

How Relativist Should We Be? A Reply to Stenmark
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Mikael Stenmark's [article](#) is admirably short, succinct and lucid. It proffers an explanation of relativism's current appeal to people in general and in the humanities and social sciences in particular; an analysis of its central claims in the form of four 'theses'; and it ends by challenging the reader to assess its scope. How relativist should we be?

The explanation of why relativism has become 'a pervasive feature of the contemporary western world' (Is it only western? If so, why?) appeals to the plurality of alternatives under conditions of modernity, given urbanism, mass migration, mass education and mass communications. Most people no longer live in communities where 'the prevailing worldview' is 'to be taken for granted, to take on the character of self-evidence.' With modernity there is a 'shift from fate to choice,' among 'the claims of alternative beliefs and values.' There is clearly something right about this explanation. But do we always or even often choose what to believe or value? We may well want to call into question whether 'choice' is always the best, or even the right, way to characterize how we come to believe what we believe or value what we value. Does a scientist, natural or social, 'choose' or, rather, 'recognize' what looks like the better explanation? Is becoming convinced of what is morally right, or aesthetically satisfying, best described as a choice? Is religious faith the outcome of choice? At the least, it seems clear that the language of choice here is external, or third-person, and not always, maybe even often, what seems appropriate, phenomenologically, from the first-person perspective. 'Choice' is often a term used to refer to the existence of alternatives while failing adequately to capture what we do when faced with them.

Turning now to the four theses, I have a number of comments and questions about each of them. The 'Relativist Thesis' embraces a pretty wide range when indicating where the dependency of 'what is true' is held by a relativizer to lie: it can be relative to a 'person, group, community, context, society, culture, and the like.' In later formulations, reference is made to 'language', 'worldview', 'framework; and 'perspective'—items which are not necessarily tied to given communities, societies, cultures, etc. Different issues are, of course, raised by these items, so that there are many varieties of relativism. As for 'culture', it is, rightly, no longer regarded by anthropologists as sufficiently unitary to be a plausible candidate, which deals a heavy blow to cultural relativism. But I am troubled by the second half of the statement of this thesis: the claim that what is true is 'not simply true in a universal way, that is, the same everywhere and for everyone.' On a strict understanding of relativism, whether the truth held to be relative is or is not universal should, in principle, be strictly irrelevant to the relativist thesis, since 'what is true' could still, in fact, be universally true, but still relative to the items indicated, if, as a matter of contingent fact, they all happened to converge on the truth in question. The truth can be, as Stenmark later writes, 'tied to particular groups within humanity' and those groups could, as a matter of contingent fact, agree. 'Universal' is not the antonym of 'relative.' On the other hand, as Stenmark observes, the very idea of relativism arises out of the fact

of pluralism — the fact that groups differ about what is true in some respect or respects — and the awareness that ‘we’, understood contrastively, have, as Bernard Williams noted, differing perspectives on what is right and true. The ‘relativist idea ... that there are multiple “we’s”, each with “our” own truth, knowledge and morality’ arises just because, in some respects, different ‘we’s’ do not agree about what is true.

I find the most helpful and suggestive to be the ‘Expansionist Thesis,’ because this directly raises the question of relativism’s *scope*. Footnote 8 is therefore slightly misleading in stating that ‘relativity is a matter of degree.’ The expansion is in the scope of relativism’s application, not the degree of relativity. One can be more or less of a relativist, depending on which range of beliefs and values one views as relative. More about this below.

I confess to finding the third thesis — the ‘Common Sense Appearance Thesis’ — puzzling and uncharacteristically obscure. Does a relativist have to refer to ‘common sense’, assuming that to mean (according to the Oxford English Dictionary) ‘normal understanding, good practical sense in everyday affairs, general feeling (of mankind or community)’? That would seem unnecessarily and arbitrarily to limit the scope of relativism, excluding much that both religions and science claim to be true. And what about moral and indeed aesthetic judgments that contravene common sense thus understood? There may be good reasons to exclude them, but surely not because they violate common sense?

As for the fourth, ‘Constructivist Thesis’, this is characterized as the view that ‘our beliefs are true or false relative to community dependent facts or facts dependent on particular groups within humanity.’ Facts are ‘created by a community or society as those things which make their beliefs true.’ As an example Stenmark cites the fact that the Swedish currency is the kronor. But this example tells against relativism, since ‘our’ knowledge (justified true belief) that this is so is not relative to us: it is objectively true just because the world accepts that the Swedish currency is the kronor and if the Swedes joined the Euro, our knowledge of that new fact would be equally objective in the same way. For, as John Searle writes, such facts are ontologically subjective but epistemically objective. Ontological objectivity and subjectivity have to do with ‘the mode of existence of *entities*.’ Epistemic objectivity and subjectivity have to do with ‘the epistemic status of *claims*.’ Thus Searle writes:

It is not just a matter of my opinion [or, one might add, ‘our’ opinion. SL], for example, that this piece of paper is a twenty-dollar bill; it is a matter of objective fact. But at the same time, these institutional facts exist only because of our subjective attitudes [or, one might better say, our ‘intersubjective’ attitudes. SL].

Thus there can be ‘*an epistemically objective set of statements about a reality which is ontologically subjective*’ (Searle 2010, 17-18).

The ‘bite’ (to use Stenmark’s term) of relativism embodied by the idea of social construction lies in the suggestion that what appears to be ontologically objective may turn out to be ontologically subjective: that what seems real may only be real from a given perspective, because it is viewed as real by some group or community. As Ian Hacking has argued, this suggestion incorporates three ideas: that it is contingent (it could have been otherwise: could there have been an alternative, ‘nonquarky’ physics?), that its unity consists in its being named as such, and that its stability is to be externally (i.e. socially) explained (Hacking 1999). This is what has lent excitement to claims of this sort by sociologists and historians of natural science and it is what leads Hacking to speak of ‘historical ontology’ — the idea that some kinds of objects can come into being and go out of being in time (Hacking 2004). And with respect to some kinds of objects—some social objects, such as ‘serial killers’ or ‘child abuse’—there can be interaction between the epistemic and the ontological through ‘looping’ such that what observers think in turn contributes to constituting what is observed. (Sociologists call this ‘labeling theory’). This social constructionist suggestion leads me to Stenmark’s concluding remarks about the challenge of relativism.

It is indeed valuable to ask how relativist we should be. Where is it most plausible to think relativistically? Since relativist thoughts arise out of awareness of the fact of pluralism, one obvious place to look is morality. The facts of moral diversity and disagreement raise the live questions of how deep the diversity goes and whether, and if so how, the disagreements can be resolved. What philosophers call ‘moral realism’ expresses the idea that what is right and good are, in some way, ontologically objective and thus independent of particular and divergent perspectives. By contrast, I think it is helpful to view morality ‘naturalistically’, as originating in an evolved human nature and having the basic function of structuring human motivation in ways that are conducive to following norms of social co-operation, rewarding co-operators and punishing violators, and, further, specifying character ideals of individuals and conceptions of the good life. If this is what morality is, then there will be only a limited range of adequate functioning moralities and it will be through the collective inventions of culture that in different times and places specific norms will arise along with differing priorities among valued character ideals and conceptions of the good. As David Wong (2006, 44) has argued:

There are a limited number of goods that human beings seek, given their nature and potentialities. The satisfaction of their physical needs, the goods of intimacy, sociability, and social status and approval, perhaps the opportunity to discharge aggressive energy, having some degree of variety and challenge in activities, and knowledge either of the physical world or of the human world are goods sought across many different cultures. Morality is not *determined* by these deep human propensities, but if it is to serve as an effective guide to action, it must be limited by these propensities. In identifying positive goods that human beings are to seek, it cannot identify something human beings have no propensity to seek.

Here, then, is one response to Stenmark’s challenge. We can, I believe, say that in the domain of morality, there is, within objectively given parameters, a ‘pluralistic relativism’ of norms and values.

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