

# *The Inexpressibility Objection*

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## ***Abstract***

In this paper, we offer a contribution to the discussion of one of the most important objections against a relativist position in the absolute generality debate. The inexpressibility objection accuses the generality-relativist of not being able to coherently express her own position. First, we examine Glanzberg's attempt to reply to this objection and we show that it fails. Second, we study the prospects of generalizing the relativist position. In particular, we analyze Fine's and Linnebo's modal approaches and we argue that, even though they are able to coherently express one of the core ideas of relativism while avoiding the inexpressibility objection, there is an important sense in which they are no longer relativist positions. Third, while strengthening the idea that the inexpressibility objection does succeed, we argue that this is no guarantee of the falsity of relativism. Relativism may be inexpressible but true. However, we stress that even if the inexpressibility objection does not supply a definitive, knock-down objection against relativism, if we want to discuss relativism in a rational way, the objection offers a compelling reason not to embrace generality-relativism.

**Keywords:** *absolute generality, generality-relativism, generality-absolutism, inexpressibility objection, limits of thought*

## ***1 Introduction: not only a Wittgensteinian problem***

In the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein aptly formulates our current problem: “[I]n order to be able to set a limit to thought, we should have to find both sides of the limit thinkable (i.e. we should have to be able to think what cannot be thought)” (Proposition 3).

The problem that Wittgenstein emphasizes here is well-known: if we claim that there is a limit to thought,<sup>1</sup> in the sense that there is an  $x$  which is not thought (or cannot be thought), as soon as we make

this claim, we are thinking of  $x$ , and consequently  $x$  is (an object of) thought. The same can be said if we were to claim that an  $x$  (a theory, a proposition, etc.) is not expressible: if we are to say which theory (proposition, etc.) is not expressible, this would entail expressing it. *Prima facie* one is quite naturally led to suppose that it is not possible to coherently think of the limit of thought and to coherently express that there is something totally inexpressible.

In recent years, this dialectic has been widely studied by Graham Priest,<sup>2</sup> who has convincingly argued that such a situation is very widespread within the history of philosophy from the ancient to the contemporary. Perhaps the best-known examples are Kant's four antinomies of pure reason<sup>3</sup>, which exhibit precisely the tension between the claim that a certain limit is necessary and the claim that that same limit must be overcome.

In the present paper, this is the key problem to be addressed: to set a limit to what is thinkable or to what it is expressible is possible only by thinking or expressing what, according to the limit set, cannot be thought of or expressed. However, we shall focus our attention on a very specific setting, namely the current debate on absolute generality. In fact, thanks to the wide use of formal tools within such a discussion, the problem has emerged with great clarity. In such a debate, the problem is usually stated as an objection to a particular position, the 'relativist position'. There is a clear sense in which generality-relativism (as it is often called) tries to set a limit to thought (see §2), and the objection amounts to the fact that the relativist would not be able to coherently express her own position. For this reason, I have called the problem 'the inexpressibility objection'. As such, a systematic analysis of the problem can shed light on its deep structure and its authentic meaning.

The paper is structured as follows: §2 exposes the most general formulation of the problem within the absolute generality discussion; §3 studies Glanzberg's reply, to the effect that generality-relativism can be coherently expressed, and shows that it fails; §4 examines how generality-relativism can be generalized. In particular, the section is focused on the idea of using some resources from Fine's and Linnebo's modal approaches to absolute generality to express some core idea of relativism. The paragraph argues that such resources allow one to coherently state that no domain can contain everything (or, which is the same, that every domain can be expanded). However, the price to pay is the restoration of a particular form of (non-standard) absolutism, which means that a relativist who is sympathetic to the idea that no absolutely general claim

is possible should not be satisfied with such a strategy; §5 considers a further, more radical view, to the effect that even if relativism is not coherently expressible, this does not imply that it is false. This idea is pursued in all its ramifications, with particular attention given to Button's defense of the position that he calls 'Dadaism', and it is argued that it is ultimately very unstable; §6 concludes.

## 2 *A first formulation of the objection*

Let us call 'absolutism' the view that a totally unrestricted quantification is possible. An absolutist thus believes both that an all-inclusive domain<sup>4</sup> of everything exists and that it is available for us to quantify over. On the contrary, relativism is the view that such an unrestricted quantification is not possible. As such, the relativist claims either that an all-inclusive domain of everything does not exist or that such a domain – if it exists – is not available for us to quantify over<sup>5</sup>. The first claim can be (partially) formalized as follows:

1.  $\sim \exists x(x \text{ is an absolute domain})$

while the second claim can be (partially) formalized as follows:

2.  $\sim \exists x(x \text{ is an absolutely unrestricted quantification})$

A remark is in order here: a quantifier is unrestricted if it quantifies over all elements of its domain of quantification. I shall call a quantifier 'absolutely unrestricted' if it quantifies over all elements of its domain *and* its domain is all-inclusive. A relativist may be happy to say that sometimes quantifiers are unrestricted, but they deny that there are cases where quantifiers are absolutely unrestricted.

Relativists have given different arguments in support of their view,<sup>6</sup> but maybe the most important of them utilized the set-theoretic antinomies, and Russell's paradox in particular. Suppose we consider a domain  $D$ , which purports to be the domain of everything. Since it should contain everything, it must contain every set, and – more specifically – every non-self-membered set. If  $D$  is a set, then we can use the axiom of separation which allows us to consider the set  $R$  of all non-self-membered sets of  $D$ . Thus, we have Russell's paradox. But at this point we can exploit the paradox to argue that the set  $R$  is not one of the objects included in  $D$  (in this way,  $R$  becomes the set of all non-self-membered sets of  $D$ , but since  $R$  does not belong to  $D$ ,  $R$  is not an element of itself, and the paradox is blocked). Therefore, we can

expand  $D$  by adding  $R$  to it. In this way, we find a more comprehensive domain  $D' = D \cup \{R\}$ . But  $D$  was arbitrary. Any domain that presents itself as the all-inclusive domain can be expanded, and therefore is not absolute. In the case in which  $D$  is not a set, we cannot use the axiom of separation. However, Williamson [18] has shown that it is possible to reformulate a Russell-style paradox without employing set-theoretic notions, but only predicates as specifying interpretations for quantifiers. The basic idea is to specify an interpretation  $I$  for the quantifiers that implies a contradiction on the supposition that  $I$  is in  $D$ . Therefore, the conclusion is that  $I$  is not in  $D$ , which consequently does not contain everything<sup>7</sup>.

Why is Russell's paradox a problem for unrestricted quantification? Simply because standard quantification requires the specification of a domain for the quantifiers to range over, and so an absolutely unrestricted quantification requires an all-inclusive domain. However, the paradox seems to show that there is no such domain, which implies that there can be no quantification over everything. Different replies have been offered to overcome this difficulty; however, I shall not deal with them here since this is not the topic of the present paper<sup>8</sup>.

As a consequence, the relativist is committed to the idea that every quantification is restricted to a particular (not all-inclusive) domain. Domains for quantifiers are thus *relative*, in the sense that they are never absolute. This is clearly a position that sets a limit to thought: we cannot speak of everything. But a famous objection can be raised against such a position. In the words of Lewis, the objection runs as follows: "Maybe the singularist [here the relativist] replies that some mystical censor stops us from quantifying over absolutely everything without restriction. So, he violates his own stricture in the very act of proclaiming it!" [10, p. 68]. The idea is rather simple: it is just enough to ask ourselves what the domains of the quantifiers in **1** and **2** are supposed to be. If relativism is true (and therefore if these sentences are true), then these domains must be restricted. But if they are restricted, sentence **1** will express the idea that the restricted domain of its quantifier does not contain an absolute domain (which is clearly compatible with the existence of an absolute domain), while sentence **2** will express the idea that in its own domain there is no unrestricted quantification, and in this way the sentence cannot deny that *in a more comprehensive domain* there is an unrestricted quantification (simply because the sentence would be silent about this further domain). If the quantifiers in **1** and **2** are restricted, then the truth of these sentences is compatible with the existence, re-

spectively, of an absolute domain and of an unrestricted quantification, and therefore their truth is compatible with what they *intend to deny*.

This argument shows that sentences 1 and 2 manage to express what the relativist wants to express only if their quantifiers are taken as absolutely unrestricted. But then both sentences turn out to be false: in fact, sentence 1 would assert that no absolute domain exists by means of an unrestricted quantification over an absolute domain, while sentence 2 would assert that no unrestricted quantification exists by means of an unrestricted quantification. One is thus forced to conclude that relativism is not coherently expressible.

Another way of appreciating the objection is by underlining that 3 is a logical consequence of 2 (and therefore of 1 too):

3. There is an  $x$  over which we are not currently quantifying.

If sentence 2 is true, then no matter what domain we might consider, it turns out to be restricted and, consequently, there is something not in the domain of the quantifier in 3, which is what 3 says. But sentence 3 is explicitly self-defeating: to say that we are not quantifying over  $x$ , we must quantify over  $x$ ! Again, the relativist position does not seem to be coherently expressible.<sup>9</sup> More generally, every sentence of the form

4. Not everything is in  $D$

where  $D$  is the same domain of the quantifier present in the sentence (in this case of the quantifier ‘everything’ of sentence 4) is self-defeating.

### 3 *Glanzberg’s defense of relativism*

In the literature on absolute generality, there have been a number of defenses of the relativist position and just as many critics of them<sup>10</sup>. Here I shall focus on one such defense, namely that offered by Michael Glanzberg [6], for essentially two reasons: first, his defense seems very intuitive and compelling; second, as far as I know, there has been no direct response to it until now.

Glanzberg claims that the sentence “there is no unrestricted quantification” does not need an unrestricted quantifier to deny the possibility of an unrestricted quantification. In fact, Glanzberg argues, it is enough that that quantifier ranges over a *restricted* domain that comprehends all quantifiers and nothing else. Similarly, when we say that there is no domain that comprehends everything, it is enough that the domain of this quantifier comprehends *every domain* and nothing else. Since

this domain is restricted, the relativist does not have any problem in expressing her own position

Let us begin our critical examination of such a proposal by noting that this solution may only work if the domains of quantification are seen as sets (or set-like objects) and not as pluralities. A plurality of things is simply *the things* and not an additional object that comprehends its members. If domains were pluralities, then “all domains” would indicate all pluralities, that is the totality of all things.<sup>11</sup> In this case the quantifier would be totally unrestricted, contradicting the relativist’s position.

The domains must therefore be sets (or classes, if we understand them as set-like objects). But then we essentially have three cases: (i) these domains might be well-founded<sup>12</sup>; (ii) some domains are well-founded while others are not; or (iii) all domains are non-well-founded. Let’s suppose that these domains are all well-founded, which means that no domain belongs to itself. But this has a bad consequence for Glanzberg’s proposal: in fact, the domain of all domains does not belong to itself. Consequently, we can extend it by considering the union of all its members with itself, which means that if domains are considered to be well-founded, there cannot be the domain of all domains, as required by the solution.<sup>13</sup> Let’s now consider the second option: some domains are well-founded, while others are not. Of course, the domain of all domains must be non-well-founded. The domain of all domains – let us call it  $D$  – is a non-well-founded domain that contains both well-founded and non-well founded domains. But then we can consider all and only the well-founded domains and the domain<sup>14</sup> of all of them. Is it well-founded or not? It is clear that if this domain belongs to  $D$  then we have a contradiction. To see why this is the case, let us call  $M$ <sup>15</sup> the domain of all (and only) well-founded domains. Suppose  $M$  is well-founded. Then it belongs to itself, which means that  $M$  is not well-founded. Contradiction. Therefore,  $M$  must be a non-well-founded domain. This means that there is at least an element of  $M$  that is not well-founded<sup>16</sup>. But by definition,  $M$  contains only well-founded domains. Contradiction. The natural conclusion would simply be that – for *reductio* –  $M$  does not belong to  $D$ , which implies that  $D$  is not the domain of all domains (in this case  $M$  will be the well-founded domain not belonging to  $D$  that contains all well-founded domains of  $D$ ). Of course, this result generalizes: no domain can be the domain of all domains. Note that Glanzberg and other relativists deploy a Russellian style paradox, like the one just presented, in order to argue against the possibility of unrestricted quantification, which means that if they manage to reply to the objection just raised, their reply will have

the effect of destroying their main argument against relativism<sup>17</sup>. As such, this second option also fails. There remains the third option, the one in which we admitted only non-well-founded domains. First, this option seems incapable of getting off the ground. How could there be only non-well-founded domains? Second, even if we grant, for the sake of argument, that the option is available, it still does not work. The basic reason is that without well-founded domains, and in particular without well-founded sets, i.e. a set that does not belong to itself, the relativist cannot exploit Russell's paradox to argue for relativism, and thus she will lose her main argument for relativism in this case too. Third, since it has only non-well-founded domains, there seems to be no problem in having a universal domain. But then what prevents us from quantifying over everything?

In any case, there is a further problem for Glanzberg's strategy. Recall that his idea is that the sentence "there is no unrestricted quantification" requires only quantification over all domains (not over all objects). His argument exploits Russell's paradox to show that given a domain, we can find a more comprehensive domain. So, it is committed to the following:

5. For any domain  $D_0$ , there is a domain  $D_1$  such that not everything that is in  $D_1$  is in  $D_0$ .

But 5 is self-defeating. In fact, 'for any domain' must range over all domains (although it is not necessary that it ranges over everything). If so, it will also range over an arbitrary domain  $D^*$ . Then, there is a further domain  $D^{*'}$  such that not everything that is in  $D^{*'}$  is in  $D^*$ , which means that not everything is in  $D^*$ . However, to say in  $D^*$  that not everything is in  $D^*$  is self-defeating, as we know from sentence 4. 5 is not true if its domain is  $D^*$ . But  $D^*$  was arbitrary, so 5 is not true with regard to any domain<sup>18</sup>.

#### 4 *Generalizing relativism?*

As we have seen so far, the problem that the relativist faces consists in coherently expressing their core idea – for instance, that there is no all-inclusive domain of quantification – without employing quantifiers whose domains must be all-inclusive. Of course there is no problem of this sort in denying that some specific domain can be enlarged. In front of an absolutist who claims that her domain  $A$  is all-inclusive, the relativist can use some version of Russell's paradox to identify an object  $R$  not

contained in  $A$ . With regard to the domain  $A \cup \{R\}$  she can claim that not everything that is in  $A \cup \{R\}$  is in  $A$ . However, the relativist would like to generalize her position, and claims that no domain whatever is absolute, because any domain can be expanded. And here the relativist faces a problem, because the latter sentence (‘no domain contains everything’) is a general sentence that – in order to express what the relativist intends to express – seems to require a quantifier to range over everything. How might she generalize her position, without committing herself to a language with an absolute domain of quantification? Recall that the general inexpressibility objection consists in showing that the negation of unrestricted quantification needs unrestricted quantification to be stated. The two elements that are responsible for that result are the following:

- A) The reference to everything (or to an absolute form of generality)
- B) The fact that this reference is expressed by means of a (standard) quantifier.

The central part of the argument is played by point A. *If we deny the possibility of an absolute form of generality to everything, then our denial requires an absolute form of generality to express its intended meaning.* Note that this last sentence does not say anything about the form of generality. Of course, if we interpret the “everything” in the italicized sentence as a standard quantifier, then point B is also operating in the argument and we end up with the original objection. However, it is not necessary to accept point B. If it were possible to show that absolute generality requires a form of generality *different* from the standard one, then the original argument is stopped and we can claim, without contradiction, that there is no absolute domain of quantification.

The relativist may thus try to generalize their position by means of a different form of generality. For instance, she might try to exploit the modal approach proposed by Fine [5], and then further developed by Linnebo ([12], [13], [14]) to claim – without contradiction - that there can be no absolute domain of quantification<sup>19</sup>. The basic thesis that both Fine and Linnebo defend is the existence of a form of cross-domain generality that can be expressed by combining the quantifier with a primitive modal operator. The idea is that while standard quantified sentences may express propositions with different truth-values with regard to different domains of quantification, there are sentences whose truth is domain-independent, in the sense that they do not depend on the domain in which we may evaluate them. Perhaps the simplest ex-

ample is the sentence ‘ $\forall x(x = x)$ ’. This sentence expresses a proposition that is true regardless of the domain of the quantifier. Their proposal amounts to the attempt to formalize it by means of what Linnebo calls a modalized quantifier:  $\Box\forall x(x = x)$ . The modal operator expresses the idea that the sentence in its scope is true no matter the domain of quantification.

This approach is invoked in a setting where no absolute domain of quantification is available. Both Fine and Linnebo argue that, given a domain of objects, it is possible to find a more comprehensive domain. Therefore, the modal approach can offer the relativist some resources with which to claim that no absolute domain of quantification exists. In our present setting, the relativist may claim that the fact that each domain is extensible is an essential or structural feature of domains, and so it remains true however we can expand the domain. If the relativist is right in claiming that no domain is absolute, then ‘being non-absolute’ expresses a structural condition on domains, and thus a truth that is domain-independent.

The relativist can thus exploit the generality provided by the modalized quantifier to state her own position. In such a way, she can deny the existence of an unrestricted quantification, without using an unrestricted quantifier. Sentences 1 and 2, respectively, become:

$$1' \sim \Diamond\exists x (x \text{ is an absolute domain})$$

$$2' \sim \Diamond\exists x (x \text{ is an absolutely unrestricted quantification})$$

Again, these sentences express a structural truth (according to the relativist) depending on the nature of the domains. So, they can be uttered with a specific domain of quantification, but its truth does not depend on what objects are present in this domain.

Of course, the mere introduction of modalities does not solve the problem. How are we to understand sentences with these modalities? This is a significant issue, and authors like Fine and Linnebo suggest different answers to it. We need not examine the matter here, since our primary object of study is the inexpressibility objection (on this topic, I refer the reader to Fine [5] and Linnebo ([12], [13], [14])). For our present purposes, it suffices to register the existence of such an alternative position between standard absolutism and relativism, and to see how it deals with the objection in question. Of course, it is important to understand that this position can only get off the ground if it affirms that the generality that the relativist invokes is irreducible to quantificational

generality. From a formal point of view, this means that the modal operator must be taken as primitive. Here the relativist introduces a new form of generality, which is different from the quantificational one. If we do not introduce a new form of generalization and we maintain that the quantificational generality is the only form of generality at our disposal, then there is no room to deny an unrestricted quantification without presupposing it. The only way of making this denial coherent is with a different form of generality, one that is not reducible to the quantificational generality.

One might question whether the modalities that Fine and Linnebo appeal to really express a form of generality, as we have assumed in the previous paragraphs. While Linnebo explicitly speaks of the modality as expressing a special kind of generality<sup>20</sup>, Fine is less explicit on this point. In any case, we are interested in understanding if the relativist can exploit some of their ideas to reply to the inexpressibility objection, and it seems clear that the relativist must take this modality as expressing a particular form of generality – a domain-independent form of generality – since she invokes it to express a general statement about any domains, i.e. that any domain is expansible. This point can be better appreciated if we look at how the semantics for a general sentence that employs a modalized quantifier – such as  $\Box\forall x(x = x)$  – works. Standard Kripke-style semantics will not do, for the simple reason that it interprets the modal operator of the object language with a standard quantification over possible worlds (here domains of objects) in the meta-language. Specifically, the operator ‘ $\Box$ ’ would be interpreted as a universal quantifier over all domains; as such it requires a domain for its bound variable that comprehends all domains, which contradicts the idea that any domain can be expanded in a more comprehensive one. On the contrary, the semantics of such sentences must be given by employing the same modalized quantifier in the meta-language, which is another way of saying that the modality must be taken as primitive.<sup>21</sup> As such they cannot be explained away by means of some more fundamental linguistic devices. This clearly shows that the modal operator must express some form of generality that is different from standard quantification.

Such an approach allows the relativist to give an elegant answer to the inexpressibility objection; indeed, her answer seems to be the only one that is not immediately self-defeating. This is possible by means of a primitive modality. If we have strong arguments against the existence of an absolute domain (as the relativist claims), the fact that these modalities can help her avoiding the inexpressibility objection constitutes a

good reason in favor of them, otherwise she would find herself facing a dilemma: no absolutely unrestricted quantification is possible because there is no absolute domain, and she cannot say what we have just said because the same claim presupposes an unrestricted quantification.

However, things are not so straightforward for the relativist, as you may have noticed. This is so because the inexpressibility objection has been overcome by means of a new form of generality, which makes generalizations over any domain possible. But this means that absolute generality has been reinstated. In this scenario, no standard quantification can be absolutely general, because no all-inclusive domain exists; however, the modalized quantifier manages to make absolutely general claims, such as the claim ‘ $\Box\forall x(x = x)$ ’. The resulting position is relativist only with regard to standard quantification, not in general, because it allows absolutely general claims. We may dub this non-standard form of absolutism “modal absolutism”, or “expansionist absolutism”.

The modal strategy allows one to reinstate absolutely general claims without the necessity of having an absolute domain of quantification. In §2 we defined relativism as the thesis according to which either an all-inclusive domain of everything does not exist or that such a domain – if it exists – is not available for us to quantify. However, we stressed that such a definition works in a context that recognizes standard quantification as the only form of generality. If we are stick to standard quantification and deny that there is an all-inclusive domain, then we are committed to the idea that absolutely general claims are not possible. On the contrary, now we are working in a context where the generality expressed by the modal approach is also available. In the present context, even if we can claim without contradiction that there is no all-inclusive domain, absolute general claims are still possible. And as a matter of fact, Linnebo presents his view as a non-standard form of absolutism, for precisely this reason. But this means that if the relativist wanted to exploit the denial of the existence of an all-inclusive domain as an argument against the possibility of absolutely general claims, then this strategy can only offer her a Pyrrhic victory, since ultimately it makes her position a particular form of absolutism. She can claim that there cannot be an all-inclusive domain, but this cannot be used as an argument against the possibility of absolutely general claims.<sup>22</sup>

## 5 Incoherence yes, but falsity?

The examination of the possibility of expressing the relativist position has ended up in a rather negative way. We have found no way to coherently express the relativistic position. Even the proposal of generalizing the view by means of the modal approach was shown to ultimately fail. This failure is particularly suggestive. On one side, the modal operator gives the relativist the possibility of stating that no absolute domain and no unrestricted quantification exists, but on the other, this is only possible by employing a different form of generality which is absolute anyway. The relativist believed herself to have coherently set a limit to thought (sentences **1'**:  $\sim \diamond \exists x (x \text{ is an absolute domain})$  and **2'**:  $\sim \diamond \exists x (x \text{ is an absolutely unrestricted quantification})$ , are not immediately self-defeating), but this was possible because she was in some sense already beyond the limit – she had found “both sides of the limit thinkable”, as Wittgenstein [19] says (sentences **1'** and **2'** are stated by means of a form of generality which is absolute). A view in line with those of Fine and Linnebo does not set any limit to thought, because it allows absolutely general claims, and thus it truly allows speaking of everything. Therefore, with sentences **1'** and **2'** the relativist does not really set any limit to thought. A position that really set a limit to thought should recognize the existence of an absolute all-inclusive domain while rejecting the possibility of quantifying over it. But this seems to be immediately self-defeating: as soon as we recognize a domain as containing everything, it seems that we have already quantified over it!

One might object that the arguments we have seen so far cannot exclude the possibility that there may be other ways, as yet unexamined, that may allow the relativist to coherently state her position. This is certainly true. In any case, until somebody proposes such a solution, and in light of the abundance of arguments for the inexpressibility of relativism in the literature, we conclude that we have strong reasons to hold that relativism is not coherently expressible.

Yet, does this imply that relativism is also false? Does inexpressibility imply falsity? If this were not the case, then it would be possible that the relativistic position is in fact true but inexpressible, while the absolutist position is false but expressible. This does not seem a particularly comfortable scenario, but it is one that we cannot rule out *a priori*.<sup>23</sup> For instance, if inexpressibility implied falsity, then many (and maybe all) forms of mysticism would be simply false, but this does not seem to be the case. Many mystics hold that their position cannot be coherently stated, but they do not infer that their position is, for this

reason, false. For this situation they blame logic and, more generally, rationality, which is sometimes accused of not being able to grasp the truth. In any case, the possibility that relativism is inexpressible and, nevertheless, true has been deeply analyzed by Tim Button [4], and we will analyze it in this form.

Button embraced the idea that restrictivism (how he refers to relativism) is not coherently expressible. However, he believes that the problem arises from the attempt to state *a positive restrictivist conclusion*. For Button, the restrictivist should not affirm a positive doctrine; rather, they ought to see their own position as a *challenge* to the absolutist. Button calls such a restrictivist ‘Dadaist’ so as to keep her distinct from the ‘doctrinal restrictivist’, who interprets restrictivism as a positive doctrine. The idea is that when an absolutist claims to have a sentence that quantifies over everything, the restrictivist need only produce a sort of *ad hominem argument* (based on Russell’s paradox) to show that the specific domain in which the absolutist was quantifying was not absolute after all. If the Dadaist succeeds, she should not draw from her victory any positive conclusion: “our Dadaist therefore thinks that *any putative doctrine whatsoever about ‘unrestricted quantification’ fails in its ambitions, whether that doctrine is generalist or restrictivist*” [4, p. 395]. That is why the Dadaist merely poses a challenge to the absolutist.<sup>24</sup>

Button considers two possible objections to Dadaism, the answers to which clarify what he has in mind. The first objection is as follows: the Dadaist poses her challenge because she thinks that she is always able to show that a domain is not absolute. To do so, she exploits Russell’s paradox to extend any given domain. However, in exploiting this reasoning, she makes use of sentences with unrestricted quantifiers over everything. For example, it is likely that she will rely on what Button calls ‘the extensibility principle’: given any totality of objects, we can find some object which is not in that totality. But this is an absolutely general claim, and in such a case the Dadaist would affirm a positive truth in a way that is not coherent. Button’s first answer to this problem is the following. The argument the Dadaist uses to show that a particular domain is not absolute is not a positive argument; rather, it is a *reductio ad absurdum*. And in a *reductio* argument, we are not forced to commit ourselves to the premises of the argument that we reject in order to avoid the absurd conclusion that we have derived. In this case, the premise that is rejected is the claim that there is an absolute domain. However, one might insist, the Dadaist has made use of the extensibility principle in order to derive

a contradiction, which turns out thus to be an undischarged premise to which the Dadaist should be committed. Moreover – and here comes the second objection – if the Dadaist’s argument is a *reductio*, then its conclusion should be the negation of one of the premises. But this negation is an absolutely general claim (if the negated sentence is absolutely general). In this way both the extensibility principle and the conclusion of the argument are absolutely general statements to which the Dadaist should be committed. To this objection, Button replies by saying that, strictly speaking, the argument is *not* a proper case of a *reductio*. A *reductio* starts with a meaningful premise, it supposes that it is true, and it derives a contradiction that allows us to conclude the falsity of that premise. But for the Dadaist the premise of the argument (namely that there is an absolute domain of quantification) is *not meaningful*: “in fact, I start by pretending that some sentence *makes sense* (some sentence containing the phrase ‘absolute generality’ or ‘absolutely everything’), and I then produce a series of sounds which might *seem*, to my opponent, like a logical argument towards a contradiction” [4, p. 395]. If the argument is logically valid, since for the absolutist the premise makes sense, then for her the argument is an authentic *reductio* of the premise. However, this is not the case for the Dadaist, for whom every passage of the argument is, strictly speaking, a non-sense: the reason why the second objection is not a problem for the Dadaist is that pretending that the sentences are meaningful does not commit her to accept that those sentences actually make sense.

Before examining the tenability of this position, it is important to stress that Dadaism challenges the absolutist to exhibit an absolute domain of quantification. Once the absolutist individuates a domain, the Dadaist exploits Russell’s paradox to extend the domain. As such, it should be clear that the Dadaist’s challenge can be posed against a standard form of absolutism that links the possibility of unrestrictedly quantifying over everything with the existence of an all-inclusive domain, and *not* against a non-standard absolutist approach (as that of Fine and Linnebo), which claims that absolutely general sentences are possible even in the absence of such a domain. Moreover, such a non-standard form of absolutism would actually agree with the challenge posed by the Dadaist of showing that no domain is absolute. In this sense, there is an important asymmetry between standard and non-standard absolutism, which shows that Dadaism can only attack the former. The latter cannot be touched by the Dadaist’s challenge.

Is Dadaism a coherent position? At first glance, it seems that the

answer should be affirmative. If the Dadaist is not committed to any positive claim, then there is no possibility at all to show that it is committed to the negation of its claim. However, life as a Dadaist seems to be acutely tricky. First of all, the Dadaist is only improperly a relativist. A relativist believes that no absolutely general claim is possible. But the Dadaist would reply that as soon as you believe *this content*, then you have a positive claim that cannot coherently be expressed (uttered, written, thought, or believed!). So, you could not coherently believe that no absolutely general claim is possible. Moreover, this fact renders the challenge somewhat peculiar: usually, if I seriously challenge somebody on a certain matter, it is because I think I have all the means with which to win the challenge. But this cannot be the case for the Dadaist: if she believes that she shall win the challenge because she has some principle that allows her to expand every domain, then she is upholding an absolutely general claim! A real Dadaist must simply engage the challenge and see what happens. In other words, before the match, she cannot believe that she is going to win. In general, a Dadaist may be happy with this situation. But there is a consequence of this position that weakens the Dadaist view: in not being committed to any positive truths, Dadaism is not a denial of absolutism. Moreover, since it must proceed on a case-by-case basis, even if the Dadaist succeeds in showing that a certain domain is not absolute, there is no guarantee that she will always succeed. In other words, a Dadaist can never show the falsity of absolutism. Of course, I do not want to suggest that the absolutist should *not* care about such a challenge; in any case, this clearly shows a structural weakness of Dadaism which is linked to the fact that it does not constitute any positive doctrine.

A further problem for the Dadaist concerns the possibility of claiming to be a Dadaist. Suppose a Dadaist claims: "I am a Dadaist". You could ask what a Dadaist is, and you will probably receive a reply. In this reply, there must appear somewhere the phrase 'absolute generality' and similar (for instance, in saying that Dadaism is a challenge to absolutism – as Button affirms). Now, all the occurrences of this phrase are meaningless for the Dadaist (maybe not for you who asked the question, which means that you can understand what the Dadaist is saying). Consequently, from the Dadaist point of view, every time she claims to be a Dadaist, she actually utters (or thinks) a non-sense. A Dadaist cannot say of herself that she is a Dadaist. And for the same reason, she cannot believe herself a Dadaist (she cannot think of being a Dadaist, and so on). While it seems clear how one should behave to be dubbed

a Dadaist, it does not seem clear how someone can both be (or behave as) a Dadaist and be aware of being a Dadaist. As soon as she is aware of her behavior (and so as soon as she believes herself to be a Dadaist), she is believing (at least) in an absolutely general claim, and thus she is no longer acting as a Dadaist.

The last objection seems quite destructive for Dadaism. It seems that nobody can really be a Dadaist. However, it is not clear that, even if we grant this last point, the fact that relativism is not coherently expressible and Dadaism cannot be supported is enough to say that absolutism is true. The standard absolutist must show that its actual domain is absolute, but as a matter of fact she can always fail to show that. In any case, to rescue Dadaism from the last critique, one might note that the demand for coherence from the Dadaist might be misplaced. The idea would be that we should ask for coherence and consistency to somebody who defends a certain positive doctrine, but of course this is not the case with Dadaism. There are at least two objections against this attempt to redeem Dadaism. First, it is not certain that we can ask for consistency since there is no positive doctrine, but we certainly should ask for coherence, at least in the Dadaist's behavior. With "coherence in the Dadaist's behavior" I mean that the Dadaist's behavior should not contradict what the Dadaist says or believes, particularly the claim made by herself of being (or believing herself to be) a Dadaist. In fact, Dadaism is motivated by the idea that standard forms of relativism (which are committed to a positive doctrine) cannot be coherent, and so they must be abandoned. It is therefore considerations of coherence that motivate Dadaism; if this were not the case, there would be no reason to support such a view. But we saw that the Dadaist cannot speak (or think or believe) of being a Dadaist without committing to an absolutely general claim, and therefore her position is not coherent. Second, if we were to abandon the considerations of coherence, then Dadaism would be terribly close to some forms of mysticism. That is to say, the natural effect of such a defense would be to place such a position outside the field of rational discussion. And this is in fact the risk we run when *insisting* that the inexpressibility of a position does not imply its falsity.

At this point, Dadaism finds itself confronted with a choice: either it accepts the validity of coherence's consideration, or it takes the mystical turn and places itself outside the field of rational discussion. The first alternative seems to succumb to the objections we raised a few lines above, while the second would make it a position unworthy of consideration.

## 6 Conclusion

In this paper we strengthen the thesis that generality-relativism, as a position that truly sets a limit to thought, is not coherently expressible. We started by rejecting Glanzberg's attempt to coherently state relativism; we then analyzed the prospects of generalizing the relativism. This has provided more precision to the Wittgensteinian idea that in order to set a limit to thought we must already be beyond that limit, since it turned out that to claim without contradiction that there is no all-inclusive domain, since all domains are expandable, we had to employ an absolute form of generality (as happened in sentences 1' and 2'). Finally, we analyzed and rebutted a far more extreme version of relativism, namely Button's Dadaism. However, we have also seen that inexpressibility is in no way a guarantee of falsity.

Of course, that inexpressibility does not imply falsity is not an argument in favor of the truth of relativism, just as the fact that a sentence can be true (or false) is not an argument for the truth (or falsity) of such a sentence. But in any case, this shows that the inexpressibility objection analyzed herein cannot be seen as a fatal objection against the truth of relativism. Relativism may be true and inexpressible. However, as was set out in the discussion of Dadaism, the effect of this possibility would be that of excluding such a position from the realm of rational discussion. As such, we would have no reason to worry about it. So, why even discuss it then? Why engage in a critical and rational discussion with a position that we know to be critically and rationally beyond discussion? This situation reveals a crucial fact: as long as we want to rationally discuss absolutism, relativism, and in general the topic of absolute generality, the inexpressibility objection offers an extremely strong reason not to be a relativist.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> I am considering the thought in its objective, Fregean sense, i.e. as the contents of the intentional states.

- 2 The book in question is *Beyond the Limits of Thought*, which first appeared in 1995 (see [15]). Priest also argues that such examples are cases of true contradictions. I do not agree with Priest on this last point; however, the discussion of this topic exceeds the scope of this paper.
- 3 See [9], *The transcendental dialectic*, second book, chapter 2 entitled ‘The antinomy of pure reason’ (A405/B432 – A567/B595). On this point see also [15] chapter 7, and the conclusive comments in [20].
- 4 I use the word ‘domain’ here to indicate a plurality (in the sense of plural logic) of objects, not a set or a set-like object. For the notion of plural (or plurality) see ([2], [3], [11]). For a general presentation of the positions in the debate on absolute generality, I refer the reader to [16, Introduction].
- 5 It is important to bear in mind that such definitions of absolutism and relativism are given in a context where the only legitimate form of generality is expressed by standard quantification, where ‘standard’ denotes the current practice of specifying a domain (a set or a plurality) for the quantifiers to range over. In this setting, to say that absolutely unrestricted quantification is not possible is the same as saying that absolutely general claims are not possible.
- 6 See [16, Introduction] for an overview of the main argumentative strategies that relativists have used. Since it is not the topic of the paper, I shall not discuss any of these arguments here.
- 7 For the details of Williamson’s version of Russell’s paradox, I refer the reader to [18]. In the literature such a version of the argument has been disputed, for instance in [1]. I am not interested in defending or criticizing such an argument, since my aim here was only to give a taste of how one can argue for relativism. A different argument in favor of the idea that there cannot be an all-inclusive domain of everything would consist in the defence of the claim that any domain is collectable in a set or, in other words, that any plurality of objects forms a set. This principle – known as Collapse – has been defended (in a modal version) by Linnebo [12].
- 8 Again I refer to [16] for an overview of different possible ways of tackling this problem.
- 9 See [18] for a deep development of these considerations.
- 10 For instance, ([6], [7], [8]) defends a relativist position, while [19] strongly argues against relativism.
- 11 Here I consider even single objects as forming a plurality: a plurality of only one thing. This may seem strange when compared with the usual notion of plurality in natural language; however, this is perfectly coherent for theoretical purposes. In any case, admitting pluralities with only one thing is not necessary to hold that all pluralities taken together give rise to the plurality of everything. In fact, even if one recognizes a plurality where there are at least two objects, since any object can be paired together with any other objects, all objects are members of some pluralities.
- 12 A set (or, more generally, a domain)  $A$  is well-founded if, and only if, every non empty subset (or sub-domain) of the transitive closure of  $A$  contains an element which is *minimal* with regard to the membership relation  $\in$ . An element  $m$  is minimal with regard to the  $\in$ -relation if there is no element  $a$  such that  $a \in m$ . A set  $A$  is transitive if, and only if  $x \in A, y \in x$  imply  $y \in A$ . The transitive closure of a set  $A$  is the smallest (with regard to the inclusion relation) transitive set

containing  $A$ . In the presence of the axiom of choice, the well-founded condition (on  $A$ ) is equivalent to the non-existence of an infinite descending membership-chain (starting from  $A$ ), which means that neither the domain nor its elements can belong to themselves.

- 13 The reasoning here corresponds to Mirimanoff's paradox, which can be exploited to argue that there cannot be a set of all well-founded sets.
- 14 This passage relies on the assumption that every subdomain of a domain is itself a domain. This is indeed very plausible: if we can consider all sets – both well-founded and non-well-founded – as a domain, why should we not consider a domain composed of only the well-founded sets? Thanks to an anonymous referee for calling for the explication of this point.
- 15 I call it  $M$  in honor of Mrimanoff, since this is essentially Mirimanoff's paradox.
- 16 If  $M$  is non-well-founded, there is at least an infinite descending chain such that  $M \ni m_1 \ni m_2 \ni \dots$ . Then  $m_1$  is an element of  $M$  and  $m_1 \ni m_2 \ni \dots$  is still an infinite descending chain, which means that  $m_1$  is non-well-founded.
- 17 As a referee rightly noticed, Glanzberg interprets the paradox as showing a much more widespread phenomenon: quantifier domain restriction. Properly speaking, it is this phenomenon that prevents unrestricted quantification. However, a Russell-style paradox is essential insofar as it provides Glanzberg with an argument to claim that there is an occurrence of this phenomenon even where no domain restriction seems to occur. Therefore, the paradox plays a fundamental role in Glanzberg's position.
- 18 I have adapted here an argument developed by Williamson in [18] to argue that the sentence "For any context  $C_0$ , there is a context  $C_1$  such that not everything that is quantified over in  $C_1$  is quantified over in  $C_0$ " is self-defeating.
- 19 What I am proposing here is that the relativist may want to use some ideas from Fine and Linnebo's approaches to express her own position, and not that Fine and Linnebo's approaches are relativist. While on this point Fine is not very clear, Linnebo is clearly defending a non-standard form of absolutism, as I shall set out at the end of the present paragraph.
- 20 See for example [14] paragraph 6, which is entitled 'two sorts of generality', with reference to standard quantification and modalized quantifiers.
- 21 This is nothing terribly surprising since it is exactly what happens in first-order logic with the standard quantifiers. The semantics of a quantified sentence is given by a sentence of the meta-language that employs a quantifier. This is because quantifiers (at least one between the universal and the existential quantifiers) are primitive resources of the language of first-order logic.
- 22 Santos [17] proposes to generalize the relativist position not by using a modal approach, but by interpreting generalization as in intuitionistic logic. The result is somehow similar, in the sense that his proposal allows one to deny the existence of an all-inclusive domain, and at the same time to have absolutely general claims. Where the proposal diverges from that of, for example, Linnebo is that the latter one is compatible (as Linnebo clearly shows in [13]) with classical logic: in Linnebo's approach the modalized quantifiers syntactically behave as standard classical quantifiers (of course they differ with respect to semantics).
- 23 An anonymous reviewer pointed out that "since 'the relativistic position' has not been expressed, it is not even clear what the present claim is, since it is not even clear what the position is, or if there is one, that is true but inexpressible".

However, it is not the case that the relativistic position has not been expressed; rather it has not been expressed in a coherent way. For sure, to show that the position is not coherently expressed one has to understand what the position amounts to. One has to understand what the relativist would like to claim, and why she cannot coherently make such claims.

- 24 This idea is inspired by a certain interpretation of the Protagorean sentence “there are no absolute truths”. The sentence is self-defeating. However, the Protagorean attitude should not be taken as being committed to a positive truth; rather, it should be thought of as a challenge to everybody who claims to have an absolute truth. Another source of inspiration mentioned by Button is Feyerabend’s irrationalism.

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