

Relativism

Although relativism is most often associated with ethics, one can find defenses of relativism in virtually any area of philosophy. In what follows, I will narrow my focus considerably. I first discuss the general structure of relativist positions and arguments. I will then examine several influential ideas concerning relativism in the late 20th century. Finally, I end by considering the rise of relativism in one area outside of ethics, epistemology.

What is Relativism?

Relativism about some property F can be divided into a number of different theses. One relativist view is that there exists a plurality of standards of Fness associated with different places, people, cultures, or times.. Call this *descriptive relativism*. A different relativist thesis is that there is no single universally valid standard of Fness for all places, people, cultures or times. Call this *philosophical relativism*. In this view, a plurality of standards of Fness provides the only frames of reference against which the truth of claims that something is F can be evaluated. Such claims thus cannot be evaluated unless and until a framework is specified. A third and further relativist thesis is that we should be tolerant of those who, for some F, use standards of Fness different from our own; each standard is appropriate for its own culture or time. The claim that we ought not pass judgment on those deploying alternative frameworks is often dubbed *normative relativism*. Although these three relativist doctrines are distinguishable from one another and can be consistently held in various combinations, all three quite often go together.

Most people are and ought to be relativists about some things—etiquette, for instance. Is it rude to call one's colleagues by their first names? Yes and no; yes in Japan and no in the United States. The truth or justifiability of judgments of rudeness can be evaluated only relative to the prevailing standards of etiquette, and it would be absurd to insist that our own standard is closer to the right way of doing it; it is just different, not better. There is no “universal” standard of etiquette against which each act of rudeness can or should be measured. Relativism about what is funny, edible, or delicious seems reasonable as well. Our own senses of humor or tastes are just different, not better, than those of others. Some may feel less confident saying that our standard of beauty is just different, not better, than others, but few would press the issue.

About some things, however, it is difficult to defend relativist positions. Few think that arithmetical truths such as $7+5=12$ are only true relative to some arithmetical framework to which there are alternatives that are just different, not worse. There are necessarily no acceptable alternative mathematical frameworks in which $7+5=12$ is false. The ordinary view of moral judgments is that they lie somewhere in between etiquette judgments on the one hand and arithmetical judgments on the other. Some think they are closer to etiquette, others to arithmetic.

It is important to hold agreement on non-F facts fixed to determine whether there is a genuine difference in standards of Fness, and whether a given philosophical view is truly relativist. *Parametric universalism* (so dubbed by T. M. Scanlon) allows that what is F in one place or time might not be F in another. However, it is not a relativist view, since it allows opposed judgments of whether a given action or activity is F to be generated from a single universal standard of Fness due to different circumstances. Diversity of

judgments about Fness, according to the parametric universalist, are traceable to differences in non-F facts, rather than different standards of Fness. Only a view that allows different standards in a given area of concern to be in some sense equally valid is a genuinely relativist view.

Issues and Arguments Relating to Relativism

As obvious as it may seem that we ought to be relativists about some things, late 20th century philosophical discussions of relativism have spent a surprising amount of time simply trying to state the view coherently. The ethical relativist familiar to most of us, for instance, combines all three above relativist theses in a way that best illustrates the problem. He will begin with the innocent observation of a diversity in moral practices, infer that therefore there is no single universal moral standard, and then confidently wrap up with the conclusion that therefore no person should judge the actions of those from other cultures or times. As Bernard Williams points out, although this crude bit of reasoning is obviously self-contradictory (the conclusion asserts a universal moral requirement the existence of which the premises deny), avoiding this kind of incoherence has proved surprisingly difficult.

Second, philosophers have also been concerned with the extent of defensible tolerance. For any outlook, sincerely holding that outlook seems incompatible with regarding it as merely one among a number of outlooks, each different, but not better, than the others. How, for instance, could morality have the grip on us that it does if it does not lead us to condemn those who, however distant from us in time and place, radically violate its deepest tenets? The normative relativist requirement of tolerance

apparently can only be taken seriously by those who have no sincere moral convictions. Thus the basic relativist dilemma is this: Either the “ought” in the claim that we ought not to condemn standards radically at odds with our own is a relative “ought” from within our own standards or an “ought” tied to an absolute standard. The former is incompatible with sincerely embracing and living within a standard. The latter is incompatible with relativism.

Third, does relativism about a given F require skepticism? Skepticism about F holds that there are no good grounds for believing anything really is F. The question is whether relativism about Fness undermines any good grounds for believing that there really is such a thing as Fness. Size, for instance, is relative to some frame of reference, such that a given whale might be tiny while a mosquito huge; but this seems compatible with claiming that the tiny whale *really* is tiny and the huge mosquito *really* is huge. Suppose what we morally ought to do is relative to the culture or era in which we find ourselves; is this compatible with claiming that what we ought to do is what we *really* ought to do? Some, such as J. L. Mackie, have argued that it is not. Moral beliefs, in his view, are beliefs about an absolute standard of conduct. If what exists are multiple standards, each no better than the others for its context, then it follows that there really is nothing answering to our moral beliefs. Others, such as David Wong, argue that moral beliefs are not about absolute standards but about prevailing standards. Hence there is something answering to these beliefs in his view.

The most powerful consideration philosophers have mobilized in favor of the claim that there is a plurality of equally correct standards of Fness is that it provides the most satisfying explanation of existing differences over the question of whether

something is F. If relativism explains existing differences—differences that persist even against the background of agreement on non-F facts—then we should be relativists about F. Consider the question whether, for instance, C's “thumbs-up” to D was a rude gesture. Suppose A from one culture and B from another agree on all the nonetiquette facts: C gestured toward D with his fist out and thumb extended skyward. A thinks this was rude. B denies it. One explanation for the dispute is that they have yet to uncover some further fact about the gesture, its deeper etiquette nature. But there is a better one available: A is judging relative to standards from his culture according to which the thumbs-up is rude, while B is judging relative to a different standard according to which the thumbs-up is not rude. Indeed, A and B will likely conclude this quickly. B will say “In *my* culture, the thumbs-up is a sign of encouragement,” while A will say *in his* it is not.

Of course, it does not follow from the fact that different frameworks for judging Fness exist or have existed that no single correct universal standard of Fness exists. Different frameworks might be assessable as more or less close to some all-encompassing universal standard. Perhaps because of its complexity, it is simply difficult to understand or know the correct universal standard of Fness. But it may be that the existence of different frameworks could be explained by the absence of a universal standard. It also does not follow from the fact that there appear to be different frameworks for judging Fness that there are in fact different frameworks. The parametric universalist in moral standards, for instance, holds that diversity is a result of the application of a very general but universally shared standard to locally diverse conditions. If that view is right, then the philosophical relativist position that there is no such universal standard—sometimes referred to as “metaethical” relativism—lacks its main support, as an explanation of

moral diversity.

Shared Motivational Attitudes

Gilbert Harman has argued for philosophical relativism about what he calls “inner” moral judgments. These are moral judgments that imply that the agent has certain motivating reasons to do something, and the person making the judgment and his audience endorse those reasons. For instance, the claim that S ought to do some action is an inner moral judgment. Harman claimed that relativism about such judgments is a "soberly logical thesis" about "what makes sense" and what does not in our moral language. (Harman, 1975, p. 3) The motivating reasons implied, Harman argued, are those that derive from an implicit agreement reached by bargaining between people of differing powers and resources. Such moral judgments are thus relative to this agreement. This agreement, in turn, may differ from society to society, each being different but not better than the other agreements. In a society with slavery but no agreement that speaks against it, for instance, it is false that the slave owners ought to free their slaves. Even if we would condemn such a society, Harman's view implies that it would be "inappropriate to say that it was morally wrong of the slave owners to own slaves." (Harman, 1975, p. 18) The agents involved are not parties to an agreement that would give them the relevant motivations.

In fact, the claim that slave owners are doing something wrong ought to be a logical mistake, if Harman's relativism is a "soberly logical thesis." But it is hard to see how this could be so. Surely it makes sense to say of slaveholders in a slaveholding society of the sort Harman envisions that they are doing something wrong. Perhaps we

should not blame someone for an act if she had no chance to avoid it, and a person brought up in a slaveholding society might have had no chance to see slaveholding as wrong. Perhaps we should not blame her, if saying that she did wrong is a form of blame. But that such judgments, at least under some circumstances, might be inappropriate does not make them contrary to a soberly logical thesis.

In later works, Harman has elaborated his view so that it combines four theses: (1) there is a plurality of moral frameworks, none more correct than any other; (2) moral judgments are elliptical for more complex judgments whose truth conditions include one of these frameworks; (3) morality should not be abandoned; and (4) even if relative, moral judgments can play a serious role in practical thought. (Harman & Thomson, 1996, pp. 3-19) The second thesis is an important adjustment: Relativism is, he argues, not a claim about "what makes sense" in our moral statements but a claim about their truth conditions. What we are saying when we say the slaveholder is doing something wrong makes sense. It is just that we are saying something false because the slaveholder is not party to an agreement giving him motivation to act accordingly. But the third thesis runs into the relativist dilemma. What sort of "should" would we be invoking in saying that morality should not be abandoned? Suppose "morality" refers to some moral framework: We "should" have some morality or other. Then either there is some absolute framework that makes this "should" true, or there is no standard at all that makes this true. From within the point of view of one morality, it is not true that some other morality should not be abandoned.

Real and Notional Confrontations

Bernard Williams was concerned to come up with some way of stating normative relativism such that it is coherent and does not fall victim to self-contradiction. Recall that the self-contradictory ethical relativist view is the claim that since there are no universal moral standards, no one ever ought to condemn the practices of other cultures. The main issue is whether philosophical relativism can coherently be grounds for normative relativism. Coherent normative relativism requires recognizing the absence of a vantage point from which one can make meaningful evaluative comparisons between alternative frames of reference for judging fitness. Such a vantage point would result in what Williams calls a "real confrontation" between systems of belief. (Williams, 1981, pp. 132-143)

The idea is this: The possibility of normative relativism arises only when some action or practice is the locus of disagreement between holders of two self-contained and exclusive systems. Two systems of belief, S1 and S2, are exclusive of one another when they have consequences that disagree under some description but do not require either to abandon their side of the disagreement. When groups holding S1 and S2 encounter one another, this can result in a confrontation between their systems of belief. A real confrontation between S1 and S2 occurs when S2 is a real option for the group living under S1. In a notional confrontation, S2 is not a real option. S2 would be a real option for a group living under S1 if two conditions held. First, those in S1 could "retain their hold on reality" living under S2, in the sense that they would not, for instance, need to engage in radical self-deception. Second, they could acknowledge their transition to S2 in the light of a rational comparison to S1. If the conditions for a real confrontation are not met for holders of S1, however, then there is only a notional confrontation with S2 and

there is no "point or substance" to considerations of whether S2 might be a better or worse system of belief than S1. If a member of S1 does not regard the confrontation with S2 as a real confrontation, then "the language of appraisal—good, bad, right, wrong and so on ... is seen as inappropriate, and no judgments are made." (Williams, 1985, p. 161) The suspension of such judgments amounts to adopting normative relativism about S1 and S2.

The language of appraisal is appropriate regarding S2 only if those in S1 could "go over" to S2. The hoi polloi who pursue the pleasures of so-called "low" culture may judge that there is little of value in a life crowded with the elite activities of "high" culture. It is a real possibility that they could learn to love opera and lose their taste for country music, so they may evaluate doing so in their own terms. Those from the low culture judge high culture to be boring; those from high culture judge low culture to be tacky and lacking depth. However, Williams observes, "the life of a Bronze Age chief or a medieval samurai are not real options for us: there is no way of living them." (Williams, 1985, 161) They are too alien to permit us to make the same judgments made between culture mavens.

In this respect, however, Williams's account, like Harman's, fails to deliver what it set out to—a coherent normative relativism. For it is not clear in what sense it would not be "appropriate" to appraise these moralities as less morally enlightened than our own. If appraisals of S2 are inappropriate, then they must be inappropriate according to some S. Can S1, then, forbid appraising other S's? It is difficult to see how it could, if, as we assume, a system of belief requires having a grip on the thinking of those within it that prevents taking an external view of it. Suppose Williams thinks that a "real option" is an

option that would be as good or better from a point of view external both to S1 and S2—say, the point of view of human well-being. This would be to abandon relativism. For according to the relativist, there is no S external to particular systems such as S1 or S2, a universal standard from which one could judge that appraisal is inappropriate. To measure S2 and S1 by human well-being would be to hold human well-being up as a universal standard. Alternatively, suppose Williams is thinking, like Harman, that this is a “soberly logical thesis”; it is just nonsensical to judge medieval samurai morals to be better or worse than our own. Williams himself denies this claim, saying that the vocabulary of appraisal in such cases “can no doubt be applied without linguistic impropriety”. (Williams, 1981, p. 141) But if he were to accept that this is a logical or linguistic impropriety, then he, like Harman, would have to explain how this could be so, given it seems intelligible enough to say that their morals were worse in many respects than our own.

Pluralism

With respect to some areas of thought and discourse, unbridled relativism will be less attractive than a relativism that requires certain boundaries be respected. As we have seen, it is difficult to see how tolerance about alternative standards of Fness can be maintained unless we suppose there is some viewpoint independent of these alternative standards from which to evaluate them. Many philosophers have come to the conclusion that there is such a viewpoint, although it can only be a very broad standard imposing limits on the range of acceptable standards. Some such philosophers, such as David Wong and Michael Walzer, do not shun the label “relativists,” but they are perhaps better

described as “pluralists.” Pluralism holds that a range of different standards of Fness exists and can be tolerated, but only within limits. One sort of pluralism might be based on a kind of indeterminacy among acceptable standards: Begin with a universally valid framework for any acceptable standard, including, for instance, demands such as that any valid standard must treat like cases alike. Such a framework alone is not itself a standard for Fness and so cannot provide any kind of guidance. It is, rather, a second-order standard, or a standard for any acceptable first-order standard Fness. Suppose, further, this framework marks off a “range” property of standards, in the sense that no standard fits the framework any better than any other standard fits the framework (as when, for a given circle, no point within the circle is more within it than any other). (See Rawls, 1971, P.508) As long as a given standard fits the framework, it is acceptable, but an indefinite number of different standards could meet it. This case offers no grounds for judging that any standard of Fness is “better” or “worse” than any other, based on the second-order framework, except to say that either a standard fits the framework or it does not. Limited tolerance, then, would amount to approving of those standards within the range that fit the framework and disapproving of those outside of that range, based on the second-order standard of acceptability provided by the framework.

A different sort of pluralism would be based simply on epistemic modesty (i.e., a justifiable reticence to assert claims that one does not know to be true). One can even combine this with parametric universalism: a single universally valid framework yields standards that deliver opposed conclusions in a given case depending on the circumstances. Modesty implies that even if there is a determinate answer to the question whether, for any given thing, it is F or not, it may not be possible to be confident enough

of this in any case. Suppose, then, no one can be confident that he or she knows how that framework is to be put into practice in any particular culture or time. That is, she does not know which of the available standards that fit the framework is best given the circumstances. Then, where one is not confident, one should be tolerant.

Whether pluralism of either kind can meet the challenge of developing a coherent defense of tolerance is not clear. For one thing, pluralism based on epistemic modesty implies a kind of diffidence in the face of alternative standards that is sufficient to prevent the modest just from condemning the alternative standards. Yet it must also leave one confident in the importance of one's own standard. Moreover, although pluralism based on indeterminacy allows one to see one's own standard as acceptable based on meeting a sort of minimum, this is hardly the sort of endorsement that can sustain its grip on us in the face of a variety of equally acceptable alternative standards.

Contextualism and Relativism in Epistemology

By far the most discussed form of relativism is ethical relativism. However, relativist issues arise quite frequently in almost every area of philosophical research. One of the most significant trends in late 20th century epistemology has been the rise of views that are broadly either relativist or pluralist and are loosely collected under the banner “contextualism.” Contextualists hold that the truth of sentences attributing knowledge, such as “S knows that p,” like the truth of sentences attributing tallness, such as “S is tall,” depends on the contexts of their use. In particular, the speaker's context determines which standards of epistemic justification are in play. Hence, A's statement “Stella knows that Stanley loves her” may be true, while B's seemingly contradictory statement

“Nobody ever knows anything at all” might also be true, since their contexts of utterance might invoke quite different standards of justification. A's may be a conversational context; perhaps Stella has told A about Stanley's having confessed his feelings to her, A knows that Stella is a good judge of dissembling, and so on, so A can rule out the possibility that she is ignorant. In A's context, that possibility is not salient. B, on the other hand, has been studying Descartes and in that context the possibility that everyone is being tricked by an all-powerful evil demon is very salient. In A'S context, the demon hypothesis is out of place. That “Stella knows” is true relative to one context of A'S statement that she does, but not relative to B'S context.

In effect, contextualism in epistemology amounts to a kind of speaker relativism, in which the standards in play are determined by the person making knowledge claims. Standards are relative to contexts, and the context is set by the speaker. A certain standard is appropriate for each context. A speaker then “picks out” the relevant standard when making knowledge claims that then determine the truth conditions of the claim. However, it may be better to classify contextualism as a kind of pluralism, because any contextualist hold that there are standards of justification no lower than which can be gone in any circumstance. For instance, there are no contexts in which simply having a belief that something is so counts as knowledge. Thus a range of standards exists, each appropriate for some context, but all are subject to a certain baseline minimum of justification.

It also seems as if contextualism could be regarded as parametric universalist view. For instance, evidentialism is the view that S knows p only when S's belief fits the evidence. When someone says that S knows that p, the evidentialist who is a contextualist

will say that this will be true only when, according to the speaker's context, there is enough evidence and the belief fits it well enough. What varies here, then, is not the standard of justification; the standard is that a justified belief must fit the evidence. It is the degree of fit that varies according to context, and that is not a matter of standards varying.

Steven Stich, however, defends an unambiguously relativist view of knowledge. (Stich, 1999) In his view, it doesn't make sense to think that there are standards of rational belief formation independent of those that happen to be accepted in a given place and time. Standards of rationality in belief formation vary from locality to locality. And this, it seems, is grounds for holding there is no universal standard. But someone knows something only if her beliefs about it are rationally held—formed for good reasons. Since the standards vary, knowledge varies with it. Hence, according to the prevailing standards of rationality in one locality, a belief may be held for good reasons, while in another those selfsame reasons may not be good enough.

Stich's statement of epistemological relativism appears to conform to Harman's original model. In particular, it conforms to Harman's view that “there is no sense attached to” judging dimly the practices of someone who conforms to standards other than our own. Because of this, it also inherits the difficulty of explaining why that kind of judgment seems to make sense. There is no apparent confusion about what someone is saying when she says that those people over there have no reason to believe what they believe, even though they think they do. We may think it morally inappropriate to make such judgments, but it is not nonsensical. Indeed, we may even think our condemnation to be epistemically rash. But just as in the case of ethical relativism, if we do think it

epistemically rash to condemn the epistemic practices of others, it must be based on some standard of rationality. If it is based on our own standards, however, it is not clear how we can maintain confidence in those standards when forming beliefs on their basis. If it is not based on our own standards, then we must be invoking some nonrelative standards. It seems that relativism in epistemology faces the same dilemma that ethical relativism faces.

Conclusion

Normative relativism in a given area counsels tolerance of practices that conform to alternative standards prevailing in the area. The paradigm of acceptable tolerance is clearly the case of etiquette. Here we have grounds for a defensible and thoroughgoing relativism. And here the relativist doctrines we have discussed fit: Clear-eyed judgments that the practices in a different culture conforming to standards of etiquette prevailing there are rude are, indeed, puzzling. What could such judgments mean? It is true both that such judgments make little sense and that we ought not to try to engage in them. But what distinguishes etiquette from other areas is its relative lack of importance in our thinking and behavior. We can maintain our manners even while taking an external view of them as simply one standard of etiquette among others. When we turn to claims about what is of value or what is rational, for example, the subject matter itself raises the stakes. Once the stakes are raised, we seem less able to take an external view, to maintain our views about what is morally worth doing, or what it is reasonable to believe. Future work on relativism will no doubt bring new ways of thinking about such difficulties.

See also **Philosophy, History of; Philosophy, Moral: Modern; Philosophy: Historical Overview and Recent Developments; Skepticism.**

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