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Relativism: Protagoras and Nelson Goodman*

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Abstract

Discussion of the many faces of relativism occupies a highly prominent place in the epistemological literature. Protagoras in ancient Greece and Nelson Goodman in the modern period are two most notable proponents of relativism. In the present article, I discuss and explain relativistic approaches of these two important relativists. I will first briefly define and review some faces of relativism. Then I will discuss and elaborate Protagorean or true-for-me relativism and Goodman's radical relativism in turn. I will argue that there are crucial difficulties in Protagorean and radical relativism, and that these difficulties, as the realist philosophers insist, make these two faces of relativism undefensible. No doubt, these two shapes of relativism have paved the way for anti-realism. In the end, it will appear that Goodman's radical relativism and so the theory of worldmaking, like Protagorean relativism, suffers from a fatal flaw: the flaw of self-refuting.

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Introduction

Some thinkers maintain that our thoughts about the world are influenced by such things as point of view, temperament, capacities, language, conceptual schemes, scientific paradigm, historical periods, and culture. These thinkers are relativist, and their approach has been called relativism. Relativism, as mentioned, takes many shapes and forms. Realists hold that reality is independent of our thinking, even if it is up to us how we think about it. Relativists, on the contrary, hold that what there is, and what is true, depends on many things such as point of view and conceptual schemes, and consequently a neutral standpoint for evaluating the cognitive norms and moral values is not available to us.

Relativism is frequently defined negatively, in terms of the doctrines it denies, as well as positively, in terms of what it affirms. A number of philosophers who, despite their protestations, are frequently accused of being relativists—Hilary Putnam, Nelson Goodman, Richard Rorty, and maybe even Jacques Derrida—can be seen as negative relativists in so far as they tend to deny universalism and objectivism, but do not accept straightforward attempts to relativise epistemic and moral values to social or historical contexts. (see, Baghramian, 2004:3)

Relativism is a form of anti-realism. Realism and anti-realism have stronger and weaker forms that can be separated from each other. The word ‘real’ is derived from Latin *res*, which means things both in the concrete and abstract sense. Thus, ‘reality’ refers to the totality of all real things, and ‘realism’ is a philosophical doctrine about the reality of some of its aspects. (Niiniluoto, 1999:1).

As realism is divided into several subdisciplines, the doctrines of anti-realism are likewise divided into a number of varieties. Relativism is in fact a bundle of different doctrines. We can distinguish between the broad categories of cognitive, moral and aesthetic relativism. Cognitive relativism can be subdivided into categories such as ontological, semantical, epistemological and methodological. Any of these four categories may include some items. Ontological categories include objects, facts, world and reality; semantical include truth, reference and meaning; epistemological categories include perception,

belief, justification and knowledge; methodological categories include inference, rationality and progress; and moral categories may include at least customs, values, ethics, law, politics and religion.

On the other hand, there is a great variety of factors which some category might be taken to be relative to. Some of the most important factors are: persons, groups, cultures, environment, languages, conceptual frameworks, theories, paradigms, points of view, forms of life, gender, social class, social practices, social interests and values. Relativity to individual persons has been called 'subjectivism' and 'protagoreanism'. Relativity to cultures is 'cultural relativism'; relativity to languages or conceptual or theoretical frameworks is usually called 'conceptual relativism' or 'framework relativism', or 'incommensurabilism'; relativity to viewpoint is 'perspectivism'; relativity to gender is 'gender relativism'; and relativity to social factors is 'class relativism', or 'social relativism'.(Ibid, 228).

It is also helpful to distinguish between local and global form of relativism. The former restricts its claim to a specific category (as reality that may be relative to culture), while the latter generalizes this claim to all categories. For example, global subjectivism asserts that everything is relative to individual persons, but local subjectivism may be restricted to morality only. (Ibid.229).

Discussion of the many faces of relativism occupies a highly prominent place in the epistemological literature. Why is this? Briefly, the reason is because of the theoretical interest and varieties of arguments for philosophical and epistemic relativism. Relativist, from Protagoras to postmodern philosopher, frequently appear able to start from plausible, commonly held assumptions about the nature of knowledge and deduce from these assumptions that we really know from our points of view, our mental structure, our forms of life, our languages, our conceptual frameworks and soon. Non- relativist philosophers then face the task of identifying the mistake in these otherwise plausible assumptions.

The measure of all things

The first known statement of a relativist position in western philosophy is a famous dictum by Protagoras. He famously asserted

that ‘Man is the measure of all things: of the things which are that they are, and of the things which are not, that they are not’(Plato, 1997:*theat.* 152-a1-3). What did he mean? Plato took him to mean: ‘Each things appears [phainesthai] to me, so it is for me, and as it appears to you, so it is for you-you and I each being a man’ (Ibid. 152a6-8).

This famous dictum can be interpreted from individualistic, ontological, logical, alethic and cultural points of view.

It seems that ‘man’ in the dictum refers to the individual person, and that Protagoras’ thesis has more in common with modern subjectivist views than relativism. SextusEmpiricus at times interprets Protagoras’ dictum as a subjectivist thesis in the sense that ‘every appearance whatsoever is true’ (Burnyeat 1976a:172).

The ontological dimension of Protagoras’ relativism commits him to the view that ‘what appears to each individual in the only reality and therefore the real world differs for each’ (Guthrie, 1971:171).

The logical reading of the doctrine is supported by Plato’s report that Protagoras rejected the principle of non-contradiction. The logical interpretation is also favoured by Aristotle who argued that for Protagoras ‘contradictory statements about the same thing are simultaneously true’ and that ‘it is possible either to assert or deny something of every subject’ (Aristotle, 1908: *Met.* [100] b)

Plato also attributes a thesis of alethic relativism, or relativism about truth, to Protagoras, to the effect that if somebody believes or judges P, then P is true for that person (Baghrmian, 2004:29). Whatever the preferred interpretation of Protagoras relativism, it is a mark of the great anxieties caused by Protagoras’ arguments that both Plato’s theory of Forms and Aristotle’s formulation of the categories, which included the category of ‘the relatives’, were, in part, attempts to neutralize the threat posed by it (Barnes, 1988:90).

Plato in *Theaet* offers three interlinked arguments to show that relativism is self-refuting. Suppose you come to a decision in your own mind and then express a judgement about something to me. Let us assume with Protagoras that your judgement is true for *you*. But isn’t it possible that the rest of us may criticise your verdict? Do we

always agree that your judgement is true? Or does there rise up against you, every time, a vast army of persons who think the opposite, who hold that your decisions and your thoughts are false? ...Do you want us to say that you are then judging what is true for yourself, but false for the tens of thousands? ...And what of Protagoras himself? Must he not say this, that supposing he did not believe that man is the measure, any more than the majority of people, then this *Truth* of his which he wrote is true for no one? On the other hand, suppose he believed it himself, but the majority of men do not agree with him; then you see to begin with- the more those to whom it does not seem to be the truth outnumber those to whom it does, so much the more it isn't than it is? (Plato, 1997: *Theaet*, 170d-171a)

One main objection to Protagorean relativism is that, when we form our beliefs and theories, we are aiming to represent things as they really are. That means we think it is possible not only to succeed, but to fail. We succeed when our beliefs and theories represent things as they are, and we fail when they do not (See. Kirk, 1999:39).

It has also been argued that the main problem with Protagorean relativism is that a relativist cannot distinguish between what is right and what one thinks is right. Hilary Putnam maintains that the relativist cannot make sense of the distinction between being right and thinking that he is right. However, the distinction between being right and thinking that one is right is essential to our ability to distinguish between asserting and making noises (Baghramian, 2004:35).

Aristotle argues that Protagoras' doctrine implies that contradictory judgements are true at the same time about the same thing. Aristotle says,

Again, if all contradictory statements are true of the same subject at the same time, evidently all things will be one. For the same thing will be a trireme, a wall, and a man, if of everything it is possible either to affirm or to deny anything (and this premise must be accepted by those who share the views of Protagoras). For if any one things that man is not a trireme, evidently he is not a trireme; so that he also is a trireme, if, as they say, contradictory statements

are both true. And we thus get the doctrine of Anaxagoras that all things are mixed together; so that nothing really exists. (Aristotle, 1908: Met, book Γ, 1007621)

The relativist assumes that every utterance and its negation is true. Therefore, the relativist is unable to make a meaningful statement, and even the very expression of relativism as a position is meaningless since it does not exclude its denial. In this way relativism involves flouting the law of non-contradiction.

Mind, Language and the world

Is the world come ready-made or we divide it into various categories and kinds by applying a conceptual scheme or categorical framework? Are we buildworks by building systems of beliefs? Is this a true proposition that worlds are created through system of description, and different worlds are created by different systems of description?

No doubt our thoughts about the world are influenced by such things as point of view, capacities, experiences, temperament, religion and culture. But some thinkers maintain that we make or construct the world. Nelson Goodman goes much further and maintains that, not only what exists itself depends on us, but even reality is relative. Quinesuggests that even the ‘truths’ of logic and mathematics may be ‘revisable’ and are not ‘necessary’ in any respectable sense. These thoughts sum up under the title of ‘conceptual relativism’.

Before elaborating the Goodman’s conceptual relativism, let me mention very briefly to Popper’s three worlds.

In popper’s terminology, *world 1* contains physical things and processes -from middle-sized ordinary objects to small (atoms), large (stars, galaxies), and process like entities (fields of force).

World2 is the domain of consciousness, in both animals and human beings. It consists of the mental states and processes within individual minds. For humanity, world 2 thus contains what is called ‘psyche’ or ‘soul’.

World3 consists of the products of human social action. It consists of abstract entities like propositions, arguments, theories, and natural numbers (see Niiniloto, 1999:23).

Many people can doubt about the reality of Popper's *world 2* and *world 3* and maintain that these two world and theirs entities are relative to language and conceptual schemes or to culture. But most people properly think that Popper's *world 1* and entities within this world are real and completely mind- independent. An ontological realist insists that world 1 is ontologically mind- independent. Even if we can interact with it and transform it though our actions, we are not the creators of the world 1. Religious man and woman believe that in the beginning of time the world was created by God.

The anti-realist, on the contrary, insists that 'reality' simply is the picture presented by human judgement, not some unreachable abstraction we are perpetually striving to grasp. This is the position that Goodman embraces. According to Goodman one builds worlds by building systems of beliefs. Goodman's position stems from the long-standing dispute between realist and anti-realist philosophers.

We can find the seed of this line of thought or conceptual relativism in German idealism, especially, in Kant's transcendental idealism and Nietzsche's perspectivism. The basis of Kant's transcendental idealism is the distinction of appearance and things in itself. According to Kant our empirical knowledge is a compound of that which we receive through impressions, and that which the faculty of cognition supplies from itself. Kant argues that:

What objects may be in themselves, and apart from all this receptivity of our sensibility, remains completely unknown to us. We know nothing but our mode of perceiving them. (Kant, 1933: A42-B59)

Intuitions are those representations by means of which objects are given to us, and concepts those by means of which we think about objects. Accordingly, objects of our cognition are mere appearances. In sum, our mode of cognition determines objects constitution. For Kant, the categories of understanding are the universal and necessary

conditions of thought and knowledge. But new Kantian thinkers do not insist on there being a unique and immutable scheme.

Nietzsche reject the distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenal world. He claims that we not only construct the world in which we live but also can construct it in different ways. Nietzsche writes of the invention of thinghood and [our] interpreting it into the confusion of sensation (Nietzsche, 1968:§552). He argues: ‘the value of the world lies in our interpretation... previous interpretations have been perspective valuations by virtue of which we can survive in life’ (Ibid.,§616). He also writes of truth as something which is ‘a mobile army of metaphors ... [he proclaims that] truths are illusions of which we have forgotten that they are illusions’ (Nietzsche, 1999: 146).

According to Nietzsche, since we cannot appeal to any facts or criteria independently of their relation to the perspectives we have, we can do little more than insist on the legitimacy of our own perspective, and try to impose it on other people. In sum, Nietzsche’s perspectivism refers to this position that truth is relative to historically conditional points of view.

Goodman and radical relativism

Nelson Goodman in *Structure of Appearance and ways of worldmaking* changed the current conception of conceptual relativism and developed what he called a “redical relativism”. As Harris properly says, the title, *ways of worldmaking*, is appropriately chosen because Goodman really means that we actually make different worlds by creating different theories or systems. (Harris, 1992:65) But every systems consist of many statements that may be incompatible whit each other. Goodman observes that apparent conflicts between plausible statements can often be resolved by relativization to frames of reference:

Consider, to begin with, the statements ‘the sun always moves’ and ‘the sun never moves’ which, though equally true, are at odds with each other. Shall we say, then, that they describe different worlds, and indeed that there are as many different worlds as there are such mutually exclusive truths?

Rather, we are inclined to regard the two strings of words not as complete statement as 'under frame of reference A, the sun always moves' and 'under frame of reference B, the sun never moves' – statements that may both be true of the some worlds. (Goodman, 1978:2)

According Goodman we can have many description of the world, but there is no way of describing the world independently of all frames of reference. Much more striking thing is the vast variety of frames of reference or versions and vision in several sciences... Even with all illusory or wrong or dubious versions dropped, the rest exhibit new dimensions of disparity. Here we have no neat set of frames of reference. (Ibid, 3)

In Goodman's radical relativism even truth is relativized to different worlds or versions. No doubt this relativism is consistent with the pragmatic theory of truth. Indeed, the only guiding principles for system choice and 'worldmaking' are pragmatic. Correspondence with a world independent of all versions has no place in Goodman's philosophy. He explicitly rejects the notion that there is any sort of criterion or test for measuring the accuracy of a theory by its correspondence with world in any realist sense (Goodman, 1972:30). However, he insists that contradictory and incompatible sentences cannot be simultaneously true of the same world.

I maintain that many world versions-some conflicting with each other, some so disparate that conflict or compatibility among them is indeterminable- are equally right, nevertheless, right versions are different from wrong versions: relativism is restrained by consideration of rightness. Rightness, however, is neither constituted nor tested by correspondence with a world independent of all versions. (Goodman, 1996:144)

Goodman wants to replace the objective notion of truth with the relative concept of rightness. Description of the world from a realist point of view can be true or false. In Goodman's relativism the truth and falsity of judgements are relative to the versions of individual.

The idea of worldmaking is the ontological aspect of his relativism. Goodman describes the process of worldmaking in terms of composition and decomposition. He argues that:

Much but by no means all world making consists of taking apart and putting together, often conjointly: on the hand, of dividing wholes into parts and partitioning kinds into sub-species, analyzing complexes into component features, drawing distinctions; on the other hand, of composing wholes and kinds out of parts and members and subclasses, combining features into complexes, and making connections. Such composition or decomposition is normally effected or assisted or consolidated by the application of labels: names, predicates, gestures, pictures. (Goodman, 1978: 7-8)

We have to ask whether Goodman's relativism and worldmaking should be understood literally or metaphorically. Is he simply confusing World 1 and 3? Before answering to these questions, let me to refer to Goodman's important article under the title of 'on star making'. He in that article replaces the concept of worldmaking with the notion of starmaking and claims:

Now we thus make constellations by picking out and putting together certain stars rather than others, so we make stars by drawing creation boundaries rather than others. Nothing dictates whether the sky shall be marked off into constellations or other objects, we have to make what we find, be it the Great Dipper, Sirius, food, fuel, or a stereo system. (Goodman, 1996:145)

Stars and constellations are made by us. Worlds or world versions are constructed by human beings. No doubt, many versions of the world can be right, but many other versions of the world are wrong. Therefore, some ways of worldmaking yield true or right worlds and that others yield false worlds. Although Goodman calls his position "radical relativism" he, at the same time, imposes severe restraints to that. He says, 'willingness to accept countless alternative true or right

world-versions does not mean that everything goes, ...that truths are no longer distinguished from falsehoods, but only that truth must be otherwise conceived than as correspondence with a ready-made world (Goodman, 1978:94). If some world-versions are to be right and others wrong, there must be some standards or “rightness” according to which such an assessment is made. Goodman’s standard of rightness is his notion of *fit with practice* (*Ibid*, 138).

Now we must answer to the above mentioned question: whether Goodman’s Idea of worldmaking should be understood literally or metaphorically? Goodman says, ‘we do not make stars as we make bricks; not all making is a matter of molding mud. The worldmaking mainly in question here is making not with hands but with minds, or rather with languages or other symbol systems’ (Goodman 1996:145).

Does he mean that we have to take his Idea of worldmaking metaphorically? The answer is no, because he then adds: ‘yet when I say that worlds are made, I mean it literally...’ (*Ibid*). Thus, he clearly wishes to make the radical claim that the project of worldmaking goes all the way from artefacts to what the realist takes to be objective, non-relative physical reality.

Goodman’s position has interesting relations to Thomas Kuhn’s claims about theory-relative ‘worlds’. Also, since according to Goodman individual statements have truth-values only relative to some theory of description or some frame of reference, he also aligns himself very closely with Quine’s holism. These similarities are readily apparent in Goodman’s discussion of the comparison of ‘the sun never moves’ and ‘the sun always moves’. But unlike Quine, who gives ontological preference to a world composed of physical objects, Goodman does not attribute ontological priority to any particular frame of reference (see Harris, 1992, 61-68). Goodman, like Kuhn, maintains that there are no good epistemological grounds for preferring one kind of system or frame of reference to another.

Objections to worldmaking theory

Goodman’s radical relativism faces several difficulties. There are some subtle objections to his theory. One problem facing Goodman is how to distinguish between right and wrong versions. As we saw,

Goodman argues that a description is right if it fit with the practice for which the version has been constructed. Goodman relativises the rightness of design and truth of statements to a system. There are criteria of rightness or 'fit', but they are based on the specific purpose that a version serves. This allows us to assess judgments within a given system or version, but we are left with no metacriteria to adjudicate between all those versions that are internally coherent or workable (see Baghramian, 2004:232).

Furthermore, Goodman's criteria of rightness might be interpreted as relative to his own meta-theory of worldmaking. Harvey Siegel says, meta-version is itself only one countless possible meta-versions. So the restraints on radical relativism which keep it from being the case that "everything goes" in Goodman's relativism are themselves relative to Goodman's meta-version. Relativity of versions re-arises at the level of meta-version. In short, it is the case that not "everything goes" *only in Goodman's meta-version* (see Harris, 1992: 70-71).

According to John Searle, when Goodman writes, "we make stars by drawing certain boundaries rather than others", there is no way to understand that claim except by presupposing something there on which we can draw boundaries ... contrary to Goodman, we do not make "worlds" ; we make description that the actual world may fit or fail to fit. But all this implies that there is a reality that exists independently of our system of concepts. Without such a reality, there is nothing to apply the concept to (Searle, 1997: 22-28).

As we saw, Goodman argues that 'we make constellations by picking out and putting together certain stars rather than others' (Goodman, 1996:145). He also insist that 'when I say that worlds are made [by us], I mean it literally (Ibid). It seems certain that it is up to us whether and how we use words 'star' or 'Himalayas'. But that by no means implies that the existence of star or Himalayas is also up to us. They are out there regardless of how we descript them. As John Searle says, 'different descriptions of facts [...] came and went, but the facts [such as Himalayas] remained unaffected' (Searle, 1997: 28-29).

It is important to emphasize that, as Harvey siegel has argued, Goodman's relativism, like all other relativistic claims, is self-refuting

because Goodman believes his ‘restraints on radical relativism, his criteria of rightness to be version- neutral, and to pick out his version as right. But, by his own scheme, those restraints, those criteria cannot be seen as version- neutral, but rather must be seen as part of his meta-version-and so cannot non-question-beggingly pick out his version as right’ (Siegel, 1987: 155-6).

The relativist tells us things are relative to A, B or C, but this is a self-refuting claim that we are not really capable of taking seriously. This is not to say that relativistic position is not a serious one about our epistemological and cognitive relationship to the worlds. Rather, it seems certain that we cannot help but believe in some rational and ontological principles and facts such as, non-contradiction, causation, deductive reasoning and external worlds. It seems certain that existence of something are relative to A, B or C, but there is a logical error in argument from “it is possible to relativise some things to A, B or C” to “it is possible to relativise everything to A, B or C”. In other world, relativism loses all meaning if we try to relativise everything. The game of relativizing itself presupposes non-relative reality.

Conclusion

Protagoras in ancient Greece and Nelson Goodman in modern period are two outstanding proponents of relativism. Protagoras relativises truth to man: man is the measure of all things. Goodman claims that rightness of description and truth of statements are alike relative to system. He also relativises ontology to version, and maintains that there is no realistic ontology of physical objects to make any one of the choices metaphysically or scientifically more desirable than any other choice.

The main problem with Protagorean relativism is that a relativist cannot distinguish between what is right and what one thinks is right. False beliefs and self refutivity are other difficulties of Protagorean relativism.

Goodman’s position faces several difficulties such as: (1) since there is no meta criteria to adjudicate between versions that are internally coherent or workable, he cannot distinguish between right

and wrong versions; (2) relativity of versions re-arises at the level of meta-version; (3) Goodman's worldmaking presuppose something out there on which we can draw boundaries and complete the process of worldmaking. In short, Goodman's relativism, like all sorts of relativism, requires a context and in any context, there are necessarily truths and mind-independent realities.

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