WHY RELATIVISM IS NOT SELF-REFUTING IN ANY INTERESTING WAY

Is relativism really self-refuting? This paper takes a look at some frequently used arguments and its preliminary answer to the question is: No, not in any interesting way.

Of course, much depends on what you mean by ’relativism’ and by ’self-refuting’. The first section presents the main, common, features of relativism, and it is followed by sections discussing three types of self-refutation. First, logical *reductio*, secondly performative inconsistency, and last the claim that one of the components of relativism, incommensurability, makes a demand that is so strong that there can never be any viable relativism. In each case typical examples of lines of argument arguing the different forms of self-refutation are discussed, with the expectation that the discussion is of relevance to all forms of that type of self-refutation.

RELATIVISM: A PRELIMINARY CHARACTERISATION

There are two main features of relativism: relativistic dependence and antagonistic incommensurability.

*Relativistic Dependence*
Whatever else relativism is, any form of it includes that something is relative to something else, i.e. a two-place relation. Here we have three components of relativism: something, a *relativatum*, stands in a relation *R-dependence* to a *relativiser*.

*Relativatum*. Some kind of status that is relativised. Most frequent candidates: truth, justification, rationality, existence, meaningfulness. For convenience *relativata* are extended to the carriers of the status, e.g. for truth: sets of statements, propositions, beliefs, etc.

*Relativiser*. What the *relativatum* depends on for its relativisation. It is – at least at the first glance – of a different kind from the *relativatum*. Some candidates: paradigms, cultures, *Lebensforme*, classinterest.

*R-dependence*. The relativisation can be of different nature and strength. It is not enough that something is a necessary condition for some status. The relativiser must (partly) control the content of the *relativatum*,
or the relativiser constitutes or creates the relativatum, or the relativatum is reducible to the relativiser.

The contrary opposite of relativistic dependence is absolutism, the idea that there is such a thing as the view from nowhere to use Nagel’s metaphor.

There are many forms of dependence of course, not all of which are of relevance here. If we stipulate that humans are the only creatures with sufficient mental capacity in the universe, then epistemic justification depends on there being enough oxygen in the atmosphere. That is not a form of dependence that is of interest to philosophical relativism however. What forms of dependence are of interest then? Well, relativism has another typical feature beside dependence, and the kinds of dependence that are relevant to relativism typically are those that can give rise to antagonistic incommensurability.

**Antagonistic Incommensurability**

If relativism was a matter of relativistic dependence only, it would hardly be a concern outside of philosophy. What gives relativism its real bite is that it opens the door for antagonistic, incommensurable, alternatives. Two different relativisers might lead to two different relativata that are in relativistic conflict.

**Antagonism.** If two relativata (each R-dependent on its own relativiser) are antagonistic in relation to each other, they are in real conflict. This implies that it is incompatible with (ideal?) rationality to accept both relativata at the same time.

**Incommensurability.** That two relativata are incommensurable implies that there is no neutral, or absolute, way to evaluate which of them is superior with regard to the kind of status involved (more true, better justified etc.).

Relativism implies that, due to differences in relativiser, there are – or could be, or might have been – alternative positions that are at once antagonistic and incommensurable. The contrary opposite of antagonistic incommensurability is universal, intersubjective agreement.

**REDUCTIO**

The most evident form av self-refutation is logical reductio ad absurdum. Can it be shown that relativism entails its own negation?

For obvious reasons it is relativism about truth (truth is the status that is the relativatum) that is relevant here. A general argument that all forms of relativism are consistent cannot be given for the simple reason that it is quite easy to make up forms of relativism that is self-contradictory in the required sense: 'Every truth is relative – and I mean every single one – and that is
absolutely true.’ This is not a position anyone has wanted to defend, so we just leave it.

Thomas Bennigson has attempted to show that even very strong forms of relativism about truth are consistent.¹ This paper takes another route. It attacks a well-known line of argument for the inconsistency of relativism. The idea is that self-contradiction follows from the claim

(1) Every truth is relative
alone, and surely that is a part of any form of global relativism about truth.

You get self-contradiction by self-application. (1) is taken to entail the existence of incommensurable alternatives, which amounts to the claim:

(2) For every true statement S, i.e. every statement that is true R-dependent on some relativiser R₁, there is another relativiser R₂ R-dependent on which the contrary opposite of S is true

If we apply this to (1), which, in the relativistic spirit, must be taken to entail ”’Every truth is relative’’ is true given our relativiser’, we get the implication that there is some other relativiser given which

(3) Something is absolutely true
is true. But (3), if true at all, can only be absolutely true. Therefore, (1) if true, implies (3), i.e. that (1) is false. Therefore global relativism about truth cannot be true.

As an argument against relativism this is not useful. There are, at least, five problems. (i) Even if it did work against global relativism about truth, this would still leave us with other, strong varieties of relativism. (ii) Why say that (1) implies (2)? Might not (1) mean only that every truth is relativistically dependent, leaving the question of incommensurable, antagonistic alternative open? (iii) Even if global, incommensurable, antagonism is included in the way (2) suggests, there are other forms of antagonism than contrary opposites, and a reductio cannot be produced from all of them. (Other forms of antagonism is discussed below.) (iv) One could claim that (2) is too strong and what is really implied by (1) is the weaker

(2’) For every true statement S, i.e. every statement that is true R-dependent on some relativiser R₁, there could have been another relativiser R₂ R-dependent on which the contrary opposite of S would have been true.

But from (2’) the reductio cannot be derived. (v) Is it really the case that (3), if true, can only be absolutely true? From a relativistic point of view, what (3) in this context is saying is that based on our relativiser there is some other party P, and R-dependent on P’s relativiser the claim that something is absolutely true is true, which is to say that (3) is true-R-dependent-on-P’s-relativiser and this is based on our relativiser. Of course the members of P think nothing of our relativiser, and from within their relativiser it might well be correct that (3) is absolutely true (which obviously is an observation based on our relativiser).

¹ Bennigson 1999.
what is in question is whether our relativism is self-contradictory, and since, to us, (3) clearly is not absolutely true (nor absolutely false) no reductio can be produced.\(^2\)

There is another line of argument against relativism that has some resemblance to this reductio argument. The argument simply is that truth is absolute truth. There is no such thing as truth-for-us. The use in everyday language of expressions like ‘true for us/them’ is an epistemic or doxastic usage; it refers to what we/they take to be true, not to what really is true.\(^3\) (Thomas Nagel, for one, could be interpreted as invoking this line of argument.)

Formally, this argument in beyond the scope of this paper. It does not say that relativism is self-refuting, i.e. that relativism, once it is stated, immediately destroys itself. It says that relativism about truth cannot even be stated. It is so close to the reductio argument that it is worth hinting some problems with this line of argument however.

It can be doubted whether our everyday, working, notion of truth really is absolute truth. A parallel to a version of free will compatibilism is useful here. Admittedly we are easily lead to believe that responsibility and voluntariness are incompatible with determinism, but this is a mistaken impression. Our working criteria of voluntariness were described pretty well already by Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics*\(^4\) and determinism is neither mentioned nor implied there. A similiar line of argument can be used with regard to truth: It is tempting to think that truth is absolute, but if we take a steady look at how our normal notion of truth actually works – my personal favorite here is some form of slightly inflated minimalism – we will see that it is not tied to absolutism.

Even if an absolutistic analysis of our everyday notion of truth were correct, why should this be much of an embarrassment for relativists. Why not simply answer: So what! As Richard Brandt said of R M Hare’s attempts (in his earlier works) to derive a normative theory from conceptual analysis. ‘Where is the sting in being denied the use of a certain English expressions?’\(^5\) It might be that in ordinary usage ‘truth’ is absolute truth. So much the worse for ordinary usage. Relativism just turns into being also a suggestion for linguistic reform. It could be argued that absolute truth must be evidence-transcending truth, and that puts truth beyond our grasp. What we need is a revised notion of truth, relative truth.

To really sink relativism about truth you would need some kind of transcendental argument showing that anything doing something like the work our ordinary notion of truth is doing must be of an absolute nature. To the best

---

\(^2\) A similiar argument is used by Tomoji Shogenji (Shogenji 1997) in reply to a formalised version of the reductio argument invoked by Steven Hales (Hales 1997), and by Bennigson 1999 p 221f.

\(^3\) Some might be tempted to take a similiar position with regard to existence.

\(^4\) Book III Chapt 1.

\(^5\) Brandt 1979 p 9.
of my knowledge nobody has even come close to presenting such an argument (though Nagel might have claimed that he has).

PERFORMATIVE INCONSISTENCY

Another version of the self-refutation argument against relativism is that the relativist falls into performative inconsistency when she asserts a relativistic position, perhaps even when she believes it.

Possibly Thomas Nagel could be interpreted as advocating a version of this, saying something along these lines: 'To assert is to assert that something is true and justified, and to be true and justified is to be absolutely true and absolutely justified, so if you assert global relativism of truth or justification your action contradicts the content of your position.' A problem here is that I cannot see that Nagel gives any argument to support that the truth we claim must be absolute truth – which probably is a good reason not to interpret Nagel this way. Assertions must abide by the basic rules of communication; notably, what you assert must be of relevance to your audience. But absolute truth is not a necessary condition here. Relative truth will do just as well, if its based on a relativiser you share with your audience (and mutatis mutandis for justification).

A more promising version of the performative inconsistency argument against relativism invokes a Principle of Respect PR that is taken to be a part of relativism. PR says that if there is a position $P$ that is an antagonistic and incommensurable alternative to your own position, $P$ must be shown respect. This respect, of course, does not include that you must believe in, or live by, $P$, but it includes that you cannot claim that your own position is superior to $P$.

If speaker S makes an assertion that p, S, by illocutionary implication, thereby creates an obligation for himself to believe that p and to have sufficiently good reason that p is the case. At the same time S’s assertion creates a demand on others; it gives S a prima facie legitimate claim to be believed regarding that p. You must have some special reason to disregard what S says. If you just ignore him this is an insult. Now, this claim on others can be legitimate only if S has good reason to believe that the position that p is superior in truth and justification to its alternatives.

It could be argued that combined with PR this creates a performative inconsistency for any relativist that accepts that relativism itself is only relatively true or justified. To assert relativism is to claim the superiority of relativism over its alternatives, and this contradicts the content of relativism, viz. PR. One might even make the case that believing in relativism also involves a performative inconsistency. To believe – i.e. to believe rationally and not as just

---

6 Westacott 2000 uses arguments similiar to those presented in this section.
a totally blind leap of faith – is to think that ones own position is superior in truth and justification.

This argument might carry some weight as an *ad hominem* argument against certain individuals holding peculiar relativistic positions, but its useless as an across the board argument against relativism.

There is a general problem with all arguments using performative inconsistency. As an example, let me use arguments of this nature that I think really works: G. E. Moore’s argument against pyrrhonic scepticism. Anyone advocating this type of scepticism will contradict himself in words and actions. (If we happened to come across a sceptic that actually lived as he preached, we can just sit back; he will be dead within a week.) But is this enough? We only have *ad hominem* arguments against anyone advocating the sceptical position, but these arguments do not touch the content of the sceptical position itself. We can expose anyone asserting scepticism – and staying alive – as a fraud, but what the defender of common sense needs to do is to expose scepticism itself. Correspondingly for the performative inconsistency argument against relativism. At best it could have shown that there is something odd about asserting relativism, but that might be only some human, psychological quirk. What the anti-relativist needs to do to be able to sleep well at night is to show that there is something wrong with the content of relativism itself, not just with those asserting relativism.

Another weakness of this argument is the idea that PR is a component of relativism. The constituting components of relativism I listed in the first section of this paper, relativistic dependence and antagonistic incommensurability, are neutral with regard to respect of incommensurable alternatives. The attitude prescribed by PR to antagonistic and incommensurable alternatives is compatible with this kernel of relativism, but so is dislike or contempt of, or even open hostility towards, incommensurable alternatives. This means that for every variety of relativism R that contains PR, you can construct an equally consistent, corresponding version R’ with exactly the same relativistic content, except PR.

Furthermore, what kind of claim to superiority does PR really forbid? PR is reasonable if interpreted as a ban on claims to absolute, or neutral, superiority to incommensurable alternatives. The superiority illocutionary invoked in assertions does not have to be absolute or neutral however. Something corresponding to agent-relative values or norms (good for us, right for them) will do nicely. To fulfill his speech-act commitments the speaker has to believe that what he asserts is superior in truth-for-us and justification-for-us (i.e. truth and justification is R-dependent on a relativiser shared by the speaker and his audience). If PR is interpreted this way, and for a relativist it does seem

---

7 I am aware that this argument is controversial. It is invoked here only to illustrate a certain kind of reasoning. The content of the position is not used in this paper.
to be the natural way to see it, it will not give rise to any performative inconsistency.

THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF ANTAGONISTIC INCOMMENSURABILITY

Two of the components of relativism, antagonism and incommensurability, pull in different directions. Antagonism pulls towards likeness – to be able to contradict each other two positions must have much in common – whereas incommensurability draws on difference. This might spell trouble for relativism.

One could even argue that this makes relativism self-refuting. One of the demands at the core of relativism, the demand for the existence, or at least the possibility, of antagonistic, incommensurable, alternatives, is, in fact, so strong that it makes relativism impossible. There can never be any antagonistic, incommensurable, alternatives. If two positions are sufficiently different to be incommensurable, they are too different to contradict each other; they will simply be talking past each other.

There are at least two kinds of reply the relativist can use here. The first line of defense is to argue that there are other kinds of antagonism beside logical contradicting. When two positions av antagonistic they are not rationally cotenable. If one position asserts that p, an alternative can be antagonistic without asserting, or implying, that not-p. The alternative position might be implying that p lacks truthvalue, or is irrelevant to what is at issue.\(^8\) A more holistic approach is to deny that separate parts of the positions contradict each other individually. The positions are contradicting only as wholes. Or the antagonism might be of a pragmatic nature. The line of action following naturally from a position comes into practical conflict with the actions flowing from another position.

The second reply is that there is no lack of examples of logical contradicting between incommensurable positions. Take one of Kuhn’s example of incommensurability, the conflict between early Daltonians and pre-Dalton chemists. One side was saying/implying that certain methods, results and problems were central, and the other side strictly contradicted this, and *vice versa*.

You could argue that this is only an example of temporary incommensurability, which does not pose any threat to anti-relativism. If the pre-Daltonians had known what we know today about the development of modern chemistry they would have been rationally compelled, even from their own point of view, to accept the Daltonian position as superior. Well, perhaps, but there are conflicts of a similiar nature alive today; some of the disagreements in the social sciences between ontological and methodological individualists and collectivistic approaches might be an example. How do we know that this

\(^8\) It could be argued that this is possible only if the two positions logically contradict each other at a metalevel.
incommensurability is always only temporary? Is it not an open possibility that the antagonistic incommensurability lingers on, perhaps even deepens. To be a relativist you only have to say that such a development is possible.

One of the reasons for taking the combination of antagonism and incommensurability to be a problem is the idea that incommensurability implies incomprehensibility. An incommensurable position does not make sense to its opponents; they fail to completely understand it. This is not implied by the notion of incommensurability presented here though. The core of incommensurable antagonism is that a position is not acceptable to its opponents – they might well be able to understand it completely, but they cannot accept it.

Another reason is to take incommensurability to always imply differences in meaning. The only relativism available is semantic relativism, and it is rather harmless. When two sides are locked in an incommensurable confrontation they simply mean different things by the central terms in the conflict. Therefore their positions are not really antagonistic; the disagreement is merely verbal. As an example take a candidate for incommensurable ethical conflict: the disagreement between (some versions of) animal rights defenders and those that live by a more antropocentric ethic. This conflict is centred on rights and personhood; are only humans persons (and thereby have the rights associated with personhood). The semantic relativist will say that expressions like ‘rights’ and ‘person’ just mean different things to the two sides.

Including several species of animals in the class of persons would of course make a difference to what we take to be paradigmatic examples of persons and rights. I doubt that saying that the two sides use the central terms with different meaning is a fruitful way to describe the conflict however. Since it is common, philosophical, wisdom that there is no strict line between meaning and theory, let us, for the sake of the argument, say that there is substantial difference of meaning between the two conflicting parties though. That will not turn the conflict into a harmless matter of wording. The conflict would be about which meaning of ‘right’ and ‘person’ is the ethically correct one, and that would be a substantial issue, with wide practical implications. It would not be a harmless matter of just words.

anders.tolland@phil.gu.se

References