understanding* the meaning of religious statements: 'It is not the task of the philosopher to decide whether there is a God or not, but to ask what it means to affirm or deny the existence of God' (Phillips 1965, 10); and more recently he has admitted that 'there is no sharp line between belief and unbelief' (Phillips 1976, 187), which rules out the model of sharply demarcated systems of language.
- 27 Rorty 1980 provides the most exciting and sustained argument along these lines, eschewing the epistemological image of 'mirroring' reality altogether, and substituting a Jamesian notion of truth as 'what it is better for us to believe' (see *ibid.* 10). Suffice it to say here that I cannot concur with Rorty's radical proposal that the notion of an external state of affairs can be disposed of *tout court*.
- 28 Thus Kuhn still refers to 'nature' as something which is in a sense neutral and waiting to be organized, despite his insistence that there is no 'basic vocabulary consisting entirely of words which are attached to nature in ways that are unproblematic and...independent of theory' (ed. Lakatos and Musgrave 1970, 267, 266). And Feyerabend says, 'there is still human experience as an actually existing process' which provides a point of reference in the 'selection' of a theory 'even in those cases where a common observation language does not exist' (ed. Colodny 1965, 214).
- 29 Davidson 1973–4 (now reprinted in ed. Meiland and Krausz 1982) presents the classic case for the debunking of 'the very idea of a conceptual scheme' (i.e. framework) on the grounds that it is impossible (a) to provide clear criteria for distinguishing different such frameworks, or (b) to show them to be different from mere 'beliefs'. Hence, or so Davidson argues, the concept collapses into meaninglessness.
- 30 Although Troeltsch is certainly culpable on this score, it may indeed prove cogent (*contra* Davidson) to continue to defend the existence of frameworks without being able to provide hard and fast verification as to their exact make-up or the

- boundaries or demarcations between them: see ed. Meiland and Krausz 1982, 64–5, and Runzo 1986, 51 ff., for a discussion of various recent replies to Davidson on this score.
- 31 Reprinted in *GS* ii. 729–53, where it is wrongly ascribed to the year 1898.
- 32 See e.g. *TA* 1900, 94, 107 = *GS* ii. 737, 751. As we shall see, Troeltsch is here referring to his (metaphysical) position on the ‘conditioning’ and ‘interconnectedness’ of all historical events.
- 33 Among the most influential treatments of these principles are those of Harvey 1967, 14–19, and Pannenberg 1970, 40–50, whose expositions are not however without misleading characteristics. More recently, see Abraham 1982, 92 ff., and (best in my opinion) Apfelbacher 1978, 209 ff.
- 34 I phrase this description of ‘the principle of analogy’ deliberately vaguely, since it is far from clear to me exactly what Troeltsch meant by it. (For the relevant passage see *TA* 1900, 90 = *GS* ii. 732–3.) This is a notoriously difficult paragraph; but it is generally assumed that Troeltsch is here discussing the problem of the miraculous, and specifically of the abrogation of natural law, and that he is ruling out the possibility of the latter a priori. But apart from one (throwaway) reference to the resurrection at the end of the passage in question, I see no particular reason to think that this is the issue Troeltsch has in mind. Even if it is, then I still doubt Pannenberg’s interpretation: Troeltsch talks about ‘imputing *probability*’, and ‘of interpreting what is unknown...by reference to what is known’, and this does not seem to me to suggest an a priori rejection of unparalleled events, but rather a (suitably cautious) attempt to understand them. However, as I see it, the main point of the ‘principle of analogy’ is an *epistemological* consideration about what (minimally) must be the case for knowledge and understanding of the past to take place at all. And the ‘common core of similarity’ (*Gleichartigkeit*) which Troeltsch deems to be the necessary condition is surely not, as Pannenberg thinks, a means of signalling the dogmatic rejection of the miraculous, but is rather to be identified with the ‘basic consistency of the human spirit’ mentioned in the next paragraph. This would then be akin to the point made today by some analytical philosophers of history (see e.g. Walsh 1976, 63 ff.) that the historian must, and does, assume certain basic traits about ‘human nature’ to be constant when he plies his trade.
- 35 *TA* 1900, 102 = *GS* ii. 746.
- 36 Troeltsch is already talking here about the need to do theology in the context of ‘universal history’. This, and his concomitant remark that human activities are (ultimately?) only understandable ‘within the context of the most comprehensive whole’ (*TA* 1900, 92 = *GS* ii. 734), might well suggest that knowledge *is* constitutively affected by the framework in which it is assimilated; full knowledge (or absolute knowledge), on this view, is nowhere to be found except at the end of history.
- 37 As before, too, *Relativität* is contrasted with *Relativismus*, which Troeltsch takes to be the dangerous form of ‘scepticism’ that can (wrongly) be thought to follow from an understanding of *Relativität*. See *Abs.* 86–7, cf. 89–90.
- 38 The appeal to ‘faith’ here is, as we shall see in ch. 2, a backtracking to a greater admission of methodological subjectivity than Troeltsch had been willing to grant in his two preceding large essays ‘Geschichte und Metaphysik’ (1898) and ‘Über historische und dogmatische Methode der Theologie’ (1900).
- 39 *Abs.* 63: ‘and sociological laws’ is added only in the 2nd edn. (1912).
- 40 This ambiguity did not escape Troeltsch’s contemporary critics. See Drescher’s discussion of this point (1957, 75), citing Eucken’s review of *The Absoluteness of Christianity* in *GGA* 1903.
- 41 See more fully *Abs.* 112; also 98: the nature of the ‘goal’ towards which the religions are claimed to be tending ‘can be known’.
- 42 In the 2nd edn. (1912) Troeltsch in general moved towards a greater admission of the subjectivity of the claim to Christianity’s superiority (see *Abs.* 120, where the central two paragraphs are new additions: Troeltsch here admits that he has moved from scientific discourse to something more like a sermon). But at the same time, and bemusingly, Troeltsch leaves intact the confident claims to Christianity’s (publicly demonstrable) superiority already cited.
- 43 See S. W. Sykes’s analysis of the two versions of the article in ed. Clayton 1976, 139–71 (and in résumé, see his note in ed. Morgan and Pye 1977, 180–1).
- 44 This parallel is applied illuminatingly in Clayton 1980, 236–48.
- 45 This interpretation may also be suggested by the passage quoted by Köhler (1941, 1) at the opening of his book on Troeltsch: ‘Truth is always polymorphous, never monomorphous; it manifests itself in different forms and kinds, not in different degrees’. See also the illuminating closing passage of the ‘Historiography’ article, *ERE* vi. 722^b: ‘every epoch has a relative justification, though it must, at the same time, be judged in the light of an absolute end’.
- 46 See *AJT* 1913, 11–12: Troeltsch considers the idea of the whole of Christianity being vivified by an ‘immanent impelling power’ and then rejects it. At most, he says, we can talk in an entirely formal way about Christianity’s ‘productive power’ to respond to new contexts. Note, however, the subtle difference in impression created by the end section that is found in the German only (*GS* ii. 519–24). Troeltsch does here readopt a form of ‘perspectivism’ (*ibid.* 520), but simply says that from the limited perspective of today’s culture one still hopes to participate to a degree in the ‘Absolute’. He does not however any longer use the language of (one) ‘essence’ of Christianity working its way out through history.

- 47 Also see *AJT* 1913, 20–1, and *Chr. Th.* 13: ‘...Christianity is itself a theoretical abstraction. It presents no historical uniformity, but displays a different character in every age.’
- 48 The two occasions when Troeltsch strains to separate the two tasks are to be found in ‘Essence’ 177–9 (in the 1913 edn. only) and ‘Historiography’, *ERE* vi. 721^b. In both cases, however, Troeltsch ends up by admitting that in practice the two tasks cannot be kept separate (even though they should be kept distinct).
- 49 It is true that Troeltsch may be using the word ‘objective’ in a slightly forced sense (‘Essence’ 166) when he claims that these many different accounts of essential Christianity may all have their ‘objectivity’. On the other hand, I cannot concur with Sykes (in ed. Clayton 1976, 157) that all Troeltsch’s ‘protestations about objectivity become redundant’, or with the dismissive remark of Allen 1980, 47, that Troeltsch ‘ends finally with an admonition to search one’s own experience’. Admittedly the argument in this essay is muddled; but the important criteria that Troeltsch provides for achieving the maximum possible balance and fairness in the task of doctrinal reformation (see ‘Essence’ 167: there must be a basis in conscientious historical work by those who are professionally competent) seem thoughtful and realistic, and provide an important check on rampant ‘subjectivity’.
- 50 I am not claiming, of course, that Troeltsch’s view on ethical relativism, especially, had not already started to become apparent some time before *Der Historismus und seine Probleme* (see e.g. *ST* 1003 as just one example). His later position on the truth claims of the world religions also began to emerge before *Chr. Th.*: see ‘On Poss.’ 32^a.
- 51 What Troeltsch most feared was Dilthey’s ‘anarchy of values’: ‘In the case of Dilthey...the consequence of historicism is scepticism, the tragic sense of life belonging to a highly stimulated mentality which aimlessly moves about in the wealth of historical data’ (Troeltsch’s ‘Adolf von Harnack and Ferdinand Christian von Baur 1921’ in Pauck 1968, 109).
- 52 See again esp. Bodenstein 1959; Ogletree 1965; Lessing 1965; Reist 1966; Dyson 1968; and (most fully) Klapwijk 1970.
- 53 See *GS* iii. 79–99. However, here Troeltsch attempts to show—some would object by sheer fiat—that there is none the less a kind of ‘objectivity’ or ‘apriority’ granted to such value judgements (a) by their being rooted in historical work, and (b) by their ‘decisiveness’ or ‘self-certainty’.
- 54 *GS* iii. 678: the divine and the human are united ‘in a completely unknown way’.
- 55 See *Chr. Th.* 67, where Troeltsch likens his metaphysical postulate to the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith.
- 56 *GS* iii. 212. Troeltsch here plays on the ambiguity of positive and negative interpretations of the word *Mythos*: see *ibid.* 213.
- 57 Troeltsch also mentions ‘the criteria of interior purity and clearness of vision’ (*Chr. Th.* 34).
- 58 See *GS* iii. 72, e.g.: philosophy of history logically presses out until it includes reference to humanity as a whole (‘up to the final boundary, humanity’); but in practical terms this is both impossible, because of the welter of material involved, and also unnecessary for us (according to Troeltsch at the time of writing), because ‘Europe’ has a distinct cultural identity and history which is relatively detached from other great cultural and religious blocks (see e.g. *ibid.* 704, 708).
- 59 See particularly ‘The Ideas of Natural Law and Humanity in World Politics’ (1922), an appendix by Troeltsch in Gierke 1957, 217–18. It must be said however that the status of ‘universal history’ is left hanging somewhat ambiguously in the last chapter of *GS* iii.
- 60 Mannheim 1952, 97–108, esp. 105–6, comments on Troeltsch’s unclarity on this point, but he puts it down to the failure to explicate more precisely the metaphysic which is undergirding his ‘perspectivism’.
- 61 See e.g. *Gl.* 64: ‘We clearly cannot barricade ourselves against the consequences of a Copernican system...of necessity the geocentric and anthropocentric picture of things vanishes.’