

Relativism:

Relativism is a broad philosophic theory commonly associated with values, norms, and standards in the areas of morality, culture and social interaction. It is contrasted with “absolutism.” Briefly, relativists believe that standards of right and wrong, the moral values of good and evil, and the norms of good and bad, and of beauty and ugliness, are *relative* to a peoples’ way of life, they are not absolute. What is considered “right” in one culture might be considered “wrong” in another culture, what one society thinks is “good” or “beautiful” might be taken to be “bad” or “ugly” in another society, and each culture or society would be correct; each society, according to relativism, has the right to determine their own cultural values, moral norms, and evaluation standards, and societies have done so throughout the course of history. There are no “absolute” standards or values that humans can turn to, to discover which culture or which society might be “better” or “superior” (that is: closer to an absolute standard) in how they arrange and live their lives.

In epistemology, “relativism” has a more narrow focus: it is a theory of a specific value, *a theory of truth*. Epistemic relativism (ER) states that:

- (a) our beliefs are either true or false (= not true), and
- (b) truth is not objective; that is, it is not independent of people, and
- (c) the truth of any belief depends on people deciding and agreeing on either
 - (i) what the words in their language mean (called: linguistic relativism), or
 - (ii) what their perceptions of reality are (called: metaphysical relativism).

There are three versions of relativism concerning the people truth depends on. Some philosophers argue it might be:

- (a) individual persons (called: individual epistemic relativism or subjectivism), or
- (b) a group or community (called: social epistemic relativism), or
- (c) an historical tradition (called: cultural epistemic relativism).

The general form of epistemic relativism is:

If P is true, it is true only for S (where “P” is a belief, and “S” can be a person, a community, or a culture). This implies that: *if there is no S relative to which P is true, then P is neither a true belief nor a false belief*. (Note: do not reverse this general form and think it is the same as saying: “if P is true for S, then P is true,” for this would be saying that believing P is sufficient to make P true; this is not what epistemic relativism claims. No one in philosophy would claim that believing something automatically makes it true.) For ER, it is a necessary condition for a statement to be true that a person or group of people *take it – believe it –* to be true.

Anyone who believes: “there is no absolute or objective truth, beliefs are true only for those who believe them” is an epistemic relativist.

Evaluation of epistemic relativism:

Relativism, it is argued, is a self-refuting theory of truth: by its own standards of truth it must count **as true** any belief by a person or group or tradition that it is a *false* theory!

How does this happen? Imagine any 2 individuals, or 2 communities, or 2 cultures that hold opposing beliefs (they might be Democrats and Republicans, or a theist and an atheist, or pro-choice and pro-life groups, or a government and a group of rebels who are against the government – it doesn't matter). Call one "A" and the other "B". What would each believe if:

Case 1 – both sides held that truth is objective (=not relative) and each formed beliefs about the other side's beliefs?

A's beliefs

1. We believe our beliefs are true.
2. We believe B's beliefs are false, and
3. We believe B's belief that our beliefs are false, is false.

B's beliefs

1. We believe our beliefs are true.
2. We believe A's beliefs are false, and
3. We believe A's belief that our beliefs are false, is false.

Clearly A and B can't both be right; if truth is objective at least one side (maybe both!) must be wrong. What are the possibilities?

- 1) Each side could try to convince the other side to give up their beliefs and adopt the one side's beliefs (eg., education, rational debate, argument). (Good)
- 2) Each side could act on their beliefs and try to dominate the other side – force the other side to give up their beliefs (eg., intimidation, war, indoctrination, brainwashing, etc.). (Bad)
- 3) Each side could epistemically avoid and keep separate from the other side – a stalemate and isolationism (e.g., toleration by avoiding certain topics). (Not so good, but not bad either)

In case 1 we have dangers and hopes.

Case 2 – both sides held that truth is relative (not objective) and each side formed beliefs about the other side's beliefs?

A's beliefs

1. We believe our beliefs are true, only for us
2. We believe B's beliefs are false, only for us
3. We believe B's beliefs are true only for B, is true only for us

B's beliefs

1. We believe our beliefs are true, only for us
2. We believe A's beliefs are false, only for us
3. We believe A's beliefs are true only for A, is true only for us

What happens here? *Both* A and B can be right, but only in a limited way. Each side believes the other side's beliefs are just as true for them as each side's beliefs are true for each. So, each side believes its beliefs *are both true and false*, and the other side's beliefs are also both *true and*

false; and it all depends on which group or community a believer belongs to or has grown up in. What are the possibilities?

- 1) There is no motive for either side to try to *convince* the other side to change their beliefs, for each side believes the other side is right! (Is this good or bad?)
- 2) No motive to try to *force* the other side to change their beliefs, for the other side is just as right in their beliefs as any one side is. (Good, we avoid hostilities)
- 3) There is complete epistemic separation and isolation; A and B have no basis on which to “exchange” beliefs. (Bad)

Case 3 – now we let each side differ in beliefs *about epistemic relativism*.

A (= relativists)

B (= anti-relativist/objectivist)

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. We believe relativism is true, only for us2. We believe B’s belief that relativism is not true, is not true only for us3. We believe B’s belief that relativism is not true, is true only for B, <u>only for us</u> (= for us and for B, we both believe it is true that relativism is false!) | <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. We believe relativism is objectively not true2. We believe A’s belief that relativism is true only for A, is objectively not true3. We believe A’s belief that our belief that (relativism is not true, is true but only for us) is objectively not true.
(= this set of beliefs does not give A’s beliefs about relativism equal status to its own beliefs about relativism). |
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See what happened in case 3? Relativism does not just claim that different people, communities, and cultures believe opposite things to be true (of course they do!). Relativism is about truth itself; it holds that what is true is really true (for those who believe it true). So, A says: what B says about relativism is really true – for B. And B says: what A says about relativism is false – objectively. So, A (the relativist) ends up supporting a claim that A is wrong about what truth is. Epistemic relativism, it seems, is a self-refuting theory!

Argument: Is epistemic relativism true?

- 1) If relativism is true, then by its own standards of truth, it is true only for those who believe it, and it really is not true only for those who believe it is not true. Thus, if epistemic relativism is true, it is both true and not true (equally, but relative to different people).
- 2) If relativism is true, not just true relative to those who believe it, but true objectively, then relativism is not true, objectively (for it claims there is no objective truth)
- 3) Thus, epistemic relativism (when turned on itself) is either relatively not true, or objectively not true.