Five varieties of cognitive relativism

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The issue of relativism

The doctrine of relativism was once widely dismissed as incoherent. Yet recent philosophy abounds with relativistic claims. It is now common for philosophers of science to deny that there are objective standards for the assessment of scientific theories. Anti-realist philosophers of language suggest that truth is internal to language or conceptual schemes. Some contemporary metaphysicians tell us much the same thing about reality. And reflection on the vast variety of beliefs and practices found among the numerous peoples of the world has led many to think that what it is right to do and believe depends on the culture to which one belongs.

However, claims of relativism continue to be controversial. There are still those who think that without objective standards there can be no intellectual difference between a good idea and a lunatic one. They think that without some standard against which to judge our beliefs and actions, any belief or act is as good, or as rational, as any other. And they see relativism as a profound threat to human reason, which threatens to undermine all the progress that has been made over the centuries by serious thinkers devoted to rational thought.

When controversy flares over a doctrine, an important philosophical task is to clarify the issue by making relevant distinctions. In this paper, my aim is the simple one of bringing out the range of possible relativist positions. To this end, I will distinguish five varieties of cognitive relativism. In so doing, I will be setting aside non-cognitive forms of relativism, such as moral relativism and certain relativistic views about cultural practices. It will emerge in the course of my analysis that there are deep problems with cognitive relativism. But my main point is that there is a range of possible positions here.

Relativism about rationality

My first form of relativism is relativism about rational belief. The issue has perhaps most clearly emerged in recent work in the philosophy of science. On a traditional view, associated in this century with assorted empiricist philosophers, science was governed by a scientific method, common to all scientists in all subject areas. Opinions diverged over the precise details of the scientific method. But the method was thought largely to involve the use of observation and rationally grounded patterns of inference. Whatever the details, scientific method was held to provide objective criteria for the evaluation of scientific theories.

Much recent work in the philosophy of science rejects the idea that science is governed by a stable scientific method. It has tended, instead, to make the standards employed in science vary with the theoretical framework or context in which scientists operate. Paul Feyerabend has argued that, at one time or another, all methodological rules have legitimately been broken by the practice of actual scientists. And Thomas Kuhn argued that many of the standards used to evaluate the solution of scientific problems are internal to the large-scale theoretical structures he called 'paradigms'.

Often, the denial that there is a fixed scientific method is taken as relativism about scientific rationality. For it is thought to entail that rational belief in science is relative to the theoretical or historical context within which a scientist works. That is, it is thought to follow from standard variance that beliefs certified by the standards of one context are rationally on a par with beliefs certified by the standards of another context. In short, standard variance is taken to relativize rationality.

But it is one thing to say that the principles employed in science vary with context. It is quite another to infer relativism from this. For rationality to be relative, it is not enough for standards to vary. This is because the claim of standard variance is a descriptive claim lacking in normative force. By contrast, to claim that a belief is rational is to judge it worthy of acceptance, which is to make an evaluation of it.

Therefore, for rationality to be relative, not only must standards vary, but the satisfaction of some set of standards must itself constitute rational belief-worthiness. If this were the case, rationality would be relative to context in the sense that a belief certified by standards operative in some context would thereby be rational. Since any belief is certifiable by some possible standards, the apparent upshot of such relativity is that one belief is as rational as any other.

The vital premise in the argument for relativism about rationality is that there is nothing to rationality beyond adherence to a set of standards. Thus, taken by itself, the denial of fixed methodological rules or standards falls short of a full-blown relativism of rational belief. For it does not entail the further claim that a belief that accords with one set of standards is as worthy of belief as one that accords with any other set of standards. Rather, the denial of a stable methodology only denies that the principles which are accepted as governing rational thought remain fixed. It does not follow from this that the rationality of a belief is insured by the existence of some set of standards with which it accords.

Relativism about truth

It is crucial to distinguish between relativism about truth and relativism about rationality. The latter says that rationality depends on theoretical or historical context, and is relative to such context. The former makes the claim that the truth of a given belief or proposition depends on and is relative to the context in which it occurs. Whatever the merits of relativism about rationality, relativism about truth is still widely dismissed by philosophers as incoherent or self-refuting.

On the face of it, truth-relativism is less plausible than rationality-relativism. To see why, suppose the truth of some proposition is said to be relative to context. The claim that truth is relative in this way seems to entail that a proposition 'P' could be true in one context but false in another. On the face of it, this is incoherent since it leads to contradiction: it implies that both P and not P. Because of this, such relativism appears to be incoherent.

Relativism about truth also appears to be self-defeating. The truth-relativist asserts that truth is relative. The question arises of how this assertion *itself* is to be understood. Is the truth of relativism asserted as an absolute claim or as a relative one? Suppose that relativism about truth is asserted as an absolute claim. That is, suppose relativism is asserted to be true without its own truth being relative. If so, then it denies what it asserts. It asserts that truth is relative while making that very assertion non-relative. On the other hand, if relativism is asserted as true relative to context, then it is true for the relativist but false for the non-relativist. But if the view that truth is relative is false for the non-relativist, then presumably it follows that the view that truth is non-relative is true for the non-relativist. But if truth is non-relative, then relativism is false. So the claim that relativism is true relatively also seems to lead to the denial of what the relativist asserts.

For reasons such as these, relativism about truth has a bad reputation in philosophy. However, there is a suggestion found in the work of Kuhn and Feyerabend on scientific theory change, which may enable partial sense to be made of truth-relativism. The suggestion is contained in their thesis that some pairs of scientific theories are 'incommensurable' for semantic reasons. Some successive or rival theories operate with divergent conceptual apparatus. Kuhn and Feyerabend argue that, in the transition between such conceptually variant theories, a semantic shift in the vocabulary occurs, resulting in translation failure between the expressions the theories employ.

Now suppose that some proposition 'P' of theory T is such that neither it nor its denial can be translated from T into another theory T*. If 'P' were true, then there is a sense in which its truth is relative to T. For while the truth of 'P' may not depend on T, 'P' cannot be removed from T and transplanted into T*. Nor can 'not P' be formulated in T*. The truth of 'P' is therefore relative to T in the sense that 'P' is asserted by T and is true, while neither 'P' nor 'not P' can be asserted by T*.

This falls short of relativism about truth, where the latter is understood as the doctrine that 'P' is true in one theory and false in another. But the idea that there may be a true proposition which is only available from a particular theoretical standpoint captures something the truth-relativist may want to say. For such a relativist denies that truth is independent of theory, and incommensurability seems to tie truths closely to the theory in which they are asserted.

Epistemological relativism

The third variety of relativism I wish to distinguish is a hybrid of the preceding two. It arises by combining the idea that truth is relative with the idea that rationality is relative. Philosophers have traditionally conceived knowledge as justified true belief, meaning that a belief that is rationally held and true constitutes knowledge. By combining truth-relativism with rationality-relativism, we get epistemological relativism, or relativism about knowledge.

According to this form of relativism, knowledge is relative to context. What is knowledge for members of one culture, or for proponents of a given scientific theory, depends upon their cultural or theoretical context. On the assumption that truth and rational belief are relative to context, the belief that P constitutes knowledge if, in that context, 'P' is both rationally believed and true. It follows that a belief that is knowledge in one context may not be knowledge in another. For example, 'P' might be true and rationally believed to be true relative to one context, yet false and rationally believed to be false relative to another context.

Interestingly, whatever plausibility this form of relativism has with regard to rationality, it inherits a high degree of implausibility from relativism about truth. It can be argued in terms precisely analogous to those used against truth-relativism that epistemological relativism is both incoherent and self-defeating. This does not bode well for the epistemological relativist. However, the situation may begin to seem more promising for epistemological relativism if support is sought from either of the next two doctrines that I will discuss.

Relativism about reality

Sometimes it is said that the way the world is, reality itself, depends upon or is in part influenced by the beliefs or theories we hold. Something like this is hinted at by Kuhn's talk of change of world with change of scientific paradigm. He says, for example, that "when paradigms change, the world itself changes with them" (Kuhn, 1970, p. 111). This can make paradigm change sound like space travel, "rather as if the professional community had been suddenly transported to another planet" (ibid.). Such change of world is a constant theme in Kuhn's discussion of scientific revolutions, e.g. "after a revolution scientists are responding to a different world" (ibid.).

Such relativism makes the world or reality investigated by scientists depend upon the theory they accept. It is a difficult view to make sense of. For it comes close to the absurd claim that reality pops in and out of being whenever scientists change theories. Worse, it suggests that there is a whole multitude of alternative realities constantly popping in and out of existence with theory change.

Ordinarily, a view such as the one suggested by Kuhn's talk of world-change would not be described as a form of relativism. Since such a view makes reality depend upon human thought, it seems rather to be a version of what has traditionally been called "idealism". Idealism, roughly, is the view that what exists either is itself mental, or else depends for its being on mental activity. Such an idealist approach rejects the idea of an objective reality whose existence is independent of human thought and experience.

It is possible to distinguish a weaker position which is more intelligible than world-change idealism. Such a weaker view would allow that there is an external physical reality, perhaps beyond our ken, existing independently of human thought and experience. But the only world which is accessible to us is a made-up world, a construction. Such a constructed world is a partial product of human thought and practice, and can change when human thought and practice change. But it is not produced by human thought and activity alone. The independent reality that lies beyond human thought exercises constraint on the constructed world, since it impinges on us in the form of sense experience. We have, therefore, to mould our constructions to fit the rough shape of things as they are disclosed to us by our senses.

Could they be seeing the same things?

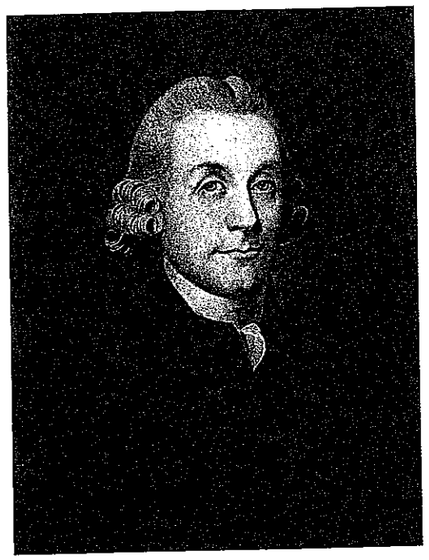
The main difficulty facing this form of relativism is to avoid slipping into an extravagant world-change idealism which dispenses with reality altogether. On the one hand, such relativism must avoid giving too great a role to experience in fixing our belief schemes, or else there would be little scope for major variation of constructed world. On the other hand, the moorings must not be cut completely, or else there would be no difference between the constructed reality of the constructivist and that of the world-change idealist.

Conceptual relativism

One way to retain a mind-independent reality while holding it at an epistemic remove is conceptual relativism. This is the view that there is a multiplicity of conceptual schemes, none of which is, or can be shown to be, superior to any other. On such a view, reality is a Kantian thing in itself, lost behind a veil of appearances. Truth and reality are what is taken as such by those who employ a given conceptual scheme. As a result, radically differing beliefs and theories elaborated within a given conceptual scheme are, from an epistemological point of view, no better or worse than those elaborated within some other. But what is a conceptual scheme?

What precisely a conceptual scheme is depends on the form of conceptual relativism in question. In general, a conceptual scheme is a set of concepts, ordinarily associated with a particular descriptive vocabulary. Sometimes conceptual schemes are taken as the fundamental systems of categories by means of which the world is partitioned into various kinds of things. Sometimes, in a nominalist vein, they are identified with the set of predicates of some natural language, or of closely related languages.

Conceptual schemes may also be more localized entities, such as the conceptual apparatus of a particular theory. An example of alternative conceptual apparatus is that of phlogistic versus oxygen chemistry. Eighteenth century phlogistic chemists spoke of such things as phlogiston, phlogisticated air,



Joseph Priestley (1733–1804), one of the great defenders of the phlogiston theory.

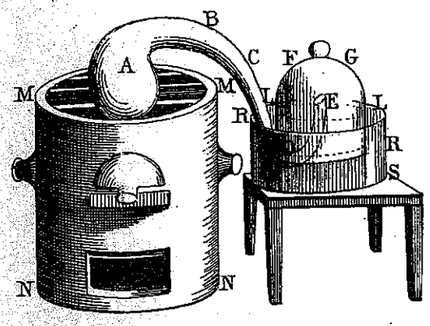
Antoine Laurent Lavoisier (1743–1794), whose work overthrew the phlogiston theory and established the modern oxygen theory.

dephlogisticated air, and light inflammable air. Oxygen chemists, following Lavoisier, employed more familiar concepts, such as oxygen, hydrogen and nitrogen. The phlogiston and oxygen theories are examples of different scientific theories which applied distinct conceptual apparatus to a common set of phenomena.

Conceptual relativism arises from reflection on multiple conceptual schemes, as well as on the role of concepts in cognition. In both description of observed fact and observation, a conceptual scheme is interposed between observer and reality. It is impossible to remove oneself from one's native conceptual apparatus and view or describe reality in its pure form. Reality in itself, stripped of conceptual overlay, is not something to which we have epistemic access. Since it is impossible to remove oneself entirely from all conceptual schemes, it is impossible to take up some neutral position outside of one's own conceptual scheme to compare it with reality. Similarly, one can never get outside of conceptual schemes altogether to compare rival conceptual schemes with reality.

As a result, it is impossible ever to be in a position to tell whether some conceptual scheme better matches the world's own categorical structure than another scheme. That is, it is impossible to check conceptual schemes against reality to see which scheme correctly represents reality itself. Therefore, it is impossible to know if one theory with one conceptual scheme is correct and another theory with a different conceptual scheme is incorrect.

Similarly, since it is impossible to shed conceptual schemes, it is impossible for there to be any neutral means of comparing rival theories which have alternative conceptual schemes. Adherents of rival theories cannot appeal to neutral statements of evidence or standards of appraisal to evaluate comparatively the rival theories. For adherents of rival theories will accept observation statements and standards couched in terms of their conceptual schemes. Given this, there will be no access to neutral observation described in neutral terms, or to neutral standards of appraisal. So there will be no objective way of deciding which theory to accept.



The crucial experiment: did Priestley and Lavoisier see it differently?

The major drawback with conceptual relativism is its assumption that an objective critical appraisal of a theory requires one to shed all of one's conceptual baggage. Here the case of phlogistic and oxygen chemistry serves as counter-example. Advocates of both the phlogiston and oxygen theories of chemistry were able to see the gain in weight of oxidized metals as a problem for phlogistic chemistry, though they described the process of oxidation in different terms. It took some time for this and other empirical and conceptual difficulties to wear away support for phlogistic chemistry, but in the end the oxygen theory won out. It may be impossible to calibrate a conceptual scheme directly with reality. Yet where experience and prediction conflict, or where data otherwise fail to mesh with theory, it remains possible to test our views—albeit fallibly—against reality. A discredited philosophy of science empiricism may be, but that does not mean that experience plays no epistemic role.

Conclusion

My main aim here has been to stress the range of available forms of cognitive relativism. However, I have indicated difficulties with various forms of the doctrine. One influential form of relativism about rational belief suffers due to lack of argument from standard variation to standard-relative rationality. Relativism about truth courts paradox, as, by implication, does relativism about knowledge. Relativism about reality risks collapse into an absurd idealism, while conceptual relativism implausibly diminishes the role of empirical evidence.

It will hardly have escaped notice that the various forms of relativism may stand in different relations. For example, one might defend relativism about rationality but reject cognitive relativism in all other forms. Or one might combine truth-relativism with reality-relativism, thinking thereby to rescue the former from incoherence. But I suspect that one particular combination is of most contemporary relevance. This is a concoction blended from rationality-relativism, a limited incommensurability-based relativism about truth, and a conceptual relativism admitting the existence of a mind-independent reality. For such relativists, as for their adversaries, the crucial issue remains that of the extent to which variation of rational belief is subject to objective constraints.

References

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