

HANDBOOK OF EPISTEMOLOGY

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RELATIVISM

Epistemological¹ relativism may be defined as the view that knowledge (and/or truth or justification²) is relative – to time, to place, to society, to culture, to historical epoch, to conceptual scheme or framework, or to personal training or conviction – in that what counts as knowledge (or as true or justified) depends upon the value of one or more of these variables. Knowledge is relative in this way, according to the relativist, because different cultures, societies, epochs, etc. accept different sets of background principles, criteria, and/or standards³ of evaluation for knowledge-claims, and there is no neutral way of choosing between these alternative sets of standards. So the relativist's basic thesis is that a claim's status as knowledge (and/or the truth or rational justifiability of such knowledge-claims) is relative to the standards used in evaluating such claims; and (further) that such alternative standards cannot themselves be neutrally evaluated in terms of some fair, encompassing meta-standard.⁴ (The character of such 'neutrality' is addressed below.)

The doctrine of relativism is usually traced to Protagoras, who is portrayed in Plato's *Theaetetus* as holding that "man is the measure of all things" ('homo mensura'), and that any given thing "is to me such as it appears to me, and is to you such as it appears to you." (Plato 1961, 152a) Plato's Socrates characterizes Protagorean relativism as consisting in the view that "what seems true to anyone is true for him to whom it seems so." (Plato 1961, 170a) This view is a form of relativism in the sense just explained, since for the Protagorean there is no standard higher than the individual – with her own specific location in time, place, culture, framework, etc. – with reference to which claims to truth (and so knowledge) can be adjudicated. But relativism is best understood as a more general doctrine than the Protagorean version of it, which places the source of relativism at the level of standards rather than (as for the Protagorean) at the level of personal opinion or perception, and as such aptly characterizes more recent, influential versions of relativism.

ARGUMENTS CONTRA

Opponents of relativism have made many criticisms of the doctrine; by far the most fundamental is the charge that relativism is *self-referentially incoherent* or *self-refuting*, in that defending the doctrine requires one to give it up. There are several versions of the incoherence charge. The most powerful (for others, see Siegel 1987) is that relativism precludes the possibility of determining the truth, justificatory status, or, more generally, the epistemic merit of contentious claims and theses –

including itself – since according to relativism no claim or thesis can fail any test of epistemic adequacy or be judged unjustified or false.

Take Protagorean relativism as an example. If “what *seems* true [or justified] to anyone *is* true [or justified] for him to whom it seems so” (emphases added), then no sincere claim can fail to be true or be justifiably judged to be false. But if there is no possibility that a (sincerely held) claim or doctrine can be false, the very distinction between truth and falsity is given up; a ‘false’ belief is reduced simply to one which is not believed. While Protagorean relativism is in the first instance a doctrine about the relativity of truth, it is readily extended to matters of epistemic appraisal generally (as the bracketed insertions in the just-quoted expression of Protagorean relativism are meant to illustrate), and understood as asserting the relativity of standards of rightness⁵ and justification as well as those of truth. If read in this way, it follows from this form of relativism that there is no possibility that a belief sincerely judged by a person to be right or justified can be wrong or unjustified. The end result is that the very notions of truth, rightness and justifiedness are undermined. But if this is so, relativism itself cannot be true, right or justified.

Relativism is thus (according to this argument) incoherent in that, if it is true (or right or justified), the very notion of truth (or of rightness or justifiedness) is undermined, in which case relativism cannot itself be true (or right or justified). This undermining results because the relativism of standards alleged by the relativist renders it impossible to distinguish truth (or rightness or justifiedness) from its (their) contrary (-ies). The *assertion and defense* of relativism requires one to presuppose neutral standards in accordance with which contentious claims and doctrines can be assessed; but relativism denies the possibility of evaluation in accordance with such neutral standards. Thus the doctrine of relativism cannot be coherently defended – it can be defended only by being given up.⁶ Relativism is thus *impotent* – incapable of defending itself – and falls to this fundamental reflexive difficulty. Defending relativism non-relativistically is logically impossible, in that any such defense must appeal to that to which the relativist cannot appeal except by giving up relativism; while ‘defending’ relativism relativistically is not *defending* it, i.e., providing any reason for thinking it to be in any way epistemically superior to non-relativism, at all. (Siegel 1987, ch. 1)

To put this fundamental difficulty facing the relativist in a somewhat different way: insofar as she is taking issue with her non-relativist philosophical opponent, the relativist wants both (*a*) to offer a general, non-relative view of knowledge (and/or truth or justification), and assert that that general view – i.e., that knowledge is relative – is epistemically superior and preferable to its rivals; and also (*b*) to deny that such a general, non-relative view is possible or defensible. But the relativist cannot defend the view of knowledge offered in (*a*), according to which relativism is epistemically superior to non-relativism, in a way consistent with her own commitment to relativism. On the other hand, ‘defending’ relativism in a way which does not assert its epistemic superiority is not to defend it at all; neither is it to engage seriously the cluster of issues which divide the relativist from her non-relativist philosophical opponent. Embracing (*b*) – i.e., denying that a general, non-relative view of knowledge (including the relativist view) is possible or defensible – similarly precludes the relativist from seriously engaging the issues to which her

relativism is a response. Moreover, defending (*b*) requires a commitment to (*a*), which commitment the commitment to (*b*) itself precludes.

In short: the relativist needs to embrace *both* (*a*), in order to see her position both as a rival to, and, further, as epistemically superior to, the position of her non-relativist opponent; and (*b*), in order to honor the fundamental requirements of relativism. But the mutual embrace of (*a*) and (*b*) is logically incoherent. For the embrace of (*a*) forces the rejection of (*b*): if relativism is the epistemically superior view of knowledge (i.e., (*a*)), then one general view of knowledge is both possible and defensible as epistemically superior to its rivals (contrary to (*b*)). Similarly, the embrace of (*b*) forces the rejection of (*a*): if no general, non-relative view of knowledge is possible or defensible (i.e., (*b*)), then it cannot be that relativism is epistemically superior to its rivals (contrary to (*a*)). Here again the argument strongly suggests that the assertion and defense of relativism is incoherent.⁷

This incoherence charge is by far the most difficult problem facing the relativist. It is worth noting that attempts to overcome the problem by appealing to the notion of *relative truth* appear not to succeed. Many versions of relativism rely on such a notion, but it is very difficult to make sense of it. An assertion that a proposition is ‘true for me’ (or ‘true for members of my culture’) is more readily understood as a claim concerning what I (or members of my culture, scheme, etc.) *believe* than it is as a claim ascribing to that proposition some special sort of truth. Constructing a conception of relative truth such that ‘*p* is relatively true’ (or ‘*p* is true for *S*,’ or ‘*p* is true for members of culture *C*’) amounts to something stronger than ‘*S* believes that *p*’ (or ‘Members of culture *C* believe that *p*’), but weaker than ‘*p* is true (*simpliciter*)’, has proved to be quite difficult, and is arguably beyond the conceptual resources available to the relativist. (Siegel 1987, 9–18)⁸

Moreover, even if a viable conception of relative truth could be developed, versions of relativism based on it would apparently still fall to the incoherence argument rehearsed above. In particular, a defense of relativism which rests on the notion of relative truth appears doomed to failure insofar as it seeks either to defend the notion of relative truth as superior to its ‘absolutist’ contrary, or to defend any particular relative truth *p* as in any way epistemically superior to equally relatively true *not-p* or arbitrary relative truth *q*. For any such defense would presuppose neutral, fair standards by appeal to which such epistemic superiority might be established, and such standards are precisely those to which the relativist, by virtue of her own commitment to that doctrine, cannot appeal.

Furthermore (as above), to decline to offer a defense – “you have your conception of truth, I have mine, and there is no question of one being ‘better’ than the other,” or “you have your relative truths, I have mine, and there is no question of any relative truth being ‘epistemically superior’ to any other” – is to fail to acknowledge (or take seriously) the philosophical issues that divide the relativist from her non-relativist opponent. For if there is *no* sense, according to the relativist, in which her general epistemological view, her conception of truth, and the particular relative truths she embraces – in particular, her embrace of the relative truth of relativism itself – are epistemically superior to their alternatives, it is hard to understand the dispute between relativists and non-relativists as a *philosophical dispute*. In this case, the relativist seems to be saying “I’m a relativist, you’re not, but your view is just as good (epistemically) as mine.” If the relativist does say this

– if she declines to defend her view on the grounds that she does not regard it as epistemically superior to non-relativism – it is unclear why she should be regarded as a relativist at all; let alone why the non-relativist should be bothered by such a seemingly inert ‘challenge.’ Here we see again the problem of impotence, which arises with the relativist’s declining to defend relativism just as surely as it results from her inability to do so.

Thus relying on the notion of ‘relative truth’ seems not to help the relativist here; indeed, the centuries-old preoccupation with the viability of that notion seems to be mainly irrelevant to the question of the viability of relativism when the latter is understood as a general epistemological doctrine. Whether the relativist’s conception of truth is relative or non-relative, the assertion and defense of relativism appears to remain self-refuting, and so incoherent. (Siegel 1987, 18-20)⁹

ARGUMENTS PRO

Despite these ancient and powerful responses to relativism, the last several decades have witnessed a resurgence of the doctrine. Contemporary versions of relativism occur in a wide variety of philosophical contexts and enjoy an equally wide variety of philosophical pedigrees. Chief among them are versions of relativism spawned by Wittgensteinian considerations concerning language use, conceptual schemes or frameworks, and ‘forms of life’; the ‘strong programme’ in the sociology of knowledge; a variety of quite different positions which might be grouped together under the heading of ‘contemporary neo-Pragmatism’; and, perhaps most surprisingly, highly influential work in the philosophy of science. I briefly review some of these developments below. First, I consider two more general arguments for relativism, which play important roles in many more specific arguments for it: that which claims the impossibility of a *neutral* perspective sufficient to avoid relativism; and, relatedly, that which denies the possibility of transcending one’s (relative) perspective, such *transcendence* being allegedly required to avoid relativism.

a) *Is ‘Neutral’ Judgment Possible?*

As just rehearsed, the argument that relativism is incoherent relies at key junctures on the possibility and accessibility of *neutral* standards in accordance with which knowledge-claims can be adjudicated. But relativists often reject the possibility of such standards, since relativism, as defined above, results (according to the relativist) in part because there are no neutral standards available by which the claims or criteria of rival perspectives can be fairly evaluated. That is, if you and I have a dispute – concerning a given claim’s status as knowledge, or its truth or justificatory status, or the standards to which we should appeal in deciding such matters – the relativist’s contention that such disputes can be resolved only relative to our respective standards (and not ‘absolutely’) rests on her contention that there are no ‘meta-’ or higher-order standards available to which we can appeal which will fairly or non-question-beggingly resolve our dispute.

Thus consider the famous dispute between Galileo and the Church concerning the existence of moons orbiting Jupiter. Not only did the two parties disagree as to the truth of the relevant claim – Galileo affirmed the existence of the moons, while his opponents denied it – they also disagreed about the relevant standards (telescopic observation? naked eye observation? Scripture? Aristotle?) to which appeal should be made in order to resolve their disagreement. The relativist here claims that such disputes admit of no non-relative resolution, precisely because there is no neutral, non-question-begging way to resolve the dispute concerning (meta-)standards. Any proposed meta-standard which favors regarding naked eye observation, Scripture, or the writings of Aristotle as the relevant standard by which to evaluate ‘the moons exist’ will be judged by Galileo as unfairly favoring his opponents, since he thinks he has good reasons to reject the epistemic authority of all these proposed standards; likewise, any proposed meta-standard that favors Galileo’s preferred standard, telescopic observation, will be judged as unfair by his opponents, who claim to have good reasons to reject that proposed standard. In this way, the absence of neutral (meta-)standards seems to make the case for relativism.

However, it does not. The ‘no neutrality, therefore relativism’ argument just rehearsed has an ambiguity at its heart which undermines its ability to support relativism. Let us grant that there is no standard which is neutral *generally*, i.e., neutral with respect to all possible disputes. There may nevertheless be standards which, while not neutral in that sense, are neutral in the weaker sense that they do not unfairly prejudice any particular, live (at a time) dispute. So, for example, both Galileo and his opponents recognized *logic* (or, more broadly, ‘*reason*’) as a standard to which either disputant may fairly appeal. Both sides also agreed that, were Galileo able adequately to explain the workings of his newly invented telescope (something he could not do at the time of the dispute), that explanation would undermine his opponents’ rejection of the proposed Galilean standard of telescopic observation – thus acknowledging *adequate explanation* as a relevant meta-standard for evaluating first-order standards (i.e., those relevant to the resolution of first-order disputes).¹⁰

Consequently, there is no reason to think that there were not – let alone could not be – neutral (meta-)standards available, in terms of which both the first-order dispute between Galileo and his opponents concerning the existence of the moons, and the second-order dispute between them concerning the appropriateness of the various proposed standards for judging first-order disputes, might be evaluated and, at least in principle, resolved. Of course the two meta-standards noted, logic (or ‘*reason*’) and explanatory adequacy, are not neutral with respect to all possible disputes. In particular, they might fail to be neutral with respect to disputes concerning the character and force of logic, and to disputes concerning the character of explanation and its possible tie to truth (although establishing this would require considerably more extensive discussion). Still, while not neutral *simpliciter*, they are in the relevant sense neutral in the Galileo case insofar as both sides both explicitly accept them and rely upon them in the execution of their respective cases. If in the end one side measures up less well against them than the other, that is a result which that side will not like, but such a result in itself is no reason to think such standards unfair, biased, or otherwise objectionable.

The neutrality required to avoid relativism is thus not some sort of *universal* neutrality – neutrality with respect to *every* possible dispute or *all* conceivable conceptual schemes – but only neutrality with respect to the issue at hand. Such neutrality, further, does not require that standards cannot discriminate among better or worse competing views, but rather simply that such discrimination must be fair to competing views, i.e., cannot be prejudicial toward or irrelevantly biased against one or another of them. There is no reason to think that *this* weaker sort of neutrality cannot, in principle, be had.

Moreover, to say that the standards just mentioned are in this weaker sense ‘neutral’ is not at all to say that resolving disputes in terms of them will always be easy. The Galileo case exemplifies how difficult such resolution can be, even absent worries about relativism. Still, as Popper says, one should not “exaggerate... a difficulty into an impossibility.” (1970, 56-7) The difficulty of resolving genuinely hard cases does not yet give aid or comfort to the relativist.¹¹

While in the Galileo case it is clear that the two sides explicitly accepted the meta-standards mentioned, it should be emphasized that such explicit acceptance is not required for this reply to the ‘no neutrality, therefore relativism’ argument to succeed. For if one of the parties were to have rejected one of the meta-standards, it might well nevertheless be the case that that party, in the case now being imagined, *should* have accepted it (or a related higher-order standard), and moreover that the dispute is rightly regarded as legitimately resolvable by reference to such a standard.

A disputant’s rejection of a proposed standard, e.g., as biased or prejudiced against her, may well be legitimate, but it must be established as legitimate by argument – that is, she must provide reasons for thinking that the proposed standard in fact biases or prejudices the outcome of the dispute in an unacceptable way. For if such reasons cannot be produced, the rejection of the proposed standard not only will appear to her opponent to be, but will indeed be, arbitrary. On the other hand, if such reasons can be produced, then some standards – namely, those which sanction those reasons as epistemically forceful – will be presupposed by the party offering them, and will be offered as fair, non-prejudicial (meta-)standards in accordance with which the dispute on the table, concerning the objectionable non-neutrality of the proposed first-order standards, can be fairly resolved. This is a consequence, as noted above, of both sides regarding their dispute *as a genuine dispute*. (In fact, it is a straightforward application of the incoherence arguments against relativism rehearsed above.)

It goes without saying that the non-relativist should acknowledge that all proposed standards (and meta-standards) are open to challenge, and therefore that a disputant who challenges a standard proposed by her opponent is completely within her rights in doing so. But in order for such a challenge to succeed, the challenger must presuppose some (other) standard, one which is neutral with respect to the challenge at hand. Otherwise there would be no reason to regard the originally proposed standard as problematic. For on what basis could a given standard be challenged, absent some meta-standard in accordance with which that first-order standard is (according to the challenger) problematic?

Indeed, a relevant meta-standard which any such challenge must presuppose seems clearly enough to be that of neutrality itself: the problem with proposing a standard not embraced by one’s protagonist in a dispute (say, Galileo’s opponents

proposing to Galileo that the standard of logic is appropriately appealed to in the resolution of their dispute, in the imagined case in which Galileo rejects it), if such a proposal is in fact problematic, is that appeal to that standard prejudices the resolution of the dispute in an unacceptable way. That is, appeal to such a standard is unacceptable (if it is) because its impact upon the dispute is such that any resolution flowing from it would objectionably privilege one of the disputants – it would fail to treat them neutrally or fairly. Thus successfully challenging the appeal to such a standard appears to require acceptance of a general (meta-)standard of neutrality, or fairness. Consequently, the relativist cannot challenge all such appeals to standards as unacceptably non-neutral except by presupposing that particular (meta-)standard herself.

Of course not all proposed standards will be acceptable. But the (meta-)standard of neutrality seems unproblematic, especially since (as just argued) any disputant wishing to challenge an opponent's proposed standards must accept that one; even though, by contrast, other standards – say, that disputants make their cases in ‘formal’ terms, or that those cases must comport with Scripture – will be obviously problematic (e.g., prejudicial) in some cases. The point is not that an appeal to standards one’s opponent does not antecedently accept is always legitimate; it is not. The point, rather, is that challenging a proposed standard itself requires appeal to some standard or other – either a (meta-)standard of neutrality, or some other standard itself presumed to meet that of neutrality – if it is hoped that such a challenge might be successful. For without such an appeal it would be impossible to distinguish successful from unsuccessful challenges of standards. (That is, without such an appeal, the very notion of ‘*successful* challenge’ would be undermined.) Consequently, while the relativist may well be right to protest appeals to standards which are not independently agreed to by the parties to some particular dispute, she can do so only against the background of other standards which she takes to be neutrally and fairly applied to the dispute in question.

I conclude that the relativist cannot consistently defend the premise of the ‘no neutrality, therefore relativism’ argument. Not only is the premise false, in that, so long as ‘neutral’ is understood appropriately, there not only can be but are neutral standards to which parties in particular disputes can legitimately appeal; in addition, the relativist must herself presuppose the falsity of the premise when reserving the right to criticize any proposed standard as unacceptably non-neutral. Moreover, as already noted, the assertion and defense of the ‘no neutrality’ argument for relativism requires appeal to the sort of standard to which the relativist cannot, by her own lights, consistently appeal. Thus relativism appears not to be established by this argument.

I immediately concede that I have not here considered any actual (i.e., in the literature) relativistic denials of neutrality. This is because my aim in this section has been to discuss the general problem, broadly conceived. As we will soon see, the ‘no neutrality, therefore relativism’ argument plays a key role in many of the specific cases for relativism to be discussed below; more specific appeals to it will be considered there. Still, the basic point is clear: while we may agree that neutrality *simpliciter* is not to be had (at least by creatures like us), the absence of this strong form of neutrality has no tendency to establish relativism; by the same token, we have as yet no reason to think that the weaker form of neutrality required for the

avoidance of relativism in any given case cannot be had. Furthermore, the making of this case for relativism itself embroils the relativist in self-referential difficulties, since making it requires appeal to neutral standards of just the sort which the relativist abjures.¹² So this general argument for relativism, based on the impossibility of neutral judgment, does not succeed in establishing that doctrine.

A related general argument for relativism concerns not the impossibility of neutrality, but the impossibility of *transcendence*. I turn to it next.

b) Is It Possible to 'Transcend' One's Perspective?

It is widely acknowledged in contemporary discussion that one can never completely escape one's perspective, framework, or conceptual scheme and achieve a 'God's eye view' or a 'view from nowhere' (Nagel 1986); that all cognitive activity is inevitably conducted from some ongoing perspective or point of view. A typical expression of this thesis is Quine's (1960, 275-6):

The philosopher's task differs from the others', then, in detail; but in no such drastic way as those suppose who imagine for the philosopher a vantage point outside the conceptual scheme that he takes in charge. There is no such cosmic exile. He cannot study and revise the fundamental conceptual scheme of science and common sense without having some conceptual scheme, whether the same or another no less in need of philosophical scrutiny, in which to work.

Philosophers generally grant Quine's point: there is no 'cosmic exile' from all conceptual schemes; one cannot cognize except from within the confines of some scheme or other. But from the relatively uncontroversial claim that we cannot escape all perspectives and achieve a 'view from nowhere,' it seems a short step to the relativistic conclusion that what we can know, or what can be true or justified, is itself relative to the frameworks which inevitably limit our judgment; that, since there is no 'perspectiveless' judgment, there is no possibility of achieving a perspective which would allow us to compare and evaluate (except in a question-begging way) either judgments issued from different perspectives, or alternative perspectives themselves. That is, the uncontroversial claim that all judgments inevitably occur in the context of some perspective or other might be thought to entail that all judgments are therefore *bound* or *determined* by such *inescapable* perspectives – and so that what a given epistemic agent is able to know, or regard as true or justified, is problematically *limited* by her perspective or framework in such a way, or to such an extent, that relativism inevitably results. Is relativism correctly derived in this way?

It is not – or so I will argue. The alleged entailment just mentioned fails; even though we cannot attain a 'perspectiveless perspective,' in the relevant sense we *can* nevertheless 'transcend' our frameworks and perspectives. Here, as in the discussion of neutrality above, we must distinguish between transcending or escaping any given perspective from transcending *all* such perspectives. Once this distinction is drawn, the 'no transcendence, therefore relativism' argument collapses.

Are we limited by our perspectives, such that we cannot achieve any critical perspective on them? Are we really 'trapped' within our perspectives in this way? Common sense and every day experience indicate the contrary. Perhaps the most obvious range of counter-examples involves the cognitive activities of children.

Children of a certain age, for example, can count and have a reasonable grasp of whole numbers, but have no understanding of fractions or decimals, i.e., parts of whole numbers. If asked 'is there a number between 1 and 2?', they will answer in the negative, and will be unable to comprehend any suggestion to the contrary. But, given normal psychological development, within a few years such children will answer affirmatively; they will have no problem recognizing that, e.g., 1.5 is a number between 1 and 2, and more generally, that there are non-whole numbers. This seems a perfectly straightforward case of the modification of a perspective or framework (or of the abandonment of one framework for another) which belies the claim that we are trapped in, bound by, or limited to our frameworks.¹³ (Scientific examples can equally easily be given, e.g., of the recognition of the existence of things too small to see with the naked eye, or of the interanimation of space and time and of the large scale non-Euclidean geometry of the universe.)

Very different sorts of examples can also be given. Consider, for example, the 'male sexist pig' who has no awareness or understanding of women other than as (sex) objects, but who in the course of his experience comes to realize (if only dimly) that he does treat women as objects, that many women want not to be so treated, and that there might well be something objectionable about treating women in that way. Suppose that this benighted male comes eventually to a full(er) awareness of the injustice of his earlier treatment of women; he comes to believe that it is wrong to treat women as objects and, over a considerable period of time and with the help of many women (and perhaps some courses in the Women's Studies Department), he develops a radically different and more respectful view of women and (hallelujah!) treats them accordingly. (Surely many men have had their consciousnesses raised to some extent in this way in recent decades.) Here again it seems that our subject has had his perspective altered and, indeed, improved; that is, he has 'transcended' his old sexist perspective for another.

In these examples not only have perspectives altered; the cognizers considered all regard their later perspectives as *improvements*; i.e., as better than, superior to, their earlier ones. If asked, these cognizers will be able to offer reasons which purport to justify those judgments of superiority. Those reasons, and the judgment that they are good ones which offer justification for the superiority of those later perspectives, are of course made from the perspective of those later perspectives or frameworks; they are not outside of all frameworks or issued from a perspectiveless perspective. Thus is acknowledged the uncontroversial premise of the argument under consideration. But the conclusion is undermined by the several counter-examples offered: epistemic agents always judge from some perspective or other, but there is no reason to think that they are trapped in or bound by their perspectives such that they cannot subject them to critical scrutiny. In this sense, we *can* 'transcend' our perspectives; and this sense is sufficient to defeat the argument for relativism we have been considering. As Popper puts the point:

I do admit that at any moment we are prisoners caught in the framework of our theories; our expectations; our past experiences; our language. But we are prisoners in a Pickwickian sense: if we try, we can break out of our frameworks at any time. Admittedly, we shall find ourselves again in a framework, but it will be a better and roomier one; and we can at any moment break out of it again.

The central point is that a critical discussion and a comparison of the various frameworks is always possible. (1970, 56)

Here Popper clearly draws the crucial distinction which undermines this path to relativism. While the Quinean point that we inevitably judge from some framework or other, that we cannot judge from a perspectiveless perspective, must be granted, it does not follow that our judgments are necessarily tainted by the fact that they are made from some framework or other. On the contrary, we can and regularly do ‘transcend’ our frameworks from the perspective of other, ‘roomier’ ones, in which can fit both our earlier one and relevant rivals to it – and in this way fair, non-relative evaluations of both our judgments and the frameworks/perspectives from which they are made are possible.¹⁴

Of course the ‘framework relativist’ may reject these alleged examples of transcendence, and in this way seek to preserve the argument we have been considering. This raises in a pointed way the question: what are ‘frameworks,’ or ‘conceptual schemes’ or ‘perspectives,’ such that our judgments and our ability to know is bound by them in a way which precludes transcendence? I have thus far understood these locutions in an intuitive and rather uncritical way, since it seems clear that the examples given – do/do not recognize non-whole numbers, do/do not recognize the existence of objects too small to see with the naked eye, do/do not recognize women other than as (sex) objects, etc. – are sufficiently general that such differences constitute differences in conceptual framework or scheme if anything does. An equally plausible example of alternative schemes are the Galilean and Aristotelian schemes discussed above. Understood so generously that all these examples are indeed examples of alternative frameworks or schemes, the argument for relativism based upon that generous understanding of these terms seems clearly deficient. Attempts to resuscitate the argument minimally require a more careful explication of these terms than I have given them here – and, it must be said, than defenders of ‘framework’ relativism have typically given them. Further, they require attention to Davidson’s (1973) famous argument against the possibility of such alternative schemes (and hence of a relativism based upon them).¹⁵ Absent such efforts, the ‘no transcendence, therefore relativism’ argument seems clearly to fail.

As in the discussion of neutrality above, here too I have treated the difficulty raised by ‘transcendence’ in very general terms and have refrained from citing specific versions of the ‘no transcendence, therefore relativism’ argument. In the following sections we will see that several influential arguments for relativism utilize one or both of the arguments just discussed.

c) Kuhn and Relativism in the Philosophy of Science

Much philosophical water has passed under the bridge during the nearly four decades since Kuhn’s highly influential *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) first appeared.¹⁶ I will not review the book’s basic claims, initial reception, or lasting impact on the philosophy of science at length here; rather, I concentrate on its contribution to contemporary defenses of relativism.¹⁷

Both the ‘no neutrality’ and the ‘no transcendence’ arguments for relativism are present in Kuhn’s apparently relativistic position – indeed, they seem to merge

together into one argument in Kuhn's hands. For Kuhn famously (though this attribution to Kuhn is not entirely uncontroversial) argues both that there can be no neutral choice between rival, competing paradigms, and that paradigms are inescapable in the sense that it is not possible rationally to transcend them.

While it is significant that Kuhn himself denied being a relativist and claimed to "categorically reject" that label (1970, 234), many of his readers interpreted his discussions of 'paradigms,' 'incommensurability,' 'revolutionary science,' 'scientific revolutions,' 'gestalt switches,' and the like relativistically. Kuhn's view is especially suggestive of relativism in its apparent contention that paradigms bring with them their own criteria of paradigm evaluation – criteria which are internal to paradigms, but must nevertheless be appealed to in evaluating rival paradigms during episodes of revolutionary science. (Notice how this view appeals to the premises of both the 'no neutrality' and the 'no transcendence' arguments for relativism.) Kuhn's early critics, e.g., Shapere (1964), Scheffler (1967), and Kordig (1971) seized on this point in arguing against Kuhnian versions of relativism. They argued, among other things, both that paradigm-neutral criteria of paradigm evaluation were available, and that Kuhn's view, when interpreted relativistically, succumbed to versions of the incoherence charge.

Whether or not Kuhn's view is rightly interpreted in this way remains a controversial question: Kuhn (and his sympathetic interpreters¹⁸) continued, until his recent death, to insist that his view is not relativist, while some of his critics persist in finding relativism entailed by his more general philosophy of science. This question of interpretation is, for present purposes, less important than the relatively uncontroversial fact that Kuhn does not see his views concerning science as providing a basis from which to argue for relativism. Kuhn rejects relativism, and denies that his philosophy of science entails it; some critics uphold that entailment, but use it not as an argument for relativism but rather as an argument against Kuhnian philosophy of science. Both sides, in other words, agree in their rejection of relativism; they disagree not on the viability of relativism but rather¹⁹ on whether Kuhn's views in fact lends support to that doctrine. In other words, neither Kuhn nor his critics find support for relativism in Kuhn's philosophy of science.²⁰

There is of course more to recent philosophy of science than Kuhn. Themes and theses developed both in Kuhn's work and in the work of Quine, Popper, Feyerabend²¹, and many others – incommensurability, holism, the non-cumulativity of scientific knowledge, the theory-ladenness of observation, the underdetermination of theory by data, the indeterminacy of reference, the failure of traditional accounts of scientific progress and of objective testing of scientific theories, the conventionality of methodological rules and the role of convention in observation statements, a holistic view of meaning, etc. – all have been used in arguing for relativism. They have been rehearsed to good effect by Laudan in his dialogues on *Science and Relativism* (1990), who engagingly labels the relativist thesis "that remarkable thesis of cognitive egalitarianism" (69), and who elaborates the ways in which these arguments for relativism face both specific difficulties and the general self-refutation problem described above. (See also Laudan 1988.) I do not have the space to address these several topics in the philosophy of science here; the reader may pursue them in the article by Humphreys in this *Handbook* or in a host of other recent works in the philosophy of science, e.g., Papineau 1996.²²

d) The Sociology of Science and the 'Strong Programme'

The sociology of scientific knowledge concerns itself with the sociological processes through which such knowledge is generated or produced, the processes through which it is 'legitimated' and accepted within a particular community, and other sociological processes and phenomena which play a role in the collective human effort to know. Traditionally, this sort of sociological investigation into the production, acceptance, legitimization and dissemination of knowledge has been taken by sociologists and epistemologists alike to be distinct from genuine epistemological inquiry, for the most that can be expected from the former sort of inquiry is a descriptive, *causal* account of how some particular community *C* produced and came to accept some knowledge-claim *p* or theory *T*, while the truth and/or justificatory status of *p* and *T* cannot be settled by such causal accounts: *C*'s *regarding p* as true or justified, however caused, is one thing; *p*'s *being* true or justified quite another. In this way a sharp division between sociological and epistemological inquiry concerning science and its claims to knowledge has traditionally been drawn, a division which cedes to sociology the task of describing and explaining scientific beliefs and attitudes at the sociological level, and to epistemology the task of evaluating such beliefs and, more generally, dealing with the normative assessment of candidate knowledge-claims.²³ Indeed, it has seemed to many that the 'sociology of *knowledge*' is a misnomer, in that inquiry conducted under that banner happily ignores any distinction between genuine knowledge and its counterfeits, and is better called the sociology, not of knowledge, but of *belief*.

Leaving the question of what such inquiry should be called to one side, advocates of the 'Strong Programme' explicitly reject, for the purposes of their inquiries, any such distinction between genuine knowledge and spurious impostors to that title, and explicitly accept that, for them, knowledge is nothing more than belief. David Bloor, perhaps the most visible leader of the strong programme, writes: "Knowledge for the sociologist is whatever men take to be knowledge. It consists of those beliefs which men confidently hold to and live by." (Bloor 1976, p. 2) As Barry Barnes and Bloor, in their widely cited defense of relativism, put it: "We refer to any collectively accepted system of belief as 'knowledge'." (1982, p. 22 n5) Their preference for this "terminological convention" (*ibid.*) concerning 'knowledge' – in contrast to the more usual 'convention,' which takes for granted that, since one of the central tasks of epistemology is to say what knowledge is, for purposes of epistemological theorizing it is of central importance to distinguish between genuine knowledge and spurious contenders for that title, however widely believed – has the unfortunate consequence that much of the debate between proponents and opponents of the relativism of the 'strong programmers' seems to be ineffectual, due to these very different understandings of 'knowledge.' Nevertheless, in view of the wide-ranging influence of the strong programme in the broad area of science studies, the centrality of relativism in the overall perspective of that programme, and the fundamental status of Barnes and Bloor's argument for relativism in that perspective, it behooves us to consider that argument here.

Central to their case for relativism is their claim that *relativism is required for science*: "Far from being a threat to the scientific understanding of forms of knowledge, relativism is required by it. Our claim is that relativism is essential to all those disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, the history of institutions and ideas, and even cognitive psychology, which account for the diversity of systems of knowledge, their distribution and the manner of their change." (1982, 21-2) There are two things to notice about this proclamation. First, it must be remembered that by 'knowledge' Barnes and Bloor mean *belief*; their claim is that social scientists studying alternative systems of belief and the dynamics of belief change at the social level, if that study is to be scientific, must study both systems thought by the sociologist to be normatively praiseworthy, and systems thought to be less praiseworthy. No epistemologist who rejects relativism, and who believes that the non-relative normative evaluation of belief is possible, need disagree with this. But second, the proclamation is unclear as to the sense of 'relativism' alleged here to be 'essential' for social scientific inquiry: are Barnes and Bloor making the innocuous point that social scientists studying belief distribution and the dynamics of belief change must study belief systems of both epistemically meritorious and epistemically less meritorious normative status; or the philosophically more contentious claim that any such distinctions concerning epistemic merit are illusory? (Only the latter would qualify their view as a version of relativism of the sort we are concerned with here.)

The answer to this question is, unfortunately, less than clear. On the one hand, they endorse what I just called the 'innocuous point':

Our equivalence postulate is that all beliefs are on a par with one another with respect to the causes of their credibility....The position we shall defend is that the incidence of all beliefs without exception calls for empirical investigation and must be accounted for by finding the specific, local causes of this credibility. This means that regardless of whether the sociologist evaluates a belief as true or rational, or as false and irrational, he must search for the causes of its credibility. In all cases he will ask, for instance, if a belief is part of the routine cognitive and technical competences handed down from generation to generation. Is it enjoined by the authorities of the society? Is it transmitted by established institutions of socialization or supported by accepted agencies of social control? Is it bound up with patterns of vested interest?....All of these questions can, and should, be answered without regard to the status of the belief as it is judged and evaluated by the sociologist's own standards. (1982, 23)

In this central passage Barnes and Bloor are clear that (a) epistemic evaluation is possible (although, as we will see in a moment, only relative to local contexts), even though the sociologist is to ignore such evaluation in her inquiries and investigate the causes of the credibility (or lack thereof) of all beliefs independently of their normative status, and (b) by 'causes of credibility' they mean those factors which cause believers to believe as they do, i.e., to regard some beliefs as credible and others not. The causes of a belief's credibility thus are not, for Barnes and Bloor (contrary to some causal theories of justification), those factors which cause beliefs to be justified or worthy of belief; they are rather the factors which cause beliefs to be *regarded* by believers as credible (although again, as we'll see in a moment, Barnes and Bloor reject this distinction). The epistemic status of all beliefs is thus left open: once the sociologist identifies the causes of community *C*'s regarding belief system *BS* as credible, her work is done. It is no concern of the sociologist to determine whether or not beliefs so regarded really are credible. So far, then, Barnes and Bloor are not committed to any philosophically controversial sort of relativism.

But on the other hand they also endorse what I called above the ‘philosophically more contentious claim’ committing themselves to epistemological relativism of the sort with which we are here concerned. Discussing two tribes and their local epistemic predilections, Barnes and Bloor write:

The crucial point is that a relativist accepts that his preferences and evaluations are as context-bound as those of the tribes T1 and T2. Similarly he accepts that none of the justifications of his preferences can be formulated in absolute or context-independent terms. In the last analysis, he acknowledges that his justifications will stop at some principle or alleged matter of fact that only has local credibility....For the relativist there is no sense attached to the idea that some standards or beliefs are really rational as distinct from merely locally accepted as such. Because he thinks that there are no context-free or super-cultural norms of rationality he does not see rationally and irrationally held beliefs as making up two distinct and qualitatively different classes of thing....Hence the relativist conclusion that they are to be explained in the same way. (1982, 27-8)

Unlike the passage cited earlier, in this passage Barnes and Bloor clearly endorse an epistemologically contentious form of relativism. Let us briefly examine their case.

i) First, as this passage makes clear, Barnes and Bloor reject the distinction drawn above between beliefs which are *regarded*, perhaps erroneously, *as* justified, and beliefs which actually *are* justified: ‘For the relativist there is no sense attached to the idea that some standards or beliefs are really rational as distinct from merely locally accepted as such.’ This is parallel to their rejection of any distinction between genuine knowledge and a counterfeit taken by some to be genuine. Genuine knowledge, and ‘really rational’ beliefs, just are what people regard as such; to be *regarded as* genuine is to *be* genuine.

There are three points to make here. The first is that this ‘locality claim’ (let us call it) is not a consequence of the equivalence postulate concerning the causes of credibility of beliefs with which Barnes and Bloor define their brand of relativism; it is an independent dimension of their view which requires its own justification (to be considered below). The second is that their equation of genuine knowledge (and ‘really rational’ belief) and that which is taken to be knowledge (and rational belief) flows naturally from their initial decision to adopt the ‘convention’ according to which ‘knowledge’ is defined as belief. Insofar, their rejection of the ‘is regarded as/is’ distinction is of no epistemological moment, since epistemologists are concerned with a quite different conception of knowledge, and are centrally concerned to distinguish the genuine article from imposters, however sincerely they might be embraced as genuine by some cognizers.

But third, Barnes and Bloor do offer a reason for rejecting any such distinction, namely that all such judgments of genuineness will themselves be only ‘local’: “...a relativist accepts that his preferences and evaluations are...context-bound....Similarly he accepts that none of the justifications of his preferences can be formulated in absolute or context-independent terms. In the last analysis, he acknowledges that his justifications will stop at some principle or alleged matter of fact that only has local credibility.” That is, it is not possible for any cognizer, including the sociologist, to escape her local context and judge from some ‘context-free,’ ‘super-cultural’ or context-independent perspective.

ii) This claim will sound familiar to the attentive reader. It is, in fact, nothing more than (a version of) the conclusion of the ‘no transcendence’ argument for

relativism addressed above (and possibly of the ‘no neutrality’ argument as well). Barnes and Bloor’s argument is in the end one of very simple form: all judgment is local – no judgments have any positive epistemic status beyond that granted them by epistemic agents in some locale, and there is no getting beyond such locales to reach a context-independent platform from which to judge – therefore relativism. I will not repeat my earlier discussions of the ‘no transcendence’ and ‘no neutrality’ arguments for relativism here. It is enough to note that Barnes and Bloor’s case for relativism – insofar as it goes beyond their decision to regard ‘knowledge’ as belief – rests upon these general, but unsuccessful, arguments for relativism.

iii) Barnes and Bloor’s ‘equivalence postulate’ insists that all beliefs, however appraised from whatever perspective, be dealt with in the same way by the sociologist: that is, their ‘credibility’ is to be *explained causally*. The sociologist’s task is to identify the ‘causes of credibility’ of beliefs, i.e., the social forces which explain their development, acceptance, and change. This causal thesis is not something that the opponent of relativism need reject, since that opponent can simply distinguish between the causes of belief, on the one hand, and the epistemic status of belief, however caused, on the other. Barnes and Bloor would reject this distinction, since ‘epistemic status’ for them just means ‘locally perceived epistemic status,’ and the causal question in which they are interested is precisely: what social forces cause belief system *BS* to be perceived, in a given locale, as having the status it is perceived to have? But the non-relativist can happily acknowledge the scientific legitimacy of the question. The important point here is that the legitimacy of the question, and the ‘equivalence postulate’ more generally, offers no support to relativism; the symmetry of explanation is perfectly compatible with the non-relativity of epistemic evaluation. The social forces (feudalism, religion, poverty, etc.) which brought about the acceptance of the Aristotelian belief system in the Middle Ages is one thing, the epistemic status of that system another. Of course Barnes and Bloor reject any non-relativist reading of the latter, but, as we have seen, their reason for doing so – the ‘no transcendence’ argument – fails.

But there is a further question here that deserves brief comment. Many authors²⁴, on both sides of the debate, take the equivalence postulate to entail that the sociological explanation of belief cannot include appeal to reasons which believers judge to be *good* reasons which *justify* belief. These authors hold that explanation in terms of reasons is a kind of explanation which is fundamentally different from explanation in terms of (sociological) causes. I cannot enter into this controversy here, but it is worth noting that (a) at least on many accounts of these things, reasons *can* be causes, and, to the extent that reasons can be causes, they can be the causes of (perceived) credibility; (b) therefore, the equivalence postulate does not rule out (causal) explanation of belief in terms of reasons whose perceived epistemic strength causes belief – e.g., ‘community *C* is caused by its appraisal of the evidence to regard theory *T* as highly credible’; and (c), therefore, the equivalence postulate in no way entails relativism.²⁵

iv) As we have seen, for Barnes and Bloor there is nothing more to ‘knowledge’ than community approval.²⁶ The task of the sociologist of science is not to give an epistemic account of why community *C* *rightly* regards some theory *T* or claim *p* as knowledge (or justified), but rather to give a causal account of community *C*’s coming to so regard them.

Consider the character of such a causal account. Presumably it will have the general form: '(Particular) social forces cause the credibility of belief systems within a given community,' or, schematically, '*SF* cause the credibility of *BS* in *C*.' So suppose the sociologist proposes such a causal account of belief credibility – say, that the belief that relativism is self-referentially incoherent is caused to be credible in the community of analytic epistemologists in the second half of the twentieth century by social forces involving the elite status of private research institutions, the reward system within such institutions, etc. How do Barnes and Bloor regard such accounts? As relativists, they seem to have no choice but to regard them relativistically: within community of sociologists *C** – say, the one located in Edinburgh and environs in the last quarter of the twentieth century – social forces cause the belief in question to be highly credible; whereas within community *C*** – say, the one located around Merton in the United States in the third quarter of that century – that belief is caused by social forces to be less credible. In both communities credibility is just 'credibility-as-perceived-in that-community'; to be *regarded as* credible is to *be* credible. Barnes and Bloor are clear that they accept this consequence of their views: the sociologist enjoys no special exemption from the 'equivalence postulate'; the credibility of her beliefs, like all scientific and other beliefs, is to be explained causally.

So far none of this poses any difficulty for Barnes and Bloor. But consider now the case in which two different communities of sociologists account for the credibility of a belief system in a third community, i.e., in which *C** and *C*** offer alternative accounts of the social forces which cause a belief (system) to be credible in a third community *C*. Let *C** and *C*** be the communities of sociologists just identified; let *C* be the community of analytic epistemologists in the United States and Western Europe in the third quarter of the twentieth century;²⁷ let *BS* be that system of beliefs concerning knowledge, truth, justification, etc., which includes the belief that relativism is self-referentially incoherent; let *SF** be the social forces cited by *C** as those which cause the credibility of *BS* in *C* (for example, social and economic forces involving the power structure, reward system, and student selection procedures of prestigious universities during the time period in question); let *SF*** be the social forces cited by *C*** as those which cause the credibility of *BS* in *C* (for example, social forces which encourage respect for conservative values such as '(perceived) common sense'); finally, let *CC** be the account of the causes of credibility of *BS* in *C* offered by *C**, and let *CC*** be the account of the causes of credibility of *BS* in *C* offered by *C***. The question is: how are we to think about these alternative accounts *CC** and *CC***? Barnes and Bloor regard the evaluation of these alternatives as a *scientific* matter: the sociologist of knowledge is, after all, a scientist. But they also regard all such judgments as relative: the scientific worth of these accounts will be judged variously – or rather, will be caused to be credible to varying degrees – by scientists in differing communities. But this raises the question: why do Barnes and Bloor place so much importance on the *scientific* character of sociological accounts of the causes of credibility of belief systems, if all such accounts will themselves have only local credibility?

To sharpen this problem: suppose Barnes and Bloor favor some particular *CC**, and their sociological opponents (the 'weak programmers') favor an incompatible *CC***, of the credibility of some *BS* in some *C*. As relativists, Barnes and Bloor

seem forced to acknowledge that their preferred account *CC** itself has only local credibility – i.e., it is caused to be credible in the community of strong programmers – while the account they reject, *CC***, is equally locally credible in the rival community of weak programmers. Is this sensibly regarded as a *scientific* account of scientific knowledge? Since judgments of the causes of credibility, and of the scientific merits of competing accounts of those causes, are themselves relative to locale, it seems that Barnes and Bloor's relativism is at odds with their desire for scientific respectability.

v) This last point brings us, finally, back to the problem of incoherence. Barnes and Bloor appear not to have overcome this problem. First, as just noted, their yearning for a *scientific* sociology of science does not sit well with their endorsement of relativism, since the former requires a non-relativistic notion of causality, and a non-relativistic account of the specific causes of credibility of any particular belief system, which the latter precludes.

Second, their argument for relativism itself requires the rejection of that conclusion. Barnes and Bloor claim to show, in their discussion, that “the balance of argument favours a relativist theory of knowledge.” (1982, p. 21) By this it is clear that they do not mean that their argument supports relativism only from the perspective of their own community of sociologists, but rather that it supports it generally, and should be found persuasive even by those outside that community (e.g., philosophers who endorse “rationalism”). (*ibid.*) Insofar as they see themselves as providing a justification of relativism which has epistemic force beyond their local community of sociologists, and as providing a case for thinking that ‘rationalism’ is mistaken – as they clearly do see themselves as doing – their relativism contravenes these claims. For if their arguments are successful, and their claims correct (or justified), the epistemic status of these arguments and claims extend beyond the bounds of their local community, thus undermining their relativism. If, on the other hand, their relativism remains, then their claim to have arguments for it whose force extends beyond their community is undermined, since their relativism, according to which epistemic judgments are necessarily local and context-bound, explicitly rejects any such possibility. Either way, their relativism is incompatible with their claim to be able to justify it in terms of ‘the balance of argument.’ This combination remains incoherent: the latter depends upon a non-relative sense of ‘argument’ or ‘evidence’ which the former precludes.

Of course Barnes and Bloor could bite the bullet here and retreat to the view that the balance of argument does not favor relativism *tout court*, but does so only for those already on the inside of their community – that that balance favors relativism only locally, i.e., relative to their community. In this case, their argument would be presented as having no tendency or ability to establish the error of ‘rationalist’ ways to those in rationalist communities, let alone to fair-minded students of the issue generally. But if their case is indeed taken by them to be limited in this way, why bother making that case in the first place? Here we see again relativism’s impotence.

Given the quite familiar way in which Barnes and Bloor face the incoherence problem, their attempt to deflect it requires brief comment. They eschew two alternative ‘equivalence postulates’ – that all “general conceptions of the natural order” are either equally false, or equally true – because they both “run into technical difficulties” involving incoherence. (1982, 22) In favoring their chosen

'equivalence postulate' concerning the 'causes of credibility' of beliefs, with which we have been concerned throughout this section, Barnes and Bloor believe themselves to have avoided these 'technical difficulties.' (Space precludes speculation concerning the causes of the credibility (for them) of *that* belief.) I have just argued that, on the contrary, those technical difficulties have *not* been overcome – mainly because, independently of their chosen equivalence postulate, they hold that all judgments of truth, justification, etc., are equally *local* and admit of no higher-order assessment – that is, they endorse the problematic 'no transcendence' argument for relativism – and this is sufficient to give life to the 'technical difficulties' involving incoherence.

In any case, and despite their claim that their choice of equivalence postulate allows them to avoid such technical difficulties, Barnes and Bloor also reject the incoherence charge *überhaupt*, on the authority of Mary Hesse: "The claim that relativism is 'self-refuting' is thoroughly discussed and thoroughly demolished in Mary Hesse [1980]." (1982, 23 n6) Has Hesse 'demolished' this claim? Alas not. While Hesse's interesting discussion may plausibly be seen to establish, as has already been noted above, that the causal explanation of a community's finding a belief system to be credible (or not) is independent of that system's epistemic status (from the sociologist's point of view), it does not in the least establish relativism or defeat the self-refutation charge. Rather, Hesse argues only that if "we *shift* our concept of 'knowledge'...so that...knowledge is now taken to be what is accepted as such in our culture," then "the alleged [self-]refutation becomes an equivocation." (1980, 42, emphasis in original). But this (a) follows Barnes and Bloor in understanding the strong programme as one involving the sociological study of belief rather than knowledge, thus trivializing it (as discussed above); (b) dismisses the problem of relativism by means of stipulative redefinition, but does not resolve it; (c) fails to face the problem raised by judgments for and against such a shift being themselves relative to locales; and (d) rests, as does Barnes and Bloor's discussion, on the 'no transcendence' argument for relativism criticized above. Hesse rejects any appeal to "transcendent rationality" (56) which is somehow beyond the pale of sociological explanation, but so do (or at least should) non-relativists: that rejection follows from the equivalence postulate, but, as we have seen, from that postulate relativism does not follow. The bottom line here is that Hesse's discussion does not in the least 'demolish' the self-refutation charge.

To summarize: 1. Given their refusal to distinguish between knowledge and belief, Barnes and Bloor's arguments concerning the 'equivalence postulate' establish at most the relativity of belief. This sort of relativism is uncontroversial, indeed trivial. 2. The equivalence postulate concerning the causes of credibility does not entail relativism; only 'locality' – a quite independent thesis – entails this conclusion. 3. The argument for this thesis relies on the unsuccessful 'no transcendence' argument for relativism, and so fails. 4. A non-relative notion of causality appears to be required for the scientific study of belief that the strong programme recommends. 5. Finally, despite their heroic attempts to deflect it, the self-refutation/incoherence problem remains as much a problem for Barnes and Bloor as for other advocates of relativism.

None of this is to deny that science is a social activity, that scientists have interests other than the 'purely cognitive,' or that the sociological study of science is

an eminently worthwhile undertaking – it is; they do; and it is. The question concerns not the viability or worth of the sociological investigation of science, but only the tendency of such investigation to support relativism. If my arguments in this section succeed, it does not.²⁸

AMBIVALENCE CONCERNING RELATIVISM?: MACINTYRE, PUTNAM, AND RORTY

The work of three highly visible and influential philosophers – Alasdair MacIntyre, Hilary Putnam, and Richard Rorty – is intimately involved in the relativism controversy. That they regard the issue as central to their larger philosophical projects is indicated by the fact that their respective Presidential Addresses to the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association all involve relativism.²⁹ Interestingly, all three explicitly reject relativism; yet all three are frequently interpreted as relativists by their commentators and critics. While I cannot here enter into a full discussion of these philosophers' positive views, a word about their places in the relativism controversy is I hope in order.

a) MacIntyre

MacIntyre's 1987 contains one of the best anti-anti-relativism lines I know of: "...relativism, like skepticism, is one of those doctrines that have by now been refuted a number of times too often. Nothing is perhaps a surer sign that a doctrine embodies some not-to-be-neglected truth than that in the course of the history of philosophy it should have been refuted again and again. Genuinely refutable doctrines only need to be refuted once." (385)

In his efforts "to capture the truth in relativism" (387), MacIntyre explicitly rejects the doctrine as defined above on the grounds that it cannot meet the Socratic challenges to it (386-7). Nevertheless, he claims to find in relativism an important truth: "[W]hen we learn the languages of certain radically different cultures, it is in the course of discovering what is untranslatable in them, and why, that we learn not only how to occupy alternative viewpoints, but in terms of those viewpoints to frame questions to which under certain conditions a version of relativism is the inescapable answer." (404) This is so, MacIntyre argues, because any language which affords us the ability to frame such questions itself precludes us from finding non-relative reasons for rationally preferring one such viewpoint to another. Why? Because, MacIntyre argues, in any such language there will be, "for the relevant kinds of controversial subject matter, all too many heterogeneous and incompatible schemes of rational justification. And every attempt to advance sufficient reasons for choosing any one such scheme over its rivals must always turn out to presuppose the prior adoption of that scheme itself or some other. For without such a prior pre-rational commitment, no reason will count as a good reason." (405) Consequently, MacIntyre suggests, it will not be possible to find "any genuinely neutral and independent standard of rational justification." (405)

MacIntyre's argument for this 'inescapable' (in the "certain conditions" which he specifies, 387-405) version of relativism sounds very much like another instance of the confluence of the 'no neutrality' and 'no transcendence' arguments we have

seen before: any proposed ‘good reason’ presupposes a ‘prior pre-rational commitment’ to some standard which sanctions that reason as a good one; that standard cannot itself be advanced on the basis of good reasons, since one’s commitment to it is ‘pre-rational.’ That is to say, there is no possibility of good reasons which are in the relevant sense ‘genuinely neutral’; and there is no possibility that one’s ‘pre-rational commitment’ can be ‘transcended’ and given rational support. Insofar as the version of relativism MacIntyre defends here depends upon these arguments, it is, as we have seen, problematic.

But MacIntyre’s attitude towards this version of relativism is somewhat unclear, since he claims that it can be ‘transcended.’ (405) Such transcendence involves the recognition, from within one’s particular conceptual framework, that that very framework faces problems it cannot solve, but that an alternative framework is preferable to it in that the latter framework can both resolve the problems facing the former, and explain the former’s failure to resolve them as well. Indeed, according to MacIntyre, this recognition, from within one’s framework, that another can be superior, reveals “a central characteristic of theoretical and practical rationality” (408) which itself identifies a framework-neutral (in the sense explained above) standard of framework adequacy; and this standard, which involves the requirements of “[r]ationality ...*qua* rationality” (408), constitutes a clear rejection of relativism. The historicism which MacIntyre articulates and defends throughout his work rests upon what seems clearly to be, in MacIntyre’s hands, this ahistorical and non-relativistic standard. (Siegel 1997, pp. 216-17 n31.) So despite his excellent pro-relativist-sounding line cited above, and his claim to have captured ‘the truth in relativism,’ MacIntyre cannot be counted among the friends of relativism in the sense we are considering it here.³⁰

b) Putnam

Putnam (1981, 54-55, 119-124, 157-162; 1982, 7-14; 1983, 288; 1990, 125-126, 139-141; and many other places as well) rejects relativism even more emphatically than MacIntyre, arguing with energy and passion that it falls, as Plato claimed (and MacIntyre agrees), to the now standard self-refutation/incoherence arguments against it. Indeed, in several of these works Putnam has offered interesting and original variations on the incoherence theme. (See esp. the cited passages in his 1981 and 1982.)

Nevertheless, though apparently staunchly anti-relativist, Putnam has sometimes been seen as a relativist because his ‘internalism’ – which rejects any “God’s eye point of view” (1981, p. 50), and insists both that fundamental metaphysical and epistemological questions “only make... sense to ask *within* a theory or description” (1981, p. 49, emphasis in original) and that “‘objects’ do not exist independently of conceptual schemes” (1981, p. 52) – has seemed to some to involve some sort of objectionable relativism, since these passages suggest that Putnam embraces some combination of the ‘no neutrality’ and ‘no transcendence’ arguments for relativism discussed above.³¹

I will not try here to determine whether Putnam’s internalism amounts to or entails a problematic form of relativism. It does not matter for present purposes how

that question is resolved, although it is worth emphasizing that resolving it in a way that makes Putnam a relativist depends upon attributing to him endorsement of one or both of the problematic arguments for relativism discussed above. The important points in this context are simply that Putnam, like MacIntyre, (a) explicitly rejects relativism, (b) explicitly endorses as decisive the standard self-refutation/incoherence arguments against it, (c) if a relativist at all, is one in virtue of his embrace of arguments for relativism which, as argued above, do not succeed, and so (d) offers no aid or comfort to relativism.

c) Rorty

Like both MacIntyre and Putnam, Rorty famously rejects relativism, when understood as “the view that every belief is as good as every other.” (1989, 37; see also 1982a, 166) Indeed, Rorty agrees that “relativism is self-refuting” (1991, 202), on the basis of the familiar self-refutation/incoherence arguments canvassed above. (1982a, 167) He ridicules this sort of relativism – which is the sort, verbal quibbles aside, with which we have been concerned throughout – as one which “[n]o one holds”: “Except for the occasional cooperative freshman, one cannot find anybody who says that two incompatible opinions on an important topic are equally good.” (1982a, 166) He articulates here and elsewhere his positive view, called ‘pragmatism’ and characterized in terms of ‘solidarity’ rather than ‘objectivity,’ as his preferred alternative to relativism.³²

However, Rorty equally famously accepts claims which seem clearly to commit him to a version of relativism suspiciously similar to the sort he rejects. For example, he holds that his pragmatist can, “in the process of playing vocabularies and cultures off against each other,...produce new and better ways of talking and acting”; but that what is in this way produced is “not better by reference to a previously known standard, but just better in the sense that they come to *seem* [to this pragmatist] clearly better than their predecessors.” (1982, p. xxxvii, emphasis in original) (Here we hear echoes of the ‘no neutrality’ argument for relativism rehearsed above.) Moreover, as this same passage suggests, Rorty consistently rejects any appeal to non-‘ethnocentric’ standards or criteria, in accordance with which disputes about truth or warrant might be rationally resolved, in favor of “criterionless muddling through” (1989, 43; see pp. 40-43), which, in view of the discussion above of the need for some such standards if relativism is to be avoided, again suggests relativism. (Here the ‘no transcendence’ argument seems clearly in play.) In the same vein, Rorty rejects the possibility of non-relativist debate concerning the merits of old vs. new vocabularies, on the basis of the (Heideggerian *and* Davidsonian!) point that there is no higher order vantage point available from which to referee such debates (Rorty 1989a, 50 ff.). (Here again Rorty invokes the ‘no neutrality’ and ‘no transcendence’ arguments.) He says, further, that he “view[s] warrant as a sociological matter, to be ascertained by observing the reception of S’s statement by her peers” (1993, 449), which seems clearly enough to relativize warrant, in distinctly Protagorean-sounding fashion, to the judgment of one’s fellow community members: if one’s statement is judged by one’s peers to be warranted, it *is* warranted. (Here both the ‘no neutrality’ and ‘no transcendence’ arguments are

suggested.) Finally, as MacIntyre shrewdly observes, Rorty's rejection of relativism seems clearly incompatible with his efforts, in the name of pragmatism, to render "is true" as "seems true to such and such persons, namely *us*" (MacIntyre 1987, 386, emphasis in original; for Rorty's discussion of his 'pragmatic' conception of truth, see, e.g., his 1982, xxiii-xxix, or his 1989, 37-39), since that rendering, and Rorty's pragmatist view of truth more generally, is itself open to those same self-refutation arguments: "[T]he premises from which Plato derived Socrates' refutation of Protagoras' version of relativism also entailed the necessary failure of any reinterpreting reduction of 'is true' to 'seems true to such and such persons.' From these premises the one conclusion is not available without the other." (MacIntyre 1987, 387)

What are we to make of all this? I will not here attempt to sort out Rorty's status as a relativist. We may accept his own proclamations that he is not; or we may try to show that, despite those proclamations, his general views of rationality, truth, criteria, our locatedness in history, etc., commit him to a version of relativism which he claims to eschew. This interpretive task is not essential to the present inquiry. Rather, the important points to notice are that (a) Rorty accepts the self-refutation arguments as decisive against relativism of the sort with which we are concerned; (b) insofar as Rorty accepts relativism, such acceptance seems clearly enough to be based upon his acceptance of some combination of the 'no neutrality' and 'no transcendence' arguments criticized above; and (c) relativism, consequently, derives no aid, comfort or support from Rorty's varied musings on the topic.

It is worth reiterating that although MacIntyre, Putnam, and Rorty all advocate positive views not always easily distinguished from relativism (MacIntyre's 'historicism,' Putnam's 'internalism,' Rorty's 'pragmatism'), all three firmly reject relativism. Their determination to grapple in this serious way with the relativism issue, trying hard to distinguish versions of relativism which fall to the standard self-refutation arguments from versions which capture important philosophical insights, is I think one explanation for the widespread interest in the work of these three distinguished figures. It is also worth noting how the three have tried to clarify their own views by contrasting them with the views of the other two – sometimes by criticizing one or both of the other two for embracing a problematic form of relativism – thus establishing a complex network of cross-criticism which is worth sustained study.³³

All three of these thinkers are clearly involved in the effort to find a way to acknowledge and avoid the defects of overly strong forms of 'absolutism,' while at the same time avoiding the defects of relativism. Whether or not their efforts succeed – that is, whether or not Rorty's pragmatism, Putnam's internalism, or MacIntyre's historicism prove to be successful articulations of non-relativistic epistemologies – I leave for the reader to judge. The important thing to note, for present purposes, is that, as these three important contemporary thinkers explicitly claim, relativism must be avoided, on pain of self-refutation and incoherence. To the extent that any of their positive stories are committed to relativism, as many of their critics allege, those stories are, even from their authors' points of view, defective. Consequently, the work of Putnam, Rorty and MacIntyre does not help the relativist cause, however relativistically that work is interpreted and understood.³⁴

IF NOT RELATIVISM, WHAT?: THE SHAPE OF A DEFENSIBLE ‘ABSOLUTISM’

To briefly summarize the case against relativism presented thus far: I have suggested that the more specific arguments for relativism considered above all rely on either the ‘no neutrality’ or the ‘no transcendence’ (or both) arguments for relativism; I have also tried to indicate why these arguments – specific and general – are problematic.³⁵ Whether or not they can be repaired sufficiently to overcome those problems I leave the reader to judge. Moreover, it is worth repeating that, even if one or more of these arguments for relativism can be adequately repaired, it will still face the incoherence problem considered earlier. How can the relativist regard one of these arguments, or indeed any argument, as rationally compelling – or supportive of its conclusion to any degree – given her denial of non-relative standards of evaluation, appeal to which is required in order to establish such rational compulsion or support? In endorsing one or another of these arguments as rationally compelling or supportive, such that it *ought* to be found (at least to some degree) persuasive by fair-minded students of the issue, the relativist seems forced to give up her commitment to relativism, according to which no arguments or standards have probative force beyond the bounds of the communities which endorse them. On the other hand, to acknowledge that these arguments have force only for such communities, the relativist explicitly acknowledges that she has no reason to offer which should persuade her opponent to give up her non-relativist position and switch to the relativist’s camp, or which should persuade the fair-minded student of the issue to join that camp. Thus, whatever the ultimate fate of the arguments for relativism we have considered, the relativist still faces the hoary and deep problem of incoherence.

Given the apparent intractability of this fundamental problem, how should we understand the continuing philosophical appeal of the doctrine? As is so often the case in philosophy, relativism benefits from the problems facing its main alternative. The contemporary resurgence and continuing appeal of relativism is at least in part due to the difficulty of formulating a defensible conception of ‘absolutism’ (understood simply as the contradictory of relativism). In addition to the arguments for relativism just reviewed, many relativists argue for relativism on the grounds that any non-relativistic alternative will require repugnant epistemological commitments, e.g., to certainty, privileged frameworks, or dogmatism. And it must in fairness be granted that in the long and complex history of epistemological consideration of relativism in the Western tradition, anti-relativists, from Plato to Descartes and beyond, have indeed often supposed that avoiding relativism requires the embrace of one or another of these unpalatable alternatives.

Although this is no doubt something of an historical oversimplification, it is only relatively recently (historically speaking) that epistemologists have recognized that one can reject both relativism and certainty (and dogmatism, privileged frameworks, and other epistemological evils historically associated with absolutism), and opt instead for a *fallibilistic* absolutism. While both doctrines reject the idea – characteristic of historically important (e.g., Cartesian) absolutist epistemologies – that knowledge requires certainty, fallibilism differs from relativism in that the former holds (while the latter denies) that, in the sense explained above, non-relative evaluations of knowledge-claims can be made.³⁶

Still, while saying this is easy enough, it must nevertheless be admitted that a fully developed absolutism remains to be articulated and defended. The challenge to opponents of relativism is to develop a non-relativistic, ‘absolutist’ epistemology, which includes an acceptable account of rationality and rational justification (as the discussions above of Kuhn, Barnes and Bloor, MacIntyre, Putnam and Rorty suggest),³⁷ which is fallibilistic and non-dogmatic, which rejects any notion of a privileged framework in which knowledge-claims must be couched, and which is self-referentially coherent. This is obviously a philosophically demanding task, which involves many of the most fundamental issues of epistemology.³⁸

Given the difficulty of formulating a satisfactory version of absolutism, and the understandable and quite justified unwillingness of relativists to embrace unsatisfactory versions of it – i.e., those which endorse certainty, privileged frameworks, dogmatism, and other epistemically noxious views historically associated with it – it should come as no surprise that activity on both sides of the relativism/absolutism controversy remains high. A further explanation for the continued intense interest in this issue is that there is much at stake: it (along with rationality, with which it is entwined) can be seen as the most basic epistemological issue of all, since, whichever side is correct, the outcome of the dispute has enormous implications for epistemology generally. For how we are to understand the full range of fundamental epistemological issues (e.g., those treated at length in this *Handbook*), and what counts as success in resolving them, depends to a significant extent upon the resolution of the relativism/absolutism issue.

Take, for instance, truth. Philosophers defend and criticize a range of theories here: correspondence, coherence, pragmatic, redundancy, etc.³⁹ If absolutism in some form is correct, disputes concerning alternative theories of truth are appropriately understood as disputes concerning truth *simpliciter*, i.e., independently of (not relativized to) persons, cultures, communities, conceptual schemes, frameworks, historical epochs, etc. On the other hand, if relativism is correct, theorists of truth cannot be happily understood as offering *general* theories of truth, since what counts as the correct or most adequate theory of truth will be relative to one or another of these relativizing variables or contexts. How epistemologists understand epistemological controversy concerning truth, consequently, depends upon how the relativism issue is ultimately resolved. The same point can be made with respect to all other matters of epistemological moment. In this sense, the relativism issue is as fundamental an issue as there is in epistemology.⁴⁰

Given the fundamental nature of the issue, and the formidable difficulties facing those on either side of it, it is safe to predict that the controversy will not be put to rest any time soon.⁴¹

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NOTES

^{1.} There are many sorts of relativism other than the epistemological sort – ontological, moral, axiological, cultural, etc. – which are not addressed here. I typically do not use the modifier ‘epistemological’ in what follows, but the reader should assume, unless it is explicitly indicated otherwise, that all mentions of ‘relativism’ below are to epistemological relativism. For discussion of other varieties of relativism, see (e.g.) Krausz and Meiland 1982 and Harré and Krausz 1996.

^{2.} The two main versions of epistemological relativism may thus (following Knorpp 1998) be labeled *alethic* relativism, i.e. relativism with respect to truth, and *justificatory* relativism, i.e. relativism with respect to justification. It is perhaps worth noting that the relativity of *belief* – the third of the three ‘standard’ conditions of knowledge, along with truth and justification – is at most a trivial aspect of epistemological relativism, although it is rightly seen as central to *cultural* (or anthropological (or sociological)) relativism. Indeed, the most basic way to distinguish between these latter two sorts of relativism is to note that the latter requires only the uncontroversial relativity of belief and cultural practice, while the former requires the philosophically more contentious relativity of truth and/or justification as well – and hence, at least on most accounts of it, of knowledge itself. For this reason I will not in what follows discuss the cultural relativism associated with Sumner, Benedict, and other cultural anthropologists. Relativism inspired by the sociology of knowledge is discussed below.

^{3.} Authors use these terms – ‘principles,’ ‘criteria’ and ‘standards’ – somewhat idiosyncratically, to refer to that which is (allegedly) the ultimate source of relativism. Although the terms can be distinguished from one another in various ways, in what follows I use them more or less interchangeably in order to honor the preferences of the authors discussed.

^{4.} For a somewhat more technical definition, see Siegel 1987, p. 6. Similar definitions are offered by Krausz and Meiland (1982, ‘Introduction,’ p. 8), Krausz (1989, ‘Introduction,’ p. 1), and Bayley (1992, ‘Introduction,’ p. 2). Authors are generally agreed that relativism is a matter of the relativity of evaluative *standards* or *criteria* governing judgments of knowledge, truth, and justificatory status. Many definitions are cited and discussed in Siegel 1987, e.g. those of Brown (p. 10), Doppelt (p. 90), Field (p. 26), Goodman (p. 150), Popper (p. 33), and Weinert (p. 33); virtually all of them are clearly in keeping with the definition proposed in the text.

It is important to distinguish relativism from related but distinct epistemological positions with which it is frequently confused, e.g., skepticism, fallibilism, pluralism, nihilism, etc. For an instructive guide to the relevant distinctions, see Knorpp 1998.

^{5.} I use this term in deference to Nelson Goodman’s (1978) unique form of relativism; I regret that I cannot consider Goodman’s version of relativism further here. For discussion of Goodmanian (relativistic) ‘rightness,’ and Goodman’s ‘radical relativism within rigorous restraints’ more generally, see Siegel 1987, ch. 7.

^{6.} As Levin (1992, 72) engagingly puts it, in attempting to defend relativism, the relativist commits “dialectical suicide.”

^{7.} The relativist can respond by denying that she is engaged in the project of defending relativism, and asserting that relativists have other purposes in mind when arguing for relativism. For discussion and references, see Siegel 1987, 21-23. She can also respond by holding that the argument purporting to demonstrate the incoherence of relativism just rehearsed in fact begs the question against the relativist by presupposing an ‘absolute’ conception of truth. For discussion, see the following four paragraphs in the text; also Siegel 1987, 23-25.

⁸. Joseph Margolis 1991 defends what he regards as a form of alethic relativism. But he grants (pp. 9-12 and *passim*) that relativism, as defined above (which he calls ‘relationism’), falls to the standard incoherence arguments against it. The view he defends appears to be not that truth is relative, but that we ought to reject *tertium non datur* and so embrace more than the usual two truth values. I will not discuss Margolis’ idiosyncratic treatment further here.

⁹. Hales 1997 is an interesting attempt to show how appropriate logical machinery can be utilized to avoid the self-refutation charge and establish “a consistent relativism,” which holds not that “everything is relative” but that “everything true is relatively true.” (pp. 33-4) This paper aims to establish the consistency of alethic relativism; it addresses mainly metaphysical and semantic problems rather than the epistemological ones I have been belaboring thus far, and does not (as Hales notes) speak directly to the epistemic status of either relative truths or the arguments offered in defense of the consistency of this version of relativism. Hales’ version of relativism, according to which truths are relative to ‘perspectives,’ raises deep questions which are discussed below in terms of the ‘no neutrality’ and ‘no transcendence’ arguments for relativism but which are not discussed in detail by Hales. It is, further, unclear that that version escapes the ‘impotence’ problem just discussed. Finally, I must point out that Hales’ definition of ‘relativism’ (and of ‘absolutism’), on analogy with modal terms, is sufficiently non-standard that it is unclear how the relativism whose consistency Hales claims to establish is related to relativism as defined above. For these reasons I do not pursue his discussion further here, though I happily acknowledge the originality of his approach and the contribution to the metaphysical and semantic issues addressed in his paper which it makes.

¹⁰ This is obviously a very superficial account of ‘The Galileo Affair,’ offered here for illustrative purposes only. For a more serious treatment, see, e.g., Finocchiaro 1989.

¹¹ It might perhaps be thought that such aid or comfort might flow from the recognition that, while there may well be neutral standards which the parties to a given dispute will (or should) acknowledge as relevant to the rational resolution of that dispute, it is nevertheless the case that such resolution is often *underdetermined* by the available evidence, even granting such shared standards. It must I think be granted that shared standards will often be insufficient to resolve such disputes; even granting shared standards, the resolution of such disputes will be underdetermined by the total available evidence. But this sort of underdetermination is not sufficient to secure relativism, since many disputes will not be so underdetermined. To move from underdetermination to relativism, one must argue both that all disputes are in fact underdetermined, and, moreover, that they are necessarily so. But the first is false – e.g., ‘eye color in humans is genetically determined’ is not underdetermined by the evidence – and the second (as well as the first) is unavailable to the relativist, given relativism’s impotence (discussed above). In order to secure relativism on the basis of underdetermination, the relativist must claim to have (non-relativistic) good reason to believe that all disputes will inevitably be underdetermined by all relevant evidence, but it is unclear how the relativist can claim this in a way consistent with her relativism. In other words, the phenomenon of underdetermination can (and should) be acknowledged; such acknowledgement is perfectly consistent with the rejection of relativism. The anti-relativist need not (and should not) say that the existence of shared standards is in and of itself sufficient to preclude underdetermination in all cases.

¹². That is, this argument, if it did appear to be epistemically forceful, would still have to face the incoherence charge already discussed: how could a relativist regard the argument (or any other) as epistemically forceful, given her rejection of the possibility of non-relativistic epistemic forcefulness? I won’t pursue this point further here, but the fundamental problem of incoherence plagues this and all other cases for relativism.

¹³. Children typically attain ‘a reasonable grasp of whole numbers’ by age three or four. Grasp of fractions and decimals usually involves a process which extends over several years and is in part a function of what is taught, when. The classic work in this area is Gelman and

Gallistel 1978; it (including their account of what counts as a 'reasonable grasp' of numbers) is summarized briefly and lucidly in Moshman, Glover and Bruning 1987, 420-423. Thanks to David Moshman for helpful advice on matters concerning psychological development.

¹⁴. For critical discussion of Popper's view, and of 'framework relativism' more generally, see Siegel 1987, ch. 2; for consideration of this issue in the context of arguments for/against naturalized epistemology, see Siegel 1995, esp. pp. 50-1; for more general discussion of the possibility of 'transcendence,' see Siegel 1997.

This path to relativism also arises in the context of stage theories of psychological (or 'conceptual' or 'foundational') development. For discussion, see the exchanges between van Haaften 1990, 1993 and Siegel 1993, and van Haaften and Snik 1997 and Scheffler 1997.

¹⁵. Davidson's argument is criticized, though not in a way which lends support to relativism, in Siegel 1987, 38-42.

¹⁶. 'Highly influential' is something of an understatement. At the time of this writing (early 1998) approximately one million copies of Kuhn's book have been sold; translations into twenty-five languages have been authorized. It 'revolutionized' the philosophy of science, dramatically invigorated the (at the time) rather quiet scholarly study of the history and historiography of science, virtually created the intense contemporary interest in the sociology of science, and continues to be studied not only in these fields but across the humanities, the social sciences and the natural sciences. It seems safe to say that, in light of its dramatic impact upon the philosophy, history and sociology of science, its influence across a much wider range of scholarly disciplines, and the degree to which its basic concepts (e.g. 'paradigm') have seeped into every day discourse, *Structure* will prove to be among a very small number of the most influential philosophy books of the second half of the twentieth century.

¹⁷. The secondary literature on Kuhn's philosophy of science is vast; I can only nod at it here. Siegel 1987, chs. 3-5 critically discusses Kuhnian philosophy of science, especially as it bears upon issues concerning relativism and the (ir)rationality of science. The papers in Gutting 1980 and Horwich 1993 (including Kuhn's 'Afterwords,' 311-341) include important analyses, clarifications and mostly sympathetic criticisms of Kuhn's work; the former provides some sense of the wide range of disciplines Kuhn's work has influenced. Hoyningen-Huene 1993 provides an impressively researched and imaginatively conceived (although in some respects philosophically controversial) systematic interpretation of Kuhn's philosophy of science, one which Kuhn himself warmly endorses in his 'Foreword.'

¹⁸. See esp. Hoyningen-Huene 1993. It is unfortunate that while Hoyningen-Huene's thorough discussion touches on relativism at many points, the topic is not systematically discussed in the book, and 'relativism' does not appear in the index.

¹⁹. Of course there are also important disagreements on many other aspects of Kuhn's views. For a very broad and detailed consideration of the enormous critical response to Kuhn, see Hoyningen-Huene 1993.

²⁰. There are of course some who both praise relativism and find support for it in Kuhn's philosophy of science; this view is not uncommon among sociologists of science, especially those sympathetic to the 'Strong Programme' (discussed below).

²¹. I will not consider Feyerabend's complex version of relativism here; for discussion, see Siegel 1989.

²². It is perhaps worth noting that Quine, in whose writings may be found important early statements of many of these allegedly relativism-supporting themes (in particular, those of holism, indeterminacy and underdetermination), has in recent years qualified/weakened his view to such an extent that it can no longer be seen (if it ever could) as lending any support to relativism. (1991, 268-272; 1992, 13-16, 93-102) Further, underdetermination of a sort strong enough to yield relativism is effectively challenged in Laudan and Leplin 1991 (and in Laudan 1990, 54-6). The route to relativism which passes through the undeterdetermination

thesis – roughly, ‘For any evidence set E which supports theory T , E will equally strongly support rival, empirically equivalent but incompatible theories T' , T'' , etc.; hence all such rivals to T are as well supported by E as T itself is; hence there can be no epistemic grounds for preferring one of these rivals to another; hence relativism’ – contains insuperable roadblocks.

²³ It is worth noting that one of the protagonists of this section, Barry Barnes, has explicitly endorsed this distinction, and agreed that the sociologist’s project is distinct from the epistemologist’s: “The sociologist is concerned with the naturalistic understanding of what people take to be knowledge, and not with the evaluative assessment of what deserves to be so taken; his orientation is normally distinct from that of the philosopher or epistemologist.” (Barnes 1977, 1) This acknowledgement does not sit well with his paper with Bloor (1982) discussed below, since that paper emphatically rejects this distinction, and advocates epistemological relativism on the basis of the sociologist’s concern with ‘what people take to be knowledge’ – indeed, far from these being two distinct projects, the epistemological point, according to that paper, follows directly from the sociological ones.

This traditional distinction has come under attack in ways other than those to be addressed here. In particular, *causal* accounts of knowledge and justification, and *naturalistic* accounts more generally, have played important roles in recent decades. I regret that I can consider only matters related to relativism in what follows; for further discussion of causal/naturalistic theories in epistemology, see the articles by Bloor, Bradie, Lammenranta, Schmitt, and Shope in this *Handbook*. Criticism of naturalized epistemology/philosophy of science is offered in Siegel 1995, 1996, 1996a, and 1998.

²⁴ See references to Barnes, Bloor, Hollis, Lakatos, Laudan, Lukes, and Mannheim at Barnes and Bloor 1982, 26; and several papers in Brown 1984, esp. those by Bloor, Brown, Gutting, and Laudan.

²⁵ On the last point see Gutting 1984, 106; Elster 1982, 147; and McCarthy 1989. A simple example: a given student’s belief that the distance between the sun and the Earth is approximately 93,000,000 miles (on average) might be caused by her conducting an experiment to measure the distance, combined with her instructor’s approval of her experimental procedure; it might instead be caused by her having learned and memorized that figure in her childhood, and her unconscious ‘fudging’ of the experiment to produce that result. Both of these are possible causal explanations of her belief. That they differ in epistemic status (presumably, the first would go some way toward justifying her belief, while the second would not) is irrelevant to the question of their (in)correctness as causal explanations of the belief. Both explanations of the belief’s credibility are causal; but this leaves open the epistemic status of the belief. Thus the equivalence postulate offers no support to relativism. Barnes and Bloor would of course disagree, and reject the distinction between epistemic status and perceived epistemic status. But this rejection depends upon their version of the defective ‘no transcendence’ argument for relativism.

²⁶ This brings to mind Kuhn’s famous remark that, with respect to paradigm choice, “there is no standard higher than the assent of the relevant community.” (1962, 94) Here is one clear instance of Kuhn’s influence on the strong programme in particular, and on post-Kuhnian sociology of science more generally.

²⁷ For the record, Barnes and Bloor do talk about “the received culture of epistemologists” (1982, p. 39); there is nothing unfair in characterizing their view in such a way that specific academic groups – e.g., epistemologists, sociologists, and even particular ‘schools’ within these groups – constitute their own local communities which can be investigated sociologically in order to determine the causes of the credibility of their belief systems.

²⁸ I must acknowledge that my discussion is open to the charge of being out of date: while Barnes and Bloor’s 1982 is perhaps the classic defense of relativism from the perspective of

the sociology of science, there are many more recent discussions available which defend, presuppose, or critically discuss this route to relativism. The work of Collins, Edge, Gooding, Knorr-Cetina, Latour, Lynch, Mulkay, Pickering, Pinch, Shapin, and Woolgar spring immediately to mind; there are course many other important practitioners in this remarkably active field. I regret that I cannot treat this work here. For references and further philosophical critique of its tendency to support relativism, see Slezak 1994, 1994a and 1994b; for additional references and sociological critique, see Cole 1992.

²⁹. Rorty's (1982a) and MacIntyre's (1987) Presidential Addresses centrally concern relativism. Putnam's Presidential Address (1977) concerns relativism only tangentially; it is mainly concerned to criticize 'metaphysical realism' and to articulate and defend his 'internal realism.' But since it is that doctrine of Putnam's that is often taken to be relativistic, it seems fair to regard his Address as also highly relevant to the relativism controversy. It is worth noting that a fourth highly influential figure, Donald Davidson, also devoted his Presidential Address to the Eastern Division (1973) to the issue of relativism. (I discuss Davidson's Address in my 1987, 38-42.)

³⁰. This tension between MacIntyre's embrace of a thoroughgoing historicism and his insistence on his proposed traditional-neutral, ahistorical standard in accordance with which rival traditions can themselves be fairly evaluated occurs elsewhere in his work as well. See, e.g., MacIntyre 1988, 7-10, 346-403. Here the ahistorical character of his standard is put as follows: "It is in respect of their adequacy or inadequacy in their responses to epistemological crises that traditions are vindicated or fail to be vindicated" (366); judgments concerning such (in)adequacy and (non)vindication are not, on MacIntyre's positive view, tradition-relative, but are rather a function of features of '[r]ationality... *qua* rationality.' Whether or not he succeeds in resolving this tension I leave the reader to judge. But MacIntyre himself is clear that in his view his historicism offers no aid or comfort to relativism, which he clearly means to reject (e.g., 366-7).

³¹. See Siegel 1987, 176 n64 for brief further references. Putnam's more recent discussions of 'conceptual relativity' (1990, x-xi) might also contribute to the perception that his view is in the end relativist.

³². Rorty defends this alternative mainly in terms of his historicist rejection of the possibility of achieving an ahistorical standpoint – of stepping "outside our skins" (1982, xix) – thus bringing to mind the 'no neutrality' and especially the 'no transcendence' arguments for relativism examined earlier. I cannot here enter into a full scale discussion of Rortian pragmatism. For brief criticism and further references, see Siegel 1997, 174-5. To Rorty's suggestion that 'no one holds' a relativistic view, I can only recommend the wide range of relativist literature cited above.

³³. A few of many examples: MacIntyre criticizes Rorty in his 1987, 387, and 1990, 710-711. Putnam criticizes Rorty in his 1981, 216, in 1982, 9-12, in 1990, ix, 19-29, in 1992, 67-71, and elsewhere. Rorty criticizes Putnam in 1989, p. 39, at many points in 1991, and in 1993, *passim*. (Putnam and Rorty are interestingly compared in Forster 1992.) Rorty criticizes MacIntyre in 1991a, 158-163. No doubt important light will be shed on this vexing cluster of issues, which has relativism at its center, in future studies of these three-way disputes. It seems an obvious topic for future doctoral dissertations.

³⁴. Richard Bernstein's influential 1983 also deserves brief comment. In it Bernstein bequeaths to the debate the notion of "Cartesian anxiety." (16-20 and *passim*) Those who have this anxiety "quest for some fixed point, some stable rock upon which we can secure our lives against the vicissitudes that constantly threaten us"; this quest is motivated by "[t]he specter that hovers in the background of this journey [, which] is not just radical epistemological skepticism but the dread of madness and chaos where nothing is fixed, where we can neither touch bottom nor support ourselves on the surface.... *Either* there is some support for our being, a fixed foundation for our knowledge, *or* we cannot escape the forces

of darkness that envelop us with madness, with intellectual and moral chaos." (18, emphases in original) Bernstein urges us to reject (or overcome) Cartesian Anxiety, and, in so doing, to get 'beyond objectivism and relativism.'

It must be granted that Bernstein's discussion usefully relates the literature we have been considering to the hermeneutical tradition, in particular the work of Heidegger, Dilthey, and especially Gadamer. His discussion is wide-ranging and often insightful. But it should be noted, first, that there is a looseness to his characterizations of the positions he discusses which renders his account of the issue somewhat unhelpful. For example, Bernstein's 'objectivism' is not equivalent to 'absolutism.' In the passage just cited, he explicitly conflates 'objectivism' with 'foundationalism' and 'relativism' with 'radical epistemological skepticism,' and implicitly conflates 'absolutism' with 'objectivism.' In the course of the book these conflations, and others, are quite clear. Bernstein's conception of 'relativism,' moreover, is far more general than the epistemological relativism being treated here.

Second, it is unclear whether 'Cartesian Anxiety' helps much. To be Cartesially anxious is to have a certain dread, fear, or anxiety concerning the possible absence of a certain foundation. But being anxious in this way is being in a particular psychological state; while pointing out that one who wishes to avoid relativism is in that state might help to explain that person's tendency to embrace 'objectivism,' it seemingly has no tendency to discredit that view (or to support or discredit either its relativist contrary, or whatever it is we get to when we get 'beyond' both objectivism and relativism). To reason in this way – 'she is (Cartesially) anxious, therefore her objectivism is misguided' – is straightforwardly to commit the freshman-level fallacy of psychologizing, i.e., of evaluating the epistemic status of a belief in terms of the psychological state or motivation of the believer. A person's anxiety concerning relativism, however genuine, has no tendency to undermine either her arguments against it or her arguments for a non-relativist alternative. Whether or not Bernstein is himself guilty of this fallacy I leave to the reader to judge. (I think it is clear that others who appeal to Cartesian Anxiety in their arguments against 'foundationalism' (which, again, is not equivalent to 'absolutism') do indeed commit it.)

Third, Bernstein's 'Cartesially anxious' philosopher appears to be bothered by her inability to achieve an overly strong sort of neutrality or transcendence. But (as we have seen) the non-relativist need not and should not aspire to such overly strong forms of these – weaker forms of neutrality and transcendence are both available and sufficient to block relativism. In this respect, Bernstein's discussion trades on the equivocations central to the 'no neutrality' and 'no transcendence' arguments discussed above. For these reasons, I do not think that Bernstein's book, despite its undeniable strengths, significantly advances our understanding of the issues being considered here.

³⁵ While I have not the space to consider them in detail, I want to point out that a further cluster of relativistic positions – those associated with the later Wittgenstein and his treatment of 'forms of life,' with the related idea of (inescapable) 'conceptual schemes' and the impossibility of judging such schemes 'from the outside,' and with the anthropological work of Evans-Pritchard on the Azande and the huge philosophical literature it provoked – also rely on the 'no transcendence' argument for relativism, and typically on the 'no neutrality' argument as well. Insofar as they do so rely (I regret being unable here to establish that they do in detail), they are likewise deficient. For the arguments see especially Winch 1958 and Winch 1964 (and references to Wittgenstein therein); for discussion for and against see the essays in Wilson 1970 and in Hollis and Lukes 1982. (See also Siegel 1987, 178 n37.)

³⁶ Crucial to the articulation and defense of fallibilism is the work of Peirce 1931-58; for lucid discussion and references see Scheffler 1974, pp. 42-57. Popper's *conjectural* account of knowledge (1963, 1972) has also been influential in the fostering of a widespread acceptance of fallibilism.

³⁷. For further discussion of the interanimation of relativism and rationality, see Siegel 1987, ch. 8.

³⁸. Of value in clarifying the character of an acceptable form of absolutism are Harré and Krausz' (1996) distinctions among three different sorts of absolutism – ‘universalist,’ ‘foundationalist,’ and ‘objectivist’ – which they use with some effectiveness (despite their somewhat imprecise handling of those three key terms) to delineate alternative varieties of relativism in terms of their rejection of one or more of these varieties of absolutism, and to evaluate the many positions thus delineated.

³⁹. I am ignoring here *relativistic* theories of truth, which have been discussed above and which are not central players in mainstream philosophical treatments of truth. For further discussion and references, see the essay by David in this *Handbook*.

⁴⁰. I note in passing that working epistemologists, at least in the analytic tradition, generally presume absolutist understandings of the issues – perception, memory, induction, rational belief change, etc. – on which they work. This seems clear from the way in which epistemology is generally presented and practiced, from introductory textbooks to sophisticated, ‘cutting edge’ journals. In this sense absolutism is the ‘default’ position in epistemology. No doubt there are compelling historical explanations of this, in terms of the influence of the Greeks in establishing the agenda of the Western philosophical tradition. That absolutism is the default position of most practicing epistemologists is not, of course, in itself a powerful argument for the correctness of that view. For further discussion of the relation between the relativism/absolutism issue and other epistemological issues, see Siegel 1987, ch. 8, esp. pp. 165–6.

⁴¹. There are of course many serious works on relativism other than those mentioned above. I regret that I cannot consider them here, but I have listed some of them in the following bibliography. Many of the individual articles in the several anthologies listed especially merit attention. Thanks to Ilkka Niiniluoto for suggestions on an earlier draft.

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