

The implications of relativism

This handout follows the handout on ‘Relativism about knowledge’. You should read that handout first.

WHETHER RELATIVISM IS SCEPTICISM IN DISGUISE

It is important to note the difference between relativism about knowledge and scepticism. Scepticism denies there is knowledge, but relativism claims that there is knowledge, i.e. that there are beliefs that can rightly be said to be true and known to be true; but knowledge is relative to a society, theory, or conceptual scheme. The standard argument for relativism is that societies and theories can disagree over knowledge claims without there being any way in which the disagreement can be resolved in favour of one or the other.

Put another way, scepticism is the claim that our usual justifications are inadequate for knowledge, so we do not have the knowledge we think we have. Relativism claims that our justifications are local to our culture, belief system or paradigm, and so there is no unconditional or universal standard of justification. A stronger form of relativism claims that truth itself is relative to a conceptual scheme, as no one set of concepts can be said to represent reality ‘as it really is’.

This understanding of conceptual schemes can suggest the idea that concepts somehow ‘come between’ us and the world ‘as it is in itself’. No set of concepts can present reality without imposing something on it. Since we cannot get ‘beyond’ our concepts, scepticism argues, we cannot tell whether they represent reality more or less accurately.

The relativist can respond that in drawing the sceptical conclusion, we make an incoherent assumption. There is nothing we can mean by talking of ‘how reality is’ independent of the application of our concepts. There is no sense to the idea of ‘comparing’ how reality is with how our concepts represent it. Such a comparison is not simply impossible for us – as though that were some epistemological failing of ours; it is simply incoherent. (This, relativism argues, is why objectivism cannot be true.)

However, a sceptical conclusion may follow from the arguments regarding justification. If justification is relative, then how can we have any confidence that our standards of justification help us get at the truth? We see from looking at other belief systems that beliefs can be justified without being true or even close to the truth, as we understand it. What confidence can we have that our justified beliefs are any better?

But relativism can point out that the sceptic harbours an idealized model of justification in which justification in itself can secure truth. Our models of justification are not lacking, for there is no further account of how they can be improved. But this gap between justification and truth doesn’t demonstrate scepticism, only fallibilism. We should only lack confidence in our standards of justification if we can show that they are inadequate for knowledge. But the relativist argues that knowledge is perfectly possible, understood as relative to a belief system.

WHETHER RELATIVISM AND CONTINGENCY INVITE INERTIA IN CERTAIN FIELDS OF HUMAN ACTIVITY

Whether relativism is true or not, we can ask whether the belief that it is true impacts negatively on intellectual enquiry, in particular, enquiry into how the world is. First, we should note the distinction between relativism and contingency. The idea of contingency is captured by Hume's observation that empirical knowledge can only be held with a degree of probability, not complete certainty; and by the complementary idea of fallibility. Contingency is compatible with objectivism, though not with arrogance.

We may argue that as long as they recognise progress in some meaningful sense, neither relativism nor contingency invite inertia. So it is important to repeat that Kuhn argued that there is meaningful scientific progress. But progress involves the capacity to solve problems, not getting closer to the truth. Does giving up the ideal of 'knowing the truth' undermine the motivation to enquire about the world? Not if that motivation is reaffirmed when, instead of looking forward, we look backward, and see how far we have come, whether we measure this distance by what we can explain, or predict, or control through technology, or how coherent and wide-ranging our theories are, or by what we know now but didn't before.

While this answer is available for empirical theories, it is not so easily given in other areas of intellectual endeavour in which we cannot clearly identify 'progress' over time. We may wonder whether, if the truth about morality or metaphysics or religion is relative, if philosophy itself has made no 'progress' since Plato, what the point of thinking about such questions really is.

Of course, this depends on what we think we are doing when engaging in this process of intellectual enquiry. Any student of philosophy who thinks part-time study over two years will solve the puzzles of 2500 years will be disappointed. But relativism and contingency need not lead to inertia. First, if the truth is relative to cultural belief systems, there remains the question 'what do we believe?'. Cultures are highly complex, and not transparent to themselves. Philosophical enquiry is then a process of cultural self-understanding. Second, for each individual, there is still the matter of what to believe personally. Whatever the truth of the matter turns out to be, one can discover a lot about oneself in the attempt to discover as honestly as possible what one truly thinks about the world.