Relativism, Fallibilism, and the Need for Interpretive Charity

NADINE ELZEIN

Abstract

'Relativists' and 'absolutists' about truth often see their own camp as promoting virtues, such as open-mindedness and intellectual humility, and see the opposing camp as fostering vices, like closed-mindedness and arrogance. Relativism is accused of fostering these vices because it entails that each person's beliefs are automatically right for the person who holds them. How can we be humble or open-minded if we cannot concede that we might be wrong? Absolutism is accused of fostering these vices because the view is seen as entailing certainty. This also seems to preclude us from conceding that we could be wrong. However, no relativist defends the Protagorean version of relativism that entails infallibilism. And no absolutist posits infallible certainty. Fallibilism really is a precondition of various virtues, but both camps take themselves to be defending fallibilist positions against opponents who they take to be committed to infallibilism. Philosophers may inadvertently end up promoting precisely the sort of infallibilism they oppose by creating a false dichotomy and caricaturing the opposing camp. This underscores the importance of interpretive charity in both academic and public debate.

It is hard to avoid getting a depressing sense that standards of argument are declining in the present age. While the internet has brought with it the possibility of getting vast amounts of information with ease, it also seems to have ushered in an age of 'post-truth' politics, misinformation, 'alternative facts', and intense intractable social and political polarisation.

Among academics, debates about bad reasoning and the erosion of the concern for truth and accuracy sometimes focus on worries about whether people are increasingly viewing truth in relativistic terms. This is reflected in our experiences in the philosophy classroom.

I often teach introductory philosophy classes, both to undergraduates and to members of the public, many of whom are new to philosophy. I usually begin by covering Plato's *Theaetetus*. Among other things, in this text, Socrates tackles the doctrine associated with Protagoras, that 'man is the measure of all things: of those that are, that they are; of the things that are not, that they are not' (*Theaetetus*, 152a; trans. Waterfield, 1987, p. 30).

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Plato understands the Protagorean doctrine to entail that each individual's opinion is necessarily and infallibly true *for that individual*, and that there can be no absolute truth, outside of what it true relative to each individual's perspective.

This is a simple form of relativism about truth (or 'alethic relativism'). Roughly, it is characterised by the following claims: that there is no objective fact of the matter about what is true; that what each individual believes to be true really is true for that individual, and that where individuals have conflicting opinions, each of those conflicting opinions is true for the individual who holds it. In present-day broadly analytic philosophy, these commitments are typically understood as capturing the central tenets of relativism about truth.

Plato raises some serious puzzles for the Protagorean view (*Theaetetus*, 160e2–187b1; trans. Waterfield, 1887, pp. 47–91). Is the Protagorean relativist thesis itself supposed to hold true absolutely, or merely for those who hold it? It seems it cannot be absolutely true on pain of contradiction. But if it is false for the rest of us, why should we be troubled by it? And since the view is false for those of us who think it is, isn't it also true for us that the view is mistaken even for its *own* proponents? Can those proponents concede this point? The view also struggles to make sense of cases in which we change our minds, or in which our future experiences do not bear out our earlier predictions, and it eliminates expertise in any field.

Many philosophers see this sort of relativist position as lazy and incoherent. It is accused of eroding our sense of truth and falsity and committing to a sort of irrationalism that precludes clear and careful thought. If each person's beliefs are automatically right for that person, how could we ever be motivated to subject our own opinions to critical scrutiny or to try to improve our perspectives in any way? Sometimes, philosophers worry that this relativistic view is rife among certain areas of academia and is bleeding into popular culture, having a damaging influence on public thought. But this story seems dubious in many ways.

It is unclear whether even Protagoras himself ever quite held the view that Plato attributed to him (Maguire, 1973). As someone who received most of my training within the analytic tradition of philosophy, I have often heard this position attributed to various philosophers working broadly outside of it, especially Friedrich Nietzsche, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Richard Rorty.

Even a cursory reading of Nietzsche and Foucault renders this interpretation doubtful. Both of those theorists seek to examine a wide variety of historical perspectives precisely in order to create some critical

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distance with which to examine our own practices. This strategy seems to aim precisely at freeing us from our culturally ingrained biases so that we can assess our practices with a greater degree of objectivity.[1] And Rorty and Derrida both explicitly deny embracing Protagorean relativism, and express sympathy for Plato's critique of it.[2]

William Knorpp (1998) notes that many theorists who label themselves relativists actually seem to be defending distinct positions, such as pluralism, scepticism, fallibilism, or even merely an attitude of tolerance towards those with conflicting viewpoints. Perhaps Protagorean relativists are mythical creatures. But if this is so, it becomes difficult to account for one puzzling fact. Whenever I teach the Protagorean argument, many *students* proclaim to accept it, despite Plato's critique. Even if no professional philosopher subscribes to the view, many other people do, even in its simple 'Protagorean' form.

Upon questioning students as to why they are swayed by Protagorean relativism, I tend to find that their motives are largely practical and social. They tend to suppose that relativism fosters open-mindedness, tolerance, and intellectual humility, whereas objectivism fosters closed-mindedness, tyranny, and intellectual arrogance. They are more concerned with the consequences of relativism than with its coherence.

This supports Maria Baghramian's conjecture (2019, pp. 250-57) that relativism ought to be understood as a 'stance' rather than a

[1] Nietzsche's critique of the 'will to truth' in the *Genealogy* (Part III, especially sections 24-6, trans. Clarke & Swensen, 1998, pp. 108–15) is sometimes read as supporting a sort of alethic relativism, but his attack is plainly on the idea of *valuing* truth as a moralised ideal, divorced from any concrete interests. The question of whether we should disinterestedly value the pursuit of truth is unrelated to the question of whether truth is relative. Perhaps Foucault's critique of the sharp distinctions between 'reason' and 'sanity' in *Madness & Civilization* (1967) is thought to entail relativism, though the relativistic reading seems similarly dubious here.

[2] Rorty defines relativism as 'the view that every belief on a certain topic, or perhaps about any topic, is as good as every other' and denies that anyone holds this position (Rorty, 1982, p. 166). Similarly, Derrida claims that relativism is the doctrine that 'there are only points of view with no absolute necessity, or no references to absolutes.' He goes on to claim: 'That is the opposite to what I have to say. Relativism is, in classical philosophy, a way of referring to the absolute and denying it; it states that there are only cultures and that there is no pure science of truth. I have never said such a thing. Neither have I ever used the word relativism' Derrida (1999, p. 78).

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'thesis'. The distinction comes from Bas van Fraassen (2002, p. 47), who notes that a stance is more like an attitude than a collection of beliefs. Stances tend to be embraced precisely for their results rather than for their plausibility as doctrines. Proponents of relativism embrace it not because there are strong reasons to think it's right, but because they suppose that it will foster various virtues and prevent various vices.

I will follow Baghramian (2019) in arguing that that there is something seriously mistaken in the idea that Protagorean relativism will help to foster the virtues allegedly associated with it. However, it seems that the Protagorean doctrine is rarely, if ever, defended by professional academics. Insofar as theorists are willing to label themselves 'relativists' it is typically because they take it to be *opposed* to another doctrine. Typically, the doctrine that they are opposed to is labelled 'objectivism' or 'absolutism'.

While plenty of philosophers embrace these labels in describing their own views, their positions seem to have little connection to those that self-styled relativists oppose; they do not usually oppose the idea that there exist facts independent of anyone's perspective, but the idea that anyone can claim to have absolutely certain and infallible *access* to these facts, and this is a doctrine that also seems to have few, if any, proponents.

I will argue that there is a position here which is distinct from relativism and absolutism and which we really *ought* to see as a precondition of various epistemic and social virtues. That position is *fallibilism*. It is the simple point that our own opinions are capable of *falsity*: the view that we could always be wrong.[3]

An agent who cannot acknowledge her own fallibility is certainly an agent who must lack intellectual humility, open-mindedness, and flexibility. The problem is that it turns out that both those who call themselves 'relativists' and those who call themselves 'objectivists' generally take themselves to be supporting a fallibilist position against opposing views that commit us to *infallibilism*. Hence both sides take themselves to be sole protectors and promoters of various epistemic and social virtues.

[3] The position known as *epistemic fallibilism* holds that the fallibility of our beliefs is consistent with our having knowledge, whereas epistemic infallibilism holds that our actual fallibility rules out any claim to knowledge. That distinction can be put aside for the present discussion. We are not concerned with epistemic fallibilism and infallibilism. We are only concerned with the fact that our opinions could be false. We may think of this as a sort of *descriptive* fallibilism.

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I will suggest that a failure of theorists on both sides to interpret opponents charitably is at the root of the problem, and that this helps to perpetuate a false dichotomy which, paradoxically, may end up inadvertently promoting precisely the sort of infallibilism that both sides seek to oppose.

We see a parallel pattern emerge with respect to many debates involving highly polarised discourse. Consider the controversies surrounding vaccines. In the UK, vaccines have generally been encouraged for voluntary take-up, and there has been no suggestion that the Covid-19 vaccine would be made mandatory (although it has been made a precondition for being permitted to engage in other activities). Nonetheless, prior to the vaccine rollout, social media sites were flooded with comments from people vehemently opposing the policy of *forcing* everyone to get vaccinated. This immediately produces doubt regarding what the differing sides of the debate are actually arguing about and can open up a gulf between the commitments people actually hold and the commitments that their opponents take them to hold. Are apparent opponents to the vaccine rollout trying to stop vaccines from being made available, or merely trying to stop people from being forced to take them? And do proponents endorse coercively forcing people to take vaccines, or do they merely wish to encourage voluntary uptake? Given a little ambiguity about whether it is availability or coercion that is at issue, we may see polarisation even among those whose perspectives do not actually significantly differ, at least to begin with.

The debate about relativism exhibits a parallel pattern of polarisation. But it is also, surprisingly, often invoked within these very social and political controversies themselves, with accusations of relativistic or absolutist thinking often being thrown in conflicting directions. Allan Bloom (1987) influentially argued that the views of liberals in the US, which he opposed, were driven by a commitment to relativism about moral truths. But it's just as common in more recent discourse for liberals to be accused of 'absolutism' about morality, especially when connected to 'cancel culture' or controversies about free speech.[4] And while the American right are often accused of 'absolutism' in their moral perspectives,[5] Kellyanne Conway's infamous comments about 'alternative facts' have also given rise to

[4] For example, a recent *Observer* headline runs: 'Cancelled culture is moral absolutism, and it's unsustainable' (Zhu, 2020). See also: Costello, *et al*. (2021) who associate left-wing authoritarian traits with a tendency towards moral absolutism, along with various other qualities.

[5] E.g., Marietta, *et al*. (2017).

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accusations that the right are engaged in relativistic thinking (which is often put forward as a potential explanation for Trump's apparent lack of regard for truth-telling).[6]

While the dispute about relativism is primarily an academic endeavour, it is often reflected in social and political controversies outside of philosophy classrooms too. And examining this dispute may help us to appreciate the mechanics of polarisation more broadly. My claim will be that we need to exercise a greater degree of charity in interpreting views that diverge from our own, because a lack of interpretive charity tends to lie at the heart of most cycles of increasing polarisation. This is certainly evident in the case of relativism about truth.

1. Relativism and Intellectual Humility

A number of philosophers who take themselves to be defenders of 'relativism' have argued that their position is associated with epistemic or social virtues, such as humility, open-mindedness, and tolerance.

Lorraine Code, for example, sees relativism as a defence against a conception of knowledge that presupposes a restrictive sort of homogeneity, one that involves the 'often coercive view that we all see everything in the same way' (1995, p. 201). Code associates relativism with various emancipatory social and epistemic values.

David Bloor (2011) similarly argues that relativism entails the rejection of absolutism, and that this encourages curiosity and discourages dogmatism. Paul Feyerabend (1975) associates relativism with opposition to uniformity, and argues that the proliferation of theories is good for science, since uniformity endangers the free development of the individual.

The basic idea is that any form of 'objectivism' or 'absolutism' will foster intolerance, dogmatism, closed-mindedness and intellectual arrogance. In contrast, 'relativism' is thought to promote tolerance, flexibility, open-mindedness, and intellectual humility.

Baghramian (2019) puzzles over why we should suppose that relativism promotes these virtues or that absolutism promotes opposing vices. While relativism is epistemically egalitarian, it does not promote open-mindedness since it undermines our ability to transcend our own standpoint and to consider the merits of alternative ones. The relativist insists on the accuracy of her own point of view

[6] E.g., Kakutani (2018).

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for herself, and on the points of views of others for them (2019, p. 264). If anything, this leaves us trapped within our own narrow perspectives, and undermines the possibility of communication across different standpoints.

Similarly, intellectual humility requires not only that we concede that other viewpoints might be right for other people. It also involves being able to concede that our own opinions might be wrong. But Protagorean relativism entails infallibilism: If each individual's opinion is right for *that individual*, then it is impossible for anyone, from their own perspective, to have a belief that is false. Far from fostering humility and curiosity then, it seems to undermine all possibility of expanding or improving upon our own opinions.[7]

And even the idea of promoting tolerance make very little sense if an individual with intolerant opinions is held to be automatically and infallibly *right* in those opinions, at least from their own perspective. At best, intolerant opinions will be wrong for those who don't hold them, but right for those who do.

It is also hard to see how we might reach any agreement on controversial issues if each person is right from their own perspective. This becomes especially problematic for policies that require us to arrive at a shared understanding. On the Protagorean view, those who believe that we need to take effective action to stop climate change, for instance, will be right, but only from their own perspectives. Similarly, those who believe that we can continue to pollute the environment with no repercussions at all will be right, but also only from their own restricted perspective. This leaves us with a serious practical difficulty. Whether it's climate change, covid restrictions, or effective procedures for counting votes, it is essential that we have some motivation to reach a shared understanding and to determine the truth in a way that enables us to transcend our own prior beliefs and get beyond our own individual perspectives.

The problem is that on the Protagorean view, since whatever one believes is automatically thereby true, we can never concede that we ourselves might be wrong about anything. This infallibilism essentially undermines many of the epistemic goals that relativists aim to promote, and hence the relativist stance appears to be completely misguided, even when it comes to promoting the virtues that relativists themselves proclaim to value.

[7] See Lani Watson (2022) for a discussion of some of the real-world complexities surrounding curiosity as a virtue.

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2. Who Defends Relativism?

Why, then, do these theorists imagine that relativism might be important to promoting virtues like open-mindedness and intellectual humility, when these virtues seem to require precisely the sort of fallibilism that is ruled out by relativism?

The simple answer is that they do not. While some theorists certainly call themselves 'relativists', very few adopt Protagorean relativism so defined. Knorpp (1998) points out that there is, generally, a great deal of confusion about relativism. It is often directly confused with scepticism, nihilism, pluralism, fallibilism, or theoretical egalitarianism, or even simply confused directly with tolerance. Martin Kusch (2019) notes that theorists like Code, Bloor, and Feyerabend are not actually committed to the claim that all standpoints are equally valid and that there is no neutral way to adjudicate between them. Moreover, it is *this* that gives rise to the infallibilist commitments that Baghramian critiques.

Kusch notes that Bloor (2011) explicitly ridicules the idea that all theories have equal validity. And Bahgramian (2019, p. 259) herself acknowledges that Bloor prefers the characterisation of his position as the view that all theories should be treated merely with 'equal curiosity'.

Similarly, Kusch notes that Feyerabend explicitly rejects the view that that all theories 'are equally true or equally false' (1978, p. 84). Relativism would entail that all views are true, but only from particular standpoints. If there is, further, no neutral perspective from which to adjudicate, it then becomes hard to see how one can avoid a commitment to the thesis that all viewpoints are equally valid. But this is, as Kusch notes, a commitment that Feyerabend explicitly rejects. The view that all opinions are equally false is *nihilism*, not relativism, and Feyerabend rejects this too.

So why does Feyerabend sometimes endorse relativism? Knorpp argues that Feyerabend conflates relativism with *fallibilism*. Feyerabend explicitly associates relativism with the view 'that even our most basic assumptions, our most solid beliefs, and our most conclusive arguments can be changed, improved, or defused' (Feyerabend, 1987, p. 74). Knorpp takes this to be ironic in light of the fact that relativism would seem to entail precisely *infallibilism*. Once we see Feyerabend as defending fallibilism rather than Protagorean relativism, it becomes clear why he associates the view with such notions as curiosity and open-mindedness.

Code certainly describes herself as a 'relativist', but Kathrin Hönig (2005) notes that some of Code's claims seem to suggest she endorses,

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at most, a mitigated form of relativism. For example, Code says explicitly that if one culture supports the view that the Earth is flat while another supports the view that the Earth is round, it would be absurd to treat these views as equal (1995, p. 202).

In fact, Code seems particularly opposed to a narrow positivist perspective in epistemology, which assumes a 'view from nowhere', and holds that there are certain knowledge claims that are universally justifiable with no consideration of context. Again, however, the mere rejection of this view does not seem to commit us to Protagorean relativism.

Hönig suggests that Code may be better understood merely as an 'anti-anti-relativist'. The idea that endorsing an 'anti-anti' position is not the same thing as a double negation that entails supporting the position one is 'anti-anti' was first suggested by Clifford Geertz (1984). As a comparison, we may think of those who opposed McCarthy era anti-communist propaganda. Being anti-anti-communist, in this sense, did not entail endorsing communism. It merely involved rejecting alarmist propaganda that demonises communists and creates an exaggerated caricature of the communist threat. Being opposed to anti-relativist rhetoric, similarly, does not entail endorsing relativism. Moreover, given that none of the theorists so far discussed who regard themselves as relativists are committed to what *opponents* typically regard as the central tenets of relativism, it certainly seems likely that their views have been uncharitably mischaracterised.

Thus, there is a great deal of confusion about what ought to be regarded as a relativistic theory and what ought to be regarded as an absolutist or objectivist one. The confusion appears to be almost comically captured in the following quote from Melville Herskovits (1951, p. 24), cited by Knorpp (1998, p. 293):

> As a method, relativism encompasses the principle of our science that, in studying a culture, one seeks to attain as great a degree of objectivity as possible

This is, of course, precisely how most opponents of relativism would define objectivism, and objectivists would take this to be directly *ruled out* by the relativist framework.

Kusch (2019) suggests that the main problem is that the relativist view has been so frequently caricatured and mischaracterised. This accusation seems just. It certainly seems unfair for Baghramian to treat any of these theorists as supporting the Protagorean doctrine that we are each infallibly right, whatever we believe, when none of them actually embrace it. Nonetheless, at least part of the reason

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for the confusion may also be because those who typically call themselves relativists often define themselves in opposition to a view that that has been similarly caricatured and mischaracterised.

Theorists who call themselves relativists often take themselves to be opposed to 'objectivism' or 'absolutism' precisely because they see proponents of those views not merely as supposing that there *are* independently true or false answers, but as supposing, variously, some claim to infallible certainty about what those answers are, some claim to be uniquely placed to arbitrate objectively about all other viewpoints, or as supporting a coercive (or even totalitarian) agenda that denies validity to all perspectives other than one's own.

So perhaps we also ought to examine what exactly those who call themselves relativists tend to be opposed to and why.

3. What is Meant by 'Absolutism' or 'Objectivism'?

Relativism is typically opposed either to 'absolutism' or to 'objectivism', with most theorists using the terms interchangeably (although some theorists, such as Bloor, argue that we ought to distinguish them, contrasting relativism with absolutism and subjectivism with objectivism). Proponents of 'objectivism' or 'absolutism' typically argue that while our *beliefs* may be shaped by the available evidence, or by our prior attitudes, or by our differing perspectives, what is *true or false* is not dependent on our prior attitudes or evidence in the same way (with the obvious exception of beliefs specifically about our own attitudes).

Bloor and Feyerabend associate 'absolutism' or 'objectivism', respectively, with policies that involve enforcing a single perspective on others. Hans Kelsen (1948) goes further and defines absolutism as a sort of 'epistemological totalitarianism', even suggesting that it invariably entails support of authoritarian regimes and opposition to democracy.

Knorpp (2019) notes that 'objectivism' is often confused with *success theory:* The view not only that there *are* truths to be gotten at, but that one can be certain that one actually has *access* to those truths. But obviously, there is all the difference in the world between the claim that there are objective truths and the claim that anyone has unique access to those truths.

Feyerabend's optimism about relativism and pessimism about objectivism make sense once we see that further to identifying relativism with fallibilism, Feyerabend characterises objectivism as a stance that involves supposing one's own way of life is universally and

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unquestionably right. Again, the contrast he seems to have in mind is perhaps not best understood as contrast between 'objectivism' and 'relativism' so much as a contrast between fallibilism and the unquestioning assumption of infallibility that would have to accompany success theory. For instance, he says:

> The idea of objectivity … is older than science and independent of it. It arose whenever a nation or a tribe or a civilization identified its ways of life with the laws of the (physical and moral) universe (1987, p. 5)

Here, not only is the idea of objectivity conflated with the claim that some group of people *is able to attain* a perfectly objective perspective, but also with the further claim that one's *own* way of life, specifically, is akin to an unbreakable law of nature.

Bloor similarly defines relativism in contrast to 'absolutism', and has sometimes given an unusual characterisation of absolutism. In an interview in 2007 with François Briatte, he describes his advocacy of relativism as follows:

> I would say the essential feature of every type of relativism must be a rejection of absolutism. To be a relativist acknowledges that the knowledge claims of science do not and cannot live up to the title of absolute knowledge. If knowledge is going to be absolute then it has to be true without any qualification, it has to be known with certainty, to be completely stable and eternal truth: those are the sorts of connotations that give meaning to the word 'absolute'. And it is precisely all of these connotations that the relativist rejects. (Briatte, 2007)

In this case, it seems that 'absolutism' is directly conflated with *infallibilism*. Not only is absolutism associated with the idea that truths are known with *certainty* but, even more surprisingly, with the further idea that they are 'true without qualification' and that they are 'stable and eternal'. The idea seems to be that there can be no ambiguity, no possibility of mistake, and even no possibility that facts could ever *change*. It is unclear who could be taken to hold an 'absolutist' view so defined.

Elsewhere, however, Bloor (2011) is less hyperbolic in his characterisation of absolutism. His project primarily involves examining the standards by which we *determine* truth in a scientific context. He takes the relevant contrast to relativism to be 'absolutism' as opposed to 'objectivism' (which would be contrasted with 'subjectivism' – a view that he explicitly rejects). Absolutism, as applied to scientific theories, for Bloor, entails that those theories may be

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directly descriptive of the facts, independent of any context-sensitive features of human language, standards, practices, etc., such that that it may one day be safe to assume that the truth has been arrived at, and hence that there is no possibility of further scientific progress.

This form of relativism seems to require *fallibilism* and some degree of scepticism with respect to how close empirical practices and scientific descriptions could ever get us to conveying the world as it really is. But it does not require Protagorean relativism.

Insofar as his opponent is painted as an infallibilist, he seems to be attacking a strawman. But if his opponent is merely optimistic about the prospects of scientific theory one day hooking up to the world accurately, then this looks like more of a feasible target. But we should be able to agree that there is a debate to be had about *this* which is entirely separate to the debate about Protagorean relativism. Neither side in *this* dispute must commit to infallibilism.

Code's rejection of objectivism (which she contrasts with relativism) also seems to involve associating it with a wide variety of views, including positivism, reductionism, imperialism, and scientism. It is not entirely clear how objectivism is supposed to be related to these positions. Code seems to suppose that 'mainstream epistemology' necessarily involves a commitment to the idea that there is a culturally divorced perspective from which to evaluate knowledge claims, and that epistemologists take themselves to occupy such a perspective.

This view certainly does seem apt to promote intellectual complacence, even if it does not directly conflate objectivism with infallibilism. But the analysis somewhat blurs the distinction between objectivism and success theory. The problem is not with whether there is an objective reality, but with whether we can claim to *access* that objective reality, free from all biases and contextual limitations. For instance, Code criticises the assumption that the detached methods of physics, with its relative freedom from cultural constraints, can be taken as an absolute paradigm for attaining knowledge in all fields, and especially in the comparatively messy social realm, and is sceptical about our ability to view things from a purely objective perspective, free from any taint of subjectivity (e.g. see Code, 2018, pp. 27–70).

Code's prime target, then, does not seem to be an objectivist perspective on truth or knowledge, but may perhaps be better captured by Rae Langton's (2000) related but distinct target: The *assumption* of objectivity. This involves assuming that observation of the ordinary course of things actually *occurs* from an objective and unbiased standpoint, as well assuming that there is no possibility that one's

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own expectations and practices sometimes shape social phenomena that one is observing.

But the assumption of objectivity is not the same thing as objectivism. In fact, one of the prime problems, as Langton notes, with the assumption of objectivity, is that it leads us to *false beliefs*. This can only *be* a problem to the extent that we suppose that we are aiming to form accurate beliefs about the way things actually are, independent of our particular and limited perspectives. It could not be a problem if we embraced Protagorean relativism.

It is easy to see why we might suppose relativism is on the side of various social and epistemic virtues when the relativist's opponents are characterised as being committed to the claim that they necessarily have something like a 'God's eye view' of the world, which affords them virtually infallible *access* to the truth, and some right to inflict their own way of life or worldview on anyone who might disagree with them.

It seems what both sides to this dispute object to, and what both sides take themselves to be opposed to is precisely *infallibilism*. Moreover, as Baghramian points out, fallibilism really is a plausible precondition of various virtues, including intellectual humility, open-mindedness, and flexibility of thought. One would hardly have a reason to be curious or open-minded about alternative viewpoints if one did not take there to be some serious possibility that one's own viewpoint was in error.

What we find is that objectivists frequently take relativists to be committed to infallibilism, since they take relativism to be precisely the rejection of 'objectivism' or 'absolutism', as they *themselves* understand it. Hence relativism is taken to involve a commitment to the claim that each person's belief is necessarily true from their own perspective, that conflicting beliefs held by others are equally true from the perspectives of those others, and that there is no sense in which we might be able to characterise one perspective as more or less valid than any other. This view certainly does involve a commitment to infallibilism, but it is not the view that any self-styled relativists actually seem to accept.

Similarly, relativists tend to assume that their opponents reject their *own* far more modest position, which usually amounts to the claim that each of our perspectives is fallible and limited by various contextual constraints, that none of us has a 'God's eye view', and that we ought to be open to other perspectives. Defined like this, the objectivist is taken to be a sort of arrogant authoritarian, convinced not only that there is such a thing as truth, but that they have unquestionable sole access to it, and that it is impossible that they could be wrong. Understood like this, objectivists are similarly

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characterised by their opponents as being committed to a sort of infallibilism. Once again, however, this is not a view that any self-styled objectivist actually seems to accept.

4. The Need for Interpretive Charity

What impression is this debate apt to give rise to in a casual observer? A quick glance at what each side takes themselves to be opposed to is liable to give the impression of a terrible (though obviously false) dichotomy. On the one hand, we can take the side of the fuzzy relativists, who suppose that 'anything goes' and that no opinion is better supported than any other, and who are happy to entirely collapse the distinction between belief and truth, leading to the collapse of all reasoned dispute and undermining any conceivable motivation to subject one's own opinions to rational scrutiny. On the other hand, we can take the side of the arrogant authoritarian absolutists, who take themselves to be the sole possessors of knowledge, and who will tyrannically crush the views of anyone who opposes them, devoid of any capacity to seriously consider any viewpoint other than their own, and oblivious to the fact that their oppressive policies might play any role in shaping the social world that they take themselves to be objectively observing.

No wonder, then, that even while neither position is defended by any academic philosophers, as far as I can tell, students who are new to the discussion may be tempted to embrace views that seem implausible or puzzling to us. No doubt, students are sympathetic, even to the sort of crude relativism we find in Plato's portrayal of Protagoras, in part, because they associate opposition to that view with intolerance or authoritarianism. While proponents of this authoritarian caricature thankfully tend to be rare in philosophy classrooms (though sadly not non-existent), views quite like it are certainly found lurking in various internet chat forums. No doubt, proponents may take themselves to be providing the only line of 'defence' against fuzzy relativistic thinking, further entrenching the idea that this arrogant authoritarian stance is somehow the natural alternative.

The problem, then, is that extreme views often give rise to extreme counterviews. The more absurd or threatening the perspective, the more likely people are to side with those they take to be natural enemies of it, especially when they take themselves to be defending the 'reasonable' stance against those who threaten to undermine it. People cannot be adopting these views on the basis that academics

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defend them and this bleeds into popular culture, since academics largely *don't* defend them. But they may well adopt them because they see them as the only viable alternatives to views frequently *attacked* in academic writing (views which are, in fact, defended by virtually no one).

Perhaps then, we ought to embrace both anti-anti-relativist sentiments *and* anti-anti-objectivist sentiments. While 'relativists' and 'objectivists' understand those terms, respectively, in ways that both sides should acknowledge to be largely innocuous, it seems both 'anti-relativist' and 'anti-objectivist' rhetoric are reactions to caricatures.

Freed from this rhetoric, we stop seeing a 'culture war' between opposing sides, and instead see both sides as largely agreeing on a view that may seem so obvious that it borders on the trite: that there is very little that can be known for certain, that we had better be willing to acknowledge the possibility that we might be in error, that we would be well advised to listen to other viewpoints with an open-mind, and that we should probably strive to view our own opinions with some critical distance, maintaining an awareness of the fact that none of us has access to a 'God's eye view' immune from all biases and perspectival limitations. The problem is that some seem to label this innocuous stance 'relativism' while others label it 'absolutism'.

This suggests that views that actually entail infallibilism only really become appealing when pitted against strawmen, caricatured so as to appear opposed to the reasonable stance of fallibilism. So insofar as we want to emphasise the sorts of virtue that seem to depend on fallibilism, virtues like open-mindedness and intellectual humility, it seems that we need to cultivate the additional virtue of *interpretive charity*.

Interpretive charity entails a commitment to trying to interpret one's opponents' views in the most sympathetic light. It stands opposed to the vice of interpreting one's opponents unsympathetically, as happens when we caricature those views or mischaracterise them to suit our critique. Interpretive charity can be a difficult virtue to cultivate. In present academia, pressure to publish combined with intense competition can make the vice of uncharitably interpreting one's opponents irresistible, especially where there is a great deal of pressure to make one's own arguments seem novel and disruptive. This adversarial approach has advantages, but it may also contribute to the illusion of extreme polarisation.[8]

[8] This may require us to cultivate the collective virtue of responsibility. See Mandi Astola (2022).

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The debate between 'absolutists' and 'relativists' shows that this impression of polarisation can persist even when there is barely any separation between the views embraced by most proponents of the two camps.

When it comes to polarised debates outside of academia, the drivers are slightly different, but the mechanics appear to be similar. People may not be under pressure to publish seemingly controversial opinions on social media sites (the way that academics may feel pressured to produce novel viewpoints) but the algorithms used to promote content will make controversial claims more visible and will drive us towards extremes. The more we can ridicule or caricature our opponents, the more exposure our opinions are likely to get and the more heavily they will be promoted. The cycle is a vicious one. Again, this is a pressure that we must learn to resist. Some responsibility for this obviously lies with social media companies themselves and with policymakers. It would help if charitable content was promoted over divisive content, but while there is a commercial incentive to secure ever-greater levels of engagement, social media companies are likely to keep these policies going unless legal regulations are introduced to stop them. But this vicious cycle also relies crucially on users themselves repeatedly being willing to buy into depictions of their opponents that confirm or magnify their own biases against them.

The ability to interpret one's opponents charitably requires us to be able to step back and question an ungenerous caricature. It requires us to voluntarily resist the slide into tribalistic thinking and to try to recognise a mean-spirited dismissal of an opposing viewpoint and question it, even if we do not support the view under attack. Interpretive charity may therefore become one of the key virtues that we must cultivate in order to navigate the modern world and restore the possibility of constructive debate between camps that seem to disagree. Moreover, it may actually help us to recognise common ground where the dynamics of social media work to actively obscure it.

Virtues are, according to the traditional Aristotelian view, character traits that relate to fundamental human tendencies of the sort that we often struggle to get right. Learning to get them right requires a great deal of practice and self-control. In the case of interpretive charity, we are prone to getting it wrong because there are mechanisms in human society that consistently drive us in this direction. Almost every source of information we encounter is there because it is in somebody's interests to persuade us of something (whether it's voting for a particular party, spending more time scrolling, buying more

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papers, contributing to a cause, etc.) We are more likely to keep reading and more likely to adopt one side of an argument when the contrast between the two sides is exaggerated. This means that there is a constant incentive for some to caricature their opponents and a constant incentive for each of us to buy into those caricatures. Cultivating interpretive charity requires us to continuously question these. This is inherently difficult, but so is the development of any virtue worth cultivating.

University of Warwick
Nadine.Elzein@warwick.ac.uk

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