Epistemic relativism

Stephen P. Stich

An account of what makes a system of reasoning or belief revision a good one is relativistic if it is sensitive to facts about the person or group using the system. It may then turn out that one system is best for one person or group, while a quite different system is best for another. Some of the most popular accounts of how systems of reasoning are to be assessed, including those based on reflective equilibrium and those based on the system's truth-generating capacity, appear to be relativistic. It is sometimes claimed that epistemic relativism leads to nihilism or that it severs the connection between good reasoning and true belief.

1. Relativism defined

The term 'epistemic relativism' has been used in a bewildering variety of ways. Here, we focus on an account that takes epistemic relativism to be a species of normative cognitive pluralism (see Cognitive pluralism). Normative cognitive pluralism claims that there is no unique system of reasoning (or of forming and revising beliefs) that people ought to use, because various quite different systems can all be equally good. An account of what makes a system of reasoning a good one is relativistic if the assessments of cognitive systems it offers are sensitive to facts about the person or group using the system. If systems of reasoning are evaluated in this way, then in general it will make no sense to ask whether one system is better than another: rather, we must ask whether one system is better than another for a given person or group.

2. Two relativistic accounts of cognitive assessment

Though it often goes unnoticed, some of the most popular accounts of how systems of reasoning are to be assessed are, or at least might well turn out to be, relativistic. Here, two such accounts are considered: one based on reflective equilibrium, the other based on a system's truth-generating capacity.

Nelson Goodman claimed that general principles of inference were justified by their conformity with the particular inferences we make and accept, and that our acceptance of particular inferences was justified by their accord with general inferential principles. This, he noted, looked 'flagrantly circular' but, he continued:

this circle is a virtuous one. The point is that rules and particular inferences alike are justified by being brought into agreement with each other. A rule is amended if it yields an inference we are unwilling to accept; an inference is rejected if it violates a rule we are unwilling to amend. The process of justification is the delicate one of making mutual adjustments between rules and accepted inferences; and in the agreement achieved lies the only justification needed for either.

(Goodman 1965: 64)

John Rawls (1971) introduced the term 'reflective equilibrium' to label the endpoint of the process of 'delicate … mutual adjustments' that Goodman describes.

Although Goodman did not discuss the matter, other authors have noted that there is no guarantee that everyone who uses the process will end up at the same point. If two people begin with significantly different judgments rejecting or accepting particular inferences, or with different views about which rules they are willing to amend (or both), then it seems entirely possible that they will end up with quite different sets of rules, though each set will be in reflective equilibrium. If, as Goodman insists, the process of mutual adjustment is all that is needed for rules and inferences to be justified, then these people may end up reasoning in very different ways, each of which is justified for the person who reasons in that way.

Reliabilist accounts of how to assess systems of reasoning or belief revision link the assessment to the truth-generating capacity of the system (see Reliabilism). Other things being equal, the better a system is at producing true beliefs and avoiding false one, the more highly a reliabilist will rank it. Though it is not often emphasized by reliabilists, this sort of assessment is quite sensitive to the environment in which people using the system find themselves. Thus it may well turn out that a given system of reasoning does an excellent job for one person and a very poor job for another. Imagine a pair of people who suddenly fall victim to Descartes' demon, and are from that time provided with systematically misleading or deceptive perceptual data. Suppose that one of the victims has been using cognitive processes quite like our own, and that these have done a good job in generating truths and avoiding falsehoods, while the other victim's cognitive processes have been (by our lights) quite mad, and have produced far more falsehoods and far fewer truths. In their new demon-infested environment, however, the 'normal' system of cognitive processes will yield a growing fabric of false beliefs. The other system, by contrast, may now do a much better job at generating truths and avoiding falsehoods, since what the evil demon is doing is providing his victims with radically misleading evidence – evidence that only a lunatic would take to be evidence for what actually is the case. So on an account of cognitive evaluation in which generating truths and avoiding falsehoods plays a central role, our system would be preferable in one environment, the mad system in another. Which system a person ought to use will depend on which environment the person is in.

Invocation of evil demons to make the point might suggest that this is a very peripheral phenomenon that is hardly worth worrying about. However, the Cartesian demon case is just the very small tip of a very large iceberg. Any reliabilist evaluation of cognitive processes is going to be acutely sensitive to the cultural, technological and epistemic setting in which the processes are to function. The likelihood that one system of cognitive processes will do a better job than another at generating truth, I suspect, will depend on such factors as the existence of a system of writing, the existence and the structure of disciplinary communities, and the relation of those communities to the political and economic arrangements of the wider society. It will also often depend on the level of conceptual, mathematical, scientific and technological sophistication that has been achieved. If these conjectures are right, it follows that reliabilist accounts of cognitive or epistemic evaluation will have a certain post-Hegelian historicist flavour. There will be no one ideal method of inquiry, no cognitive system that excels in all historical settings. Rather, we can expect that the assessment of a cognitive system will vary as its

historical setting varies, and that, just as with technologies (and indeed with genes), it will sometimes happen that a successful system will undermine its own success by changing the environment in such a way that competing systems will now be more successful.

3. Is epistemic relativism problematic?

Many philosophers consider epistemic relativism a dangerous or troubling doctrine. It is, however, not easy to find plausible arguments justifying this negative attitude. This section briefly sketches two lines of argument that might motivate opposition to relativism, although I do not think either argument very persuasive.

The first charge against relativism is that it is nihilistic because it simply gives up on the project of distinguishing good reasoning from bad, and embraces a sort of epistemic anarchy. From our previous discussion, however, it should be clear that the 'anything goes' slogan is a singularly inappropriate one for many relativistic accounts of cognitive assessment. Many versions of reliabilism are relativistic. But reliabilists are certainly not epistemic anarchists – quite the contrary. Reliabilism offers an extremely demanding account of cognitive evaluation. For a given cognitive agent in a given historical setting, it will typically be the case that a reliabilist evaluation will rank one system of reasoning higher than another. Rarely will it be the case that reliabilism ranks all contenders on a par.

A second complaint against relativism is that it threatens the connection between cognitive inquiry and truth. For if the epistemic relativist is right, then there may be a pair of people whose systems of reasoning are very different from one another, though each system is optimal for the person using it. We can expect that on being exposed to essentially the same data these people will sometimes end up with very different sets of beliefs. When this happens it is unlikely to be the case that both sets are true; at least one set of beliefs will be substantially mistaken. Since at least one person will end up with false beliefs, and since *ex hypothesi* they are both using optimally good cognitive systems, it can not be the case that good cognition always leads to true beliefs.

What this argument shows is that if the epistemic relativist is right, then good reasoning does not guarantee truth. But it does not show that good reasoning and truth are unconnected. If, for example, we adopt a reliabilist account of cognitive evaluation, then people who reason well will do the best job possible at producing truths and avoiding falsehoods. To expect more than this seems unreasonable.

See also:

Rational beliefs
Relativism

References and further reading

Daniels, N. (1980) 'Wide Reflective Equilibrium and Archimedean Points', *Canadian Journal of*

Philosophy 10: 83–103.

(Discussion of the virtues and shortcomings of reflective-equilibrium accounts of justification.)

Foley, R. (1987) *The Theory of Epistemic Rationality*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

(A sophisticated statement of an epistemic position that has some features of relativism.)

Goldman, A. (1986) *Epistemology and Cognition*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

(Important statement of reliabilism.)

Goodman, N. (1965) *Fact, Fiction and Forecast*, Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill.

(Referred to in §2 above. The classic statement of a reflective-equilibrium account of justification.)

Hollis, M. and Lukes, S. (1982) *Rationality and Relativism*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

(Collection of essays by philosophers, anthropologists and historians of science debating the evidence for descriptive pluralism and the merits of relativism.)

Rawls, J. (1971) *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

(Classic work in which reflective equilibrium is used to defend an account of justics.)

Stein, E. (1996) *Without Good Reason: The Rationality Debate in Philosophy and Cognitive Science*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

(Systematic study of the empirical and philosophical literature relevant to relativism.)

Stich, S. (1990) *The Fragmentation of Reason*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

(Expansion of the material of this entry; see especially chapters 1, 4 and 6.)