



# ESCAPING FROM THE MORASS: A CRITICAL SURVEY OF RELATIVISM AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

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*"Almost every student entering the university believes,  
or says he believes, that truth is relative."  
- Allan Bloom*

## INTRODUCTION

Of the many topics pertaining to philosophical inquiry, perhaps the most significant is the issue concerning the nature of knowledge. Relativism as a philosophical doctrine has been heavily criticized and attacked as an incoherent and self-refuting position. A source of problem for anti-relativists is that most of the literature on the topic seems to suggest that relativism is a rather amorphous concept about which a plurality of opinions is held. Although it is the case that there are a plethora of views pertaining to the doctrine of relativism, it can be generally agreed that its fundamental principle is such that 'truth' is a contingent concept relative to individuals, communities, and/or language.

A *prima facie* look at relativism, even from the perspective of the most honest inquirer, often appears to be quite the seducer. The aim of this paper is to present a defence of a realist position pertaining to knowledge to show that relativism is in fact self-referentially incoherent

and cannot be defended objectively; furthermore, my focus shall be a criticism of relativism in general but, more specifically, relativism in the landscape of epistemology. This article is divided into two main parts. The first is an analysis of epistemology as it relates to relativism through the lens of three critical principles that I take to be essential to knowledge. Although not an exhaustive list, the principles (as part of a coherent system) are: *a*) the presumption that our cognitive faculties have a goal of maximizing true beliefs and minimizing false ones; *b*) the non-negotiability of the laws of logic; *c*) the reliability of sense perception. The second part presents the two possible options for the relativist: defeat or irrationality. Drawing from the contributions of Roderick Chisholm, Paul O'Grady and Alvin Plantinga to the debate, I shall attempt to show that neo-classical foundationalism serves as a defeater of relativism (i.e. one cannot continue to rationally hold relativism after accepting realism). As opposed to the classical Cartesian foundationalism that deduces all truth claims from only indubitable and infallible propositions, neo-classical foundationalism allows for a wider spectrum of truths drawn from an inference to the best explanation based not only on indubitable and infallible propositions but also *basic beliefs* such as the reliability of memory, testimony of others, phenomenal experience and sense perception. Note that I use *realism* to encompass both *foundationalism* and *properly basic beliefs*.<sup>1</sup> My working definition of knowledge in this article is: 'S knows that *P*' if and only if *a*) *P* is true, *b*) S believes that *P*, and *c*) S is justified in believing that *P*.

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<sup>1</sup> I distinguish neo-classical foundationalism from classical foundationalism by adding these properly basic beliefs. These beliefs are not indubitable, nor infallible.

CAN EPISTEMIC RELATIVISM BE DEFENDED OBJECTIVELY?

It is difficult to pinpoint exactly what epistemological relativism is. Paul O'Grady rightly states that the "multiplicity of positions labelled epistemological relativism arises due to the fact that the rejection of this absolutist view yields a variety of possible positions of varying degrees of strength."<sup>2</sup> One thing is certain, however, and that is that this position is diametrical to an absolutist conception of knowledge. The goal of epistemology for both the realist and the relativist is to arrive at knowledge; yet, the former claims that knowledge is absolute while the latter takes the position of knowledge being relative and subject to a particular framework. Some questions that revolve around the nature of knowledge are as follows: What is knowledge? How is knowledge achieved? What are the means of achieving knowledge? In this section I will attempt to provide a cluster of reasons why relativism about knowledge cannot be defended objectively and also that the attempt to defend relativism about rationality "invariably end[s] up showing the reverse" as John Searle pointed out.<sup>3</sup>

I want to first make it clear that most people (if not all) do not believe something that they *know* is not the case; in other words, 'S knows that *p*' is inconsistent with 'S believes  $\sim p$ '. For example, it happens to be the case that 'I am sitting in front of a computer typing a paper and that I am experiencing a mild headache (probably because I have not had my morning coffee yet)', call this statement *p*. It is

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<sup>2</sup> Paul O'Grady, *Relativism* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 2002) p. 89.

<sup>3</sup> *Mind, Language and Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1998) p. 5.

also the case that I happen to believe  $p$  and also that I am immediately justified in believing  $p$  through sense perception, phenomenal experience and memory. So I do have knowledge in this case and it would be irrational to know  $p$  and not believe it. But there are other fundamentals that need to be accepted before one can even make sense of knowledge. According to Chisholm, it is generally accepted in “western philosophy” that there are four sources of knowledge:

- 1) external perception
- 2) memory
- 3) self-awareness (reflection or inner consciousness)
- 4) reason<sup>4</sup>

One does not need to go very far to notice that Chisholm is correct. This creates a problem for relativism, however. If the advocate of relativism wants to make a knowledge claim, she must also accept these principles. It would be very difficult, if not impossible, for the relativist to overlook memory or self-awareness as a reliable source of knowledge. This, along with sense perception, must be acknowledged as an indispensable source of knowledge. These must be viewed and adopted by the honest inquirer as fundamental grounds in which without them knowledge cannot be attained. Thus it is the case that if the relativist adopts these fundamental principles she defeats the position she is defending. But there are other underlying issues that the relativist must account for and not merely circumvent. In the following paragraphs, I shall survey in-depth three principles that contribute to a coherent system.

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<sup>4</sup> Roderick Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge*, 2nd ed. (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1977) p. 122.

*The Goal of Cognition*

Here, I am working under the assumption that the goal of cognition – ignoring whether human cognition is a direct endowment from the divine or a product of evolution – is to provide the agent with a maximization of true or mostly true beliefs and a minimization of false beliefs. If this is the goal of cognition, we have reason to subscribe to the position that there are in fact mind-independent propositions and the aim of our cognitive faculties is to give us a reliable account of these propositions such that its aim would be to accept those that are true and reject those that are false. However, one does have the option to adopt the position that there is no such truth-maximizing – or at least truth-preserving – goal of cognition. Indeed there are unhealthy implications to the adherent of such position; but it will soon be clear that relativism must either adopt this self-defeating stance or resort to the truth-seeking function of our cognition faculties that flourishes only if relativism is not true.

To dig a bit deeper, we must analyze what exactly constitutes the nature of a goal-oriented cognition. I believe it is fair to say that human cognition plays a major role distinguishing us from other animals. Alvin Plantinga, who subscribes to an externalist view of epistemic justification, claims that there are conditions that must be met so that when added to true belief entails knowledge. He dedicates a whole book to this and, succinctly put, concludes that it is necessary that our cognitive faculties be working properly (i.e. one is not intoxicated or has a high fever) in a compatible epistemic environment (i.e. one is not subject to some sort of illusion) according to a plan successfully aimed at true or mostly true beliefs. He states

that if these conditions do not hold then one must render all beliefs suspect.<sup>5</sup> Although the limits of this paper restrict me from delving even deeper into Plantinga's work, it suffices to say that it is not reasonable to bring a charge against this truth-providing function of our cognitive faculties. Note that I am not making the 'strong' claim that our cognitive system must be aimed at *only* true beliefs; rather, it must – at minimum – be aimed at *mostly* true beliefs.

Here's the catch for the relativist. Given that knowledge is commonly accepted by epistemologists to be justified true belief as I stated in the introduction of this paper, the claim that knowledge is relative implies that truth is relative and vice-versa. The justification of any belief can be entirely internal to the agent; this is known as *internalism*. Thus, one can be a relativist in regards to her justification and also in regards to her beliefs, that is, she is allowed to believe whatever she wants by any internally justified means. A justified belief could be something like, 'I see the Sun moving in the heavens; therefore, it is the case that the Sun rotates around the Earth'. This is a case of a justified *false* belief. Hence, justified belief is not sufficient to yield knowledge, what is missing is a true proposition, a state of affairs outside the agent that has some relation to her.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, if truth is a necessary component to knowledge as I have shown to be, then epistemic relativism is by necessity false.

The relativist finds herself at odds with propositions and also with her beliefs about those propositions. As

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<sup>5</sup> *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993)

<sup>6</sup> Here I overlook phenomenal statements such as 'I know I am in pain,' which is an immediate justification of a private, ineffable states of one's own body.

noted, the relativist's beliefs are inscrutable, that is, unable to verify whether it is true or false, unless it is accepted that her cognitive faculties have the goal of providing true or mostly true beliefs. If the relativist accepts this to be true, she has established a foundational basis for her beliefs. Establishing such a foundation automatically presupposes that the purpose of this foundation (i.e. functional cognitive faculties aimed a true or most true beliefs) is to provide the most accurate account of the agent's environment. Thus if truth is relative, either the agent's cognitive faculties are malfunctioning or relativism is false.

*The Non-Negotiability of the Laws of Logic*

There are certain fundamental principles in this world that cannot be denied, defeated or overridden. I want to delineate here the importance of adhering to the laws of logic and its relation to relativism. The rejection of fundamental laws of logic such as the law of excluded middle and the law of non contradiction comes at a high cost for the relativist.

It happens to be the case that relativism is true if and only if it is not false ( $p \equiv \sim\sim p$ ), or stated positively, relativism is true if and only if it is true ( $p \equiv p$ ); if the relativist denies this, she will find her position indefensible and incoherent. Roderick Chisholm rightly affirms that it may be assumed that everyone "is subject to a purely intellectual requirement – that of trying his best to bring it about that, for every proposition  $h$  that he considers, he

accepts  $h$  if and only if  $h$  is true"<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, O'Grady informs us that,

"Logic is clearly fundamental to human reasoning. It governs the process of inferring between beliefs in a truth-preserving way, such that if one starts with true beliefs and then makes no mistakes in logic, one is guaranteed to have true beliefs as a conclusion. The central notion of logic, validity, is usually characterized in this fashion."<sup>8</sup>

If O'Grady is correct the laws of logic can only be broken at the expense of rationality. So, if such is the case, relativism can only hold a cogent and rational position if it adopts these fundamental principles. But relativism by definition resists any absolute truth. O'Grady sees the law of non-contradiction as one of many "core principles" that suffice to "curb relativistic excesses tending towards scepticism or subjectivism."<sup>9</sup> According to this law, it cannot be the case that it is true that  $p$  and also  $\sim p$ . One must presuppose the laws of logic in order to make sense of anything whatsoever. Furthermore, these laws must be universal and mind-independent.<sup>10</sup> Hence, the relativist position is one of extreme infelicity if this law is violated. If it is true that this law can be violated, it necessarily follows that relativism is true and false. In order for the relativist to avoid this problem, this law must be adopted, but only at the expense of relativism itself, so rightly Phillips: "the

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<sup>7</sup> *Theory of Knowledge*, p.14.

<sup>8</sup> *Relativism*, p.44.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140

<sup>10</sup> This would be against a conventionalist doctrine of truth that views logical and mathematical truths as human creation. See, O'Grady, *Relativism*, pp. 122-124 for an objection to this position.



'truth' of relativism is essentially ineffable and non-rational and no arguments can be offered to support it."<sup>11</sup>

*The Reliability of Sense Perception*

The reliability of sense perception (hereafter SP), I want to argue, is an inadmissible tool for justification of beliefs. SP must be adopted by the honest inquirer and cannot go overlooked. The reliability of SP permeates philosophical inquiry of many kinds but this does not mean that it is sufficient on its own. Before continuing on to show how SP relates to relativism, a brief moment is needed to delineate the limits of SP. Take the following statements:

- (1) No one is taller than himself.
- (2) There are no such things as 'square' triangles.
- (3) 17 is prime.

The above-mentioned are examples of beliefs that cannot be verified through SP and demarcates the limits of it. Statement (1) must be taken to be true and there is no way that it can be verified through SP, even if SP is a reliable faculty. It would be irrational for one to say "it could be the case that there is no one taller than himself, but that may not be the case in some other world." The underlying issue here is that one must appeal to something other than SP to have knowledge of this truth. Statement (2) is also unverifiable by virtue of the fact that a 'triangle' by definition is different than a 'square' by definition. An enclosed figure with three angles with sum equal to  $180^\circ$  cannot be the same thing as an enclosed figure with four angles with sum equal to  $360^\circ$ . So for the realist, where ' $3 \neq 4$ ' is a necessary truth, this truth is merely contingent to a

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<sup>11</sup> *The Challenge of Relativism* (New York: Continuum, 2007) p. 47

given framework according to the relativist. Statement (3) is true by virtue of the definition of 'prime' i.e. a natural number which has 1 and itself as the only natural divisors.

Continuing on with the limits of SP, take two more sets of statements that should not be put to question:

(4) SP is reliable

(5) There are minds other than my own

My purpose here is to show that (4) and (5) are examples of veridical statements that must be presupposed for any rational conjecture. One cannot formulate an argument for the veracity of these two statements; one must assume them to be true (and not false) in order to achieve coherence. Interestingly, almost everyone takes it for granted that their SP apparatus actually provides them with accurate information about the material world.

How do these few paragraphs relate to relativism? Briefly stated, I outlined that SP is not necessarily sufficient to provide true beliefs leading to knowledge (thought at times it is). There are *a priori* truths that are entirely independent of SP such as (1), (2), and (3). Moreover, (4) presupposes SP and (5) is a metaphysical presupposition necessary for rationality and also survival. One is thought to be insane to deny (5). Furthermore, there are no arguments that accompany the acceptance or denial of anyone of these statements. On a realist account, these are fundamental truths.<sup>12</sup> The relativist will find herself in a very unpleasant, incoherent position that leads to nonsensicality if she denies the reliability of SP. The reason why I chose to focus on SP is because it is the most reliable faculty that provides us with information about the

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<sup>12</sup> I hold to the belief that (4) and (5) are also fundamental, even though (4) is an example of epistemic circularity (which differs from logical circularity).

physical world<sup>13</sup>; thus, it cannot be the case that the reliability of SP is a relative concept. For the relativist to make any rational claims about the physical world, she must assume that SP is a reliable source of knowledge about the world. In doing so, relativism about the source of knowledge of the physical world must be false. To prevent from missing the point here, I'd like to make clear that my reason for showing the limits of SP was to emphasize the fact that some sources of knowledge must be justified by appeal to such a fallible and dubitable apparatus.

THE END OF THE RELATIVIST ROPE: DEFEAT OR  
IRRATIONALITY

According to William Alston, 'realism' as opposed to 'antirealism' (or relativism) "is often concerned to assert that physical objects, universals, propositions, or whatever, enjoy an "independent" existence."<sup>14</sup> I propose here to show that realism, serves as a defeater of relativism, that is, one cannot continue to rationally hold to relativism when realism is adopted by that individual. Examples of defeaters are ample in (but not limited to) the history of science. One recalls that the heliocentric model of the universe combined with Newton's gravitational laws defeated the geocentric model of the universe held by Aristotle and Ptolemy. This defeat is something active in the mind of an individual so that if, after accepting a position that defeats the previously held position by the

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<sup>13</sup> For a detailed work on the topic, see William Alston's *The Reliability of Sense Perception* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

<sup>14</sup> *A Realist Conception of Truth* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996) p. 73.

individual, it becomes irrational to continue to accept the previous position. In other words, a defeater does one of two things: it either completely removes the justification of a certain belief, or severely weakens it. I propose here the conclusion that foundationalism serves as a defeater of relativism by undercutting its justificatory ground.

The focus of this paper is to evaluate whether relativism can be defended objectively. The abovementioned case is an instance of a rebutting defeater, where reason is given to believe  $\sim q$  (where  $q$  is geocentric model). One learns, despite the appearance of the heavenly objects rotating around the Earth, that the Earth is actually not the center of the universe and that only one heavenly object rotates it; therefore, it would be irrational for one to still believe  $q$ , because the evidence against  $q$  rebuts it. Likewise, in the case of relativism, realism serves as an undercutting defeater such that one cannot continue to rationally adhere to relativism when the claim of realism is cognitively and honestly acknowledged.

So a relativistic framework can only be rationally defended if it adopts its defeater. Adopting the defeater undercuts the ground necessary to rationally continuing adhering to relativism. Therefore, relativism is defeated such that "it fails to establish the truth of the relativist's claim universally."<sup>15</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Putting together the threads of this essay, it is clearly seen that the primary concern was with relativism's inability of defending its position objectively. I have labored to show that epistemic relativism fails in every direction, especially

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<sup>15</sup> Phillips, *The Challenge of Relativism: Its Nature and Limits*, p. 31

when it tries to defend itself objectively. I approached this discussion first by establishing the goal of cognition: to provide true or mostly true beliefs. As such, if the relativist denies that a truth-inducing cognitive faculty is necessary for knowledge, it follows that knowledge claims have no epistemic value. Furthermore, if one claims that truth is relative, then either her cognitive epistemic faculties are malfunctioning or relativism is false. The non-negotiability of the laws of logic showed us that violating these laws leads to a self-referentially incoherent position, whereas adopting these laws defeats relativism. Finally, I showed that sense perception is an indispensable tool for providing us with facts about the physical world. Though not infallible and indubitable, it is unreasonable to raise suspicion in regards to its reliability; thus the relativist must either subscribe to the reliability of the senses as a basic belief or always be sceptical about information received from the senses. We have seen that relativism is a self-defeating or at best, incoherent philosophical doctrine. According to Christopher Norris, relativism is something that is made to appear plausible by crafty arguments, though most people, including its defenders at times, are always inclined to know it to be false.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Truth Matters* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 2002) p. 23.