

SELF-REFUTATION

Steven D. Hales

1. Introduction

The chief complaint against relativism is as ancient as relativism itself: the charge that the doctrine is self-refuting. How exactly the self-refutation purportedly comes about, and whether relativists can adequately answer the objection has been a topic of sporadic interest for over two millennia. Plato first filed the grievance, sketching an argument that has been described by Robert Nozick as “the quick and standard refutation [of relativism]” (Nozick 2001, 16). Even those often considered relativists, like Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam, have admitted the power of the peritrope.¹ Precisely how the argument is supposed to work – as well as how effective it really is – is not obvious. Here I will review some of the more prominent discussions.

Proposals of very general applicability constitute their own tribunal; they must clear the bar that they themselves have set. “All sentences are five words long” is immediately seen to be false even without consulting additional evidence. Other examples of self-reference are neither clearly true nor clearly false. Eubulides, a contemporary of Plato, was well-known for generating such paradoxes, including the famous liar.² “A man says he is lying. Is what he says true or false?” The liar is probably the most celebrated of the self-referential puzzles. If the man is lying, then he speaks the truth and therefore cannot be lying, but if he is speaking the truth then it follows that he is in fact lying and therefore cannot be speaking the truth. The truth value of the liar sentence is unstable. Not everyone noticed that this is a problem; in St. Paul’s Letter to Titus (5:12–13) he writes, “One of themselves, a prophet of their own [Epimenides] said, ‘Cretans are always liars’ . . . this testimony is true.” Paul didn’t catch on that the truth of Epimenides’s testimony also made it false.

The most famous statement of relativism from ancient times was given by Protagoras. Reportedly the first sentence of his book *Alēthia* (Truth, a book now lost) was “Man is the measure of all things: of the things which are, that they are, and of the things which are not, that they are not.” Protagoras’s ancient commentators, including contemporaries such as Plato and Aristotle, took him to be defending a form of global relativism, and pounced on the issue of self-reference as a way to refute him.

In *Theætetus*, Plato marshals several arguments against Protagoras’s “man is the measure of all things.”³ One is that it leads to various counterintuitive results, particularly a great flattening of knowledge: we each turn out to be as wise as any of the gods (162c), yet we may not even be wiser

than pigs or baboons (161c), no one is ignorant or makes mistakes (170c), and there are no true experts on any topic (178 et passim). At 171a Plato offers “a really exquisite conclusion,” namely that Protagoras’s Measure Thesis can be turned on its head. Since Protagoras claims that everyone’s opinion is true, it follows that his opponents who consider the Measure Thesis to be false are right – it is false. Protagoras must concede that their opinion is as true as any other, which means he is forced to admit either that the Measure Thesis is both true and false (a *reductio ad absurdum* on his own view), or that his endorsement of the thesis is no better off than the rejection of it. Worse, when Protagoras acknowledges that his opponents’ denial of the Measure Thesis is true, it implies that truth is not relative to the individual. Therefore, for his critics, truth is not simply objective for them, it is objective simpliciter, which directly dismisses Protagoras’s relativism.

Aristotle in *Metaphysics* Γ gives a somewhat similar argument. He begins the chapter by positing the law of noncontradiction: it is impossible for anything at the same time to be and not to be (1006a). Noncontradiction was more than a mere logical law for Aristotle. He also thought it is doxastically impossible for anyone to believe the same thing to be and not to be (1005b25). Protagoras seems to fall afoul of these bedrock principles. Suppose we accept the position of the Measure Thesis that every opinion is a true opinion. Clearly people dispute with each other and each disputant believes the other to be wrong. It follows that each party is right; the same proposition is both true and false and each person is both right and wrong. Likewise, Protagoras’s Measure Thesis itself is subject to dispute and therefore it too is both true and false. These results violate noncontradiction and Protagoras is thereby refuted (1009a5).

In the second century CE, Sextus Empiricus echoes these concerns. In *Against the Logicians* (2005, 60–64) he offers Protagoras a fair hearing, conceding that human beings testify from the point of view of human beings, children from the perspective of childhood, the insane from the standpoint of the insane, and so on. It would be a mistake for a person of sound mind to reject the ideas of the crazy since they are not in the right circumstances to do so, or for adults to dismiss the views of children. Be that as it may, Protagoras’s proposal that every appearance is true fails because of “the turning about,” i.e. self-refutation. In Sextus’s words, “if every appearance is true, then even not every appearance’s being true, since it takes the form of an appearance, will be true, and thus every appearance’s being true will become false” (Empiricus 2005, 389–390). As a Pyrrhonian skeptic, Sextus denies that we are justified in accepting any claims as either true or false, but for different reasons than the “turning about” argument that skewers Protagorean relativism.

It is worth noting that one way to skirt the problem of self-refutation entirely is to limit the domain of the relativist’s claims. Someone might be a local relativist about ethics, aesthetics, epistemic modals, knowledge attributions, or a variety of other matters without running the risks of universal relativism.⁴ Take for example, Rousseau’s remark that “every one gives the title of barbarism to everything that is not in use in his own country. As, indeed, we have no other level of truth and reason than the example and idea of the opinions and customs of the place wherein we live.”⁵ Rousseau’s quotation is from an essay on cannibalism, and he is suggesting that behavior in other cultures that we find shocking is no more than the result of our own enculturation, and that we are savages from the point of view of others, just as they are to us.

Suppose Rousseau’s position is MR: “the truth of any moral proposition is relative to a particular culture.” Thus cannibalism is immoral in one society but not in another. MR is not itself a moral claim, but a meta-level claim about the truth conditions of object-level moral propositions. Therefore the truth value of MR is not – on the basis of MR alone – culturally relative. Likewise relativism about predicates of taste is not a matter of taste, and so on. To the extent that self-refutation is a problem, it is a problem for global relativism, which will be the focus of what follows.

The ancient critics, especially Aristotle, struggled to grasp the radical idea of relative truth, and their attempts at a self-refutation argument don’t clearly distinguish between objective and

relative truth. As a result they may be illicitly assuming that truth is objective to make their case. A really compelling charge of self-refutation needs to explicitly assume that truth is merely relative to a point of view, and then show how that idea is self-undermining.

To be a relativist about truth, minimally you have to think that truth is partly a function of some parameter like perspective, culture, world view, conceptual scheme, historical period, point of view, etc. For simplicity, let's just call this parameter a "perspective." There are two possible anti-relativist positions: (i) Deny that there are perspectives. If the very idea of a perspective is incoherent or useless, then truth is independent of perspective and propositions are true absolutely. (ii) Admit that there are perspectives, but insist that propositions are true (or false) in all perspectives and are true absolutely for that reason.

An analogy to the theistic debate over God's eternity helps to illustrate the preceding distinction. One idea about eternity is Augustine's and Aquinas's view that God exists outside of time. He is eternal in the sense that he is atemporal or timeless, separated from the temporal order of the world, and able to survey all of points in time at once. Positing the existence of time is irrelevant to understanding God's eternity, just as option (i) maintains that positing perspectives is irrelevant to understanding absolute truth. Another option is that God exists within time, and that he is eternal in the sense that reality has no beginning or end, and God exists at every moment of it. This is analogous to option (ii) in that eternity is existence at every moment and absolute truth is truth within every perspective.

Absolutists certainly can and have argued that there are no perspectives to which truth is indexed, and that relativism is mistaken for that reason. (Famously, Davidson (1984) takes this line). Whatever the merits of that approach, it won't help build a self-refutation argument. An absolutist about truth who rejects the existence of perspectives from the start cannot effectively mount a self-refutation argument against the relativist, since without admitting the relativist's key contention that there are perspectives to which truth is indexed, there is no chance of constructing a *reductio ad absurdum*. If relativism really is self-undermining, then it has to be false by its own lights; the assumption of the truth of relativism needs to imply its own falsehood.

So let us assume for the sake of argument that there are perspectives and that, like times or possible worlds, they are parameters of truth. A proposition is true at a world, at a time, and at a perspective. The position of absolutism can still be formulated even if we stipulate the existence of perspectives; it is the view that for all propositions P, P has the same truth value at each perspective.

GLOBAL RELATIVISM (GR) Every truth is true relative to some perspectives and false relative to other perspectives.

Either GR is absolutely true (true in all perspectives) or it is relatively true (true relative to some, but not all perspectives). If GR is absolutely true, then it is true in all perspectives (by the definition of absolutism). However, GR states that every truth is true in some, but not all perspectives. Therefore if GR is true, it is not absolutely true. This seems to be the point where Aristotle stopped and, as it stands, is rather thin gruel to count as adequate self-refutation.

2. Relativism is merely relatively true

There remains the possibility that GR is true, just relatively true. What is the problem with claiming that every truth is relative to some perspectives and false relative to other perspectives, and that very fact is itself is true relative to some perspectives and false relative to other perspectives?

The relativity of relativism has appealed to various thinkers. Friedrich Nietzsche, for example, defended a form of relativism known as perspectivism. Perspectivism for Nietzsche is not one precisely defined doctrine, but a cluster of related ideas about the subjectivity of truth, anti-realist metaphysics, a bundle theory of objects, the revaluation of values and the creation of one's own virtues, and the role of varying interpretations in knowledge (Hales and Welshon 2000; Hales forthcoming). But part of it is a rejection of absolute truth. In *Human, All Too Human* §2, Nietzsche writes that “there are no eternal facts, nor are there any absolute truths,” and doubles down on this comment in *The Genealogy of Morals* (III, §12), “there is only a perspective seeing, only a perspective knowing.” Nietzsche is untroubled by the possibility that his ideas about perspectival knowledge are true only relative to his perspective. “Supposing that this also is only interpretation – and you will be eager enough to make this objection? – well, so much the better” (*Beyond Good and Evil* §22). Is his defiance justified?

If (GR) is merely relatively true, then there are perspectives in which (GR) is true and perspectives in which it is false. When there are points of view from which it is false, the relativist faces a kind of pragmatic challenge: what makes relativism so special that a fence-sitter would be persuaded to adopt it? After all, the relativist has just conceded that there are perspectives in which absolutism is true. Why not adopt one of those? One possible reply is that we are in certain circumstances that preclude an absolutist perspective. (GR) is a relative truth, but it is relative to me, so I had better accept it. Of course, the fact of (GR)'s truth relative to me is also relatively true, and therefore there are perspectives in which it too is false.⁶ While this may be an unsatisfying dialectical eddy, it is not obvious that the relative truth of (GR) is self-referentially inconsistent. John MacFarlane is sympathetic to the “relativism is relatively true” move, writing, “it is usually conceded that there is no real contradiction in the relativist's holding that relativism is not true for everyone.”⁷

The idea that (GR) is merely relatively true will fail to save relativism from self-refutation just in case admitting a perspective in which (GR) is false (and hence absolutism is true) cannot sufficiently bind absolutism. Relativism proposes to bottle truths within perspectives, but if absolutism is a kind of universal acid that dissolves any bottle in which it is put, then it cannot be safely placed on the shelf along with the other relative truths. A closer examination of the idea that even allowing (GR) to be absolutely true within a perspective will lead to the elimination of the “within a perspective” stricture will be looked at shortly.

3. Self-refutation as regress

Some interpreters of the peritrope take the real problem to be one of infinite regress.⁸

Suppose that Protagoras says

- (1) “Man is the measure of all things” is true for me.

Plato then asks whether (1) is absolutely true, or just relatively true. Obviously, Protagoras isn't about to say that it is absolutely true. Instead, staying true to his own principle, he avers that

- (2) (1) is true for me.

The same question then arises: is (2) absolutely true or not? Once again Protagoras makes the same move

- (3) (2) is true for me.

This line of questioning and response can be repeated ad infinitum. The relativist is an elusive and slippery foe, and it is not clear what exactly the problem is with his willingness to admit that all of his assertions, at whatever meta level you wish, are simply true for him.

Putnam thinks that the problem is ultimately grounded in Wittgenstein's Private Language argument. Wittgenstein argues (Wittgenstein 1953, notably §258, §265, §268) that if I invent a word in a private language, this means that I invent a rule of application for the word. Now, how can I tell if I am using the rule correctly? Whenever it *seems* that I am using the rule correctly. There is no external check since it is my own personal language. Yet if whatever seems right is right, then there is no rule at all, only the semblance of one. Writing down the rule is no use, as I still have to count on memory to determine how to interpret the rule. Counting on my mind to confirm something else done by my mind is, as Wittgenstein says in § 265, like buying several copies of the morning newspaper to confirm that what it contains is true. He concludes that we cannot invent actual rules on our own and that language – which requires the systematic application of rules – can originate only in the public sphere.

According to Putnam, relentlessly iterating sentences as being relatively true *for me* amount to making the truth predicate part of a private language. If Wittgenstein is right, as Putnam thinks he is, then relativism is impossible. Protagoras may keep insisting that his assertions are only true for him, but he is unable to make any sense of the difference between *being right* and *thinking that he is right*, or between *genuine assertion* and *merely making noises*. The affirmation of truth is essentially public, something that holds in all perspectives, something absolute.

Paul Boghossian, on the other hand, thinks the regress problem leads to propositions with infinite conjunctions. With respect to relativizing the claim that there have been dinosaurs, he writes,

The fact-relativist is committed to the view that the only facts there are, are infinitary facts of the form:

According to a theory that we accept, there is a theory that we accept and according to this latter theory, there is a theory that we accept and . . . there have been dinosaurs.

But it is absurd to propose that, in order for our utterances to have any prospect of being true, what we must mean by them are infinitary propositions that we could neither express nor understand.

(Boghossian 2006, 56)

Boghossian's criticism here is analogous to a familiar argument in epistemology. Is all justification inferential or not? If it is not all inferential, then there are some basic justified beliefs, and we have a form of foundationalism. If it is all inferential, then we have a choice between coherentism and an infinite regress of justified propositions, each of which depends for its justification on propositions evidentially prior in the chain. One classic objection to the infinite regress idea is just Boghossian's objection to global relativism in another context, namely that finite minds such as ours cannot have an infinite number of beliefs or reasons like those required by infinitism.

Peter Klein has defended infinitism in epistemology against the finite minds objection in two ways (Klein 1999). First, it is possible for a finitely extended thing to be in an infinite number of states; even Zeno knew that an arrow was in an infinite number of infinitesimally small locations on its way to a target. So infinity alone isn't a problem. Second, grant that a conscious belief requires a non-zero amount of time to attend to or grasp, thus preventing finite human beings from entertaining an infinite number of conscious thoughts. Klein suggests that the infinite set of beliefs be *dispositional*. No one possesses an infinity of already-formed dispositional beliefs, rather, we all have 2nd-order dispositions to supply a justifying reason for any occurrent

1st-order belief. For infinitists, we are always able to devise a reason for anything we think, and if we can't then the belief is not justified. To the extent that Klein's strategies work for the structure of justification, they should also work to defuse Boghossian's complaint against the relativist. The relativist need not grasp or believe a proposition with an infinity of "there is a theory that we accept" conjuncts. The global relativist need only be prepared to dispositionally add such meta-conjuncts when called to do so.⁹

4. The logic of relativism

The final approach to the self-refutation problem is to explore the formal structure of global relativism, and develop a solution based on its logic. Ideally the logical approach would also provide an error theory that could explain why the self-refutation argument looked so promising for so long while at the same time defusing or avoiding that argument. Here is one attempt.

First, stipulate the existence of a non-zero number of perspectives. These can be taken as primitive elements in the system. Then specify that the truth of propositions is to be indexed to perspectives, analogous to the way that the truth of propositions is typically indexed to a language, a time, and a possible world. "Perspective" just becomes one more parameter. Those who think there is just one perspective, or who want to reject the idea of points of view altogether, can regard this requirement as trivially satisfied. An analogy is to those who, like Spinoza, think that every truth is necessarily true. While they have no need of possible world semantics to distinguish necessity from contingency, Spinozists could still allow that necessary truth is truth in all possible worlds; they just think that there's only one possible world, and whatever is true at that world is trivially true in all. Absolutists could allow that there are perspectives, even if they think there is only one, and insist that whatever is true is trivially true in all.

Nothing is true outside the structure of perspectives any more than there are true sentences that aren't sentences of any specific language. It remains an open question as to whether there could be a proposition that is true in all perspectives, just as there might be a proposition true in all possible worlds. Formally, a proposition is relatively true just in case it is true in some perspectives and it is absolutely true just in case it is true in all perspectives. This parallels the idea that a proposition is possibly true if it is true in some worlds and necessarily true if it is true in all worlds. Let " \blacklozenge " be an operator that takes sentences and indexes them to perspectives, so that " $\blacklozenge\Phi$ " is to be read as "it is relatively true (true in some perspective) that Φ ." The claim that everything is relative is thus: for all Φ , $\blacklozenge\Phi$. Further, let us introduce " \blacksquare " as an "absolute" operator so that " $\blacksquare\Phi$ " is to be read as "it is absolutely true (true in all perspectives) that Φ ."

Now let's formulate the self-refutation problem. The thesis of global relativism is everything is relative. Absolutism denies global relativism: not everything is relative. By "everything is relative," let us understand the claim that every proposition is true in some perspective and untrue in another. Absolutism is then: there is at least one proposition which has the same truth value in all perspectives. Clearly, either the thesis of relativism is true absolutely (true in all perspectives) or just relatively (true in some, but not all perspectives). Suppose that relativism is true in all perspectives. If so, then there is a proposition which has the same truth value in all perspectives – viz., the thesis of global relativism itself. Yet, if there is some proposition which has the same truth value in all perspectives, then absolutism is true. Thus if relativism is true in all perspectives, absolutism is true; equivalently, if relativism is true in all perspectives then by reductio relativism is untrue.

So far this is fairly straightforward. The more interesting work comes in assessing the idea that global relativism is merely relatively true. Here is a more contentious assumption, one that will do real work in the peritrope argument: assume that the relativist logic has an S5 structure, and

particularly that S5's characteristic theorem $\blacklozenge\blacksquare\Phi \Rightarrow \blacksquare\Phi$ holds.¹⁰ Further assume that for all propositions Φ , $\blacklozenge\blacksquare\Phi$. That is, every proposition is relatively true (true in some perspective). Allow Φ to be "it is absolutely untrue that everything is relative." Then the following turns out to be true: relatively, it is absolutely untrue that everything is relative. Granted the S5-like theorem that whatever is relatively absolute is absolute, then it will follow straightaway that it is absolutely untrue that everything is relative. And, by reductio, the relativist thesis is false. Absolutism really is a universal acid that cannot be harmlessly contained by a perspective.

The beauty of the preceding result is that it explains why the self-refutation argument has been so durable and yet so tricky to formulate compellingly. Without recognizing that the relativist thesis can be formulated modally, or knowing about S5 logic, there is no easy path to proving that "relativism is merely relatively true" is just as self-refuting as "relativism is absolutely true." These logical ideas are of recent vintage in the history of philosophy.¹¹ Another positive result is that while

(1) Everything is relative

turns out to be false and self-undermining,

(2) Everything true is relatively true

does not.

The difference between the two formulations can be brought out with an analogy. Compare *everything is possible* to *everything true is possibly true*. No one except the pathologically optimistic would defend the idea that *everything is possible*, but *everything true is possibly true* is so obvious as to hardly rate a comment. *Everything true is possibly true* allows the possibility that there are necessary truths that are true in all worlds and it permits that some truths are merely contingent ones that are true in some worlds but false in others. Analogously, *everything true is relatively true* is compatible with there being absolute truths that are true in all perspectives while also permitting that there are merely relative truths that are true in some perspectives and false in others. Given the logical space in which to develop their theories, honest relativists must then argue that truths about morality, aesthetics, set theory, or what have you are merely relatively true.¹²

Some critics have rejected the preceding logical analysis of the self-refutation problem on the grounds that the S5 theorem $\blacklozenge\blacksquare\Phi \Rightarrow \blacksquare\Phi$ is unmotivated.¹³ It is difficult to see what such critics want. The assumption of the theorem helps provide a rigorous demonstration of the self-refutation argument while at the same time allowing for a consistent global relativism. Why S5? Because doing so does valuable philosophical work. It is like asking a carpenter, "why use a 3-inch screw?" The obvious answer is because that's the tool he needs. To demand an independent semantic reason for accepting $\blacklozenge\blacksquare\Phi \Rightarrow \blacksquare\Phi$, apart from the role it plays in sorting out relativism, is like demanding a justification for using a 3-inch screw apart from the role it plays in fastening two things together. If a 2-inch screw can do just as good a job, then one might reasonably ask "why use a 3-inch screw instead of a 2-inch screw?" By analogy the critics would then need to offer a real alternative to the S5 theorem that is as effective in explaining and defusing the peritrope for their challenge to be compelling.

The self-refutation objection to global relativism has plagued relativists from the start. It turns out that neither the structure of the argument nor its effectiveness is clear as some have thought. It is certainly not the knockdown argument that Plato thought it was. Whether the objection can be marked as solved or it is still an open question depends upon what theory of relativism is being considered. The key question is what do we want any theory of relativism to do for us;

what difficulties does it solve? Knowing that, future relativists must consider the peritrope, but there are many ways it might be accommodated.

Notes

- 1 “Relativism certainly is self-refuting” (Rorty 1991, 202), “Although we all know that cultural relativism is inconsistent (or say we do) I want to take the time to say again that it is inconsistent” (Putnam 1983, 236).
- 2 According to Diogenes Laertius (book 2, ch. 10, §108). Diogenes clearly thought that Eubulides was a pretentious lover of controversy. See Kneale and Kneale (1962, 113–114, 227–229) for discussion.
- 3 For an excellent close reading of both Plato and Aristotle on the self-refutation argument, see Lee (2005, esp. ch. 4).
- 4 See MacFarlane (2005) and Carter (2016, 58).
- 5 Montaigne (1877, ch. 30). Compare ch. 36 where Montaigne purports to “believe and apprehend a thousand ways of living; and, contrary to most men, more easily admit of difference than uniformity amongst us.”
- 6 Cf. Nozick (2001, 15–16).
- 7 MacFarlane (2014, 30).
- 8 For example, Putnam (1981, 119–124) and Boghossian (2006, 54–56). Cf. MacFarlane (2014, 32–33).
- 9 Also see the somewhat different response to Boghossian in MacFarlane (2014, 33).
- 10 The S5 theorem is provable if the commensurability relation among perspectives is an equivalence relation. See the appendix in Hales (1997).
- 11 Cf. Hales (2006) and for a similar earlier treatment, see Hautamäki (1983).
- 12 This logical treatment is not the only one possible. Bennigson (1999) offers an alternative, and Ressler (2013) has the most comprehensive overview of relativist logics.
- 13 See Kölbel (2011, 27) and MacFarlane (2014, 30) for examples of this criticism.

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