

# RELATIVISM: A GUIDE FOR THE PERPLEXED

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## CHAPTER 1

# A DEFINITION AND BRIEF HISTORY OF RELATIVISM

### INTRODUCTION

Relativism is a multi-faceted topic that ranges over a vast array of areas of human enquiry, from pop culture to technical journals in philosophy. In discussions of relativism, one often hears cited Allan Bloom's famous quotation from his controversial work *The Closing of the American Mind*, that, 'There is one thing a professor can be absolutely sure of; almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative' (Bloom 1987, p. 25).

There appears to be some empirical data that may support Bloom's claim. For example, consider the following:

In two national surveys conducted by Barna Research, one among adults and one among teenagers, people were asked if they believe that there are moral absolutes that are unchanging or that moral truth is relative to the circumstances. By a 3-to-1 margin (64% vs. 22%) adults said truth is always relative to the person and their situation. The perspective was even more lopsided among teenagers, 83% of whom said moral truth depends on the circumstances, and only 6% of whom said moral truth is absolute (Barna Group 2002).

This may not mean that a majority of Americans are moral relativists in a strong sense, but it does give some support for the idea that relativism is part of how people think about philosophical issues today.<sup>1</sup>

Whether unreflective relativism is a default intellectual position in contemporary Western culture remains to be seen. This guide is not

meant as a proof that relativism is accepted by most people; rather this study will attempt to show what relativism is and the various criticisms of it that occur in the sub-disciplines of philosophy. We begin this chapter with a short discussion of how to define and understand relativism broadly speaking. We then present a brief survey of the history of relativistic thought. We conclude this chapter with a cautionary note that seeks to be charitable to some forms of relativistic thought while simultaneously maintaining that certain forms of relativism are intellectually implausible.

### DEFINING RELATIVISM

What is relativism?<sup>2</sup> In developing a general statement of what relativism is, it may be useful to examine several recent definitions of relativism. Consider the following: 'Any doctrine could be called relativism which holds that something exists, or has certain properties or features, or is true or in some sense obtains, not simply but only in relation to something else' (Lacey 1986, p. 206). This definition is too broad. Its broadness lies in the phrase 'only in relation to something else'. For example, philosophers who maintain some kind of correspondence theory of truth might claim that a proposition  $p$  is true in virtue of the relation that  $p$  has to a fact  $f$ ;  $p$  is true only in relation to  $f$ . A theistic philosopher might argue that the universe exists and has the properties it has 'only in relation to' the mind of God. This definition will not work since 'only in relation to' includes, in the two examples just presented, alethic (truth) and ontological (existence) dependence (which is a relation of something with something else) in the definition. But this is not what is ordinarily meant by advocates of relativism. There are only certain kinds of relations that result in relativism.

Other definitions are too narrow. For example: 'Relativism [is] the denial that there are certain kinds of universal truths' (Pojman 1995, p. 690). This definition puts an epistemic premium on what relativism is, but not all forms of relativism need to have epistemic elements – although all forms of relativism have epistemic implications. Ontological relativism, according to which the existence and/or nature of some entity  $x$  is relative to language(s), concepts, etc., does not seem to have an epistemic element to it. However, it seems to have epistemic implications in that if the existence and/or nature of an entity  $x$  is relative to language, then knowing that  $x$  exists and

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exists as such, will be dependent upon what x is like which is dependent upon language, concepts or whatever.

Let me propose the following definition of relativism that is broad enough to encompass a wide variety of relativism and narrow enough to exclude other varieties:

Relativism = df:

the nature and existence of items of knowledge, qualities, values or logical entities non-trivially obtain their natures and/or existence from certain aspects of human activity, including, but not limited to, beliefs, cultures, languages, etc.

This definition is broad enough to show that philosophical relativism can be applied to a variety of views within the academic discipline of philosophy (e.g. ontology, epistemology, ethics, aesthetics), but it is also narrow enough to draw out the idea that the existence of things within these philosophical categories is dependent in some non-trivial way on the activity of at least one human mind. With this notion of relativism in mind, let us turn briefly to examine a short history of relativistic thought in Western philosophy.

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF RELATIVISM<sup>3</sup>

From the history of philosophy, it appears that the first articulation of relativism (at least in its epistemic form) was given by Protagoras in his work *Truth*, now lost but most widely known through Plato's presentation of it in the *Theaetetus*. What exactly is Protagorean relativism? It is simply the view that 'what seems true to anyone is true for him to whom it seems so' (Plato, *Theaetetus* 170a). Siegel claims,

Protagoras' view is an extreme version of relativism: knowledge and truth are relative to the person contemplating the proposition in question. p is true (for me) if it so seems; false (for me) if it so seems. Since the final arbiter of truth and knowledge is the individual, Protagoras' view denies the existence of any standard or criterion higher than the individual by which claims to truth and knowledge can be adjudicated (Siegel 1987, p. 4).

Harré and Krausz also recognize that Protagorean relativism is extreme in its formulation. Part of what makes Protagorean relativism

extreme lies in the making of knowledge relative to the individual. Harré and Krausz concur with Siegel when they state,

Protagorean relativism is an extreme form of truth relativism. It is extreme in the sense that it makes the truth or warranted assertibility of propositions relative to individual persons on unique occasions. This is a most implausible doctrine, in that we could hardly imagine a coherent form of life developing in such circumstances. But there are other varieties of epistemic relativism which are not so easily dismissed. One could concede the possibility that every general relativism holds among large scale belief systems without embracing extreme Protagorean individualism (Harré and Krausz 1996, p. 74).

As Harré and Krausz recognize, the extreme individualism makes Protagorean relativism problematic.<sup>4</sup>

Although relativism has its philosophical beginning with Protagoras, it has been present in various ways and in various times throughout the long history of Western thought from the 'pre-Socratic' period up through the 21st century. However, one is hard pressed to find hints of relativism in post-Aristotelian philosophy, Roman philosophy and early Christian philosophy, or even find philosophers being accused of holding to relativistic thought, until the 16th century. While the Romans had their sceptics, they did not seem to have their relativists, and with the rise of the 'church age' in the Middle Ages, given the canonical theism so dominant in this period, there was no room for relativism of any kind.

It was not until the Renaissance that relativism appears once again to provide a challenge to the thought of classical antiquity and the medieval synthesis of faith and reason. The historian of philosophy Fredrick Copleston accuses the Renaissance philosopher Michel de Montaigne (1533–92) of reviving in his essays 'the ancient arguments for . . . the relativity of sense-experience, the impossibility of the intellect's rising above this relativity to the sure attainment of absolute truth . . . [and] the relativity of value judgments' (Copleston 1993, p. 228).

Probably the most famous Enlightenment philosopher holding to, or at least accused of holding to, a form of relativism was Giambattista Vico (1688–1744). Vico (most famous for his views about the nature of history) developed an epistemology in which

truth is understood as something that is made. Vico states, ‘it is reasonable to assume that the ancient sages of Italy entertained the following beliefs about the true. “The true is precisely what is made”’, and ‘human truth is what man puts together and makes in the act of knowing it’ (Vico 1988, p. 46). This sounds like it could lead to a form of relativism with respect to truth being made by particular individuals or groups of individuals. However, Vico was not a wholesale relativist. He did not believe that our knowledge of the physical world was relative to the human mind, but only that our knowledge of geometrical and mathematical objects is created by the mind. His view was that we come to have ‘scientific knowledge of Nature only in so far as we remake, as it were the structure of the object in the cognitive order’ (Copleston 1993, p. 156). Vico was also not a relativist with regard to the goodness or badness of particular customs in history. He did not claim like the Greek sceptics ‘that it is impossible to judge whether one custom is better or worse than another’ (Burke 1985, p. 56). We will look at some 20th-century examples of wholesale ethical relativism in Chapter 3.

Other philosophers from the 17th and 18th centuries, such as Charles de Secondat Montesquieu (1689–1755), François Marie Arouet de Voltaire (1694–1778) and Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), like Vico claimed that things appeared relativistic, but were merely partial relativists. For example, Voltaire pointed out the differences in moral views across cultures, but he rejected ‘extreme ethical relativism’ (Copleston 1993, p. 23).

In the 18th and 19th centuries, proponents of relativism seem to begin to sprout up both in Great Britain and on the Continent. Sir William Hamilton (1788–1856) in a section of his works entitled the ‘Relativity of Human Knowledge’ states, ‘We must, therefore, more precisely limit our sphere of knowledge, by adding, that all we know is known only under the special conditions of our faculties. “Man,” says Protagoras, “is the measure of the universe”’ (Hamilton 1861, p. 91). Hamilton follows with a lengthy quotation from Bacon, ‘All perceptions, as well of the senses as of the mind, are conformed to the nature of the percipient individual, and not to the true nature of the universe which distorts and discolours the nature of things, by mingling its own nature with it’ (p. 92). Hamilton appears to be arguing that perceptual knowledge is relative to the individual. He states, ‘In the perception of an external object, the mind does not

know it in immediate relation to itself, but mediately, in relation to the material organs of sense' (p. 94).

It is not clear to what extent Hamilton maintains relativism about knowledge, as it appears that he is simply arguing that knowledge comes from perception and our perceptions of objects are relative to our sense faculties and the physiological apparatus through which we sense things. However, his invocation of Protagoras is non-trivial. If Protagorean relativism amounts to a self-refuting position and Hamilton is invoking these Protagorean views as predecessors of his own, then his own views will succumb to these difficulties as well. While it is not my task here to evaluate Hamilton's views, it is historically noteworthy that Hamilton is one of the figures in the history of philosophy who holds to a form of relativism that lay dormant for millennia.

In a commentary of Hamilton's work, John Stuart Mill praises Hamilton stating, 'Among the philosophical writers of the present century in these islands, no one occupies a higher position than Sir William Hamilton' (Mill 1866, p. 9). However, Mill recognized that the notion of the relativity of knowledge is not without difficulties. The person claiming that knowledge is relative in the sense that

we may . . . be looking at Things in themselves, but through imperfect glasses: that we see may be the very Thing, but the colours and forms which the glass conveys to us may be partly an optical illusion . . . could not, consistently, assert that all our knowledge is relative; since his opinion would be that we have a capacity of Absolute knowledge, but that we are liable to mistake relative knowledge for it (p. 27).

Mill concludes after his examination of Hamilton's views that it does not appear that Hamilton held to the relativity of knowledge in any but a trivial sense in which 'we can only know what we can know' (p. 40) which, according to Mill, is a 'barren truism' (p. 41).

Turning now to the 19th century, we find that the philosopher Augustus Comte (1798–1857) is also accused of relativism. Wilhelm Windelband, in his *A History of Philosophy*, states:

Comte's projected positive system of the sciences first of all pushes Hume's and Condillac's conception to the farthest point. Not only is human knowledge assigned for its province to the reciprocal



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relations of phenomena, but there is nothing absolute whatever, that might lie unknown, as it were, at the basis of phenomena. The only absolute principle is, that all is relative. To talk of first causes of ultimate ends of things has no rational sense (Windelband 1901, pp. 650–1).

Similarly, Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) in his *First Principles* following in Hamilton's path, maintains that knowledge is relative (Spencer 1958, pp. 80–1). At the close of the 19th century, Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844–1900) is saddled by Copleston with a strong view of relativism. Copleston states:

But there is, according to Nietzsche, no absolute truth. The concept of absolute truth is an invention of philosophers who are dissatisfied with the world of Becoming and seek an abiding world of Being. 'Truth is that sort of error without which a particular type of living being could not live. The value for life is ultimately decisive' (Copleston 1993, p. 409).<sup>5</sup>

The obvious comment on Nietzsche's general view of truth is that it presupposes the possibility of occupying an absolute standpoint from which the relativity of all truth or its fictional character can be asserted, and that this presupposition is at variance with the relativist interpretation of truth. Further, this comment by no means loses its point if Nietzsche is willing to say that his own view of truth is perspectival and 'fictional'. No doubt Nietzsche would admit this in principle, while insisting that his interpretation of the world was the expression of a higher form of the Will to Power. But what is the standard of higher or lower (p. 410)? With the advent of the 20th century, Ferdinand Canning Scott Schiller (1864–1937) raises the banner of relativism in a way that is unprecedented in the history of philosophy to this point. Schiller states that Protagoras' 'famous dictum that "man is the measure of all things" must be ranked even above the Delphic "Know thyself," as compressing the largest quantum of vital meaning into the most compact form' (Schiller 1912, p. 33). Schiller criticizes the Platonic (ultimately an 'idealist') notion of a duplication of the real world with the Ideal world. Schiller maintains contra Plato that concepts are not eternal, timeless entities by means of which we know through grasping them with our intellect. Rather,

concepts are not unalterable and only relatively constant (like mere material things), being essentially tools slowly fashioned by a practical intelligence for the mastery of its experience, whose value and truth reside in their application to the particular cases of their use, and not in their timeless validity nor in their supra-sensible otium cum dignitate in a transcendent realm of abstractions (p. 64).

Regarding truth and rationality Schiller urges,

Let us go back to Plato, by all means; but let us go back not with the intention of repeating his mistake and painfully plunging into the ‘chasm’ he has made, but in order to correct his initial error. But to do this we must return from Plato to Protagoras. We must abandon the attempt to dehumanize knowledge, to attribute to it an ‘independence’ of human purposes, an ‘absoluteness’ which divorces it from life, an ‘eternity’ of truth must mean its applicability at whatever time we will . . . we must start once more, with Protagoras (p. 69).

In a little fictional dialogue entitled ‘Protagoras the Humanist’ Schiller forms a conversation between Protagoras and a philosopher named Morosophus. Schiller has Protagoras discuss how we ‘make’ the world into what it is. He states, ‘We “find” a world made for us, because we are the heirs of bygone ages, profiting by their work, and it may be suffering for their folly. But we can in part remake it, and reform a world that has slowly formed itself. But of all this how could we get an inkling if we had not begun by perceiving that of all things, Man, each man, is the measure’ (p. 320). Although Nelson Goodman does not acknowledge Schiller in his little book, the title alone, *Ways of Worldmaking*, would probably have made Schiller quite happy.<sup>6</sup>

It is not my purpose here to give an entire history of relativism. Nor is it my task to speculate as to why relativism is largely absent from the philosophical scene for nearly 2,000 years. Rather it is simply my intent to place current discussions of relativism in a bit of historical context preceding our own times that one philosopher speculates will be called ‘The Age of Relativism’ (Harris 1992, p. 1). Philosophical views usually have some historical roots, and relativism as it appears in contemporary philosophy is no exception.

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Just as philosophers in the past have examined other philosophers' works, examining the putatively relativistic claims that are made by various philosophers (Plato vs. Protagoras; Mill vs. Hamilton; Copleston vs. Nietzsche), so too it is our task to examine the relativistic claims made in our own time to see what we can learn from these claims and what we must reject. We turn now to that task with a look at relativism in the three main areas of philosophy: epistemology, ontology, ethics and aesthetics.

### A CAUTIONARY NOTE

Relativism in philosophy and in other disciplines has become so much of a concern it has sparked an understandable backlash. Relativism is often raised as a bugbear to motivate people to reject a certain position or cluster of positions in philosophy that lead to an 'anything goes' view of the particular topic under discussion, especially in ethics.<sup>7</sup> While the bulk of this particular work aims to show the problems of relativistic thinking in various areas of philosophical enquiry, and is thus anti-relativistic, I want to be careful at the outset to recognize that anti-relativistic thought is often used to justify positions which, while not relativistic, are certainly not entailed by a failure of relativism. For example, while it may be the case that relativistic thought in ontology fails, this does not entail Platonic dualism about reality; epistemological relativism, while self-defeating, does not entail either a correspondence or coherence view of truth; relativism in ethics might be incoherent, but this does not entail that an Aristotelian virtue theory is the way in which we ought to approach the good life; relativism in religion may be intellectually implausible, but this entails neither theism nor atheism. The bulk of the arguments in each chapter of this book focus on the main difficulties faced by a particular philosophical outlook, namely a relativistic one. So, while this book is anti-relativistic, I am aware that anti-anti-relativism might not be such a bad position as well, especially if the anti-relativism in question is used to support philosophical views that it is unable to support.

Clifford Geertz in a very readable essay sketches the possibly false dichotomy between relativism and anti-relativism. Geertz writes:

We are being offered a choice of worries. What the relativists, so-called, want us to worry about is provincialism – the danger

that our perceptions will be dulled, our intellects constricted, and our sympathies narrowed by the overlearned and overvalued acceptances of our own society. What the antirelativists, self-declared, want us to worry about, and worry about and worry about, as though our very souls depended upon it, is a kind of spiritual entropy, a heat death of the mind, in which everything is as significant, thus as insignificant, as everything else: anything goes, to each his own, you pays your money and you takes your choice, I know what I like, not in the south, *tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner* (Geertz 1984, p. 265).

Geertz' reminder here is a good one. Although Geertz' paper takes place within the context of the discipline of anthropology, relativistic views in philosophy are related to these ideas. On the one hand, relativistic philosophical tendencies may have the virtues which Geertz points out such as warning us against provincialism. On the other hand, anti-relativistic philosophical positions rightly warn us about the 'anything goes' attitudes that seem to arise from relativism.

However, Geertz claims that some thinkers (e.g. Paul Johnson in *Modern Times*) maintain that 'Cultural Relativism causes everything bad' (p. 267). Cultural relativism is not the root of all evil. False beliefs, wrong accounts of reality, moral evils can be easily had without relativism. Geertz is an anti-relativist *and* an anti-anti-relativist. I am sympathetic to this position. Thus, although this book will argue against relativism, this does not imply that relativism as such is the root of all evil. It most certainly is not, even though it is implausible as an approach to philosophical inquiry.