

Interview with Filozofuj!

Interview via email with Max Kölbel

1. Can we define any set of features which a view needs to be called relativistic?

Of course one can define any term in any way one likes. However, if after defining “relativism” I want to address the same or similar questions as other people who are using the term, i.e. if I do not want to talk past them, I need to define the term in the same way they do, or in a way that captures at least some of what they have in mind. Would-be opponents of relativism often operate with definitions such as: “Relativism is the view that every belief is true.”, and then they are quick to point out problems with such a view. Others perhaps define relativism as an uncontroversial view, such as “the view that people at different times and at different places have had mutually conflicting views.”. I myself try to use a definition that makes relativism an interesting view.

The core idea of relativists is that the truth, or correctness, of beliefs of a certain kind depends on some factor. Of course, the idea that truth can depend on some factor is not always exciting: the truth of the belief that Poland is a republic depends on the time concerning which the belief is held. Perhaps A’s belief concerns the year 1543 and the belief is false, while B’s belief concerns the year 1925 and is true. It is quite obvious that beliefs about whether Poland is a republic depend for their truth-value on the time concerned. But there are other theses of the same form that are not so obvious: Relativism about simultaneity: = the view that beliefs about whether two events are simultaneous depend for their truth-value on the frame of reference concerned. Relativism about moral permissibility: = the view that beliefs about whether an action is morally permissible depends on the system of norms concerned. Relativism about logical consequence: = the view that beliefs about whether a conclusion follows logically from some premisses depends for its truth-value on the choice of logical constants concerned. These three theses are not obvious, and at least the second and third are controversial.

We can define “relativism” for variable kinds of belief and variable factors of dependence: Relativism about K with respect to F : = the view that beliefs of kind K depend for their truth-value on factor F . Depending on what we put in for “ K ” and “ F ”, we get an interesting relativism or a relativism that is not interesting because it is obviously true or obviously false. Moral relativism results if the kind in question is moral beliefs (or perhaps more neutrally: moral judgements), and the factor in question is something like: a set of moral principles or a cultural background. That’s an interesting and controversial view.

2. *What reasons support relativism?*

There are many different kinds of reasons that might support relativistic theses. For example, Protagoras (as portrayed by Plato in the *Theaetetus*) seems to have reasoned by analogy: the correctness of beliefs about whether a wind is cold seems to depend on who believes it when (for example their constitution, state of health, the time of year etc). Beliefs about how things seem or look seem to be similar. Protagoras apparently moved from these obvious relativisms to a radical general thesis: that the correctness of every perceptual belief depends on who holds the belief.

Sometimes, relativistic theses are motivated by reference to some obvious cases of truth-value variation. It seems obvious to many people that sometimes it can be correct for one thinker to believe something, and incorrect for another thinker to believe the very same thing. For example, it might be correct for you to believe that chocolate icecream is better than vanilla icecream, but incorrect for me to believe the very same thing. It might be correct for you to believe that the keys might be in the drawer (given the information you have), while it would be incorrect for me to believe this (given the information I have). Cases like this can motivate operating with objects of belief whose truth-value can (but need not) depend on some factor, such as a perspective, or simply on a thinker and a time.

A different type of motivation comes from metaphysics or epistemology: sometimes certain metaphysical views require that there cannot be facts of a certain sort, for example evaluative facts or facts about probabilities in individual cases. This might lead to the view that the truth-value of certain judgements (about values, about single-case probabilities) is not yet determined by the facts alone, but depends moreover on an evaluative standard, or on one's evidence.

3. *In contemporary philosophy many authors point to the problem of disagreement among philosophers (and not only philosophers). Can we say that from the fact of persistent disagreement in a certain domain one can draw relativistic conclusions about this domain?*

This sort of reason for relativism is similar to the second kind of reason I mentioned above. If in a certain area (for example moral judgement) there are persistent disagreements, and if we cannot easily point towards any error that would explain why one side at least is mistaken, then that could lead to the conclusion that perhaps neither side *is* mistaken, and that the area in question is one where it depends on some extra factor whether it is correct to accept these contents of judgement.

John Mackie famously argued in this way against the existence of moral facts. But he didn't arrive at the relativistic conclusion that the correctness of moral judgements

can depend on something other than the objective state of the world, but at the conclusion that *all* moral judgement was mistaken: all moral judgements require for their correctness the existence of objective moral facts, but since there are no such facts (as the existence of persistent disagreement shows), moral judgements are mistaken.

It is important to keep in mind that arguments of this type rely on more than just persistent disagreement: they also rely on the premiss that there is no better explanation for the disagreement than the absence of corresponding facts. Thus, for example, one cannot conclude directly from the persistence of disagreement about whether global warming is caused by humans to the conclusion that there are no facts of the matter, or that correctness of beliefs about the cause of global warming depends on a point of view. In this case, there are many better explanations for why the disagreement persists: lack of information about the evidence, errors in assessing the evidence, willful ignorance of evidence, economic interests, etc.

4. *Does epistemic relativism entail moral relativism?*

In current epistemology, “epistemic relativism” is typically defined (roughly) as the view that beliefs as to whether a person knows something (e.g. knows that the bank is open on Saturdays) can depend not just on that person’s evidence and the truth of what they believe, but also on contextually determined standards of justification. I don’t see why moral relativism (defined as above or in a similar way) should follow from epistemic relativism in this sense. But perhaps the question targets epistemic relativism in some different sense.

5. *Does accepting relativism in a given domain lead to accepting skepticism in this domain? For instance, can I justifiedly express my moral criticism of someone’s behavior, say enslaving other people or torturing them for fun, is morally outrageous, and at the same time believe that all the moral views (or/and practices) are equally well justified (or that there is no objective or universal criterion allowing us to tell which views are right and which are wrong)?*

These are two questions. On the first question: relativism has no tendency to lead to skepticism. On the contrary, relativism in a certain domain might help the epistemologist explain how we can obtain knowledge in that domain, where it would have been difficult to explain this on the assumption of absolutism (compare the third type of motivation for relativism I mentioned above).

On the second question: Let’s define moral relativism as follows: judgements about whether something is morally wrong etc depend for their correctness on the judge’s

moral norms. A person holding this form of moral relativism can consistently believe that torture, or slavery, is morally wrong, and their belief can be correct. Thus, moral relativism is in no way incompatible with taking a moral stance or acting upon it.

But the second question was asking about a different claim: the view that all moral views are equally justified, or equally correct. Neither the claim that all moral judgements are equally justified, nor the claim that they are equally correct, follows from moral relativism. But would-be opponents of moral relativism often say incorrectly that these views follow from moral relativism, or they define “relativism” in such a way that they do follow from the view thus defined. There might be people who hold such views, and possibly some of them even call themselves “relativists” (who?). But when looking at serious discussions of moral relativism in the philosophical literature, this is not how “relativism” is defined. It is a case of the rhetorical trick that Harman has called “dissuasive definition”. It is an attempt to distract from the serious issues that are actually discussed under the label “relativism”.

6. *Is relativism an indispensable part of postmodernism?*

Postmodernism is a very loose conglomerate of tendencies and views. I believe that Richard Rorty would qualify as an important postmodernist thinker, so I will say something about his views that seems to me to be relevant. Rorty thinks that the enlightenment has replaced belief in god by belief in an objective reality. While welcomes that belief in god was replaced, he thinks that belief in an objective reality is also a pernicious ideology, an ideology that competes with an ideology of solidarity (which is what he promotes). Curiously, most philosophers nowadays do believe in an objective reality (see PhilPapers survey), and they also treat it as a kind of ideology: they simply stipulate that the contents of belief and of assertion, and of all representation, have absolute truth values.

Relativism, as I define it, opens up a way for rational discussion about the question of whether there is an objective reality that we can represent correctly in thought. For if we leave open whether the contents of representation have absolute truth-values, i.e. allow that perhaps they sometimes don't, then Rorty and the believers in objective reality can at least start from a common point of departure without presupposing the existence or non-existence of objective reality. I believe that one can on that basis argue that at least in some areas, we are capable of approximately objective representation. This is a topic on which I have recently written.

7. *What is/are the most serious weakness of relativism according to its critics?*

I have already mentioned some of the strategies by would-be opponents of relativism (of one kind or another), for example the claim that relativism entails that all views are equally correct. Or the claim that it is inconsistent to say that another person is correct in believing some content of belief and to deny that very content oneself. I do not think that there are any serious challenges in this area (even though the rhetoric is sometimes successful).

There are some challenges that are more serious. Those concern, for example, the question how one can should think about interpersonal communication and exchange of information in areas about which people have defended relativistic theses. Thus, for example, if what I believe and assert when I sincerely say “Foot massages are pleasant” is a content whose truth-value depends on a perspective, then why do we assert such things? How can anyone learn from this? I believe that this sort of problem is indeed one that one does not have if one assumes that objects of belief and assertion have absolute truth-values (although one will have different problems as a result). So working on answers is an important task for relativists of the various stripes.

8. Global relativism is quite often refuted with the argument that it is self-refuting. How strong is this argument? How could one respond to it?

Self-refutation arguments against relativism have a long tradition, and they actually comprise very different kinds of argument. One thing is clear: they work best when applied to global forms of relativism, i.e. views that claim that correctness *in all domains* depends on some factor. Suppose the global relativism in question is the view that for *every* content of belief, whether it is correct to believe that content depends on who the believer is. This view by itself is consistent with there being some contents that it is correct to believe for every thinker. But suppose we make the view more radical and define “radical global relativism” as follows: every belief content is such that it is correct to believe it for some thinkers and incorrect to believe it for others. Then we might ask: what about the content of radical global relativism itself? It too will be a content that it is correct to believe for some, but not for others.

Many people have thought that this is somehow problematic. But it is hard to turn it into a “refutation”. Usually some further assumption is needed, one which the radical global relativist need not accept. For example, the assumption might be that by asserting something, one presents it as absolutely correct. On that assumption, it is incoherent for the radical global relativist to assert his or her own view.

There is much more that could be said about self-refutation, and much more has been said throughout the ages (including my own article in Hales’ *Companion to Relativism* (2011)). But one should remember: even if one thinks that radical global

relativism is in some sense self-refuting, this does not yet show anything about non-radical or non-global forms of relativism.