

J. Adam Carter

Metaepistemology and Relativism. Palgrave MacMillan, 2016. Pp. xiv + 298. ISBN 978-1-137-33663-7

The philosophical literature on relativism is a little like the literature on scepticism. The relativist, like the sceptic, is a foe to be vanquished. In the rush to condemn, it is often unclear which variety of relativism is under attack. One can be a relativist about *everything*. Or one can be a relativist about a *particular domain*, for instance, epistemology. Even within a domain, there are further choice points. One can be a relativist about *epistemic facts*, like the fact that I know the earth was created millions of years ago. Maybe this is a fact for the scientist, but not the creationist. Or one can be a relativist about *knowledge attributions*. Maybe it is true for me to say “I know the earth was created millions of years ago”, but not for the creationist. J. Adam Carter’s new book discusses all of these forms of relativism. While he takes a critical line, he is a careful and patient philosophical interlocutor. He takes the time to formulate a variety of relativisms, before telling us whether he thinks they are ultimately plausible. He concludes that the most plausible form of epistemic relativism, relativism about knowledge attributions, poses an important challenge to contemporary epistemology, though not the challenge one would expect. Maybe this relativist is right that our knowledge attributing practice is relativistic. The problem for epistemologists is that their knowledge attributing practice isn’t. In this review I will give a summary of the book, making some critical comments along the way.

Chapter 1 situates epistemic relativism as a view in *metaepistemology*. Metaepistemology steps back from particular substantive debates in epistemology and asks which commitments are shared by those engaging in epistemological debate (1). How does one go about identifying these commitments? As I read him, Carter proposes a kind of heuristic. Take some epistemological dispute D between A and B. A and B are committed to *p* if *p* is part of the common ground (in Stalnaker’s sense) in D. Carter uses this heuristic to argue that epistemologists are committed to there being *objective* epistemic facts (15). Skipping over some details, the key feature of objective epistemic facts is that they are *authoritative* in the sense that they imply reasons for subjects to behave (form beliefs, collect evidence, etc.) in certain ways irrespective of their wishes and desires (26). The *epistemic realist* holds that there are such epistemic facts. The epistemic relativist seems to challenge this. For the relativist, the authority of an epistemic fact seems restricted to those it is a fact relative to (29).

I want to register two worries here, and make a comment. The first worry is that Stalnakerian acceptance is quite a weak propositional attitude; we can accept that *p*, in

Stalnaker's sense, without believing that p is true. Maybe epistemologists talk *as if* they believe in objective, authoritative epistemic facts. This doesn't mean they do.

The second worry is that, if Carter is right, then anyone who defends instrumentalism about epistemic norms—the view that we only have reason to follow epistemic norms because we want true beliefs and following them is a way of achieving true beliefs—is violating commitments shared in first-order epistemology. Maybe instrumentalism is false, but is it so unorthodox?

The comment is that we can formulate a kind of epistemological scepticism that is analogous to J. L. Mackie's moral scepticism. Mackie thought that, even though there are no (objective) moral facts, this is compatible with a fairly standard first-order ethical picture, on which some things are right and other things wrong. So consider the view that, even though there are no (objective) epistemic facts, we are still justified in believing some things and unjustified in believing others. One of the benefits of Carter's discussion of metaepistemology is that it explains why there is conceptual space for this kind of view.

Chapter 2 argues convincingly against global relativism. Carter uses this chapter to distinguish between two ways of thinking of relativism. According to the first way, relativism about some claim of the form 'x is P'—e.g. 'S's belief that p is justified'—should be construed as the view that the claim should be *replaced* with a claim of the form 'x is P relative to F', where 'F' is something like a framework or epistemic system. According to the second way, claims of the form 'x is P' are true or false only relative to F. The key difference is that the former view reconstrues the relevant claims so that they are true or false absolutely, whereas the latter thinks of the original claims as genuinely true or false, albeit relatively so (52-3). For the cognoscenti: this is the distinction between *contextualism* (Keith DeRose etc.) and *assessment relativism* (John MacFarlane).

Chapters 3-5 argue against relativism about epistemic facts. The foremost proponent of this kind of epistemic relativism was perhaps Richard Rorty, according to whom epistemic facts—like the fact that some piece of information justifies some belief B—are relativised to frameworks or grids. Thus, while observation through his telescope may have justified Galileo in believing that the earth orbits the sun, it didn't justify Cardinal Bellarmine.

Chapter 3 focuses on the problem of the criterion, repurposed as an argument for relativism instead of for scepticism (60). The basic thought is that absolute epistemic facts about, say, justification require a criterion for distinguishing between justified and non-justified beliefs. But, for any given criterion, we can ask what justifies it. The relativist argues that, in view of the problems with the foundationalist, coherentist and infinitist alternatives, the only

reputable way of thinking of justification makes it relative: a criterion is justified for some X (an individual, a community) just on case it is the one they use. One of Carter's objections to this is that no argument for preferring the relativist to the sceptical alternative is given (65-8). Another is that accepting whatever criterion I happen to have is no less dogmatic than foundationalism (68-71). I would have liked to have seen more discussion of the fact that Rortean epistemic relativism is a sort of (formal) foundationalism, albeit with culturally shifting foundations. If the relativist can argue they are offering the only plausible sort of foundationalism, perhaps both objections can be dealt with.

Chapter 4 focuses on disagreements like that between Galileo and Bellarmine. The problem here is that both have provided arguments that, by their own lights, are persuasive (Galileo by appealing to the telescope, Bellarmine by appealing to scripture), but by the lights of their opponents are unpersuasive. As Carter notes, this is a variant on the Pyrrhonian idea that, for any argument that A can provide for p , there is an equally good argument that B can provide for not- p (78). The Pyrrhonian concluded that A and B should suspend judgement on p . The relativist concludes that A and B are both right, but only relative to their respective frameworks.

Carter objects that neither conclusion follows unless we assume two things. First, that there is no 'Archimedean' norm they can appeal to in order to resolve their dispute (in the Bellarmine/Galileo dispute, this norm would adjudicate between experimental observation and scripture) (84-7). Second, that the disagreement is due to their having different frameworks (90). I was unsure of Carter's reasons for worrying about the second assumption. He is clearly right that many disputes are due to cognitive biases and the like as opposed to clashes in frameworks (94-5). But wouldn't showing that the Bellarmine/Galileo dispute was due to biases rather than a clash in frameworks require engaging in extensive historical research? One suspects this dispute is discussed so often *because* it is meant to be a rare case of an actual clash in frameworks.

Chapter 5 focuses on epistemic circularity. Let's assume that frameworks have a structure, and are built around basic principles, like a principle that says that beliefs formed through observation (e.g. looking through a telescope) in certain conditions are justified. It looks like the only kind of justification for such frameworks is going to be circular, either because it will assume the framework, or particular principles that are part of it. The relativist argues that, because (within certain limits) any framework will be self-justifying in this way, any framework is equally defensible, and so justified. Carter's discussion of this argument is intricate and draws on some details from the debate over the structure of perceptual warrant

(127-32). But the gist is that not all forms of circularity are problematic (the epistemic externalist tends to make a virtue of circularity).

Chapter 6 deals with Paul Boghossian's influential attack on epistemic relativism. While there is an interesting discussion of Martin Kusch's attempt to tweak the kind of relativistic position Boghossian attacks, the main point of this chapter is that Boghossian's target is the *contextualist* as opposed to the genuine (MacFarlane-style) relativist (153-61). One of Boghossian's central objections to relativism is that it seems to turn normative claims ('S is justified in believing *p*') into descriptive claims ('Relative to epistemic framework F, S is justified in believing *p*'). But this is contextualism, not genuine relativism. Thus, Carter concludes that Boghossian has ignored a worthy target (161-2).

Chapters 7-9 argue against John MacFarlane's relativism. MacFarlane's basic idea is that whether epistemic judgements—like "Adam knows that the bird is a chaffinch"—are true or false depends on which alternatives are relevant, and different sets of alternatives are relevant in different contexts of assessment. Say that in context of assessment C1 the set of relevant alternatives is {eagle, buzzard, hawk} and in context C2 the set is {finch, budgie, sparrow} and that Adam can rule out the first set but not the second. According to MacFarlane's relativism, Adam knows relative to C1 but not relative to C2. The vital point is that MacFarlane's relativism is a *semantic* thesis: he is a relativist about the *extension* of the word "knows" (the extension depends on the context of assessment).

Chapter 7 argues that MacFarlane's view is at odds with the epistemologist's views about the extension of the word "knows". The argument is intricate. Carter takes it that, according to MacFarlane, the set of relevant alternatives is entirely 'fixed' by the context of assessment (178-80). But this means that his view can't always distinguish between the epistemic situations of subjects located in different external environments. Say Adam is in a fake barn scenario whereas his internal duplicate Adam* isn't. So long as this information isn't part of the context of assessment, an assessor will require that Adam and Adam* rule out the same set of alternatives in order to know. But epistemologists would usually take it that Adam* knows whereas Adam doesn't. Carter concludes that an assessment-sensitive semantics for knowledge attributions gives us an extension for the concept "knowledge" that rejects certain epistemological assumptions about its extension (188). Chapters 8 and 9 utilise this conclusion to argue that, to the extent that MacFarlane gives us a plausible semantics for knowledge attributions, he succeeds in giving us reasons to think that the ordinary (relativist) concept of knowledge is distinct from the epistemological (non-relativist) concept. This is, in Carter's view, the epistemologically interesting upshot of MacFarlane's relativism (230-1).

I have two worries about Carter's argument here. The first is that it turns the problem of relativism into another problem, viz. the problem that epistemological ways of thinking about knowledge are at odds with ordinary ways of thinking. This problem is already raised by experimental epistemology, and it is unclear whether the relativist gives us a distinctive take on it. On the one hand, this is good news for Carter, who is after all not a relativist. On the other, this makes me question his claim that MacFarlane-style relativism is more worthy of philosophical attention than Rortean relativism.

The second is that it isn't clear why MacFarlane needs to say that the context of assessment entirely fixes the set of relevant alternatives. In an extended footnote (fn. 45 on p. 179), Carter claims that, if the set of relevant alternatives is a function of both the context of assessment and the subject's environment, then relativism will face a problem with modal and temporal embeddings. That is, it will have to allow that utterances of claims like this can be true: "I know I have £2 in my pocket, but if the possibility of counterfeiting were relevant to my practical situation, I wouldn't know that." But this only follows if the relativist allows a *particular* feature of the subject's environment to determine the relevance of alternatives, viz. their practical situation (this is what so-called 'subject-sensitive invariantism' does). Why does the relativist need to allow *all* features of the subject's environment in order to allow the feature required to deal with fake barn cases, viz. the prevalence of fakes in the area? He also claims that, if MacFarlane appeals to the environment, his view loses its distinctively relativist flavour. But one would think the view is distinctively relativist so long as the context of assessment plays a *central* role.

These quibbles aside, *Metaepistemology and Relativism* is an important contribution to the literature. It is one of the first attempts to evaluate the epistemological implications of MacFarlane's brand of epistemic relativism. But it also gives equal consideration to more traditional forms of relativism. That I have found aspects to criticise also reflects its other chief virtue: this book seeks to understand what relativism is before condemning it. I am happy to recommend it as a model for how to work on the problem of relativism today.

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