Relativisms Re-evaluated

21-23. September 2017, University of Vienna, NIG Building, Room 2G

This conference is organized by the ERC Advanced Grant Project "The Emergence of Relativism" (Grant No. 339382)

Day One (September 21st):

9:00-9:05   Opening Words

Session 1: Historicism Today

9:05-10:20   Kristin Gjesdal (Temple): "The Hermeneutic Response to Relativism: A Critical Review of Gadamer's Contribution"
                     Chair: Martin Kusch

10:20-11:35   Katherina Kinzel (Vienna): "Historical Representation: Narratives, Metaphors and Models"

Chair: Martin Kusch

Coffee Break

11:50-13:05   Aviezer Tucker (Harvard): Historicisms Today
                     Chair: Martin Kusch

Lunch Break

Session 2: Relativism and Politics

14:30-15:45   Natalie Ashton (Vienna): "Relativising Epistemic Advantage"
                     Chair: Robin McKenna

15:45-17:00   Maria Baghramian (UCD): "The Politics of Relativism"
                     Chair: Robin McKenna

Coffee Break

17:15:18:30   Johannes Steizinger (Vienna): "The Charge of Relativism. The
                     Significance of Political Motifs"
                     Chair: Robin McKenna

Day Two (September 22nd):

Session 3: Sociologism Revisited

10:00-11:15   David Bloor (Edinburgh): "Sociologism and Relativism"
                     Chair: Katharina Sodoma

11:15-12:30   Paul Boghossian (New York): "What is Epistemic Realism?"
                     Chair: Katharina Sodoma

Lunch Break

14:00-15:15   Martin Kusch (Vienna): "The Relativism of the Strong Programme
                     Revisited"
                     Chair: Katharina Sodoma

Session 4: Psychologism and Naturalism in Logic and Epistemology

15:15-16:30   Catarina Dutilh Novaes & Herman Veluwenkamp (Groningen):
                     "Reasoning Biases, Non-Monotonic Logics and Belief Revision"
                     Chair: Natalie Ashton

Coffee Break

16:45-18:00   Hilary Kornblith (Massachusetts, Amherst): "Naturalism, Psychologism,
                     Relativism"
                     Chair: Natalie Ashton

Day Three (September 23th):

Session 4: Psychologism and Naturalism in Logic and Epistemology (contd.)

10:00-11:15   Michiel van Lambalgen (Amsterdam): "Taking Psychologism Seriously"
                     Chair: Katharina Sodoma

Session 5: New Relativisms, New Data

11:15-12:30   Delia Belleri (Vienna): "Contextualism and Relativism About Evidence

Statements"

Chair: Natalie Ashton

Coffee Break

14:00-15:15   Robin McKenna (Vienna): "Understanding, Humility and Relativism"

Chair: Natalie Ashton

15:15-16:30   Alexandra Plakias (Hamilton): "Relativism: The Most Ecumenical

Metaethics?"

Chair: Natalie Ashton

Coffee Break

16:45-18:00   Edouard Machery (Pittsburgh): "Against Parochialism"

Chair: Natalie Ashton

19:30   CONFERENCE DINNER (Rebhuhn)

Abstracts

Session 1: Historicism Today

Kristen Gjesdal: "The Hermeneutic Response to Relativism: A Critical Review of Gadamer's Contribution"
TBA

Katherina Kinzel: "Historical Representation: Narratives, Metaphors and Models"

How do historical narratives represent past events? What is the representational relation that allows narrative texts to provide knowledge about the past?

Hayden White famously argued that historical discourse takes a narrative form. He also claimed that historical narratives are in some sense epistemically deficient. This worry is based on his assumption that successful representation in history depends on the existence of structural similarities between the historical narrative and the sequence of past events. But according to White, historical reality has no inherent structure. Thus, narratives project structure and meaning onto historical reality, rather than representing that past.

Responses to White try to avoid this conclusion either by denying the *essentially* narrative character of historiography (Noël Carroll) or by arguing for the continuity and similarity between historical narratives and past actions (David Carr). The approach to the problem of historical representation presented here takes a different route. Unlike Carroll, I do accept that historiography is essentially narrative, but I reject the similarity account of historical representation that informs both White's and Carr's approaches.

Building on contemporary pragmatic and inferentialist accounts of scientific representation (Bas Van Fraassen, Ronald Giere, Mauricio Suárez), I argue that historical narratives represent the past in a similar manner as scientific models represent their target domain: they exploit similarities and dissimilarities in selective and context-dependent ways in order to allow a user (reader) to draw informative inferences about the past. This approach to narratives, I argue, can make sense of many of the constructive features of historical discourse that were highlighted by White without buying into the more radical claim that historical narratives are epistemically deficient.

Aviezer Tucker: "Historicisms Today"

Historicism, like Scientism and Psychologism, is a derogatory term that expresses resistance to overreaching epistemic norms, disciplinary methodologies, metaphysical assumptions, and theories beyond their proper disciplinary bounds. Like other such negative labels, it may be worn with pride by some of its intended victims. Though there have been diverse interpretations of Scientism and Psychologism, there have been even more extreme disagreements about conflicting meanings of Historicism following broader disagreements about the epistemology and methodology of historiography. The use of abusive terms generally does not correlate well with understanding the object of derision, and this is particularly true about the misunderstandings of what historians are doing that underlie some of the uses of "historicism."

I distinguish four broad meanings of historicisms:

1. Organicism: Understanding phenomena by tracing them back to their origins, where they came from.
2. Ideographic understanding: Understanding phenomena as unique in their context.
3. Historical absolutism: Everything is historical, subject to change. There are no timeless ideas or absolutes.
4. Methodologies common to some of the more obnoxious substantive philosophies of history.

The first two types of historicism are epistemic, the third is ontological and the fourth is methodological. There are variations within each of the four types, but generally two characteristic are common to all: they are mutually incoherent and have nothing to do with what historians have actually been practicing and assuming since Ranke.

I propose a historical understanding of historiography, contained within the classical HPS research project: Historiography is what historians have been doing within the Ranke introduced a paradigm. Since historians do not practice what has been attributed to them by the classical discussions of historicism, there is nothing there to misapply beyond historiography. I outline what are the epistemic, ontological and methodological uniting properties of historiography and accordingly what an inappropriate misapplication of them to other disciplines would look like; what a coherent meaning of Historicism today be. I

conclude with a few notes about the reverse of historicisms, a-historicism or anti-historicism, the inappropriate misapplication of ahistorical methodologies and assumptions for the understanding of history.

Session 2: Relativism and Politics

Natalie Ashton: "Relativising Epistemic Advantage"

According to feminist standpoint theory, social and political factors affect justification. This means that standpoint theorists are committed to aspects of relativism like *pluralism* and *dependence*. However a key part of this view - the epistemic advantage thesis - is supposed to show that standpoint theory is not compatible with *equal validity*, and so is not a form of relativism. In this paper I argue that Jose Medina fails to show that his recent account of epistemic advantage is not compatible with equal validity, and so we have no reason to think that his view is not relativistic - and in fact have reason to think that his version of epistemic advantage is actually an endorsement of equal validity. As such, I argue that this view is relativist. I also offer some reasons to think that this is less problematic than standpoint theorists have generally thought.

Maria Baghramian: "The Politics of Relativism"

Relativism traditionally has been identified with tolerance, a value dear to most liberals. To be a relativist, it has been argued, is to embrace pluralism, multi-culturalism and diversity, some of the main tenets of liberal politics. The identification is not new, as early as 1930 jurist and poetical theorist Hans Kelsen had expressed the view that "almost all outstanding representatives of a relativistic philosophy were politically in favor of democracy, whereas followers of philosophical absolutism, the great metaphysicians, were in favor of political absolutism. (Kelsen, H., 1948, "Absolutism and Relativism in Philosophy and Politics," *The American Political Science Review* Vol. 42, p. 911). Similarly, starting in the earlier parts of twentieth century, it became commonplace to argue that philosophical absolutists "favor a government which denies freedom of opinion and compels its citizens to adhere to the views which he considers absolutely true, and that means an absolutistic government" (Oppenheim, F., 1950 "Relativism, Absolutism, and Democracy", *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (pp. 951-960). The identification of anti-relativism and absolutism with political hegemonies reached its nadir with the advent of postmodernism. The connections between relativism and liberal ideologies have also been emphasised by those at the other end of the political spectrum, Alan Bloom and other conservative political

commentators have seen relativism as continuous with the politics of the left, Cardinal Ratzinger, the former Pope, had riled against the dictatorship of relativism in Western liberal democracies and in 2011 Paul Ryan, prior to becoming the speaker of the US House of Representatives, went as far as declaring that "The biggest problem in America isn't debt, it's moral relativism". Recently, the political discourse around relativism has taken a different turn. The questioning of the role of truth in public discourse and the introduction of terms such as "post-truth' and "alternative facts" have led to a renewed examination of the politics of relativism and to a questioning of its easy identification with liberal politics. A closer look at the history of relativism and the political allies and supporters it has forged, however, presents a more complex picture showing that the links between relativism the politics of the right have a long history, going back, at least, to the 19th century.

This paper relies on historical evidence, as well as philosophical considerations, to examine the connections between relativism and the politics of both the left and the right. I argue that different features of the broader doctrine of relativism can and have been successfully used in the service of widely divergent political ideologies and therefore there is no single politics of relativism but a variety of political uses of a heady but nebulous doctrine.

Johannes Steizinger: The Charge of Relativism: The Significance of Political Motifs.
Political motifs are an important issue in modern debates on relativism. Some philosophers argue that relativism is a prerequisite for open and multicultural societies as it enables their members to live on equal terms. Others argue that relativism gives rise to a problematic "anything goes" form of tolerance that is responsible for the flourishing of irrational views. Moreover, these critics of relativism often claim that relativists undermine the authority of truth and hence disparage a key virtue of democratic political life, namely truthfulness.

My talk examines some of the political concerns that are currently raised by anti-relativists. I discuss both the main arguments against relativism and the potential rejoinders of the relativist. Here, I examine in particular whether recent developments in political theory support a relativistic outlook in the domain of politics.

Session 3: Sociologism Revisited

David Bloor: "Sociologism and Relativism"
"Sociologism" is the claim (i) that knowledge and morality are social phenomena, and (ii)

that traditional "philosophical" accounts of knowledge and morality are nothing but misrepresentations of these social realities. They are reified accounts of social processes. Thus "philosophy" should be replaced by the positive science of sociology. In his 1912 book *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Emile Durkheim offered a classic statement of sociologism. First he gave a sociological account of "primitive" religious beliefs and then applied his analysis to contemporary forms of Neo-Kantian philosophy. I shall explain Durkheim's position and then use his perspective to examine a typical example of a current, anti-relativist argument. The target will be a paper by the philosopher Crispin Wright. I shall argue that there is much to learn from Durkheim that is relevant to today's discussions of relativism.

Paul Boghossian: "What is Epistemic Realism?"
Abstract: Many thinkers have been skeptical of epistemic realism. In this talk, I will examine what we should mean by 'epistemic realism' and whether, in the end, there is any real alternative to epistemic realism as so understood.

Martin Kusch: "The Relativism of the Strong Programme Revisited"
This paper will revisit the epistemic relativism of the „Strong Programme" in the "Sociology of Scientific Knowledge" as it was formulated by the Edinburgh sociologists Barry Barnes and David Bloor. I will test the viability of this version of relativism by measuring it against recent analyses and criticisms of relativism in different areas of philosophy (esp. Work by Paul Boghossian, John MacFarlane, and Crispin Wright).

Session 4: Psychologism and Naturalism in Logic and Epistemology

Catarina Dutilh Novaes & Herman Veluwenkamp: "Reasoning Biases, Non-Monotonic Logics and Belief Revision"
A range of formal models of human reasoning have been proposed in a number of fields such as philosophy, logic, artificial intelligence, computer science, psychology, cognitive science, etc.: various logics (epistemic logics; non-monotonic logics), probabilistic systems (most notably, but not exclusively, Bayesian probability theory), belief revision systems, neural networks, among others. The present investigation compares two formal models for reasoning – namely the non-monotonic logic known as preferential logic; and a particular version of belief revision theories, screened belief revision – against the phenomenon known

as belief bias in the psychology of reasoning literature: human reasoners typically seek to maintain the beliefs they already hold, and conversely to reject contradicting incoming information. Our conclusion will be that screened belief revision is more empirically adequate with respect to belief bias than preferential logic and non-monotonic logics in general, as what participants seem to be doing is above all a form of belief management on the basis of background knowledge. The upshot is that, while it may offer valuable insights into the nature of human reasoning, preferential logic (and non-monotonic logics in general) is ultimately inadequate as a formal model of the phenomena in question. Indeed, these results support an even stronger claim, namely that no currently available logical system can suitably account for the belief bias phenomenon, as the stage of what happens with incoming information is not sufficiently problematized by existing logical systems

Hilary Kornblith: "Naturalism, Psychologism, Relativism"

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw a great debate in the German-speaking philosophical world on the status of psychologism and its relation to relativism and naturalism. For a variety of reasons, the attentions of the disputants largely moved elsewhere with the start of the First World War. The concerns of that period, however, are once again a focus of much debate. The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have seen discussions of naturalism, the relationship between philosophy and psychology, and issues about the autonomy of philosophy return to the center of philosophical attention. While it is certainly too early to claim that any of these issues has been resolved, it is, perhaps, a good time to take stock of the current status of these debates, to clarify just what the available positions seem to be, and what is to be said for and against them.

In this paper, I provide one small piece of this very large picture. My focus here will be on naturalistic epistemology, and the perspective it offers on these issues. And since even among naturalistic philosophers there is not complete agreement on these matters, it will be more accurate to say that I will offer one naturalistic perspective on the relationship between philosophy and psychology, on the relationship between psychology and the principles of proper reasoning, and on the upshot of these matters for relativism. I believe that, as a result of the very substantial advances which have been made in experimental psychology, we are now in a position to make progress on the matters which were much debated one hundred

years ago. And I believe that these advances give us reason to support a refined version of psychologism.

Michiel van Lambalgen: "Taking psychologism seriously"

Psychologism (with respect to logic) holds that logical laws are empirical generalisations of the way humans reason. Careful observation shows that (i) each human has various (possibly incompatible) sets of inferences at their disposal; (ii) these sets of inferences are generally linked to (`relative to') particular cognitive tasks, such as real-time discourse comprehension, determining causal relationships, planning and action selection, and verbal reasoning tasks. In addition to this variety within subjects, one observes also considerable variety between subjects. As will be discussed in detail, the same reasoning task elicits very different inferential behaviour in subjects with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), when compared to neurotypical subjects. Roughly speaking, people with ASD are much less inclined to engage in non-monotonic reasoning than neurotypicals.

Even the picture just sketched is too simple. Cognitive tasks are not givens, and do not qualify as psychological stimuli. They require interpretation by the subject; this will be illustrated with the Wason Selection Task, in which concepts like `rule' and `truth' allow multiple interpretations. Since these are logical notions, one may consider the reasoning involved in solving a cognitive task as being composed of two parts: (a) imposing a logical form upon the task, and (b) reasoning in accordance with the logical form assigned.

To repeat, the adoption of the psychologistic standpoint forces one to acknowledge that one `must go beyond the information given'; it is at this point that a very relativised normativity enters the fray, in the form of harmony between (a) (`constitutive norms') and (b) (`regulative norms').

Session 5: New Relativisms, New Data

Delia Belleri: "Contextualism and Relativism about Evidence Statements"

This paper addresses the question whether the truth-value of evidence statements of the form "E is evidence for *p* (for a subject S)" is in any way context-sensitive. Call "Contextualism" the view whereby the truth-value of evidence statements is sensitive to the *context of use* (see Neta 2003, Wedgwood 2008). Jessica Brown (2016) argues that the prospects for this kind of contextualism are dim, because (i) some key arguments

employed for knowledge attributions do not apply and (ii) the view is not the best explanation for data involving context-shifts. In the first part of the paper, I defend the viability of contextualism by countering Brown's considerations. In the second part of the paper, I move to what may be called "Relativism" about evidence statements, whereby, adopting MacFarlane's (2014) semantics, the truth-value of evidence statements is sensitive to the *context of assessment*. The main arguments commonly invoked by the relativist involve the theory's capacity to capture disagreement data and retraction data. I argue that, in the case of evidence statements, disagreement-based arguments are far less forceful than the same arguments as recruited for terms like "know" or "tasty", while retraction-based arguments lead to dubious implications. I conclude that, although there are reasons to think that evidence statements are sensitive to context, it seems more plausible to cash out this sensitivity in Contextualist rather than in Relativist terms.

References

Brown, J. (2016). Contextualism about Evidential Support. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 92 (2):329-354.

MacFarlane, J. (2014). *Assessment Sensitivity: Relative Truth and its Applications.* Oxford University Press.

Neta, R. (2003). Contextualism and the problem of the external world. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 66 (1):1–31.

Wedgwood, R. (2008). Contextualism about justified belief. *Philosophers' Imprint* 8 (9):1-20.

Robin McKenna: "Understanding, Humility and Relativism"

In this talk I start by identifying two types of motivation for relativism. The first is based on the idea that we should strive to understand others on their own terms, and assess their behaviour based on their self-understandings. The second is based on the idea that any evaluation is itself undertaken from some perspective or other, and therefore cannot assume absolute validity. While these motivations are entirely consistent—one could combine them—I show that separating these motivations is useful because it helps us distinguish between some importantly different forms of relativism. In ethics, these distinct

motivations help shed some light on the debate between 'agent' and 'assessor' relativists. In epistemology, they help shed some light on the debate between 'interest-relative invariantists' and various forms of 'contextualism' and 'assessment relativism'. I finish by drawing some conclusions from my discussion.

Alexandra Plakias: "Relativism: The Most Ecumenical Metaethics?"
Moral relativism is often portrayed as a last resort: something we retreat from rather than aspire to. This is partly due to the perception that realism best captures our ordinary, commonsense moral commitments, whereas relativism is a revisionary account of ordinary practice and therefore bears a higher burden of proof. I argue that relativism can capture a feature of ordinary moral discourse—its supposed commitment to objectivity— as well as, if not better than, realism. I discuss two arguments in favor of relativism: the argument from disagreement, as well as an argument based on evidence that folk morality is variable with respect to objectivity. I suggest that a relativist view can capture this variation better than moral realism, and sketch out a relativism that is variable with respect to objectivity. In the course of explaining this view, I examine why objectivity is thought to be such a central part of our moral discourse and practice, and look at what relativism really requires us to give up. I conclude that relativism can satisfy many of the needs that motivate our insistence on moral objectivity. If this is true, relativism should not bear a heavier burden of proof than realist views: the same data that is supposed to give realist views an advantage is perfectly compatible with relativism as well.

Edouard Machery: "Against Parochialism"
In this talk, I will review the variation in philosophical judgments about thought experiments that experimental philosophers have brought to light. I will then discuss its metaphilosophical significance for the method of cases.