

## Problems for Epistemic Relativism: The Case of Testimony

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In this paper, I argue against epistemic relativism. More precisely, I argue against epistemic relativism conjoined with the knowledge norm for assertion and belief. Even more precisely, I argue that such a view cannot account for the ways in which we react to certain kinds of testimony. In particular, such a view cannot account for the following seeming datum: When someone we trust reports of some else, S, we also trust that S said that she (S) doesn't know that p, we tend to form the belief that S doesn't know that p. A concrete example: Suppose the newspaper reads, "The police officer said that she didn't know that the perpetrator was hiding in the building, but had the firm belief that she was. Etc." Plausibly, to the extent that both the newspaper as well as the police officer are considered trustworthy, we will most likely form the belief that the police officer didn't know that the perpetrator was hiding in the building in response to reading the newspaper. I will argue that epistemic relativism conjoined with the knowledge norms of assertion and belief cannot account for this seeming datum. First, I will briefly say what epistemic relativism and the knowledge norms of assertion and belief are. Then I will explain why these claims lead to trouble when it comes to the just mentioned cases of testimony.

Epistemic relativism, or "relativism" for short, is roughly the view that (1) sentences like "S knows that p" express one and the same proposition in every context of use and (2) this proposition has truth-values only relative to an epistemic standard. So, according to relativism, the proposition that S knows that p may be true relative to one standard but not relative to another. It will be true relative to a given standard just if S does know relative to that standard that p. What does it mean to know something relative to a given standard? This will depend on one's theory of knowledge. For example, from the perspective of a relevant alternatives framework, to know that p relative to a given standard means to be able to rule out the set of alternatives to p that is determined by the given standard. Here, more demanding standards will determine larger sets of alternatives than less demanding standards.<sup>1</sup>

Relativism may or may not be conjoined with the knowledge norm for assertion and belief. The view I am addressing here, however, is relativism conjoined with these norms. What is the knowledge norm of assertion? From an anti-relativist viewpoint, this norm simply says that one should assert that p only if one knows that p. If the relativist accepts that norm, however, she will most likely not accept that formulation. Rather, she will hold that one should assert that p in a given context only if one knows that p relative to the standard of that context.<sup>2</sup> In just the same way, the relativist will most likely construe the knowledge norm of belief as the thesis that one should believe that p in a given context only if one knows that p relative to the epistemic standard of that context. Let's from now on use "relativism" to refer to relativism conjoined with the just described norms. I will now argue that relativism in this sense cannot account for the above mentioned facts about testimony.

Consider again the case of the newspaper. As I said, I take it as a datum that readers of the newspaper will normally form the belief that the police officer didn't know that the perpetrator was hiding in the building, for short, that the officer didn't know that P. This datum is problematic for the relativist for the following

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g. (Richard 2004; 2008), (Brogaard 2008) and (MacFarlane 2005; 2011) for proponents of such views.

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. (Kölbel 2003: 70; Kölbel 2004: 309), (Egan et al. 2005: 153), (MacFarlane 2005: 315; 2012: 453) and (Brogaard 2008: 448). See (Greenough 2011) for an opposing view.

reason. Given relativism (and thus the knowledge norm of belief), a reader, R, should believe that the police officer didn't know that P only if she knows relative to her own standard that the police officer didn't know that P. As I will argue in more detail in the full paper, this, in turn, most plausibly means that R will have to know by her standard that the police officer didn't know *by her (R's) standard* that P, for short, R will have to know- $E_R$  that the police officer didn't know- $E_R$  that P. The problem for the relativist is that this kind of knowledge will generally be impossible to achieve through the newspaper's report even assuming the trustworthiness of both the newspaper and the police officer.

Here is why. Plausibly, if the newspaper is trustworthy, it will have reported that the police officer said that she didn't know that P only if the police officer did in fact say that. So, assuming that R knows- $E_R$  both that the newspaper did report the officer's claim and that the newspaper is trustworthy, she will also be in a position to know- $E_R$  that the police officer did in fact say that she didn't know that P. So far, so good. Now let's also assume that the police officer was trustworthy. What will this amount to? Plausibly, we cannot simply say that the officer's trustworthiness entails that if she said that she didn't know that P, she did in fact not know that P. For this will raise the question relative to which standard she didn't know that P. Most plausibly, then, we will have to say that the officer's trustworthiness entails that if she said that she didn't know that P, then she did in fact not know that P *relative to her (the officer's) standard*, for short, that she didn't know- $E_O$  that P. (This, at least, will be the most natural construal if we accept the above mentioned relativistic knowledge norm of assertion according to which one should assert only what one knows relative to one's own standard.) So, assuming that R knows- $E_R$  that not only the newspaper but also the police officer was trustworthy, she will thereby come to know- $E_R$  that the police officer didn't know- $E_O$  that P. This, however, is not quite the knowledge we are looking for. In order to properly form the belief that the police officer didn't know that P, R must, according to relativism, know- $E_R$  that the police officer didn't know- $E_R$  (not - $E_O$ ) that P. But how should R get to know- $E_R$  that? Plausibly, she will have to know- $E_R$  that  $E_O$  equals  $E_R$ , that is, that the epistemic standard relevant in the officer's context was the same as hers. But how should she know- $E_R$  that? We may very well imagine that the newspaper says nothing about the context in which the police officer said what she said. This would seem to make it impossible to come to know- $E_R$  that  $E_O$  equals  $E_R$  by reading the newspaper. So, it would also become impossible to form the belief that the police officer didn't know that P without violating the relativistic knowledge norm of belief. So, relativism would clearly predict that R shouldn't form the belief that the police officer didn't know that P. However, it seems to be a datum that R will form such a belief. Hence, relativism fails to account for this datum and, thus, our reactions to certain kinds of testimony.

In the full paper, I will discuss various possible response strategies for the relativist. Let me here just briefly mention one that may come to mind immediately. One might want to argue that even if nothing is said in the newspaper as to whether  $E_O$  equals  $E_R$ , R may reasonably assume that  $E_O$  equals  $E_R$  because most ordinary contexts are governed by the same standard. This response is problematic for two reasons. First, it is not at all clear why epistemic standards should mostly be the same. Standardly, epistemic standards are supposed to vary with what is at stake and which error-possibilities are salient. These features seem to change frequently. So, epistemic standards should change frequently as well. Second, even if epistemic standards don't change frequently, this will still not provide R with knowledge- $E_R$  that they don't. The mere fact that something occurs rarely plausibly does not suffice for knowledge by any reasonable standard that the thing does not occur. For example, the mere fact that it is very rare that one's lottery ticket wins plausibly does not suffice for knowledge by any standard that it doesn't win. So, this response strategy is bound to fail.

## References

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