



Scepticism, relativism and the argument from the criterion

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the relationship between epistemic relativism and Pyrrhonian scepticism. It is argued that a fundamental argument for contemporary epistemic relativism derives from the Pyrrhonian problem of the criterion. Pyrrhonian scepticism is compared and contrasted with Cartesian scepticism about the external world and Humean scepticism about induction. Epistemic relativism is characterized as relativism due to the variation of epistemic norms, and is contrasted with other forms of cognitive relativism, such as truth relativism, conceptual relativism and ontological relativism. An argument from the Pyrrhonian problem of the criterion to epistemic relativism is presented, and is contrasted with three other arguments for epistemic relativism. It is argued that the argument from the criterion is the most fundamental argument for epistemic relativism. Finally, it is noted how the argument of the present paper fits with the author's previous suggestion that a particularist response to the Pyrrhonian sceptic may be combined with a naturalistic view of epistemic warrant to meet the challenge of epistemic relativism.

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1. Introduction

Philosophical treatment of relativism stands to gain from reflection on scepticism. Though epistemic relativism and scepticism are distinct doctrines, they rest on common ground. In light of this, I propose an approach to relativism that draws upon a response to the sceptic. This requires consideration of the relationship between relativism and scepticism.

Epistemic relativism and scepticism constitute opposing epistemological tendencies. The epistemic relativist holds that knowledge and justified belief depend upon epistemic norms which vary with cultural or historical context. By contrast, the sceptic either denies that knowledge and justified belief are possible or else suspends judgement with respect to the possibility of knowledge and justified belief. Thus, the relativist allows that we may have knowledge or justified belief while the sceptic either denies this or withholds judgement.

But while epistemic relativism and scepticism represent opposing tendencies, they are not to be treated in isolation from each other. According to the epistemic relativist, there is no objective, context-independent justification for epistemic norms. Epistemic

justification depends upon culturally variant norms, rather than unchanging or objective standards. I wish to show that the rationale for this claim derives ultimately from a sceptical source.

On my analysis, the principal argument for epistemic relativism derives from an argument that has played a central role in the sceptical tradition. This is the argument from circularity and the regress of justifications which is commonly known as the problem of the criterion. As shown by the ancient Pyrrhonian sceptics, the attempt to justify an epistemic norm leads to an infinite regress of justifications which may only be terminated by circular appeal to the original norm itself or by dogmatic adoption of the norm without justification. Because no epistemic norm may be provided with an acceptable justification, no such norm may be better justified than any other. Thus, epistemic norms employed in one community are as well justified as the norms employed in any other community, even if the norms vary between the communities. Justification depends, upon, and varies with, the ultimately unjustified norms which happen to be accepted in particular communities.

In this way, an argument with sceptical lineage may be employed on behalf of epistemic relativism, despite the opposition

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between scepticism and relativism. While this may seem to be a mere curiosity, I wish to show that it has important implications for the treatment of relativism. For, to the extent that epistemic relativism depends upon a sceptical line of argument, anti-sceptical resources may be deployed against the relativist. It will be convenient to have a shorthand way of referring to the argument from the problem of the criterion to epistemic relativism. I will refer to it as *the argument from the criterion*.

I have attempted to motivate this approach to epistemic relativism in two previous publications. In Sankey (2010), I sought to show how an anti-sceptical strategy may be employed against the relativist. I presented a naturalistic response to relativism that draws upon Roderick Chisholm's particularist response to the problem of the criterion. I then sought to establish the relevance of this strategy to contemporary epistemic relativism. In Sankey (2011), I demonstrated the widespread use of arguments that are either identical to or closely analogous to the problem of the criterion in recent discussions of epistemic relativism within the history and philosophy of science.

In this paper, I wish to explore the relationship between scepticism and epistemic relativism in further detail. I wish to argue, or at least to strongly suggest, that the argument from the problem of the criterion to epistemic relativism is one of the primary, perhaps even the most fundamental, arguments for epistemic relativism. Because of this, my proposal to respond to the epistemic relativist on the basis of a response to the problem of the criterion is not a response to one form of epistemic relativism among others. It is a response to epistemic relativism itself.

In Section 2, I provide an overview of epistemological scepticism. I contrast Pyrrhonian scepticism with other forms of scepticism, and present the problem of the criterion. I turn to epistemic relativism in Section 3. I contrast epistemic relativism with other forms of cognitive relativism. I then characterize epistemic relativism due to variation of epistemic norms, and contrast it with other forms of epistemic relativism. In Section 4, I turn to the argument for epistemic relativism. First, I present the argument for epistemic relativism based on the problem of the criterion. Then I consider an alternative argument for epistemic relativism, and suggest that it reduces to the argument from the criterion. In Section 5, I consider two further arguments for epistemic relativism, and suggest that while they are distinct arguments they are less fundamental than the argument from the criterion. Finally, in Section 6, I conclude with a brief sketch of the response to the epistemic relativist that I favour. I also indicate additional issues which remain to be addressed in further development of this position.

2. Scepticism

In this section, I will introduce the problem of the criterion, which is the basis of the sceptical argument that I take to underlie epistemic relativism. But first I will briefly distinguish two well-known varieties of scepticism, before turning to Pyrrhonian scepticism and the problem of the criterion.

2.1. Varieties of scepticism

The best-known form of epistemological scepticism is the scepticism promoted by the hyperbolic doubt which opens Descartes's

Meditations. Descartes considers perceptual error before asking how we know we are not dreaming. He then turns to the radical doubt that arises from the possibility of massive illusion created by an evil demon. In light of the evil demon hypothesis, we may neither know nor justifiably believe that we are embodied subjects who inhabit a world of ordinary things and events. Of course, Descartes does not embrace the scepticism about the external world suggested by the evil demon hypothesis. Instead, he employs the method of doubt as the basis for his positive epistemology of clear and distinct ideas.

The sceptical problem of the external world is an extreme form of the problem of the underdetermination of theory by data (cf. Devitt 1991, p. 62 ff). In the same way that multiple scientific hypotheses may be consistent with a given body of empirical data, our sensory experience equally fits the external world and evil demon scenarios. This is not, however, the form of scepticism that will form the basis of discussion here. I will focus, instead, on the form of scepticism which presents a challenge specifically to the justificatory status of epistemic norms or standards of rationality.¹

A second well-known form of epistemological scepticism is Humean inductive scepticism. As it is usually understood, the problem arises from the question of how to justify inductive inference. Induction cannot be justified on the basis of deductive logic because inductive inference is deductively invalid. Nor may it be justified by appeal to experience. For if one appeals to previous experience of reliable inductive inference in support of induction, this very appeal to previous experience proceeds on an inductive basis. To argue that past use of induction has been successful therefore future use of induction will be successful, is to argue by induction from past success of induction to its future success. To argue in this way is to argue in a circle, since it uses induction to justify induction. The problem of induction is the problem of showing how induction may be justified without circular use of induction itself.

The problem of induction shares a common structure with the form of sceptical argument under consideration here. For one response to the circular justification of induction is to appeal to a higher order, meta-inductive principle, such as the principle of the uniformity of nature or a principle of induction. On such an approach, induction is to be justified by appeal to a meta-inductive principle which licenses use of ordinary inductive inference. But how might such a meta-inductive principle be justified? Appeal might be made to an even higher order, meta-meta-inductive principle in support of the meta-inductive principle. But, if this is done, the attempt to justify induction by appeal to higher order principles gives rise to an infinite regress. The similarity to the problem of the criterion could not be more striking.²

2.2. Pyrrhonian scepticism and the problem of the criterion

I turn now to the form of scepticism which has come down to us from Greek antiquity. Though there is some disagreement among commentators on points of detail, it is customary to distinguish between Academic and Pyrrhonian scepticism. Academic scepticism denies outright that knowledge is possible. In so doing, Academic sceptics incoherently assert that knowledge is known to be impossible. Instead of such an incoherent denial of knowledge, the Pyrrhonian sceptic suspends judgement. The Pyrrhonian withholds belief about whether we have knowledge or are capable of having

¹ This is not to say that the issue of Cartesian scepticism is irrelevant to the response to relativism which I propose. To the contrary, it is relevant. The Moorean response to Cartesian scepticism ("here is one hand and here is another") is a particularist response to the sceptic of the kind that Chisholm proposes. Hence, a Moorean response to the sceptic may play the same role in response to the relativist that I ascribe to Chisholm's approach to the problem of the criterion.

² Of course, advocates of the inductive justification of induction appeal to just such a hierarchy of higher order meta-inductive principles. For discussion, see Skyrms (1986, pp. 30–40).

it.³ In what follows, I have in mind the portrayal of Pyrrhonian scepticism in the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* of Sextus Empiricus (*PH*).

Pyrrhonian sceptics employed a number of argumentative devices, known as Modes, in order to bring about suspension of belief. Many of the Modes turn on an opposition which may obtain between the appearances with which one may be presented in respect of a particular object or situation. For example, one and the same tower may both appear round from a distance and square from close up. Opposition between appearances may arise with respect to human and animal perception, between different human observers, between the senses of a single observer, or even with respect to the same sense in different circumstances as in the case of the tower. By considering oppositions between appearances, one is brought to a situation of equipollence in which the opposing appearances seem equally well-founded. As a result, one suspends judgement about what is in fact the case.

The problem of the criterion arises when one attempts to overcome the impasse created by the opposition between appearances. In the attempt to do so, one might appeal to a criterion on the basis of which it is possible to distinguish correct from incorrect appearances. But how is such a criterion to be identified? In order to identify a criterion, one must determine that it is indeed able to distinguish between correct and incorrect appearances. Thus, the question arises of how to decide that a proposed criterion actually has the capacity to distinguish correct from incorrect experiences.

In effect, this is the question of how to justify a criterion. A number of options are available. First, one might attempt to justify a criterion by appeal to some further criterion, which justifies the original criterion. But what justifies this further criterion? If one appeals to such a further criterion, the attempt to justify the original criterion gives rise to an infinite regress of justifications. If one appeals to the original criterion in support of itself, then the justification proceeds in a circle. And if one adopts the criterion without recourse to any further criterion, then the original criterion is adopted without justification. Thus, it seems impossible to justify any criterion, since the attempt to justify a criterion results in an infinite regress, circularity or unjustified acceptance of the criterion.

This, in summary form, is the problem of the criterion. I have discussed the problem at greater length in Sankey (2011), and will not repeat that discussion here. It is an argument of this form which, in my view, constitutes the foundation for contemporary epistemic relativism.

3. Relativism

The defining characteristic of an epistemological sceptical position is that it rejects positive attribution of knowledge or justified belief. Either the sceptic denies that knowledge or justification is possible or suspends judgement with respect to the possibility of knowledge or justification. By contrast, the epistemic relativist is prepared to ascribe knowledge or justified belief to individuals or groups. We do have knowledge and justified belief. It is just that knowledge and justification are relative to context. They are relative to the standards and norms that are operative in some historically situated locale, culture, paradigm or belief-system.

In Section 2.2, I identified the form of scepticism which is of particular relevance to epistemic relativism. The purpose of Section 3 is to specify the form of epistemic relativism that is under consideration here. I wish to focus upon the form of epistemic relativism that arises due to the variation of epistemic norms or standards.

But before I turn to such relativism, I will first distinguish a number of other forms of relativism that are not at issue here. My discussion of these forms of relativism will be more extensive than may be strictly necessary for present purposes. However, it is an important part of the project to have a clear understanding of where epistemic relativism stands in relation to other forms of relativism.

3.1. Varieties of relativism

Relativism is a many-splendoured thing. At the risk of oversimplification, I will distinguish between three forms of cognitive relativism, namely truth relativism, conceptual relativism and ontological relativism. By ‘cognitive relativism’, I intend to speak of varieties of relativism which involve cognitive relations to reality, rather than varieties of relativism which involve morality, aesthetics or cultural practices.⁴ While it may be possible to define a form of epistemic relativism on the basis of other kinds of cognitive relativism, these fall outside the scope of this paper. Here I am interested only in epistemic relativism due to variation of epistemic norms.

Perhaps the best known form of cognitive relativism is relativism with respect to truth. According to truth relativism, the truth of our beliefs and assertions depends upon the context in which our beliefs and assertions are situated. This is not a claim about obviously contextual forms of discourse or thought, such as indexical claims or beliefs (e.g. “I am here now”). Truth relativism is the claim that a non-indexical claim, e.g. an empirical claim about a contingent matter of fact, is true relative to the context within which the claim is endorsed or asserted. Here context is not to be construed as the immediate physical environment of the speaker, but the broader cultural or historical setting within which the speaker is situated.

To illustrate, suppose that in a particular cultural and historical setting, people once believed that the earth was flat. According to the truth relativist, the claim that the earth is flat was true for those people in that context. Equally, for those of us who do not believe that the earth is flat, the claim that it is not flat is true for us in the setting in which we find ourselves. The truth relativist claim is not just that those who believed the earth to be flat accepted the claim ‘The earth is flat’ as true, whereas those of us who deny that it is flat hold the same claim to be false. It is not just a claim about what is believed to be the case. It is a claim about what is actually true. According to the truth relativist, what is actually true depends upon the context in which a claim is taken to be true.

Truth relativism has been widely dismissed as incoherent since Plato’s treatment of Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*. This is for a number of reasons. For one thing, the assertion that truth is relative implies that mutually contradictory claims may be true. Without explanation of how contradictory claims may be true, it is unclear that sense may be made of the doctrine. For another thing, truth relativism itself appears to be a non-relativistic position. Truth relativism asserts the general claim that truth is relative to context. But if the claim that truth is relative applies across the board, then that very claim is itself asserted to be true in a non-relativistic sense. This conflicts with the claim that truth is relative, which therefore undermines itself. Yet while the intelligibility of truth relativism seems doubtful, it may be possible to defend a relativistic conception of truth in combination with other forms of cognitive relativism, such as conceptual and ontological relativism.

³ For this way of drawing the contrast between Academic and Pyrrhonian scepticism, see Popkin (1979, pp. xiii–xvi).

⁴ Here I employ the taxonomy of cognitive relativist positions outlined in (Sankey 1997, chap. 1). However, rather than speak separately of rationality relativism and epistemological relativism, as I did there, I now speak of epistemic relativism. I take this to apply to relativism both with respect to epistemic justification and with respect to knowledge.

According to the conceptual relativist, there may be alternative conceptual schemes.⁵ Either there is no fact of the matter about the way that the world is structured, or else there is but it is unknowable. It is possible to divide the world up into a number of different, non-identical, but equally adequate systems of categories. These alternative categorial systems may in turn be represented using alternative systems of concepts. In the same way that there is no single correct way to classify the world, there is no uniquely correct conceptual system. There is a multitude of possible ways to classify the world, which is reflected in the multiplicity of possible conceptual schemes.

Alternative conceptual systems may be expressed by means of different vocabulary, between which translation may fail either in whole or in part. Assuming that there may be genuinely alternative conceptual schemes, the possibility arises of truth relative to conceptual scheme. Claims which may be articulated using the conceptual and linguistic resources of a given scheme may be true within the context of that scheme. Claims that are true within one conceptual scheme may fail to be translatable by semantically equivalent expressions into the vocabulary of an alternative conceptual scheme. So what truths it is possible to assert may vary from one conceptual scheme to another. But where there is sufficient semantic overlap for claims of alternative schemes to be incompatible with each other, the problem of truth relativism remains. For where there is conflict between the claims of alternative schemes, the conflicting claims cannot both be true, despite variation in conceptual scheme.

At this point, the truth relativist may seek further support from ontological relativism. According to the ontological relativist, not only are there alternative conceptual schemes, but the way the world is depends upon conceptual scheme. The conceptual scheme that one adopts provides the conceptual basis for one's experience of the world. This is not the idealist doctrine that reality, the "world-in-itself", depends upon and varies with conceptual scheme. Rather, the position I have in mind is a neo-Kantian view, according to which the "phenomenal world", the world that humans experience through the lens of their conceptual scheme, depends upon and is subject to variation with conceptual scheme.⁶

If the way that the world of our experience is depends upon the conceptual scheme that we adopt, then it may be possible for truth to vary with conceptual scheme. To return to the example of the flat earth, the claim that the earth is flat may be true within the phenomenal world of the conceptual scheme within which that claim is asserted. At the same time, that claim is not true within the world of our conceptual scheme. So the truth of the claim that the earth is flat depends upon, and varies with, the world defined by the conceptual scheme adopted in a particular cultural or historical context.

In this way, it is possible to combine the view that truth is relative with conceptual and ontological relativism. But, while this may provide a way to make sense of the idea of relative truth, the resulting position has little to recommend it. In the first place, there is no reason to agree that there may be alternative, equally

correct conceptual schemes, since there is no reason to suppose that the world is fundamentally lacking in categorial structure or that its categorial structure may not be known. Secondly, it is possible to use empirical means to evaluate alternative conceptual schemes with respect to the adequacy of the categories they employ.⁷ In the third place, the idea that phenomenal worlds vary with conceptual scheme runs into direct conflict with the commonsense view that we inhabit an independently existing world that does not change as our beliefs about the world undergo change. But common sense must surely take precedence when confronted with such an opposing standpoint.

As previously indicated, it may be possible to define a form of epistemic relativism within the context of other forms of cognitive relativism. For example, one might argue that knowledge and justification vary from one conceptual scheme to another, or that they vary with the phenomenal worlds associated with alternative conceptual schemes. But while I do not deny that this is possible, the form of relativism at issue here is the form of epistemic relativism that depends upon the variation of epistemic norms, whether or not it is combined with other forms of cognitive relativism. In what follows, I shall focus on that form of epistemic relativism to the exclusion of other forms of cognitive relativism.

3.2. *Epistemic relativism and epistemic norms*

In Section 3.1, I have discussed forms of cognitive relativism that are not at issue here. In this section, I will specify more precisely the form of epistemic relativism that is at issue.

As already indicated, the form of epistemic relativism under scrutiny here is epistemic relativism which arises due to the variation of epistemic norms. According to such relativism, the norms or standards of epistemic justification vary with context, where a context may be a setting such as a local culture, historical time period, paradigm or belief system. There is no single, fixed set of epistemic norms. Nor is there any set of uniquely correct meta-level norms which may be used to decide between conflicting sets of norms. There are just the norms adopted in various local settings.

Such contextually variant epistemic norms provide justification for those situated in a context in which the norms apply. Given the variation of norms, the same belief may be adopted on the basis of different norms by people who adopt opposing sets of norms. Conversely, those who adopt opposing norms may disagree on a rational basis with respect to particular beliefs. A belief may be justified on the basis of one set of norms, while its negation is justified on the basis of a competing set of norms. In both agreement and disagreement, beliefs may derive the same degree of justification on the basis of opposing sets of norms.

To illustrate the form of epistemic relativism that I have in mind, I will now present a relativistic interpretation of the account of scientific theory-choice proposed by T. S. Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. According to Kuhn, normal scientific research is governed by a paradigm which provides a set of rules on the basis of which scientists assess solutions proposed to the puzzles of

⁵ Of course, it is controversial to assert that there may be alternative conceptual schemes. As is well-known, the very intelligibility of the idea of an alternative conceptual scheme has been subjected to powerful critique at the hands of Donald Davidson (1984). I have sought to defend more limited forms of conceptual relativism against Davidson's objections (see Sankey 1990). But I suspect that Davidson's attack on full-blown conceptual relativism suffers from an implicit verificationism that begs the question against a minimal form of realism.

⁶ The ontological relativist position I have in mind here is best represented by T. S. Kuhn's idea that the world of scientists depends upon and varies with paradigm. The neo-Kantian interpretation is found in a number of authors, but has been most influentially developed by Hoyningen-Huene (1993). I follow his use in employing the expressions 'phenomenal world' and 'world-in-itself' to present the neo-Kantian version of Kuhn's world change thesis. I do not myself regard the neo-Kantian position as coherent (for my criticism of the position, see Sankey 2009, pp. 200–201). But it does provide a way of attempting to articulate the ontological relativist position.

⁷ There is a tendency to exaggerate the difficulty involved in the appraisal of conceptual schemes. Some authors seem to think that it requires us to remove ourselves entirely from our conceptual apparatus and perceive the world directly, unobstructed by conceptual scheme. But no such direct access to non-conceptual reality is required. In the same way that one may evaluate a scientific theory on the basis of empirical tests of its consequences, so, too, may one evaluate a conceptual scheme by determining whether the theoretical structure of a conceptual system passes empirical muster. There was no need for 18th century chemists to step outside their conceptual scheme to appreciate that the empirical difficulties facing phlogistic chemistry made it difficult to sustain in the face of the challenge of Lavoisier's oxygen theory.

normal science. Such rules of puzzle-solution are internal to paradigm. In the transition between competing paradigms, the rules of the original paradigm give way to a new set of rules provided by the successor paradigm. Apart from the paradigm-based rules of normal science, there are no higher order rules to which appeal may be made in order to decide between the alternative rules of competing paradigms. As Kuhn says, “there is no standard higher than the assent of the relevant community” (1996, p. 94). There are just the rules adopted within the context of a given paradigm. Their status is simply that of a set of rules which have been adopted by a particular group of scientists.

Given that there are no higher standards than the rules of particular paradigms, the rationality of science is relative to paradigm. Scientists who work within one paradigm are justified in their beliefs on the basis of the rules of puzzle-solution which apply within the paradigm. Likewise, scientists who work within a competing paradigm are justified in the beliefs they accept by the rules internal to their paradigm. In this way, rational belief depends upon rules internal to paradigm. There are no extra-paradigmatic standards which stand outside paradigms. So epistemic justification is relative to paradigm. But while rationality is internal to paradigm, the choice between paradigms is itself unjustified. For there are no external standards to which appeal may be made in support of the choice between competing paradigms.

Such a relativistic reading of Kuhn was once the standard interpretation of Kuhn.⁸ However, as became clear in Kuhn’s later work, it is a misinterpretation of Kuhn’s view of theory-choice. Kuhn allows that there are universal scientific standards, though they are at best values which guide rather than dictate theory-choice (e.g., Kuhn 1977, p. 331). But we may set such matters of Kuhn interpretation aside in the present context. What is important is that the relativistic conception of scientific rationality which the above interpretation attributes to Kuhn constitutes a clear example of the sort of epistemic relativism with which I am concerned in this paper.⁹

More specifically, according to this form of epistemic relativism, justification depends upon a set of epistemic norms which are operative in a particular context. Where beliefs formed within a particular context satisfy the operative norms, those beliefs are justified. In different contexts (e.g. a culture or paradigm) different sets of epistemic norms may be in force. There are no higher order epistemic norms over and above the norms that are operative in particular contexts. There are only the norms which are in place within a given cultural setting. Epistemic justification depends upon and varies with such norms. Epistemic justification is relative to locally operative norms.

The question, of course, is whether there is any reason to accept such a relativistic position. I shall return to this question in the next section, where I claim that the principal argument for such relativism is based on the problem of the criterion. So far in this section, I have sought to characterize the form of epistemic relativism of relevance here, namely, epistemic relativism due to the variation of epistemic norms. However, before going further, it should be noted that there may be other forms of epistemic relativism.

One alternative form of epistemic relativism may be found in the symmetry thesis of the strong programme in the sociology of science advocated by Barry Barnes and David Bloor. According to the symmetry thesis, “all beliefs are on a par with one another with respect to the causes of their credibility” (Barnes & Bloor, 1982, p. 23). Regardless of whether beliefs are true or false, justified or unjustified, they are to be explained by appeal to the same kinds of causal factors. Barnes and Bloor are principally concerned to argue against the view that beliefs deemed true or justified are to be explained as the rational consequence of the use of method, whereas beliefs deemed false or unjustified are to be understood as the result of a cognitive pathology to be explained in external sociological terms (Barnes & Bloor 1982, p. 26). While there is no denying the relativistic intent of the symmetry thesis, the position does not appear relativistic in the sense of making rational acceptance dependent upon variant epistemic norms.¹⁰

Another possible form of epistemic relativism may be found in the context-sensitive attributions of knowledge urged by epistemological contextualists (e.g. DeRose 1992). According to contextualism, the notion of knowledge is one that may be employed in different ways depending on details of the context of application. For example, in circumstances where little is at stake, it may be entirely appropriate to say that one knows something. Yet in more demanding circumstances, even though there is no difference in available evidence, it may be appropriate to deny that one knows that very thing. Hence, attributions of knowledge may be relative to context of application. But, again, this seems to be quite a different form of epistemic relativism from that at issue here. The form of epistemic relativism of interest here holds that there may be alternative entirely acceptable epistemic norms able to provide genuine epistemic warrant. It is not a matter of more or less demanding contexts of application. It is a matter of variant epistemic norms which justify belief.¹¹

4. Relativism, norms and the problem of the criterion

In my view, the argument for epistemic relativism based on the problem of the criterion is one of the most fundamental arguments for epistemic relativism. I do not know how to show that this is the case. So instead I will attempt to strongly suggest that it is the case.

In this section, I will present the argument for epistemic relativism that is based on the problem of the criterion. I will then consider an alternative argument for epistemic relativism which derives from the underdetermination thesis. As we shall see, that argument turns out to depend upon the problem of the criterion. In Section 5, I will consider two arguments for epistemic relativism that are independent of the argument from the criterion, though I will suggest that they are less fundamental than it is.

4.1. Epistemic relativism and the problem of the criterion

As we saw in Section 3.2, the epistemic relativist holds that there are no standards over and above the variable epistemic

⁸ For examples of this interpretation of Kuhn, see Lakatos (1978, pp. 90–1) and Scheffler (1967, p. 84).

⁹ I discuss the relationship between Kuhn’s view of the circularity of paradigm debate and the problem of the criterion in Sankey (2011, Section 3.2.1). Two points are of most relevance here. First, Kuhn claims that debate between paradigms is circular because defenders of competing paradigms appeal to their own paradigm in defence of the paradigm. As with the circular justification of a criterion, such circular defence of a paradigm fails to provide justification for the paradigm. Second, Kuhn’s remark that there is no “standard higher than the assent of the relevant community” bears striking resemblance to the Pyrrhonian point about a criterion that is adopted dogmatically in the attempt to avoid infinite regress or circularity. Such dogmatic adoption fails to provide either a paradigm or a criterion with a satisfactory justification.

¹⁰ My point that the symmetry thesis is not relativistic in the sense of making justification relative to variant epistemic norms relates specifically to the symmetry thesis. It is noteworthy that, when Barnes and Bloor do consider the question of standards, they raise concern about the circular justification of standards. For further detail, see the discussion of Barnes and Bloor in Sankey (2011, Section 3.4).

¹¹ In a discussion of the relation between relativism and contextualism, Paul O’Grady notes that “general epistemic standards hold in place and govern the more localized contextual aspects” (2002, p. 106). That is, even if knowledge attribution is sensitive to the exigencies of local circumstance, it does not follow that epistemic norms vary with respect to such circumstance or that norms are unable to apply across circumstances.

norms operative in different cultural settings. The question to which we must now turn is why there are no such standards.

For concreteness, I will frame the discussion in terms of the relativist position earlier attributed to Kuhn. Let us suppose that the rules of puzzle-solution employed within a particular scientific paradigm constitute the epistemic norms which are operative in the context of that paradigm. We may begin by asking how justification may be provided for such norms.

Consider any rule of puzzle-solution that may be employed within the context of a paradigm. In order to provide the rule with a justification, one option might be to appeal to some other rule which justifies that rule. But in order for this to effectively justify the original rule, this further rule must itself be justified. In order to justify the further rule, appeal might be made to yet another rule to justify it. But, as should be clear, such an attempt to justify the original rule leads to an infinite regress. To avoid the regress, we may now consider the familiar Pyrrhonian alternatives. Instead of appeal to a further rule, appeal may at some point be made to the original rule. If this occurs, then the justification proceeds in a circle, and so fails to justify the original rule. Alternatively, one might simply adopt the original rule dogmatically, without justification. But if the original rule is adopted in this way, it is adopted without any basis, and so is unjustified.

In this way, the attempt to justify a rule of puzzle-solution leads to the problem of the criterion. But rather than suspend judgement in Pyrrhonian manner, the relativist proceeds in a different direction. The problem of the criterion provides the basis for an argument that justification is relative to operative norms.

The problem of the criterion shows that no epistemic norm may be justified in a manner that admits of no further request for justification. The regress which arises in the attempt to justify a criterion may only be avoided by proceeding in a circle or by dogmatic adoption of a norm. Neither option yields justification. Hence, the adoption of a norm is unable to be made on a rational basis. Nor may any norm be better justified than another. All norms are equally lacking in justification. Instead of being a rational decision, the adoption of a norm is therefore unjustified. It may rest upon an irrational leap of faith, a subjective personal commitment or an arbitrary convention. But it cannot be supported by appeal to rational grounds which show one set of epistemic norms to be better justified than an alternative set of such norms.

If no norm is better justified than any other, all norms have equal standing. Since it is not possible to provide an ultimate grounding for any set of norms, the only possible form of justification is justification on the basis of a set of operative norms. Thus, the norms operative within a particular context provide justification for beliefs formed within that context. Those who occupy a different context in which different norms are operative are justified by the norms which apply in that context. There is no sense in which the norms operative in one context possess a higher degree of justification than the norms employed in another context. Justification is an entirely internal matter of compliance with norms that are operative within particular contexts.

The relativist is now in a position to claim that epistemic justification is relative to locally operative norms. According to the relativist, alternative sets of epistemic norms may be employed in different cultural settings, such as Kuhnian paradigms. As a result of the variation of epistemic norms, justified belief depends upon the context within which an epistemic subject is situated, as well as the epistemic norms operative in that context. In no sense may the justification provided by one set of epistemic norms provide a greater degree of justification than any other set of such norms.

4.2. *Relativism, underdetermination and theoretical virtues*

I will now consider an alternative argument for epistemic relativism that turns on the thesis of the underdetermination of theory by data. For the purpose of the argument, let us assume that there are competing theories (actual or possible) that are equally supported by the empirical data. Though incompatible with respect to unobservable states of affairs, the theories are empirically equivalent. Thus, the empirical data fail to provide a basis on which to choose between the theories. Because the empirical data are equally consistent with the competing theories, the theories are equally supported by the empirical evidence. Given this, there can be no empirical basis on which to accept a theory as true, since the evidence in favour of a theory provides the same level of support for a multitude of theories that are empirically equivalent to the original one.¹²

In response to the underdetermination thesis, appeal may be made to theoretical virtues of a non-empirical nature, such as simplicity, unity, breadth, etc. It may be possible to rationally choose between empirically equivalent theories on the basis of such theoretical virtues. For example, faced with a choice between empirically equivalent theories, one might choose the simplest theory over one that is more complex. Thus, a theoretical virtue such as simplicity may be used to overcome the limitations of empirical evidence which arise in choosing between theories.

It is at this point that the relativist enters the scene. For the question now arises of the epistemic status of the theoretical virtues. Perhaps there is no single, fixed set of theoretical virtues capable of adjudicating between empirically equivalent theories. Instead, there may be diverse sets of theoretical virtues. In this case, appeal to different sets of virtues may support opposing theories. The possibility of diverse sets of virtues raises the question of how to choose between such sets of theoretical virtues. On what basis is such a choice to be made? How is a theoretical virtue justified?

Here an argument precisely analogous to the one presented in the previous section may be employed. The attempt to provide a rationale for a theoretical virtue will result in a regress of justifications. To avoid the regress, one must either provide a circular defence of the virtue, or else dogmatically adopt the virtue without justification. In this way, the argument for epistemic relativism deriving from the underdetermination of theory by data depends upon considerations analogous to the problem of the criterion. It is not, after all, an independent line of argument for epistemic relativism.

5. *Non-neutrality and the inescapability of perspective*

I will now consider two arguments for epistemic relativism discussed by Harvey Siegel in his recent survey of the topic (Siegel, 2011). The first argument turns on the claim that there are no neutral standards on the basis of which a conflict between competing epistemic standards may be adjudicated. The second turns on the claim that we inevitably approach the world from perspectives that we are unable to transcend. I do not deny that these are important arguments for epistemic relativism. What I hope to show, however, is that they are less fundamental than the argument from the criterion.

5.1. *Non-neutrality of standards*

To illustrate the problem of the non-neutrality of standards, Siegel considers the case of Galileo's dispute with the Church about the moons of Jupiter. The dispute was not simply an empirical one. It was also a dispute about standards. Galileo appealed to

¹² I focus here on underdetermination due to empirical equivalence, rather than Quine-Duhem underdetermination. However, an analogous argument relating to the use of theoretical virtues in the assessment of competing theories may also be mounted on the basis of Quine-Duhem underdetermination. For related discussion of Quine-Duhem underdetermination in connection with relativism, see Laudan (1990, pp. 49–68).

the standard of telescopic observation. The churchmen appealed to naked eye observation, Scripture and Aristotle. How might such a dispute about standards be resolved?

Siegel presents the issue as follows:

The relativist here claims that there can be no non-relative resolution of the dispute concerning the existence of the moons, precisely because there is no neutral, non-question-begging way to resolve the dispute concerning the standards. Any proposed meta-standard that favors regarding naked eye observation, Scripture, or the writings of Aristotle as the relevant standard by which to evaluate “the moons exist” will be judged by Galileo as unfairly favoring his opponents, since he thinks he has good reasons to reject the epistemic authority of all these proposed standards; likewise, any proposed meta-standard that favors Galileo’s preferred standard, telescopic observation, will be judged to be unfair by his opponents, who claim to have good reasons to reject that proposed standard. (Siegel, 2011, pp. 205–206)

According to this line of argument, epistemic relativism arises because there are no neutral meta-standards. Any meta-standard to which one might appeal to resolve a dispute about competing standards will favour one side of the dispute over the other. Because there are no neutral meta-standards, the dispute about standards is unable to be resolved on an objective basis. As a result, justification is relative to the standards to which appeal is made on either side of the dispute. Let us call this *the non-neutrality argument*.

Now, it is entirely unclear why appeal to meta-standards must beg the question in favour of one standard or another. Surely not all meta-standards need favour either Galileo or the churchmen in a way that begs the question. There is no reason to think that all meta-standards must specifically favour either the side of Galileo or the side of the Church, even if the meta-standards fail to be neutral in some absolute sense.

In his discussion of the non-neutrality argument, Siegel makes a related point. To rebut the argument, Siegel distinguishes between meta-standards that are neutral in general and meta-standards that are neutral in the context of some particular dispute. He points out that there may be meta-standards that are neutral with respect to a particular dispute, even if there are no meta-standards that are neutral in general. Such locally neutral meta-standards may suffice to resolve the dispute about standards without begging the question against either party in the dispute. There is no need for absolutely neutral meta-standards in order to resolve the dispute about standards that arises between adversaries such as Galileo and the churchmen.

Siegel’s objection exposes a serious flaw in the non-neutrality argument. However, I wish to focus on a different question here. Specifically, what is the relationship between the non-neutrality argument and the argument from the criterion? I wish to suggest that, though they share a similar structure, there is a significant difference between the two arguments. Moreover, I will argue that the argument from the criterion is the more fundamental of the two arguments.

The similarity of structure may be seen from Sextus’s own treatment of a related matter. Sextus considers the problem that arises when there is a dispute about a criterion. The Stoics proposed one criterion. Other Greek philosophers offered another criterion. How might such a dispute about the criterion be resolved?

... in order to decide the dispute which has arisen about the criterion, we must possess an accepted criterion by which we shall

be able to judge the dispute; and in order to possess an accepted criterion, the dispute about the criterion must first be decided. And when the argument thus reduces itself to a form of circular reasoning the discovery of the criterion becomes impracticable, since we do not allow them to adopt a criterion by assumption, while if they offer to judge the criterion by a criterion we force them to a regress *ad infinitum*. And furthermore, since demonstration requires a demonstrated criterion, while the criterion requires an approved demonstration, they are forced into circular reasoning. (PH, II, 20–21)

In this passage, Sextus raises the question of how to resolve a dispute about a criterion. The attempt to resolve the dispute leads to the problem of the criterion, since the attempt to justify a criterion results in circularity, regress or unjustified adoption of the criterion. Thus, the attempt to resolve a dispute between alternative criteria results in an appeal to criteria which are themselves subject to dispute. To adopt a criterion without justification would beg the question against a proponent of the opposing criterion.

In both the case of the non-neutrality argument and the argument from the criterion, a central role is played by appeal to a further criterion in order to justify the criterion that is in dispute. However, the two arguments diverge in relation to the issue of non-neutrality. In both cases, the attempt to justify a criterion or standard fails because appeal must be made to some further criterion or standard. In the argument from the criterion, justification fails due to the regress of justification which arises in the attempt to justify the criterion. By contrast, in the non-neutrality argument justification fails because the attempt to justify a standard appeals to a non-neutral meta-standard that question-beggingly favours one standard over another. Because of this, the non-neutrality argument is a separate argument from the argument from the criterion. However, it can be shown that the former is less fundamental than the latter.

To see this, let us suppose that a satisfactory response has been provided to the non-neutrality argument. (For simplicity, I will speak of standards rather than meta-standards.) Such a response might take either of two forms. One form it might take is that proposed by Siegel, namely, that there are locally neutral standards which are neutral with respect to a particular context of dispute. The other form it might take is the form that Siegel rejects, namely, that there are in fact universal standards which are neutral with respect to all contexts of dispute.

Let us now consider the status of these neutral standards, whether universally or locally neutral. What justifies such standards? Here, the familiar Pyrrhonian argument rears its head again. If, in the attempt to justify the neutral standards, appeal is made to some further standard, the question arises of the justification of that standard and a regress ensues. If appeal is made to the original standard, the argument proceeds in a circle. If a standard is adopted without defense, it is unjustified. Whether the standard has local or universal neutrality, it is unable to be justified. Because it is unjustified, it has no greater justification than any other standard. So there is no need to adopt the neutral standard over any other standard.

Thus, while the non-neutrality argument does introduce a distinct element into the argument for relativism, it is less fundamental than the argument from the criterion. For even if it were possible to meet the non-neutrality argument, the argument from the criterion would still apply. Hence, the argument from the criterion is the more fundamental argument.¹³

¹³ Even if it is admitted that the argument from the criterion is more fundamental than the non-neutrality argument, it might still be felt that the latter constitutes a major objection to any anti-relativist epistemology. While Siegel’s rebuttal seems to provide a perfectly satisfactory response to the argument, it is worth mentioning that my own naturalistic approach contains the resources for a further response to the argument. In my view, the warrant of an epistemic norm is an empirical matter that depends upon its reliability in leading to an epistemic aim such as truth. This means that one norm may be better warranted than another because it possesses greater reliability. But if one norm is more reliable than another, then that constitutes an objective ground to prefer the former to the latter. Epistemic warrant, in other words, is the basis of objectivity, at least in epistemological matters.

5.2. The inescapability of perspective

The second argument considered by Siegel relates to the inability to view the world without adopting a perspective. When we think about the world we do so from a perspective. The fact that we must approach the world from a perspective lends itself to relativist interpretation. We may call this *the argument from perspective*.

Siegel expresses the point as follows:

...from the relatively uncontroversial claim that we cannot escape all perspectives and achieve a “view from nowhere” or “perspectiveless perspective,” it seems a short step to the relativistic conclusion that what we can know, or what can be true or justified, is itself relative to the schemes, frameworks, or perspectives that inevitably limit our judgment; that, since there is no “perspectiveless” judgment, there is no possibility of achieving a perspective that would allow us to non-question-beggingly compare and evaluate either judgments issued from different perspectives or alternative perspectives themselves. (Siegel, 2011, p. 209)

The argument from perspective is based on the assumption that we must approach the world from some perspective. We cannot adopt a stance which does not have a perspective. This raises the problem of how to evaluate an alternative perspective. It would be impossible to evaluate an alternative perspective from an independent standpoint, since we must approach the alternative perspective from the perspective that we occupy. Given this, knowledge and justification must be relative to perspective. For they may not be based on anything that transcends our perspective.

The argument from perspective imports elements from forms of relativism other than the strictly epistemic form of relativism at issue here. Siegel tends to frame the argument in terms of conceptual schemes rather than epistemic norms. Still, it is possible to understand the argument in strictly epistemic terms. It may be understood as the argument that we must approach the world on the basis of our own epistemic norms, so that we are unable to evaluate opposing norms in an independent manner. Because it is impossible to evaluate alternative epistemic norms in an independent manner, knowledge and justification are relative to the set of norms with which one operates.

In reply to the argument from perspective, Siegel points out that we may modify and replace a framework even though we are unable to transcend all frameworks.¹⁴ There is no need to escape all frameworks in order to move beyond an existing framework. We are able to adopt a critical stance toward our own perspective, and adopt a new one instead. The fact that we cannot remove ourselves from all frameworks or perspectives whatsoever does not rule out the possibility of rejecting an existing framework in favour of another one.

Siegel's reply provides an effective response to the argument from perspective. However, as with the previous argument, I wish to compare the argument from perspective with the argument from the criterion. The argument from perspective derives a relativist conclusion from the assumption that we must approach the world on the basis of the epistemic norms that we employ. By contrast, the argument from the criterion derives a relativist conclusion from the lack of justification of epistemic norms due to the sceptical regress. What is the relationship between these two arguments?

Once again, Sextus considers a related issue. He considers how perceptual conflict (e.g. between animal and human perception) may be resolved. It would beg the question against animal perception if we attempted to resolve the conflict by appeal to human sensory experience. For, as Sextus notes, we “are involved in

the dispute and are, therefore, rather in need of a judge than competent to pass judgement ourselves” (PH, I, 59). The need to identify a criterion in order to resolve a conflict such as the conflict between animal and human perception is one source of the problem of the criterion. The problem arises due to the attempt to justify a criterion proposed to resolve such a conflict.

There is a close analogy between the problem of perceptual conflict and the inescapability of perspective. On the one hand, to appeal to human sense experience to resolve the conflict between human and animal perception begs the question. On the other hand, the inescapability of perspective suggests we are unable to evaluate an opposing perspective from an independent standpoint. The point of the former is that it begs the question to judge other viewpoints from our own perspective. The point of the latter is that we are caught within our own perspective, so we cannot avoid begging the question.

As with the previous argument, the argument from the criterion appears to be the more fundamental argument. This is readily shown. Suppose that in order to adjudicate between competing perspectives appeal may be made to a criterion or to a set of epistemic norms independent of our own. The question would then arise of how to justify that criterion or set of norms. But this would lead straight into the Pyrrhonian regress of justification, since the question arises of how the criterion or set of norms is to be justified. So, even if it were possible to respond to the argument from perspective, the argument from the criterion would remain, as a basis on which to argue for relativism with respect to epistemic norms.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have considered the relationship between scepticism and epistemic relativism, and presented an argument for epistemic relativism that derives from the Pyrrhonian problem of the criterion. I have attempted to show, or at least to strongly suggest, that the argument from the criterion is one of, if not the, most fundamental arguments for epistemic relativism.

In earlier work, I have presented an approach to the form of epistemic relativism that is based on the problem of the criterion. I argued that a particularist response to the problem of the criterion of the kind proposed by Roderick Chisholm (1973) may serve as basis for a response to the relativist. Chisholm points out that the problem of the criterion arises if one attempts to identify criteria for knowledge without prior identification of cases of knowledge. The problem may be avoided if one commences epistemological inquiry with particular cases of knowledge.

In my approach to relativism, I have argued that a particularist response to scepticism may be incorporated within a naturalistic response to the relativism. Once specific items of knowledge are identified, they may be employed as a basis on which to evaluate alternative epistemic norms. Given that specific cases of knowledge may be identified, it is possible to determine whether the use of an epistemic norm does reliably lead to genuine items of knowledge. Moreover, alternative epistemic norms may be compared on an empirical basis to determine whether one norm is more reliable than another. Given that alternative norms may be compared for reliability, we need not concede to the relativist that all epistemic norms are on a par. Some norms may be more reliable than others. Hence, some norms may carry more epistemic weight than others.

In Sankey (2011), I seek to show that the argument for relativism based on the problem of the criterion figures centrally in significant treatments of epistemic relativism in the history and philosophy of science. In the present paper, I have attempted to

¹⁴ Here Siegel acknowledges and draws upon Popper's objections to the “myth of the framework” (Popper, 1970).

show that the argument from the criterion is one of, if not the, most fundamental arguments for epistemic relativism. If I am right about this, then the strategy that I have proposed as a response to epistemic relativism is not merely of relevance to one specific argument for epistemic relativism. It is a response to epistemic relativism itself.

In addition, if I am right in my diagnosis of the basis of epistemic relativism, then my approach may shed new light on the relation between scepticism and relativism. On the face of it, the two doctrines tend in opposite directions. Scepticism refrains from positive attribution of knowledge or justified belief, whereas the relativist asserts that knowledge and justified belief exist but depend upon operative norms. But, while the two doctrines differ at one level, they converge at a deeper level. For, if the fundamental argument for relativism is a sceptical one, this suggests that relativism is ultimately a sceptical doctrine.

It is time to take stock. I have proposed a naturalistic response to epistemic relativism that draws on a particularist response to the problem of the criterion. I have attempted to show that the argument from the criterion is not only an argument that has been widely canvassed within the history and philosophy of science, but that it is one of the most fundamental arguments for epistemic relativism. This seems to provide good reason to take the strategy that I propose seriously. It offers a promising response to an argument for epistemic relativism that has a claim to be the central argument for that position.

More remains to be done to fully develop this approach. The relationship between the particularist response to relativism and the problem of the criterion requires more detailed exploration. If the position that I propose is correct, then a Moorean response to the Cartesian sceptic may contain untapped resources for the response to the relativist. It remains to explore the present strategy within the context of Moore's response to the sceptic. Another issue relates to the status of particularism itself. Recent epistemologists often favour reflective equilibrium approaches rather than Chisholm-style particularism. It remains to explore the connections between epistemic relativism, reflective equilibrium and the particularist response to the relativist. Reflective equilibrium may open the door to relativism in a way that particularism avoids, since diverse systems of epistemic norms may enter into reflective equilibrium with wildly varying epistemic intuitions.

These are topics for future work. My purpose in the present paper has been to further secure the relevance of the particularist strategy to the problem of epistemic relativism. Having developed the strategy in preliminary form, and having sought to specify the target, it remains to develop the position in greater detail. That is the next step in the project.

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