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3rd prize in Marianne Talbot Student Essay Competition, Hilary 2024

Give reasons in support of relativism. Why would we prefer a relativistic notion of truth?

Relativism contends that truth, ethics, and reasoning are contextual and subject to frameworks created by cultures, societies and individuals. According to philosopher Maria Baghramian (2022), relativistic truths stand only once the relevant framework has been defined. Relativism raises essential insights, particularly in objection to monistic dogmatism and in support of intellectual and cultural tolerance. However, relativism does face some significant challenges. After outlining the key arguments supporting relativism, I will briefly highlight the challenges before concluding that a form pluralism incorporating relativism offers a more robust and flexible alternative model.

Relativism as a philosophical position has existed at least since the time of ancient Greece with the famous quote attributed to Protagoras of Abdera mentioned in Aristotle's Metaphysics: "Man is the measure of all things, which is saying nothing other than that what seems so to each person also assuredly is". (Aristotle and Reeve, 2016) Given the centuries since relativist theories were first documented, it is unsurprising that there would be a wide variety of related schools of though. However, Baghramian (2004, pp. 6-11) identifies six common characteristics of the many forms of relativism. First and foremost, **non-absolutism** rejects the concept that at least some forms of truth or values exist universally and independent of culture and societally influenced individual perspectives. The second common characteristic of relativism, according to Baghramian, is **dependence**, the notion that for any given value x, including concepts, facts and truth, there is a dependence on parameter y, such as language, culture or other subjective values. A third feature of relativism is that of **multiplicity**, which is the assumption that both for the value x and the parameter y, there is a plurality or multiplicity of possibilities. A fifth commonality is **incompatibility**, stating that for each value of x and parameter of y, there is a sense of non-convergence. The degree towards which the incompatibility question is taken seriously determines the strength of the relativist stance. Finally, there is a typical assumption of relativism of **equal validity**, where, in general, the incompatible judgements are on par and cannot be ranked against one another.

One way of expressing the benefits of a relativist approach is through the themes of empathy, cultural sensitivity and open-mindedness. I will address each in turn.

Empathy

According to Rorty (1984, p. 1), there are two major ways humans reflect their sense of place; through community stories and through a relation to non-human reality. It is the former approach of "solidarity" that Rorty emphasises as underrepresented and crucial for empathy. Donald Davidson saw empathy, in what he termed "the principle of charity", as very much essential. In Davidson's opinion, "…whether we like it or not, if we want to understand others, we must count them right in most matters."(Davidson, 2008, p. 993). To Davidson's point, if we dismiss the beliefs of others out of hand, we are left in a fragile position from which to find consensus about truth, learn, evolve our understanding of truth and even survive as an ever-more global civilisation. Moreover, according to Jeremy Rifkin (2009, p. 1), we are moving from the age of reason to the age of empathy, which in his view is the most crucial characteristic needed to avert ecological disaster. Additionally, Rifkin (2009, p. 46)

reminds us that empathy is crucial in accepting "the other" and avoiding past mistakes. Recent examples of increased East-West tensions, trade wars, threats of invasion, despotic land grabs and ethnic conflicts show that we are never more than a misunderstanding or a miscalculation away from the next world war. Empathy, through understanding and accepting others' beliefs and perspectives, is crucial for establishing truth, learning, and avoiding conflicts in an interconnected world.

Cultural sensitivity

Relativism can help promote cultural sensitivity by helping us understand and appreciate other cultural practices and influences such as history, society and cultural zeitgeist. Adopting a relativist position can help us avoid imposing our values on others. In the case of the wearing of a hijab by many Muslim women, this can be a difference of interpretation and perspective of viewing the wearing of a hijab as a personal choice and normatively accepted practice of modesty within the culture versus through the lens of the outsider. Furthermore, a lack of cultural sensitivity can lead to a sense of difference and a widening gap between in-groups and out-groups. This effect can manifest as cultural ethnocentrism and, in extreme cases, lead to the delegitimisation of the 'other,' resulting in dehumanising treatment. Daniel Bar-tal (1990, p. 77) makes the point that ethnocentrism in Nazi Germany, combined with their sense of Aryan superiority and racist ideology, set the stage for the delegitimisation of the Jewish people and the horrors of the holocaust. In short, cultural sensitivity is an essential positive trait that can help bind individuals and cultures, while a lack of cultural sensitivity can lead to dire consequences.

Open-mindedness

Relativism promotes open-mindedness by reminding us that our beliefs and values are contingent on circumstances and subject to change. Recognising this contingency makes us more aware and open to questioning our assumptions. Embracing relativism supports intellectual humility, a greater willingness and ability to engage with and learn from others. As psychologist Jonathan Haidt (Haidt, 2012, p. 55) suggests, empathy is critical to opening our minds to different moral and political perspectives: "If you really want to change someone's mind on a moral or political matter, you'll need to see things from that person's angle as well as your own." For example, many Western societies have become more open to LGBTQ+ rights in the past few decades. Moving from outlawing homosexual activity, as was the case in Alan Turing's time, to being more accepting and understanding of LGBTQ+ individuals and their experiences. Framing this shift should also make us more aware and tolerant of other cultures that do not share the same contextual position, while also offering them a path to openness, should they choose to take it.

There are overlapping problems with the relativist position, which is perhaps why philosophers like Richard Rorty rejected the label relativist in favour of pragmatist (Rorty, 1984, p. 12). If one accepts cultural relativism, one risks moral paralysis and suppression of critical thinking across cultures and internally. Subsequently, the lack of ensuing critique and grounding makes growth and learning that much more difficult. Taking a strong relativist position means denying the possibility of truth or falsehood, with no position either questionable or developable. In extreme cases, if a distorted form of relativism is applied dogmatically, we can see debate shut down. This problem has surfaced recently with the wave of cancel culture, censoring and de-platforming, even in academia. (Saha, 2024) Through Rorty's "ethnocentrism"—a crucial critical understanding— one also risks factionalism and legitimising nationalism, in only needing to seek to convince cultural peers (Putnam, 1983, p. 235). While being empathic, culturally sensitive and open-minded are all

essential qualities, it does not seem to follow that one must be a relativist to hold them. Nor does it always seem wise to adopt relativism as a monistic position.

In conclusion, there are important lessons to learn from the relativist approach and important considerations to keep in mind. Equally, slipping into relativism risks serious problems manifest in contemporary culture and society where truth is sometimes deliberately devalued, and totalitarian adherence to relativism shuts down debate and critique. In my view, pluralism offers a more balanced approach, where the idea of correspondence can be maintained in domains like science, while matters of taste can be left to relativism. According to Crispin Wright, questions of morality sit somewhere in the middle, and this is where he feels we need a higher standard of confidence that he termed "superassertibility" (Wright, 1995, p. 218). I agree with Wright, that forming various levels of confidence in "truth" is necessary. The notion of variable degrees of confidence also aligns with most people's intuitions. Furthermore, we can all think of examples where, within specific domains, we wish to take a pluralist approach to layering justification. We often layer elements of correspondence, checked against coherence and pragmatic utility in daily situations. For example: If we think of a thermometer in a room reading 24.5 degrees centigrade as correspondence. We might compare the coherence of that reading with our experience and expectations, or refer to another device. Finally, we can take a pragmatic and utilitarian view about how to act on the information. We tend to see the struggle that Rorty (1984, p. 12) describes between relativism and objectivism play out philosophically in tides that ebb and flow depending on the current state of the world and the predominance of one way of thinking over another. Each generation challenges the current orthodoxy and uses the state of the world as a case in point. Currently, we appear deep in the mire of relativism's negative externalities, and the push is perhaps more towards finding ways to ground objectivity. Acknowledging our subjective and relativistic stance remains a crucial part of this balanced pursuit, reflecting the ongoing philosophical tension between relativism and objectivism.

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