A Companion to Relativism

Edited by
Steven D. Hales

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Introduction

Relativism is one of the oldest and most tenacious ideas in all of philosophy. About 2,500 years ago, Protagoras reportedly began his book *Truth* (now regrettably lost) with the claim that "Of all things the measure is man, of the things that are, that they are, and of things that are not, that they are not." Protagoras was apparently struck by the fact that there were situations in which it looked like two parties disagreed, and yet they were both right. Protagoras's idea is explained by Plato in his dialogue *Theætetus*: suppose we both have the same wind blowing in our faces and you are cold and I am hot. You claim that it is a cold wind and I claim that it is a hot wind. While we disagree, it seems implausible that one of us is objectively right and the other objectively wrong. Not only could we argue indefinitely without resolution, but it seems quite peculiar to suppose that there even is some absolute matter of fact upon which we might converge. Protagoras's solution is that we are both right: it is a hot wind relative to me and a cold wind relative to you. There is no further, human-independent fact of the matter.

Protagoras's relativism is a form of conflict resolution. You and I dispute about whether the wind is hot or cold, and some sort of relativizing move is a way to make the disagreement go away. There are other approaches to disagreements too. Here are a few:

1 We keep arguing even though you think I'm too hard-headed to ever to see the light of reason, and I think the same thing about you.
2 We agree to disagree and move on to other topics.
3 We compromise and decide that we're each partially right. We agree that the wind is sort of hot and also sort of cold. Maybe it's in-between.
4 We determine that we're using our terms differently and settle on a common usage. So what you mean by "cold" isn't the same thing that I mean by it, and what I mean by "hot" isn't the same thing that you mean by it. We work out our linguistic differences and reach agreement.
5 We continue to argue until one of us capitulates.

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The first two options aren't really a way to *resolve* a disagreement. Still, someone very hopeful or very willful might put the first into practice when arguing with a fanatic. Friends stuck in a dialectical impasse who value their continuing friendship more than their continuing argument might opt for the second. But for philosophers bent on ferreting out the truth through universally recognizable reason, neither seems very appealing.

Compromising is a genuine way of reaching agreement. For example, an abortion conservative (one who believes that all abortions, even of zygotes, is morally impermissible) and an abortion liberal (one who believes that all abortions, even of very late-term fetuses, is morally permissible) might settle their differences through compromise on a moderate position. Perhaps they decide that early abortions are morally permissible, late abortions are not, and that they can amicably work out the middle-term boundary cases.

The fourth option is also a promising means of settling some seemingly intractable disputes. William James opens the second lecture of his *What is Pragmatism?* (1904) with a nice example of a purely verbal disagreement:

> Some years ago, being with a camping party in the mountains, I returned from a solitary ramble to find everyone engaged in a ferocious metaphysical dispute. The corpus of the dispute was a squirrel – a live squirrel supposed to be clinging to one side of a tree-trunk; while over against the tree's opposite side a human being was imagined to stand. This human witness tries to get sight of the squirrel by moving rapidly round the tree, but no matter how fast he goes, the squirrel moves as fast in the opposite direction, and always keeps the tree between himself and the man, so that never a glimpse of him is caught. The resultant metaphysical problem now is this: *Does the man go round the squirrel or not?* He goes round the tree, sure enough, and the squirrel is on the tree; but does he go round the squirrel? … "Which party is right," I said, "depends on what you practically mean by 'going round' the squirrel. If you mean passing from the north of him to the east, then to the south, then to the west, and then to the north of him again, obviously the man does go round him, for he occupies these successive positions. But if on the contrary you mean being first in front of him, then on the right of him, then behind him, then on his left, and finally in front again, it is quite as obvious that the man fails to go round him, for by the compensating movements the squirrel makes, he keeps his belly turned towards the man all the time, and his back turned away. Make the distinction, and there is no occasion for any farther dispute. You are both right and both wrong according as you conceive the verb 'to go round' in one practical fashion or the other."

Once James was able to make clear two different senses of "to go round," there was no longer any dispute to be had. James offered the squirrel story as an example of his pragmatic approach to "settling metaphysical disputes that otherwise might be interminable."

Yet not all metaphysical disputes can be so easily converted to verbal ones. Again, consider the abortion debate. An abortion conservative and an abortion liberal might both be in complete moral agreement – both agree on the principle that it is wrong to kill persons. What they disagree about is whether fetuses are persons. The liberal thinks that they are not and the conservative thinks that they are. While their point of contention is metaphysical, this dispute does not seem like just a verbal quarrel. Even if both

parties recognize that the liberal defines "person" in terms of functional mental capacities and the conservative defines "person" in terms of biological humanity, the disagreement between them does not go away. With James's squirrel, it seemed unreasonable to insist that there is One True Definition of "to go round." In the case of "person," it seems that there is a more substantial dispute that simply making a definitional distinction does not solve. The liberal and the conservative each believes that it is they who have limned the metaphysically correct kind.

When opposing parties reject compromise and their differences look more than merely verbal, the most common response is to choose option (5) above: continue the debate until someone gives in. Many times this is surely the right approach. Plato remarks in *Euthyphro* (7b–c) that if there is a dispute about numerosity, then the disputants can reach agreement by counting; if there is a dispute about size, agreement can be achieved through measurement; if the disagreement is about weight, they can use a weighing machine to end the controversy. In short, we keep looking for the appropriate kind of mutually agreed-upon evidence that will settle the matter to everyone's (epistemic) satisfaction. That's perfectly fine for certain sorts of conflict. However, as Plato goes on to say (using Socrates as his mouthpiece):

> But about what would a disagreement be, which we could not settle and which would cause us to be enemies and be angry with each other? ... Is it not about right and wrong, and noble and disgraceful, and good and bad? Are not these the questions about which you and I and other people become enemies, when we do become enemies, because we differ about them and cannot reach any satisfactory agreement?

It is in such cases of apparently intractable disagreement that one starts to look for an alternative solution.

Although Plato specifically addresses moral conflicts in *Euthyphro*, they are not the only ones about which one might despair of fighting to eventual unconditional surrender. Consider aesthetic predicates, like those of personal taste. I declare that spicy lamb curry tastes delicious and you deny that it does. You insist that death metal is the finest music ever made and I extol Philip Glass as vastly superior, or I maintain that Halle Berry is more beautiful than Nicole Kidman, but you think the reverse is true. Such debates appear intractable; we could argue forever over whether spicy lamb curry is delicious without any prospect of resolution. Even more, such an argument seems pointless – not because there is no merit to the question, but because it does not look like either one of us could reasonably be said to be in error. I'm in a sense epistemically blameless for believing that spicy lamb curry is delicious, since it unambiguously tastes that way to me. Likewise, you too can't be blamed for thinking that it is not delicious, and no amount of testimony from others will affect your judgment of the curry's flavor.

Sometimes such cases are described as instances of faultless disagreement. It doesn't seem right to dismiss faultless disagreements as empty, as if there is no fact of the matter. After all, spicy lamb curry really *does* taste wonderful, and I appreciate that fact with every bite. Rather than there being no truth about the taste of curry, instead there may be multiple truths. It is true (relative to me) that spicy lamb curry is delicious, and it is false (relative to you) that it is delicious. This sort of relativizing approach is another way to resolve contradictions. We don't argue endlessly, compromise, decide that we're

engaged in a purely verbal dispute, or agree to disagree. Instead, we determine that we are both right!

There are many kinds of relativizing strategies in philosophy, made under the pressure of varying considerations and for diverse ends. Some are so routine and commonplace that one hardly notices them – indexicals for example. The thesis that *tomorrow never comes because it is always today* would be a serious metaphysical conundrum without recognizing that "today" and "tomorrow" are indexicals, and the proposition's content is relative to these variables, even if its character is not. But once this relativity is understood, then the claim is just a child's joke. Or take relative terms, such as "being short," "being heavy," "being small," and "being rich." Two people might dispute whether John is rich while both being in full possession of all the facts about his net worth and income. How such a thing could happen is again puzzling, until the implicit relativity of "being rich" is appreciated. "John is rich (for a philosopher)" might be true while "John is rich (for a capitalist)" is false.

Or imagine two people debating whether Australia is the land down under. One person insists that all one has to do is look at a globe to see that Australia is buried deep in the southern hemisphere and that most of the Earth's land is above it. The other person turns the globe upside down, noting that there is no privileged position from which the Earth is to be viewed, and that the perspective from which Australia is close to the top of the world is just as legitimate as any other. We might as well call Australia "the land up over." The relativizing strategy (and the astute reader will sense the shade of Carnap here) is to invoke the notion of cartographic frameworks. "Australia is the land down under" is true relative to our usual cartographic framework, and false relative to other astrophysically legitimate frameworks. There is no framework-independent fact of the matter.

Another respectable form of relativizing involves modal language. Two people might agree about all the relevant empirical facts and still be at loggerheads over whether "it is impossible for Kathy to move her bishop that way" is true. The dissolution of the dispute again comes from the recognition of an implicit relativity. One party might accurately judge that it is impossible for Kathy to move her bishop that way, given that which possible worlds are accessible from the actual world are completely determined by the rules of chess, the position of the pieces in this game, and whose move it is. A disputant might veridically judge that it is *not* impossible for Kathy to move her bishop in a certain way, assuming it is only physical law that determines which possible worlds are accessible from the actual world. In other words, a prospective move might be impossible relative to the rules of chess, but not impossible relative to the laws of nature.

One final, philosophically current, example is contextualism. In epistemology, the view is motivated by cases in which two people agree about the merits and quantity of evidence that S possesses in favor of *p*, and yet one person judges that S knows that *p* and the other person denies it. The contextualist solution is, roughly, to say that both may be right. Under lower, everyday epistemic standards, S does know that *p*; S's warrant for *p* clears the low bar. But given the high standards insisted upon by an intransigent critic, S does not know that *p*; S's justification just can't measure up. According to contextualists, these epistemic standards are relative to variable contextual features such as conversationally salient assumptions, the interests of the knowledge attributors, and so on.

Inclusive-minded folks are happy to classify all of the preceding forms of relativizing as species of the genus *relativism*. Such inclusivity means that relativism is so ordinary and familiar that endorsing it should hardly raise an eyebrow; it is a semantic feature so mundane that the heated opposition of social critics and popes (see John Paul II's encyclical *Fides et Ratio*) seems bizarre. Of course, there are more radical relativist programs, and some philosophers prefer to consider these alone to be relativism proper, relegating indexicals, modality, contextualism, etc. to a distant branch of the family tree.

Consider the simple relativism of predicates of personal taste sketched a few paragraphs back. There the fact of whether curry is delicious is relative to tasters, an idea that doesn't seem prima facie implausible. Now, "delicious" is obviously a normative term; something is delicious just in case it tastes very good. What about other normative predicates, such as ethical ones? Should we analogously say that whether an action is good is somehow relative to the actors, so that the same (type of) action is right for me, but wrong for you? Such egoistic relativism is clearly more controversial. Yet all it took was a left-hand turn from aesthetic predicates to ethical ones to wind up in a much scarier part of town. Other forms of ethical relativism are in the same neighborhood too, such as ones that relativize moral truth to cultures instead of individuals.

Moral relativism is not the only relativizing move that engenders controversy. Contested relativistic approaches also appear in logic, the philosophy of science, and ontology, to name a few. One might think that of all the subfields of philosophy, logic has the best claim on producing absolute truths. Yet even here there are relativistic motivations. For example, von Neumann–Bernays–Gödel set theory (NBG) and Zermelo–Fraenkel set theory with the axiom of choice (ZFC) are both perfectly suitable for use by mathematicians. In fact, NBG is regarded as a conservative extension of ZFC, so that anything that's a theorem of NBG is also a theorem of ZFC and conversely. In that sense they (successfully) aim to capture the same truths. However, NBG and ZFC have different metalogical properties. It is a metalogical fact about NBG that it is finitely axiomatizable and a metalogical fact about ZFC that it is not finitely axiomatizable. Well, then, is the one true set theory finitely axiomatizable or not? Perhaps the correct answer is that there is no one true set theory; instead there are many equivalently true set theories. That is, set-theoretical truth is relative to whichever set theory one has chosen.

Here's an example from ontology. Consider the principle of unrestricted mereological composition. According to this principle, every combination of things is a thing. Accepting or rejecting this principle matters a great deal in answering the question of what there is. To take a simple illustration, suppose you have three marbles. How many things do you have? If we accept unrestricted composition, then the answer is "seven." If we reject it, then the answer might be "three." How many things there are is thus relative to which composition principle is correct. As it stands, that's rather innocuous. However, it is very hard to determine which composition principle is correct, or even that any composition principle is correct. As David Lewis argued, a satisfactory composition principle must accommodate our intuitions about which ostensible things are genuine objects and which not. Such a principle would give a precise ruling in every case, for instance, that a marble is an object but a pair of marbles is not. However, our intuitions about objects involve vagueness, as the sorites paradox shows. Thus no

composition principle could accord with our intuitions. Lewis takes this argument to motivate unrestricted composition, but one might conclude instead that there is no uniquely true principle of mereological composition, and that it is theoretically arbitrary which we choose. If that's right, then the nature of objects is deeply relative – in the case of the marbles, it is true that there are only three things (relative to a more atomistic mereology) and it is also true that there are seven things (relative to a mereology with unrestricted composition).

So far I have painted a broad-brush picture of various relativistic ideas and some motivations for them. Philosophically adequate accounts of relativism must fill in the details. If truth is relative to a parameter other than times, possible worlds, and contexts of tokening, what is it? Is truth relative to individuals? cultures? investigative paradigms? abstract perspectives? If truth is so relative, what does this mean about the property of truth itself? Perhaps there is no one univocal property that corresponds to "being true," and instead we should adopt a truth pluralism according to which there are multiple, divergent properties that serve the role of truth.

Or maybe truth is not relative at all, but it is the conceptual content of truth-value-bearers that is somehow relativized. At *Phaedrus* 265e, Socrates advises the use of reason to classify objects into natural kinds, carving reality "where the natural joints are, and not trying to break any part, after the manner of a bad carver." For conceptual relativists, there is no such thing. Reality is more like an amorphous jellyfish than a segmented chicken, and there are many possible conceptual schemes, no one of which can be privileged above the others as delivering the proper way to conceptualize reality. A conceptual relativist may hold that Goodman's grue and bleen are as legitimate as blue and green, despite the fact that the latter concepts are more familiar and well entrenched. Or they may aver that our familiar understanding of the world as consisting of objects that persist through time does not reflect reality more accurately than the reputed Hopi conceptual scheme in which the world consists of events and processes.

I have tried to present a few of the motivations that philosophers have had to promote relativist theses and show the intuitive pull of the relativist vision. Of course, the broad category of relativism includes a very contentious set of theories, and there are many objections, worries, and concerns that have been raised about them. Here are some of the more prominent general objections.

Conceptual relativist views often give rise to concerns involving incommensurability. One problem about incommensurability can be put as a dilemma. Either (1) two distinct conceptual schemes are transformations of each other, i.e. there are rules that allow an assertion employing concepts from scheme_1 to be translated into an assertion employing concepts from scheme_2, or (2) there are no such translation rules. Under the first disjunct, the two schemes aren't fundamentally distinct after all; really, we have one conceptual scheme with different expressions for the same concepts. Therefore, conceptual relativism is false. Under the second disjunct, it becomes difficult to see why we should think that the two conceptual schemes are different ways of conceptualizing the same thing. If there is no way of interrelating the content of scheme_1 and the content of scheme_2, then they might as well be about completely different things. The US Tennis Association rulebook cannot be translated into the engineering guidelines for microchip design, which is a good reason to think that they concern unrelated

topics. If scheme$_1$ and scheme$_2$ aren't different ways of conceptualizing the same subject matter, then again conceptual relativism is false.

Probably the most famous complaint was raised by Plato himself. Consider a form of relativism that relativizes truth to some parameter. What facts are thus relativized? We needn't suppose that all truths are merely relatively true. Perhaps moral relativism is true, but absolutism is correct for empirical propositions, or relativism is true for predicates of taste, but not for morality. One might defend a local relativism without being committed to the view that all truths are relative ones.

However, suppose that one does want to support a global relativism, the view that everything is relative. This was apparently Protagoras's view. In *Theætetus* Socrates argues that, taken to its logical conclusion, Protagorean relativism means that no one is any wiser than anyone else. Protagoras himself is no more knowledgeable than a baboon or a pig and yet he is as wise as any of the gods (*Theætetus* 161–2). Since all who disagree with Protagoras are as equally in the right as he is, those who deny his relativism must also be in possession of the truth. This, of course, implies that Protagoras is wrong about man being the measure of all things. Yet the doctrine states that Protagoras, along with everyone else, must be right in his opinions; thus for Protagoras relativism is true. The apparent contradiction Socrates calls "a really exquisite conclusion" (*Theætetus* 171a). Many subsequent philosophers have taken Plato's self-refutation objection to be a definitive blow against global relativism.

Other critics of relativism argue that it is not a coherent solution to the problem of disagreement. If two parties disagree, then one asserts *p* and the other not-*p*. That is, disagreement means contradiction: *p* and not-*p*. The usual, absolutist approach is to continue arguing about which conjunct is true until one side gives up and everyone settles on either *p* or not-*p*, exclusively. The relativist solution is to divide and conquer: *p* is true relative to some parameter, and not-*p* is also true, relative to a different parameter. The objection is that by relativist lights, the original two parties never disagreed at all; their dispute was merely superficial. In fact, they actually agree! Person A believes that *p* is true, relative to X, that not-*p* is true, relative to Y. Person B believes the exact same thing. Not only is there no disagreement, but there is no relativism. Reality contains these absolute truths, upon which all ideal observers concur: *p* is true relative to X, and not-*p* is true relative to Y. Thus "relativism" fails to preserve the datum of disagreement and even fails to offer a cogent alternative to absolutism.

Yet another objection is that avowed relativists are incapable of rationally convincing their opponents. Either the arguments for relativism are presented from a neutral or transcendent perspective, or they are presented from some specific perspective; i.e. the reasons themselves are perspective-dependent. First horn of the dilemma: if pro-relativist arguments are presented from a neutral or transcendent perspective, then substantive relativism is abandoned. Relativism is presumably in the business of denying that there are neutral or transcendent perspectives. Second horn of the dilemma: if the articulation and defense of the relativist's thesis is launched from some particular perspective or other, then opponents in alternative perspectives will have no rational reason to accept the thesis. By the lights of the opponents, the reasons offered don't count as adequate ones, if they count as reasons at all. Thus the relativist must either abandon relativism or concede that she has no means of rationally persuading her opponents.

A Companion to Relativism attempts to present a wide range of approaches and responses to relativism. Some of the authors take relativism seriously, but argue that it is ultimately untenable. Others defend relativistic positions that range from the humble, limited, and mild to the extreme, far-reaching, and radical. Still other authors engage in neutral explorations of what relativism has to offer in different domains of inquiry without choosing up sides. Relativist ideas have been investigated in all the major subfields of philosophy, and *A Companion to Relativism* provides a smorgasbord of these regional dishes. Other readers on relativism are typically narrowly focused on relativism as conceived by one group of practitioners – philosophers of language, say, or ethicists. It is hoped that the more synoptic overview provided here will be an impetus to a fruitful dialogue, and that philosophers well versed in Kuhn-style relativism in the philosophy of science might find it useful to see how epistemologists have developed similar ideas, or that there might be a cross-fertilization between moral relativism and ontological relativism. At least, those are valuable goals from my perspective.

Steven D. Hales

Part I

Characterizing Relativism

1

Global Relativism and Self-Refutation

MAX KÖLBEL

Abstract

Relativism, in particular global relativism, is often said to be "self-refuting." In fact, there are several different shortcomings that may be meant by the term "self-refuting." The purpose of this chapter is to survey and assess some interesting ways in which some forms of relativism may be thought to be self-refuting. I begin by clarifying what can be meant by "self-refutation," and by providing a definition of "relativism" to work with. Since self-refutation is usually thought to be a problem specifically for *global* forms of relativism, my preliminaries will include a section that clarifies the senses in which a relativistic doctrine might be global. With the preliminaries out of the way, I consider, in sections 4 and 5, certain fundamental difficulties faced by global forms of relativism and how they might be avoided. Sections 6 and 7 then move on to an assessment of several different self-refutation arguments against relativism. The result of the investigation will be that any form of global relativism that manages to avoid the more fundamental difficulties discussed in sections 4 and 5 has little to fear from self-refutation objections.

1. Self-Refutation

The dialectical notion of self-refutation (*peritrope*) originates in the early Hellenistic period (third century BC, see Burnyeat 1976a). Arguments against relativism that have been styled "self-refutation arguments" go back further, for example to Plato (*Theaetetus* 171a–b) and Aristotle (*Metaphysics* Γ 1008a 28–30, 1012b 12–18, K 1063b 30–5) and even, according to Epicurus, to Democritos. The general idea of self-refutation seems to be that a claim is self-refuting if it can in some way be turned against itself. This might involve the content of the self-refuting claim entailing its own falsity, either on its own or in conjunction with further premises. Alternatively, it might mean that

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making the claim (perhaps making it in a certain way) somehow entails its falsity or else commits the person making it to its falsity. Or, finally, it might mean that the claim cannot be defended in a debate that is conducted according to certain dialectical rules.

It will be worth pausing briefly to appreciate these subtle and perhaps initially confusing distinctions. Consider the following sentence:

(L) What I am saying at this moment is false.

Suppose I uttered (L). I would then be claiming that what I am saying is false. Thus what I have claimed entails that my claim is false. Thus, my claim would be self-refuting in the first sense mentioned above: the content of the claim entails its falsehood. (NB: the difficulties with (L) go far beyond this: consider the assumption that my claim is false.)

Another example. Consider Would-be-Socrates, who claims to know that he does not know anything. We can again use what he has claimed as a premise in an argument that shows that what he has claimed is false:

(P1) Would-be-Socrates knows that he does not know anything. (That's what he has claimed.)
(P2) What is known is true. (This is an additional a priori premise.)
(C1) So, Would-be-Socrates does not know anything. (Follows from P1 and P2)
(C2) So, in particular, Would-be-Socrates does not know that he does not know anything. (Follows from C1)

Thus, we have used what Would-be-Socrates has claimed (the content of his claim) together with a further a priori premise, to deduce that what he has claimed is false.

However, traditional self-refutation arguments usually seem to involve a charge that is subtler than the charge of direct or indirect self-contradiction. Consider a different example. Many of us are familiar with situations where someone shouts the following sentence at the top of their voice:

(S) I am *not* shouting.

It would be correct (though in many cases not prudent) to point out to such a person that their shouting is "pragmatically self-refuting" (Passmore 1961; Mackie 1964): the fact that they are *shouting* the sentence refutes *what* they are shouting, namely that they are not shouting. However, what they are shouting (the content of their claim) is in no way self-contradictory. For they could have made the very same claim – asserted the very same content: that they are not shouting – in a calm voice, or they could have remained silent altogether. In either case it would have been true that they are not shouting.

Some sentences are worse off than (S), in that one cannot use them to make a true assertion (NB: this is not the same as saying that the *content* expressed by such a sentence in a context could not be true). For example, the sentence "I am not saying (claiming, asserting) anything." No one can truly say (claim, assert) that they are not