

**The Italian translation of and earlier version of this article is forthcoming.
Comments on this draft are most welcome.**

The Many Faces of Relativism

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Relativism, an ancient philosophical topic, has become a dominant theme of philosophical debate over the last ten years. However, it is not clear whether the participants in numerous ongoing discussions, even when directly engaging with each other, are addressing the same subject matter. The problem is not that relativism can be carved up in different ways. It is commonplace that it could, for relativism is not one but several, loosely interconnected, doctrines developed and shaped in response to a variety of philosophical concerns. The worry I would like to explore in this paper goes beyond this readily acknowledged and rather elementary point. My concern is that, despite a number of very significant attempts to address the question of what relativism, in its various forms, amounts to, the participants in heated disagreements on the topic of relativism still don't seem to have a firm grasp on what exactly they are debating.

By way of demonstrating this point I will compare two methods of characterising relativism. The first approach –I call definition by enumeration or DE- is empirical in its orientation in that it lists the major doctrines that have been labelled by their advocates or critics as 'relativist'. The second – definition by abstraction or DA - attempts to define relativism by capturing and abstracting some essential features of all relativistic doctrines. DA, if successful should map onto DE; that is any successful definition of relativism should capture the essential features of existing

relativistic theses. I shall examine three – not wholly incompatible- varieties of DA and conclude that there is in fact a significant degree of disconnect between the various definitions of relativism and the philosophical doctrines falling under that label. Furthermore, the disconnect applies more clearly to the newer, rather than traditional, versions of relativism

Part I. Definition by Enumeration (DE)

Over the last few decades at least five philosophical positions or schools of thought have been labelled as ‘relativist’ by their opponents or proponents. Some of these views have an ancient pedigree, others date back to Kant and post Kantian philosophy, still others are quite novel and not yet fully formed.

1. Cultural Relativism. Modern cultural relativism is inspired by the work of social anthropologists who argue that there could be no such thing as culturally neutral criteria for adjudicating between conflicting claims arising from different cultural contexts. The view has become one of the best known forms of relativism of recent times and has shaped not only the theoretical framework of the social sciences but also the ethical and political outlook of many non-specialists. Cultural relativism itself falls under a variety of subcategories, chief among them is the division between moral and cognitive relativism.

Historically, cultural relativism goes back at least to the ancient Greeks but its strongest formulations were achieved at the beginning of the 20th century by social anthropologists such as Edward Westermarck¹. Contemporary discussions of cultural relativism focus primarily on ethical, social and aesthetic issues where it is argued that moral norms, aesthetic values and legal precepts are culture specific and should be evaluated according to local criteria only. The primary motivations for this kind of relativism are:

(a) Acceptance that there is a significant degree of diversity in norms, values and beliefs across cultures and historic periods

and

(b) a pessimistic induction to the effect that failures of previous attempts to resolve disagreements on moral and cognitive precepts show that there are no universal criteria for adjudicating between differing world views.

2. Conceptual Relativism. This is a more narrowly delineated form of relativism where ontology is relativised to conceptual schemes, scientific paradigms, or categorial frameworks. The underlying rationale for this form of relativism is the belief that the world does not present itself to us ready-made or ready-carved, rather we supply different, and at times incompatible, ways of categorising and conceptualizing it. This type of relativism is motivated by considerations that have very little to do with the impulses informing cultural relativism. Reflection on the connections between mind and the world, rather than empirical observations of historic and cultural diversity, is the engine driving various forms of conceptual relativism. The thought, since at least Kant, is that the human mind is not a passive faculty merely representing an independent reality; rather, it has an active role in shaping the 'real'.

Quine's ontological relativity and Putnam's conceptual relativity are notable instances of this variety of relativism. Putnam, for example, has argued that our most basic metaphysical categories, e.g. objecthood, could be defined variously depending what conceptual scheme we use. According to him, what counts as an object itself is relative to the ontological framework we use. Depending on whether we are using our every-day common sense conceptual scheme, a mereological framework or the theoretical apparatus of quantum mechanics the question 'what objects exist?' would receive different answers². Pragmatic considerations, such as

salience and usefulness decide which conceptual scheme is more appropriate or useful.

3. Social Constructivism. Constructivism, also known as constructionism, is motivated by considerations similar to those informing conceptual relativism but the moral drawn are more radical in their relativistic implications. According to constructivists, nature as studied by scientists, does not come carved at its joints. Reality – with its objects, entities, properties and categories -is not simply out there to be discovered by empirical investigation or observation only, rather it is constructed through a variety of norm-governed socially sanctioned cognitive activities such as interpretation, description, manipulation of data, etc. Social constructivism has relativist consequences insofar as it claims that different social forces lead to the construction of different ‘worlds’ and there is no neutral ground for adjudicating between them.

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The Strong Programme developed by Barnes and Bloor, and “Science Studies,”[C1] influenced by Bruno Latour are prime examples of this approach. As Latour and Woolgar put it, “Our point is that ‘out-there-ness’ is the consequence of scientific work rather than the cause.”³ So called ‘scientific facts’ and the ‘truths’ of science emerge out of social and conceptual practices and inevitably bear their imprints. The constructionist approach relativises scientific knowledge in so far as it claims that different social and conceptual conditions can lead to the constructions of different systems of knowledge. Scientific theories, it is claims, are products of socially constituted social practices. They are ‘contextually specific constructions which bear the mark of the situated contingency and interest structure of the process by which they are generated.’ (Knorr-Cetina 1984: 226). Social constructionism has been the target of some of the strongest critics of relativism, Paul Boghossian in particular. Boghossian argues that

constructivism leads to the unacceptable thesis of ‘equally validity’ or the claim that, depending on the background and context of knowledge, there could be equally valid but non-convergent, and even incompatible knowledge claims. The world as constructed by Cardinal Bellarmaine has as much claim to epistemic legitimacy as the world constructed by Galileo because not only are there different ways of constructing the world but also ‘there are many radically different, [mutually incompatible], yet ‘‘equally valid’’ ways of knowing the world, with science being just one of them’⁴

[suggest review numbering here - is this part 4 of the definition by enumeration?]

Postmodernism. Postmodernism – particularly as first articulated by French philosophers Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida - is arguably the most potent source of the popularity of relativism today. The movement is identified with relativism because of its mistrust of claims to objectivity, denial of universal conceptions of rationality and rejection of the role of truth and reason as legitimate universal courts of appeal. At its most extreme, Post Modernists claim that truth is not an objective mind-independent property to be discovered, rather it is created through social interactions centering around power relations. Many postmodernists share the constructivist view that so called ‘reality’, both physical and socio-political, to a significant degree, is a product of social and historical forces, but they go even further than the constructivists would by denying the authority and even legitimacy of reason, logic and rationality, some of the key tools of science. The Enlightenment ideal of reason, they claim, is a product of local socio-historical conditions and has no universal validity and yet in the hands of white men it has become a tool of intellectual and hence social repression⁵.

In the English speaking world, Richard Rorty is the most important advocate of a less belligerent or obscure version of postmodernism, PoMo light as one may call it. According to Rorty both knowledge and truth are compliments ‘paid to beliefs which we think so well justified that for the moment further justification is not needed’⁶. Truth, ‘in James's phrase, is what is good for us to believe’⁷ but the ‘us’

always refers to some historically conditioned community of enquirers and judgements of 'better' are inevitably contingent upon historic circumstances. There is no transcendent or Archimedean point to adjudicate between disputing viewpoints, rather theories are adopted or discarded based on their fitness for particular purposes. Rorty rejects the label 'relativist' and insists that he should in fact be seen as an 'ethnocentrist'. His protestations, however, have not changed the view of anti-relativist Paul Boghossian who attacks his old teacher for his 'postmodernist brand of global relativism' particular criticism⁸.

Post Modernists, from Foucault and Derrida to feminist philosophers, insist that their approach is in line with the social aspirations of a liberation philosophy. They trace the genealogy of their ideas to revolutionary and iconoclastic thinkers such as Marx and Nietzsche and see postmodernism and relativism as continuous with progressive politics and opposition to the tyranny of western political and intellectual hegemony. Defence of objectivity and universal values, on the other hand, is taken as an indication of support for the status quo and a tool of further oppression⁹. Postmodernism and Rorty's views in particular, like constructivism, have been the targets of strong attacks by contemporary anti-relativists.

4. New Relativism Over the last few years a novel approach to relativism has been developed by philosophers of language in the analytic tradition. The approach, also known as New Relativism or truth relativism (as opposed to relativism about truth), attempts to provide a tool dealing with assertions containing predicates that do not seem suitable for assignment of truth values in the usual fashion. The motivation for New Relativism is primarily linguistic. It follows the views advocated by David Lewis and David Kaplan, who believed that propositions are true or false, only relative to a circumstance of evaluation. It proposes that for certain discourses, the ones with predicates involving first person beliefs, e.g., expressions of personal taste, epistemic modals, moral predicates, future contingents, context-sensitive ascriptions of knowledge, and epistemic possibility claims. The evaluation of the truth would depend not just on the context in which s statement is uttered—when, where, to

whom, by whom, in what language, and the state of the world in relevant respects—but also the context of assessment. The suggestion is that the same token assertion could receive different truth values depending on its context of assessment.

Contexts of assessment could include time of assessment, information state of assessor, relevance to the range of interests the assessor has, taste parameter, and the aesthetic or moral standards of the agent. A new generation of philosophers of language has developed various versions of this type of relativism.¹⁰ Truth-relativism about future contingent statements and the problem of the ‘Open Future’, relativistic treatment of epistemic modals and conditionals, context sensitive ascriptions of knowledge, as well as relativism about aesthetic, moral and taste judgments are some of the varieties of new relativism.

There is a question mark over the continuity between traditional forms of relativism and the so called ‘New Relativism’. Traditional forms of relativism about truth and justification, such as cultural relativism, have had a metaphysical and epistemological import. They were about the limitations of representational view of truth, the possibility of objectivity, and the existence of irreconcilable diversity in claims to knowledge. New relativism, on the other hand, is a semantic theory proposed as a remedy to the shortcomings of classical Fregean approach to assigning meaning and truth values, particularly in discourses involving first person beliefs. Viewed in this light, ‘New Relativism’ [is a mere semantic theory while older relativisms make ontic and epistemic claims. Or at least, this is the way old fashioned anti-relativists, such as Paul Boghossian, see the matter. Boghossian writes:

I do not just mean that the relativisms at issue concern different domains (though that might also be true); but rather that New Age relativism uses a different template for generating a relativistic view of a given domain than I do.¹¹

Boghossian, in *Fear of Knowledge*, specifically targets epistemic relativism. The relativists he attacks, the cultural relativists, constructivists, and postmodernists make substantive epistemic claims. New relativism, on the other hand, has more limited goals - it is an attempt to come up with a satisfactory semantic theory for a limited class of statements – and hence falls out of Boghossian’s target statements. But the distinction between old and new relativism is not as clear cut as all that. For instance Crispin Wright claims that:

It is a paradigm of the most traditional relativistic thinking to hold that there are indeed no defensible absolute notions of morally justified action, or of evidentially justified belief, in exactly this sense: that whether an action, or a belief, is justified depends on one’s standards, where the standards concerned are conceived as principles governing evaluation, rather than projections of actual patterns of evaluation, and as subject to no objective notion of correctness.

This important kind of relativism—relativism, I venture to suggest, pretty much as generally and traditionally understood—is clearly easily assimilated to the New Age template. One has merely to take principles of moral and epistemic evaluation as a relevant kind of assessment-contextual parameter.¹²

It seems that, at least in so far as local relativism, relativism about ethics and aesthetics for instance, is concerned, it may be possible to analyse ethical statements in terms of context sensitive parameters and hence treat old relativistic claims in the novel way proposed by Kolbel and Wright. Global relativism involving truth claims and even knowledge, however, have a much broader scope and are not easily assimilated into truth-relativism or New Relativism. New relativism is still in development. It is certainly true that the initial motivations of this type of relativism was purely semantic but recent discussions of it, particularly in area of ethics, have started to move the debate beyond the merely linguistic into more substantive arenas. What is certain is that the label ‘relativism’ is used to cover both the ambitious epistemic and metaphysical theses as well the more

circumspect semantic doctrine and any analysis of the topic should be cognizant of this fact.

The different types of relativism, enumerated here, are not only motivated by different philosophical but also have distinct intellectual genealogies. Cultural relativism has the longest philosophical pedigree, going back to Protagoras and Classical Greece, re-emerging with Montaigne at the dawn of modern philosophy and receiving its full articulation at the beginning of 20th century. Versions of conceptual relativism were developed in 19th century post Kantianism and were identified as forms of psychologism by Frege and Husserl. Social constructivism goes back to early 20th century, Russian psychologist and social constructivist, Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934), an important figure in the development of sociology of knowledge, who, in turn, was strongly influenced by Marxist and Humboldtian approaches to culture and language.¹³ Its relativistic implications for science, however, were more fully articulated under the influence of Kuhn's views on the role of paradigms in science. Postmodernism developed out of structuralism and was influenced by Marxism and neo-Marxism, as well as Nietzsche [suggest spelling might be Nietzsche]. New Relativism is a very recent and somewhat unexpected development within analytic philosophy motivated by questions about the role of context in the assignments of truth values and meaning to utterances. What, if anything, do these diverse strands of relativism have in common? In order to answer that question we need to look at the ways in which relativism has been defined.

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[also suggest review numbering in the document - it began with Part I but has now moved on to Section II]**Section II: Definition by Abstraction (DA)**

We can find three distinct, but not necessarily incompatible, definitions of relativism in contemporary discussions of the topic.

DA1. Classificatory Definition

A standard way of defining and hence distinguishing between different types of relativism is to ask the dual questions: a) what is it that we are relativising? and (b) what is it being relativised to? The first [suggest FIRST]question enables us to distinguish relativism in terms of its objects, for example, relativism about truth, goodness, beauty and in terms of its subject matter e.g. science, law, religion. The answer to the second question individuates relativism in terms of its domain or frames of reference [suggest delete this second FRAMES] e.g., conceptual, cultural and historical.

To take an example, Susan Haack in addressing these dual questions has proposed an identikit picture of various types of relativism, according to which:

- (1) Meaning is relative to (a) language
- (2) Reference is relative to (b) conceptual schemes
- (3) Truth is relative to (c) theory
- (4) Metaphysical commitment is relative to (d) scientific paradigm
- (5) Ontology is relative to (e) version, depiction, description
- (6) Reality is relative to (f) culture
- (7) Epistemic values are relative to (g) community
- (8) Moral values are relative to (h) individual
- (9) Aesthetic values are relative to (i) historical periods

A more generalised approach to Haack's classificatory system is represented in the following table.

Table I: **Classificatory Definition of Relativism**

Objects of Relativisation	Domains of Relativisation
(A) Cognitive norms: truth, rationality, logic, justificatory standards (cognitive relativism, epistemic relativism, postmodernism, truth-relativism)	I- Individual's view points and preferences (subjectivism, new relativism)
(B) Moral values (moral relativism)	II- Historical epochs (historicism)
(C) Aesthetic values (aesthetic relativism)	III- Cultures, social groupings (cultural relativism, social relativism)
(D) Knowledge claims, worldviews, ontologies, systems of belief (cognitive, conceptual, and epistemic relativism, social constructivism)	IV- Conceptual schemes: languages, theories, frameworks (conceptual relativism, social constructivism)
(E) Propositions or tokens of utterances (particularly those expressing personal preferences, future contingents, epistemic modals, aesthetic and moral predicates)	V- Context of assessment, e.g. taste parameter, assessor's/agent's sets of beliefs (new relativism, epistemic relativism)

The classificatory approach to defining relativism has obvious merits and has been adopted widely.¹⁴ It follows a venerable methodology in analytic philosophy where a philosophical puzzle is addressed through attempts to break down and systematize the object of study. The resulting classification is elegant and productive. Yet it faces some difficulties. Most importantly, the classificatory scheme gives the impression that the resulting categories of relativism are the permutations of one core underlying idea, but this is not the case. As the discussion of the varieties in

Part I demonstrated, actual philosophical doctrines falling under the heading of relativism have diverse and incompatible motivations and history and attempts to characterize relativism simply in terms of objects and domains of relativisation glosses over these differences. To take an example, Postmodernism and New Relativism have diametrically opposed views on truth and knowledge. PoMo [rejects the role of truth as a core philosophical idea. New Relativism, on the other hand, arises out of an attempt to give a rigorous explication of truth in cases not readily amenable to a classical treatment within standard semantics, yet the classificatory scheme ends up glossing over this distinction and pushing them into the same box. A similar point applies to constructivist vs. conceptual relativist positions. Despite a shared view on the role of concepts in establishing an ontology, what radically separates Quine's ontological relativity from constructivists such as LaTour and Woolgar is their diametrically opposed positions on science. For Quine, naturalism defined by the best scientific method available at any given time, is the only genuine theory of knowledge. Constructivists, on the other hand, see social norms as necessary components of not only the manner in which science conducts itself but also the end result it produces. Furthermore, Quine's ontological relativity, in part, is founded on his rejection of the role of normativity in epistemology; constructivism on the other hand is premised on the inevitable and prior role of social norms in all scientific endeavours. To give the impression that constructivism and ontological relativism can fit into a single grid, in any non trivial sense, is to miss an important philosophical distinction

DA2. Negative Definition

A second approach to defining relativism is by focusing on what relativists deny.¹⁵ Defined negatively, relativism amounts to the rejection of a number of philosophical positions that are traditionally juxtaposed with it, chief among them are:

- (a) Universalism or the position that there could and should be universal agreement on matters of truth, goodness, beauty, meaningfulness, etc
- (b) Objectivism or the position that cognitive, ethical and aesthetic norms and values, such as truth, goodness and beauty are mind-independent.
- (c) Monism or the view that, in any given area or on any given topic, there can be no more than one correct opinion, judgement, or norm.

In certain respects the strategy is more fruitful than the classificatory approach to relativism outlined above in that it captures some key features of many relativistic positions. It is, for instance, a useful way of understanding the positions defended by feminist epistemologists and Postmodernists. However, as the table below shows, there is no complete agreement between various relativists as to which of a-c they should reject and when there seems to be a greater consensus, for instance regarding the rejection of universalism, there is a disagreement on how to interpret the content of that which is denied universality.

Table II: Negative Definition of Relativism

	(a)Universalism	(b) Objectivism	(c)Monism
Cultural Relativism	√ (cultural)	√	√ (cultural)
Conceptual Relativism	√ (conceptual)		√ (ontological)
Constructivism	?	√	?
Postmodernism	√	√	√
New Relativism	√		√

To take a few examples, cultural relativists deny the universality of norms. They believe that moral and epistemic values are not universal, objective or singular but that that there is a plurality of such values. Conceptual relativists, on the other hand,

deny the ontological version of monism and universalism, for instance Hilary Putnam who advocates ontological pluralism emphasises the role of objectivity. Constructivists deny that science captures and presents a mind-independent reality and in that sense they deny the importance of objectivity, as traditionally construed. Their position on universalism and monism, however, is more complex. The main point of constructionism is the denial of the presumed mind-independence of the objects of scientific discovery and their dependence on social norms and values. So called 'objective scientific facts' are, at least in part, the products of social norms, but the question of the status of these norms, particularly when it comes to rationality and logic, is open to dispute. The more extreme forms of constructivism, in science studies for example, also embrace cultural relativism about logic and rationality, but not all constructivists do¹⁶. What the constructivists affirm is an extreme form of mind-dependence but such a position is not necessarily incompatible with universalism. Postmodernists, like the cultural relativists, tend to deny a-c but this denial takes a very different form. Their aim is to deconstruct the very idea of objective truth and universal reason rather than relativising them to specific cultural contexts. For Derrida, to take an example, the notion of relative truth and rationality is just as suspect as that of objective truth and universal reason. The New Relativists deny some elements of a and c, at least in so far as they are seen as claims about the truth conditions of utterances, but they do not dispute that truth and knowledge are objective. In this respect, New Relativism is closer to semantic anti-realism than traditional relativism.

As the above table shows, not all versions of relativism deny a-c but all of them deny a version of at least one of the triad, in particular relativism often seems to involve the denial of claims to universality. Should we then be content to define relativism only negatively, for instance by identifying it with a denial of its key contrast term 'universalism'. Unfortunately this is too blunt an instrument for resolving the issue. Not only does it end up lumping different shades of relativism together, but it makes relativism indistinguishable from a variety of other philosophical positions that also deny one or more of a-c. For instance, pluralism in

\\ the ethical or epistemic arena -the claim that there could be incompatible and even incommensurable values and norms- denies universalism, objectivism and monism. Yet pluralism is distinct from relativism, for the pluralist does not take the additional step of relativising values to a framework or worldview. Similarly particularist and situationalist views of ethics eschew universalisation but are not inclined towards relativism. The negative definition, although useful in clarifying the contours of the general idea of relativism, does not provide the necessary or the sufficient conditions relativism.

DA3. Hidden Predicate Definition (HPD)

A more sophisticated approach to defining relativism has been proposed, in different forms, by Gilbert Harman, Robert Nozick, and Crispin Wright. As Boghossian puts it, the claim in a nutshell is that ‘the relativist about a given domain, D, purports to have discovered that the *truths* of D involve an *unexpected* relation to a parameter’¹⁷. The suggestion is that what binds various forms of relativism is an underlying claim that the truth, the acceptability or the justification about one or more objects of belief has a hidden, often unnoticed, relationship to a parameter or domain. To take an example, moral relativism, according to this approach, is the claim that the truth or the justification of beliefs with a moral content depend on, and hence are relative to, specific cultural moral codes. So the statement ‘it is wrong to sell people as slaves’ is elliptical for the statement ‘‘it is wrong to sell people as slaves’ relative to the moral code of ...’’. The resulting sentence turns out to be true depending on how we fill in the ‘....’. So, ‘it is wrong to sell people as slaves’ relative to the moral code of United Nations Charter of Human rights’ comes out true, while ‘it is wrong to sell people as slaves’ relative to the moral code or framework of ancient Greece’ turns out to be false¹⁸. The justifying thought behind this move is that the thinking about the morality of slavery, or any other ethical issue, differs depending

on the time and place when particular moral assessments take place and there is no universal or objective criterion for choosing between these differing frameworks.¹⁹

Gilbert Harman's version of this approach takes an explicitly linguistic route. The relativists propose that predicates such as 'is true', 'is rational' 'is right', 'is good' etc that have the apparent logical form of one-place predicates, upon further analysis, would prove to be elliptical for two-place predicates such as 'is true relative to...', 'is right according to', etc. As Harman puts it, the relativists' claim that statement of the form 'A is P', within a given domain (e.g., science, ethics, metaphysics, etc.), is elliptical for the statement 'A is P in relation to C', where A stands for an assertion, belief, judgement or action, P stands for predicates such as 'is true', 'is beautiful', 'is right', 'is rational' 'is logical', 'is known' etc., and C stands for a specific culture, framework, language, belief-system, etc.²⁰

HPD does lay out an important feature of the logic of relativising predicates, however, it is difficult to see how this technical explication of the supposed hidden relativity would deliver a philosophically interesting form of relativism.²¹ What the relativists, since Protagoras have claimed is not just that for 'any value V, V is relative to a frame of reference' but also that V, while remaining constant or invariant, is assessed differently in different frames of reference. Not to include this provision in our definition of relativism undermines its philosophical import and obliterates the distinction between relativism and variants of the principle of relativity (in the sense made familiar by Einstein). Boghossian, as well as Wright have noted this point. Boghossian insists that relativism could not be just a thesis about the content of certain sentences, to be of any philosophical significance, then it has to be about the world and the facts about that world. As Boghossian put it

'A correct construal of relativism about a given domain, D, cannot locate the unexpected relationality in the *contents* of D's sentences. It must locate it, rather, in the *facts*. Relativism cannot properly be seen as correcting our view of

what our sentences mean; it must rather be seen as correcting our view of what the facts are.’²².

Crispin Wright's approach to the same kind of definition bypasses this worry by expressing the idea of relativism as implicit relationality in ontic rather than semantic terms. He says:

The relativist's basic claim is that, "there is no such thing as simply being Φ ". For instance, 'there is no such thing as simply *being beautiful*: things are beautiful or not in (relation to) 'the eye of a beholder'. There is no such thing as its simply *being four o'clock* — it is four o'clock or not in relation to a time zone (that is, a set of places).'

He goes on to argue:

The underlying idea is that the circumstances that confer truth or falsity on a predication of Φ tacitly involve a *further parameter* of some kind — a parameter that goes unreflected in the surface syntactic structure of the relevant predication. In such cases, what makes a predication of Φ on x correct or not is actually x 's standing in a certain relation to certain relevant items that is more complex than the surface expression reveals. The idea is that the satisfaction-conditions of a certain property or family of properties, though superficially presenting as unary, are actually implicitly relational.....²³

In Wright's version of HPD the linguistic phenomenon is reflective of how the world is. Relativism is a feature of the world and not of just language, so Paul Boghossian's justified criticism of this type of definition does not apply. But the problem with this approach is that it does not fully account for the various types of relativism currently under debate and outlined in Part I. HPD, even if it sets out the necessary condition for expressing relativism, is not sufficient either for delineating relativism or setting out a comprehensive definition of it for it fails to capture some

central features of some of the newer varieties of relativism. To look at each of the five versions of relativism separately:

Cultural relativism seems to meet the definitional criteria set by HPD, for it claims that values such as beauty, rationality, goodness, etc could not meaningfully be applied without introducing hidden cultural and contextual variables. X is good, for instance should really be understood as elliptical for X is good according to culture C. Versions of New Relativism, when appropriately configured in terms of the propositional content of assertions, could also be stated in such a way as to meet this definition.

The story is somewhat different with conceptual or ontological relativity. To take Quine, the quintessential ontological relativist of our time as an example, according to his 'principle of relativity', 'reference is nonsense except relative to a coordinate system'²⁴. Just as there is no absolute velocity or absolute position, but only 'position or velocity relative to a given frame of reference'²⁵ there is also no reference except relative to a background language, theoretical framework or conceptual scheme. Claims of existence are deemed to be dependent on an unstated but implicit theory or language. The parallels with cultural relativism, however, are not exact. Disputes about existence, Quine argues, can ultimately be settled by an act of ostension. Disputants to a debate about objects of reference (rabbit/gavagai for instance) can settle their differences by pointing to a single region of time/space. This is not true of cultural relativism, where the immediate physical encounters with the world could not settle cultural disagreements about norms and values.

The relativistic claims inherent in social constructivism follow a somewhat similar pattern. What social constructivists, such as Woolgar (1989), claim is that, in an important sense, theoretical entities, the objects of scientific examination, are not discovered but socially constructed. The claim, then, has similarities to ontological relativity, in so far as reference claims, and ontic commitments are relativised to a theoretical framework. The parallels, however, are not exact. The constructivists claim is not simply that the success of our referential apparatus is inseparable from

the theoretical framework we use, but the stronger claim that (1) Scientific activities, including theory construction, laboratory experimentation and the development of a referential apparatus are products of social interactions and are imbued with social norms. (2) The objects that scientists study are products of socially informed norm governed theoretical frameworks. So, in effect, social constructivism, unlike ontological relativity, makes a claim of double dependency. First it embeds the theoretical and practical activities of the scientists within a context of social norms and actions and then claims that the objects of science are produced, rather than discovered, by these activities. Whatever one might say about this type of relativism, the simple hidden predicate model used for cultural and ontological relativism is not adequate to the task of fully capturing its essential features.

The Hidden Variable Model of relativism is least useful in discussing Postmodern relativism. This is in part due to the sheer variety of claims that fall under this heading, but also because of the iconoclasm of Postmodernism, particularly when it comes to truth and reason. The core dispute between Postmodernists and their opponents revolves around the question whether knowledge is ‘a neutral transparent reflection of an independently existing reality’ and whether truth and falsity are ‘established by transcendent procedures of rational assessment’.²⁶ Most Postmodernists, including Derrida and Rorty, while rejecting this absolutist conception of knowledge and justification, are simply unwilling to accept that they are implicitly or explicitly relativising truth or justification. Their aim is to show the aridness of metaphysical conceptions of truth. They wish to bring about a change in our philosophical discourse rather than to redefine the old notions of truth and rationality. Careful work can show the relativistic commitments of Postmodernism but the Hidden Predicate Definition is not adequate to the task.

If the above account is correct, then there is no single definition of relativism that does full justice to the variety of doctrines that fall under that heading. Would a combination or aggregation of the three definitions outline here be more effective?

There are some advantages to such a move. For instance adding the hidden predicate definition to the negative definition of relativism would obviate the concern about distinguishing between relativism and pluralism. Unfortunately, however, the resulting overarching definition will still suffer from some of the defects experienced by its individual components. For instance, the philosophical motivations behind New Relativism and Postmodernism are too diverse for the two doctrines to be covered by a single overarching definitional attempt. Such a move will hide more that is of interest while clarifying little.

Critics of relativism, even the careful ones, tend to condemn relativism in a wholesale fashion. 'Relativism' is often used as a term of approbation if not abuse. It is, therefore, not surprising that those critics are hardly ever taken seriously by the targets of their attacks. Post Modernists and constructivists in particular, readily dismiss these attacks because they do not see their actual positions represented fairly or accurately in the way(s) in which relativism is defined. To engage effectively with relativism we need to examine and flesh out specific philosophical projects one at a time rather than developing overarching strategies to defeat all relativisms.

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¹ See Baghramian (2004) chapters 1 and 3

² Putnam, H. 1987

³ B. Latour and S. Woolgar, 1986 180.

⁴ Boghossian, (2006) , p. 2 and (2008) 377

⁵ See Michele Foucault for the original articulation of this view.

⁶ Rorty, R, 1984. p. 7

⁷ Rorty, R, 1982, p. 5

⁸ See Boghossian (2006?) and also Baghramian (2004) chapter 4.

⁹ This is most obvious in the writings of relativistically inclined feminist epistemologists.

¹⁰ See for instance, Max Kolbel, (MacFarlane (2003), (2006a) and (2006b), Egan-Hawthorne-Weatherson (2004), Egan (2005),

¹¹ Boghossian, (2008), 408

¹² Wright, C, (2008) 'Fear of Relativism?' *Philosophical Studies* 141: 141:379–390

¹³ L. S. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978).

¹⁴ Paul O'Grady also makes use of Haack's identikit in his 2002 book

¹⁵ This approach has been suggested as a definition of relativism by Harré and Krausz (1997: 24),

¹⁶ Barnes, B. 'Azande Logic'

¹⁷ Boghossian, Paul (2006b), p. 26

¹⁸ Specifically Article 4 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Right States: No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms. Contrast this with Aristotle's position: 'The master is only the master of the slave; he does not belong to him, whereas the slave is not only the slave of his master, but wholly belongs to him. Hence we see what is the nature and office of a slave; he who is by nature not his own but another's man, is by nature a slave; and he may be said to be

another's man who, being a human being, is also a possession. And a possession may be defined as an instrument of action, separable from the possessor.' Aristotle, 1905 Politics, Oxford, Translated by Benjamin Jowett, 1254 a.

¹⁹ Boghossian (2006 b) argues that we cannot make sense of this type of approach to moral relativism. I am not fully convinced by the Boghossian's argument. In particular, I believe there are better ways of setting the relativising clause in moral relativism. This, however, is work for another day and cannot be undertaken here.

²⁰ See Gilbert Harman, G. (1996)

²¹ See Wright, C., 'Relativism about Truth Itself: Haphazard Thoughts about the Very Idea', forthcoming

²² Boghossian, P. 2006 b, 6?

²³ Wright, C., forthcoming

²⁴ Quine, W. V., 1968, 203

²⁵ ibid p. 201

²⁶ Boghossian 2006, p. 6.