

Relativism

Authored by
mohammad looti

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Relativism

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Philosophy (Epistemology, Ethics, Metaphysics, Social Theory)

1. Core Definition

Relativism constitutes a broad philosophical family of views that maintain that truth, justification, moral value, or aesthetic worth are not absolute, objective, or universal. Instead, these fundamental concepts are held to be relative to a specific frame of reference, which might be an individual's conceptual scheme, a cultural framework, a linguistic community, a historical period, or a specific set of interests or assumptions. The core tenet is the rejection of the idea that there exists a single, privileged, and perspective-independent standard against which all claims can be measured. Consequently, a proposition is deemed "true" only in relation to--or relative to--the specific standpoint from which it is asserted. This means that two seemingly contradictory claims might both be equally valid when assessed within their respective, distinct frames of reference, challenging the principle of non-contradiction in application to universal claims.

The distinction between absolute and relative frames is paramount in understanding the relativistic stance. An absolute claim, such as the mathematical truth that two plus two equals four, is often argued to hold true regardless of who believes it, where they are, or when they live. Relativists, however, focus on domains where such universality appears to break down, particularly in areas concerning values, social facts, and personal experience. They argue that our perceptions are always mediated and filtered through contingent factors--historical background, cognitive biases, linguistic structures, and socio-cultural norms--making the attainment of truly objective reality an impossibility. Therefore, all knowledge claims, even those striving for objectivity, are ultimately situated, meaning they are inherently bound to the conditions of their origin and assertion.

It is crucial to differentiate relativism from mere perspectivism or context-dependence. While acknowledging that all judgments are made from a perspective is simply a descriptive fact recognized by most philosophers, relativism goes further by making a normative claim: the validity or truth of the judgment cannot be assessed or compared across different perspectives. The relativist asserts not just that "P is true for A" and "P is false for B," but rather that there is no independent meta-standard--no 'God's eye view'--to determine which perspective (A or B) is ultimately more correct, true, or justified. This radical equality granted to competing viewpoints is what defines the strong relativistic position, often leading to profound implications for areas like moral reasoning and scientific epistemology.

2. Types of Relativism

Relativism is not a monolith; it manifests across various philosophical domains, each applying the core concept of dependence on a frame of reference to a different type of claim. One of the most

frequently discussed forms is **Moral Relativism**, which posits that moral judgments (e.g., "killing is wrong") are true or false only relative to the standards, traditions, or conventions of a particular group, society, or individual. This view directly challenges ethical universalism, which holds that certain moral principles apply universally to all rational beings regardless of culture or personal sentiment. The observation of differing ethical codes across distinct civilizations, such as the variation in acceptable gender roles cited in the source content, often serves as empirical evidence supporting the moral relativist claim.

Another significant type is **Epistemic Relativism**, or "truth" relativism, which addresses the nature of knowledge and justification. This form argues that the truth of a statement, or whether a belief is rationally justified, is relative to the standards or conceptual schemes of a specific cognitive community. For example, what constitutes "evidence" or "proof" in a scientific community might differ fundamentally from the standards used in a religious community or an ancient civilization. Epistemic relativists contend that there is no single, universally valid set of criteria for rational assessment; rather, criteria of justification themselves are historically and culturally contingent. This perspective often draws heavily on the philosophy of science, noting how paradigms (as introduced by Thomas Kuhn) shift the very definition of legitimate scientific inquiry and truth.

Beyond ethics and epistemology, **Cultural Relativism** is perhaps the most widely recognized form, especially within anthropology and sociology. While primarily a methodological stance encouraging the understanding of cultural practices within their own context without imposing external standards, it often carries strong philosophical implications. Cultural relativism suggests that a person's beliefs, values, and practices should be understood based on that person's own culture, without judgment. In areas like aesthetics (**Aesthetic Relativism**), claims about beauty or artistic merit are deemed relative to the viewer, the cultural tradition, or the artistic movement. Similarly, **Metaphysical Relativism** suggests that even reality itself--the furniture of the world--might be relative to the descriptive schemes or conceptual frameworks we employ to articulate it.

3. Historical and Philosophical Roots

The philosophical lineage of relativism stretches back to antiquity. The Sophists of Ancient Greece are generally credited with articulating one of the earliest and most famous relativistic statements: Protagoras' dictum, "Man is the measure of all things: of those that are, that they are; and of those that are not, that they are not." This assertion, as interpreted by Plato and others, implies that truth is subjective and relative to the individual perceiver, fundamentally challenging the search for objective knowledge pursued by Socrates and Plato. However, following the classical period, objective reason and universal principles, heavily influenced by Aristotle and later by monotheistic religious traditions, dominated Western philosophy for centuries, generally relegating relativistic ideas to the periphery.

Relativism re-emerged with renewed force during the Enlightenment and the subsequent Romantic and Counter-Enlightenment movements. Philosophers like David Hume introduced significant epistemic doubts regarding universal causality and necessary truths, paving the way for Kantian critiques that situated knowledge firmly within the structures of the human mind. The 19th and early 20th centuries saw crucial developments from thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, who famously analyzed how moral and epistemic truths are constructed as expressions of the "will to power" and are tied to historical contexts rather than eternal facts. Nietzsche's genealogical method sought to expose the contingent origins of what we often assume to be timeless values.

The mid-20th century witnessed the "linguistic turn" and the rise of the philosophy of science, which provided powerful new frameworks for relativist thought. Figures like Ludwig Wittgenstein, through his concept of "language games," argued that meaning and rules of justification are fundamentally tied to specific communal practices. Similarly, anthropological findings by Franz Boas and his students solidified the empirical basis for cultural relativism, demonstrating vast differences in human conceptualizations of reality. This confluence of linguistic philosophy, sociology of knowledge (e.g., Mannheim), and historical analysis of scientific revolutions (Kuhn) established relativism as a central, unavoidable challenge in contemporary epistemology and ethics, demanding that philosophers address the situated nature of all human inquiry.

4. Key Philosophical Distinctions

To accurately analyze relativistic claims, it is necessary to distinguish it sharply from related, yet fundamentally different, philosophical positions such as **Subjectivism** and **Contextualism**. Subjectivism, often confused with individual relativism, holds that truth or value depends entirely on the beliefs, feelings, or preferences of the individual subject. While an individual relativist holds that P is true for person A and false for person B, the subjectivist often implies that A's assertion makes P true merely because A believes it. The core difference lies in the frame of reference: relativism usually refers to larger, shared frameworks (cultures, theories, language games), whereas pure subjectivism focuses exclusively on immediate, personal feeling, often bypassing the need for coherence or justification within a system.

Contextualism is another related, yet distinct, position, particularly in epistemology. Contextualists agree that knowledge claims are always assessed relative to a context--the interests, purposes, or standards of the assessors. However, unlike strong relativists, contextualists typically maintain that there is still a single, objective truth that may hold across contexts, even if the standards for asserting knowledge of that truth vary. For example, a contextualist might argue that the standard of "knowing" whether a bank is open differs depending on whether one is just passing by or planning a major transaction, but the objective fact of whether the bank is open remains singular. The relativist, in contrast, often argues that the truth itself shifts with the framework, not just the justification standards.

The distinction between relativism and **Nihilism** is also critical. Nihilism, particularly moral nihilism, states that there are simply no truths, no values, and no justification whatsoever--everything is meaningless. Relativism, conversely, does not deny the existence of truth or value; it merely denies their universality or objectivity. A relativist believes that truths and values exist and are perfectly functional, but only within their specific systems of reference. For instance, a moral relativist holds that culture X's values are genuinely binding and correct for culture X, even if they are not binding for culture Y. The nihilist denies that any values are truly binding for anyone, anywhere. Thus, relativism functions as a localized assertion of validity, while nihilism constitutes a total denial of validity.

5. Applications and Conceptual Examples

The application of relativism is most vivid in cross-cultural comparisons, especially in anthropology and sociology. The source content provides a powerful example concerning gender roles: "In some cultures women are allowed to compete with men in the workplace and other cultures hold that women should remain in the home and be completely subservient to males." The relativist analysis acknowledges that while these two practices are "diametrically opposed," each viewpoint is "correct" and justified within its own specific cultural milieu or "bailiwick." This perspective warns against ethnocentrism--the evaluation of other cultures according to the standards of one's own culture--and urges a deeper understanding of internal cultural coherence.

In the domain of scientific inquiry, epistemic relativism is often illustrated by observing historical changes in scientific theory. For instance, the shift from the Ptolemaic (Earth-centered) model of the cosmos to the Copernican (Sun-centered) model was not simply the correction of a few mistakes, but a wholesale revolution that changed the definition of what constituted a "successful" astronomical explanation. A strong epistemic relativist might argue that both the Ptolemaic and Copernican systems offered truths relative to their respective scientific paradigms, standards of observation, and foundational assumptions, rather than asserting that the Copernican view is simply the absolutely true description of reality regardless of perspective.

Furthermore, in law and justice, relativism emerges when comparing legal traditions. Concepts of private property, individual rights, or acceptable punishments vary dramatically between common law systems, civil law systems, and customary law systems. What constitutes a fair trial or a just punishment is relative to the fundamental procedural and philosophical commitments of that legal tradition. For example, the prioritization of communal harmony over individual rights in certain traditional legal structures can be deemed correct relative to the goals of that society, even if such prioritization appears fundamentally unjust according to Western liberal standards that emphasize individual autonomy.

6. Debates and Criticisms

Relativism, especially in its stronger forms, is one of the most vigorously debated positions in philosophy. The primary and most famous criticism is the charge of **self-refutation** or incoherence. Critics argue that the statement "All truth is relative" must itself either be an absolute truth or a relative truth. If the statement is an absolute truth, then the claim is false because it identifies at least one absolute truth. If the statement is a relative truth (e.g., relative to the relativist's framework), then it provides no reason for those outside that framework to accept it, thereby undermining its universal philosophical relevance and failing to act as a general critique of objectivity.

A second major criticism focuses on the practical and moral implications of relativism, particularly moral relativism. Opponents argue that if all moral standards are merely relative to a culture or individual, then it becomes impossible to condemn inherently unjust, cruel, or oppressive practices--such as slavery, genocide, or gender oppression--in other societies. If these acts are considered "right" within their originating culture, the moral relativist loses the necessary objective ground to criticize them, leading to a problematic tolerance for intolerance. Critics assert that this undermines the very foundation of human rights and international justice, which rely on the existence of universal moral norms.

Finally, critics often challenge the relativist's ability to define and maintain the boundaries of the "frame of reference." If truth is relative to a culture, how is "culture" defined? If it is relative to a linguistic community, what happens when linguistic communities overlap or shift? Critics argue that if the boundaries of the reference frame are vague or subject to arbitrary choice, the claim of relativity becomes meaningless. Furthermore, if the standards of the framework themselves can be criticized, the relativist must either retreat to a new, higher framework (thus abandoning relativity) or claim that the criticism itself is only valid relative to another framework, leading to an infinite regress of justification and ultimately dissolving the possibility of meaningful dialogue or rational assessment.

Further Reading

[Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Relativism](#)

[Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Relativism](#)

[Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Moral Relativism](#)

[Wikipedia: Cultural Relativism](#)

[Wikipedia: Protagoras and Man is the measure of all things](#)