

# EPISTEMIC RELATIVISM

*Paul Boghossian*

This essay is about epistemic relativism, relativism about the epistemic domain. Since different views have gone by the name “relativism,” epistemic relativism is not a single view, but a family of views. What unites these various views is that, in one way or another, the fact that some item of evidence justifies a given belief is said to be relative to the value of some further parameter. Typically, this further parameter is held to be either the believer’s or the assessor’s epistemic system or framework. (Compare moral relativism: the fact that some act is wrong is said to be relative to the agent’s (or assessor’s) moral code or framework.)

In order to focus on the issues that concern us, we will need to make certain assumptions about what epistemic facts are like. Given the state of epistemology these days, most any such assumption is likely to be controversial. However, once we get clear about the relevant issues, it is likely that we will be able to restate our discussion using alternative assumptions.

I will assume that a canonical *epistemic sentence* is a sentence of the form:

- (1) S’s belief that p is justified iff (a) S bases his belief that p on his (overall) evidence E and (b) E justifies the proposition that p.

I will concentrate on the propositional component:

- (2) S’s overall evidence E justifies the proposition that p.

I will assume that the notion of justification is a *normative* notion; that when we say that E justifies p we are positively evaluating believing p, given E.

Let us take a particular example. Most of us tend to think of the following epistemic sentence as true:

- (3) Its visually seeming to S that there is a cat in front of him, along with S’s not possessing any background information that counts against that being the case, justifies the proposition that there is a cat in front of S.

At least on the surface, then, our epistemic discourse suggests that whether a proposition is justified is relative to a thinker’s overall evidence and to nothing else.

One type of epistemic relativist thinks that this is wrong, that there is a further parameter involved. He might think that this further dependence is already anticipated by our discourse in a way that might not be apparent on the surface but which would be

revealed by a deeper semantical analysis. Or he may think that our discourse is in error on this point and needs to be replaced by a discourse that overtly acknowledges this further dependence. (On the latter view, the epistemic relativist's thought would be akin to Einstein's view that we were wrong to think that two events could simply be simultaneous with one another, independently of a spatio-temporal frame of reference.)

Either way, the epistemic relativist thinks that we should affirm the following two claims (see Boghossian 2007):

- (4) There are no facts of the form 'E justifies p,' but only facts of the form 'E justifies p relative to the epistemic system, C, accepted by a given person or community.' (Epistemic Relationism)
- (5) There are several mutually incompatible epistemic systems, but no facts by virtue of which one of these is more correct than any of the others. (Epistemic Pluralism)

The Epistemic Pluralism clause is needed because without it Epistemic Relationism could not be guaranteed to have captured a relativistic view (suppose one of these epistemic systems were held to be privileged, the uniquely correct epistemic system relative to which epistemic claims should be assessed). It is possible to see something like this view in the work of Richard Rorty and others (see Rorty 1980; Barnes and Bloor 1982; Lennon 1997).

What motivates this type of relativist? The most important of these motivations can be summarized as follows (for more detailed discussion see Boghossian 2007):

- A. How can it just be a fact about the world that such and such information epistemically justifies a given belief? Epistemic facts, if there are any, are normative facts. And there is a general puzzle making sense of absolute normative facts, facts that are binding on anyone whether or not they are aware of them or accept them.
- B. If there were absolute normative facts, there would be a big puzzle explaining how we could know about them. Any attempt to know anything relies upon some epistemic system or other—some sort of system of general rules that tells us what justifies what. But it is not possible to justify a view about which epistemic rule is correct by relying on that very rule.
- C. History and anthropology teach us that different people have subscribed to different and mutually incompatible epistemic systems. Yet, for the reasons mentioned above under B, it would be impossible to rationally resolve a dispute between these systems.

The proponent of (4) owes us answers to three questions:

- (a) What is an epistemic system?
- (b) What is it for E's justifying p to obtain relative to such a system?

and

- (c) What is it for a person to accept a given epistemic system?

And the most natural package of answers to these questions begins with an answer to (a) that has it that an epistemic system consists of general propositions of the form:

(6) For all  $e, h$ :  $e$  justifies  $h$  iff  $f(e, h)$ .

The relativist can then say, in answer to (b), that a *particular* statement of the form ‘ $e$  justifies  $h$ ’ (e.g.,  $S$ ’s seeming to see a cat justifies his believing that he sees one) obtains relative to such a system just in case that system, along with the epistemic facts, *entails* ‘ $e$  justifies  $h$ .’ And he can also say, in answer to (c), that to *accept* an epistemic system is to believe that its ingredient epistemic principles are true. However, this natural package of answers won’t do: it does not lead to a reflectively tenable position.

One problem is that propositions of the form (6) seem to be complete truth-evaluable propositions that state the conditions under which a belief would be absolutely justified. It is, therefore, not open to the relativist to say that he *believes* these propositions to be true, since it is a non-negotiable part of his view that no absolute epistemic principle is ever simply true.

A second problem is that, if the only facts there are are relational facts of the form

$E$  justifies  $p$  relative to epistemic system  $C$

then it looks as though the consistent relativist should never assert propositions of the form

(7)  $E$  justifies  $p$

but only propositions of the form

(8)  $E$  justifies  $p$  relative to the system,  $C$ , that I accept.

But the trouble is that while (7) is a properly normative proposition, (8) is just a logical remark about what the epistemic system in question does or does not claim, with no normative force whatsoever. Even someone who wholeheartedly disagreed with system  $C$  could agree that, according to  $C$ ,  $E$  justifies  $p$ . So, at least on this construal of epistemic relativism, the whole subject of epistemic justification will have been lost, and not just a universalist construal of it. We need to be able to retain genuine normative disagreements in the epistemic domain, if we are not to lose the subject matter. We may call this the Normativity Problem.

Finally, there is a problem making sense of the Pluralist clause. Here, the epistemic relativist’s thought is that there are many possible mutually conflicting epistemic systems, but no facts by virtue of which one of them is more correct than any of the others. But there is a serious puzzle seeing how any such claim could be true.

An epistemic system consists of a set of general normative propositions that specify under what conditions beliefs are and are not justified. So, we will have one system,  $C1$ , which says that:

If  $E$ , then  $p$  is justified

and we will have another system,  $C2$ , which contradicts it and says:

It is not the case that if  $E$ , then  $p$  is justified.

In such a circumstance, however, it is very hard to see how the Pluralist clause, which says that all epistemic systems are on a par as far as their correctness is concerned, could

be true. For, presumably, either it is the case that E is sufficient for p to be justified, or it is not. If we say, with the relativist, that E is not sufficient for p to be justified, because there are no absolute facts about justification, then C1 makes a false assertion; but C2, which denies that E is sufficient for p's justification, then says something true. How, then, could it possibly be right to say that there can be no fact by virtue of which some of these systems are more correct than any of the others?

### Alethic Relativism for Epistemic Sentences

Recent analytic philosophy has seen a great deal of interest in formulations of relativism that emphasize the relativity of the *truth* of propositions of a given domain (Kölbel 2002; MacFarlane 2007; Richard 2008). Applied to our case, the idea would be to accommodate the claim that there are only relational facts about epistemic justification not by saying that we should assert only claims of the form (8), which, when true would be absolutely true, but rather by saying that such non-relativized claims as

(7) *E justifies p*

have only relative truth-values and no absolute ones. In the case of such contents, fixing the facts is not enough to fix a truth-value; in addition, the thinker's or assessor's epistemic system (depending on the details of one's view) must also be specified.

This proposal looks as though it has a shot at solving the Normativity Problem for it allows us to continue judging claims that look normative. But even if it did solve that problem, it would still leave the other two problems untouched. And, it's worth emphasizing, it does not really solve the Normativity Problem either. There are several big problems only two of which can be outlined here (for further discussion see Boghossian forthcoming and Wright 2008).

First, the proposal requires a new notion of propositional content—of a complete judgeable claim—one that, unlike Frege's or Russell's, doesn't have its truth value either essentially or intrinsically. One and the same judgeable content will have different truth-values depending on the context (according to some views, the context of the judgment, and according to others, the context in which the judgment is assessed). But it is unclear that we can make sense of such a notion of a judgeable content.

Suppose I come across a token of "It was hot" written on a blackboard. Should I accept this sentence or reject it? Surely, there is nothing specific enough either to accept or reject. We need to know which place and time were being referred to so that we can attach some determinate truth conditions to the sentence and come up with a view as to whether they were or were not satisfied.

The alethic relativist's proposal is similarly puzzling—perhaps even more so, since as most of its proponents insist, the contents in question are to be assessed relative to the assessor's epistemic system rather than the original judger's (see Zimmerman 2007).

Second, if when I judge, "S ought to f" I am judging something that is true relative to my standards and if when you judge "S ought not to f" you are judging something that is true relative to your (different) standards, then we are clearly not disagreeing in any interesting sense.

This should be obvious, but is occasionally denied. Suppose we adopt a relativistic treatment of "It is hot," so that the content I express by "It is not hot" is the *negation* of the content that you express by "It is hot." Still if I uttered my token in NYC referring

to the weather in NYC and you uttered yours in Chicago referring to the weather in Chicago, then no matter how much our semantics allows us to say that my content is the negation of yours, we are clearly not disagreeing in any interesting sense.

However, if you and I can't disagree by my saying "S ought to f" and by your saying "S ought not to f," how can we claim to have captured the normative content of normative judgments?

### Absolutist Relativism

We have been trying to make sense of the idea that there are no absolute facts about epistemic justification. And we have not succeeded in getting very far.

In examining epistemic relativism, we have been guided by a conception of relativism according to which to be a relativist about a given domain is to hold that there are no absolute facts in that domain. To be a relativist about morality is to hold that there are no absolute facts of the form

Act A is morally bad

but only such absolute facts as

Act A is morally bad relative to a particular moral framework.

To be a relativist about epistemic justification is to hold that there are no absolute facts of the form

e justifies h

but only ones of the form

e justifies h relative to epistemic system C.

This does seem like a very natural construal of relativism and it conforms extremely well to the only uncontroversial cases of relativism that we know of—namely, the cases of motion, mass, and time order that are familiar from physics (see Boghossian 2007).

Traditionally, however, a rather different idea has also gone under the banner of relativism and we should look at that idea as it might be applied to the domain of epistemology. According to this idea, it's not that there are no absolute facts in a given domain; it's rather that such absolute facts as there are call for different and incompatible actions under different circumstances, where those circumstances are themselves permissible from the standpoint of the domain in question. That's rather abstract, so to illustrate what I have in mind here, let me discuss the case of etiquette.

We are all familiar with the idea that different cultures have different practices when it comes, say, to eating. For example, in the West it is considered impolite to noisily slurp one's noodles, while in Japan it can be considered impolite not to, the noisy slurping being a sign of the eater's satisfaction with the dish before him. How should we understand such a case?

Well, in the first instance the judgments we make are of the form

(R) It is rude to slurp one's noodles in (our) community C.

The relativization is made explicit.

But how do we now explain how a statement like (R) has normative force? It looks as though it is just a sociological remark about how things are done around here, one with which anyone could agree, even someone who belonged to a culture in which it is not rude to slurp one's noodles. Yet, if I say (R) to someone, a child, for example, I intend my remark to have normative force, to give him or her a reason to stop slurping his or her noodles.

The answer is that we all subscribe to some non-relative, universal moral norm, one that we typically express by saying

When in Rome do as the Romans do!

or, perhaps more precisely,

(Etiquette) With respect to certain behaviors, one ought to behave as the members of the community one finds oneself in find it natural to behave.

This normative principle is a non-relative, universally binding principle. Nevertheless, it prescribes acting in different ways depending on one's cultural location. It is our acceptance of this principle that explains how remarks like (R) can have normative force even as it accommodates our tolerance for alternative practices.

We may call this a species of Absolutist relativism, to contrast it with the sort of Thoroughgoing relativism that we have been discussing thus far. And we can imagine generating a version of epistemic relativism that conforms to it. Indeed, one of the most influential versions of epistemic relativism in the contemporary literature is an example of absolutist rather than thoroughgoing relativism.

The case I have in mind is that of Subjective Bayesianism. Bayes' rule (or theorem) prescribes how a thinker ought to update his beliefs in response to incoming evidence. Where  $P(A)$  is the prior probability of  $A$  and  $P(A/B)$  is the conditional probability of  $A$ , given  $B$ , Bayes' rule states that

$$P(A/B) = \frac{P(B/A) \cdot P(A)}{P(B)}$$

This rule, then, can be used to update one's belief in  $A$  given that one has observed  $B$  and Bayesianism is the view that doing so is the properly rational way to update one's beliefs.

Any such view has to face the question of how to assign the prior probabilities since Bayes' rule is useless without such an assignment and is itself silent about how that is rationally to be done.

A radical view in this connection has it that you are rationally permitted to assign whatever priors you find it natural to assign.

(Subjective Priors) For any contingent proposition  $p$  and credence value  $X$ , there exists a probability function  $f$  that assigns  $X$  to  $p$ , and  $S$  is rationally permitted to have that function as his initial credence function.

Subjective Bayesianism is a perfect example of what I have been calling Absolutist relativism. Both Bayes' rule and the doctrine I have labeled Subjective Priors are put forward as absolute non-relative norms that govern rational belief.

But Subjective Bayesianism has what can be thought of as a relativistic upshot. It allows two thinkers to have mutually incompatible views about whether  $e$  justifies  $p$ , if they have started out with sufficiently different prior assignments to  $p$ . And, yet, the view seems untouched by all the arguments that were directed at thoroughgoing versions of relativism (see MacFarlane 2008). So, can't the major controversies about relativism now proceed in this form?

In a sense, this is right. I don't think there is anything straightforwardly incoherent about absolutist versions of relativism per se. But what we should recognize is that the aspiring relativist now has a much harder hand to play.

One of the normative relativist's strongest cards, as noted above, is that it is very hard to see where absolute normative facts could come from. It is very hard to see how such facts could be built into the fabric of the world. His other strong card is that it is also hard to see how one could *know* anything about such facts, even if we could make sense of their existence. These powerful considerations give very strong support for the claim that launches a relativistic outlook, namely, that there are no absolute facts in the relevant normative domain, but only relative ones.

However, on the absolutist way of formulating relativism, where what underlies the relativism is some universally binding non-relative normative principle of some sort, both of these cards are taken away from the relativist. Having committed himself to knowing of the existence of at least one non-relative normative principle, he can no longer avail himself of those powerful considerations.

Instead, he will have to find some way of arguing that, although there are non-relative normative principles and although we are able to know what they are, still there are only the sorts of spare principles that govern etiquette.

This, however, will be a difficult trick to pull off. Once it has been admitted that there are at least some non-relative moral principles in a given domain, it's hard to see how to stop short of the conclusion that there are as many such principles as there intuitively seem to be in that domain. It's morally plausible that you should conform your table manners (and not even all of those) to whatever the local practice is; it's not plausible that you should so conform your views on the treatment of children or the sick.

Once we have admitted that we know of some absolute normative principles, ordinary normative reasoning kicks in to tell us exactly what such principles there are. Viewed in that light, any attempt to assimilate morality to etiquette will seem normatively implausible. What makes the Rome dictum the only dictum you need for etiquette is that it is morally plausible that when it comes to such matters as whether or not to slurp one's noodles, all that really matters is what the local conventions are. But it is not similarly plausible that that is all that matters when it comes to the question whether it is alright to cleanse a region of a particular ethnic minority. Once we allow that there are some absolute moral facts, our usual procedures for determining what such facts there are kick in. And it is very implausible that these procedures will yield the result that what it is morally correct to do in a given situation will depend on which norms are accepted in that situation, or what the agent's inclinations happen to be.

Similar remarks apply to the case of Subjective Bayesianism. The idea that you are rationally permitted to assign whatever priors you please is extremely implausible. It leads to the craziest beliefs counting as justified. It conflicts with whatever hold we have on the intuitive extension of 'justified.'

It's a good question what story the Bayesian could tell about what could rationally constrain the assignment of priors, but that's his problem. Just as it would be implausible

to maintain that people are morally permitted to adopt whatever moral rules they find it most natural to adopt, so it is implausible to maintain that they are rationally permitted to adopt whatever initial credence function they find it most natural to adopt.

### Epistemic Permissiveness

The tendency of our reflections has been to cast doubt both on thoroughgoing versions of epistemic relativism and on extreme versions of Absolutist relativism. But there is a more subtle position—one we might call, following Roger White, “epistemic permissiveness”—that is not so easily dispatched and that calls for considerably more work (see White 2005).

Even if we agree that there are perfectly absolute, universally binding epistemic norms governing the rationality of our beliefs, we face the question whether those norms imply Uniqueness:

(Uniqueness) Given one’s total evidence, there is a unique rational doxastic attitude that one can take to any proposition.

And here an interesting puzzle arises. On the one hand, Uniqueness seems too strong. Intuitively, as Gideon Rosen has put it (Rosen 2001: 71),

[i]t should be obvious that reasonable people can disagree, even when confronted with the same body of evidence. When a jury or a court is divided in a difficult case, the mere fact of disagreement does not mean that someone is being unreasonable.

This seems right. To take just a humdrum sort of case: we are familiar with the fact that one person can be more cautious than another in reaching conclusions on the basis of evidence. Of course, extreme caution, as exemplified by the Pyrrhonists, for example, might be thought to be a form of irrationality. But some small variation in caution seems to be permitted by the norms of rationality.

This, however, immediately leads to the conclusion that one person can be rational in concluding  $p$  on the basis of evidence  $e$  and another rational in suspending judgment on whether  $p$ , or perhaps even, under the right circumstances, concluding that not- $p$ . If Marco requires evidence of strength  $a$  to believe that  $p$  and Paolo requires evidence of strength  $a'$  ( $a' > a$ ) to believe that  $p$ , and both values of the caution parameter are rationally permissible, and the evidence is of strength  $a$  but not  $a'$ , then it looks as though Marco is rational in believing that  $p$  and Paolo is rational in withholding belief. This is puzzling, however, for it suggests that Marco himself could be rational in withholding belief, even after he has seen the relevant evidence and concluded that  $p$ , if he adjusts his caution parameter upwards, so that the belief that  $p$  is no longer justified. After all, since by hypothesis both values of the caution parameter are rationally permissible, they are permissible for either thinker.

We will need to think further about this kind of case before it will be clear what we should say about it.

---

**References**


---

- Barnes, B. and Bloor, D. (1982) "Relativism, Rationalism and the Sociology of Knowledge," in Hollis, M. and Lukes, S. *Rationality and Relativism*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Boghossian, P. (forthcoming) "Relativism: New and Old."
- Boghossian, P. (2007) *Fear of Knowledge*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kölbel, M. (2002) *Truth Without Objectivity*, London: Routledge.
- Lennon, K. (1997) "Feminist Epistemology as Local Epistemology," in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 71: 37–54.
- MacFarlane, J. (2008) "Boghossian, Bellarmine, and Bayes," *Philosophical Studies*, 141: 391–98.
- MacFarlane, J. (2007) "Relativism and Disagreement," *Philosophical Studies*, 132: 17–31.
- Richard, M. (2008) *When Truth Gives Out*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rorty, R. (1980) *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Rosen, G. (2001) "Nominalism, Naturalism, Epistemic Relativism," *Philosophical Perspectives*, 15: 69–91.
- White, R. (2005) "Epistemic Permissiveness," *Philosophical Perspectives*, 19(1): 445–59.
- Wright, C. (2008) "Fear of Relativism?" *Philosophical Studies*, 141: 5–16.
- Zimmerman, A. (2007) "Against Relativism," *Philosophical Studies*, 133: 313–48.