Big Questions in Philosophy

What Is Relativism?

Paul O’Grady
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1. Introduction
2. Examples
3. Making “Relativism” precise
4. Objections
5. Implications
6. Resources
1. Introduction

Taking Conflicting Beliefs as equally true. “True-for-me”.
Belief in God versus denial of belief in God.
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Belief in God versus denial of belief in God.

Belief in universal validity of science versus denial of universal validity of science.
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Conflicting Attitudes to this.

i) Emancipatory, coming-of-age, tolerant, clear-sighted
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ii) Pernicious, retrograde, confused, source of ‘fake news’
1. Introduction

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Conflicting Attitudes to this.

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Tasks:

Clarification of what it is

Why espouse it?

What objections can be levelled against it?
2. What is Relativism?

Rather than start with definition – start with examples.
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Relativism about Taste

– liking Guinness
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– liking Bach
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- liking Westlife
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Relativism about **Taste**

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Issues of: Value, Connoisseurship, Knowledge
2. What is Relativism?

Relativism about **Morality**

– Sexual revolution – Victorians versus Hippies
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- Sexual revolution – Victorians versus Hippies
- Athens versus Sparta
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- Pluralism in Society (not imposing single view e.g. Sharia)
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Relativism about **Morality**

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- Pluralism in Society (not imposing single view e.g. Sharia)

**Issues:**

- Hierarchy of claims (diversity in some, not in others)
- Fundamentals - human rights?
- Dictator appealing to Relativism
2. What is Relativism?

Relativism about **Facts (Cognitive Relativism)**

– Kuhn Paradigms. “Mass” relative to Paradigm

– Scientific Revolution – not a reasoned process.
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Relativism about **Facts (Cognitive Relativism)**

- Kuhn Paradigms. “Mass” relative to Paradigm
- Scientific Revolution – not a reasoned process.
- Foucault: Framework constituted for power interest
- Boghossian example: Lakota Sioux versus Anthropology
3. Making “Relativism” precise

Range of areas
– morals, aesthetics, truth, knowledge, meaning, logic, rationality.

Global and Local

Different contemporary theorists:
John MacFarlane
Max Kölbel
Paul Boghossian
3. Making “Relativism” precise

Distinguishing genuine relativism from mere terminological difference.

Debate whether a distance is 5 miles or 8 kilometres.
Distinguishing genuine relativism from mere terminological difference.

Debate whether a distance is 5 miles or 8 kilometres.

Indexicals – ‘here’, ‘now’, ‘I’ (meaning given by context)

Indexical Relativism “It’s raining here” – T/F relative to context.
3. Making “Relativism” precise

What’s Genuine Relativism?

Kölbel - “Faultless Disagreement”

Genuine difference in content of belief

However – no fault on either side of P or not-P

(Guinness is tasty – Guinness is not tasty)

(restricted to matters of taste – problem of triviality)
3. Making “Relativism” precise

What’s Genuine Relativism?

MacFarlane Double Indexical

Context of meaning + Context of Evaluation

“There will be a sea battle tomorrow”

Context of today/context of tomorrow.

(Problem of future contingent propositions)

Genuine example, motivated to solve a philosophical problem.
3. Making “Relativism” precise

What’s Genuine Relativism?

MacFarlane and Kölbel – too trivial and limited. Doesn’t capture Boghossian example.

[An X is F when it is G in respect of H]

A belief is justified when it is licenced by an epistemological system

A moral belief is correct when it is allowed by a moral system

An aesthetic judgement is true when it ratified by an aesthetic system.

More than one system

Systems clash
3. Making “Relativism” precise

Religious Worldview and Scientific Worldview beliefs relativized to framework

World Cultures/Alien Cultures/Gender Differences/

Incommensurability – inappropriate to judge.
4. Objections

Problem of Self-Refutation

Hard to make any claim without making it absolutely.

This contradicts the basic claim of relativism

(maybe relativism is the one absolute truth?)

Problem of Assertion

“It’s raining” is true entails “It’s not raining” is false.

To allow “It’s not raining” makes “it’s raining” meaningless
4. Objections

Maybe Relativism is relatively true — so avoids self-contradiction?
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Hilary Putnam – “I see where you’re coming from with relativism but it just isn’t true-for-me”.
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Problem of lack of argumentative force

How do you deal with someone who rejects relativism — can’t make unrelativized claims and relativized claims are impotent?
5. Implications

Laudable desire to avoid Dogmatism and Procrastean vision.
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Religious Dogmatism
5. Implications

Laudable desire to avoid dogmatism and procrastean vision.

Religious Dogmatism

Scientific Fundamentalism
5. Implications

Fallibilism: Allows one make definite claims, but allows for the possibility of being mistaken. (Skepticism background).
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Contextualism: Apparently conflicting views may in fact be compatible when analyzed sufficiently. (Science and Religion)
6. Resources

Maria Baghramian  *Relativism*, Routledge 2004

Paul O’Grady  *Relativism*, Routledge 2002

https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/relativism/

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Thank You