

Relativism about knowledge:

Do different perspectives have their own internal criteria as the final court of appeal?

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

THE PROBLEM OF JUSTIFICATION

Objectivism defends the view that we can judge that one conceptual scheme is – absolutely speaking – better than another. We can object that while this may be possible sometimes, it is not always so. One reason for this is that what counts as ‘better’ is itself relative to each conceptual scheme.

Different societies have disagreed about the nature of evidence and justification. Beliefs in one society are judged ‘reasonable’, while the same belief (or something very similar) in another is judged ‘unreasonable’ (devils, alchemy, magic, the divine right of kings). The relativist can argue that these disagreements don’t show that one society is irrational, or less intelligent, or simply being dogmatic. Instead, they show that standards for judging when a belief counts as justified are relative.

This doesn’t show the truth is relative to society. However, if knowledge is justified true belief, it shows that knowledge is relative, because a true belief in one society may count as justified while in another it does not. So even if truth is objective, there is no single objective standard for knowledge.

Objectivism can reply that standards of justification cannot vary greatly – there are universal requirements of reason, e.g. non-contradiction, coherence, forms of rational inference, and so on. But relativism can respond that this will not secure objectivism. For instance, there is no universal standard for whether two beliefs are coherent – it depends on what else is believed; and likewise for forms of inference. For example, until 200 years ago, everyone believed that geometry had to accept the laws of Euclid. Anything else was incoherent. But mathematicians have since shown this belief is false. Not only is non-Euclidean geometry coherent, it even describes what space is actually like under certain conditions!

Justification and language games

A variation on this argument, inspired by ideas from Wittgenstein, contends that standards of justification are relative to particular social practices. Different ways of relating to the world – in aesthetics, morality, religion, science, interpersonal relations, the self – are each coherent in their own way. We make a mistake if we think that all human intellectual activity must be assessed by the standards of physical science. Each area of endeavour is a distinct ‘language game’. The rules for what counts as a recognised form of reasoning can differ, just as different games have different rules for moves within the game.

This argument is usually based on Wittgenstein's ideas about how language gets its meaning. If we use the scientific model, we may think that the basic form of language is asserting, on the basis of sense experience, that certain things exist and attributing properties to those things. Words get their meaning by referring to and describing objects. But this is much too simple. Meaning is a matter of the rules that govern how words are used. And these rules differ from one part of language to another.

Appreciating this requires a distinction between surface grammar and depth grammar: words or sentences in one context describing objects may be similar on the surface to ones that in another context do nothing of the sort, e.g. 'the glass is full of water', 'his mind is full of evil thoughts', 'the world is full of beauty'. To understand a particular 'piece' of language, one must look at how the language is used, as meaning is not given by the form of words alone.

Together with these different rules for how to use words go different standards for counts as 'rational' or 'justified' within the game. No language game can be assessed by standards of justification that belong to a different language game. So, for instance, Wittgenstein argued that religious belief cannot be criticised as 'highly improbable' on scientific grounds.

However, relativists who appeal to Wittgenstein sometimes do not notice that Wittgenstein defended his view by arguing that many of these different language games are non-cognitive. They may be justified as ways of living, but they do not ground distinct types of knowledge. The relativist must defend the view that different language games can be cognitive, but still have different rules for justification

CAN WE MAKE ABSOLUTE JUDGEMENTS REGARDING ALTERNATIVE BELIEF SYSTEMS?

Can we go beyond relativism about justification to relativism about truth? Some ancient cultures believed that stars are pinpricks in the fabric of heaven, letting light through from beyond. Let us grant that their belief was, even according to the best standards of justification, justified. Is there any sense in which we can say that this belief was 'true for them'? To say it was 'true for them' must be more than simply to say that they believed it. We all agree they believed it, and to believe something is to believe that it is true. But to believe that some proposition is true is not the same as the proposition being true. If we say that all beliefs are true 'for' the person who believes them, this entails that there can be no false beliefs!

If we say that it was true, for those ancient cultures, that stars were pinpricks in the fabric of heaven, and it is true for us now that stars are burning balls of gas, the question arises how both of these claims about stars can be true. Did stars miraculously change from being holes in cloth to being giant balls of gas?? It looks like the only coherent response from relativism on this question is to argue that we cannot ask 'what are stars (really)?', we can only ask 'what do we think stars are?'. But this is paradoxical, because each culture comes up with its account of stars by asking 'what are stars (really)?'!

When two cultures, then, give differing empirical accounts of some part of the world, the two accounts are in competition, and at most one can be right. Because they are empirical, the criteria for their truth are not internal to each belief system. It seems hard

to resist the claim that the modern theory of stars is closer to the truth than the ancient theory.

However, we can respond that this argument only works if both cultures offer empirical accounts and we can translate the claims of one conceptual scheme into the claims of another (e.g. both are theories of stars).

Where only one account is empirical, and the other is, say, religious, or when both are religious, then the issue is far more complex. First, are both accounts claiming a form of knowledge, or is (at least) one account non-cognitive? (Does evolution contradict the account of creation in Genesis?) Second, if they are both cognitive, are their claims in contradiction, or can both be true? Third, if their claims are in contradiction, does the contradiction arise from the way the claims are presented (e.g. within certain conceptual schemes)? If so, can the contradiction be removed by interpreting the claims differently? An example here might be religious pluralism – God is so beyond human concepts that each religion can be understood as a partial grasp of God's nature.

If we have contradictory cognitive claims that cannot be resolved by rational means that both cultures agree upon, then we have relativism about knowledge.

KUHN ON SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTIONS

Thomas Kuhn defends relativism about scientific knowledge. (*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*) Not only standards of justification, but claims about the truth, are relative, because science does not progress by getting closer to the right set of concepts that matches the nature of reality.

Normal science proceeds by working within a 'paradigm', which includes a conceptual scheme, shared beliefs about theories, methodology, what counts as a evidence or argument, and shared values and techniques. The development of new ideas is assessed in relation to this paradigm. However, the paradigm runs into 'anomalies' – problems that can't be solved or incorporated within the paradigm. As the number of these anomalies grows, this leads to a sense of crisis. A revolution occurs when a new paradigm is proposed and developed, breaking the old ways of thinking, and in doing so, solving a number of the anomalies. Classic examples include developments in molecular chemistry around 1800, the replacement of Newtonian physics with Einsteinian physics, and the shift from Rutherford's realism about sub-atomic particles to the Copenhagen interpretation of Bohr.

Kuhn argues that, even though the new paradigm solves many anomalies of the old, we cannot compare paradigms in such a way as to judge that one is correct while another is wrong. There is no way of saying that something (e.g. genes, electrons, etc.) is 'part of reality', without implicitly relying on a particular paradigm. Three considerations support this argument.

First, we may think that a theory (paradigm) can be evaluated as true or false, or at least better or worse, by comparing its claims with evidence derived from observation. But there is no 'theory-neutral' way of describing the world which we can use to compare and judge between two paradigms. How scientists describe what they observe already depends on one paradigm or another.

Second, the main concepts of a paradigm take their meaning in relation to the paradigm as a whole. A different paradigm, even if it uses the same term, interprets the concept differently, because it plays a new and different role. They are therefore talking about different things. As a result, we cannot compare their claims to say that one is more 'correct' or 'true' than another, as then they could both be correct in their own terms. An objective judgment needs to find neutral terms – but these don't exist.

Third, what counts as evidence and justification also depends on the paradigm. There are no paradigm-independent rules for what is good evidence. And so again, we can't compare two paradigms to say that one fits better with the 'evidence' than the other.

Objectivism in science

Objectivists can object to Kuhn's relativism that all scientists are persuaded by the new paradigm to abandon the old. There must be reasons for this, in particular the power of the new paradigm to resolve the anomalies of the old. Isn't this an objective measure of improvement?

Karl Popper (*The Logic of Scientific Discovery*) argued that scientific theories make predictions which we can test through experiment against experience. If the prediction is shown to be false, then the theory is falsified, and a different theory must be developed. So we can argue that one theory is better than another if it makes more true predictions.

But the kinds of high-level theories that form part of a paradigm are never simply 'falsified' through a single test. They are falsified slowly, over time, by failing to provide adequate explanations of observations. And Kuhn argues that the new paradigm rarely manages to carry over all the successes of the old. The shift to the new paradigm brings costs as well as benefits, and some phenomena that were explained become no longer explicable. This is now called 'Kuhn-loss'. Kuhn-loss shows that while a new paradigm may fill the gap, it will be subject to its own gaps.

Objectivists can nevertheless argue that Kuhn's theory is inadequate. First, even with Kuhn-loss, we can make meaningful comparisons between theories in terms of their overall capacity to solve problems. This is an absolute standard of progress. Second, if we do not assume that scientific theories are getting closer to the (objective) truth, we cannot explain the success of science. Technology has advanced considerably – the best explanation for this is that the scientific theories which underpin technology are more accurate than before.

Kuhn agrees that there is progress, including the solving of problems, but he argues that the idea that we are getting 'closer to the truth' makes no sense. Science responds to the challenges it faces at any particular time; this does not mean that there is an 'ultimate goal' towards which it is moving.

As we saw, one reason for his view is that concepts have their meaning within a paradigm, so we cannot say that one concept (or interpretation of a concept) is more true than another. But philosophers have challenged this claim. Meaning is not given just by use, but also by reference. We can compare two theories of molecules or space by looking at the nature of molecules or space. Both theories are talking about the same thing, because in both theories, the terms were developed in response to particular experiences. There is a causal chain from molecules to the concept 'molecule' in both theories, and this fixes what the concept is a concept of. Kuhn must accept this view

when talking improvements of a theory within a paradigm; we should also accept it when talking about how one paradigm solves the anomalies of another.

Have there, in fact, been any Kuhnian revolutions? Or have changes in scientific theory at any one time involved considerable continuity and overlap in beliefs about methodology, evidence, values and technique? If there have been no Kuhnian revolutions, then scientific theories exhibit enough similarity for us to compare them and come to an absolute judgment on which are better.