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Politics, Deep Disagreement, and Relativism

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This chapter critically discusses the relationship between political disagreements and political relativism, roughly, the idea that both parties to (at least some) political disagreements are right relative to their own perspective. Two key strands of argument that take a substantive stand on this relationship are considered. The first – which is the primary focus of the chapter – reasons from political disagreement to political relativism through premises about *epistemic circularity*. The second kind of argument diagnoses some political disagreements as 'faultless' on the basis of semantic considerations. As we'll see, considerations in favour of accepting or rejecting either variety of political relativism do not carry over as considerations for accepting or rejecting the other, and so these forms of political relativism – despite some superficial similarities – do not stand or fall together.

1. Introduction

Political disagreements, particularly in Western liberal democracies, are becoming increasingly *polarized*, and they are polarized to an extent that can make political consensus nowadays seem unrealistic, or like a relic of the past.[1]

According to a January 2020 Pew Research study, nine out of ten Americans (91%) hold the view that the disagreements dividing Democrats and Republicans in the United States are either 'strong or very strong', with nearly three quarters of Americans (71%) reporting that they view these disagreements to be 'very strong'. When the same question was posed in the previous presidential election year, 2016, only 56% gave a 'very strong' verdict, which itself was up from 47% in 2012.[2] Meanwhile, in the U.K., 'Brexit identity' (i.e., the mutually exclusive identities of 'Leave' or 'Remain') has become – moreso now than any of the comparatively less

well-defined U.K. political party identities – among the most important markers of in-group/out-group self-identification (Hobolt et al., 2018), and this self-identification corresponds with a range of increasingly rigid attitudinal fault lines on issues such as immigration, diversity, globalisation, human rights, and trust in experts (Marsh, 2020).

These wide divisions are on full display on social media, where political arguments online (e.g., on Facebook and Twitter) often have the counterproductive effect of amplifying previously held positions (Carter & Broncano-Berrocal, forthcoming; Quattrociocchi et al., 2016; Sunstein, 2002). Even more, extreme views are easily exacerbated simply by searching YouTube, whose automated recommender system is programmed to recommend additional content that aligns with a user's previous history (Alfano et al., forthcoming, 2018).

The question of whether the present trend toward increased political polarization in Western democracies will continue to widen is a matter for the social sciences. However, there are important *philosophical* issues in the neighbourhood, especially once we consider what it means for the status of contested political claims if and when political disagreements become *irreconcilable.*

A relativist-friendly template strategy of argument that is familiar from debates about the status of moral, scientific as well as epistemic claims, goes roughly as follows: once disagreements in *any* given area – politics or otherwise – get deep enough, they pass the point at which rational adjudication is possible. This usually occurs when what is contested is not merely some first-order topic or topics in the domain, but also the very *principles* that permit and forbid ways of evaluating those first-order claims (see, e.g., Boghossian, 2006, Ch. 5; Carter, 2016, Ch. 4, 2018; Hales, 2014; Lynch, 2016; Ranalli, 2018; Rorty, 1979; Siegel, 2011). When a disagreement reaches this level, it looks *ex ante* as though all each side can do is appeal to its own principles, including its most fundamental principles, in the service of justifying them.

And it's at this point that the relativist claims a key foothold. As Michael Williams (2007) characterizes the relativist's thread of thinking – once a disagreement moves from the first-order to the second-order:

the best we can hope for is a justification that is *epistemically circular*, employing our [...] framework in support of itself. Since this procedure can be followed by anyone, whatever his [...] framework, all such frameworks, provided they are coherent, are equally defensible (or indefensible) (2007, pp. 94–95, *my italics*).[3]

If the above is right, then consider what this all means for your favourite Brexit debate on Facebook. Roughly: you support anti-Brexit policy X. Your interlocutor says 'not-X!'. As the debate progresses, rather than to converge on common ground, you discover that your interlocutor subscribes to different fundamental views about what makes for a reasonable political argument about Brexit, what counts as good evidence for a political position more generally, etc. Of course, you proceed to defend your *own* views about these deeper, 'meta-political' matters, but in the course of doing so, you (obviously) are reasoning in accordance with those *very* kinds of principles now under dispute at the second-order.[4] Enter the relativist: "Whether you like it or not, you are *both* now on epistemically *equal footing* when it comes to the original Brexit policy X. Both of you can, at most, defend your preferred stance about policy X by appealing to principles that are *circularly* justified – and your circular reasoning lends no better support to your position than theirs does to theirs!"[5]

In what follows, this chapter will focus in on two distinct philosophical questions that arise out of the above kind of reasoning, and some of the recent debates in the literature surrounding them. These are the *depth question* and the *circularity question*:

- *Depth question*: Are political disagreements really as deep as they seem?

- *Circularity question*: *If* we can, at best, circularly justify our deeply contested political views, does political relativism follow?

The former question is the focus of Section 2, and the latter of Section 3. The chapter concludes, in Section 4, by showing how political relativism might be motivated in an entirely different way, by appealing to some new insights in the philosophy of language and formal semantics.

2. The Depth Question

Political disagreements *seem* deep. But might this be illusory?

Here, a comparison with scientific disagreements will be instructive. Consider, for example, the famous 17th century dispute between Galileo and Cardinal Bellarmine about the matter of whether geocentrism (the thesis that the earth is the fixed centre of the universe, around which the sun revolves) is true. Galileo's view was that geocentrism was false, a view he held on the basis of telescopic evidence, and more generally, by appealing to the scientific method. Cardinal Bellarmine maintained that geocentrism was true; however, his appeal was to Scripture. Galileo and Bellarmine accordingly disagreed not only about geocentrism, but also about what kinds of methods constituted good ways of resolving the dispute: science or Scripture?

According to Richard Rorty (1979, pp. 328–329), Galileo and Bellarmine were using entirely different epistemic 'grids'; they were so far apart that rational adjudication was unattainable (as well as pointless to attempt). On a strong way of reading Rorty's assessment of the situation, the 'grid', or framework constituted by Galileo's principles, and that which is constituted by the principles that Bellarmine accepts, are *disjoint* – viz., they contain no common principle. Call a disagreement with this feature a 'disjoint deep disagreement'. On a weaker way of unpacking Rorty's assessment, Galileo and Bellarmine's (respective) sets of principles are not disjoint, however, they contain between them no 'Archimedean' principle – viz., that is, no common principle the acceptance of which would be effective in helping them rationally (by both of their lights) break the deadlock (even if there are some common principles)[6]. Call a disagreement with this feature a 'non-Archimedean' deep disagreement. All disjoint disagreements are non-Archimedean, but not all non-Archimedean disagreements are disjoint.

It's worth noting at the outset that, at least in the case of this famous scientific dispute – one often used in the service of motivating relativism (by Rorty and others[7]) – a disjoint interpretation of Rorty's assessment is implausible. Consider, for example, a simple logical principle: Inferences of the form (X and Y, therefore, X) are justified. This is surely part of

Galileo's framework. But, is it really *not* part of Bellarmine's? It most plausibly is. And, *mutatis mutandis* for other reasoning principles at a high level of abstraction, viz., the law of the excluded middle, the law of identity, etc.

Rather than to suppose that the depth of Bellarmine and Galileo's dispute is such that they subscribe to disjoint sets of principles when it comes to reasoning about the earth's location, the comparatively more plausible reading is the weaker 'Non-Archimedean' reading on which, in short, it's not that there's no common principle, but there's not a common principle of the 'right kind' (we'll return to this).

But first, let's return to politics: are some of our most entrenched contemporary political disagreements more plausibly classed as disjoint or non-Archimedean? A moment's reflection suggests at most the latter. Even the most hardline disputes about, e.g., Trump and Brexit, take place against at least some shared background about what constitutes rational moves in a political dispute (think again here about the law of the excluded middle and the law of identity). Accordingly, if such disputes are rationally irreconcilable (as opposed to rationally reconcilable), then it is because they are – like the debate between Galileo and Bellarmine – non-Archimedean.

Interestingly, Boghossian (2006) casts doubt on whether even *this* is true in the case of Galileo and Bellarmine. As he puts it:

> For many ordinary propositions, then—propositions about what J. L. Austin called "medium-sized specimens of dry goods"—Bellarmine uses exactly the same epistemic system we use. About the heavens, though, we diverge—we use our eyes, he consults the Bible. Is this really an example of a coherent fundamentally different epistemic system; or is it just an example of someone using the very same epistemic norms we use to arrive at a surprising theory about the world—namely, that a certain book, admittedly written many years ago by several different hands, is the revealed word of God and so may rationally be taken to be authoritative about the heavens? (2006a, pp. 103–104)

By parity of reasoning, we can imagine an analogous Boghossian-style diagnosis of a Trump/Anti-Trump or a Brexit/Anti-Brexit debate: (i) For many ordinary propositions, the Trump/Brexit supporter uses the *same* epistemic system as we[8] do; (ii) when it comes to the matter of supporting Trump/Brexit, we diverge with them – we consult the Guardian/BBC/CNN, they rely on FoxNews/Breitbart/Quillette etc.; (iii) (Rhetorical question): "Is this *really* an example of a coherent fundamentally different epistemic system; or is it just an example of someone using the very same epistemic norms we use to arrive at a surprising theory about the world"

If Boghossian is right in his characterization of Galileo versus Bellarmine, then – by parity of reasoning – it becomes much less plausible to suppose that paradigmatic examples of contemporary political disputes are irreconcilable because non-Archimedean. After all, *prima facie*, rational adjudication is possible between interlocutors who share an epistemic system, where an epistemic system is at minimum a set of basic epistemic principles.

But then, if paradigmatic political disputes are *not* irreconcilable either because they are disjoint *or* because they are, more weakly, non-Archimedean, then it becomes increasingly mysterious why we should think that they *really are* rationally irreconcilable at all – and, *a fortiori*, that there is any plausible path of argument from deep political disagreement to relativism about contested political claims.

A potential reply at this juncture might proceed along the following lines: "But, we have empirical evidence that such disagreements *are* irreconcilable! Empirical evidence that supports group polarization in the case of political discussions (e.g., Lorentzen 2014; Yardi & Boyd 2010), at the same time, supports the idea that these disagreements tend not toward, but *away from*, consensus."

The counterreply available to this line of thinking, though, is instructive. Evidence that political disagreements have *in fact* not been reconciled is not good evidence that they are irreconcilable. For example, for all we know, individuals who polarize when debating a hot-button political issue *might not have.* That is, it might be a highly contingent fact that such polarization occurs when it does. On one empirical theory that purports to explain political

polarization – self-categorization theory (Turner, 1982; Wetherell et al., 1986) – the reason that we polarize when we do has do with an underlying need to categorize ourselves in contrast with others. This need for self-categorization, a need that happens to have social benefits, leads us to amplify the kinds of differences that serve the social categorization purpose.

If self-categorization theory were correct, then notice that in a world where such a need was controlled for, we'd have no expectation that a group would polarize as opposed to converge. The matter of what the social-psychological mechanisms are that drive polarization in politics and elsewhere does not presently have consensus amongst social scientists.[9] This much places an important dialectical burden on one who wants to insist – given what we presently know (and don't know) about these mechanisms – that paradigmatic disagreements are 'deep' in the sense of being rationally irreconcilable. This is the case even if we agree – as we should – that many paradigmatic political disputes are disputes not only about political issues, but about political principles more generally.

3. The Circularity Question

Let's suppose, from here on out, that the situation is worse than Section 2 suggests. Assume, for the sake of argument, that there are at least *some* irreconcilable political disagreements. What then?

As we saw in Section 1, once an irreconcilability premise is granted, the relativist submits that our attempts to sway our interlocutor will involve appealing to a different system of principles (to wit, *our* system) than the interlocutor with whom we are deeply divided appeals to in an attempt to justify their own. But *this*, the relativist maintains, is best understood as a situation where both parties are on an *equal footing*, epistemically. Sure, we can provide a circular justification for our own epistemic principles. But so can they!

As Howard Sankey (2010, 2011, 2012) captures the relativist's reasoning at this juncture: once the above point about circularity is granted, the relativist thinks the only remaining options are between skepticism and relativism. Skepticism is – as Steven Hales (2014, p. 81) puts it,

'throwing in the towel' – and so relativism is really the only remaining choice that can make sense of how any of us can have justified beliefs *at all* in the relevant contested domains.[10]

Two points merit some clarification about the above reasoning. First, note that while irreconcilability is *sufficient* for getting the kind of circularity noted above up and running, it's not *necessary.* Consider, for example, that one might simply – in isolation from the context of an irreconcilable disagreement – aim to justify one's own most fundamental epistemic principles out of intellectual curiosity, or to achieve a kind of grounding for one's knowledge. This was, more or less, what Descartes was up to early in the Second Meditation[11], when he sought to defend the use of clear and distinct perception as a method for forming beliefs and, in the course of doing so, wound up using that very method he sought to justify.[12]

The second point that deserves some careful thought is actually implicit in the relativist's thinking, rather than explicitly argued for. This concerns the idea that epistemic circularity is always vicious. Or, more accurately: that the kind of circularity that one party to a disagreement faces when justifying her principles by appealing to them is *equally bad*, epistemically, as the other party's (viz., in the case of a deep disagreement).

But there is some precedent for *denying* this implicit premise in epistemology. Here, it will be helpful in particular to consider a line of argument found in Ernest Sosa's (1997) early virtue epistemology.[13]

A question Sosa was grappling with is this: how can we *know* that our faculty of perception is reliable?[14] After all, it looks like we'll inevitably need to rely on perception to establish this. But, if we can't know that perception is reliable on account that we'd have to use it to some extent in coming to a view about its reliability, then aren't we, as perceivers who maintain that perception is reliable, in no better epistemic position (in taking the view we do about the reliability of perception) than would be a crystal ball gazer who comes to the view that crystal ball gazing is reliable *because* the crystal ball says it is?

Sosa encourages us to nip this rhetorical line of thinking in the bud. As he points out, the idea that one would need to use (and in doing so take for granted the reliability of) a given faculty at

some point in order to come to have an adequate view of that faculty's epistemic status is implied by the very *possibility* of having 'an adequate theory of our knowledge and its general sources' (2009, p. 201; cf., 1997, p. 422). Put another way, the idea is that no one could provide adequate support of *any* of our sources of knowing, including perception, memory, deduction, abduction, and testimony, without employing those faculties; and so the suggestion that we should expect that we ought to be able to is a misguided one.[15]

If Sosa is conceded the above point, then it's false that *all* epistemic circularity of the sort that involves using a way of forming beliefs to come to have a positive view of its epistemic status must be epistemically vicious. However, this still doesn't address the issue of why the kind of circularity one would inevitably rely on in the case of perception, deduction, inference, etc., is on a *better* footing that the kind of circularity that features in the crystal ball gazing case.

At this juncture, the *epistemic externalist* has a special card to play.[16] Suppose, *ex hypothesi*, that to know something, p, what you need is a true belief that p that is appropriately causally related to a reliable belief forming process or disposition; further, suppose that epistemic externalism is true, and thus, that one needn't have any reflective access to facts about the appropriate causal relatedness between one's belief that p and the process that issued it in order for one to know that p when one does.

With this kind of reliabilist externalism in play, Sosa argues, you can straightforwardly, and favourably, distinguish the epistemic status of the reliable perceiver who uses perception to form the belief that perception is reliable from the crystal ball gazer who uses gazing to form the (unreliably produced) belief that crystal ball gazing is reliable. Because perception is *in fact* a reliable belief-forming process, you can come to know, by the lights of the general kind of reliabilist externalism sketched above[17], *that* perception is reliable through its use. But crystal ball gazing is not, in fact, reliable. And so through its use, you can't. In this respect, the two cases of epistemic circularity are not on an epistemically 'equal footing'.

Bringing things back full circle: we can see that there is at least one straightforward way of resisting the following idea, which looked to be an important one in the relativist's strategy of reasoning from deeply contested disagreements (in politics and elsewhere), through a

circularity premise, to relativism: and this was, in short, the idea that circular justifications are all epistemically on a par with one another.

Of course, in a heated political debate (e.g., Trump/Brexit), it remains that the matter of which side's circular reasoning – viz., reasoning that will be circular in so far as each side is justifying its ways of forming political beliefs by using those very ways of forming them – is on a better footing than the other *will not be apparent* to both parties to the political dispute. What is the significance, if any, of this fact?

One notable answer to this question is defend by Paul Boghossian (2001). Boghossian, like Sosa, thinks that some of our most basic ways of forming beliefs in any domain of inquiry are such that we *inescapably* will need to appeal to them in the course of any viable attempt to justify them. In Boghossian's case, he gives the example of the basic inference rule *modus ponens*. A thinker who antecedently *doubts* modus ponens will of course object if her interlocutor attempts to reason to the conclusion that modus ponens is true in a way that involves taking one or more reasoning steps in accordance with modus ponens. Does this fact (i.e., that one has reasoned at least one step in accordance with modus ponens) bear in any way on the epistemic status of the assessment one makes of modus ponens as an inference rule?

Boghossian thinks the answer is 'no'. If a criterion of epistemic adequacy of a defence of an inference rule is that that defence must not beg the question against anyone who happens (even if they have no good reason to) to call the status of that inference rule in to doubt, then we can never satisfactorily justify any epistemic principle. Any actual or possible inference rule could be objected to. Boghossian accordingly reasons that we should reject the idea that a given way of thinking whose defence involves its own application is *thereby* epistemically defective on account of this.[18]

What the discussion in this section suggests, then, is that an argument for relativism about political matters – if it is to appeal to the prevalence of political disagreement – is going to have to do much more than simply to establish that the kind of justification we're in a position to give in defence of our own political principles, in the face of one who challenges them, will be circular.

4. A different kind of political relativism

In this section, the focus will be on a much more recent strategy of argument which takes (a version of) political relativism to gain support from considerations to do with political disagreements. Rather than to appeal to circularity, the strand of argument we consider in this chapter appeals to language, and in particular, to semantics.

Consider the following political disagreement:

> A: *The U.S. President ought to issue an executive order banning fracking – it's bad for the environment, and plus, we have other renewable sources of energy we should focus on developing, including wind and solar.*
>
> B: *That's not true! The U.S. President ought to encourage fracking, even if it's bad for the environment, because it helps us to not rely so much on foreign energy, which is good economically. Plus, windmills are an eyesore and are overrated.*

It's apparent that A and B are coming from different background perspectives here. (For simplicity, stipulate that A is a Democrat and B is a Republican). That said, let's zero in on one very specific sentence, which A uttered:

(1) "The U.S. President ought to issue an executive order banning fracking."

It looks like B has just denied the proposition (1) expressed when A used it. So either A or B must be wrong, right? The answer is 'yes' if the extension of the prescriptive[19] 'ought' is – as traditional invariantists maintain – invariant across the contexts in which B is denying what A is asserting. But this is a point that *contextualists* about 'ought' deny. Contextualists about 'ought' maintain that the extension of 'ought' in (1) varies with the context in which (1) *is used*, and thus, that (1) can actually express different propositions (and thus have different truth-conditions) in different contexts of use.

For instance, when A uses the sentence (1), the proposition A expresses is something like: *The U.S. President ought$_{Democrat}$ to issue an executive order banning fracking*, where 'ought$_{Democrat}$' means (roughly) 'ought, according to the Democrat worldview that I, the speaker, accept.'[20]

But, according to the kind of contextualism we're envisaging here, when B denies that the U.S. President ought to issue an executive order banning fracking, the proposition B denies is actually a different proposition, viz., *The U.S. President ought_{Republican} to issue an executive order banning fracking,* where 'ought_{Republican}' means (roughly) 'ought, according to the Republican worldview that I, the speaker, accept'.

It looks as though, if the contextualist offers the right way to think about the meaning of 'ought' in our dispute between A and B, then A and B are not *really* disagreeing in the sense that there is not a single proposition that one is asserting and the other is denying. The idea that contextualists 'lose' disagreement is a longstanding challenge for contextualists about a range of phenomena, and it's beyond what we can do here to evaluate whether and to what extent this turns out to be a genuine problem for the view.[21]

More to the point: is *this* relativism? That is: is embracing the view that what 'ought' means changes across contexts of use – as the contextualist says it does – sufficient for a kind of political relativism, when what the relevant 'ought'-containing sentence is about is a political matter?

This is a complex question.[22] There is at least one way of answering it according to which the answer is 'no'. This is the answer given by John MacFarlane (2014), one of the leading contemporary exponents of what is sometimes called a 'relativist semantics' or a 'truth-relativist semantics' for various expressions, including 'ought.'[23] As MacFarlane sees it, a contextualist about 'ought' is not a relativist about 'ought' because the contextualist holds that the propositions expressed by ought-ascribing sentences have the truth-values they have *absolutely*. MacFarlane's brand of relativism denies *this.*

In order to appreciate the difference between contextualism about 'ought' and relativism about 'ought', as MacFarlane is framing the issue respect to absolute truth, it's important to distinguish between the *context of use* and the *context of assessment* as follows:

> *Context of use*: a possible situation in which a sentence might be used and where the agent of the context is the user of the sentence.

> *Context of assessment*: a possible situation in which a use of a sentence might be assessed, where the agent of the context is the assessor of the use of a sentence (2014, p. 60)

Whereas relativising ought-ascribing sentence truth to merely a context of use is *compatible* with the proposition expressed by the sentence having an absolute truth value, relativising an ought-ascribing sentence truth to a context of *assessment* is not.[24]

On MacFarlane's view, truth-relativism of the philosophically interesting sort with respect to 'ought' holds that when A utters the sentence "The U.S. President ought to issue an executive order banning fracking," the truth of what A says depends in part on a context of *assessment*, which means that the proposition expressed by that sentence (alternatively: that utterance token) gets a truth value only once the standard of the *assessor* is specified.[25] What this means is that when A says "The U.S. President ought to issue an executive order banning fracking," this can be *at the same time*, both (i) true relative to a context of assessment in which another Democrat is evaluating A's claim, yet (ii) false relative to a context of assessment in which A's Republican interlocutor, B, is assessing the claim.

Since the very same use of an ought-ascribing sentence (with political content in its scope), such as (1), can be assessed from an *indefinite* number of perspectives, there are only perspective-relative answers to the question whether what A says when A says (1) is true. In this respect, for the MacFarlane-style relativist, A's utterance of (1) does not get its truth value absolutely, but only relatively.

This clearly looks like a form of 'political relativism'. Whether the view is right, however, is something that would depend on whether a relativist semantics for 'ought' does better than the competitors, which include not only traditional invariantism and contextualism, but also interest-relative invariantism, expressivism, and other semantic treatments of 'ought.'[26] And indeed, if it *does*, then this would appear to tell us something interesting about the correctness of our political discourse. Perhaps, among other things, an implication of 'political relativism', derived from semantic motivations, is that there will be a less clear basis for excluding certain political perspectives on the basis of their endorsing false normative claims. However, one may

of course embrace a relativist semantics for political 'ought' claims without taking any further (non-semantic) stances about political practice.

It's well beyond our present scope to adjudicate whether a MacFarlane-style semantics for political 'oughts' is viable. For our purposes it's worth – with reference to the above brand of political relativism – drawing attention to two key points. The first has to do with disagreement, and the second has to do with arguments for and against political relativism generally.

First, regarding disagreement. If the relativist about 'ought' is right about the extension of 'ought', and thus, about the truth-conditions of ought-attributing sentences, then disagreements of the sort we find between A and B about (1) turn out to be *faultless*.[27] This kind of diagnosis of our example case is interestingly distinct from the diagnosis the traditional invariantist as well as the contextualist offers. The traditional invariantist's assessment of the disagreement between A and B about (1) is that the disagreement is genuine in the sense that A's use of (1) expresses a proposition that A affirms and B denies; secondly, the traditional invariantist is committed to the view that at least one party to the dispute has made a mistake; they can't both be right. The contextualist generates the opposite result: whereas, if contextualism is true, there is no mistake being made by either side, there is also no genuine agreement, given that the proposition A affirms is different from the proposition B denies.

The relativist's assessment combines – in a way that MacFarlane thinks is optimal[28] – the 'disagreement' aspect of the invariantist's diagnosis with the 'no-mistakes' aspect of the contextualist's diagnosis. Because the truth conditions of the proposition A expresses when using (1) is assessment-sensitive, it is true when assessed by A, false when assessed by B. Both are right, and yet, they *do* disagree – albeit, about a proposition with assessment-sensitive truth conditions. An appreciation of this 'combinatory result' (viz., disagreement + no-mistakes) gives us a perspective from which to see how a MacFarlane-style relativist semantics about 'ought', one widely applicable to normative political disagreements, has ramifications for the very *status* of those disagreements.

Regarding the second point concerning political relativism generally. It's important to notice that the kind of philosophical motivations that underpin the circularity-based argument from

political disagreements to political relativism (Sections 2 and 3) are *entirely distinct* from the kinds of philosophical motivations – mostly linguistic – driving the species of political relativism discussed in this section, one that involves a truth-relativist semantics for 'oughts' whose scope include political claims. What this means is that arguments *against* one of these species of political relativism do not, at the same time, count as arguments against the other. The matter of which form of political relativism is more viable remains contested and is a question for ongoing research across several subdisciplines of philosophy, including epistemology, ethics, political philosophy and the philosophy of language.

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NOTES

[1] For discussion of eras of greater political consensus in previous decades of Western politics, with a focal point being the U.S. Congress, see for example Adler & Wilkerson (2013) and Maass (1983). See, however, Campbell (2018) for a defence of the view that U.S. polarization in politics goes back at least to the 1960s civil rights movement.

[2] See Schaeffer (2020).

[3] See also Green (this volume) for a discussion of epistemic circularity in justifying norms of truthfulness in politics.

[4] This might involve explicitly stating these principles and reasoning from them in order to justify them – what is called *premise circularity* (Psillos 1999). Or, more subtly, it might involve reasoning in accordance with contested rules or norms without explicitly endorsing them, viz., *rule circularity.* For a helpful discussion of rule circularity in reasoning, see Boghossian (2001).

[5] It is worth noting that a potential explanation for some of these epistemic commitments is a difference in fundamental non-epistemic commitments. Even more, on some views, apparent deep epistemic disagreements are better understood as disagreements in fundamental moral values. For the present purposes and space, I will be focusing on cases where the epistemic divergence is assumed to be genuine. Thanks to Michael Hannon for discussion on this point.

[6] For a discussion of Archimedean principles in the context of deep disagreements, see Carter (2016, Ch. 4), (2018). Cf., Baghramian & Carter (2015).

[7] For alternative arguments for relativism that use the Galileo/Bellarmine dispute as a reference point, see Kusch (2019) and MacFarlane (2008).

[8] For neatness with the analogy with Boghossian's diagnosis of Bellarmine versus Galileo, I'm using 'we' inclusively to refer to those who adopt an anti-Trump/anti-Brexit stance. But nothing hangs on this. If the reader is a either a Trump or a Brexit supporter, simply swap out the 'anti' qualifiers.

[9] For an alternative empirical explanation of polarization in group deliberative settings, framed in terms of an abundance of persuasive arguments, see Burnstein & Vinokur (1977). For critical reviews of this literature, see Isenberg (1986) and Carter & Broncano-Berrocal (forthcoming, Ch. 1).

[10] For criticisms of this line of argument, see Carter (2016, Ch. 3) and Seidel (2013).

[11] (Descartes, 1641/1975, p. 24).

[12] As Sosa (1997) discusses in some detail, the kind of epistemic circularity Descartes engages in in the third paragraph of the Second Meditation is distinct from the wider form of circularity often described as the 'Cartesian Circle', which involves an appeal to God as a guarantor. Sosa accordingly refers to this circle in the Second Meditation as a 'smaller circle' (1997, p. 415).

[13] Note that a slightly amended and expanded presentation of the arguments from this paper appears as a chapter, with the same title, in Sosa's later (2009) book on reflective knowledge and circularity, the second of the two books on virtue epistemology that arose from his 2005 John Locke Lectures 'A Virtue Epistemology'.

[14] For an extended discussion of this question, from the perspective of virtue epistemology, see Sosa (2009).

[15] For a detailed assessment of Sosa's reasoning here, and how it is in tension in important ways with the thinking of Barry Stroud (1989, 2004) on these issues, see Carter (2020).

[16] Epistemic externalism, minimally, involves the denial of *epistemic internalism*, the view that what makes a belief epistemically justified is something a justified believer has reflective access to (or: supervenes on the subject's internal mental states). For general discussions of epistemic externalism in epistemology, see, e.g., Alston (1986); BonJour, (2002); BonJour & Sosa (2003); Carter et al. (2014); Goldberg (2007); Pappas (2005).

[17] Sosa opts for a *virtue reliabilist* externalism (e.g., Sosa 1991; 2007), however, the argument considered here does not turn on this fact and is available to a process reliabilist externalist (e.g., Goldman 1999) more generally.

[18] Of course, Boghossian's point also applies, mutatis mutandis, to those who would attempt to reason from rule circularity to scepticism rather than relativism. For discussion, see Carter (2016, Ch. 5)

[19] Prescriptive 'oughts' of the kind that are principally of interest in moral and political philosophy (and the sort that will be the focus here) differ importantly from *predictive* 'oughts'—viz., the bank ought to be open by now. For discussion, see Von Wright (1986).

[20] Note that this is just a toy version of contextualism about 'ought'. Different contextualists can fill in the relevant parameter that is fixed by the context of use in different ways. For example, rather than to use individual worldviews, one could use local cultures. Such a position would be a form of cultural contextualism.

[21] See DeRose (2009) for some general strategies to responding to this objection from the perspective of contextualism. See also McKenna (2015).

[22] For discussion, see Carter (2016, Ch. 7). Cf., Boghossian (2006b) and Harman (1975).

[23] This kind of position, alternatively, is referred to as 'New Relativism' (Baghramian & Carter, 2015, Sec. 5) and sometimes as 'New Age Relativism' (Wright 2007). For an overview of this view across a range of areas of discourse, see Baghramian & Carter (2015, p. Sec. 5) and Baghramian and Coliva (2019).

[24] For a related discussion about the distinction between contextualism and relativism, see Carter (2017, pp. 294-5).

[25] What I am describing here is the basic template structure of MacFarlane's proposal, on which 'ought'-ascriptions are modeled as assessment-sensitive as opposed to merely use-sensitive. There are also some further substantive elements of MacFarlane's view (including to do with how the view is meant to reconcile subjective and objective uses of 'ought') which I'm not discussing here, as these points are independent of the key structural feature of his proposal which distinguishes it as a relativist (as opposed to, e.g., a contextualist) proposal.

[26] For a discussion of various competitors to relativism in semantics, see Baghramian & Carter (2015, Sec. 5).

[27] For discussion, see Kölbel (2004), MacFarlane (2007), and Baghramian & Carter (2015, Sec. 5)

[28] On MacFarlane's view, this combination best accords with our patterns of 'ought' attributions than the combinations implied by invariantism and contextualism.