BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Relativism: New Problems of Philosophy
By Maria Baghramian and Annalisa Coliva

Routledge, 2019. 332 pp.

Précis

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Relativism: New Problems of Philosophy[1] presents, in some detail, the key arguments and justifications for the most prominent relativistic positions in contemporary philosophy and provides critical responses to them.[2] An additional aim of the book is to address the question whether there is a single doctrine of relativism that can be coherently stated.

The book thus begins with a conceptual analysis of relativism and proposes six core features – *viz*. non-absolutism, dependence, multiplicity, incompatibility, equal validity, and non-neutrality – that we take to be common to all relativist doctrines. Some of them are familiar from the literature on relativism, but two of them – non-neutrality and equal validity – are certainly more controversial. This opening chapter also identifies two main forms of relativism: relativism as a reaction to irresolvable and yet apparently faultless disagreements and relativism as an attempt to make sense of unbridgeable differences between people's views and attitudes.

The book continues with an account of the various approaches to the idea of relativism, in the history of Western philosophy. We argue that the main difference between Ancient relativism and later versions of it is the abandonment of its global aspirations. Methodologically, this historical survey helps to substantiate the characterization of relativism presented in the previous chapter.

We then turn to local forms of relativism, which target specific notions or areas of discourse, namely alethic relativism, conceptual relativism, epistemic

relativism, and moral relativism. Our discussion of alethic relativism focuses chiefly on the versions defended by Max Kölbel and John MacFarlane. While finding them wanting *vis-à-vis* the aim of making sense of the normative trappings of the relevant areas of discourse, we also take issue with the methodology they employ. Linguistic data are messy, we propose, and do not decisively favor one relativistic account over others. To select only some of them seems arbitrary, and yet holding them all together may lead to forms of local revisionism, contrary to the descriptivist attitude that seems to animate these projects.

The topic of conceptual relativism is discussed over the subsequent three chapters. It examines W.V.O Quine's version of it, based, according to its main critic – Donald Davidson – on the 'third dogma of empiricism', namely the distinction between conceptual scheme and empirical content. We then consider a version of it proposed as an interpretation of Ludwig Wittgenstein's views about meaning and use. We argue, however, that such an interpretation is misleading and that there is little room to maintain that Wittgenstein was a conceptual relativist. Finally, we consider the more radical claim that our concepts and descriptions can be used to create facts. We examine the linguistic version of the constructivism proposed by Richard Rorty, the ontological 'world-making' of Nelson Goodman, and the epistemological constructivism of Bruno Latour, and find them all wanting.

We then turn to relativism and constructivism about science. We present the tenets of this approach, prominent in the writings of Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend: the thesis of the underdetermination of theory by data, the thesis of confirmation holism, the thesis of the theory ladenness of observation, and the thesis of incommensurability between competing scientific theories. We then consider some recent applications of these theses proposed by the 'Strong Programme', in the sociology of science and in feminist epistemologies. We conclude the chapter by raising a general problem for their approaches.

We then devote two chapters to epistemic relativism. To know, or to be able to claim to know, is not only to hold true beliefs but also have justifications for them. We consider three main arguments for relativizing justification: relativism regarding evidentiary principles, as exemplified by the dispute between Galileo and Bellarmine; relativism about logic; and relativism about explanatory principles. We also examine the popular interpretation of Wittgenstein's views in *On Certainty* as fostering a form of relativism about justification and reject it. None of the arguments listed in favor of epistemic relativism proves convincing.

We then attend to the important issue of how best to characterize epistemic relativism and consider two main proposals. One, due to Paul Boghossian (who eventually rejects it), and indebted to Gilbert Harman,

holds that claims of the form 'S is justified in believing that P' should be replaced by relativized statements such as 'According to the epistemic system ES (that I/we adopt), S is justified in believing that P'. Another, due to MacFarlane, holds that knowledge ascriptions are relative because their semantic assessment is. We raise problems for each of these formulations.

Lastly, we discuss relativism concerning evaluative areas of discourse, such as morals. We consider three main versions of ethical relativism: One, due mainly to Harman, holds that the truth-conditions of moral statements are relative to ethical systems or standards. Another, due to Kölbel, claims that the very truth of moral statements is to be relativized to their holders. Finally, we consider the version of ethical relativism in terms of 'relativism of distance' put forth by Bernard Williams and, more recently, defended by Carol Rovane, who appeals to the idea of 'multimundialism'. We raise objections to all these views, some of which are just instances of the familiar issue that either relativism cannot make sense of genuine disagreement, or it cannot preserve equal validity. With respect to Rovane's proposal, however, we think it is difficult to make sense for most ethical disputes of the kind of strong normative insularity she maintains.

The final chapter of the book is meta-philosophical in its approach. As noted, relativism can be characterized in at least two main ways: one that aims to make sense of irresolvable yet faultless disagreement, and one that aims at making sense of the idea of an unbridgeable distance – often cashed out in terms of incommensurability – between parties to certain debates. We consider whether each of these characterizations is ultimately stable and whether a model for their respective desiderata can indeed be found. We explore several possible proposals and find them wanting. Yet, while this diminishes our confidence that relativism can be given any consistent formulation, it still allows scope for further discussions of how to make sense of relativism as a philosophical thesis.

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