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Equal Validity or Nonneutrality? A defense of relativism¹

EDUARDO PÉREZ-NAVARRO

1. Introduction

The purpose of Baghramian and Coliva’s book is twofold. On the one hand, it aims at identifying a consistent set of commitments shared by all theories that have been called “relativist”. On the other hand, it offers a battery of arguments against views that undertake these commitments.² The book’s efforts along these two fronts are among the most comprehensive I have had the chance to witness, and it has made me consider a lot of points to which I had not given enough attention before. I remain unconvinced by many of the book’s arguments against relativism, though, and part of the reason stems from my disagreement with the authors’ characterization of the view. In this paper, therefore, I first explain the sense in which I would characterize relativism in a different way from Baghramian and Coliva (Section 2) and then discuss the impact that revising the definition of relativism in this way would have on their arguments (Section 3).

The aspect in which I disagree with Baghramian and Coliva’s characterization of relativism concerns the view’s alleged commitment to Equal Validity – the idea that the many radically different ways of seeing the world are equally valid (see [Boghossian 2006](#): 2). I argue that Equal Validity conflicts with Nonneutrality, which is another of the theses that Baghramian and Coliva use to characterize relativism, and which can be summarized as the idea that there is no privileged point of view. I argue that, once we choose Nonneutrality over Equal Validity, we can make sense of the notion of faultless disagreement, which Baghramian and Coliva reject. This goes against Baghramian and Coliva’s argument that, since there

is no such thing as faultless disagreement, there is no motivation for relativism either.

In dealing with these issues, I will focus on Baghramian and Coliva's characterization of relativism and their arguments against epistemic and moral relativism. I will thus leave aside their survey of the history of relativism (Chapter 2), as well as their discussion of conceptual relativism (Chapter 4), constructivism (Chapter 5) and relativism about science (Chapter 6).

2. *Characterizing relativism*

In Section 1.1 of the book, Baghramian and Coliva characterize relativism as committed to six claims: Nonabsolutism, Dependence, Multiplicity, Incompatibility, Equal Validity and Nonneutrality. Nonabsolutism implies denying that “at least some truths or values in the relevant domain apply to all times, places, or social and cultural frameworks” (p. 6). Dependence “is the claim that a given value x – be it concepts, facts, truth, good, permissibility, justification, or knowledge – depends on parameter y – such as languages, descriptions, cultures, and subjective evaluative standards” (p. 6). Multiplicity involves “the assumption of a multiplicity of both the value x and the parameter y on which such values depend” (p. 8), and Incompatibility implies “that there is a genuine incompatibility, in the sense of nonconvergence, between the values x can take as well as between the values the parameter y can take” (p. 9). Equal Validity means that “values of x , determined on the basis of differing parameters y , though incompatible, are both equally valid or admissible” (p. 9). Nonneutrality, finally, is the idea that “there is no Archimedean point of view or neutral criterion of evaluation available for adjudicating between the plurality of incompatible frameworks, or different values of parameter y , which determine different and incompatible values of x ” (p. 10).

Baghramian and Coliva also devote a few lines of the section to discussing the relationship between some of these commitments. They say that Nonabsolutism (p. 6), Dependence (p. 8), Multiplicity (pp. 8–9) and Incompatibility (p. 9) do not by themselves result in relativism. They also say that “(t)he claim of (E)qual (V)alidity (...) follows from (N)onneutrality and from the refusal of (A)bsolutism” (p. 10). This seems to mean that embracing

- 1 The comments here were written for an authors-meet-critics session that took place as part of the Truth 2021 conference. I would like to thank María José Frápolli and Susanna Melkonian-Altshuler, who were in charge of organizing the session, as well as the Virtual International Consortium for Truth Research, which is responsible for the Truth conference, for giving me the chance to discuss these important issues with such important philosophers.
- 2 On p. 1 of the book, Baghramian and Coliva describe its aim as “to present, as even-handedly as possible, reasons for or against some of the most prominent relativistic positions”, but relativism is ultimately deemed unsound under every single construal considered in the book.

Nonneutrality is *per se* not enough to qualify as a relativist. But it also suggests that, for Baghramian and Coliva, embracing Equal Validity does amount to accepting relativism.

I agree with Baghramian and Coliva's characterization in all respects but one that, if my interpretation is correct, is quite important: like [Kusch \(2019\)](#), I do not think relativism should be committed to Equal Validity. In fact, I think that the set of commitments specified by Baghramian and Coliva will be inconsistent unless we exclude Equal Validity from it. Baghramian and Coliva may of course welcome this result, as it could be used to base a further argument against relativism if we think actual relativists are committed to Equal Validity. There is, however, plenty of textual evidence to resist this assumption (see [Kusch 2019](#): 274–276).

What I propose is to understand Nonneutrality in such a way that, instead of resulting in Equal Validity when combined with Nonabsolutism, it is in fact incompatible with it. This is what happens when we understand Nonneutrality as the idea that there is no external point of view from which we can assess things. Our evaluations are always done from our own point of view. Now, to be able to say that all points of view are on a par, as Equal Validity requires, we would have to “jump over our own point of view” to consider it at the same level as others (see [Pérez-Navarro 2022](#): 59). But this is precisely what Nonneutrality precludes once we understand it as suggested above. To see this, consider the following dialogue:

- (1) Alice: Abortion is morally wrong.
- (2) Beth: No, abortion is not morally wrong.

One way in which we could say that Alice and Beth's points of view are on a par is by taking both (1) and (2) to be true. We could do so if we said that each claim will be true if in making it the speaker said something true according to her moral standard. Since abortion is morally wrong relative to Alice's moral standard but morally right according to Beth's, (1) and (2) will both be true. However, this reasoning requires the admission of a neutral criterion that tells us when a given moral claim is true: it will be so whenever the asserted content is true according to the speaker's moral standard. If this is so, everyone should agree that the claim is true.

No relativist could accept this, as it is precluded by Nonneutrality. The relativist should instead take her own standard into account when deciding whether Alice and Beth have said something true or false. If she coincides with Alice, she will say that Alice is right. If she coincides with Beth, she will say that Beth is right. But she will not say that Alice and Beth are equally right. There is a sense, therefore, in which we cannot consider a disagreement as a third party, which is what we would need to do to declare both positions equally right. The moment we wonder which of the parties to a conversation is right, we become participants in the discussion.

Baghramian and Coliva could reply that, once we have left Equal Validity out of the picture, we are no longer talking about relativism. However, my contention is that we can still be said to be relativists insofar as we maintain commitments such as Nonabsolutism, Dependence and Multiplicity, which help us become aware that there are points of view different from our own, and that there is a point of contingency to the views that we hold. If relativism is characterized by a tolerant stance, these commitments are all we need to obtain it. I will develop this in the next section, where I will discuss Baghramian and Coliva's arguments against relativism.

3. *Defending relativism*

In Section 1.2 of the book, Baghramian and Coliva divide the views that they take to be committed to the six relativist claims they identify into two broad families, depending on how they are motivated. On the one hand, we have relativist views, such as Kölbel's (2004) or MacFarlane's (2014), that take the existence of faultless disagreement as their starting point. On the other hand, we have relativist views, such as Rovane's (2013), whose aim is to make sense of the Alternatives intuition – “the existence, or perhaps just the possibility, of alternatives in the sense of truths that cannot be embraced together” (p. 15). Baghramian and Coliva have a different set of arguments against each of these families of views, each of them aimed at proving that, in the end, relativism does not manage either to account for faultless disagreement or to accommodate the Alternatives intuition. In what follows, I present these two sets of arguments in turn. I will only reply to the first set, though, as it is against it that the point made in the previous section can be used.

Baghramian and Coliva argue against relativist views motivated by faultless disagreement at several points throughout the book, but the structure of the arguments they offer is always similar. The starting point is that, if there is no fault involved in a conversational exchange, it cannot be an instance of disagreement; and, if the two speakers disagree, they cannot do so faultlessly. The first conditional holds even if the standard at issue is not taken to be part of the proposition expressed – even if the asserted contents cannot be held by the same person at the same time, speakers should be aware that each one is to be evaluated relative to a different standard, so there should be no disagreement after all. In response to the second conditional, for its part, the relativist can say that there is disagreement inasmuch as each speaker holds her standard to be the right one, but then the previous argument can be repeated for the disagreement about standards: if it is a disagreement it is not faultless, and if it is faultless it is not a disagreement. Moreover, as soon as we move from the first to the second step the disagreement ceases to be about its original subject matter. This kind of argument appears for the first time on p. 11, and it is eventually used against Protagoras (pp. 63–64), Kölbel (p.

77 and pp. 241–243), MacFarlane (pp. 81–83), Wright (p. 87) and relativism understood as perspectivalism (p. 258).³

Baghramian and Coliva’s argument against varieties of relativism based on the Alternatives intuition, for its part, is as follows. Versions of relativism such as Rovane’s need for some pairs of truths not to be able to be held together while not being contradictories. If they were, Baghramian and Coliva could rely on their arguments against relativist views motivated by faultless disagreement. But, if these truths are not contradictories, in what sense can they not be held together? Rovane’s answer is that they belong to different worlds. This is what allows a person to reject another person’s beliefs even if she does not take them to be false. Pairs of beliefs that belong to different worlds, however, are neither consistent nor inconsistent. Baghramian and Coliva claim that this move requires a kind of logical revisionism that should only be embraced “if the benefits of such a radical change in our view of truth would outweigh its costs” (p. 253).

As advanced above, I will not reply to Baghramian and Coliva’s argument against relativist views based on the Alternatives intuition. I do not think that relativists need to find a sense in which truths that are not contradictories cannot be held together, as they can take these truths to be contradictories and still allow for the disagreement that stems between speakers who hold them to be faultless, in a sense to be specified below. To put it simply, there is no puzzle, as one of the horns of the supposed dilemma is not problematic at all.

Now, I think my discussion in the previous section of the features that should characterize relativism might shed some light on what I take to be a weakness of Baghramian and Coliva’s arguments against relativist views motivated by faultless disagreement. I have rejected that relativism implies Equal Validity. Baghramian and Coliva might say that, if we do this, relativism will be unable to account for the faultlessness of faultless disagreement, as the latter implies Equal Validity (p. 24, n. 1). But I think that we can have faultless disagreement without Equal Validity, as all that is needed for a disagreement to be faultless is that no participant in it is at fault *with respect to her context*.⁴ Relativism allows us to have this in virtue of Nonabsolutism, Dependence and Multiplicity. Together, these commitments allow us to become aware that what other people think, even if wrong by our standards, may be right by theirs. This is the only interesting sense I can conceive of in which a disagreement might be said to be faultless, and making room for this kind of disagreement is all we need to make the tolerant stance that characterizes relativism a possibility.

3 A simpler version of the argument is used against several views that might be deemed contextualist, such as the replacement model (p. 209), epistemic contextualism (p. 214), Harman’s proposal (pp. 233–237), and simple indexical relativism (p. 239).

To say that none of the participants in the conversation is at fault *simpliciter*, in contrast, would require us to say that both Alice and Beth speak truly when they utter (1) and (2), respectively. To do this, we would have to say that they do so in virtue of their both saying something that is true with respect to each one's standard. But Nonneutrality precludes us from doing this, as it would amount to accepting that there is a neutral criterion for the truth of a moral claim that does not allow for disagreement as to its verdict: once we knew what Alice and Beth's moral standards are, we would have to agree on whether they have said something true or false.

Taking Equal Validity out of the list of commitments that characterize relativism, moreover, allows us to avoid one of the most feared consequences of relativism – the possibility, considered by Baghranian and Coliva on p. 227, that it forces us to suspend our judgment about issues that do not allow for such comfort. This would indeed follow from relativism if it were compatible with our taking (1) and (2) to be true at the same time. But, thanks to relativism's commitment to Nonneutrality and its corresponding rejection of Equal Validity, this is just not available to us. We have to pronounce ourselves.⁵

4. Concluding remarks

Once we understand Nonneutrality as the idea that there is no privileged point of view, Equal Validity must be thrown out of the picture. And once it is, we can characterize faultless disagreements as those in which the parties, even if wrong from each other's point of view, are both right from their own perspective. This is the way in which a tolerant person should see some of the disagreements she gets into, and it can only be made sense of in a relativist manner. This is what I have aimed at showing in this paper.

I have presented my comments to Baghranian and Coliva's book as a list of criticisms, some of them pertaining to their characterization of relativism, some of them to their arguments against it. Of course, my comments could have also taken the form of a list of questions that, when answered, could strengthen Baghranian and Coliva's position. So, given the considerations made throughout this paper, these are the issues on which I would like to know Baghranian and Coliva's thoughts: can we have relativism without Equal Validity? Can we have faultless disagreement without Equal Validity? And how should Nonneutrality be understood?

4 This sense of "faultless" should not be confused with the one that MacFarlane (2014: 133–136) identifies as equivalent to "epistemically warranted". As MacFarlane himself acknowledges, it is not distinctive of relativism that it allows wrong beliefs to be *justified* given the subject's evidence. What we need is for these beliefs to be *right* from the subject's point of view, even if they are not from other perspectives. In other words, we need them to be faultless in the sense, also identified by MacFarlane, of being *accurate*.

5 I have developed this defense of relativism in my (Pérez-Navarro 2022).

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Universitat de Barcelona
Barcelona, Spain
epereznavarro@ub.edu

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