Scepticism, Relativism and a Naturalistic Particularism

1. Introduction

In this paper, I further elaborate an approach to epistemic relativism that I have developed in detail elsewhere. The most notable feature of this approach is that it is based on the epistemic particularist stance of Roderick Chisholm. But where Chisholm employs particularism as the basis for a response to scepticism, I employ particularism as the basis for a naturalistic response to epistemic relativism.

On my analysis, one of the most fundamental arguments for epistemic relativism is an argument that derives from Pyrrhonian scepticism. The Pyrrhonian sceptics employed the regress of justifications to show that it is not possible to justify an epistemic standard (a “criterion”) without circularity or dogmatism. The problem of the regress of justifications is known as the “problem of the criterion”. I have argued that this problem provides the basis for the case for epistemic relativism. I call the argument for epistemic relativism based on the problem of the criterion *the argument from the criterion*.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The paper is structured as follows. In section 2, I contrast epistemic relativism with other forms of relativism and provide a characterization of epistemic relativism. In section 3, I distinguish relativism from epistemological contextualism. In section 4, I contrast epistemic relativism with scepticism, and show how the problem of the criterion serves as the basis for the argument from the criterion. In section 5, I outline Chisholm’s response to the problem of the criterion. In section 6, I present my own response to relativism, which combines particularism, reliabilism and naturalism. In section 7, I respond to a number of objections that may be levelled against my position. Finally, in section 8 I summarize the key points of the paper and point in the direction of future anticipated developments.

1. Epistemic relativism

In this paper, I focus specifically on epistemic relativism rather than other forms of relativism. I take epistemic relativism to be relativism about knowledge or justified belief. Epistemic relativism stands in contrast to other forms of relativism from which it is to be distinguished. Such alternative forms of relativism include relativism about truth, as well as ontological relativism and conceptual relativism. These alternative forms of relativism are not at issue here.

Despite this, a caveat is required to ensure clarity. In what follows, I assume that knowledge is justified true belief (or something akin to it).[[2]](#footnote-2) Given this, knowledge requires truth. It might therefore be thought that epistemic relativism has an intrinsic connection with relativism about truth. For it may seem natural to suppose that relativism about knowledge entails relativism about truth.

However, the issue of relativism about truth may be safely regarded as a separate matter from relativism about knowledge or justified belief. Justification and knowledge may be relative even if truth is not. In order to specify our topic precisely, it is crucial to focus on the justificatory component of knowledge rather than the truth component. Thus, when I raise the question of whether knowledge is relative, it is to be understood that I am speaking about knowledge only to the extent that it involves the component distinct from truth, namely, justification. In the present context, if knowledge is said to be relative, this is because epistemic justification is relative, not truth.[[3]](#footnote-3)

With that qualification in place, let me further explain what epistemic relativism involves. The central claim of the epistemic relativist is that norms of epistemic justification are subject to variation with cultural context or setting. According to epistemic relativism, beliefs are justified on the basis of the epistemic norms which are employed in the specific cultural settings in which the beliefs occur. So, for example, if an Azande tribesman appeals to the poison oracle to justify the belief that the failure of his crops is due to the intervention of a witch, then that belief is justified on the basis of the norm of the poison oracle.[[4]](#footnote-4) To take another example, if a western medical researcher believes that a drug is effective in the prevention of a disease condition because it has been shown to be effective in double blind trials, then that belief is justified on the basis of the norm of double blind trials. In this way, beliefs are justified on the basis of epistemic norms which are employed in the cultural setting in which an epistemic agent is situated.

For the relativist, epistemic norms depend upon local context.[[5]](#footnote-5) They also vary with local context. Contexts include a variety of different kinds of social or cultural setting. A context might be provided by a culture in the way that the Azande belief-system relating to witchcraft provides a set of epistemic norms specific to Azande culture. A context might also involve an intellectual or epistemic milieu, of the kind that might be provided by a Kuhnian paradigm.[[6]](#footnote-6) As will be noted in the next section, the relevant sense of ‘context’ is a broad cultural or epistemic setting rather than a specific practical context of linguistic assertion of the sort that is of interest to contemporary epistemological contextualists.

For the epistemic relativist, it is important that epistemic norms may vary from context to context. But such variation may be granted at the descriptive level without agreeing that relativism follows.[[7]](#footnote-7) The relativist’s claim is not just that the norms actually employed in different cultural contexts may vary. The relativist must also assert that such variable epistemic norms are able to provide justification for beliefs arrived at under their aegis. For the relativist, justification by means of such variable epistemic norms is all that there is to epistemic justification. There are no higher epistemic norms independent of the norms employed in different cultures which have any claim to being absolutely correct. Nor are there any norms which are in any sense objectively correct. There are just the norms which happen to be used within particular cultural settings.

The denial of absolute correctness or objectivity points to the most fundamental feature of epistemic relativism. What is characteristic of the claim of relativism is a certain kind of equivalence claim. Namely, all epistemic norms have equivalent epistemic status. All norms have equal merit. No epistemic norm has any greater justification than any other. The epistemic norms employed in various cultural or epistemic contexts all have equivalent status with respect to epistemic justification.

Given the equal status of epistemic norms, justification of belief varies with the norms that are adopted in local contexts. This means that justification of beliefs is relative to such variable norms. In particular, a belief may be justified by norms employed in one context while its negation is justified by different norms employed in another context. Moreover, a belief that is justified on the basis of norms employed in one context may be justified in another context on the basis of a distinct set of norms employed in the other context. Finally, a belief may be rejected in two different contexts on the basis of different sets of norms employed in the different contexts. Epistemic justification is simply a matter of compliance with locally operative epistemic norms. There is no higher justification than that.[[8]](#footnote-8)

1. Epistemic relativism and epistemological contextualism

In discussing epistemic relativism, I find it natural to employ the term ‘context’ in characterizing the cultural settings to which epistemic justification may be relative. But this can easily lead to trouble. There is the potential for confusion which may be created by my use of this term. My use of the term ‘context’ may suggest that relativism is a form of epistemological contextualism. But I do not think that this is the case.[[9]](#footnote-9)

There are at least three salient differences between epistemic relativism and epistemological contextualism. First, for the epistemic relativist the contexts are broad intellectual and cultural contexts rather than specific contexts of utterance. Second, for the relativist there may be substantive variation in the norms employed in different contexts rather than more or less rigorous application of standards in different contexts. Third, for the epistemic relativist, there are no higher standards than the locally operative norms, whereas for the contextualist the application conditions for the word ‘know’ are sensitive to context. In order to illustrate these three points, I start with a pair of cases presented by Keith DeRose (1992, p. 913).

Case one: a couple are driving home from work on a Friday evening. Both wish to deposit their pay checks in the bank. But it is not urgent that they do so immediately. The wife asks the husband if the bank is open on Saturday morning. The husband was recently in the bank on a Saturday morning when it was open. He replies “I know the bank is open Saturday morning. I was there recently on a Saturday morning.”

Case two: the couple are driving home on Friday evening. Both wish to deposit their pay checks in the bank. This time it is urgent. If their checks do not clear over the weekend, a large check which they have just written will bounce. This time when his wife asks whether the bank is open on Saturday, the husband replies “I’m not sure whether it is open on Saturday. I had better check.”

According to the contextualist, the context has shifted from case one to case two in a way to which use of the word ‘know’ is sensitive. This is in spite of the fact that the evidence available to the husband is exactly the same in both cases, namely, that he had recently been in the bank on a Saturday morning when it was open. The only factor that has changed is that the stakes are higher in the second than in the first case. But precisely because the stakes are higher it seems appropriate to deny that he knows that the bank is open on Saturday morning. For the contextualist, it is appropriate to deny this with respect to the second case even though it remains appropriate to attribute knowledge in the first case.

With this brief sketch of contextualism, I will now further elaborate the three points of apparent contrast between epistemic relativism and epistemological contextualism which I noted previously. The first point of difference relates to what is meant by ‘context’ by the two positions. For the epistemic relativist, a context is a broad cultural or intellectual setting. It could be a historical time period, such as the Enlightenment. It could be a specific culture, e.g. the culture of the Azande. It could be the theoretical framework adopted by a group of scientists, such as a Kuhnian paradigm in physical science. By contrast, for the contextualist, a context is a specific circumstance of linguistic utterance. In the two cases above, the two contexts are a conversation between a man and a wife, in a car, pertaining to the opening hours of a bank. The only difference is how urgent it is to deposit their checks in the bank. These are specific contexts of linguistic assertion. Given this, the first difference to note between epistemic relativism and contextualism relates to the specificity of the context. Whereas the epistemic relativist takes contexts to be broad cultural or intellectual settings, the contextualist treats contexts as specific circumstances of utterance. There is therefore a difference of grain: contexts for the contextualist are more fine-grained than they are for the epistemic relativist. Thus, there might be variation in context (of assertion) in the contextualist sense within a single (cultural) context in the relativist sense.

The second point of difference between the relativist and the contextualist relates to standards.[[10]](#footnote-10) Both the relativist and the contextualist hold that the standards which apply to knowledge or justification vary in a contextual manner. But what is meant by ‘standard’ is not the same for the relativist as for the contextualist. For the epistemic relativist, the claim is that there are different epistemic standards which are employed in different cultural or intellectual contexts to justify belief. So, to continue with the examples employed in the previous section, the Azande use the poison oracle to determine why crops have failed or why a grain shed has collapsed. The poison oracle provides Azande tribesmen with justification for their belief about the cause of such events. Similarly, medical researchers may employ a double blind trial to determine whether a newly discovered drug is effective in preventing a disease. The double blind trial provides the researchers with epistemic justification for their belief in the effectiveness of the drug. For the relativist, these are examples of alternative standards employed in different cultural contexts. No standard is more correct than any other. There is just cultural variation of epistemic standards.

The contextualist does not understand standards in the same way as the relativist. For the contextualist, standards depend upon how high the stakes are in a particular conversational setting. In a low stakes case, low standards are appropriate. In a high stakes case, high standards are appropriate. So, in the bank example, greater certainty is required for knowledge in the second case than in the first case. There is no substantive variation in standards between the cases. In the first case, a lower degree of certainty is appropriate, whereas in the second case a higher degree of certainty is required. The same standards apply in both cases. But they are applied more rigorously in one context than the other.

The third point of contrast is more difficult to specify. Notice that, in DeRose’s two cases, it is a matter of whether we should attribute knowledge to the husband or not. The contextualist draws attention to the contextually sensitive nature of the use of the term ‘know’. It is appropriate to say that the husband knows in one context but not in the other. It appears, therefore, that the contextualist is concerned to offer an answer to a question in the philosophy of language which pertains to the pragmatics and semantics of the word ‘know’. By contrast, the epistemic relativist is not claiming that the meaning of the word ‘know’ is context-sensitive in the way suggested by the contextualist. Rather, the thesis of the epistemic relativist is that what constitutes knowledge in different contexts depends on different sets of standards which are employed by different groups of people in different cultural settings. This is not a difference in the semantics or pragmatics of the word ‘know’. It is a difference in the standards of epistemic justification which gives rise to a difference in what counts as knowledge.[[11]](#footnote-11)

1. Epistemic relativism and Pyrrhonian scepticism

Not only is epistemic relativism to be distinguished from contextualism, the position of epistemic relativism also stands in opposition to the position of scepticism. According to the radical sceptic, we have neither knowledge nor justified belief. According to the moderate sceptic, we should suspend all belief, including beliefs about whether we have knowledge. By contrast with both forms of scepticism, the relativist asserts that we do have knowledge and justified belief. It is just that knowledge and justification are relative to context (e.g. culture, paradigm, etc.).[[12]](#footnote-12)

But while relativism and scepticism pull in opposing directions, there is an important argument for relativism that derives from scepticism. The argument is based on the ancient Pyrrhonian problem of the criterion. I call it *the argument from the criterion*. For purposes of exposition, I find it simplest to present the problem of the criterion in the form of argument that is usually known as “Agrippa’s trilemma”.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The problem of the criterion may be introduced by reflecting upon how one justifies an ordinary belief, for example a belief about something that one perceives with immediate sense perception. It is natural to suppose that such a belief is to be justified on the basis of such immediate experience. The question might then be posed why one is justified in believing something that is based on immediate sense experience. In reply, one might appeal to an epistemic norm or principle to the effect that in normal circumstances beliefs formed on the basis of immediate sense experience are reliable. But the question would then arise of how such a norm or principle is itself to be justified. Such a process of providing a justification for a belief illustrates the structure of justification which is exploited by Agrippa’s trilemma.

An epistemic norm or principle is what the Pyrrhonian sceptic called a “criterion”. In effect, the question posed by the Pyrrhonian is how such a criterion is itself to be justified. Faced with the request to justify a criterion, it would be possible to appeal to some other higher order criterion on the basis of which the initial criterion may be justified. But such an appeal to a further criterion will lead to an infinite regress since the further criterion must also be justified. To avoid the regress, at some point in the chain of justification one might appeal to the original criterion. But if appeal is made to the original criterion, then this would be to argue in a circle, which fails to provide the original criterion with an appropriate justification. The only apparent alternative is simply to adopt the criterion on a dogmatic basis without providing any further justification for it. But if a criterion is adopted on a dogmatic basis, this is just to say that it is adopted without justification. The trilemma is simply that a choice must be made between three unpalatable options, an infinite regress of justifications, circularity, or dogmatic adoption of a criterion without justification.[[14]](#footnote-14)

In light of the trilemma, it is impossible to provide any acceptable justification for the original criterion. Given this, there is no apparent way to provide any belief with a justification, since no belief may receive appropriate epistemic justification from a criterion. But rather than draw the extreme conclusion that both justification and knowledge are impossible, the Pyrrhonian sceptic is led to the suspension of belief. Unlike the radical sceptic who denies all knowledge, the Pyrrhonian withholds judgement on all questions, including the question of knowledge.[[15]](#footnote-15)

This is where the relativist and the sceptic part company. Where the sceptic suspends judgement, the relativist draws the conclusion that all epistemic norms have equal status. The problem of the criterion shows that no epistemic norm may be provided with a justification. It follows from this that no epistemic norm may have a greater level of justification than any other epistemic norm that may be proposed. Thus, instead of being a rationally based decision, the adoption of an epistemic norm must be an unjustified decision. Such a decision may be based on an irrational leap of faith, a subjective personal commitment or an arbitrary convention. But it cannot be based on an appeal to rational grounds which show the norm to be more highly justified than an alternative norm. All norms are equally lacking in justification, hence all norms have equal epistemic status. Given this, epistemic justification can at most consist in justification of belief on the basis of norms which happen to have been adopted in some context. The norms adopted in one context justify beliefs formed in that context, while norms adopted in another context justify beliefs formed in that context. Justification is simply a matter of conformity with the norms that operate in specific local contexts. There is no higher form of justification than that. This, in summary form, is the argument from the criterion.[[16]](#footnote-16), [[17]](#footnote-17)

5. Chisholm on the problem of the criterion

The approach that I propose to epistemic relativism takes its departure from the response to the problem of the criterion proposed by Roderick Chisholm in *The Problem of the Criterion* (1973). Chisholm poses the problem in terms of two pairs of epistemological questions. He then considers three opposing responses to the questions: the responses of the sceptic, the methodist and the particularist.

Here are the two pairs of questions which Chisholm poses:

(A) ‘*What* do we know? What is the *extent* of our knowledge?’

(B) ‘How are we to decide *whether* we know? What are the *criteria* of knowledge?’

Chisholm (1973) p. 12

The first pair of questions relates to what it is that we know. The issue divides into two parts. The first part is the question of what particular items of knowledge we possess. The second is the question of the scope of our knowledge or of how far our knowledge extends. The second pair of questions relates to how we determine whether we know something. At issue in the second pair of questions is the nature of the criteria or norms which we employ in order to determine whether we know something.

The two pairs of questions are interconnected. On the one hand, if we did know what items of knowledge we possess, then we would be able to use this knowledge to identify criteria of knowledge. Starting off with what we know, we would be able to inspect particular cases of knowledge. On that basis, we would be able to identify features of the items of knowledge which are distinctive of knowledge. On the other hand, if we were already in possession of criteria of knowledge, this would permit us to determine the extent of our knowledge. For we would be able to employ criteria of knowledge to identify instances of knowledge. Given criteria of knowledge, we would be able to determine what we know.

In Chisholm’s view, the sceptic exploits the interconnection between the pairs of questions. For the sceptic, the two pairs of questions presuppose each other in a way that makes it impossible to answer either. We are unable to respond to the question of what we know without having already responded to the question about criteria. We could not know what it is that we know if we did not possess criteria which would enable us to identify cases of knowledge. Conversely, we cannot respond to the question about the criteria of knowledge if we do not already know what we know. For, unless we already knew how to identify items of knowledge, we would be unable to determine whether what the criteria pick out are genuine items of knowledge. Because we cannot answer one pair of questions without previously having answered the other, we are unable to respond to either pair of questions. So we do not know what we know and we are unable to decide in any specific case whether we know something. This form of the problem of the criterion is known as the ‘diallelus’ or the wheel in recognition of the way in which the answer to one pair of questions presupposes an answer to the other pair.

Is there any way to get off of the wheel? Can we break into the circle? Chisholm distinguishes between two strategies. The first strategy is to start with an answer to the question about the criteria of knowledge. If we begin by answering the question of the criteria of knowledge, we may subsequently turn to the question of what it is that we know. Chisholm proposes to call philosophers who adopt this strategy “methodists”, since they approach the matter on the basis of a view about the methods to be employed in the identification of items of knowledge (1973, p. 15). For methodists, we first define criteria of knowledge and then we use the criteria to determine what we know. As examples, Chisholm cites Locke and Hume, who employed their empiricist epistemology as a means of determining what we know. But how, Chisholm asks, can we decide on criteria before we know what we know (1973, p. 17)? If we adopt a criterion without consideration of what we know, there are no constraints on the criterion. The choice of criterion must therefore be arbitrary. Because of this Chisholm rejects the methodist response.

The second strategy is that of the “particularist”. Chisholm thinks that the particularist response is the “most reasonable” of the three responses to the problem of the criterion (1973, p. 21). By contrast with the methodist, the particularist proposes that we begin with the question of what we know before turning to the question of the criteria. The strategy is therefore to break into the circle on the basis of what we know. In effect, the particularist takes there to be a great variety of things that we uncontroversially know to be true (cf. Chisholm 1973, p. 22). The fact that we know these things has a certain kind of priority over the question of how we know them. The priority consists in this: that the development of criteria of knowledge must be based on inspection of particular cases of knowledge which are identified prior to the development of the criteria. We should not begin by devising epistemic criteria before we have identified items of knowledge to which those criteria are to be applied. That is to get the order of epistemological inquiry backwards.

Chisholm cites Thomas Reid’s response to Humean scepticism as an example of a particularist approach. But his most striking example of a particularist is that of G. E. Moore. Chisholm imagines Moore raising his hand while speaking as follows:

‘I know very well that this is a hand, and so do you. If you come across some philosophical theory that implies that you and I cannot know that this is a hand, then so much the worse for the theory’. (1973, p. 21)

Though this Moore-style remark is rather compressed, we may detect in it two familiar Moorean themes. First, against the external world sceptic, Moore points out that we have direct perceptual evidence for the existence of quite specific external things. (Moreover, as Moore notes, it is a simple matter to provide the same kind of evidence for numerous other external things.) Second, any argument against the existence of such external things must be based on assumptions that are far less certain than the simple fact that we know that we are perceptually presented with particular things in just the way that we are perceptually presented with our own hands. Thus, as Chisholm’s reference to Moore indicates, the particularist embraces the epistemology of common sense, at least with respect to ordinary everyday observable entities.

As understood by Chisholm, the particularist employs the response to the question of what we know as the basis for a response to the question of how we know. In order to determine how it is that we know, the particularist suggests that we commence with an examination of particular cases of knowledge. As a result of such examination, we may identify epistemically distinctive features of these cases. On this basis, “we generalize and formulate criteria of goodness – criteria telling us what it is for a belief to be epistemologically respectable” (1973, p. 24). Chisholm’s particularist response to the sceptical diallelus is therefore that we may answer the question of what we know before we answer the question of the criteria. This is how to break into the sceptical circle.

But, of course, there is a problem. There is a problem with simply *starting* with what we know. How can we start with what we know without first establishing that we know something? To start with knowledge simply assumes that we do have knowledge. As a result, the question is begged against the sceptic.

This is something to which Chisholm readily admits. He writes as follows:

What few philosophers have had the courage to recognize is this: we can deal with the problem only by begging the question. It seems to me that, if we do recognize this fact, as we should, then it is unseemly for us to try to pretend that it isn’t so. (1973, p. 37)

No doubt, some will find Chisholm’s admission that we must beg the question rather disappointing. But, from a naturalistic perspective, the admission should not be the occasion for any great concern. The naturalist regards the sceptic’s attempt to impose standards that are higher than those of science or common sense to be mistaken. Given this, it is inevitable that a naturalistic response to the sceptic may appear to beg the question. But, as I will now suggest, such question-begging is entirely acceptable from a naturalistic point of view.

6. A naturalistic particularism

In this section, I present my own response to epistemic relativism. Because the fundamental argument for relativism is based on a sceptical argument, this licenses use of an anti-sceptical strategy against the relativist. Specifically, I suggest that in order to respond to the relativist, we may adopt Chisholm’s epistemic particularism along with his response to the problem of the criterion. Where I depart from Chisholm is in suggesting that we combine a particularist stance with a naturalistic approach to both scepticism and epistemic justification.

This approach takes off from two basic points of overlap between particularism and naturalism. First, in keeping with the particularist, the epistemic naturalist takes us to be in possession of a considerable store of genuine knowledge. Second, like the particularist, the naturalist holds that we may draw on what we know in developing an account of epistemic norms. The first point is most apparent from the way in which the epistemic naturalist typically rejects scepticism. Given the rejection of scepticism, the naturalist assumes that a great deal of what we take to be knowledge in both ordinary life and in scientific inquiry may legitimately be regarded as knowledge. As for the second point, naturalists in the philosophy of science have proposed that an empirical investigation of the actual historical practice of science may be employed to determine the epistemic merits of alternative rules of scientific method which have been either used or proposed in the history of science (e.g. Laudan 1996, pp. 137-8). Moreover, naturalized epistemologists have sought to show that the findings of empirical science may provide the basis for important insight into the mechanisms which underlie reliable belief formation (e.g. Kornblith 1993).

The epistemic naturalist is typically committed to what Kornblith characterizes as a “robust anti-scepticism” (1993, p. 4). In the eyes of an epistemic naturalist, the sceptic is guilty of a basic error. The sceptic’s error is to hold that excessively strict standards must be satisfied in order for us to have either knowledge or justified belief. But, from the point of view of the naturalist, such strict standards are inappropriate. There are no higher standards than those employed in the course of ordinary commonsense knowledge acquisition, as well as the standards employed by scientists in the conduct of scientific research. Given the naturalist’s endorsement of the standards of common sense and science, the naturalist rejects scepticism as mistaken.

To reject scepticism is to assume that we are at least capable of knowledge. In fact, naturalists typically assume that we are in possession of a great deal of knowledge. Thus, like Chisholm’s particularist, the naturalist takes there to be numerous specific instances in which we have knowledge. As we saw at the close of the previous section, Chisholm explicitly admits that the particularist begs the question against the sceptic. In similar vein, the naturalist may likewise grant that the naturalistic assumption that we possess a great deal of knowledge begs the question against scepticism. But this should not occasion any great concern on the part of the naturalist. For such question-begging against the sceptic is entirely appropriate. After all, the naturalist’s point is precisely that the sceptic is mistaken. As naturalists who adopt particularism, we may simply take ourselves to possess a great deal of knowledge.

In a way that has much in common with the particularist approach described by Chisholm, the naturalist suggests that we may employ empirical knowledge in the evaluation of epistemic norms. To see how this may be done, consider how one might determine the reliability of a proposed epistemic norm. In order to determine whether the norm is reliable, it must be asked whether use of the norm produces knowledge. To show that the norm produces knowledge, one must show that beliefs arrived at on the basis of the norm constitute knowledge. On the assumption that we are able to recognize particular cases of knowledge, especially unproblematic cases of empirical knowledge, this is simply a matter of determining the epistemic status of the beliefs produced as a result of use of the norm.[[18]](#footnote-18) If the norm reliably leads to knowledge on a regular basis, then the norm is justified. If the norm does not lead to knowledge in a reliable way, then it is not justified. In addition, a norm which has greater reliability than another norm (or other norms) has a greater degree of justification than the other norm (or norms). Given this, it is possible not only for some norms to be justified while others are not, but for some norms to be better justified than others. Moreover, in light of our capacity for knowledge, it is possible for us to determine that this is so.

This result is all that is needed in order to meet the challenge of the epistemic relativist. For the relativist, all epistemic norms have equal merit. But, given that some norms may have greater epistemic reliability than others, the relativist claim that all norms have equal merit may be denied. Thus, against the relativist, we simply deny that all epistemic norms have equal merit. Instead, we say that some norms have greater justification than others. For some norms lead to the truth more reliably than others do. Norms which lead to the truth more reliably than others have greater epistemic reliability than the other norms. The fact that some norms are more reliable than others is all that is needed to defeat relativism. There is no need to concede that all norms are on a par epistemically speaking.

7. Objections and replies

Before concluding, I will consider three objections that may be levelled against the naturalistic particularist response to relativism that I have outlined in the previous section.[[19]](#footnote-19) Though the objections raise a number of distinct issues, they all reflect a concern with the suitability of a reliabilist conception of epistemic justification as a response to relativism.

Objection one: The reliability of an epistemic norm does not entail that beliefs warranted by that norm are justified. In order for the beliefs to be justified, they must be based on reasons that are internally available to the agent.

Reply: An objection such as this tends to presume an internalist starting-point against the reliabilist. Still, it may be granted that the objection reflects an intuition that an agent must be aware of the basis of their beliefs in order for their beliefs to be justified. This intuition is elicited, for example, by Keith Lehrer’s well-known example of Mr Truetemp, who unknowingly possesses a capacity to reliably detect the temperature due to a device implanted in his brain of which he is completely unaware (Lehrer 1990, pp. 163-4).

Those of a reliabilist persuasion have a range of strategies at their disposal in responding to this type of objection. One option is simply to bite the bullet. It may be denied that reasons for belief must be internally available to an agent for beliefs to be justified. Reliable belief-formation suffices for justification. Another option is to introduce a requirement to the effect that a reliable belief-forming process not conflict with some other reliable belief-forming process (see, for example, Goldman 1992, p. 123). A further option is to require that a process of reliable belief-formation be accompanied by the exercise of a capacity for reflection or perhaps of a cognitive virtue.

My own inclination is to hold that reliability is a necessary condition for justified belief, but to allow that in some cases the grounds for belief must be internally available to the agent. It is plausible that animals and young children may be justified in holding reliably formed beliefs without being able to articulate a reason for such belief. Equally, it seems plausible that on at least some occasions an adult may be justified in holding a reliably produced belief (e.g. a perceptual belief) though they are unable to provide a reason for the belief. But, while there may be some cases where a reliably formed belief is justified even though the agent is unable to provide a reason for the belief, at the same time there seem to be cases in which the agent must be able to provide a reason. For example, when a scientist adopts a hypothesis on the basis of an explicitly endorsed methodological consideration (e.g. the use of double blind tests), it would seem necessary that the scientist be able to explain the methodological considerations which favour the hypothesis. So, while I do not agree that a reason must be internally available to an agent in all cases of justified belief, I am prepared to grant that there are cases in which more is required than the mere reliability of an epistemic norm.

Objection two: The naturalistic response to the relativist begs the question on behalf of norms employed in our scientific culture. If we reject the norms employed by another culture (e.g. the Azande poison oracle) because they fail to be reliable, then we presuppose the correctness of our own norms in rejecting the norms of the other culture.

Reply: I have dealt with this issue in detail elsewhere (see my 2010, section 5.2), so I will be brief. The objection fails to take into account an important practical aspect of the use to which we put epistemic norms. We value true belief at least in part because it assists in the conduct of our daily affairs and promotes survival.[[20]](#footnote-20) The value which we place on truth has implications for the justificatory status of epistemic norms. Norms that conduce to truth convey epistemic justification, whereas norms which fail to yield truth provide no justification.

This means that the empirical evaluation of the reliability of an epistemic norm is not a parochial form of epistemic appraisal that reflects the local values of our scientific culture. The requirement that an epistemic norm be reliable is a requirement that stems from a crucial purpose for which epistemic norms are employed. Thus, if a norm employed by another culture is shown empirically to be unreliable, this is not something that may simply be disregarded as reflecting the parochial values of our scientific culture. Rather, evidence that a norm fails to be reliable provides the members of a culture (whether ours or some other) with good reason to reject that norm.

The Azande poison oracle is a case in point. In his discussion of the Azande, Evans-Pritchard emphasizes the practical applications to which the Azande put the poison oracle. Though the Azande employ the oracle in an attempt to determine the presence of witchcraft activity, they also consult the oracle in relation to a wide range of practical matters such as the failure of crops and planning hunting expeditions, as well as matters of health such as disease and child-birth. Because of the material needs of the Azande, and the role of the oracle in meeting these needs, the reliability of the poison oracle is an issue of vital importance to them. Thus, given the role the oracle plays in their way of life, empirical evidence relating to its reliability can hardly be dismissed as irrelevant to their employment of the oracle.

Objection three: As characterized here, epistemic relativism is a form of epistemological internalism. Thus, to argue against relativism on the basis of an externalist position is to argue at cross-purposes to the relativist. Such an argument must therefore prove dialectically ineffective against the relativist.

Reply: It is no part of the present project to portray epistemic relativism as a form of internalist epistemology. If, as a result of my analysis of epistemic relativism, it turns out that it is best construed as an internalist position, then this is in itself no small gain. It would be an important result if it could be shown that epistemic relativism is an essentially internalist position. But I have not attempted to establish that result here.

However, if we do assume epistemic relativism to be an internalist position, then this opens the relativist position to a further level of criticism. To the extent that the internalist takes justification to be a matter of reasons accessible to an agent that are completely independent of the reliability of belief-formation, then the internalist is subject to the charge of overlooking the crucial role of truth-conduciveness in epistemic justification. The use of an epistemic norm which has no tendency to lead to truth, or of one which systematically generates falsehoods, is not a procedure capable of providing genuine epistemic warrant. In short, if the relativist endorses such an extreme form of internalism, then the relativist view conflicts with a key epistemological assumption that a procedure which provides epistemic justification must be one which has some tendency to yield truth.

It is possible that an internalist-minded relativist may insist that epistemic justification has absolutely nothing to do with a reliable tendency toward truth. Against such an internalist-relativist, an appeal to the reliability of epistemic norms will have little persuasive power. At this point, two remarks are in order. First, ability to persuade an opponent who rejects one’s basic assumptions can hardly be deemed a condition of adequacy for a position. Thus, being dialectically ineffective against a diehard internalist-relativist is not a fatal objection to the present position. Second, it is important to bear in mind the terms of the debate. The objective nature of truth is not in question because we are focused exclusively on epistemic relativism rather than on relativism about truth. Given this, the epistemic relativist has little scope for defence of an account of justification on which a norm that conveys epistemic justification need have no tendency whatsoever to conduce to truth. To hold that a belief may be justified by an epistemic norm, and yet that the norm need have no connection with the truth, is to lose sight of the purpose of epistemic justification.[[21]](#footnote-21)

8. Conclusion

In this paper, I have sought to provide further detail for an approach to epistemic relativism that I have articulated in earlier work. The key to the approach is the claim that epistemic relativism is based on an argument that derives from the Pyrrhonian problem of the criterion. Given this, it is appropriate to respond to the relativist on the basis of a response to scepticism. The anti-sceptical approach on which I base this response is Chisholm’s epistemic particularism. This much, I had already proposed in earlier work.

Here, however, I have sought to extend the approach in a number of directions. First, I have brought the approach into contact with the topic of epistemological contextualism by noting differences between the sorts of contexts of relevance to contextualism and relativism. Second, I have further articulated the relation between a particularist approach to epistemology and the epistemic naturalist idea that questions pertaining to epistemic normativity may be treated in a broadly empirical manner. Third, I have attempted to strengthen Chisholm’s question-begging response to the sceptic by pointing out that begging the question against the sceptic need not unduly concern the naturalist, given their rejection of the sceptical use of excessively high epistemic standards. Finally, I have dealt with a number of general objections which may be raised against reliabilist and naturalist elements of the position.

In future developments of the position, I plan to further explore the connection between the naturalistic response to scepticism and the contextualist response. It seems to me that the naturalist may well agree with the contextualist that it is appropriate for us to attribute knowledge and justification in ordinary contexts. But where the naturalist parts company with the contextualist relates to the way in which the contextualist allows that knowledge evaporates in sceptical contexts. From a naturalistic point of view, there are no legitimate sceptical contexts in which knowledge evaporates in that way.

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1. In my view, this is the most fundamental argument for epistemic relativism. I do not know how to prove this, so I merely attempt to strongly suggest that this is so. For my strong suggestion to this effect, see my (2012). Some other authors also share my view of the fundamental nature of the argument (e.g. Williams 2007, p. 94). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As is well known, the post-Gettier literature renders this assumption problematic. Still, epistemologists continue to understand knowledge to be something more than mere true belief. For present purposes, it suffices to assume that what is required for knowledge in addition to true belief includes some form of epistemic justification, whether justification is understood in internalist or externalist terms. It may, of course, be necessary to add some further component as well. Myself, I am inclined to interpret the justificatory component in reliabilist terms along the lines of Goldman (1992). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In other words, for present purposes I will assume that truth is not relative. Thus, the question of whether coherent sense may be made of a relativized conception of truth may be put aside as not relevant to the topic under discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. On the Azande poison oracle, see Evans-Pritchard (1976, chapter 8). For discussion of the poison oracle in the context of the present approach to epistemic relativism, see my (2010).

   [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A comment is perhaps in order about my use of the word ‘norm’. I use the word ‘norm’ to refer to what are sometimes called standards of rationality. Philosophers of science who write about theory-choice often speak of rules of theory-choice or criteria of theory-appraisal. Similarly, Kuhn has a list of scientific values (e.g. accuracy, simplicity, consistency) which guide scientists in their choice of theory. I employ the term ‘norm’ as a general term to refer to such standards, rules, criteria or values, to which appeal is made to justify belief or in the appraisal and acceptance of a scientific theory. Such norms are not epistemic aims or goals in the way that truth is an epistemic aim or goal. They are criteria of epistemic appraisal which are employed in the justification of belief. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. My mention of Kuhn may help to further specify the kind of relativist position that I have in mind. Though tendencies toward epistemic relativism are present in such authors as Paul Feyerabend, Richard Rorty and Peter Winch, my primary example of a relativist position is that of T.S. Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Kuhn’s view that the rules of puzzle-solving adequacy vary with paradigm, while there are no higher “extraparadigmatic” standards, seems to me to be a clear case of epistemic relativism. I have elaborated my approach to relativism with respect to Kuhn’s position in *Structure* in my (2013b). It is important to note, of course, that Kuhn moved away from this position in later work. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. As it happens, I endorse the view that at least some aspects of the methodology of science have undergone change in the history of science, and that there may be variation in methodology between areas of the sciences. But I do not regard the admission that method changes to be an admission of relativism. Such pluralism or variationism is consistent with the view that some methods are objectively better than others, which is what I take the relativist to deny. For discussion, see my (2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This sentiment is well expressed by Kuhn when he remarks that “As in political revolutions, so in paradigm choice – there is no standard higher than the assent of the relevant community” (1996, p. 94). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. There is a purely verbal way to avoid the problem. I could avoid using the word ‘context’ and thereby avoid the confusion. Instead I might follow philosophers such as Goldman (2010) and Williams (2007) who speak of “epistemic systems” when they discuss the issue of epistemic relativism. But, while they are perfectly right to speak in this way, my inclination to speak of contexts is meant to reflect the fact that epistemic systems are themselves thought to vary with respect to background circumstances (e.g. historical time period, intellectual milieu, theoretical framework, etc.). ‘Context’ seems to me to be the best general descriptive term for characterizing such circumstances. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. My preferred term is ‘norm’ rather than ‘standard’, but the contextualist speaks of standards. I shall follow this practice for the remainder of this section.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. There is another way to express this point. Patrick Rysiew locates what I take to be the issue of epistemic relativism in terms of the rejection by the relativist of a metaphysical claim about the absoluteness of epistemic standards. By contrast, the contextualist is interested in the “semantics of knowledge-attributing sentences” (Rysiew 2011, pp. 292-3). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Michael Williams treats relativism as a form of scepticism, since it tends to undermine confidence in our own beliefs (2007, p. 96). But, while this may be an appropriate reaction to a claim of relativism, the claim that justification is relative to local standards implies that justification and knowledge exist, albeit in a relativized sense. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. I have distinguished between a number of different forms that the problem of the criterion takes in Pyrrhonian scepticism (see my 2011, section 2). The differences have no substantial relevance in the present context. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. One might attempt to avoid the trilemma by taking some propositions to be self-evident. But, if this is to be more than the dogmatic adoption of a proposition, a reason must be given for holding a proposition to be self-evident. Yet appeal to a reason leads back to the justificatory regress, with the associated choice between circularity and the dogmatic acceptance of the proposition. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. There is some dispute among scholars on how to interpret the Pyrrhonian suspension of belief. According to a standard interpretation, Pyrrhonian sceptics accept appearances but suspend judgement with respect to how things are in reality. See Perrin (2010, chapter 3) for detailed discussion.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. For further elaboration of the argument, see my (2012). Against my way of putting the point, it has been objected that the appropriate response to the problem of the criterion is to say that the norms are unjustified, not that they are equally justified (see Seidel 2013). My response to this is to distinguish between weak and strong justification. According to the relativist, humans may be observed to appeal to a variety of norms to justify their beliefs in a range of different contexts. This is an empirical fact on which relativist and anti-relativist alike may agree. The relativist takes the argument from the criterion to show the norms to be fundamentally unjustified. Here the distinction between weak and strong justification may be employed to reflect the observed practice of appealing to norms to justify beliefs where such norms are not themselves justified. Weak justification is justification of a belief on the basis of a norm whether or not the norm is itself justified. Strong justification occurs when the norm is itself justified. The relativist denies the possibility of strong justification, so that weak justification is the only possible form of justification. For details, see (Sankey 2013a). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Lest it be thought that the relativist position described in this section is a straw man, I refer the reader to my (2011), where I show that the argument from the criterion has been widely employed by influential thinkers in the history and philosophy of science. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. It is worth noting that the assumption that we are able to identify cases of knowledge is one that both the naturalist and the particularist may share. Indeed, it seems to me to be a point of convergence between the naturalist and the particularist, which suggests that the naturalist would do well in general to adopt a particularist stance. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. I am grateful to a referee for raising these issues, thereby giving me an opportunity to address them. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. For simplicity, I mention only the value of true belief rather than knowledge. It is, of course, a complex matter whether knowledge has a value independent of true belief. However, this question may be set aside in the present context. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. An internalist may reply that justification does not require that a norm be reliable but only that it be believed to be reliable. But one may believe that any norm is reliable (e.g. crystal-ball gazing, coin-tossing, etc.). Without a requirement that a norm actually conduce to truth, there is no way to exclude such norms as mistaken. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)