

Relativism and Uncertainty – A Response to Lukes and Riggio
Mikael Stenmark, Uppsala University

A new epistemology – or a mindset through which to see truth and knowledge in a particular light – has emerged and is increasingly shaping the worldview of people in the West. (And perhaps we should not, as Steven Lukes suggests, limit it to the West.) A fundamental shift in epistemology is taking place in today’s society. An appropriate name for this new folk epistemology is disputed, as is its content and, of course, the question of whether or not it is a desirable development.

In “Relativism — a Pervasive Feature of the Contemporary Western World,” I named it *relativism* and argued that what is new is not strictly speaking its content, but rather is the extension of the viewpoint: more and more people nowadays think that the scope of what is relative is significantly greater than what had previously been commonly thought. There is a growing suspicion that, when it comes to morality, religion, knowledge, truth and science, what we had earlier thought to be fixed and universal is actually malleable and local, and is dependent on human interest, gender, class, ethnicity, culture, or worldview. Steven Lukes and Adam Riggio seem to agree, and also to find my conception of relativism illuminating and useful, but they raise some interesting and challenging questions to which I shall try to respond.

Different Epistemic Attitudes

But before I do that, let me emphasize more strongly than I did in “Relativism” that this new epistemic outlook is not a unified phenomenon but rather seems to contain different epistemic attitudes; and that this creates a certain ambiguity and ambivalence, not only in people’s lives, but also in how we as scholars should describe, explain, and evaluate it. One of my core ideas — and on this point I was relying on Peter Berger’s research in sociology — was that modernity has increased the scope of cultural plurality and accelerated its impact on people, and that this is probably the main reason why we see these changes in epistemic outlook. That is to say, the pluralistic context relativizes competing beliefs and value systems and deprives them of their taken-for-granted status. No single worldview seems inevitable. Almost everything can, it seem obvious today, be doubted or be understood from a perspective different from one’s own. One way people might respond to these changing social conditions is to adopt a *relativistic attitude* and hold that truth is historically and culturally bound, and therefore not the same for all people everywhere: “truth is relative.” Another is to adopt a *skeptical attitude* and maintain that it is difficult or perhaps not even possible for us to obtain truth: “truth is not to be had by us” or “we have no truth.” The third attitude I mentioned in “Relativism” was the *skeptical-relativist attitude*. Someone would exhibit this attitude if they claimed that there exists no truth, only propositions or beliefs, and constructions of the world or regimes of truth.

Is there more to be found? I think so. Peter Berger sometimes talks about relativism and sometimes about uncertainty, as if these were more or less the same thing.¹ But being uncertain does not imply that one necessarily adopts a relativistic stance. Charles Taylor in *The Secular Age* focuses on this change in epistemic outlook when it comes to belief in God: “We live in a condition where we cannot help but be aware that there are a number of different construals [of human flourishing], views which intelligent, reasonably undeluded people, of good will, can and do disagree on. We cannot help looking over our shoulder from time to time, looking sideways, living our faith also in a condition of doubt and uncertainty.”² But the attitude that Taylor regards as characterizing our age is not, I would say, any of the epistemic attitudes we have identified so far, since the view he explicates is not equivalent to saying that there is no truth, or that we cannot know the truth, or that truth is relative or local. We can perhaps call his attitude “fallibilistic.” You express such a *fallibilistic attitude* when you think it matters whether what you believe is the truth, but you do not think that there is any sure and certain way of attaining truth, and you are acutely aware that others reject what seems to you to be of importance; you realize you might be seriously wrong, and even wrong about what you think it is enormously important to be right about. On this construal, life in an age of uncertainty is a life under epistemic risk and fallibility; not one of skepticism or relativism. Hence, to lack full epistemic confidence in what one believes is something different from thinking that we have no truth or that truth is relative.

Uncertainty and Relativity

Riggio points out that Modernity is a social epoch that not only diversifies a community and gives rise to relativistic attitudes, but one that “develops social norms for the peaceful co-existence of all these divergences. ... [O]ne, genuinely progressive human development is when we no longer respond to heterogeneity with pogroms, lynching, and forced conversions, but with dialogue, humility, and open minds.”³ Now, one interesting hypothesis that becomes worth exploring is that it might be the widespread adoption of a fallibilistic attitude, rather than a relativistic attitude, that has fostered this progressive development.

So Berger’s mistake is to fail to take into account that uncertainty is not the same thing as relativity. Or perhaps the concept of relativity is ambiguous, and this is what leads him astray? To “relativize” is to make one thing relative to another, but I suggest that it matters what these two things are. I believe in God. When I become fully aware that, or you make me aware that, other intelligent, reasonably undeluded people, of good will, disagree — some of them are atheists, others are agnostics, and yet others believe in another kind of God than I believe in — my belief in God is relativized. Berger and Taylor’s view would then be that the place of God in the consciousness of people (or in mine in this case) is changed, moving from the deep level of taken-for-granted to the foreground and into the realm of what can be doubted. Treating belief in this way,

¹ Peter Berger (ed.), *Between Relativism and Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2010), pp. 5-6.

² Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 11.

³ Adam Riggio, “‘I Feel Like I’ve Heard All This Before,’ A Reply to Stenmark and Lukes,” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective*, 2014, Vol. 3, No. 5, p. 74.

whether it concerns religious, moral, political, or scientific aspects of human life, has drastically increased in contemporary society. So you exhibit what I shall call a *relativizing attitude* towards my belief in God. You relativize my belief when you say: “Well, other (smart and honest) people believe other things.” But this is not to express a *relativistic attitude* towards it, which in its naïve form would mean that you assume that God’s existence is true for me but not for you, or in the more sophisticated form would mean that truth in this area of human life is historically and culturally bound and thus is not the same for all people everywhere. So we need to distinguish between:

To relativize₁ in the sense of pointing out or claiming that what a person or group of persons believes, *B1*, is one feasible alternative among others, *B2*, *B3*, and *B4*, and thus can be doubted.⁴

To relativize₂ in the sense of pointing out or claiming that truth, *T*, or that the truth of a particular domain of beliefs, *TB_d*, is relative to perspective, locality, context, community, multiple “we’s,” and the like.

So there is actually a cluster of related epistemic attitudes that modernization processes cause or nurture.

I described modernization as a gigantic shift in the human condition from one of fate and destiny to one of choice. Lukes thinks there is something right about this, but asks “do we always or even often choose what to believe or value?” and rightly points out that the answer to that question is “no.”⁵ But how could there then be a gigantic shift in the human condition from one of fate and destiny to one of choice? If we lack voluntary control over our belief formation, how can what was once given at birth increasingly become a matter of choice? We can see why this is if we focus on a simple situation of belief formation.

I walk into the room and discover that the light is on. This is nothing I choose to believe; I simply find myself believing that the light is on. But I can still change this belief if I choose to perform some other actions. I can reach out and flip the switch on the wall, whereupon the light goes out and my belief changes: I now believe that the light is off. In other words, even if we might not be able to control our beliefs directly, we can control other things that affect what we believe. Consequently, when we talk about a gigantic shift in the human condition from one of fate and destiny to one of choice, we have in mind that the range of actions we can perform which affect what we believe and value has drastically increased, so that we are acutely aware, for instance, that one does not have to be a Catholic. Perhaps today one is a Catholic, but one may, without too much effort, perform actions that would make one become a Lutheran, a Buddhist or an atheist. No single worldview seems inevitable. Plurality increases people’s ability to make choices between and about worldviews.

⁴ And perhaps we should add that there does not seem to be available any obvious and public way of establishing that *B1* is true, or at least is better warranted than are *B2*, *B3* or *B4*.

⁵ Steven Lukes, “How Relativist Should We Be? A Reply to Stenmark,” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective*, 2014, Vol. 3, No. 5, p. 13.

The Relativist Thesis and Mannheim

Riggio thinks that we should compare the Relativist Thesis with what Karl Mannheim wrote almost 80 years ago. His view was that relativism is based on the recognition that all historical thinking is bound up with the concrete position of the life of the thinker and that human knowledge and morality was produced through contingent historical development.⁶ Riggio appears to think that this is essentially the same idea as the one expressed in the relativist thesis. I am, however, not certain that it is, at least not if we merely focus on this very brief summary.

In short, it seems to me that one can reject the relativist thesis and still affirm Mannheim's view. The reason for this is that knowledge partly (1) consists of belief, and belief is always local or contingent, because it is always the belief of a particular individual or group living at a particular point in time and having particular interests. But knowledge also partly (2) consists of truth, and when a non-ambiguous belief is true, it is true for all time, not just at a particular place and time. The non-relativist embraces both (1) and (2), whereas the relativist embraces (1) but rejects (2) and instead thinks that truth is local. To avoid this ambiguity I have suggested that we define relativism in terms of truth and not — as Mannheim seems to do — in terms of knowledge or thinking.

Lukes is worried about the second aspect of the relativist thesis. I say that to relativize₂ is to maintain that what is true — and not merely what is taken to be true — is dependent upon (is relative to) person, group, community, context, society, culture and the like, and *is not simply true in a universal way, that is, the same everywhere and for everyone*. Lukes does not think that “universal” is the antonym of “relative”, because “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.”⁷ The problem is that the particular groups or the multiple “we’s” which truth is relative to, could actually agree on what is true in a particular domain of beliefs, say in religion or morality, and thus satisfy the condition of universality.

Now, the second aspect of the relativist thesis was just meant to express the non-relativist stance and should therefore merely be taken to be another way of confirming what is said in the first aspect. The relativist says that “truth is relative” and the non-relativist says that “truth is universal.” In my terminology then “universal” is the antonym of “relative”; it is just a matter of giving “universal” such content as would necessitate the relativist having to deny it. So the problem should then not be that “universal” is taken to be the antonym of “relative” but that “universal” is not correctly explicated.

My idea was that if truth is independent of particular groups or multiple “we’s” *then* truth is the same everywhere and for everyone. That is true, but the implication goes merely one way and therefore the first and second aspects of the thesis do not express the same

⁶ Riggio, “I Feel Like I’ve Heard All This Before,’ A Reply to Stenmark and Lukes,” p. 74.

⁷ Lukes, “How Relativist Should We Be? A Reply to Stenmark,” p. 13.

proposition; they are not equivalent. Hence, the relativist could (although would typically not) embrace the second aspect of the thesis while denying the first. So strictly speaking, the relativist thesis should be taken to consist only of the claim that what is true — and not merely what is taken to be true — is dependent upon (is relative to) person, group, community, context, society, culture and the like. Truth is relative. Truth is universal only if what is true is *independent* of (is *not* relative to) person, group, community, context, society, culture and the like. Truth, according to the non-relativist, is not determined by or dependent upon group-belonging but merely upon the way the world is. Or alternatively stated: the non-relativist idea is that truth is not tied to particular groups within humanity but to all human beings.

Lukes also finds the third thesis puzzling and uncharacteristically obscure, because he thinks the Common Sense Appearance Thesis would “unnecessarily and arbitrarily ... limit the scope of relativism, excluding much that both religions and science claim to be true.”⁸ But all I am saying is that it is to misunderstand relativists to maintain that they take their view to imply a green light for them to believe what they like, with as much conviction and force as they like. On the contrary, relativists treat many of the things that we normally think of as true, justified, or right as indeed being true, justified, or right. So it is not that relativists could not believe things that go beyond or run contrary to common sense. The idea is rather that they believe most of the things we normally believe (this is the element of *common sense* in the thesis) but give a new and challenging account of the nature of truth and knowledge (this is the element of *appearance* in the thesis).

Constructivism and Relativism

Lukes also has some comments about the Constructivist Thesis — the idea that our beliefs are true or false relative to community-dependent facts, or facts dependent on particular groups within humanity. Facts are socially constructed. I illustrated this idea with the social fact that the Swedish currency is the kronor. Lukes, however, thinks that this example tells against relativism because our knowledge of this fact is not dependent on us, since it is true that the world accepts it. Here, I am uncertain what the conclusion should be if Lukes is right: is it that the constructivist thesis should not be taken to be one of the theses that relativism contains, or is it that the constructivist thesis can be questioned just like any other of the theses that constitute relativism, or is it that the idea of social construction can be accepted by the non-relativist as well?

Anyway, we seem to agree on what the bite of relativism is on this issue, namely that what seems real might only be real from a given perspective, because it is viewed as real by some group or community. So the Relativist Thesis says that truth or the truth of our beliefs is dependent upon (relative to) particular groups; the Expansionist Thesis regulates the scope of the application of this idea (does it apply to truth in all, or merely in some, contexts or domains?); and the Constructivist Thesis explicates what it means that the truth of our beliefs is dependent upon or is relative to particular groups, namely that it depends on how these particular groups socially construct the facts of reality.

⁸ Lukes, “How Relativist Should We Be? A Reply to Stenmark,” p. 14.

There is no way the world is the same for all human beings. Facts are dependent on human agreements and interests, and these vary from community to community.

Lukes concludes by giving an answer to the question of where it is most plausible to think relativistically. He thinks that one obvious place to look is morality. The facts of moral diversity and disagreement makes it reasonable to ask whether what is right or wrong is in some way objective, or whether it depends on divergent perspectives. I certainly agree, but I also find morality baffling. Although I do not know how to justify my belief that it is morally wrong to torture children, I am strongly inclined to say that I am more certain that this is true than that evolutionary theory is true. But this might perhaps be compatible with Lukes' suggestion that in the domain of morality there is, within objectively given parameters, a "pluralistic relativism" of norms and values?

Contact details: mikael.stenmark@teol.uu.se

References

- Berger, Peter, ed. *Between Relativism and Fundamentalism*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010.
- Lukes, Steven. "How Relativist Should We Be? A Reply to Stenmark." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 3, no. 5 (2014): 13-16.
- Riggio, Adam. "'I Feel Like I've Heard All This Before,' A Reply to Stenmark and Lukes." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 3, no. 5 (2014): 73-76.
- Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007.
- Stenmark, Mikael. "Relativism—a Pervasive Feature of the Contemporary Western World?" *Social Epistemology* (27 January 2014): 1-13. doi: 10.1080/02691728.2013.782590