

[1960. *Review of Relativism, Knowledge and Faith*, by Gordon D. Kaufman. *Christianity Today* 20 Jun.]

DEFENSE OF RELATIVISM

Relativism, Knowledge, and Faith, by Gordon D. Kaufman (University of Chicago Press, 1960, 153 pp., \$5.50), is reviewed by Gordon H. Clark, Professor of Philosophy, Butler University.

Courage and competence characterize this brief but vigorous defense of relativism. Very few relativists face the basic objections so squarely as does Dr. Kaufman. But to discuss his answers at all adequately would require a review many times the size of his book.

Relativism, he acknowledges, is supposed to founder on the genetic fallacy. It is accused of moving illicitly from descriptive to normative statements; or, conversely, it introduces nonlogical criteria into the knowledge situation. Finally, relativism is always asserted as an absolute truth.

External relativism, which is based on actual discrepancies among different cultures, succumbs to these objections; but, asserts the author, internal relativism, following the lead of Dilthey and Ortega y Gasset, in which the thinker sympathetically accepts the norms of foreign cultures, does not.

As justification, Dr. Kaufman sketches an epistemology. Knowledge exists on several levels. One must therefore, in epistemology as in life, begin with the precognitive and preconscious basis of knowing and give a genetic account. The lowest level is called *Erleben*, for the German term is much clearer than any English word: "it is almost impossible to describe this level without using language that implies much more than is intended ... the best that can be done is to use the words we have and hope that the intended meaning can be apprehended" (p. 31, n. 3). "We ought not to speak of consciousness, or even experience, as present here, for there is no distinction of subject from object ... there is only *Erleben*. We never directly observe this level" (. 68).

Now, there may be secondary flaws in Dr. Kaufman's defense of relativism. For example, he assigns an exaggerated role to language. Although words are merely "particular noises" (p. 99), he gives language the function of producing distinctions in thought, instead of allotting to thought the production of distinct words. Universal relationships are made possible by words, and the concept of validity or truth has reference to society and its language system.

Apparently relativism is based on the universal principle that people always speak before they think.

But if this is a secondary difficulty, perhaps the basic trouble lies in the genetic account of knowledge. To postulate an unobserved, an indescribable, an unexperienced and unconscious “level” — “the idea of level should not be taken thus literally” (p. 42, n. 1)—a level named by the undefined and therefore meaningless term *Erleben*, and then to assert that knowledge emerges from it, gradually and somehow, is not an explanation of knowledge, but the lack of one.

On the other hand, where the author is definite, as in his views of language and of the historical conditioning of “truth,” it is hard to see that he has escaped the initial charge that relativism is always asserted absolutely.

GORDON H. CLARK