

Witchcraft, Relativism and the Problem of the Criterion

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Abstract This paper presents a naturalistic response to the challenge of epistemic relativism. The case of the Azande poison oracle is employed as an example of an alternative epistemic norm which may be used to justify beliefs about everyday occurrences. While a distinction is made between scepticism and relativism, an argument in support of epistemic relativism is presented that is based on the sceptical problem of the criterion. A response to the resulting relativistic position is then provided on the basis of a particularist response to scepticism combined with a naturalistic approach to the warrant of epistemic norms. It is argued that it is possible to comparatively assess the ability of epistemic norms to lead to epistemic aims. As against the epistemic relativist, it is possible to provide an objective basis for the choice between alternative epistemic norms.

1 Introduction

According to epistemic relativism, it is not possible to provide epistemic norms with an objective, rational justification. Diverse epistemic norms may be employed within alternative belief systems. Beliefs receive justification on the basis of the norms which operate in particular belief systems. As a result, what is rational to believe depends upon the epistemic norms and belief system which an individual or group adopts. Beliefs that are found across belief systems might not be justified in the same way in all belief systems. Beliefs that conflict with each other may receive justification within different belief systems. The epistemic relativist holds that there is no further justification of beliefs beyond the justification that beliefs receive on the basis of norms that are operative in a belief system.

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In this paper, I propose a naturalistic response to epistemic relativism. I understand the challenge of such relativism to be to provide epistemic norms with an objective rational justification, rather than to show that there are universally operative epistemic norms. While I take pains to distinguish relativism from scepticism, I will present an argument on behalf of epistemic relativism that derives from the sceptical problem of the criterion. The response that I propose to epistemic relativism is based on a particularist approach to scepticism along lines due to Roderick Chisholm. I combine the particularist approach with a naturalized account of epistemic warrant to argue that particular instances of empirical knowledge may serve as a basis for the comparative assessment of alternative epistemic norms. Thus, I argue that there may be objective rational grounds to adopt specific epistemic norms in place of alternative norms with which they may conflict.

1.1 Azande Witchcraft

I will illustrate the idea of alternative epistemic norms with the case of Azande witchcraft. In his classic work, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*, the anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard describes the beliefs and practices of the Azande, an African tribe of the Sudan. According to Azande belief, various misfortunes encountered in daily life may be attributed to the action of witches. Someone may fall ill, crops may fail or a hut may catch fire. Such events may be due to the magic of a witch who lives nearby. Azande witchcraft involves no rituals, spells or medicines. Evans-Pritchard describes it is a psychic act whereby “the soul of witchcraft” leaves a witch’s body to interfere with its victim (1976, pp. 10–12). Witches inherit the property of being a witch from a parent of the same sex. Their bodies contain a “witchcraft substance” found in their belly, which is what makes them a witch. After the death of a suspected witch, it may be determined whether they were indeed a witch by examining the contents of their intestines for the presence of witchcraft-substance (1976, pp. 15–16).

The Azande employ a number of techniques to determine the action of unseen forces. One technique, which Evans-Pritchard calls the “poison oracle”, is used to answer a broad range of questions not limited to witchcraft (1976, p. 122). The poison oracle is the preferred way for the Azande to determine whether a particular mishap is due to the action of a witch. In the poison oracle, a poisonous substance known as *benge* is administered to a chicken (1976, pp. 134–138). A series of questions is posed. The chicken is either unaffected by the poison or, more frequently, has violent spasms. Sometimes the chicken dies. Just as often it survives. The manner in which the chicken reacts to the poison is interpreted as indicating the presence or absence of witchcraft. In certain circumstances, for example if a legal matter is at stake, poison is administered to a second chicken in order to confirm the result. When this is done, the questions are framed in such a way that, if the first chicken dies, the second chicken must survive, and vice versa.

The Azande poison oracle is an example of an epistemic norm that differs from any norm employed in the West. For the Azande, appeal to the oracle provides reason to believe that a particular occurrence either is or is not the result of witchcraft. The oracle serves as an epistemic norm which operates in Azande

society as the basis for beliefs about witchcraft. In this paper, I employ the poison oracle to illustrate the epistemic relativist claim that epistemic norms vary with belief system.

It is important to note that it does not suffice for relativism to provide an instance of an alternative epistemic norm. In addition, it must be argued that rational justification is relative to the norms that are employed within different belief systems. After some introductory remarks about relativism (Sect. 2), I offer an argument to this effect (Sect. 3). I then present my own positive proposal (Sect. 4) before considering a number of objections (Sect. 5) and drawing appropriate conclusions (Sect. 6).

2 Epistemic Relativism

Relativism comes in various forms. For example, there is relativism about truth, ontological relativism, conceptual relativism and moral relativism. My focus here is epistemic relativism, by which I mean relativism about knowledge and rationally justified belief. I will sometimes speak of rationality rather than rational justification, but it needs to be borne in mind that I mean ‘rationality’ in an epistemic rather than practical sense.

2.1 Context, Belief System and Epistemic Norms

The epistemic relativist claims that rational justification is relative to context. For example, it is rational for an Azande tribesman to believe that crops may fail due to witchcraft, whereas it is rational for a farmer in the Wimmera to believe that crops fail due to natural phenomena, such as drought. Both beliefs are rational in their respective contexts.

But what is a context? Different authors say different things. Some say that rationality is relative to culture. Others speak of historical time-period, intellectual background, conceptual scheme, Kuhnian paradigm or Foucauldian episteme. But two key elements are salient in most characterizations of the kind of context to which rationality is said to be relative. On the one hand, there is a system of beliefs which forms the background to any particular belief. On the other hand, there is a set of epistemic norms, which provides justification for a belief within the context of a given belief system.

When rationality is said to be relative, this means that what is rational to believe depends upon the system of beliefs and epistemic norms within which one operates. For example, it is rational for an Azande tribesman to believe that his crops have failed due to witchcraft, in light of the outcome of a poison oracle and the background beliefs about witchcraft which he holds. So, while one might say that the rationality of the tribesman is relative to Azande culture, the real force of this claim is to say that the tribesman’s belief is rational in light of the Azande belief system and associated epistemic norms.

2.2 Epistemic Norms and Relativism

By an epistemic norm, I mean a criterion or rule that may be employed to justify a belief. Norms play a regulative role in the appraisal of beliefs. They are employed to determine whether a particular belief is worthy of acceptance. Beliefs which are licensed by an epistemic norm are thereby justified by that norm. Beliefs which fail to be licensed by any operative norm fail to be justified.

There are various kinds of epistemic norm, ranging from the low-level norms of common sense to the abstract norms of science. Ordinary appeal to the evidence of our senses counts as use of a norm relating to sense experience as a source of knowledge. So, too, do considerations of the reliability of a witness on whose testimony we rely for information. Rules of deductive and inductive inference constitute norms which govern beliefs arrived at by means of reasoning. Principles of experimental design or scientific theory choice are further examples of epistemic norms.

The relativist claims that there is no one set of correct epistemic norms. Instead, epistemic norms vary with context. When an epistemic norm is employed within a culture, paradigm, or other relevant context, I shall sometimes say that the norm is *operative* in that context. According to the relativist, what is rational to believe depends upon the background beliefs and epistemic norms that are operative in the context that one occupies. The result is that it may be rational for members of one group to believe one thing, and for members of another group to believe the opposite, if such opposing beliefs are justified by the alternative epistemic norms. Equally, but less controversially, members of different groups may hold the same belief even though it may be justified on the basis of different norms.

3 Scepticism, Relativism and the Argument for Relativism

In this section, I will present an argument for epistemic relativism that draws on the Pyrrhonian sceptic's problem of the criterion. Before I present the argument, I will comment briefly on the relationship between epistemic relativism and scepticism.

Relativism and scepticism pull in opposite directions. The relativist asserts that we have knowledge and that our beliefs may be rationally justified. It is just that knowledge and rational justification are relative. By contrast, the sceptic denies that we have knowledge or that we are rationally justified in our beliefs. Thus, the sceptic makes a negative claim that we fail to have knowledge, while the relativist makes a positive claim that we have knowledge. However, the sceptic and the relativist do agree on one thing. They agree that there is no such thing as knowledge or rational justification in any objective sense.

But, while scepticism and relativism pull in opposite directions, the relativist can learn something from the sceptic. In particular, the sceptical problem of the criterion can be employed to argue that the choice between alternative epistemic norms cannot be made on an objective, rational basis, but must instead be arbitrary or subjective.

3.1 The Problem of the Criterion

Turning to the argument, I assume that epistemic norms, such as the Azande poison oracle, constitute criteria in a sense appropriate to the problem of the criterion.¹

Consider the justification of a belief by means of some criterion. For convenience, we may suppose that the belief is a belief about an observable matter of fact that is justified by sense experience. In such a situation, the principle that one should believe the deliverance of one's senses serves as criterion. But what justifies this criterion?

For any criterion proposed to support a belief, the sceptic requests justification. If the criterion is justified by a further criterion, the sceptic requests justification of the further criterion in a manner that leads to an infinite regress. If appeal is again made to the original criterion, the justification proceeds in a circle and thereby fails to defend the original criterion. If the regress is halted by the adoption of a criterion without justification, the criterion fails to be adopted on a rational basis. In sum, the attempt to justify the criterion leads either to infinite regress, circularity or unjustified adoption of the criterion.

This is the problem of the criterion. The sceptic concludes that knowledge is impossible because it is impossible to provide any belief with a rational justification.² This is where the sceptic and the relativist part company.

3.2 An Argument for Relativism

The problem of the criterion provides the relativist with the basis for an argument that rational justification is relative to operative epistemic norms.

The sceptical regress entails that no epistemic norm may be ultimately justified in a manner that admits of no further request for justification. The regress may only be avoided by reasoning in a circle or by unjustified adoption of a norm. Neither option yields justification. Hence, the decision to adopt a given epistemic norm is not one that may be made on a rational basis. Nor is it possible for any particular epistemic norm to receive greater justification than any other. For all norms are equally lacking in justification. Instead of being a rationally based decision, the adoption of a norm is rationally unjustified. It may rest upon an irrational leap of faith, a subjective personal commitment or an arbitrary convention. But it cannot be

¹ Sextus Empiricus (1933) speaks of a "criterion of truth" that is used to "judge of reality and non-reality" (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, II, 14–16). Since an epistemic norm is used to justify belief, and since belief involves belief in the truth of the content of the belief, an epistemic norm plays the same role as a "criterion of truth".

² Strictly speaking, the Pyrrhonian sceptic does not conclude that knowledge is impossible. This would be to adopt a stance of dogmatism characteristic of earlier Academic scepticism. Instead of such dogmatism, the Pyrrhonian advocates suspension of belief (cf. Sextus, *op. cit.* I, 25–28). Still, the stronger form of words employed in the text seems entirely defensible. Pyrrhonian scepticism leads to the rejection of knowledge on at least two counts. First, suspension of belief entails absence of knowledge. If belief is required for knowledge, and belief is suspended, then there is no knowledge, since there is no belief. Second, the Pyrrhonian problem of the criterion entails that beliefs may not be rationally justified. But since rational justification is required for knowledge, and there is no rational justification, there is no knowledge.

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 belief system provide justification within that belief system. Those who adopt a different belief system are justified by the norms operative within their belief system. There is no sense in which the norms operative in one belief system possess a higher degree of justification than the norms employed in another such system. Justification is an entirely internal matter of compliance with norms that are operative within a belief system.

The relativist is now in a position to claim that rational justification is relative to operative norms within a belief system. It is possible for there to be alternative belief systems with alternative sets of epistemic norms. As a result, what one is rationally justified in believing depends upon the belief system that one accepts and the epistemic norms which are operative within that belief system. There is no sense in which it may be said that any belief system possesses a greater degree of rationality than any other.

4 Particularism, Naturalism and Relativism

In this section, I present a response to epistemic relativism that combines a particularist approach to scepticism with a naturalistic account of epistemic warrant. While particularism is widely adopted, it is not without critics.³ Nevertheless, the particularist stance yields insight into the problem of the criterion, which may be profitably brought to bear on epistemic relativism.

4.1 Particularism and the Problem of the Criterion

In ‘The Problem of the Criterion’, Roderick Chisholm distinguishes three responses to the questions, “*What* do we know?” and “How are we to decide *whether* we know?” (1982, pp. 65–69). The sceptic’s response is that it is impossible to answer either question, since neither may be answered before the other. The response that Chisholm terms the ‘methodist’ response takes the question of how to decide to be the prior question, which places arbitrary constraints on what may be known. By contrast, the starting point for the particularist is the question of what we know.

According to the particularist, we possess numerous uncontentious instances of knowledge. Chisholm mentions G. E. Moore’s commonsense claim that he knows he has a hand as an example. In light of what we know, we formulate criteria that tell us “what it is for a belief to be epistemologically respectable” (1982, p. 70), which may be applied to contentious cases. We are aided in the task of formulating criteria by being able to inspect particular cases of knowledge that we possess in

³ See, for example, Amico (1993, chapter 4). For an overview of the criticism as well as a defence of particularism, see Lemos (2004, chapter 6).

order to identify suitable criteria. But the point of formulating criteria is not to defend the general claim that we have knowledge. For we possess particular cases of knowledge which establish that we have knowledge prior to the project of formulating epistemic criteria.

Chisholm's particularism is sometimes likened to the method of reflective equilibrium, on which instances and principles are brought into balance by a "process of mutual adjustment" (Rawls 1972, p. 20, fn. 7). But it is worth noting Chisholm's own explanation of the relationship between particular instances of knowledge and criteria:

As "particularists" in our approach to the problem of the criterion, we will fit our rules to the cases... Knowing what we do about ourselves and the world, we have at our disposal certain instances which our rules or principles should countenance, and certain other instances which our rules or principles should rule out or forbid... [B]y investigating these instances we can formulate criteria that any instance must satisfy if it is to be countenanced and we can formulate other criteria that any instance must satisfy if it is to be ruled out or forbidden. (1982, p. 74)

The point that criteria must fit with cases adds detail to Chisholm's claim that criteria may be formulated in light of what is known. But there is no suggestion that particular cases give way in face of conflict with criteria. On the contrary, it is the criteria that are to be reconciled with the particular cases that remain fixed. This contrasts with the method of reflective equilibrium, on which particular cases may be displaced if they conflict with general principles.⁴

According to Chisholm, the particularist approach has the capacity to resolve the problem of the criterion. After his presentation of the approach, he concludes with the following remark:

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.

One may object: "Doesn't this mean, then, that the sceptic is right after all?" I would answer: "Not at all. His view is only one of the three possibilities and in itself has no more to recommend it than the others do. And in favor of our approach, there is the fact that we *do* know many things, after all." (1982, p. 75)

At first, this remark may appear puzzling. Rather than resolve the problem of the criterion, it seems to concede the point to the sceptic. For it concedes that the problem may not be resolved without begging the question, which is what the sceptic sought to show in the first place.

⁴ An example of an author who equates particularism with reflective equilibrium is Lemos (2004, pp. 6–10). See Greco (2005), who argues against the equation. One also encounters suggestions that reflective equilibrium is superior to particularism. But it is hard to see why the particularist should concede that core instances of knowledge (e.g., that one has hands) might give way in the face of conflict with general principles.

But this is to misunderstand Chisholm's remark. Chisholm rejects the 'methodist' response because it is a mistake to hold that the question of how to decide whether we know may be settled before the question of what we know (1982, p. 67). Equally, he rejects the sceptic's claim that the questions presuppose one another (1982, pp. 69–70). Instead, Chisholm takes the correct approach to be particularist. We start with the fact that we know something, then turn to the question of how we know based on what we know.

By proceeding in particularist fashion, the sceptical regress is avoided because no attempt is made to justify the general claim that we have knowledge by appeal to criteria. If the claim to knowledge were justified by appeal to criteria, this would give rise to the regress. But, instead, the claim to knowledge is grounded in particular instances of knowledge which are established before one undertakes the independent task of formulating criteria. Such a particularist approach begs the question against the sceptic by insisting that we possess knowledge, thereby denying the sceptic the opportunity to generate the regress. Contrary to the sceptic, the particularist holds that our having knowledge is not something that requires defence by means of criteria in a way that permits the justificatory regress to arise.⁵

But, while putting one's foot down in this way may be a satisfactory response to the sceptic, it is less clear how the particularist approach may be employed as a response to the relativist. For the relativist's point is precisely that there may be alternative epistemic norms which warrant alternative claims to knowledge. How does being told that we have to beg the question help with the problem of showing that some epistemic norms are justified and others are not? If we beg the question on behalf of our own epistemic norms, this does not entail that alternative norms fail to be rationally justified.

4.2 Naturalism and the Evaluation of Norms

If we bear in mind the difference between scepticism and relativism, it is possible to present a reply to the relativist that builds on the particularist response to the problem of the criterion. For if Chisholm is right, there are particular cases of knowledge which we may employ as touchstones in the process of formulating and evaluating epistemic norms. The fact that we have knowledge may be put to use in attempting to show that some epistemic norms have greater epistemic merit than others.

The particularist stance has a close affinity with naturalism in epistemology, which may be employed to good effect against the relativist. It is possible to combine a particularist stance with the naturalistic view that epistemic norms are subject to empirical evaluation. For if we think of epistemic norms as themselves subject to empirical test, then we are able to evaluate norms on the basis of knowledge that is obtained in an empirical manner. In this way, we may proceed in

⁵ For detailed discussion of begging the question in the context of Chisholm's defence of particularism, see Lemos (2004, pp. 125–128). Lemos argues that Chisholm's defence is an example of an argument that is rationally conclusive even though it begs the question against an opposing party. Such arguments proceed by valid inference from premises known to be true despite all parties not accepting the premises (2004, p. 127).

the manner suggested by Chisholm by appealing to particular instances of knowledge as evidence that may be employed in the evaluation of proposed epistemic norms.⁶

One such conception of the evaluation of epistemic norms takes them to be instruments of inquiry, which are employed in the pursuit of epistemic goals such as truth or empirical confirmation.⁷ Insofar as the realization of these goals is empirically detectable, it may be possible to evaluate a proposed epistemic norm by determining whether it does in fact promote the relevant epistemic goal. When we proceed in this manner, we employ empirical knowledge which we obtain by means of experience as a touchstone against which epistemic norms may be tested. This procedure is based on a particularist approach, since it draws on particular instances of knowledge in the evaluation of proposed epistemic norms, as suggested by Chisholm.

Such a naturalistic approach provides the basis for a powerful response to the relativist. For it enables a distinction to be made between epistemic norms for which there is an objective, rational justification, and those for which there is no such justification. Where empirical evidence shows that use of a given epistemic norm leads to a relevant epistemic aim, then use of that norm is rationally justified. Where no such evidence supports use of the norm, the norm is not justified.⁸ Alternative norms may obtain an equivalent level of empirical support, and therefore convey the same measure of rational justification. Equally, it may turn out that some epistemic norms receive no support or that they receive less support than alternative norms.⁹

⁶ While there is a clear affinity between the particularist approach and the naturalism I here adopt, it should be noted that Chisholm himself favoured a traditional internalist epistemology (cf. Chisholm, 1989, p. vii). However, I do not see any reason to suppose that the particularist approach is necessarily wed to internalism. To the contrary, the internalist and the naturalist may both agree that we are able to recognize particular instances of knowledge.

⁷ The idea that epistemic norms are to be understood in instrumental fashion is an idea with deep roots in the pragmatist tradition. However, the immediate source for my use of the idea is the methodological pragmatism of Rescher (1977). Rescher speaks of methods rather than norms. But norms may be thought of as methods for the justification of beliefs, so there is no relevant difference in the present context. A naturalistic version of the idea may be found in Laudan (1996, chapter 7), who argues persuasively that the rules of scientific method are subject to empirical appraisal based on their track record in promoting epistemic aims.

⁸ It might be objected in reliabilist vein that justification does not require evidence that a norm lead to an aim. It suffices that the norm does in fact lead to the aim, whether or not there is evidence that it does so. But a reliabilist who raises such an objection is unable to provide a basis for adjudication between alternative epistemic norms in response to the relativist challenge. While there is much to be said for reliabilism, the challenge of relativism brings out a weakness in the reliabilist position. For in order to respond to relativism, it is crucial that evidence be available of the comparative reliability of epistemic norms, at least in principle.

⁹ The naturalistic approach to the appraisal of epistemic norms that I suggest places an emphasis on empirically ascertainable realization of epistemic aims. But naturalistic approaches typically appeal to the results of theoretical science over and above merely observable matters of fact. I do not oppose, indeed, I fully embrace such approaches. However, in the present context it is important to focus on something that may serve as common ground between the Azande and ourselves, which is why I focus here on empirical knowledge. It is important to establish the credentials of epistemic norms at a base level before one draws upon the theoretical knowledge that has been built on the basis of the higher level epistemic norms found in the sciences.

In sum, a particularist approach may serve as the basis of a response to the relativist. The question that Chisholm says we must beg relates to the possession of particular instances of knowledge, rather than to the evaluation of alternative epistemic norms. Knowledge comes first. The formulation of epistemic norms is a secondary task undertaken on the basis of knowledge we already possess or are able to obtain. Rather than beg the question against the relativist, particularism provides an epistemic platform on the basis of which it is possible to compare and appraise alternative epistemic norms.

4.3 Empirical Evaluation of the Poison Oracle

As an illustration of how such a response to the relativist might proceed, let us return to the example of the Azande poison oracle. As an epistemic norm, we may take the Azande poison oracle as an instrument that the Azande employ in an attempt to promote epistemic goals, such as truth or knowledge. When Azande pose questions to the oracle, they are employing the oracle in an attempt to obtain answers to their questions. The function of the poison oracle within Azande culture is to provide those who present questions to the oracle with a reason to believe in the truth of specific explanations which are proposed with respect to mishaps that occur in ordinary life.

We may, therefore, think of the poison oracle as an instrument of inquiry which is to be evaluated by measuring its efficacy in leading to the truth in relation to various everyday occurrences in Azande society. As such, empirical evidence of the reliability of the poison oracle is required in order to determine whether or not the poison oracle is an instrument that is capable of providing questioners with truth or knowledge in relation to the questions that are posed to it. In other words, it must be asked whether it is possible to subject the poison oracle to empirical test which would enable us to determine whether it is a reliable or efficacious instrument of inquiry.

This approach may seem implausible in application to the poison oracle because of the mystical and non-empirical nature of Azande beliefs about witchcraft. Because the action of a witch is not something that may be directly observed, and because many of the beliefs about witchcraft are metaphysical in nature, it may not be immediately apparent how to employ empirical considerations in determining the efficacy of the poison oracle.

But the poison oracle has a variety of practical applications which are not restricted to ascriptions of responsibility for mishaps to the action of a witch. Evans-Pritchard describes a number of different contexts in which the poison oracle is employed. The Azande employ the poison oracle in legal contexts, for instance, to decide charges of adultery (1976, p. 125). Evans-Pritchard provides a list of further circumstances in which the oracle is employed, which include questions relating to such matters as births and deaths, sicknesses, where to build a home, whether to take a job, how to end a drought, and so on. In many, but perhaps not in all, of the situations listed by Evans-Pritchard, empirical matters of fact are of clear relevance to the question of whether the oracle is able to serve as a reliable guide to the truth.

It is therefore possible to conduct tests of the efficacy of the poison oracle in application to those situations in which an outcome may be empirically determined. For example, if a question of criminal responsibility is at issue, it may be possible to

compare the outcome of the poison oracle with other empirical evidence that may either be or be made available. Eye witness reports or other physical evidence might be collected in an attempt to confirm or disconfirm the answers derived from the poison oracle. In this way, empirical evidence may be used to determine whether the poison oracle is a reliable indicator of truth.

Such an empirical test of the poison oracle in application to practical matters may not be of direct relevance to the issue of the reliability of the poison oracle in application to cases of witchcraft. But if one is able to determine that the poison oracle fails to be a reliable indicator of the truth in a range of matters in which its reliability is empirically detectable, then this will serve to cast doubt on the efficacy of the oracle in application to matters purported to involve witchcraft. If it is possible to show that the poison oracle fails to be a reliable indicator of the truth in those circumstances in which such reliability is open to direct inspection, then it may be presumed to be an unreliable indicator in those circumstances, such as witchcraft, in which such reliability is not open to direct inspection. Of course, it might turn out that the poison oracle is a reliable indicator of the truth in empirically detectable circumstances, in which case there would be *prima facie* reason to expect its reliability to extend to unobservable circumstances such as witchcraft.¹⁰

In this manner, I suggest that it is possible to employ empirical investigation as a means of appraisal of epistemic norms. As a result, it is in principle possible to determine whether or not the epistemic norms employed in one culture or context have a comparable degree of epistemic probity to those employed in some other culture or context. It is simply not the case, as I take the relativist to maintain, that no epistemic norm has any greater degree of epistemic merit than any other. Some epistemic norms may be reliable indicators of the truth, and, as such, they may be efficacious instruments of inquiry. But not all epistemic norms employed by all cultures are equally reliable indicators of the truth. It is because we know, contrary to the sceptic, that we have the capacity to acquire knowledge in concrete circumstances that we are able to use our capacity to acquire knowledge as a weapon against the relativist.

5 A Relativist Objection Considered

I will now consider a line of objection which the relativist may press against the approach that I have presented here. My proposal that epistemic norms such as the

¹⁰ The strategy I employ here is a version of a strategy that Philip Kitcher has described in another context as ‘the Galilean strategy’ (2001, p. 173). When confronted with the problem of establishing the reliability of the telescope in the face of doubt, Galileo first employed the telescope in circumstances in which it was possible to employ empirical means to determine its reliability. Galileo pointed the telescope at distant buildings or ships entering a harbour in such a way that it was possible to subsequently verify by direct observation details which had at first been detected only through the telescope. Once the reliability of the telescope was established in circumstances which were amenable to direct empirical test, it was a simple matter of then extending use of the telescope to circumstances in which what was perceived through the telescope was not subject to direct inspection. Provided that there is no independent reason to expect the telescope to fail in such circumstances, the telescope is to be presumed reliable when applied in such further circumstances.

poison oracle may be subjected to empirical appraisal may seem to beg the question against the Azande. For this approach seeks to impose the scientific norms of our Western culture upon the non-scientific culture of the Azande.

5.1 Understanding the Azande

Issues of this sort were famously canvassed in a well-known paper by Peter Winch entitled 'Understanding a Primitive Society'. Winch criticizes Evans-Pritchard for dismissing Azande beliefs about witchcraft as "mistaken, illusory" (1970, p. 79). At one stage, Winch writes as follows:

The spirit in which oracles are consulted is very unlike that in which a scientist makes experiments. Oracular revelations are not treated as hypotheses and, since their sense derives from the way they are treated in their context, they therefore *are not* hypotheses. They are not a matter of intellectual interest but the main way in which Azande decide how they should act. If the oracle reveals that a proposed course of action is fraught with mystical dangers from witchcraft or sorcery, that course of action will not be carried out; and then the question of refutation or confirmation just does not arise. (1970, p. 88)

If Winch is right, my proposal to treat the poison oracle as an epistemic norm subject to empirical appraisal is ill-conceived. For the function of the poison oracle in Azande culture is not an intellectual function, but a guide to action.

If the poison oracle were employed in random decision-making in the way that we would flip a coin, this might be a plausible interpretation of the oracle. But it seems clear from Evans-Pritchard's discussion that the poison oracle performs an epistemic function. The Azande consult the oracle to determine whether a mishap is due to the action of a witch, as well as to seek the cause of other occurrences not thought to be due to witchcraft. Thus, to say that the poison oracle is not an epistemic norm because it serves a different function in Azande society is implausible in light of Evans-Pritchard's discussion of the oracle.

But apart from this, there is the question of what Winch describes as the "spirit in which oracles are consulted". It may well be that the Azande do not treat the oracle in the manner of a hypothesis that is subject to empirical test.¹¹ But the point of the strategy that I propose is not that it is the strategy employed by the Azande when they consult the oracle. Rather, the point is that such an empirical strategy may be employed to determine the truth-indicative character of the oracle. And the point of that suggestion is that it is possible to empirically assess the differential epistemic credentials of alternative epistemic norms, such as the poison oracle.

Winch speaks liberally of alternative criteria and standards of rationality, in a manner that suggests that what it is to be rational varies from culture to culture (1970, pp. 97–100). He is critical of Evans-Pritchard's treatment of the failure of the Azande to appreciate the consequences of the contradiction that would arise from a

¹¹ Indeed, Evans-Pritchard devotes the bulk of a chapter to the fact that Azande do not adopt an experimental attitude toward the poison oracle, as well as the various mechanisms at their disposal by which they may explain away one or another failure of the oracle (1976, chapter 9).

run of negative and positive outcomes of post-mortem examinations for “witchcraft-substance” (1970, pp. 91–93; cf. Evans-Pritchard 1976, pp. 3–4). Rather than show the Azande to lack rationality, Winch suggests that it is the European who is mistaken in “pressing Zande thought where it would not naturally go – to a contradiction” (1970, p. 93).

I have no objection to the idea that there may be cross-cultural variation of operative epistemic norms, or, ‘standards of rationality’, to use Winch’s phrase. But I object to the thought that, as Kuhn put it in a related context, “there is no standard higher than the assent of the relevant community” (1970, p. 94). We need to distinguish between the descriptive question of the operative norms employed in a community and the normative question of whether such norms are themselves rationally justified. It is entirely possible for the members of a community to justify their beliefs in terms of a set of norms that they possess. But for such norms to provide the beliefs with genuine epistemic support, the norms must themselves convey epistemic warrant. Where an epistemic norm fails to be a reliable indicator of truth, compliance with the norm fails to provide rational support for beliefs which comply with the norm.

Winch may be right that standards of rationality vary with culture. But it is important to distinguish between a sense in which beliefs are rational given the operative norms of a culture, and a sense in which the norms are themselves justified and able to convey genuine epistemic warrant to beliefs that comply with the norms. In my proposal of a naturalistic approach to this issue, I have sought to characterize a way in which we might show that norms are themselves justified in this second sense.

5.2 The Objection Extended

In my comments on Winch, I have sought to show that the Azande poison oracle plays an epistemic rather than merely practical role, and that it may be subjected to empirical test even if the Azande do not themselves treat it in the manner of a hypothesis. However, this response remains open to the charge of begging the question against the Azande, and thereby against the relativist. For the naturalistic approach to the evaluation of epistemic norms may seem to presuppose norms that are operative in our Western culture.¹²

More specifically, the relativist may object that the proposal to submit epistemic norms to empirical test fails to be culturally neutral. The naturalistic approach to epistemic appraisal reflects the empiricist bias of our Western culture, which may not be shared by the Azande. The Azande might respond to the proposed empirical evaluation of the poison oracle by rejecting such an empirical test as inappropriate. Against the naturalistic proposal, the Azande might appeal to alternative non-empirical standards on the basis of which the poison oracle satisfies criteria of

¹² Strictly speaking, this discussion is to be conducted at the meta-level, since it relates to the question of whether a higher-order norm of empirical reliability may be utilized to evaluate the lower-level norms employed within a culture to evaluate beliefs. However, I do not think there is any risk of undue ambiguity that arises from glossing over the distinction of levels here.

epistemic adequacy. Hence, the relativist may reject my naturalistic approach on the basis that it begs the question against the Azande.

This objection raises a legitimate concern with the naturalistic response to epistemic relativism.¹³ But it can gain little traction in relation to the Azande. As I have previously indicated, the Azande employ the poison oracle in a great variety of practical contexts apart from events purportedly involving witchcraft. The decisions with respect to which the oracle is consulted relate to matters of survival and health, such as the planting of crops, hunting expeditions as well as disease and child-birth. Because of the practical purposes for which the poison oracle is utilized, as well as the immediate material needs of the Azande, empirical evidence relating to the efficacy of the oracle is of clear relevance to their employment of the oracle. Thus, given the facts of Azande existence, it is most unlikely that they would be insensitive to the outcomes of an empirical test of the efficacy of the oracle.

But, while the objection is implausible in relation to the Azande, the focus of the objection need not be restricted to the case of the Azande. The objection may be reformulated in the following terms. It is beside the point whether the Azande would countenance empirical evaluation of the poison oracle. It is possible for there to be another tribe that is not practically engaged to the same extent as the Azande. Empirical evaluation of epistemic norms would be an irrelevance for such a tribe. They might appeal to standards other than empirical tests of reliability in order to justify the epistemic norms which they employ to govern empirical belief-formation. Against such a tribe, the naturalistic approach does beg the question in favour of an empirical approach to the appraisal of norms.

Whereas the original objection raised a legitimate concern, this version of the objection fails to do so. For there can be no such practically disengaged tribe. Of course, we may imagine a possible world so constituted that its inhabitants need not take empirical matters into account. In such a world, epistemic norms are not subject to empirical appraisal because of the way in which the world is constituted. But, constituted as we humans are, in the world which we actually inhabit, such a tribe is not possible. For our survival in this world requires sensitivity to empirical information. Insignificant error may cause little harm in our daily transactions. But epistemic norms which lead us systematically astray in our beliefs about the surrounding environment will inevitably give rise to frustration, harm or even death. Because practical action is based on belief, the erroneous ways of faulty epistemic norms are made manifest in the form of unsuccessful practical activity, which is detectable by empirical means.

In sum, the naturalistic response to relativism that I propose applies to this world, the one that we actually inhabit, not to all possible worlds. In good naturalistic vein, it is an approach to the appraisal of epistemic norms suited to our circumstances, as creatures constituted as we are in the world constituted as it is. It is not, and cannot be, an approach to epistemic appraisal applicable in all possible worlds.

¹³ Indeed, it is something of a favourite, having been raised on various occasions when I have presented this paper, as well as by the anonymous referees for this journal.

6 Conclusion

Before concluding, I will summarize the key points that I have sought to make in this paper. I have employed the case of the Azande poison oracle in an attempt to provide a concrete example of an alternative epistemic norm. I drew upon the sceptical problem of the criterion to present an argument for relativism about epistemic norms. I employed Roderick Chisholm's particularism to argue, as against the sceptic, that we may be assured that we possess knowledge, to which we may appeal in response to the sceptic. I combined the particularist approach to scepticism with a naturalistic conception of the appraisal of epistemic norms. On the basis of the naturalistic conception of the appraisal of epistemic warrant, I then argued against the relativist that it is possible to show that some epistemic norms possess a higher degree of rational justification than others. I indicated how this approach might be employed in connection with the Azande poison oracle. I responded to a number of potential objections to the position I have defended that may be derived from Peter Winch's famous discussion of the rationality of Azande witchcraft.

I conclude that, in the same way that the relativist can learn from the sceptic, so too can the anti-relativist learn from the anti-sceptic. The particularist and naturalistic stance that I have adopted reflects an attitude of robust common sense that is well-known to be inimical to scepticism. It is less widely appreciated that it is equally inimical to relativism. Thus, I propose that a unified approach be adopted to both scepticism and relativism. Naturalists have often said that the sceptic sets the standards for epistemic justification inappropriately high. In exactly the same naturalistic frame of mind, we may also say that the relativist sets the standards inappropriately low. From a naturalistic perspective, there is no more call to be a relativist than there is to be a sceptic.

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