

RELATIVISM

*Maria Baghramian and
Annalisa Coliva*

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equally legitimate or on par and that there is no neutral perspective or framework from which other perspectives or frameworks can be assessed.³

An interesting meta-philosophical issue is whether all these features can be satisfied together. Clearly, the problem arises from the conjunction of incompatibility and equal validity. If taken at face value, they seem to lead to embracing true contradictions – an option only dialethists would choose (see Moruzzi-Coliva 2019 for a discussion). If we introduce parameterization in content, we seem to lose our grip on incompatibility. For instance, “Sushi is tasty-for-me” and “Sushi is not tasty-for-me” are not incompatible judgments if made by two different subjects. Analogously, if we do not introduce parameterization and claim, following Goodman (1978) and Rovane (2013), that opposite judgments are true in different, equally existing worlds – a thesis known as *multimundialism* – we would have lost incompatibility once again since these judgments are true in different worlds. Or else, if these worlds were conjoinable, we would have compromised the principle of non-contradiction once again. For both P and not-P would be true in one single, overarching world. We will return to this fascinating meta-philosophical issue at the end of this book (Chapter 10).

§1.2 Motivating relativism

Relativism has had an enduring appeal, in part because of the important conceptual and practical concerns that motivate it. These underlying motivations, in turn, connect directly or indirectly with the assumptions that go into characterizing it.

§1.2.1 *Overcoming persistent disagreement*

Historically, relativism has been proposed as a reaction to the phenomenon of intractable disagreement. Starting with Protagoras, diversity of views and judgment in a variety of domains has been used as a justification for relativizing epistemic, moral and aesthetic norms in those domains (see also Sankey 2011, 2012, 2013). Relativism-inducing disagreements occur in different domains and give rise to different types of relativism. Here are some crucial examples from the literature.

Disagreement about taste. People differ on what they find tasty. For instance, one person hates rhubarb, and another likes it, and neither side has managed to be convinced otherwise. Their disagreement has the following characteristics:

- (a) They are talking about the same subject-matter. So, they are not talking past each other, and also incommensurability is not threatened.
- (b) They are genuinely disagreeing with each other in the sense that one affirms the statement “Rhubarb is yum” and assigns it the truth-value “true”, if you like, and the other one denies it and assigns the truth-value “false”.
- (c) No amount of information and debate has helped to resolve the disagreement.
- (d) Most significantly, neither side seems to have made a mistake, and in that sense, their disagreement is *faultless* and thereby their claims are equally valid.

Relativists, such as Max Kölbel, one of the so-called New or Truth-Relativists discussed below and in Chapter 3, claim that, if well-informed, honest, and intelligent people are unable to resolve conflicts of opinion, we should accept that all parties to such disputes could be right and their conflicting positions would have equal claims to truth, each according to their own perspective or point of view. Their disagreement is therefore faultless (Kölbel 2004; Brogaard 2008b; Hales 2014). The disputes or disagreements are irresolvable because both sides are right – they believe what is true according to their perspective. As we will see, Max Kölbel believes that the presence of faultless disagreements is central to motivating and justifying relativism. Looking at the history of relativism, we will see that disagreements about taste were frequently treated under the heading of subjectivism rather than relativism. Relativism was generally assumed to involve some shared parameters, for example, paradigms, cultures, and frameworks, while subjectivism was seen as a claim about the relationship between assignments of truth-values to personal preferences. The difference between subjectivism and relativism, however, has largely disappeared from recent discussions of relativism about taste.

Persistent and irresolvable moral disagreements give rise to some of the most widely discussed justifications for relativism. Disagreement could be inter-cultural and over general principles such as the right or wrong of a culture of honor, killing, or harming animals (see Doris and Stich 2005). It could also be local and over more specific issues: for instance, it could be about the permissibility of abortion or capital punishment within a given society.

It is relatively easy to accept that there could be faultless disagreement in cases of judgments of inclination, more interesting and pressing possibilities arise in the domains of morals and politics, and it is widely believed that there too relativism could arise from irresolvable disagreements where both parties are deemed to be right. As we will see, in Chapter 3, relativism has been proposed as a dissolution, if not a resolution, of such persistent inter-cultural as well as personal disagreements.

A third form of disagreement discussed in motivating relativism pertains to epistemic norms and standards of justification. The most famous of these examples is the dispute between Galileo Galilei and Cardinal Robert Bellarmine and their disagreement over the appropriate “grids” for determining what would count as evidence of planetary movements (Rorty 1979). Their dispute, in turn, is seen as a manifestation of a more fundamental disagreement over the choice between the incompatible framework offered by science and religion. The relativist claims that there is no fact of the matter about whether the Copernican theory or the faith-based view is justified by the evidence, “for there are no absolute facts about what justifies what” (Boghossian 2006a: 62), while the anti-relativist attempts to show the unintelligibility or the implausibility of such a claim. Relativists, in contrast, believe in the equal epistemic legitimacy of these warring frameworks and exhort us to consider each side legitimate from their own point of view.

Formulating the disagreement intuition with reference to the Galileo and Bellarmine dispute differs from the other examples of disagreement discussed above. Unlike the disagreement between different subjects on the gustatory merits of rhubarb, and possibly even about abortion, there is a wider agreement among philosophers that judgments on empirical matters are non-relativistically true or false. Furthermore, there is a large consensus that the disagreement has not proven to be intractable and in fact was settled very decisively in favor of Galileo. Bellarmine offered a number of arguments against Galileo, some theological and others empirical, based on the dominant scientific paradigm of the time, the Aristotelian view, which even by the light of many contemporaries, let alone the eye of the posterity, was rightly seen as flawed and untenable.⁴ As we will see below and in Chapter 7, the arguments favoring a relativistic approach to this disagreement, unlike previous cases, do not propose a relativistic interpretation of truth; rather, they emphasize the contingency and the framework-dependence of epistemic justification.

Finally, relativism-inducing disagreements can be over meta-theoretical issues and at meta-evidential level. Steven Hales, to take one example,

has argued that although genuine irreconcilable differences are scarce, and therefore the usual proposals of relativism-motivators, such as predicates of personal taste, fail to generate them, relativism as a solution to disagreement can still be adequately motivated, when (1) we have uncovered a genuinely irreconcilable difference, a disagreement that is epistemically irresolvable because there is no such thing as the right kind of evidence to settle it, and (2) the alternative solutions to disagreement are not available. Predicates of personal taste and moral predicates do not meet this standard (Hales 2014: 77). Relativism-inducing irreconcilable differences and disagreements can be found at a higher level of abstraction and, generally, in the choice of “independent methods of generating non-inferential beliefs which are then used as basic data for building theories that one holds in reflective equilibrium” (Hales 2014: 63).

The purported cases of persistent and irresolvable disagreements where neither side seems to be at fault play a central role in the equal validity condition of relativists.

§1.2.2 Accommodating difference

The purported fact of deep difference between cultures, styles of reasoning, world-views, and so forth is also frequently taken as a key motivation for relativism. Relativists cite data from anthropology and history to argue that, in some crucial areas of discourse, there are no universally agreed norms, values, or even frameworks of representation or of valuation. The crucial point here is that such differences may not involve or lead to actual disagreements. Rather, it is the very fact of variability that provides a ground for supporting relativism. Actual disagreements are often a consequence of such differences, but they are not a necessary consequence of it. The argument is that different cultures, societies, and so forth have varying and ultimately incompatible values and sets of fundamental beliefs, when we are not in a position to choose between them. As we will in Chapter 2, arguments for relativism based on differences among beliefs and customs have a long history, going back to Herodotus, if not before, and are the backbone of cultural relativism.

Carol Rovane (2012, 2013) is one of the philosophers who rejects the prevailing consensus that overcoming persistent disagreement is the main motivation for relativism. She advocates what she calls an “Alternatives intuition”, based on observations of profound cultural and cognitive differences, and opposes the “disagreement intuition of relativism”. Crucially,

Rovane thinks that faultless disagreements are not proper disagreements, at least not in the sense we think of them in our ordinary encounters, where, at pain of violating the law of non-contradiction, we deny that both sides can be right. The situations that are construed as relativism-inducing disagreements lack the distinctive normative significance of a disagreement, which arises only in situations of ordinary disagreements in which the parties cannot both be right. In her approach, relativism is motivated by the existence of truths that cannot be embraced together, not because they contradict and hence disagree with each other but because they are not universal truths. Relativism, she argues, arises because different languages or theories, purportedly about the same subject-matter, fail to share the meanings of their central terms (see Rovane 2013: 116). David Velleman (2013), in a similar vein, rejects the idea that disagreements can ever be faultless and, indeed, finds the idea of faultless disagreement unintelligible (Velleman 2013: 2).

According to the Alternatives intuition, relativism arises with the existence, or perhaps just the possibility, of alternatives in the sense of truths that cannot be embraced together. Donald Davidson's famous article "On the very idea of conceptual scheme" primarily targets this kind of relativism. Bernard Williams's relativism of distance is another example for he argues that certain concepts are only available to people who live in a particular form of life. These are concepts that are not a part of what Williams calls the "absolute conception of the world" and do not express truths that any rational creature, regardless of her culture, would, in principle, acknowledge. Truths that require these concepts for their formulation are expressible only in languages whose speakers take part in that particular form of life. Such truths need not be true in a relativized sense – true relative to some parameters, false relative to others – rather, such truths are perspectival: real but visible only from a certain angle, that is, for people who adopt a certain way of life. The holders of one system cannot go over to another system without losing some of the key elements and assumptions of their prevailing world-view. Ian Hacking's (1982) views on styles of reasons and Nelson Goodman's (1978) multimundialism views may also provide grounds for weaker versions of relativism of difference. Rovane also puts Thomas Kuhn in this category and writes:

Take Kuhn, for example. Although there are good reasons not to classify him as a relativist, his account of theoretical paradigms and the revolutionary character of scientific change was widely regarded by his contemporaries

as having relativistic implications. This was not because he characterized competing theoretical paradigms as giving rise to relativism-inducing disagreements in which both parties are right. The relativistic implications were thought to flow from a quite different aspect of them, which is that they do not share meanings at all, and moreover, that this so even when they appear to employ the same theoretical terms. Kuhn's idea was that when theories belonging to different paradigms appear to employ the same theoretical terms, they nevertheless apply those terms in completely different ways, with the result that the terms do not refer to the same theoretical entities. It follows that such paradigms could not, strictly speaking, contradict each other, in the sense of affirming and denying the same proposition. Thus, disagreement between the theories was not the thing at stake; it was more that these theories, without a commonly shared semantics for their terms, were to be characterized as *alternatives* to each other.

(Rovane 2013: 72)

As we will see in Chapter 9, Rovane uses this “difference intuition” to argue for moral relativism in circumstances where two parties may be addressing quite different moral circumstances, for which they need quite different moral truths to live by without engaging in any actual moral disagreement. To embrace radically differing moral standards amounts to not (being able) to speak to each other, or at least to talking past each other, rather than disagreeing with each other.

What the argument from disagreement and the argument from difference have in common is the claim that truth and justification are plural, that there could be more than one correct account of how things stand in at least some domains.

Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009: 60–61) and John MacFarlane (2014) following them, have argued that disagreement can be understood in two different senses: disagreement as a state versus disagreement as an activity involving attitudes of disagreement between parties who are having a disagreement. Thus, relativism of difference may not involve actual attitudinal disagreements, but ultimately invokes states of disagreement. The implicit invocation of disagreement can be seen in Bernard Williams's own writings, where he starts his discussion of relativism of difference by claiming that the “first condition” for the “problem” of relativism is that there must be systems of belief that somehow *exclude* one another (cited in Rovane 2013: 104). By exclusion, he seems to mean logical exclusion. Davidson too,

who defined relativism in terms of the possibility of there being “alternative” conceptual schemes, often resorts to the locution of disagreement in talking about the phenomenon under consideration (Davidson 1974: 184).

The differences highlighted by the relativists are genuinely irreconcilable if in some sense they exclude each other: for instance, by rendering contradictory verdicts on the same subject-matter. These contradictory verdicts are in effect expressions of actual or possible disagreements. In this sense, then, difference does collapse into disagreement. The collapse of difference into disagreement may be avoided if we think that there are reasons to separate the domains of discourse from each other, maybe because of semantic or epistemic incommensurability. Kuhn and Feyerabend’s talk of incommensurability between successive scientific paradigms is such an attempt. Carol Rovane also argues that relativism of difference can be formulated in such a way that some truth-value-bearers are seen as having no logical relations to one another, that “there are many non-comprehensive bodies of truths that cannot be conjoined, that there are many worlds rather than one” (Rovane 2013: 91). However, this form of multimundialism is not without its problems, as we shall see in Chapters 9 and 10.

§1.2.3 *The inevitability of perspectivalism*

A further starting point for defending relativism is the conviction that all judgments and beliefs are irredeemably perspectival. Claims to knowledge, expressions of conviction, theoretical and practical explanations all rely on interpretive schemes, and interpretations have an irredeemably perspectival character. They express stands from a point of view, and the view from no-where or the “God’s Eye” perspective is not available to us mortals. The relativist claim, then, is that in any judgment, be it about ethics or on scientific matters, there is an implicit reference to a point of view or particular framework from which our specific judgments descend. The position, in recent years, has been given a semantic twist.

Strong support for this view has come from social scientists and cultural theorists who focus on the socio-cultural determinants of human beliefs and actions. As we will see in Chapter 2, the social sciences, from their very inception, were hospitable to relativism. Indeed, August Comte, the father of sociology, claimed that a strength of “positive sociology” was its “tendency to render relative the ideas which were at first absolute” (Comte 1976 [1830–1842]: 89). Other social scientists, under the influence of Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Wilhelm Dilthey, have given credence to the idea

that human beliefs and actions could be understood and evaluated only relative to their social and economic background and context. Beliefs, desires, and actions, the argument goes, are never independent of a background of cultural presuppositions, interests, and values. We cannot step out of our language, culture, and socio-historical conditions to survey reality from an Archimedean vantage point. Even perceptions are “theory-laden” on these views, and could vary between linguistic and cultural groupings. The sociological view that beliefs are context-dependent, in the sense that their context helps explain why people have the beliefs they do, has also been used to support what is sometimes called “social” or “sociological relativism”. That is, the view that truth (or correctness) is relative to social contexts because we can both understand and judge beliefs and values only relative to the context out of which they arise. Context-dependence is also used to explain empirical observations of diversity in beliefs and values; different social contexts, the argument goes, give rise to differing, possibly incompatible norms and values.

The perspectival justification of relativism takes a variety of forms, but many of these rely on Pierre Duhem’s thesis of underdetermination of theory by data. According to the Quine–Duhem thesis, no amount of empirical evidence would be adequate by itself for deciding between rival scientific hypotheses, because incompatible theories can be consistent with the available evidence. Relativism threatens whenever conflicting theories or views appear to have equal claim to truth or justification. The underdetermination thesis is used to highlight the absence of neutral starting points for our beliefs. Choices between incompatible but equally well-supported rival theories, it is argued, are often made based on interests and local preferences and practices rather than on neutral universal grounds. The moral of underdetermination is that it is not just the facts on the ground, scientific or otherwise, that determine or justify our beliefs. Such beliefs are open to a variety of legitimate interpretations. We will return to this topic at greater length in Chapter 6.

Rorty’s treatment of the disagreement between Galileo and Bellarmine, mentioned above, is a good instance of the type of perspectivalism that leads to relativism. As we will see in Chapter 7, Rorty fulfills the no-neutrality condition of relativism by arguing that there are no a-temporal standards which would enable us to declare Galileo as objectively right and rational. As he memorably quips, “justification is only justification from the point of view of the survivors, the victors. There is not point of view more exalted than theirs to assume” (Rorty 1999: 27).

Helen Longino's contextual empiricism is another good example of appeal to the perspectival dimension of interpretation. Longino (1990) is a relativist insofar as she argues that "epistemic justification is relative to background assumptions because such assumptions are needed to establish the relevance of empirical evidence to a hypothesis or a theory" (1990: 43). She also argues for relativism in the negative sense outlined above insofar as she believes that objectivity is a function of the practices of a community (1990: 74) and that we cannot make sense of the core antirealist idea of objectivity independently of its social context and of the practices surrounding it. Like many feminist epistemologists, she also believes that the social and cultural context of science is instrumental in introducing values and norms into the practices of science (1990: 83).⁵ What Longino has in common with Rorty is the primacy she gives to the social conditions of both justification and scientific discovery and the role these conditions have in shaping epistemic norms.

Perspectivalism has also been expressed in a semantic form. According to this approach, the contents of utterances are assigned truth-values relative to the particular context or perspective of the speaker or the assessor (Brogaard 2010). Understood in this sense, semantic perspectivalism can be seen as a version of semantic relativism discussed in Chapters 3, 9, and 10.

§1.2.4 *The virtues of relativism*

Relativism in general, and moral relativism in particular, gained popularity, in the 20th century in particular, because of their perceived links with tolerance and open-mindedness. Relativists often directly link the virtue of tolerance with a relativistic outlook. They claim that all moral frameworks and their cultural contexts not only should be tolerated but are also worthy of respect. The injunction toward tolerance is at the heart of classical liberalism. John Stuart Mill in Chapter 3 of his book *On Liberty* articulated the credo of tolerance thus:

Such are the differences among human beings in their sources of pleasure, their susceptibilities of pain, and the operation on them of different physical and moral agencies, that unless there is a corresponding diversity in their modes of life, they neither obtain their fair share of happiness, nor grow up to the mental, moral and aesthetic stature of which their nature is capable. Why then should tolerance, as far as the public sentiment is concerned, extend only to tastes and modes of life which extort acquiescence by the multitude of their adherents?

(Mill 1989: 68)

The confluence of tolerance and relativism has created the unfortunate impression that to be a tolerant liberal one must also accept relativism. The conceptual connection between relativism and tolerance is far from clear. For one thing, the true mark of tolerance is to accept a point of view that one considers wrong, but the relativist is not, or at least not obviously, in a position to judge any point of view as wrong. Moreover, if all values are culture-relative, then tolerance could be a value only for those cultures that judge it in that light. Hence, relativism would lead to tolerance only for those who already recognize the value of tolerance. The point is brought home by the way relativism is adopted as an official doctrine by the most intolerant societies, as we will see in Chapter 2, and is adaptable to all ideologies and not just liberalism. W. T. Stace famously observed,

Certainly, if we believe that any one moral standard is as good as any other, we are likely to be more tolerant. We shall tolerate widow-burning, human sacrifice, cannibalism, slavery, the infliction of physical torture, or any other of the thousand and one abominations... But this is not the kind of toleration that we want, and I do not think its cultivation will prove 'an advantage to morality'.

(Stace 1937/1973: 58–59)

This is certainly not the type of open-mindedness that the liberals desire or advocate. We will briefly return to this topic in Chapters 6 and 9, where the connections between relativism and the socio-political views of feminist epistemologists, as well as the connections between moral relativism and tolerance, are discussed.

§1.3 Forms of relativism

Relativism comes in a variety of shapes and forms when subdivided according to its scope, domain, subject-matter, and mode.

§1.3.1 *Global versus local relativism*

The first crucial distinction is between global and local forms of relativism. Global relativism amounts to the claim that truth and falsehood, in any domain and pertaining to any statement, are always relative. Nothing is true absolutely. The strong claim, as we will see in Chapter 3, is open to the charge of self-refutation and the problem of infinite regress. Local

Notes

- 1 While faultless disagreement does imply equal validity, the converse does not hold, there is more to being engaged in an actual disagreement than accepting the equal validity or parity of two conflicting propositions.
- 2 Kusch's most recent position on this topic (see Kusch 2019) specifies dependence, non-absolutism, plurality, conflict and non-neutrality, but rejects equal validity.
- 3 Equal validity is particularly clear in the case of taste, where different gustatory reactions and attendant claims vis-à-vis the same food seem to be equally legitimate.

It may be more difficult to maintain, at least *de facto*, in other areas of discourse such as morals, or with respect to epistemic claims. Yet, we claim, relativism is committed to holding that different and incompatible viewpoints in any area of discourse for which this doctrine has been invoked are legitimate *at least in principle*.

This caveat should assuage the worry that relativists would be committed to holding that any viewpoint in these “more robust” areas of discourse is *actually* on par.

- 4 For instance, in his April 12, 1615 letter to Father Foscarini, Bellarmine wrote that

to affirm that the Sun, in its very truth, is at the center of the universe... is a very dangerous attitude and one calculated not only to arouse all Scholastic philosophers and theologians but also to injure our faith by contradicting the Scriptures.

The passage from the scripture that Bellarmine had in mind is the following: “Then spake Joshua ... Sun stand thou still upon Gibeon; and thou, Moon, in the valley of Ajalon ... So, the sun stood still in the midst of heaven, and hastened not to go down about a whole day” (Joshua, X 12–13). There has been little doubt, for the last several centuries, that the sun does not literally go down and that the facts of the planetary motion have shown Cardinal Bellarmine to be wrong.

- 5 For a helpful discussion of different forms of contextualism in Longino, see Rolin (2015).
- 6 For reasons of space, this account leaves out the important role American Pragmatism, particularly William James, have played in the development of conceptual relativism on the one hand and Rorty's brand of relativism, which he paradoxically calls ethnocentrism, on the other hand.