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Epistemic Disagreement, Diversity and Relativism

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Abstract: Diversity abounds, and typically, disagreement is not far behind. Unsurprisingly, when initial starting points are far enough apart (take for example, the famous 17th century dispute between Galileo and Cardinal Bellarmine) the ensuing disagreements can appear rationally irreconcilable. Some philosophers such as Richard Rorty (1979) have taken the presence of such disagreements as evidence for epistemic relativism. The present aim will be to canvass this general argument strategy, which moves from diversity to disagreement to epistemic relativism. In the course of doing so, objections will be raised to various forms that this argument has taken, and, finally, I'll contrast traditional forms of the diversity-disagreement-relativism sequence with a more contemporary, linguistically driven variant that has been defended in recent work by John MacFarlane (e.g., 2007; 2014).

1. From diversity to disagreement to relativism: ethics and epistemology

Diversity often gives rise to disagreement. Consider a straightforward non-epistemic example, described by Herodotus in the *Histories*, concerning funerary customs¹. The custom of the ancient Greeks was always to bury their dead; eating them would have been appalling. The Callatians on the other hand honoured the dead by eating them; burying them would have been out of the question. As Herodotus noted, each thought the other custom was not merely different, but *obviously wrong*. Their differing funerary codes accordingly led to a disagreement, overseen by King Darius of Persia, about the right way to honour the dead. And it's unclear what, if anything, could have settled such a disagreement.

Perhaps, in such circumstances, mutual tolerance is the way forward. Here's a slogan that is often trotted out: burying the dead is right for the Greeks, eating them is right for Callatians. And there's no 'culture-independent' sense in which either is

¹This example, reported in the *Histories* (c. 440 BCE), is often used to introduce the idea of moral relativism. See, for example, Rachels (2003, Ch. 2), who takes this case as a starting point for discussion in the widely used textbook *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*.

right or wrong. (Compare with an epistemic analogue: Western science is right for you, Azande witchcraft is right for me, and there's no 'culture-independent' sense in which either of us is right or wrong.)

As James Rachels (2003, 16) puts it, this kind of diversity-to-relativism thinking, abstracted from the Greeks vs. Callatians case and applied more generally in the domain of morality, can be framed as the Cultural Differences Argument.

Cultural Differences Argument

1. Different cultures have different moral codes.
2. Therefore, there is no objective "truth" in morality. Right and wrong are only matters of opinion, and opinions vary from culture to culture.

Even if the conclusion is true, the Cultural Differences Argument is not a promising argument. And that's the case even though its premise is obviously true. For starters, the argument is not valid without an additional premise to the effect that *if* different cultures have different moral codes, then there's no objective or culture-independent truth about morality. But this premise is open to various kinds of well-worn objections².

Interestingly, in his critique of the Cultural Differences Argument, Rachels challenges this implicit premise on the grounds that, among other things, *even if* different cultures have different moral codes, there are nonetheless

[...] some moral rules that *all* societies will have in common, because those rules are necessary for society to exist [...] Cultures may differ in what they regard as legitimate exceptions to the rules, but this disagreement exists against a background of agreement on the larger issues' (2003, 22).

Here Rachels is expressing the idea that at least one way to block the move from diversity to relativism is to highlight the very fact of a *shared background* of at least some minimal universal moral agreement. Examples he gives of universally shared values include a general norm of truth-telling and a prohibition on murder. As he puts it, 'Not *every* moral rule can vary from society to society'³.

²See, for example, Norris (1996), Siegel (2004) and Seidel (2014). Cf., Baghrarian and Carter (2015) for an overview of replies to various kinds of cultural relativism.

³*Op. cit.* 22. My italics.

Those sympathetic to Rachels' reply here might be optimistic that a similar kind of 'anti-relativistic' move can be made in *epistemology*, and indeed, such a move has been pursued in recent work by Howard Sankey (2010)⁴. Cultural disagreements about (for example) what justifies what, what counts as knowledge, must exist against a shared background of agreement about fundamental epistemic norms.

However, this kind of move is perhaps too quick. For one thing, *contra* Rachels, it's not entirely clear how the 'shared background' rejoinder is supposed to work even in the moral case where he is explicitly applying it. Consider that on the hypothesis that moral relativism is *true*, a shared background would be entirely possible. On such a scenario, the particular moral claims constituting the shared background would fail to be candidates for objective moral truths, despite their popularity. In fact, one very influential argument for such a possibility owes to the latter Wittgenstein, as developed in his posthumous *On Certainty* (1969). Wittgenstein effectively subverts Rachels' appeal to a shared background, as a means to establishing objectivity, by arguing that a shared background is exactly the sort of thing that cannot *itself* be critically appraised one way or another⁵.

Wittgenstein's position about the status of our shared background beliefs is unsurprisingly a controversial one⁶. But even if one is unsympathetic to the Wittgensteinian rejoinder to Rachels, there's another important reason to be suspicious that we can very easily diffuse (moral or epistemic) variants on the Cultural Differences Argument by simply by pointing—as it is tempting to do—to examples of minimal cross-cultural agreement. This second line of argument owes to none other than Rachels himself.

According to Rachels, the '*fundamental mistake* in the Cultural Differences Argument is that it attempts to derive a substantive conclusion about a subject (morality) from the mere fact that people disagree about it'⁷. This is a compelling point. But a corollary of this idea is that it is fallacious to derive a substantive conclusion about a subject (morality) from facts about what people *agree* about, including the fact that most cultures agree on certain basic moral truths. If disagreement is irrelevant to what's actually true of the status of moral claims, then so is agreement.

⁴Sankey refers to this move as a kind of naturalistic rejoinder to epistemic relativism, which he understands to be motivated by the problem of the criterion. See also Sankey (2012) and Sankey (2011). Cf., Carter (2016 Ch. 3) for a critique.

⁵For some recent defences of a Wittgensteinian 'hinge' strategy in epistemology, see Pritchard (2015) and Coliva (2015).

⁶One crucial dividing line in the contemporary literature on Wittgenstein's epistemology concerns the matter of whether framework, or 'hinge' propositions have other kinds of properties characteristic of typical beliefs, despite their lying beyond what can be rationally supported. For some perspectives on the character of hinge propositions, see for example Coliva (2015), Moyal-Sharrock (2004), Pritchard (2012; 2015) and Stroll (1994).

⁷*Op. cit.* 16. My italics.

The upshot, in the case of epistemic as opposed to moral disagreements, is that *even if* it turns out that all cultures accept some basic epistemic norms⁸, we *can't simply appeal to this fact* in order to decisively conclude the epistemic relativism is false. Some further argument is needed.

Granted, this is not so much a problem in the face of the Cultural Differences Argument. This is because the implicit premise of that argument is subject to a barrage of other well-known objections⁹. However—and this will be important in what follows—there are other more subtle ways to reason from facts about diversity, broadly speaking, to the conclusion that epistemic relativism is true—i.e., subtler than the Culture Differences Argument's insistence that diversity of opinion *itself* is a consideration in favour of truth of epistemic relativism. Given that the mere fact of a shared minimal background is ineffectual in principle as an anti-relativistic response, rejoinders to more subtle moves from diversity to relativism will require other kinds of responses.

Here is the plan. In what follows, I will canvass three styles of argument for epistemic relativism which take considerations to do with diversity and disagreement as a motivating premise. §§2-3 engage with argument strategies for epistemic relativism on the basis of considerations to do with non-neutrality. §4 focuses on arguments for epistemic relativism which highlight how diverse starting points can lead to relativism by way of epistemic circularity. §5 closes by contrasting these forms of argument with a newer, semantic approach to epistemic relativism, wherein diversity plays a very different kind of motivating role.

2. 'No neutrality, therefore relativism'¹⁰

In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Richard Rorty (1979) recounts a famous dispute between Galileo and Cardinal Bellarmine, concerning the truth of geocentrism, the doctrine that the earth is the orbital centre of the universe. One piece of evidence Galileo had proffered against the geocentric model is that moons were spotted orbiting Jupiter. This is evidence he acquired through his telescope, and which counted against the prevailing thought that the earth was the only centre of motion. However, as Cardinal Bellarmine saw it, revealed scripture indicates that geocentrism is cor-

⁸Empirical evidence has become more readily available concerning points of cross-cultural agreement in epistemology, in light of results reported in recent years by experimental philosophers. For example, in an influential study reported by Machery et al. (2015), it was shown that the Gettier intuition is (perhaps surprisingly) robust across cultures.

⁹Two such objections are the 'anything goes' objection and the objection from moral progress.

¹⁰This slogan for the piece of reasoning that is under consideration in this section owes to Siegel (2011).

rect, and so *ipso facto* the telescope must not be a good source of evidence about the heavens¹¹.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, neither party was successful in persuading the other. As Steven D. Hales (2014) has noted, in circumstances like these—where it appears that interlocutors can't agree on even the most basic epistemic norms—the relativist option can look attractive. And this was Rorty's (1979) own take on the matter: both Galileo and Bellarmine were right relative to their own epistemic 'grid', and there's nothing further to say.

Harvey Siegel (2011, 205–6) helpfully summarises how the kind dialectical impasse resulting from such diverse starting points has provided fuel for the relativist¹²:

Not only did the two parties disagree as to the truth of the relevant claim – Galileo affirmed the existence of the moons, while his opponents denied it – they also disagreed about the relevant standards (telescopic observation? naked eye observation? Scripture? Aristotle?) to which appeal should be made in order to resolve their disagreement.

And from this position, the move to relativism proceeds as follows:

The relativist here claims that there can be no non-relative resolution of the dispute concerning the existence of the moons, precisely because there is no neutral, non-question-begging way to resolve the dispute concerning the standards. Any proposed meta-standard that favors regarding naked eye observation, Scripture, or the writings of Aristotle as the relevant standard by which to evaluate “the moons exist” will be judged by Galileo as unfairly favoring his opponents since he thinks he has good reasons to reject the epistemic authority of all these proposed standards; likewise, any proposed meta-standard that favors Galileo's preferred standard, telescopic observation, will be judged to be unfair by his opponents, who claim to have good reasons to reject that proposed standard. In this way, the absence of neutral (meta-) standards seems to make the case for relativism¹³ (2011, 205–6).

We can characterise the key steps of this argument as follows:

No-neutrality, Therefore Relativism

¹¹ See Finocchiaro (1989) for an historical overview of the meeting between Galileo and Bellarmine.

¹² For an expanded discussion of this move on behalf of the relativist, see Siegel (2004).

¹³ Cited also in Carter (2016 Ch. 4).

3. There can be a non-relative resolution of the dispute concerning the existence of the moons, only if there is available to the interlocutors an appropriately neutral epistemic meta-norm.
4. In the context of the dispute between Galileo and Bellarmine, no such appropriately neutral meta-norm is available.
5. Therefore, it's not the case that there can be a non-relative resolution of the dispute concerning the existence of the moons.
6. Therefore, epistemic relativism is true¹⁴.

This piece of reasoning makes a seemingly wild leap from (5) to (6). What's responsible for this leap is (3), the premise that there can be a non-relative resolution to the dispute concerning the existence of the moons, *only if* there is available to the interlocutors an appropriately neutral epistemic meta-norm.

We can generate a counterexample to (3) by simply following Sextus Empiricus: Sextus, in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* thought that in the face of *equipollence*, or a seemingly irresolvable dialectical standpoint—the appropriate move is to simply *withhold judgment*, a move compatible with the falsity of relativism¹⁵. If withholding judgment is a viable option, then (3) is false, and the move to relativism between (5) and (6) is illicit¹⁶.

Interestingly, a further potential problem with this argument is (4), the claim that, in the context of the dispute between Galileo and Bellarmine, no such appropriately neutral meta-norm is available to the interlocutors. Is this really true? For one thing, surely Bellarmine and Galileo could agree upon some very basic epistemic norms. Take, for example, the law of non-contradiction¹⁷.

However, even if one finds an appropriately *neutral* meta-norm, it's hardly obvious that mutual acceptance of such a norm would be of any *use* to Bellarmine and Galileo for the purposes of navigating out of their deadlock. Consider, for example, this tautological epistemic norm: Infer $A \rightarrow A$. Suppose Bellarmine and Galileo both (happily) accept this. The state of play becomes:

	Galileo	Bellarmino
Telescopic Evidence	Accept	Reject
Scriptural Revelation	Reject	Accept

¹⁴A variation of this argument appears in Carter (2016, 83).

¹⁵See Empiricus, Annas, and Barnes (2000) for discussion. Cf., Morison (2014).

¹⁶The relativist might reply, as Hales has, that *ceteris paribus*, scepticism is less motivated than relativism: and so if an irreconcilable dialectical position recommends just relativism or scepticism, relativism is a better option. For a response to this kind of reply, see Carter (2016 Ch. 4).

¹⁷There are some potential issues here, in Bellarmine's case, concerning the doctrine of the trinity, but let's set these aside.

	Galileo	Bellarmino
<i>Tautologous meta-norm</i>	Accept	Accept

Is this new position more promising than their previous one—viz., their dialectical position prior to realising that they’re both happy to infer $A \rightarrow A$? While the tautologous meta-norm is certainly *neutral* enough, it plausibly fails to be appropriately *discriminatory*; it is so neutral that it would plausibly fail to afford either party any ‘Archimedean’ point from which rational adjudication (one way or another) would be possible¹⁸. The sort of epistemic meta-norm that would seem to be needed to facilitate rational navigation out of the deadlock would have to be both appropriately neutral *and* appropriately discriminatory.

Of course, it is a matter of historical record whether in the case of Galileo and Bellarmine, there really *was* such a meta-norm, appropriately neutral and appropriately discriminatory, available to both parties. However, a moment’s reflection here should generate some philosophical discomfort: the ‘No Neutrality, Therefore Relativism’ argument seems to have led us down a path where the matter of whether relativism is true would appear to turn importantly on biographical contingencies to do with some particular dispute. More generally, what might rightly seem odd is that the matter of whether epistemic relativism is true should hang in the balance of what shape any *actual* debate takes or has taken.

But perhaps the relativist has a perfectly sensible way to diffuse this concern. The relativist can grant her critic that the matter of whether epistemic relativism is *true* does not depend on any biographical contingencies of particular arguments (i.e., whether any particular historical interlocutors, such as Bellarmine and Galileo, were or were not able to locate appropriately neutral and discriminatory meta-norms). The relativist can proceed to tell us that, while such actual historical arguments are useful reference points, all that’s really needed is that there *could* be situations in the neighbourhood of Bellarmine v. Galileo where no appropriately neutral and discriminatory meta-norm is available. And so, on this line, the historical Bellarmine v. Galileo debate is as irrelevant as any other actual historical dispute. Call this kind of reply *possibilism*. Let’s now consider this strategy more closely.

3. A ‘possibilist’ variation

One way to motivate a possibilist variation on the ‘No Neutrality, Therefore Relativism’ argument is to simply come up with an imagined case where all the relevant features

¹⁸For discussion, see Carter (2016, 83).

hold—viz., where two interlocutors are such that, in the context of their disagreement, no appropriately neutral or discriminatory meta-norm is available.

In recent work, Steven Hales (2014) offers just such a case, featuring two characters—Jack and Diane—who are engaged in what Hales describes as an irreconcilable disagreement over the matter of whether there is a soul that animates the human body (call this ‘P’)¹⁹. Jack’s primary source of evidence is Jaegwon Kim’s analytic philosophy of mind; Diane’s is the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Hales writes:

In the present example, Jack and Diane have a genuine irreconcilable difference; they disagree over proposition ‘P’, they disagree over what evidence is relevant to establishing to truth or falsity of ‘P’, and they have no additional means of settling their debate about the relevant evidence. Jack and Diane cannot discover any mutually agreeable meta-evidence which would allow them to settle their dispute over first-order evidence ... we might regard a persistent failure to agree about even the meta-evidence for a claim as a good reason to conclude that there is no such thing as the right kind of first-order evidence. In such a case, provided we are not tempted by scepticism, *relativism appears to be our last option*. The dispute between Jack and Diane is resolved by determining that ‘P’ is both true and false. ‘P’ is true relative to Diane’s perspective, a perspective which includes as an epistemological component the methodology of appeal to revelation, the Bible, and its expert interpreters as a source of noninferential beliefs. ‘P’ is false relative to Jack’s perspective, the epistemology of which includes analytic rationalism (2014, 78-80, my italics).

Hales’ move from irreconcilable disagreement to relativism doesn’t (like the version of the argument noted in the previous section) depend on any historical facts about how any actual disagreements proceeded. Rather, it reasons from facts about how a non-actual disagreement could go, to the conclusion that epistemic relativism is true. In this respect, it seems like an improvement. However, as I’ve argued elsewhere, a dilemma arises for the proponent of a possibilist strategy²⁰.

To appreciate the dilemma, first consider that, once we retreat to possible disagreements, we can conceive of individuals, Jack_{Math} and Diane_{Math} who rely on math

¹⁹See also Hales (2009) for a detailed defence of various kinds of relativism.

²⁰To be clear, Hales in virtue of giving the case that he has, isn’t committed to possibilism, even though his strategy is compatible with it. This is because Hales could insist that there are *actual* cases like that of Jack and Diane, and that what’s relevant to relativism is that there are at least some such actual cases, viz., where an appropriately neutral and appropriately discriminatory meta-norm are unavailable to the interlocutors. However, this interpretation of his case renders it open to the more general kind of problem with ‘actualism’; it is deeply perplexing why the truth of a metaphysical thesis such as relativism should hang in the balance of how any actual historical argument proceeded.

books, and the Catechism_{Math}—a possible religious text that includes revealed mathematical dogma—respectively, to reach an analogous dialectical position as Jack and Diane do in Hales’ case. If possibilism is assumed, it looks as though the case of Jack and Diane motivates epistemic relativism only if the case of Jack_{Math} and Diane_{Math} motivates mathematical relativism.

The first horn of the dilemma for the possibilist is to accept *global* relativism; after all, the possible dispute between Jack_{Math} and Diane_{Math} is such that we can replace ‘Math’ with any ‘X’ whatsoever. But global relativism is a very difficult pill to swallow²¹. The ‘possibilist’ proponent of the ‘No Neutrality Therefore Relativism’ argument who wishes to avoid global relativism can opt for the second horn: explain why the unavailability of an appropriately neutral and discriminatory meta-norm is supposed to motivate a relativist conclusion when the lack of such a meta-norm is a property of a possible disagreement between Jack and Diane, but not when it’s a property of a possible disagreement between other possible disputants, such as Jack_{Math} and Diane_{Math}. Opting for the second horn would appear to be unacceptably arbitrary. Opting for the first incurs the baggage of global relativism.

Suppose for a moment that the foregoing dilemma could somehow be avoided entirely. There is yet another kind of issue that faces the possibilist strategy no less than the ‘actualist’ strategy. Recall the sceptical objection to the actualist’s premise (3) of the ‘No Neutrality, Therefore Relativism’ argument. That premise, recall, stated that there can be a non-relative resolution of [Bellarmine and Galileo’s] dispute concerning the existence of the moons, only if there is available to the interlocutors an appropriately neutral (and appropriately discriminatory) epistemic meta-norm. The sceptical objection to this premise was (in short) that it effectively begs the question against the sceptic in favour of the relativist. From an apparently irreconcilable standpoint, it’s not evident why the relativist conclusion has more to recommend it all-things-considered than does the sceptical response recommended by Sextus. The possibilist, though she doesn’t hang her hat on any historical facts about how any actual disagreements have gone, nonetheless faces this same issue at the last hurdle. Why should possible irreconcilable disagreements (e.g., such as that between Jack and Diane) favour the relativist’s conclusion over the sceptic’s? It remains for the possibilist who sidesteps the two-horned dilemma to address this point.

²¹Plato, in the *Theatetus*, offers a famous refutation of global relativism, of the sort defended by Protagoras. For a charitable reconstruction of this refutation, see Burnyeat (1976). See also Carter (2016 Ch. 2) and Baghrmian (2004) for discussion.

4. Diversity, Framework Circularity and Relativism

The path from diversity to disagreement to relativism traced in §§2-3 appealed to the seeming *irreconcilability* of certain kinds of disagreements with radically diverse starting points. There is, however, another way to traverse through the diversity—disagreement—relativism sequence which needn't give 'irreconcilability facts' any important role to play in motivating epistemic relativism.

This other strategy proceeds in two parts²². Firstly, consider that—at least, outside epistemology classrooms—the activity of attempting to justify one's own system of epistemic principles is typically a pointless exercise. The simple reason is that, very often, our interlocutors already embrace these very same principles. And as a pragmatic point, justifying what is already in the common ground between speakers is, at least outwith purely theoretical interest, without obvious communicative purpose²³.

However, in cases where diverse groups come into contact with one another, things are different. Epistemic principles taken for granted by each side, respectively, are sometimes in such circumstances not common ground between both parties, and so the provision of a defence of one's own epistemic system can have a kind of relevance it lacks under more epistemically homogeneous (i.e., normal) circumstances²⁴.

But just how does one go about establishing that *one's own* epistemic system is justified? This brings us to the next step. Consider here the following often-cited passage from Michael Williams (2007, 94–95), capturing what he calls the 'fundamental argument' for epistemic relativism:

In determining whether a belief – any belief – is justified, we always rely, implicitly or explicitly, on an epistemic framework: some standards or procedures that separate justified from unjustified convictions. But what about the claims embodied in the framework itself: are they justified? In answering this question, we inevitably apply our own epistemic framework. So, assuming that our framework is coherent and does not undermine itself, the best we can hope for is a justification that is epistemically circular, employing our epistemic framework in support of itself. Since this procedure can be followed by anyone, whatever his epistemic framework, all such frameworks, provided they are coherent, are equally defensible (or indefensible).

²²For a more detailed presentation of this argument strategy, see Carter (2016 Ch. 5).

²³See, for example, Stalnaker (1978; 2002).

²⁴For an interesting discussion of how encountering radically different perspectives can engender critical introspection—in particular, regarding the contingency of certain firmly held beliefs—see Srinivasan (2015).

Suppose, for example, you encounter the Azande tribe, which regards the Poison Oracle as a fundamental source of truth²⁵; in this context, you attempt to justify your own epistemic system, say, ‘Western Science’, which the Azande reject. In doing so, you naturally apply this very framework in support of itself. The relativist, on Williams’ construal of her argument, at this point notes that the justification achieved is circular, and the circular justification achieved is on an even footing with other equally circular justifications of epistemic frameworks—e.g., as if the Azande were to defend their own method of consulting the Poison Oracle by appealing to the Poison Oracle.

There are three key points to register about this particular way of moving from diversity to epistemic relativism. For one thing, note Williams’ concession that the ensuing justifications are equally defensible or *indefensible* (*Op. cit.* 95.) In order for the relativist to reason compellingly from the datum that attempts to justify one’s own epistemic framework are inevitably circular to the conclusion that epistemic relativism is true, there has to be some positive and non-arbitrary reason to move from the intermediate conclusion that all frameworks are on an equal standing to the relativist’s conclusion. However, there is room here for the sceptic to intervene: if the above argument sequence establishes that all attempts to justify epistemic frameworks are circular, then one candidate conclusion to draw is that no one is justified in accepting his or her own epistemic framework. The relativist must offer some reason to think the intermediate conclusion favours the line that all frameworks are relatively justified to the competing conclusion that no frameworks are justified.

A second and third point to register about the above kind of sequence Williams calls the fundamental argument for epistemic relativism are related. In short, there are potential ways to resist a key premise that this argument depends on: that justifying one’s own epistemic system by appealing to epistemic principles within that very system is circular in a way that undermines epistemic justification.

One such route has been developed in work by Paul Boghossian (e.g., 2001). According to Boghossian, certain varieties of epistemic circularity needn’t be vicious. Consider, for example, what he calls *rule circularity*, as would be the case if one, in the service of justifying a fundamental rule like *modus ponens*, reasons at least one step in accordance with *modus ponens*²⁶. Boghossian concedes that attempting to justify *modus ponens* by reasoning in accordance with it will leave one in no position to rationally persuade the sceptic, viz., one who antecedently *doubts* this basic inference rule. However, Boghossian maintains that ‘something can be a warrant for something

²⁵For the details, see Evans-Pritchard (1937).

²⁶For a related line of discussion, in the case of justifying IBE, see Psillos (1999). For critical discussion, see Carter and Pritchard (2016).

even if it is powerless to bring about a determined skeptic²⁷ (2001, 38). Applying this idea more generally: the application of principles within one's own epistemic system to support those very principles could potentially leave one with a kind of positive justification 'in spite of the fact that we can produce only rule-circular arguments for them' (2001, 37).

A related route appeals more generally to epistemic *externalism*, according to which it is denied that what justifies one's belief must be accessible by reflection alone²⁸. Just suppose, *a la* Williams, that one uses one's own epistemic framework in the service of justifying it. Is the ensuing justification an epistemically acceptable one? Here the epistemic externalist can at least in principle insist that beliefs about our own epistemic systems—no less than perceptual and other kinds of beliefs—attain a positive epistemic status (e.g., epistemic justification) provided the process that issues these beliefs satisfies some externalist condition, e.g., reliability. Of course, externalist approaches such as process reliabilism have been criticised on just this ground—an objection to reliabilism known as 'bootstrapping' (e.g., Vogel 2000)²⁹. The matter of how and whether this problem can be overcome within a reliabilist framework is a matter of ongoing debate³⁰.

5. A New Argument from Diversity to Relativism

The kinds of epistemological diversity that have been appealed to in order to motivate epistemic relativism in the arguments canvassed in §§2-4 have mostly featured *intercultural epistemic diversity*—viz., as when radically different epistemic frameworks come into contact with one another. There is, however, another kind of diversity which can (but needn't be) entirely *intracultural* and which has nonetheless been argued to have an important bearing on the objectivity of knowledge ascriptions.

This kind of diversity, which can persist within even the most tightly knit epistemic communities, concerns the epistemic standards of individual agents who are assessing knowledge ascriptions (i.e., ascriptions that take the form 'S knows that *p*') for truth or falsity. According to a kind of epistemic relativism defended in recent

²⁷On Boghossian's vindication of rule-circular justification, it's argued that one can retain *non-suasive* (i.e., dialectically ineffective) objective grounds for accepting modus ponens. Cf., Wright (2001) for a critique of Boghossian's argument.

²⁸This is, at least, the externalist position framed as the denial of accessibilist versions of epistemic internalism. Externalism, contrasted with mentalist versions of internalism, is the denial of the thesis that justification supervenes on an individual's mental states. For discussion, see Pappas (2014). For a wider discussion of externalism, which compares epistemic varieties of externalism with content and other forms of externalism, see Carter et al. (2014).

²⁹For related discussion see Stewart Cohen's (2002) problem of easy knowledge.

³⁰See, for example, Goldman and Beddor (2015, sec. 4) for an overview of some notable strategies on behalf of the reliabilist in response to bootstrapping and easy-knowledge objections.

work by John MacFarlane (e.g., 2007; 2014), whether a given knowledge-ascribing sentence is true depends on the epistemic standards at play in what he calls the *context of assessment*, which is the context in which the knowledge ascription is being assessed for truth or falsity. These standards can vary across contexts of assessment. For example, the alternatives that are relevant at your context of assessment which must be ruled out might be different from the alternatives that are relevant at my context of assessment³¹. But, because the very same knowledge ascription (e.g., Keith knows that the bank is open) can be assessed for truth or falsity from *indefinitely* many perspectives, knowledge-ascribing sentences do not get their truth values absolutely, but only *relatively*.

This kind of epistemic relativism differs importantly from more familiar forms of context dependence, such as epistemic *contextualism* (e.g., DeRose 1992). According to the contextualist, even though the epistemic standard that is apposite to a given knowledge-ascription is the standard at play in the attributor's context (and different standards can be in operation at different attributor contexts), a given tokening of a knowledge ascription gets its truth value *absolutely*, not relatively. In this respect, MacFarlane's view renders the truth of knowledge attributions relative in a way that contextualism—and for that matter subject-sensitive invariantism (e.g., Stanley 2005; Hawthorne 2004)—does not.

Whether MacFarlane-style epistemic relativism is a viable view is an issue that can be debated on at least two different philosophical fronts. Firstly, MacFarlane's argument strategy consists in a kind of 'costs versus benefits' rationale, according to which his preferred relativist semantics for 'knows' is claimed to better explain our ordinary patterns of using 'knows' than competing semantics (e.g., contextualism, sensitive invariantism and insensitive invariantism)³². Thus, one natural strategy of critique will be to argue that a competitor semantics better explains our patterns of use than does MacFarlane's (see here, for example, Stanley 2016).

Given that knowledge is the dominion of epistemology, there is also room to resist MacFarlane-style epistemic relativism on the basis of purely epistemological considerations. One such line of critique is that a relativist semantics about 'knows' couldn't be embraced, within epistemology, without also accepting wholesale epistemic relativism about a range other closely related notions, such as evidence, justification and

³¹ Although MacFarlane's most recent (2014) articulation of relativism about knowledge attributions unpacks the notion of an epistemic standard in terms of relevant alternatives (e.g., (1996), his earlier formulations of the view do not. See, for example, MacFarlane (2005).

³² A principal argument MacFarlane relies on is that relativism explains disagreement data better than competitor views (e.g., MacFarlane 2007). For example, unlike the contextualist, the relativist can explain how disagreements about the truth of knowledge attributions are genuine; and, unlike sensitive invariantists, relativists can account for the behaviour of 'knows' under temporal and modal embeddings.

understanding³³. A second line of reply, advanced by Carter (2016 Ch. 7), is that a relativist treatment of ‘knows’ is incompatible with certain kinds of epistemological platitudes, such as the platitude that knowledge excludes luck³⁴. Relativism about knowledge attributions is still a young view, and its viability in the philosophy of language and its import in epistemology have largely yet to be explored.

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³³For defences of this argument strategy, see Carter (2014; Forthcoming).

³⁴For a defence of this platitude, see for example, Pritchard (2005).

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