

Introduction: A Primer on Relativism

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One could say of relativism what Hermann Ebbinghaus once observed with respect to psychology: to wit, that it has a “long past but a short history” (1908, 3). Although relativistic motifs have always played a significant role in philosophy, their systematic investigation—and thus the explicit formulation of different forms and strengths of relativism—is a child only of the twentieth century. Perhaps one could even maintain that most of the really important, detailed and systematic work on relativism was done by philosophers alive today. This volume documents both the long past and the short history of relativism.

The structure of the volume is straightforward. The first two sections cover relativistic motifs in Indian, Islamic, African and Western traditions. (Unfortunately, it proved impossible to secure chapters on relativistic motifs in Japanese and Chinese philosophy.) The following sections divide by subfields of philosophy: epistemology (section III), ethics (section IV), political and legal philosophy (section V), metaphysics (section VI), philosophy of science (section VII), and philosophy of language and mind (section VIII). The last section (“IX. Relativism in other Areas of Philosophy”) contains papers on philosophy of religion and experimental philosophy. (An entry on aesthetics fell through too late for it to be re-assigned.)

As is to be expected, the authors of this volume take very different positions concerning the forms of relativism they discuss. Some *support* particular versions of relativism, others *oppose* it vigorously in some or all of its variants. Still, I like to think that all contributions assembled here investigate relativism in a scholarly and respectful manner. This confirms my belief that disagreements over relativism need not have the character of “wars.” Remember that, in the U. S., it is customary to speak of “wars” either when intellectual exchanges become acrimonious (“science wars”) or when one launches an intellectual campaign (“war on cancer”). I regret that, in the past, disputes

over relativism have all too often had the feel of “relativism wars” or “wars on relativism.” Of course, in lamenting “relativism wars” I am not advocating a soggy attitude of “anything goes.” I am urging that in discussing relativism we rely on the same epistemic virtues of curiosity, open-mindedness, fairness and charity that serve us so well in other – less emotionally charged – areas of philosophy.

Relativism is not easy to define, and no definition has found general approval. Still, readers new to the area might profit from at least a rough characterization of the spectrum of views falling under the term.

To begin with, it is common to capture forms of relativism as different instantiations of the scheme ‘x is relative to y’ (Haack 1998, 149). Here are some examples:

“x” stands for ...		forms of relativism

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objects, properties, facts, worlds	...	ontological
truth(s)	...	alethic or semantic
classifications, concepts, meanings	...	semantic
moral values, norms, commitments, justifications	...	moral
knowledge or epistemic justification	...	epistemic
tastes	...	gustatory

“y” stands for ...	-----	forms of relativism
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individuals	...	Protagorean
cultures	...	cultural
scientific paradigms	...	Kuhnian
classes, religions, genders	...	standpoint

A further important divide is between *descriptive*, *normative*, and *methodological relativisms*. To facilitate the exposition, I shall use “culture” as the relevant “y” and “morals” as the relevant “x”. Forms of *descriptive* relativism claim that, as far as moral beliefs or standards are concerned, one finds fundamentally different standards in different cultures. Forms of *methodological* relativism insist that in investigating moralities we had better approach cultural differences in an “impartial” and “symmetrical” way. For instance: we had better be ...

... impartial with respect to truth and falsity, rationality or irrationality, success or failure. Both sides of these dichotomies ... require explanation.

... symmetrical in [the] style of explanation. The same types of cause would explain say, true and false beliefs. (Bloor 1991, 7)

Descriptive and methodological forms of relativism leave open the possibility that there are absolute norms or truths. As far as descriptive or methodological relativisms are concerned, one of the cultures might well be on the (absolutely) right track. *Normative* forms of relativism go further and deny that there are any absolutely true or absolutely correct beliefs or standards.

The last sentence gives only a very minimalist characterization of normative relativism. Although there are authors happy with this definition (Bloor 2011), others—friends and foes of relativism alike—go further and add various additional assumptions. Below is a

list of such assumptions. To be sure, I am not suggesting that these items constitute necessary and sufficient conditions for relativism. Different authors disagree over their importance and relevance. I am offering them here merely to give the (novice) reader a rough idea of the kinds of theses with which relativism is often associated. I am not addressing the question which combination of these theses leads to the most plausible version (by my lights). Note also that I have not aimed for the smallest possible set of theses; a limited degree of redundancy has been accepted for the sake of greater clarity. I am using *epistemic* relativism as my example. It should be obvious how the key parameters need to be changed to arrive at moral or other forms of relativism.

I have collected these assumptions from both friends and foes of relativism, including Maria Baghramian (2019), Barry Barnes and David Bloor (1982), Simon Blackburn (2005), David Bloor (2011), Paul Boghossian (2006), Adam Carter (2016), Lorraine Code (1995), Annalisa Coliva (2010), Hartry Field (2009), Steven Hales (2014), Gilbert Harman (1996), Christopher Herbert (2001), Barbara Herrnstein Smith (2018), Max Kölbel (2004), John MacFarlane (2014), Duncan Pritchard (2009), Gideon Rosen (2001), Richard Rorty (1979), Carol Rovane (2013), F.F. Schmitt (2007), Markus Seidel (2014), Harvey Siegel (1987), Sharon Street (2011), David Velleman (2015), Bernard Williams (1981), Michael Williams (2007), Timothy Williamson (2015), and Crispin Wright (2008).

- (DEPENDENCE) A belief has an epistemic status only relative to either ...
- (a) system of epistemic principles (REGULARISM), or
 - (b) a coherent bundle of precedents (or paradigms) (PARTICULARISM).

The distinction between (a) and (b) is meant to clarify that *what a belief is relative to* is different for different versions of relativism. Some make the “regularist” assumption that *what a belief is relative to* is a set of more or less fundamental rules (e.g. Boghossian 2006); others rely on the “particularist” thought that it is individual and concrete precedents that guide our epistemic life (Kuhn 1962). (I am here borrowing a conceptual distinction from Dancy 2017.)

(PLURALISM) There is (has been, or could be) more than one such system or bundle.

Given PLURALISM, relativism is compatible with the idea that our current system or bundle is without an *existing* alternative. Moreover, PLURALISM permits the relativist to be highly selective in choosing those systems or bundles with respect to which relativism applies. She might for example restrict her relativistic thesis to just two systems or bundles.

(NON-ABSOLUTISM) None of these systems or bundles is absolutely correct.

I already mentioned NON-ABSOLUTISM above as the minimal characterization of normative relativism. It can of course be combined with the other assumptions listed here.

(CONFLICT) Some of these systems or bundles are such that their epistemic verdicts on the epistemic status of given beliefs exclude one another. This can happen either ...

- (a) because the two systems or bundles give incompatible answers to the same question, or
- (b) because the advocates of one system or bundle find the answers suggested by the advocates of another system or bundle unintelligible.

(a) is an “ordinary” disagreement; (b) captures cases of “incommensurability;” that is, cases where the advocates of two different systems or bundles find the categories and values of the other side unintelligible (cf. Kuhn 1962, Feyerabend 1975, van Fraassen 2002).

(SYMMETRY) Different systems or bundles are symmetrical in that they all are ...

- (a) based on nothing but local causes of credibility (LOCALITY); and/or
- (b) impossible to rank except on the basis of a specific system or bundle (NON-NEUTRALITY); and/or

- (c) equally true or valid (EQUAL VALIDITY); and/or
- (d) impossible to rank since the evaluative terms of one system or bundle seem not applicable to another system or bundle (NON-APPRAISAL).

(a) is central e.g. in Bloor and Barnes (1982); (b) can be found in Field (2009); and (d) in B. Williams (1981). (c) is routinely attributed to relativism by its critics (e.g. Baghramian 2019, Boghossian 2006, Williamson 2014), but typically rejected by card-carrying relativists (cf. e.g. Bloor 2011, Field 2009, Herbert 2001).

(CONVERSION) For some pairs of systems or bundles it is true that switching from one to the other has the character of a “conversion.” “Conversion” stands for a switch (to new rules or precedents) that is not licensed by the rules or precedents of the old system or bundle.

This assumption plays of course a central role in relativism debates in the philosophy of science after Kuhn (Kuhn 1962, Feyerabend 1975, van Fraassen 2002).

(FAULTLESS DISAGREEMENT) If two epistemic subjects, committed to different epistemic systems or bundles, disagree over an epistemic issue, and if their differing views are based on their respective epistemic systems or bundles, then their disagreement is faultless: neither side can be faulted for their positions on the issue.

This assumption has played a crucial role in recent discussions in semantic relativism. A central paradigm has been questions of taste (Kölbel 2002, MacFarlane 2014).

(SEMANTIC RELATIVITY) An utterance of the form “Subject S is epistemically justified (unjustified) to believe that p” expresses a proposition of the following form:

- (a) *According to the epistemic system or bundle that I (the speaker) am committed to, S is epistemically justified (unjustified) to believe that p.* This proposition is absolutely true or false. (SEMANTIC CONTEXTUALISM)

(b) *S is epistemically justified (unjustified) to believe that p.* This proposition is true or false relative to different systems or bundles. (SEMANTIC RELATIVISM)

The first option is formulated and criticized in Boghossian (2006). Wright (2008) defends (b) as dealing the relativist a better hand. Much contemporary debate concerns these two (as well as other, more complex) semantic options.

(METAPHYSICAL COMMITMENT)

(a) (FACTUALISM) The property of *being epistemically justified* has as one of its relata (an element of) a system of rules or a bundle of precedents. This relatum is usually overlooked.

(b) (NON-FACTUALISM) Epistemic relativism is not a claim about the property of *being epistemically justified*; it is a claim about the meaning of the term “justified.”

Here too Boghossian (2006) is to be credited with first having put this distinction on the table.

(CONTINGENCY) Which epistemic system or bundle a given group is committed to, it a question of historical contingency.

If the history of the given group *g* had been different—for instance, if the members of *g* had had a different evolutionary or cultural history—*g*’s current system or bundle could be substantially, perhaps even radically, different from what it is now. The contingency might reach deep: even those beliefs that group members deem “self-evident” might be discovered to be contingent. Becoming aware of the contingency of one’s views in this sense can, but need not, undermine the strength of one’s conviction (cf. Rosen 2001, Street 2011, Kinzel and Kusch 2018).

(GROUNDLESSNESS) A given epistemic system or bundle cannot be justified in anything but a circular fashion.

GROUNDLESSNESS is rarely formulated as a distinct ingredient of epistemic relativism. But it is sometimes invoked in arguments meant to establish the truth of relativism. For instance, it is occasionally put forward that epistemic relativism results from the recognition that all systems or bundles are on a par insofar as none of them is able to justify itself without moving in an (illegitimate) circle (cf. Williams 2007: 95).

(UNDERDETERMINATION) Epistemic systems and practices are not determined by facts of nature or truths that “are there anyway.”

UNDERDETERMINATION is not to be confused with the thesis that the world has *no* causal impact on epistemic systems or bundles. Instead the relativist is committed to the view that more than one system or bundle is compatible with the given causal impact of the world (Cf. Seidel 2014).

(SELF-VINDICATION) Every system or bundle is such that it vindicates as true or correct all beliefs formed by relying on its norms or precedents.

This view is sometimes attributed to relativists by their absolutist critics (e.g. Baghramian 2019). Relativists might retort that they do not wish to rule out that systems or bundles might be self-correcting, or that advocates of a given system or bundle might recognize—by their own lights—that another system or bundle would serve them better (Kusch 2019).

(ARBITRARY CHOICE) Assume an epistemic subject *S*, information *I*, known to *S*, and a belief *B* that *S* would like to hold. *S* is epistemically blameless if *S* picks such epistemic norms or precedents (system or bundle) *E* as make holding *B* epistemically rational. The choice of *E* is unconstrained by other epistemic standards.

ARBITRARY CHOICE is in the vicinity of a wide-spread interpretation of Feyerabend’s formula “anything goes” (Feyerabend 1975, Boghossian 2001).

(TOLERANCE) Epistemic systems or practices other than one's own, must be tolerated.

Relativist views are often motivated by the wish or demand to be tolerant. But it is an open question whether one needs to be a relativist to be tolerant.

It is easy to appreciate that some of the above theses seem more important than others. For instance, to be counted a relativist, a philosopher must surely commit to (some version of) DEPENDENCE, PLURALISM, NON-ABSOLUTISM, CONFLICT or SYMMETRY. It is much less clear whether they would need to also adopt SELF-VINDICATION, FAULTLESS DISAGREEMENT, GROUNDLESSNESS, TOLERANCE or ARBITRARY CHOICE. Still, some relativists start from FAULTLESS DISAGREEMENT, TOLERANCE or GROUNDLESSNESS and then seek to argue in defense of, say, NON-ABSOLUTISM or CONFLICT on this basis.

Note also that arguments over epistemic relativism often take the form of a debate which of the above the relativist is explicitly or implicitly committed to. For instance, few relativists endorse EQUAL VALIDITY or ARBITRARY CHOICE. Their critics aim to show that the counterintuitive assumptions EQUAL VALIDITY or ARBITRARY CHOICE follow from a combination of the other theses listed above.

I am delighted to have had the opportunity to edit the to-date most extensive handbook on relativism. Of course, no handbook can pretend to be 100% complete in its coverage of relevant issues, and there are bound to be some omissions experts will quickly identify. Still, I hope this work will be useful to non-philosophers, philosophy students and professional philosophers alike.

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