Plato’s Case for the Incoherence of Relativism

As is typical in philosophy, the articulation or characterization of a controversial doctrine is crucial to the assessment of arguments for and against it. Such characterizations are themselves controversial, but unavoidable if philosophical scrutiny of such doctrines is to take place. In full recognition of this ineliminable controversiality, in this paper I will take epistemological relativism to be the view that knowledge (and/or truth or justification) is relative – to time, to place, to society, to culture, to historical epoch, to conceptual scheme or framework, or to personal training or conviction – in that what counts as knowledge (or as true or justified) depends upon the value of one or more of these variables. According to the relativist, knowledge is relative in this way because different cultures, societies, epochs, etc. accept different sets of background principles, criteria, and/or standards of evaluation for knowledge-claims, and there is no neutral way of choosing between these alternative sets of standards. So the relativist’s basic thesis is that a claim’s status as knowledge (and/or the truth or rational justifiability of such knowledge-claims) is relative to the standards used in evaluating such claims; and (further) that such alternative standards cannot themselves be neutrally evaluated in terms of some fair, encompassing meta-standard.¹ A somewhat more technical characterization of epistemological relativism is as follows:

¹ The character of such ‘neutrality’ is addressed in Siegel 2004.
For any knowledge-claim \( p \), \( p \) can be evaluated (assessed, established, etc.) only according to (with reference to) one or another set of background principles and standards of evaluation \( s_1, \ldots, s_n \); and, given a different set (or sets) of background principles and standards \( s_1', \ldots, s_n' \), there is no neutral (that is, neutral with respect to the two (or more) alternative sets of principles and standards) way of choosing between the two (or more) alternative sets in evaluating \( p \) with respect to truth or rational justification. \( p \)'s truth and rational justifiability are relative to the standards used in evaluating \( p \).

The doctrine of relativism, so understood, is usually traced to Protagoras, who is portrayed in Plato's *Theaetetus* as holding that “man is the measure of all things” (‘homo mensura’), and that any given thing “is to me such as it appears to me, and is to you such as it appears to you”.

Plato's Socrates characterizes Protagorean relativism as consisting in the view that “what seems true to anyone is true for him to whom it seems so.” This view is a form of relativism in the sense just explained, since for the Protagorean there is no standard higher than the individual – with her own specific location in time, place, culture, framework, etc. – with reference to which claims to truth (and so knowledge) can be adjudicated. But relativism is best understood as a more general doctrine than the Protagorean version of it, which places the source of relativism at the level of standards rather than (as for the Protagorean) at the level of personal opinion or perception, and as such aptly characterizes more recent, influential versions of relativism, including the one to be discussed in what follows. What can be said for and against it?

**The Main Argument Against**

Opponents of relativism have made many criticisms of the doctrine; by far the most fundamental is the charge that relativism is self-referentially
incoherent or self-refuting, in that defending the doctrine requires one to give it up. There are several versions of the incoherence charge. The most powerful⁵ is that relativism precludes the possibility of determining the truth, justificatory status, or, more generally, the epistemic merit of contentious claims and theses – including itself – since according to relativism no claim or thesis can fail any test of epistemic adequacy or be judged unjustified or false.

Take Protagorean relativism as an example. If “what seems true [or justified] to anyone is true [or justified] for him to whom it seems so” (emphases added), then no sincere claim can fail to be true or be justifiably judged to be false. But if there is no possibility that a (sincerely held) claim or doctrine can be false, the very distinction between truth and falsity is given up; a ‘false’ belief is reduced simply to one which is not believed. While Protagorean relativism is in the first instance a doctrine about the relativity of truth, it is readily extended to matters of epistemic appraisal generally (as the bracketed insertions in the just-quoted expression of Protagorean relativism are meant to illustrate) and understood as asserting the relativity of standards of justification as well as those of truth. If read in this way, it follows from this form of relativism that there is no possibility that a belief sincerely judged by a person to be true or justified can be false or unjustified. The end result is that the very notions of truth and justifiedness are undermined. But if this is so, the doctrine of relativism cannot itself be true or justified. This can be seen by reflexively applying the doctrine to itself:

\[ ER' : \text{ER can be evaluated (assessed, established, etc.) only according to (with reference to) one or another set of background principles and standards of evaluation } s_1, \ldots, s_n; \text{ and, given a different set (or sets) of background principles and standards } s'_1, \ldots, s'_n, \text{ there is no neutral (that is, neutral with respect to the two (or more) alternative sets of principles and standards) way of choosing between the two (or more) alternative sets in evaluating ER with respect to truth or rational justification. ER’s truth and rational justifiability are relative to the standards used in evaluating ER.} \]

⁵ For others cf. Siegel 1987.
Relativism is thus (according to this argument) incoherent in that, if it is true (or justified), the very notion of truth (or justifiedness) is undermined, in which case relativism cannot itself be true (or justified). This undermining results because the relativism of standards alleged by the relativist renders it impossible to distinguish truth (and justifiedness) from its (their) contrary (-ies). The assertion and defense of relativism requires one to presuppose neutral standards in accordance with which contentious claims and doctrines can be assessed; but relativism denies the possibility of evaluation in accordance with such neutral standards. Thus the doctrine of relativism cannot be coherently defended – it can be defended only by being given up. Relativism is thus impotent – incapable of defending itself – and falls to this fundamental reflexive difficulty. Defending relativism non-relativistically is logically impossible, in that any such defense must appeal to that to which the relativist cannot appeal except by giving up relativism; while ‘defending’ relativism relativistically is not defending it, i.e., providing any non-question-begging reason for thinking it to be in any way epistemically superior to non-relativism.\(^6\)

To put this fundamental difficulty facing the relativist in a somewhat different way: insofar as she is taking issue with her non-relativist philosophical opponent, the relativist wants both (a) to offer a general, non-relative view of knowledge (and/or truth or justification), and assert that that general view – i.e., that knowledge is relative – is epistemically superior and preferable to its rivals; and also (b) to deny that such a general, non-relative view is possible or defensible. But the relativist cannot defend the view of knowledge offered in (a), according to which relativism is epistemically superior to non-relativism, in a way consistent with her own commitment to relativism. On the other hand, ‘defending’ relativism in a way that does not assert its epistemic superiority is not to defend it at all; neither is it to engage seriously the cluster of issues that divide the relativist from her non-relativist philosophical opponent. Embracing (b) – i.e., denying that a general, non-relative view of knowledge (including the relativist view) is possible or defensible – similarly precludes the relativist from seriously engaging the issues to which her relativism is a response. Moreover, defending (b) requires a commitment to (a), which commitment the commitment to (b) itself precludes.

In short: the relativist needs to embrace both (a), in order to see her position both as a rival to, and, further, as epistemically superior to, the position of her non-relativist opponent; and (b), in order to honor the fundamental requirements of relativism. But the mutual embrace of (a) and (b) is logically incoherent. For the embrace of (a) forces the rejection of (b): if relativism is the epistemically superior view of knowledge (i.e., (a)), then one general view of knowledge is both possible and defensible as epistemically superior to its rivals (contrary to (b)). Similarly, the embrace of (b) forces the rejection of (a): if no general, non-relative view of knowledge is possible or defensible (i.e., (b)), then it cannot be that relativism is itself epistemically superior to its rivals (contrary to (a)). Here again the argument strongly suggests that the assertion and defense of relativism is incoherent.

Can the Strong Programme overcome these difficulties? Let us see.

The Sociology of Science and the Strong Programme

The sociology of scientific knowledge concerns itself with the sociological processes through which such knowledge is generated or produced, the processes through which it is ‘legitimated’ and accepted within a particular community, and other sociological processes and phenomena which play a role in the collective human effort to know. Traditionally, this sort of sociological investigation into the production, acceptance, legitimation and dissemination of knowledge has been taken by sociologists and epistemologists alike to be distinct from genuine epistemological inquiry, for the most that can be expected from the former sort of inquiry is a descriptive, causal account of how some particular community C produced and came to accept some knowledge-claim p or theory T, while the truth and/or justificatory status of p and T cannot be settled by such causal accounts: C’s regarding p as true or justified, however caused, is one thing; p’s being true or justified quite another. In this way a sharp division between sociological and epistemological inquiry concerning science and its claims to knowledge has traditionally been drawn, a division which cedes to sociology the task of describing and explaining scientific beliefs and attitudes at the sociological level, and to epistemology the task of evaluating such beliefs and, more generally, dealing with the norma-
tive assessment of candidate knowledge-claims. Indeed, it has seemed to many that the ‘sociology of knowledge’ is a misnomer, in that inquiry conducted under that banner happily ignores any distinction between genuine knowledge and its counterfeits, and is better called the sociology, not of knowledge, but of belief.

Leaving the question of what such inquiry should be called to one side, advocates of the Strong Programme explicitly reject, for the purposes of their inquiries, any such distinction between genuine knowledge and spurious impostors to that title, and explicitly accept that, for them, knowledge is nothing more than belief. As David Bloor puts it, “Knowledge for the sociologist is whatever men take to be knowledge. It consists of those beliefs which men confidently hold to and live by.” As Barry Barnes and Bloor, in their widely cited defense of relativism, write: “We refer to any collectively accepted system of belief as ‘knowledge’.” Their preference for this “terminological convention” concerning ‘knowledge’ – in contrast to the more usual ‘convention,’ which takes for granted that, since one of the central tasks of epistemology is to say what knowledge is, for purposes of epistemological theorizing it is of central importance to distinguish between genuine knowledge and spurious contenders for that title, however widely believed – has the unfortunate consequence that much of the debate between proponents and opponents of the relativism of the ‘strong programmers’ seems to be ineffectual, due to these very different understandings of ‘knowledge.’ Nevertheless, in view of the wide-ranging influence of the Strong Programme in the broad area of science studies, the centrality of relativism in the overall perspective of

7 It is worth noting that one of the protagonists of this section, Barry Barnes, once explicitly endorsed this distinction, and agreed that the sociologist’s project is distinct from the epistemologist’s: “The sociologist is concerned with the naturalistic understanding of what people take to be knowledge, and not with the evaluative assessment of what deserves to be so taken; his orientation is normally distinct from that of the philosopher or epistemologist.” (Barnes 1977, p. 1). This acknowledgement does not sit well with his paper with Bloor (Barnes/Bloor 1982) discussed below, since that paper emphatically rejects this distinction, and advocates epistemological relativism on the basis of the sociologist’s concern with ‘what people take to be knowledge’ – indeed, far from these being two distinct projects, the epistemological point, according to that paper, follows directly from the sociological ones.

8 Bloor 1976, p. 2.

9 Barnes/Bloor 1982, p. 22 Fn. 5.

10 Ibid.
that programme, and the fundamental status of Barnes and Bloor’s argument for relativism in that perspective, it behooves us to consider that argument here.

Central to their case for relativism is their claim that relativism is required for science: “Far from being a threat to the scientific understanding of forms of knowledge, relativism is required by it. Our claim is that relativism is essential to all those disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, the history of institutions and ideas, and even cognitive psychology, which account for the diversity of systems of knowledge, their distribution and the manner of their change.”\textsuperscript{11} There are three things to notice about this proclamation. First, it must be remembered that by ‘knowledge’ Barnes and Bloor mean belief; their claim is that social scientists studying alternative systems of belief and the dynamics of belief change at the social level, if that study is to be scientific, must study both systems thought by the sociologist to be normatively praiseworthy, and systems thought to be less praiseworthy. No epistemologist who rejects relativism, and who believes that the non-relative normative evaluation of belief is possible, need disagree with this. Second, since ‘epistemology’ is not included in the list of subjects for which relativism is thought to be essential, the passage, as far as goes, seems to be compatible with the rejection of epistemological relativism: holding that social scientists studying belief systems and the dynamics of belief change must conduct their studies in ways that don’t invoke the social scientists’ normative evaluations of the beliefs under study seems straightforwardly compatible with the legitimacy, in other contexts, of just such normative evaluations. But third, the proclamation is unclear as to the sense of ‘relativism’ alleged here to be ‘essential’ for social scientific inquiry: are Barnes and Bloor making the innocuous point that social scientists studying belief distribution and the dynamics of belief change must study belief systems of both epistemically meritorious and epistemically less meritorious normative status; or the philosophically more contentious claim that any such distinctions concerning epistemic merit are illusory? Only the latter would qualify their view as a version of relativism of the sort we are concerned with here.

\textsuperscript{11} Barnes/Bloor 1982, pp. 21–2. See also Barnes’ contribution to this volume, which aims to defend this claim.
The answer to this question is, unfortunately, less than clear. On the one hand, they endorse what I just called the ‘innocuous point’:

Our equivalence postulate is that all beliefs are on a par with one another with respect to the causes of their credibility [...]. The position we shall defend is that the incidence of all beliefs without exception calls for empirical investigation and must be accounted for by finding the specific, local causes of this credibility. This means that regardless of whether the sociologist evaluates a belief as true or rational, or as false and irrational, he must search for the causes of its credibility. In all cases he will ask, for instance, if a belief is part of the routine cognitive and technical competences handed down from generation to generation. Is it enjoined by the authorities of the society? Is it transmitted by established institutions of socialization or supported by accepted agencies of social control? Is it bound up with patterns of vested interest? [...] All of these questions can, and should, be answered without regard to the status of the belief as it is judged and evaluated by the sociologist’s own standards.\textsuperscript{12}

In this central passage Barnes and Bloor are clear that (a) epistemic evaluation is possible (although, as we will see in a moment, only relative to local contexts), even though the sociologist is to ignore such evaluation in her inquiries and investigate the causes of the credibility (or lack thereof) of all beliefs independently of their normative status, and (b) by ‘causes of credibility’ they mean those factors which cause believers to believe as they do, i.e., to regard some beliefs as credible and others not. The causes of a belief’s credibility thus are not, for Barnes and Bloor (contrary to some causal theories of justification), those factors which cause beliefs to be justified or worthy of belief; they are rather the factors which cause beliefs to be \textit{regarded} by believers \textit{as} credible (although again, as we’ll see in a moment, Barnes and Bloor reject this distinction). The epistemic status of all beliefs is thus left open: once the sociologist identifies the causes of community \textit{C}’s regarding belief system \textit{BS} as credible, her work is done. It is no concern of the sociologist to determine whether or not beliefs so regarded really are credible. So far, then, Barnes and Bloor are not committed to any philosophically controversial sort of relativism.

But they also endorse what I called above the ‘philosophically more contentious claim,’ committing themselves to epistemological relativism of the sort with which we are here concerned. Discussing two tribes and their local epistemic predilections, Barnes and Bloor write:

\textsuperscript{12} Barnes/Bloor 1982, p. 23.
The crucial point is that a relativist accepts that his preferences and evaluations are as context-bound as those of the tribes T1 and T2. Similarly he accepts that none of the justifications of his preferences can be formulated in absolute or context-independent terms. In the last analysis, he acknowledges that his justifications will stop at some principle or alleged matter of fact that only has local credibility [...]. For the relativist there is no sense attached to the idea that some standards or beliefs are really rational as distinct from merely locally accepted as such. Because he thinks that there are no context-free or super-cultural norms of rationality he does not see rationally and irrationally held beliefs as making up two distinct and qualitatively different classes of thing [...]. Hence the relativist conclusion that they are to be explained in the same way.13

Unlike the passage cited earlier, in this passage Barnes and Bloor clearly seem to endorse an epistemologically contentious form of relativism according to which ‘non-local’ epistemic evaluation, and a distinction between genuinely rational beliefs and those which are erroneously regarded as such, are philosophical fantasies. Let us examine their case.

As this passage makes clear, Barnes and Bloor reject the distinction drawn above between beliefs that are regarded, perhaps erroneously, as justified, and beliefs that actually are justified: “For the relativist there is no sense attached to the idea that some standards or beliefs are really rational as distinct from merely locally accepted as such.” This is parallel to their rejection of any distinction between genuine knowledge and a counterfeit taken by some to be genuine. Genuine knowledge, and ‘really rational’ beliefs, just are what people regard as such; to be regarded as genuine is to be genuine.

There are three points to make here. The first is that this ‘locality claim’ (let us call it) is not a consequence of the equivalence postulate concerning the causes of credibility of beliefs with which Barnes and Bloor define their brand of relativism; it is an independent dimension of their view which requires its own justification (to be considered below). The second is that their equation of genuine knowledge (and ‘really rational’ belief) and that which is taken to be knowledge (and rational belief) flows naturally from their initial decision to adopt the ‘convention’ according to which ‘knowledge’ is defined as belief. Insofar, their rejection of the ‘is regarded as/is’ distinction is of no epistemological moment, since epistemologists are concerned with a quite different conception of knowledge,
and are centrally concerned to distinguish the genuine article from imposters, however sincerely they might be embraced as genuine by some believers.

But third, Barnes and Bloor do offer a reason for rejecting any such distinction, namely that all such judgments of genuineness will themselves be only ‘local’:

[...] a relativist accepts that his preferences and evaluations are [...] context-bound [...] . Similarly he accepts that none of the justifications of his preferences can be formulated in absolute or context-independent terms. In the last analysis, he acknowledges that his justifications will stop at some principle or alleged matter of fact that only has local credibility.

That is, it is not possible for any cognizer, including the sociologist, to escape her local context and judge from some ‘context-free’, ‘super-cultural’ or context-independent perspective.

This claim is, in fact, nothing more than (a version of) the conclusion of the ‘no transcendence’ argument for relativism to be addressed next. Barnes and Bloor’s argument is in the end one of very simple form: all judgment is local – no judgments have any positive epistemic status beyond that granted them by epistemic agents in some locale, and there is no getting beyond such locales to reach a context-independent platform from which to judge – therefore relativism. Let us consider this argument, before returning to further examination of the Strong Programme.

**Is It Possible to ‘Transcend’ One’s Perspective?**

It is widely acknowledged that one can never completely escape one’s perspective, framework, or conceptual scheme and achieve a ‘God’s eye view’ or a ‘view from nowhere’\(^\text{14}\); that all cognitive activity is inevitably conducted from some ongoing perspective or point of view. A typical expression of this thesis is Quine’s:

The philosopher’s task differs from the others’, then, in detail; but in no such drastic way as those suppose who imagine for the philosopher a vantage point outside the conceptual scheme that he takes in charge. There is no such cosmic exile. He cannot study and revise the fundamental conceptual scheme of science and common sense without having some conceptual scheme, whether the same or another no less in need of philosophical scrutiny, in which to work.\(^\text{15}\)

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15 Quine 1960, p. 275–6.
Philosophers generally grant Quine’s point: there is no ‘cosmic exile’ from all conceptual schemes; one cannot cognize except from within the confines of some scheme or other. But from the relatively uncontroversial claim that we cannot escape all perspectives and achieve a ‘view from nowhere’ or ‘perspectiveless perspective,’ it seems a short step to the relativistic conclusion that what we can know, or what can be true or justified, is itself relative to the schemes, frameworks or perspectives that inevitably limit our judgment; that, since there is no ‘perspectiveless’ judgment, there is no possibility of achieving a perspective that would allow us to non-question-beggingly compare and evaluate either judgments issued from different perspectives, or alternative perspectives themselves. That is, the uncontroversial claim that all judgments inevitably occur in the context of some perspective or other might be thought to entail that all judgments are therefore bound or determined by such perspectives, which are in effect inescapable – and so that what a given epistemic agent is able to know, or regard as true or justified, is problematically limited by her perspective or framework in such a way, or to such an extent, that relativism inevitably results. Is relativism correctly derived in this way?

It is not – or so I will argue. The alleged entailment just mentioned fails; even though we cannot attain a ‘perspectiveless perspective,’ in the relevant sense we can nevertheless ‘transcend’ our frameworks and perspectives. We must distinguish between transcending or escaping any given perspective from transcending all perspectives. Once this distinction is drawn, the ‘no transcendence, therefore relativism’ argument fails.

Let me first lay out the argument explicitly:

No Transcendence:

1. Non-relative judgments require the possibility of getting outside of, freeing oneself from the influence of, or transcending one’s perspective, framework, or conceptual scheme.
2. It is not possible to escape or transcend one’s conceptual scheme. There is no ‘perspectiveless perspective’ from which one can judge.
3. Therefore, relativism.

Our question is: Is this argument any good? Does it establish epistemological relativism? I argue next that it does not, because of an ambiguity concerning ‘transcendence.’
Are we limited by our perspectives, such that we cannot achieve any critical perspective on them? Are we really ‘trapped’ within our perspectives in this way? Common sense and every day experience suggest the contrary. Perhaps the most obvious range of counter-examples involves the cognitive activities of children. Three and four year old children, for example, can count and have a reasonable grasp of whole numbers, but have no understanding of fractions or decimals, i.e., parts of whole numbers that are themselves numbers. If asked ‘is there a number between 1 and 2?’, they will answer in the negative, and will be unable to comprehend any suggestion to the contrary. But, given normal psychological development, within a few years such children will answer affirmatively; they will have no problem recognizing that, for example, 1.5 is a number between 1 and 2, and more generally, that there are non-whole numbers. This seems a perfectly straightforward case of the modification of a perspective or framework, or of the abandonment of one framework for another, which belies the claim that we are trapped in, bound by, or limited to our frameworks.

Examples from the natural sciences and mathematics can equally easily be given. Consider, for example, the hard won recognition of the existence of things too small to see with the naked eye, achieved in large part by the invention and development of the microscope; or the interanimation of space and time and of the large scale non-Euclidean geometry of the universe, achieved over a period of decades around the turn of the twentieth century and culminating in Einstein’s general theory of relativity. Both of these are cases plausibly described as fundamental changes in conceptual scheme or framework: the first as a fundamental change in our understanding of the range of existing things; the second as a fundamental change in our understanding of space and time themselves. Similar remarks apply to Cantor’s discovery (and proof) of the differing sizes of infinite sets, and of other fundamental mathematical discoveries: they

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16 Grasp of fractions and decimals usually involves a process which extends over several years and is in part a function of what is taught, when. The classic work in this area is Gelman and Gallistel 1978; it (including their account of what counts as a ‘reasonable grasp’ of numbers) is summarized briefly and lucidly in Moshman, Glover and Bruning 1987, pp. 420–3.
are plausibly described as fundamental changes in conceptual scheme. All of them involve the transcendence of prior schemes in favor of new, superior ones.

Very different sorts of examples can also be given. Consider, for example, the ‘male sexist pig’ who has no awareness or understanding of women other than as (sex) objects, but who in the course of his experience comes to realize (if only dimly) that he does treat women as objects, that many women want not to be so treated, and that there might well be something objectionable about treating women in that way. Suppose that this benighted male comes eventually to a full(er) awareness of the injustice of his earlier treatment of women; he comes to believe that it is wrong to treat women as objects and, over a considerable period of time and with the help of many women (and perhaps some courses in the Women's Studies Department), he develops a radically different and more respectful view of women and (hallelujah!) treats them accordingly. (Surely many men have had their consciousnesses raised to some extent in this way in recent decades.) Here again it seems that our subject has had his perspective altered and, indeed, improved; that is, he has ‘transcended’ his old sexist perspective for another.

In these examples not only have perspectives altered; the cognizers considered all regard their later perspectives as improvements; i.e., as better than, superior to, their earlier ones. If asked, these cognizers will be able to offer reasons which purport to justify those judgments of superiority. Those reasons, and the judgment that they are good ones that offer justification for the superiority of those later perspectives, are of course made from the perspective of those later perspectives or frameworks; they are not outside of all frameworks or issued from a perspectiveless perspective. Thus is acknowledged the uncontroversial second premise of the argument under consideration. But the conclusion is undermined by the several counter-examples offered: epistemic agents always judge from some perspective or other, but there is no reason to think that they are trapped in or bound by their perspectives such that they cannot subject them to critical scrutiny. In this sense, we can ‘transcend’ our perspectives; and this sense is sufficient to defeat the argument for relativism we have been considering. As Popper puts the point:

I do admit that at any moment we are prisoners caught in the framework of our theories; our expectations; our past experiences; our language. But we are prisoners
in a Pickwickian sense: if we try, we can break out of our frameworks at any time. Admittedly, we shall find ourselves again in a framework, but it will be a better and roomier one; and we can at any moment break out of it again.

The central point is that a critical discussion and a comparison of the various frameworks is always possible.  

Here Popper clearly draws the crucial distinction that undermines this path to relativism. While the Quinean point that we inevitably judge from some framework or other, that we cannot judge from a perspective-less perspective, must be granted, it does not follow that our judgments are necessarily tainted by the fact that they are made from some framework or other. On the contrary, we can and regularly do ‘transcend’ our frameworks from the perspective of other, ‘roomier’ ones, in which can fit both our earlier one and relevant rivals to it – and in this way fair, non-relative evaluations of both our judgments and the frameworks/perspectives from which they are made are possible.

The ‘framework relativist’ may reject these alleged examples of transcendence, and in this way seek to preserve the argument we have been considering. This raises in a pointed way the question: what are ‘frameworks’, ‘contexts’, ‘conceptual schemes’, or ‘perspectives’, such that our judgments and our ability to know is bound by them in a way which precludes transcendence? I have thus far understood these locutions in an intuitive and rather uncritical way, since it seems clear that the examples given – do/do not recognize non-whole numbers, do/do not recognize the existence of objects too small to see with the naked eye, do/do not recognize the interanimation of space and time, do/do not recognize women other than as (sex) objects, etc. – are sufficiently general that such differences constitute differences in conceptual framework or scheme if anything does. Equally plausible examples of alternative schemes are the range of ‘scientific revolutions’ made so much of by Kuhn, for example the shifts from the Ptolemaic to the Copernican, Newtonian, and Einsteini-an conceptions of the heavens. Understood so generously that all these examples are indeed examples of alternative frameworks or schemes, the argument for relativism based upon that generous understanding of these terms seems clearly deficient. Attempts to resuscitate the argument minimally require a more careful explication of these terms than I have given

17 Popper 1970, p. 56.
them here – and, it must be said, than defenders of ‘framework’ relativism have typically given them. Further, they require attention to Davidson’s famous argument against the possibility of such alternative schemes, and hence of a version of relativism based upon them.\textsuperscript{18} Absent such efforts, the ‘no transcendence, therefore relativism’ argument seems clearly to fail.

It remains to establish that the ‘no transcendence’ argument is actually the basis of the Strong Programme’s relativism. Happily, this is easily done. That argument, as we have seen, depends upon the idea that we cannot transcend our schemes to achieve a ‘perspectiveless perspective’ or ‘view from nowhere’. Barnes and Bloor’s defense of relativism, cited and discussed above, rests on their contentions that evaluations of beliefs are inevitably “context-bound”; that justifications cannot “be formulated in absolute or context-independent terms”; that “justifications will stop at some principle or alleged matter of fact that only has local credibility”; that “there are no context-free or super-cultural norms of rationality” to which appeal is possible in justificatory efforts. Let us grant that all this is correct. As we have seen, none of it entails that non-relative epistemic evaluation is impossible. That the relativism of the Strong Programme rests on the ‘no transcendence’ argument is clear. That the argument fails is equally so.

Let us consider next some further difficulties with the relativism of the Strong Programme.

\textbf{Further Difficulties with the Strong Programme’s Relativism}

Barnes and Bloor’s ‘equivalence postulate’ insists that all beliefs, however appraised from whatever perspective, be dealt with in the same way by the sociologist: that is, their ‘credibility’ is to be explained causally. The sociologist’s task is to identify the ‘causes of credibility’ of beliefs, i.e., the social forces that explain their development, acceptance, and change. This causal thesis is not something that the opponent of relativism need reject, since that opponent can simply distinguish between the causes of belief, on the one hand, and the epistemic status of belief, however caused, on the other. Barnes and Bloor would reject this distinction, since ‘epistemic status’ for them just means ‘locally perceived epistemic status’, and

\textsuperscript{18} Cf. Davidson 1984. For discussion, cf. Siegel 1987, ch. 2.
the causal question in which they are interested is precisely: what social forces cause belief system BS to be perceived, in a given locale, as having the status it is perceived to have? But the non-relativist can happily acknowledge the scientific legitimacy of the question. The important point here is that the legitimacy of the question, and the ‘equivalence postulate’ more generally, offers no support to relativism; the symmetry of explanation is perfectly compatible with the non-relativity of epistemic evaluation: The social forces (e.g., feudalism, religion, poverty, etc.) that brought about the acceptance of the Aristotelian belief system in the Middle Ages is one thing, the epistemic status of that system another. Of course Barnes and Bloor reject any non-relativist reading of the latter, but their reason for doing so – the ‘no transcendence’ argument – fails.

As we have seen, for Barnes and Bloor there is nothing more to ‘knowledge’ than community approval.19 The task of the sociologist of science is not to give an epistemic account of why community C rightly regards some theory T or claim p as knowledge (or justified), but rather to give a causal account of community C’s coming to so regard them.

Consider the character of such a causal account. Presumably it will have the general form: ‘(Particular) social forces cause the credibility of belief systems within a given community,’ or, schematically, ‘SF cause the credibility of BS in C.’ So suppose the sociologist proposes such a causal account of belief credibility – say, that the belief that relativism is self-referentially incoherent is caused to be credible in the community of analytic epistemologists in the second half of the twentieth century by social forces involving the elite status of private research institutions, the reward system within such institutions, etc. How do Barnes and Bloor regard such accounts? As relativists, they seem to have no choice but to regard them relativistically: within community of sociologists C₁ – say, the one located in Edinburgh and environs in the last quarter of the twentieth century – social forces cause the belief in question to be highly credible; whereas within community C₂ – say, the one located around Merton in the United States in the third quarter of that century – that belief is caused by social forces to be less credible. In both communities credibility is just

19 This brings to mind Kuhn’s famous remark that, with respect to paradigm choice, “there is no standard higher than the assent of the relevant community.” (Kuhn 1962, p. 94) Here is one clear instance of Kuhn’s influence on the Strong Programme in particular, and on post-Kuhnian sociology of science more generally.
‘credibility-as-perceived-in-that-community’; to be regarded as credible is to be credible. Barnes and Bloor are clear that they accept this consequence of their views: the sociologist enjoys no special exemption from the ‘equivalence postulate’; the credibility of her beliefs, like all scientific and other beliefs, is to be explained causally.

So far none of this poses any difficulty for Barnes and Bloor. But consider now the case in which two different communities of sociologists account for the credibility of a belief system in a third community, i.e., in which $C_1$ and $C_2$ offer alternative accounts of the social forces which cause a belief (system) to be credible in a third community $C$. Let $C_1$ and $C_2$ be the communities of sociologists just identified; let $C$ be the community of analytic epistemologists in the United States and Western Europe in the third quarter of the twentieth century; let $BS$ be that system of beliefs concerning knowledge, truth, justification, etc., that includes the belief that relativism is self-referentially incoherent; let $SF_1$ be the social forces cited by $C_1$ as those which cause the credibility of $BS$ in $C$ (for example, social and economic forces involving the power structure, reward system, and student selection procedures of prestigious universities during the time period in question); let $SF_2$ be the quite different social forces cited by $C_2$ as those that cause the credibility of $BS$ in $C$ (for example, social forces that encourage respect for conservative values such as ‘(perceived) common sense’ which is manifested in the members’ of $C$’s appreciation of the standard Platonic arguments for incoherence); finally, let $CC_1$ be the account of the causes of credibility of $BS$ in $C$ offered by $C_1$, and let $CC_2$ be the account of the causes of credibility of $BS$ in $C$ offered by $C_2$. The question is: how are we to think about these alternative accounts $CC_1$ and $CC_2$? Barnes and Bloor regard the evaluation of these alternatives as a scientific matter: the sociologist of knowledge is, after all, a scientist. But they also regard all such judgments as relative: the scientific worth of these accounts will be judged variously – or rather, will be caused to be credible to varying degrees – by scientists in differing communities. But this raises the question: why do Barnes and Bloor place so much impor-

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20 For the record, Barnes and Bloor do talk about “the received culture of epistemologists” (Barnes/Bloor 1982, p. 39); there is nothing unfair in characterizing their view in such a way that specific academic groups – e.g., epistemologists, sociologists, and even particular ‘schools’ within these groups – constitute their own local communities which can be investigated sociologically in order to determine the causes of the credibility of their belief systems.
tance on the scientific character of sociological accounts of the causes of credibility of belief systems, if all such accounts will themselves have only local credibility?

To sharpen this problem: suppose Barnes and Bloor favor some particular $CC_1$, and their sociological opponents (the ‘weak programmers’) favor an incompatible $CC_2$, of the credibility of some $BS$ in some $C$. As relativists, Barnes and Bloor seem forced to acknowledge that their preferred account $CC_1$ itself has only local credibility – i.e., it is caused to be credible in the community of strong programmers – while the account they reject, $CC_2$, is equally locally credible in the rival community of weak programmers. Is this sensibly regarded as a scientific account of scientific knowledge? Since judgments of the causes of credibility, and of the scientific merits of competing accounts of those causes, are themselves relative to locale, it seems that the Strong Programme’s relativism is at odds with its scientific status.

This last point brings us, finally, back to the problem of incoherence. Barnes and Bloor appear not to have overcome this problem. First, as just noted, their yearning for a scientific sociology of science does not sit well with their endorsement of relativism, since the former requires a non-relativistic notion of causality, and a non-relativistic account of the specific causes of credibility of any particular belief system, that the latter precludes.

Second, their argument for relativism itself requires the rejection of that conclusion. Barnes and Bloor claim to show, in their discussion, that “the balance of argument favours a relativist theory of knowledge”. By this it is clear that they do not mean that their argument supports relativism only from the perspective of their own community of sociologists, but rather that it supports it generally, and should be found persuasive even by those outside that community (e.g., philosophers who endorse ‘rationalism’). Insofar as they see themselves as providing a justification of relativism which has epistemic force beyond their local community of sociologists, and as providing a case for thinking that ‘rationalism’ is mistaken – as they clearly do see themselves as doing – their relativ-

Footnote 21: Barnes/Bloor 1982, p. 21. Note that Barnes and Bloor are here explicitly calling their argument for relativism a contribution to the theory of knowledge, and not a contribution to sociology in particular or the social sciences more generally.
ism contravenes these claims. For if their arguments are successful, and their claims true (or justified), the epistemic status of these arguments and claims extend beyond the bounds of their local community, thus undermining their relativism. If, on the other hand, their relativism remains, then their claim to have arguments for it whose force extends beyond their community is undermined, since their relativism, according to which epistemic judgments are necessarily local and context-bound, explicitly rejects any such possibility. Either way, their relativism is incompatible with their claim to be able to justify it in terms of ‘the balance of argument’. This combination remains incoherent: the latter depends upon a non-relative sense of ‘argument’ or ‘evidence’ which the former precludes.

Of course Barnes and Bloor could bite the bullet here and retreat to the view that the balance of argument does not favor relativism tout court, but does so only for those already on the inside of their community – that that balance favors relativism only locally, i.e., relative to their community. In this case, their argument would be presented as having no tendency or ability to establish the error of ‘rationalist’ ways to those in rationalist communities, let alone to fair-minded students of the issue generally. But if their case is indeed taken by them to be limited in this way, why bother making that case to the rest of us in the first place? Here we see again relativism’s impotence.

Given the quite familiar way in which Barnes and Bloor face the incoherence problem, their attempt to deflect it requires brief comment. They eschew two alternative ‘equivalence postulates’ – that all “general conceptions of the natural order” are either equally false, or equally true – because they both “run into technical difficulties” involving incoherence. In favoring their chosen ‘equivalence postulate’ concerning the ‘causes of credibility’ of beliefs, Barnes and Bloor believe themselves to have avoided these ‘technical difficulties.’ (Space precludes speculation concerning the causes of the credibility (for them) of that belief.) I have just argued that, on the contrary, those technical difficulties have not been overcome, mainly because, independently of their chosen equivalence postulate, they hold that all judgments of truth, justification, etc., are equally local and admit of no higher-order assessment. That is, they

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endorse the problematic ‘no transcendence’ argument for relativism – and this is sufficient to give life to the ‘technical difficulties’ involving incoherence.

To summarize: 1. Given their refusal to distinguish between knowledge and belief, Barnes and Bloor’s arguments concerning the ‘equivalence postulate’ establish at most the relativity of belief. This sort of relativism is uncontroversial, indeed trivial. 2. The equivalence postulate concerning the causes of credibility does not entail relativism; only ‘locality’ – a quite independent thesis – entails this conclusion. 3. The argument for this thesis relies on the unsuccessful ‘no transcendence’ argument for relativism, and so fails. 4. A non-relative notion of causality appears to be required for the scientific study of belief that the Strong Programme recommends. 5. Finally, despite their heroic attempts to deflect it, the self-refutation/incoherence problem remains as much a problem for Barnes and Bloor as for other advocates of relativism.

None of this is to deny that science is a social activity, that scientists have interests other than the ‘purely cognitive,’ or that the sociological study of science is an eminently worthwhile undertaking – it is; they do; and it is. The question concerns not the viability or worth of the sociological investigation of science, but only the tendency of such investigation to support epistemological relativism. If my arguments succeed, it does not.

A More Recent Defense of the Strong Programme

One might think that my focus on Barnes and Bloor’s famous paper of 1982, however influential it might have been, is unfortunately out of date. I must admit the legitimacy of the charge. Consequently, I next consider briefly a more recent paper of Bloor’s, which I will argue does little to blunt the criticisms made thus far.

Bloor’s ‘Sociology of Scientific Knowledge’ (2004) is a long, systematic, and thorough discussion of the Strong Programme’s central tenets and the critical reaction to it over the years. It is a commanding paper, but, unfortunately, it does not resolve the issues at the center of the present effort. In fact, the problems with Barnes and Bloor’s treatment of relativism in their classic 1982 paper remain problematic in Bloor’s more recent discussion.
In this paper, Bloor endorses once again the ‘innocuous reading’ of relativism noted above: “For the purpose of the sociology of knowledge relativism is the thesis that the credibility of all beliefs calls for explanation in terms of local, contingent causes.”\textsuperscript{23} As explained above, no one interested in denying epistemological relativism need disagree. In this sense we’re all ‘relativists’.

However, Bloor denies the legitimacy of any ‘evidential/social’ distinction, insisting that the two are inextricably bound:

Whatever measure is used [to determine warrant or evidential support] will have the character of a collective choice, and it will have to be sustained as a convention. The social, in other words, is right in there, in the midst of the rational process of warranting. Warranting is not acceptance minus the social, it is itself a process whose structure and content cannot be properly analyzed without identifying its conventional and social dimension.\textsuperscript{24}

This is an important passage, which I think is helpful in identifying a key point on which the advocates and critics of relativism talk past one another. Critics aren’t talking about any such process. Warrant, as the critics (and epistemologists more generally) understand it, is an evidential relation obtaining (or not) between a claim and its purportedly supporting evidence. The epistemic relation of support is one thing; the process we utilize in our effort to measure it another.

Bloor concludes his lengthy discussion with the lovely closing remark:

[The] critic of epistemological relativism […] must lay claim to absolute standards. There are bound to be those who believe they can evade this responsibility. They will think that they can reject relativism without, at some point, embracing absolutism. There will, no doubt, be talk of a “third-way”, and of going “beyond” the choice between relativism and absolutism. But those who claim they are both non-relativists and non-absolutists are deluding themselves. Critics of the relativism of the sociology of knowledge should not prevaricate. They should have the courage of their convictions, and the clarity of mind, to declare their absolutism and to show the world the absolute values they have been vouchsafed. Having done this, they can then explain to the ever curious sociologist just how they accomplished this epistemological miracle.\textsuperscript{25}

The relativism Bloor here defends is not that articulated by the ‘in-
nocuous reading’. Rather, the ‘epistemological miracle’ that Bloor here challenges the non-relativist to embrace is that contemplated in the ‘contentious reading’: Namely, that of transcending all perspectives and specifying “some standards or beliefs [that] are really rational as distinct from merely locally accepted as such.” But this, as we have seen, is just to invoke the flawed ‘no transcendence’ argument for relativism. Bloor is right that we can’t perform that epistemological miracle, of judging from outside all perspectives. But it is not necessary to do that in order to reject the ‘contentious reading’.

Here, as earlier, Bloor successfully defends the ‘innocuous reading’, but fails to distinguish it from the ‘contentious reading’. Bloor emphasizes the importance of the participants in this dispute specifying the form of relativism embraced/rejected:

> Those who reject relativism sometimes fasten upon one special form of the doctrine, refute this to their satisfaction, and then allow themselves to proceed as if they had refuted relativism as such […]. The only real basis for identifying a position as relativist lies in its rejection of a corresponding form of absolutism.\(^{26}\)

But Bloor himself sometimes defends the innocuous reading of relativism;\(^{27}\) sometimes the contentious reading;\(^{28}\) he sometimes criticizes the ‘absolutism’ that rejects the symmetry of explanation, sometimes that which embraces the ‘view from nowhere’ and ‘epistemological miracles’. That is, he has not followed his own wise counsel to be clear about the ‘absolutism’ that his own brand of relativism rejects. In so far as he rejects an asymmetry of explanation, and embraces the ‘innocuous reading’ of relativism, the anti-relativist epistemologist can happily agree with him. In so far as he rejects the ‘epistemological miracle’ of the achievement of a ‘view from nowhere’ or ‘perspectiveless perspective’, the just-mentioned epistemologist can again agree. However, in so far as Bloor thinks that rejecting all of these types of ‘absolutism’ requires one to embrace the ‘contentious reading’, such that one’s epistemic judgments and evaluations are necessarily ‘local’, and thus that alternative epistemic evaluations cannot themselves be fairly or non-question-beggingly assessed, he has fallen victim to the ‘no transcendence’ argument criticized

\(^{26}\) Bloor 2004, p. 935.
\(^{27}\) Cf. e.g. Bloor 2004, p. 936.
\(^{28}\) Cf. e.g. Bloor 2004, p. 953.
above. Yes, we always judge from our own, particular, perspective. From this the problematic form of relativism criticized at the outset simply does not follow. Despite Bloor’s protestations to the contrary, the ‘contentious reading’ remains incoherent.29

Bibliography


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