

EPISTEMIC RELATIVISM: INTER-CONTEXTUALITY IN THE PROBLEM OF THE CRITERION

Rodrigo LAERA

ABSTRACT: This paper proposes a view on epistemic relativism that arises from the problem of the criterion, keeping in consideration that the assessment of criterion standards always occurs in a certain context. The main idea is that the epistemic value of the assertion “*S* knows that *p*” depends not only on the criterion adopted within an epistemic framework and the relationship between said criterion and a meta-criterion, but also from the collaboration with other subjects who share the same standards. Thus, one can choose between particularist and methodist criteria according to the context of assessment. This position has the advantage of presenting a new perspective concerning both the criterion problem and the problem of inter-contextuality in the evaluation of different epistemic frameworks.

KEYWORDS: relativism, criterion problem, epistemic framework, contextualism

1. Introduction

In this paper, “epistemic relativism” will be understood as the idea that there is no unchanging hierarchy of criteria for both the identification and assessment of different epistemic frameworks. This characterization of epistemic relativism refers to a rather uncontentious version of epistemic pluralism in the way that (a) there is more than one set of criteria that can legitimate an attribution of knowledge and (b) a ‘parity thesis’ which implies that no set of criteria is superior to the others.¹ As such, there exist alternative epistemic frameworks² without the necessity for some constant occurrence which gives origin to a group of criteria which are superior to others.³

¹ For example: Maria Baghramian, *Relativism* (London: Routledge, 2004), Mark Kalderon, “Epistemic Relativism,” *Philosophical Review* 118, 2 (2009): 225-240.

² According to Pritchard, epistemic frameworks can be understood as clusters of epistemic principles which determine the epistemic standing of beliefs or knowledge. See Duncan Pritchard, “Defusing Epistemic Relativism,” *Synthese* 166, 2 (2009): 397-412.

³ This must be clearly distinguished from the problem of epistemic over-determination as a common phenomenon – one can come to know the very same proposition *P* by testimony, visual perception, auditory perception, and so on – from the fact that one can consider the

On the contrary, epistemic realism, or epistemic absolutism, will be understood as the belief that there exists an unchanging group of epistemic relations which apply to all context and that said group can be discovered via philosophical reflection. As an opposition to epistemic relativism, it can be claimed that although the attributions of knowledge can change with their circumstances, at least some norm must fix said attributions so that individuals can attribute knowledge in distinct contexts. In the absence of shared norms or criteria for the attribution of knowledge, it would not be possible to compare the different ways of knowing the world and, in consequence, neither could relativism sustain itself.⁴ Against epistemic realism it can be argued that epistemic relations are, in fact, sensitive to their context. Each context is dependent on a determined epistemic framework and what is affirmed in one context can be negated in another without contradiction. Natural language not only communicates something in relation with the context of use, but also tells us something with respect to the context of assessment.⁵ The attributions of knowledge are statements which pertain to natural language; they are a part of and depend on it. In consequence, epistemic realism would seem to be false.⁶

Despite the background differences, it is worth asking ourselves if it is possible to reconcile both positions, finding some sort of golden mean which may provide an explanation to the suspected disagreement that subjects in different contexts could experience towards a certain attribution of knowledge given that the criteria that constitute an epistemic framework are generalizations of particular attributions of knowledge. In that sense, while (a) relativism is defensible considering that epistemic frameworks are relevant to legitimize attributions of knowledge, it does not follow that (b) there are no criteria to be shared across different frameworks, which makes the same rules applicable to similar circumstances. Therefore, while thesis (a) is important to relativists, thesis

reliability of said sources as a legitimate criteria for the attribution of knowledge. Thus, that an individual can know *P* from a range of sources does not mean that it can know *P* from a range of criteria; *criteria* and *sources* cannot be taken as similar concepts.

⁴ *Cfr.* Paul Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). More recently, see: Markus Seidel, *Epistemic Relativism: A Constructive Critique* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

⁵ I follow MacFarlane's distinction between context of use and context of assessment. See John MacFarlane, "Making Sense of Relative Truth," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian society* 105, 3 (2005): 321-339, or also by the same author: *Assessment Sensitivity: Relative Truth and Its Applications* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁶ A similar argument can be found in Michael Williams, "Why (Wittgensteinian) Contextualism Is Not Relativism," *Episteme: A Journal of Social Epistemology* 4, 1 (2007): 93-114.

(b) is a statement that relativism could easily challenge arguing that frameworks and epistemic evaluation criteria cannot overlap themselves. The contribution about the suspicion of disagreement is supported on thesis (b) without assuming that criteria are fixed and unchanging.

This paper proposes that one can agree with particularism – in which the instances of knowledge come prior to a knowledge criterion – or with methodism – where a criterion comes prior to knowledge instances –, according to the circumstances the assessor finds itself leading, in that way, to methodism and relativist particularism respectively. The sharing of such meta-epistemological principles enables an implicit agreement between the hierarchy of criteria and the instances of knowledge, which in turn will allow us to identify alternative epistemic frameworks to be assessed.

Thus, the particular circumstances that the subjects of assessment go through converge with the epistemic norms of assessment criteria for the attribution of knowledge. In another way, the assessment criteria are a (theoretical) consequence of how subjects in a determined community cooperate, and of the success of said cooperation.⁷ To illustrate this point, we can consider the frequent debate between creationists and evolutionists. The creationists sustain that every living being is the result of God's creation, an act performed in accordance with a divine purpose. In contrast, the evolutionists affirm that every living being on Earth descends from a universal common ancestor. Both would surely assess their respective attributions of knowledge in agreement with standards which pertain to their respective epistemic framework; a framework which they adhere to as a result of their particular circumstances. But they can understand each other, since they have points in common which permit certain cooperation. Even more, if a third party decided to assess both positions, it too would do so both according to the assessment criteria that determine its beliefs and in cooperation with other parties who share the same standards (even though these standards can often be implicit).⁸ Even though the reconciliation of relativism and absolutism and conflicting epistemic frameworks are two different

⁷ *Cfr.* Steven Hales, *Relativism and the Foundations of Philosophy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), to whom irreconcilable differences may lead to epistemic relativism, which arise when opposing parties cannot even agree upon the meta-criteria of a controversial statement.

⁸ It never hurts to clarify the difference between an epistemic framework, a criterion, and a standard: Standards are epistemic norms which, combined into a whole, integrate an epistemic framework. A standard becomes a criterion when it is used for making judgments or decisions. Besides, the word 'standard' refers to a norm or set of norms that are normally followed, whilst the concept of 'criteria' is more far-reaching as it can encompass norms which are not frequently followed.

projects, if it could be proved that there is a connection among epistemic frameworks but that they change in time, then we would be advocating a middle ground between relativism and absolutism.

The following section is dedicated to the problem of the criterion, in which we consider that the meta-criteria necessary to assess attributions of knowledge depend on both the context in which the assessor finds itself and on the collaboration with other subjects with whom it shares the same standards of attribution. Thus, these criteria can be just as particularist as methodist; if what we assess are daily practices, then they will be particularist, and if what we assess are standards, norms or epistemological theories, then we establish a methodist meta-context. The third section will address the problem of epistemic relativism in relation with mankind's capacity to successfully collaborate and to replace certain criteria with others which work better. Finally, we will use the Azande culture as an example to illustrate these points.

2. The Problem of Criterion in Context

According to relativism, the truth value of an affirmation or belief depends on the epistemic standard which is relevant in the assessment context. With this there is no neutral answer to the question of whether or not an affirmation or belief is correct; diverse standards can be used within the alternative epistemic frameworks. However, the idea that relativists assess and attribute knowledge via criteria that constitute an epistemic framework leads to the problem of how justify said criteria.

Given a determined epistemic framework, the relativist justifies the formation of his beliefs – at least *prima facie* – on the grounds of his own relativist criteria, and the creationist and evolutionist justify their beliefs with their own respective standards. Furthermore, such criteria can only be justified with particular beliefs which themselves are not assessed as relative. In such a way, we arrive at a variation of the traditional problem of the criterion.

The problem of the criterion affirms the incompatibility of two alternatives:⁹

- (a) In order to recognize instances of knowledge and determine their extension, we need to know the knowledge criteria.
- (b) In order to know the knowledge criteria we need to recognize their instances.

⁹ Here I follow the Chisholm's strategy to present the problem. See Rodrick Chisholm, *The Problem of the Criterion* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1973) and *The Foundations of Knowing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

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- (c) We can neither know the extension nor know the knowledge criterion, because (a) and (b) are either equally true or equally false.

However, we identify three possible answers to this problem. First, we can begin by specifying what counts as a legitimate method and use it in order to justify doxastic states (methodism). Secondly, we can begin by identifying particular cases of knowledge and investigate the use of these cases, to later assess general criteria (particularism). For example, Descartes, Locke and Hume can be considered advocates of methodism, while Reid is considered an advocate of particularism. This is owed to the fact that both Descartes' rationalism and Locke and Hume's empiricism try to establish the conditions necessary for the acquisition of knowledge, while Reid's particularism tries to investigate the reach and extension of knowledge in order to later make generalizations.

Both the methodist focus and the particularist focus have been effectively defended using naturalist conceptions.¹⁰ However, neither is sufficient to offer any type of neutral argument which impedes the satisfaction of relativist demands. In fact, for methodism, the criterion to determine instances of knowledge will be presented in the form of an unjustified meta-criterion – even if said meta-criterion comes from the same naturalistic rationale as the criterion itself – so, in the best of cases, its substantiation will be of circular nature. A similar process will occur for particularism because a certain set of rules will be required for every assessment of an instance of knowledge in order to consider it as fully-fledged knowledge. As a matter of fact, those epistemic frameworks which may have allowed attributions of knowledge to survive share some basic elements as the subjects that use any framework, for the sole matter of using it, show a degree of linguistic proficiency that can be semantically assessed by the means of rules accepted within the framework itself. In other words, for p to be taken as part of a set of knowledge, there must be a background of rules accepted within a specific epistemic framework. Whether we settle either for methodism or particularism, a dialectical deadlock will be reached because the controversy amongst particularists and methodists cannot be solved for reasons intelligible to the disputing parties.

Following this line of thought, it can note – or distinguish – three principle characteristics of epistemic relativism, in relation with both the methodist and

¹⁰ An example of methodist focus can be found in Steven Luper, "Epistemic Relativism," *Philosophical Issues* 14, 1 (2004): 271-295. However, an example of particularist focus can be found in Howard Sankey, "Witchcraft, Relativism and the Problem of the Criterion," *Erkenntnis* 72, 1 (2010): 1-16; or also "Scepticism, Relativism and a Naturalistic Particularism," *Social Epistemology: A Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Policy*, 2015: 1-18.

particularist perspectives – besides allowing us to present relativism in a way that serves the purpose of assessing criteria depending on the context of the assessor.

Particular relativism:

- (a) There are many ways to know the world.
- (b) The ways of knowing the world are determined by particular cases of knowledge.
- (c) All the particular cases that lead to knowledge of the world are equally valid.

Methodist relativism:

- (a) There are many ways to know the world.
- (b) The ways of knowing the world are determined by criteria that pertain to the culture in which we live.
- (c) All of the criteria that lead to knowledge of the world are equally valid.

Methodist relativism seems more plausible than that of the particularist, as the latter can be interpreted as subjectivism in which all beliefs or attributions of knowledge can be considered equally valid. The implausibility of this point of view is found in the fact that there can be cases in which *S* knows that man is a product of divine creation without the necessity to argue in favor of the standards which contribute to *S*'s knowledge, yet at the same time, there can also be cases in which *S* can both have this knowledge and argue in favor of said standards; both cases would be considered legitimate attributions of knowledge, and there is no epistemic difference between both them. Perhaps this position can be smoothed by interpreting relativism as a type of internalism, in sustaining that, eventually, one's self-confidence guarantees the possession of knowledge.¹¹ All attributions of knowledge use the first person as a reference, even though one may not be capable of correcting their own beliefs. For this correction to be possible the belief needs to be contrasted by, at the very least, another belief. In consequence, one's self-confidence must be coherent with a group of accepted beliefs – or an epistemic framework – so as not to end once again in the arbitrariness of subjectivism. For example, the particular belief that mankind is a divine creation must be contrasted and, later, be coherent with the theist epistemic framework in order for it to constitute knowledge. If we contrast this with the evolutionist epistemic framework, this theist belief will be corrected for its incoherence.

¹¹ Internalism in the way the condition necessary to assess attributions of knowledge depends on some factor inside the subject's mind and that, ultimately, it would be the subject's confidence on its own abilities (see, for example, Keith Lehrer, *Self-Trust: A Study of Reason, Knowledge, and Autonomy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997). For an interpretation of internalism connected with relativism, see: Rodrigo Laera, *Los desvíos de la razón: el lugar de la facticidad en la cadena de justificaciones* (Buenos Aires: Miño y Dávila, 2011).

The notion of coherence implies – implicitly or not – the existence of a group of beliefs which constitute an epistemic framework, which leads us to a slip from particularism to methodism, as the notion of coherence requires a previous criterion. Although the intuition of common sense continues to be preponderant, in this case it also constitutes a criterion for confrontation; we can differentiate the acceptance of an attribution from its respective criterion, since it is from common sense that one accepts attributions that, before becoming explicit, one could not have ever accepted; even so, in both cases (before and after becoming explicit) the criterion for acceptance would be the same.

If the assessment criteria with which knowledge is attributed are shared by an epistemic community, then the assessor that endorses either the correctness or incorrectness of said criteria can only do so by means of a meta-criteria acting as a presupposition. But, what happens if the assessor also adheres to relativism, where no hierarchy of epistemic frameworks can be construed? Returning to the disagreement between the creationist and the evolutionist: If one considers that the creationist's position as well as the evolutionist's are correct within their own epistemic frameworks, then how can it be possible to concede a central role to the testimony of the Holy Texts or the word of God? And, similarly, how can it be possible to concede the same role to the Darwinian theory of natural selection? In this sense, the relativist position seems incompatible with both religious and secular points of view, as neither is treated as a trustworthy source of truthful beliefs which are independent of their epistemic frameworks. And, as the relativist considers himself incapable of offering validation from his own framework to another, independent epistemic framework, he will also be incapable of offering an independent assessment of the epistemic framework of some possible adversary.

However, if the conditions necessary to semantically classify alternative meta-criteria were not to be found in an epistemic framework, then it would not be possible to offer any explanation on how to identify an unconnected epistemic framework provided it is necessary to identify them as such before assessing them.¹² If one simply identified an epistemic framework with a group of standards that determine the subjective assessment of the attribution of knowledge, then this would cause the unfortunate result in that the creationist, the evolutionist and the relativist base themselves in exclusive epistemic frameworks, without any one being able to identify the others' framework. Said in another way, if the subject's

¹² Radical relativist thesis on epistemic frameworks: there are epistemic frameworks completely different amongst themselves to the point there cannot be any possible translation from one to the other, thus making them totally incommensurable.

context determines their attributions of knowledge, then how is it possible to assess distinct contexts in the third person? How is it possible to affirm, then, that the creationist and the evolutionist disagree? How can one solve the problem of reporting knowledge in frameworks distinct from his own? Such problems have to do with the intuition that we possess the capacity to recognize other assessment criteria, and that the evolutionist and the creationist sustain contradicting theories. Otherwise it would be irrational to try and assess criteria that are not shared.

If then in some contexts normal speakers would not reach the conventional meaning of the statements in which knowledge is attributed: despite being informed of all the relevant facts, these speakers would be incapable of making correct and literal usage of them. Normal speakers in this sort of context would find themselves confused concerning what requires the attribution of knowledge. However, one must keep in mind that the intuition of any competent speaker knows when he says that he knows. For example, let us consider that *S* is an ordinary speaker unfamiliar with the necessary and sufficient conditions that must be met to properly use a concept like 'democracy' in Ancient Greece. Nevertheless, *S* argues that Plato was against democracy, so one could state that '*S* knows that Plato was against democracy' while being familiar with the concept of 'democracy' in the Ancient Greek context. Hence, one could assume that whatever *S* knows is encompassed within certain specific criteria (those that uphold that 'democracy is a representative form of government') and that if one knows said criteria, then it cannot endorse that *S* knows that Plato was against democracy. In this way, it can be said an assessor is 'competent' when it is aware of the conditions of reference. If epistemic frameworks were disconnected amongst themselves – being the old frame different to the modern one – then no-one could say that that someone knows that Plato was against democracy because it would be simply impossible to understand what 'democracy' meant in the Ancient Greek world. There is always a margin of ignorance about the criteria of other epistemic frameworks, but this margin does not prevent us of inter-contextually assessing contributions of knowledge in other epistemic frameworks.

Returning again to particularism, is it necessary to take samples of relevant individual cases in order to establish criteria? The Gettier cases – where the traditional consideration of knowledge as a 'true, justified belief' is challenged – are a good example that it seems inevitable to follow our intuitions, and that a large part of epistemology's history is also sufficient evidence for this. Indeed, if with Plato it had been established that knowledge is true belief justified as a rigid or invariable criterion, then the history of epistemology would not have paid

attention to any supposed counterexample, since the Gettier cases would not have been appropriate. In consequence, there is something in daily intuition relevant to establishing epistemological meta-criteria. Above all, knowledge is something normal in man.

In agreement with the application of criteria, one can opt for methodism or particularism, depending on the context in which the assessor finds himself. For example, when the assessment context has demanding standards – as is the case for a Cartesian epistemologist – surely methodism will be sustained. On the contrary, when the assessment context is not sufficiently demanding – as occurs in the case of those who participate in everyday assessments – then surely particularism will be relied upon to attribute knowledge. This position is adequate to resolve skeptic questions. Thus, in the contexts in which criteria appropriate to a philosophical conversation are applied, in which skeptic possibilities are considered, the criteria-concerning standards for the attribution of knowledge are extremely high. Although different contextualists may affirm different things with respect to how these standards arise, this does not affect the idea that in said contexts it is false to say that *S* knows that he is not a brain in a vat and, therefore, that it is false to say that *S* knows that he has hands. Notwithstanding, in the non-philosophic context of ordinary life the skeptic possibilities are not considered, because the criteria-concerning standards for the attribution of knowledge are low. In this context, *S* knows implicitly that he is not a brain in a vat, because he knows that he has two hands. The epistemic relativist can utilize the skeptic argument to establish that there are no rational motives to consider that an epistemic framework is subordinate to another. In as much as the skeptic judgment is rejected by a subject living in everyday life, one ends up accepting the skeptic argument, since the standards of assessment are automatically raised. Indeed, to negate skepticism appealing to everyday situations implies that he who negates does so from a philosophic point of view.

All of this leads us to the consideration that there cannot be inter-contextual judgments, and so neither is there an authentic disagreement between parties. The skeptic can sustain that the attributions of knowledge that are carried out within everyday contexts are false, but the speakers in everyday contexts cannot directly reject the negation of knowledge expressed by the skeptics. One cannot deny what another affirms. Overall, what the skeptic is affirming is that *S* does know not that *p* in accordance with high epistemic standards, although this affirmation may be compatible with the affirmation that *S* does know that *p* according to the permissive, or low, standards of everyday life.

But, why is it that in some moments S knows that p and in other moments S doesn't know that p ? What does it mean that the criteria-concerning standards are sufficiently high or sufficiently low? These questions introduce the problem of relativism in terms of cooperation for the attribution of knowledge, since for conversations to function in both contexts one must implicitly accept distinct criteria for knowledge. And this implicit acceptance that happens within the same epistemic community will also happen in communities when, upon passing judgments, make use of very different criteria. Upon introducing the problem within the same community, the question is; what does it mean to say "implicitly accept a criterion in a determined context"? One can adhere to contextualism and sustain that both the changes of context and the changes of standards of criteria are induced by the dynamic of conversation. However, it is important to differentiate the notion of "context" from that of "epistemic framework." This difference is clear because the contexts can change within the same framework. The attributions of knowledge are sensitive to context because they share criteria or meta-criteria. These criteria make the notion of "to know" change context, yet maintain the epistemic strength of its epistemic framework of reference.¹³

When a conversation takes place – with others or with oneself –, a family of interrelated subjects is assumed. The pertinence of one subject establishes the continuity of the conversation without producing a rupture, while non-pertinence in a subject would produce such a break. Thus, in some cases we ask the question, "How does one know that p ?" in order to know that he knows, while in other cases we directly inquire about what is known. This is not due exclusively to the epistemic frameworks in which we assess, but also to the very genesis of belief. With this, intercontextual judgments can be judgments about the truth values of the attributions of knowledge which occur under one epistemic framework, although the genesis of the beliefs can be the same. For example, the reliability of perception can be taken as a stable relation between the subject and the object of knowledge, although its content may change with the epistemic framework. The apparent perceptions of rain are reliably connected to a hierarchy of criteria above other possible beliefs in such a way that allows one to believe that it is raining. In consequence, the perception of rain justifies the belief that it is raining, as well as

¹³ Generally, contextualism sustains that a subject S knows a proposition p with respect to the epistemic standards of the moment of attribution – as Cohen and DeRose have sustained, for example (Stewart Cohen, "Contextualism, Skepticism, and the Structure of Reasons," *Noûs* 33, no. 13 (1999): 57-89. Keith DeRose, *The Case for Contextualism: Knowledge, Skepticism, and Context, Vol. 1: Knowledge, Skepticism, and Context*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. While relativism sustains that the truth – of sentences or propositions – is relative not only to the contexts of use, but also the contexts of assessment.

the belief that it is believed to be raining, all in virtue of different groups of reliable connections. In fact, the reliable connection of the perceptions of rain with the belief that it is raining make it so that said belief is justified in the Western epistemic framework as in other epistemic frameworks. Epistemic frameworks can be connected via criteria or meta-criteria that integrate them; these also allow that some frameworks imitate others when they are more successful.

3. Epistemic Relativism and the Reliability of Perception in the Azande Case

So far, it has been sustained that certain epistemological relativism can be both particularist and methodist provided two reservations are made. The first of them is that the existence of a hierarchy or ranking of criteria that make a source of knowledge reliable – and its assessment, legitimate – is put forward. The second one consists in upholding that the different epistemic frameworks are connected amongst themselves in terms of both cooperation and of success. These provisions make relativism so moderate that it would seem as though a middle ground has been reached between it and absolutism. Now, one argument that assumes that the relativist theory, as it has been exhibited in this paper, is erroneous can be presented in the following way: if we construct the fact that p is the case and another society constructs – even simultaneously – the fact that $not-p$ is the case, it is possible that at the same time p and $not-p$ are the case. But, how could there be a world such that, being one and the same, p and $not-p$ be the case at the same time?

In another way:

- (a) A community constructs the fact x , such that if x then p .
- (b) It is possible that another community has constructed the fact x such that if x then $not-p$.
- (c) Thus, it is possible that S knows that p and that $not-p$, if x is analyzed by S from an independent framework
- (d) In consequence, given that the principle of noncontradiction is unbreakable, relativism is not possible.

Notwithstanding, this argument also can be presented as begging the question, as the same argument introduces at the same time a neutral criterion of rationality and a criterion of the impossibility of breaking the principle of noncontradiction. The previous argument tries to demonstrate that relativism is not possible or that the relativist position, at least, is found to be unjustified in such a way that there would not be any possible world in which p and $not-p$ are assessed as true – always assuming an absolute principle that does not depend on a

specific framework. However, if one accepts epistemological pluralism, it can be expected that there be a culture that does violate the principle of noncontradiction, sheltered in its own epistemic framework.

Recently, Bland has suggested that it is not necessary to respond to the criterion problem with the objective of resisting epistemic relativism, as it is always possible to attack the idea that all epistemic frameworks have the same value, establishing the superiority of one or more epistemic frameworks.¹⁴ This can be achieved via the revision of that which they have in common, focusing in how the criteria-concerning standards depend on one another, as much as for their justification as for their application. Of course, it is different to justify a standard than to apply a criterion. As Alston has observed, the normative generalizations only are applied to subjects that can govern their conduct with respect to these standards; small children and animals lack this capacity and both acquire an elemental level of knowledge.¹⁵ Therefore, there is an environment of application of the standard that is not generalized. The same occurs with the difference between criteria and meta-criteria. The first are generalized by the second, while the second are applied. There is an important distinction between an empiric explication about the genesis of the attributions of knowledge and the application of the standards that must be satisfied by beliefs in order to attribute knowledge.

Take the anthropologic description developed by Evans-Pritchard of the Zande community as a sample of an epistemic framework diametrically opposite to that of Western culture.¹⁶ The Azande believe that some men are witch-doctors and that they can, through a psychic act, do harm. Witchcraft consists of an inherited substance in the bodies of witch-doctors, which is transmitted by unilineal filiation from fathers to sons: all the sons of a witch-doctor are witch-doctors, and all the daughters of a witch are witches, but the sons of witches are not witch-doctors.¹⁷ Of course, this reasoning defies the most rooted logical

¹⁴ See Steven Bland, "Scepticism, Relativism, and the Structure of Epistemic Frameworks," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part A*, 44, 4 (2013): 539-544.

¹⁵ See William Alston, "What's Wrong With Immediate Knowledge?" *Synthese* 55, 1 (1983): 73-95.

¹⁶ Edward Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).

¹⁷ According to Richard Jennings, "Zande Logic and Western Logic," *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 40, 2 (1989): 275-285, the argument can be expressed in the following way:

- a) All witches, and only witches, have the substance of witchcraft;

intuition in the Western world: the principle of non-contradiction, with which one can more clearly see the begging the question when coherence is introduced as a preponderant factor in any epistemic framework.¹⁸ However, despite the logical inconsistency, the framework of magical beliefs functions in their community, as any inconsistency with a particular phenomenon is articulated with practical life, preserving their cultural identity.

The Azande also believed that all unfortunate events were consequences of an act of witchcraft, placing their trust in the Poison Oracle. This oracle consisted, according to the description of Evans-Pritchard, in that each participant took a fowl, and once everyone who desired to consult with the oracle was seated they decided upon the questions necessary in order to give the most information possible to the seer. Then, the seer would pour rainwater on a leaf placed over a hole and place the poisonous dust on top. After making a paste, the seer would put part of the mixture in the beak of the fowl. One of the members would ask the first question and the seer would propose an answer. If the answer was correct, then the fowl would die. Otherwise, another dose of poison would be given to the fowl and another question would be formed, and so on. The characteristic of this method is that, for the natives, the oracle is infallible, since if the fowl does not die it is because some other mysterious power has intervened. That is to say, a sort of ad hoc hypothesis is looked for in order to safeguard their beliefs, but the efficiency of the predictions is never questioned.

However, the Poison Oracle's result is not informative unless it can be bound to regularities (natural or unnatural) and with reliable shared sources which may lead to shared criteria. Besides, Zande history allows us to think that epistemic frameworks, although different, have some criteria in common that allow their interpretation and assessment. For example, the Holy Scripture is revealed to the theologians by reliable sources – such as perception and memory –

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- b) The substance of witchcraft is inherited by the children of the same sex of the witch-doctor/witch;
 - c) The Zande clan is a group of people biologically related between themselves by means of the male lineage;
 - d) The man *A* of clan *C* is a witch-doctor;
 - e) All of the men, in clan *C*, are witch-doctors.

¹⁸ Triplett questioned that there is a radical difference between the Azande's way of reasoning and that of a Western man, since the logical inconsistencies, like those of the Azande, are common in the natural language of any Western man (In: Timm Triplett, "Azande Logic versus Western Logic?" *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 39 (1988): 361-366). See also: Steven French, "Partial Structures and the Logic of Azande," *Principia: An International Journal of Epistemology* 15, 1 (2011): 77-105.

that are shared even by those who do not believe in the Holy Scriptures. Because both sources remain stable in time, it is possible to be Christian or not. In other words, the revelation of the oracles – as occurs in the revelation of the Scriptures – are reliable only while perception, memory, and inductive reasoning are reliable. Therefore, the use of these empiric methods undermines the oracular practices and the revelations of the Holy Scriptures. Both the Azande and the theologians cooperate implicitly with reliable sources, although they may wish to safeguard unreliable epistemic criteria with ad hoc hypotheses.

Reliability is a meta-epistemological principle that is the product of the functioning of norms, and it is not another norm. For example, perception can be a reliable source in determined contexts, in which case it functions as a standard for the attribution of knowledge. Reliability is not a standard of knowledge, but rather is needed by perception in order to constitute this standard. Although the sources of knowledge may be different in the Zande case and in Western culture, both epistemic frameworks need their respective sources to be reliable. Therefore, although distinct criteria are applied, the reliability in one case and the other remains stable. What's more, one can believe that a determined process is reliable without having an adequate reason and still not violate any intellectual obligation – the criterion that sustain said reliability would be put in doubt. Thus, the criteria-concerning standards are produced in a determined context without this altering the fact that they are reliable, even considering that it is a mistake to think of the disagreements between Western culture and that of the Azande in terms of a neutral arbitration.

Although the application of any criterion implies that it can fail, since there can be another more important or more basic criterion that defeats it, the connection with other criteria will continue to be successful. This is because criteria cannot fail holistically. An epistemic framework cannot be abandoned in a general way, but rather the frameworks change through their connection with other epistemic frameworks beginning with their shared criteria. Suppose there is a conversation between a Western farmer and a member of the Zande community that wants to explain the cause of the bad harvest that year. The farmer will affirm that it is due to meteorological causes and that these causes will be related to empiric observations. The Azande can also think in meteorological causes – although they lack the explicit concept of “causality” – but they will relate them to the substance of witchcraft. However, both will agree that the reliability of perception – the presence of the drought – gives place to an explanation. This starting point makes the disagreement between both cultures and both epistemic frameworks possible. Along these lines, the reliability of perception serves as a

shared criterion that bridges the cultural gap between a Zande and a Western farmer. Accordingly, from a particularistic relativism point of view it could be said that the instances of knowledge are equally valid in both cases and that, from a methodist relativism perspective, both criteria are valid depending on the epistemic framework.

It could also be argued that if there were a set of privileged criteria within a hierarchy, then we would be facing some sort of criteriologic foundationalism. Classic foundationalism grants a privileged status to a group of basic beliefs, on which other beliefs support themselves in order to attribute to these first beliefs the character of knowledge, leaving the circumstances in the background. Relativism does not necessarily reject this conception, but rather states that it can be sustained with the exception that the beliefs be basic from the point of view of a determined epistemic framework. It can match distinct basic beliefs to another framework. The same occurs with reliability: a belief is reliable only within a determined epistemic framework. In this way, it is important to differentiate relativism in the attribution of knowledge from metaphysic relativism. The first is centered not only on the role of the context of usage and on the facts of the world that are sentences, but also on the context of assessment. Metaphysic relativism also considers the semantic interpretation as a function of the assessment of truth values, but with the difference that this assessment is nothing more than a description, in part, of possible worlds. As there are no worlds more truthful than others, the same facts that determine the functional values are relative and not absolute.¹⁹

To privilege the context of usage allows that one put himself in another's position, although they may be very different. But although one can place himself in another's position, this is always done from a context of assessment. In this context the criteria of their framework are applied, proposing a determined interpretation – as Pritchard does when he describes the Zande culture. And, again, this is possible because two apparently distinct epistemic frameworks have shared criteria, although these criteria may occupy a distinct place in each framework – and not because there are possible worlds that act as references. The sentence “*S* knows that *p*” is an invitation to consider the facts in a certain way, since it represents how things are for who expresses the sentence. On saying that *S* knows, one finds themselves invited to think, what is it to know something, in such a way that *S* counts as someone who knows. If the invitation is accepted – if the criteria are cooperated with and the conversation takes place –, standards of

¹⁹ *Cfr.*, Isidora Stojanovic, “The Scope and the Subtleties of the Contextualism / Literalism / Relativism Debate,” *Language and Linguistics Compass* 2, 6 (2008): 1171-1188.

knowledge are established that, for the purpose of the conversation, are correct. In this way, following Richard, an affirmation can be both an invitation to conceptualize things in a certain way, and a representation of how things are.²⁰ On lacking an image of the affirmation on which objections to established norms or standards rest, the idea can be installed in *S* that there is only one notion of “to know that *p*,” although the extension can be determined by diverse criteria in distinct epistemic frameworks.

Finally, returning to the difference between a farmer from a Western culture and the Azande culture, both can dialogue and realize inter-contextual judgments because both epistemic frameworks share some criteria, although both are capable of imposing different extensions (and therefore intentions) on sentences with the form “*S* knows that *p*.” The attributions of knowledge are displaced in order to form sentences in which they are correctly used, as long as they cooperate and do not resist the application of the criterion.

4. Conclusion

In this paper we have presented the problem of the criterion as a meta-epistemological problem that does not require a definitive answer. Considered in the contextual reach of the attributions of knowledge, methodism or particularism can be applied in order to assess attributions of knowledge in distinct ways, depending on the context. Both options are bound to the processes that are established through a meta-criterion with which they cooperate – it is accepted as an assumption. Thus, the cooperation that is necessary for there to be negotiation between both parts and disagreement.

Firstly, the notion of “*S* knows that *p*” with its respective variants is bound to accommodation of different frameworks. Epistemic attributions in different contexts (or in different subjects that use such expressions to frame their thoughts for themselves), have as a result that the uses of “*S* knows that *p*” in different speakers can have different truth values, as in the case of the creationist and the evolutionist. But any of these speakers (or thinkers) can, in principal, recognize agreement or disagreement to their usages of “*S* knows that *p*”.

In addition, the discussion concerning criteria is not merely metalinguistic. In the case of the creationist that chooses to argue with the evolutionist, they do not discuss whether or not one “knows” nor the application of this concept. They discuss the origin of the species that inhabit Earth, from distinct criteria with

²⁰ Mark Richard, “Contextualism and Relativism,” *Philosophical Studies* 119 (2004): 215-242.

which, at least in part, they mutually collaborate – the same can be said of a supposed disagreement between the Western farmer and the Zande farmer.

To conclude, any report made concerning the contradiction between subjects that pertain to distinct epistemic frameworks, finds itself mediated by its assessment criteria. The attributions of knowledge of the reporter also are made in accordance with different epistemic norms and, in this sense, relativism often accommodates itself well to inter-contextual demands²¹.

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