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Flock, Gregor, 2015, “Four Arguments for Universal Relativism”, in: Kanzian, Christian, Mitterer, Josef, and Neges, Katharina (eds.), *Contributions of the 38th International Wittgenstein Symposium*, pp. 89–91, Kirchberg am Wechsel: ALWS.

For the somewhat updated talk that was delivered at the symposium, see version 1.1.

Four Arguments for Universal Relativism

Abstract: In the academic literature and elsewhere, specific relativisms are often a hotly debated topic. In this paper, I considerably up the ante by proposing an across the board ‘universal relativism’ that is supported by four arguments: the inductive argument, the argument from causality, the argument from elimination, and the counterargument against self-refutation.

1. Introduction

While various descriptive or normative versions of relativism (cf. e.g. Baghramian 2004, Krausz 2010, Baghramian 2014) may currently be (re)emerging in various disciplines, I would be inclined to say that the *fundamental relativistic principle* (FRP) of ‘Ys being relative to Xs’ (Swoyer 2014, sect. 1.1) has always been around. The FRP’s likely

omnipresence in time would also appear to be accompanied by its omnipresence in ontological or existential scope: Not only does the FRP apply to constructed, subjective or mind-dependent as well as to real, objective or mind-independent existence, but it also seems that we cannot seriously or sensibly conceive how non-relative existence could be possible. Universal relativism thus contains the descriptive and empirically confirmable hypothesis of ‘stuff *always* somehow depending or having depended on other stuff’ (I am using the term of “stuff” here since I want to use the ontologically most general term possible and since “stuff” is even more general than “things” or “events”).

Secondly and as a consequence of (a) our general appreciation of and our normative demands about truth and of (b) the above *descriptive universal relativism* (i.e. the position that affirms *universal relativity* or the *universality of the FRP*) being regarded as true, universal relativism also contains of the thesis of *normative universal relativism* according to which we should adopt a universally relativistic worldview. Due to the inherent connectedness of these two aspects of relativism and since I also have strong reservations about the alleged “gap” between the descriptive and the normative, I will mostly just talk about a unified “universal relativism” here.

Needless to say, universal relativism is an exceptionally far-reaching claim and one with which many of us may be quick to disagree. In my opinion, however, closer inspection is likely to reveal that resistance to relativism often turns out to be not much more than a fairly unreflected and epistemically and otherwise unjustified ‘knee-jerk reaction’ that cannot seriously be maintained in the face of an analytic and non-superficial treatment of the topic. To back up that claim, I would like to present four arguments in favor of universal relativism.

2. The Inductive Argument

The first of these arguments is a classical inductive generalization: One points to relativity here and relativity there, and after a certain sample size that one believes to be representative for the whole of existence and without having encountered examples to the contrary one infers to the conclusion “relativity everywhere!” In this respect and as far as the latter ‘relative to X’ aspect of many relativisms is concerned (for an overview over popular X-components, cf. Swoyer 2014, sect. 3), one could point to the ‘anthropocentric perspectival relativism’ that was described in and affirmed by Protagoras’ famous saying that “man is the measure of all things” and according to which Y-components are relative to subjective perception, interpretation or even construction of them. Among many other sources, one can find more recent affirmation and variations of this generic X-type relativism in Nietzschean *perspectivism* or in Nagel’s famous essay of 1974. Due to limitations of space and time though, I will cut the discussion of the latter ‘relative to X’ part short and concentrate more on the former ‘Y is relative’ part of universal relativism.

In this respect, one could point to several somewhat more specific ‘Y-type’ relativities and relativisms such as central concept relativism, central belief relativism, perceptual relativism, epistemic relativism (cf. e.g. contextualism as discussed by Cohen 1998 or DeRose 1999, 2009), moral relativism (Gowans 2012), semantic relativism, alethic relativism or even reality relativism (cf. Swoyer 2014, sect. 2, for an overview over these Y-type relativisms). Presumably, one could or should also point to the principle of causality since that is also an inherently relativistic affair, and if one is more scientifically inclined, one could also point to something like Einstein’s general theory of relativity. Then, when one is beginning to feel dizzy or exhausted after having gone into the specifics of these and many other aspects of the FRP, one can and typically will make the inductive jump from some to

all.

3. The Argument From Causality

The second and in my estimation stronger argument in favor of universal relativism is the deductive argument from causality. As the first premise of the argument, I take the in my opinion true belief that relativity and causality are at the very least strongly overlapping concepts, given that causality is about effects and causes and that effects are ‘relative to’ their causes (cf. Swoyer 2014, sect. 3.1: “relativistic claims ... are claims about *causal influence*”). More specifically, it seems as if everything that is causal is relative, but that not everything that is relative is causal, meaning that relativity is even more encompassing than causality. Formalized, one could perhaps write that as “relativity \geq causality” or, since the following is sufficient and also more fitting for our purposes, as “relativity \approx causality.” As the argument’s second premise I take the in my opinion equally evident and true belief that causality, including various versions of probabilistic causality (cf. e.g. Eells & Sober 1983, Eells 1987, Dupré 1990; for an overview cf. Hitchcock 2012), is a universal phenomenon or principle. The conclusion that follows from these two premises is once again an affirmation of universal relativism, because when “relativity \approx causality,” when causality is accepted as a fairly universal thing, and especially when relativity is considered as even more encompassing than causality, then we have no choice but to also accept relativity as universal, whether we like it or not.

4. The Argument From Elimination

The third argument in support of universal relativism is another deductive argument, this time

from elimination. Here I now try to show that the non-relative cannot be sensibly conceived to exist and that, due to the complete elimination of everything non-relative, universal relativity is the only remaining possibility.

In regard to the argument itself, I start out from the closely related set of first premises that (1a) “the non-relative” is equal to “the absolute,” which are both definable as “stuff that is and has been *completely independent* from other stuff,” that (1b) “the non-absolute” is in turn equal to “the relative,” which are both definable as “stuff that is or has been *somehow dependent* on other stuff,” and that (1c) the absolute and the relative are typically contradictorily opposed to and mutually exclusive with each other. The second premise is that (2) the absolute and the relative mutually exhaust all ‘possible categorial values’ of the ontological category that they inhabit. (This once again assumes bivalence, and while I am generally opposed to bivalent categorization and in favor of multivalent categorization, I will leave considerations about multivalence aside here mainly because the conclusion would not be noticeably different if we assumed a multivalent framework). The third premise is that (3) the absolute does not exist (except as a highly problematic concept). From this it follows that (4a) everything must be relative, but also that (4b) anyone who is opposed to 4a or to *any* claim to the extent of “Y is relative” would be compelled to assume that this Y is absolute or “completely independent from other stuff.”

Yet what single thing or being has ever fulfilled the thusly defined criterion of absoluteness? ‘Absolute’ monarchs, for instance, may have declared and installed themselves as the sole power in the state or as being *legibus absolutus* (lat. for “absolved from the law,” “above the law”). That state, however, was *relative to* their convictions or to the power they had amassed, but by no means something that was completely independent from other stuff. As such, there was nothing genuinely absolute about ‘absolute’ monarchs. The same could

also be said about allegedly ‘absolute’ values of measurement such as temperature measured in kelvin: Its inventor Thomson thought that he had discovered “an absolute scale, since its characteristic is quite independent of the physical properties of any specific substance” (1848, 69). That independence, however, is once again only a very limited independence that is counterbalanced by a lot of other dependencies (note that this is the fundamental standard flaw behind alleged absolutes in science and one that also typically escapes recent commentators on Thomson’s actually quite relative scale, such as Chang & Yi 2005). Thomson’s (aka Lord Kelvin’s) initial judgment that “we are left without any principle on which to found an absolute thermometric scale” (1848, 67) would therefore have been the far more fitting or correct one.

Needless to say, one can also find plenty of other loose, grandiose, pretentious and in the end inappropriate or superfluous talk about the absolute in ordinary language, for instance in the expressions “the absolute best/worst” or “She did absolutely everything/nothing”: In these and many other cases, the main function of “absolute” simply is to emphasize a superlative. Overall though, the term of absolute is superfluous here since we would essentially be saying the same with just “the best/worst” or “She did everything/nothing.”

Besides this rather inappropriate or superfluous use of “absolute,” there is also a more fitting and philosophically interesting use of it that occurs when the wordform is associated with the meaning “stuff that is and has been *completely independent* from other stuff.” The reason why this version of absolute is philosophically interesting is that it would make possible the conception of a first cause or origin of it all: If everything were to be relative to something else (in a linear and non-circular manner), the search for a first cause would be lost in an infinite regress and, overall, in obscurity. The absolute, on the other hand, would allow us to bottom out at some point in our search, and this is perhaps the main reason for the great

appeal of the absolute in and beyond philosophy.

The huge problem with that ‘strong’ and potentially useful conception of the absolute, however, is that it is not at all supported by experience. Given that our thinking is shaped by experience, the philosophically interesting strong version of the absolute consequently becomes rather inconceivable and wide open to relativization on closer inspection. Three examples by way of which this can be demonstrated are the religious concept of God, the philosophical and Aristotelian concept of an unmoved mover, and the scientific concept of the Big Bang: All three of those concepts are, in their own way and among other things, the result of attempting to come up with an uncaused first cause and, overall, this is about as absolute as it gets. My point, however, is that we can utterly demolish and relativize these alleged absolutes by a) asking the seemingly innocent question “And what was before that?” or “And what has caused that?” and by b) pointing out that this is a highly legitimate question, because as opposed to the empirically empty claim of the absolute, the claim of universal relativity that is implied in that question is empirically well-founded.

Absolutists have of course attempted to defend their thesis, perhaps most notably with the *causa sui* argument about God or with some other mysterious non-relativistic genesis of an allegedly absolute first cause. At the end of the day, though, there is (as far as I am aware of) no empirical backing for these or other absolutes, which is also the primary reason for why the absolute cannot be sensibly conceived or why it can always be relativized with the legitimate question about its antecedent. Philosophically relevant mention of the absolute would therefore only appear to make sense in the context of something like John Duns Scotus’ *nihil simpliciter* or the Kyoto School’s “absolute nothingness” (Davis 2014, sect. 3), because with all existence apparently being relativistic, the (me)ontological realm that is left for the absolute can only be nothingness or non-existence.

The argument from elimination would thus appear to have been brought to a successful conclusion, because when not even God or the Big Bang can sensibly be conceived to be absolute, then all the ‘lesser candidates’ certainly will not turn out to be absolute either. Conclusion (4a) that everything is relative thus once again wins the day.

5. The Counterargument Against Self-Refutation

But wait: If everything is relative, would relativity itself then not be absolute and thus *not* universal? There are several arguments against relativism on the basis of its alleged self-refutation (Swoyer 2014, sect. 5.9), with the above being perhaps the strongest one. That objection, however, can easily be defeated by pointing out that the truth of everything being relative *is relative to everything being relative*, i.e. that universal relativism is relative to the principle of non-contradiction and thus not self-refuting or above the FRP. As such, even the metalevel does not seem to be problematic. So much, in any event, for my four arguments for universal relativism.

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