

## Relativist Stances, Virtues and Vices

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*Abstract.* This paper comments on Maria Baghramian's 'The Virtues of Relativism'. We agree that some relativist positions are naturally couched as 'stances' and that it is fruitful to connect relativism to virtue epistemology. But I find Baghramian's preferred rendering of relativism uncharitable.

### I

*Introduction.* Maria Baghramian's paper, 'The Virtues of Relativism', contains a wealth of original observations and arguments. I will only be able to offer a few marginalia in response.

### II

*Debates and Wars.* There are many debates over relativism. Some of them – for instance the controversy over 'new-age' semantic relativism – are conducted like most other philosophical disputes: scholarly, esoterically, and respectfully. Other debates surrounding relativism are different: they are 'wars'. It is customary to speak of 'wars' either when intellectual exchanges become acrimonious ('science wars') or when one launches an intellectual campaign ('war on cancer'). I submit that some discussions of relativism have the feel of 'relativism wars' or 'wars on relativism' (e.g. Boghossian 2006; Williamson 2015).

The relativism wars share the following features. First, they primarily concern forms of ontological or epistemic relativism. Second, contributors aim to reach a wider audience in academia and beyond. Third, the disputes are strikingly one-sided in that the critics of relativism vastly outnumber its proponents. Relativism is 'refuted' over and over again, but only rarely defended. Fourth, the critics regularly link relativism to various social and political ills, for instance, to climate-change scepticism or Holocaust denials, to 'post-truth politics' or the 'Taliban'. Relativists are portrayed as opening the floodgates to irrationality, while the critics fashion themselves as noble fighters for decency and reason. Fifth and finally, the relativistic positions under attack in these campaigns are not carefully distilled from a large corpus of philosophical writings; more typically, the critics construct *what relativists had better be saying if they are to make any sense at all*. This dismissive and patronizing attitude is helped by the fact that the alleged or card-carrying relativists either are not philosophers (e.g. David Bloor, Stanley Fish, or Barbara Herrnstein

Smith) or outwith the Anglophone philosophical mainstream (e.g. Lorraine Code, Jacques Derrida, Paul Feyerabend, Michel Foucault, Bruno Latour, Francois Lyotard, or Richard Rorty).

I find the relativism wars and the war on relativism deeply problematic. Whenever they take for granted that reason is exclusively on their side, and that they need to reach the public, academics are prone to allow themselves dubious intellectual shortcuts. They feel entitled to dispense with detailed and charitable reconstructions of their opponents' positions and arguments; justified in giving more weight to moral signalling than to meticulous scholarship; and obliged to ignore their own allies' sloppy interpretations and poor reasoning. Applied to relativism: the urgency of the political goals of confronting and defeating climate-change scepticism and Holocaust denials is no excuse for suspending established canons of careful reading and arguing. Quick and dirty reflections directed at relativistic scarecrows do little to undermine politically unsavoury opponents. On the contrary, such reflections lower intellectual standards and enable the prophets of post-truth to dismiss philosophical reasoning as superficial propaganda.

It is to Baghramian's credit that in her writings on relativism she has generally kept off the war-on-relativism band-wagon. Although critical of almost all versions of relativism, Baghramian has done her best to do justice to relativist positions by focusing on their apparent strengths as much as on their weaknesses.

### III

*Equal Validity.* I shall now turn to the central issue on which Baghramian and I differ. Proponents and opponents of epistemic relativism tend to agree that the following five conditions have to be met for a position to qualify as relativistic:

- (1) **DEPENDENCE:** Judgements attributing an epistemic status to a person or belief (= 'E-judgements') are relative to epistemic standards. Sets of such standards form epistemic frameworks.
- (2) **NON-ABSOLUTISM:** None of these standards or frameworks is absolutely correct.<sup>1</sup>
- (3) **PLURALITY:** There is (or has been, or could be) more than one such framework.
- (4) **CONFLICT:** E-judgements of different epistemic frameworks can conflict.
- (5) **NON-NEUTRALITY:** When E-judgements (licensed by different standards of different frameworks) conflict, there are – at least in some important cases – no framework-independent, neutral ways of adjudication.

While this much is generally agreed, many friends and foes of relativism do, however, disagree over a sixth condition:

- (6) **EQUAL VALIDITY:** The different epistemic frameworks (their standards and the judgements they license) are all equally valid.

Almost all card-carrying epistemic relativists deny being committed to EQUAL VALIDITY. And yet, anti-relativists invariably regard EQUAL VALIDITY as the very heart of relativism. Baghramian is a case in point<sup>2</sup>, writing for instance that:

... the relativist is committed to ... the 'equal validity' thesis – the claim that there can be more than one equally correct or true, but mutually incompatible, judgement on a given topic ... (p. 2)

The relativist ... gives equal credence to the truth (rational acceptability, justificatory standards) of differing positions and beliefs ... (p. 9)

In Baghramian's case this is all the more surprising since she also notes in passing (p. 7) that three paradigmatic card-carrying relativists – the sociologist of knowledge David Bloor, the feminist epistemologist Lorraine Code, and the epistemological anarchist Paul Feyerabend – deny any commitment to EQUAL VALIDITY. In the case of Bloor, Baghramian quotes his denial herself (Bloor 2011, p. 452):

Bloor ... objects to Boghossian's characterization of his brand of relativism as an equal validity, rather he thinks that the relativists of the Edinburgh School treat all theses with equal curiosity. (p. 7)

Note that this has been Bloor's position since 1982:

Our ... postulate ... is not that all beliefs are equally true or equally false, but that ... all beliefs without exception call[...] for empirical investigation and must be accounted for by finding the specific, local causes of [their] credibility (Barnes and Bloor 1982, p. 23).

Bloor even ridicules the idea that relativism is committed to EQUAL VALIDITY. He does so while praising the alethic relativism of the physicist-philosopher Philipp Frank, of Vienna-Circle fame. Reflecting on Frank's 1952-book *Wahrheit: Relativ oder Absolut?*, Bloor poses this question about EQUAL VALIDITY:

What is 'equal validity'? According to this idea, the physics of Aristotle would, presumably, have 'equal validity' with the physics of Einstein. Now recall the theoretical physicist Philipp Frank. Ask yourself: Would the scientist and relativist who took over Einstein's chair really believe such a thing? (2011, p. 452)

In her paper 'Must a Feminist Be a Relativist After All?' (1995), Code takes issue with Sandra Harding's suggestion that, for the relativist, 'no reasonable standards can or could in principle [...] adjudicate between one culture's claim that the earth is flat and another culture's claim that the earth is round' (Harding 1991, p. 139; Code 1995, p. 202). Code rejects this suggestion with reference to Ivan Karamazov's 'If god does not exist, everything is permitted'. Code points out that we today no longer draw this conclusion. And she suggests that we are able to do likewise concerning

our standards: from the fact that there are no absolute standards, it does not follow that there are no standards at all (1995, p. 203).

In Feyerabend's case, the picture is more complex. In *Against Method* he regards as sceptical rather than anarchist-relativist the idea that 'every view [is] equally good, or [is] equally bad' (1975, p. 189). And he happily acknowledges that '[we] can say today that Galileo was on the right track ...' (1975, p. 6) Such judgements are not absolute of course, but relative to our epistemic practice. So far from committing to EQUAL VALIDITY, *Against Method* is willing to accept only the following equality: to make progress, every system of thought sometimes needs 'irrational means such as propaganda, emotion, ad-hoc hypotheses, and appeal to prejudices of all kinds' (1975, p. 154).

In later writings, Feyerabend distinguishes between forms of relativism he rejects, and forms of relativism he accepts. Interestingly enough, only the rejected forms involve EQUAL VALIDITY. Thus in *Science in a Free Society* (1978) Feyerabend distinguishes his own 'political relativism', that treats all cultures as politically equal, from so-called 'philosophical relativism, that is, the thesis that all traditions [and] theories ... are equally true or equally false ...' (1978, pp. 82-84) *Conquest of Abundance* rails against versions of relativism that treat cultures as 'equally truthful messengers of reality' or as 'equally successful' (1999, p. 122). Against all such views Feyerabend insists that 'not all approaches to 'reality' are successful' and that the success of cultures is 'a matter of empirical record, not of philosophical definitions' (1999, p. 215). The 'new' relativism of *Conquest of Abundance* is primarily ontological. Its core is the idea that 'Ultimate Reality ... is ineffable' and that the theoretical posits of religion and science – be they elementary particles, be they Gods – are so many attempts to cope in one's natural and social environment (1999, p. 145). But there is no suggestion here that all these theoretical posits are equally valid.

What shall we do in light of this textual evidence? Shall we say that Bloor, Code and Feyerabend are not relativists after all, on the grounds that they reject EQUAL VALIDITY? That would be a problematic move. After all, these three authors are amongst our central exemplars for relativism. Not to forget that other key card-carrying relativists across the humanities – from Barbara Herrnstein Smith (2018: p. 26) all the way to Hartry Field (2009: pp. 255-6) – also go to great lengths to distance their position from EQUAL VALIDITY. Note also that Christopher Herbert, the author of an extended study of 'Victorian Relativity', concludes a lengthy discussion of the issue with the remark: 'Nowhere does any "relativist", to my knowledge, assert that all views are equally valid ...' (Herbert 2001, loc. 440).

Of course, if we want to break the link between relativism and EQUAL VALIDITY, we need to first understand why this link can seem natural. I submit the absolutists' underlying thought is as follows. The relativist says that all E-judgements are relative to epistemic frameworks. Assume that two such E-judgments,  $J_1$  and  $J_2$ , based on two different epistemic frameworks,  $F_1$  and  $F_2$  respectively, contradict one another. The relativist endorses the following claim (\*) concerning such situation:

(\*)  $J_1$  and  $J_2$  can, at best, be 'relatively right,' that is, right relative to their respective frameworks,  $F_1$  and  $F_2$ .  $F_1$  and  $F_2$  in turn can also only be 'relatively

right': there is no way to evaluate them other than by using  $F_1$  and  $F_2$ , or same other framework; and none of these frameworks is absolutely correct.

Some absolutists think that to call  $J_1$ ,  $J_2$ ,  $F_1$  and  $F_2$  merely 'relatively right' is in fact to maintain that they are not right at all. And this makes it natural to claim that  $J_1$ ,  $J_2$ ,  $F_1$  and  $F_2$  are equally valid: they are equally valid in not being valid. From the absolutist's perspective this reading of the relativist's position makes sense. But it does beg the argument against the relativist: for the relativist, the denial of absolute correctness is no denial of correctness per se.

Other absolutists reason differently. They focus on the fact that relativists see the structure of justification of  $J_1$  and  $J_2$  as parallel:  $J_1$  is justified in light of  $F_1$ , and  $J_2$  is justified in light of  $F_2$ . Likewise for  $F_1$  and  $F_2$ : both can be justified internally,  $F_1$  from within  $F_1$ ,  $F_2$  from within  $F_2$ , in parallel ways, say, by considerations of coherence, or based on intuition. As the absolutists see it, if the relativists take the structure of justification to be parallel in this way, then the relativists must also think of  $J_1$  and  $J_2$  on the one hand, and  $F_1$  and  $F_2$  on the other hand, as equally valid. Still, the relativist will demur here too: claims concerning the equal validity of epistemic frameworks presuppose a perspective beyond epistemic frameworks. But this is precisely the sort of perspective the relativist denies. All assessments of epistemic frameworks are framework-bound. And whether or not two epistemic frameworks are regarded as equally valid depends upon the standards of the evaluating framework.

Absolutists will not be satisfied with this answer. They will pose a further question: What can the relativist say about a situation in which her own epistemic framework, say  $F_1$ , embodies epistemic relativism? Is the relativist not forced to accept  $F_2$  as equally valid? No. The relativist is committed to denying that her own – or indeed any other – framework is absolutely valid. But again, to insist that 'not absolutely valid' implies 'equally valid' just begs the question.

#### IV

*Dogmas and Stances.* In *The Empirical Stance* (2002), Bas van Fraassen suggests that at least some philosophical positions are primarily not 'doctrines' but 'stances', that is, bundles or systems of values, emotions, policies and preferences. This is not to deny that doctrines or beliefs can also be part and parcel of stances. And yet, within a stance, beliefs take second seat, and can be replaced without changing the commitments to values, emotions, policies and preferences. van Fraassen claims that empiricism and materialism are best understood as stances in this sense.

In two forthcoming book chapters (Kusch 2019a; 2019b) I have argued – without knowledge of Baghramian's paper – that at least some forms of relativism are best rendered as stances. My cases in point are Bloor's 'Sociology of Scientific Knowledge' and Feyerabend's 'epistemological anarchism'. I shall not repeat these interpretations here. I mention them only in order to underline the depth of my agreement with Baghramian's main thesis. Still, in the spirit of fostering debate over the strengths and weaknesses of our proposals, I shall highlight three quibbles concerning Baghramian's take.

First, I think there is reason to prefer van Fraassen's distinction between 'doctrine' and 'stance' over Baghramian's opposition between the 'problems-of-philosophy approach' and the 'philosophy-of-life approach'. On the problems-of-philosophy approach, philosophy is 'seen as the study of the most abstract and fundamental questions'; on the philosophy-of-life approach 'the role of philosophy is to provide a framework and set of tools for thinking and living better' (p. 3). This foregrounds a difference between fundamental and abstract questions on the one hand, and policies for research and living on the other hand. This makes it sound as if the former approach were concerned with deep and the latter with superficial issues. I am also unhappy with the very term 'philosophy-of-life approach'. At least the German term 'Lebensphilosophie' is historically tainted because of its close association with forms of irrationalism, biologism and racism in late nineteenth-and-early-twentieth century German-speaking philosophy, including the Nazi period. Of course, a good many philosophers think that relativism is tantamount to irrationalism – but we should not decide this issue by the choice of our terms.

Second, it is worth pointing out that characterizing relativism as a stance has often played a negative role. That is to say, absolutists have often portrayed relativism as a deeply problematic and dangerous 'stance' or 'attitude' towards politics, science, and rational conversation. Simon Blackburn for example, calls relativists 'abusers of their mind and enemies of ours' (2005, p. 139), 'dehumanising' (2005, p. 69), featuring a 'soggy, tolerant, happy-clappy attitude' (2005, p. xvi), 'monster[s]' (2005, p. 68), or advocates of intellectual 'perversions' (2005, p. 137):

The relativist reflection is dehumanising. Its attitude, including its light irony, is the stance of someone above the fray, someone who has seen through the debates and engagements of ordinary participants. But this stance is demeaning and impoverished ... (Blackburn 2007, no page numbers).

Or think of Zac, the muddle-headed relativist of Timothy Williamson's *Tetralogue* (2015) who proclaims: 'Sarah, you're trying to reduce relativism to a formula. It's more like an attitude to life.' (2015, loc. 504-5) The core of this attitude is tolerance. Williamson lets Zac's interlocutors trash this idea; one interlocutor gets to compare Zac's stance to that of a rapist (2015, loc. 1429), another to that of a dishonest car salesman (2015, loc. 2190).

Call this the 'negative use of the stance-idea'. Baghramian and I concur in trying out the opposite path, a 'positive use'. We both choose the largely overlooked option of presenting relativism as a plausible stance of sorts and in a more positive light. But we should not forget that there is a further option in the neighbourhood of our efforts: the option of interpreting absolutism or anti-relativism as stances.<sup>3</sup> Absolutists too can believe that 'the role of philosophy is to provide a framework and set of tools for thinking and living better'. They often put a high value on protecting the sciences and morality from social ills; they frequently commit to the idea of an unlimited undivided community of rational beings; they characteristically are fearful of anything that might seem to undermine the rule of reason; and they often oppose naturalism and empiricism. Right or wrong – first and foremost these are values, emotions, policies and preferences.

My third and final comment on stances concerns not whether relativism or absolutism are stances, but whether taking all philosophical positions to be stances commits one to meta-philosophical relativism. Baghramian takes this to be obvious (p. 5). But it seems to me that it all depends on the degree to which one takes rationality to be internal to stances and variable from one stance to the next.<sup>4</sup> van Fraassen himself ties the stance-idea to his ‘epistemic voluntarism’, a *minimalist but absolutist* conception of what rationality demands: logical consistency and probabilistic coherence. Elsewhere (Kusch 2019a; 2019b) I have urged a more radical version of epistemic voluntarism according to which consistency and coherence too are values that can vary in importance from stance to stance. The resulting position is obviously more radically relativist than van Fraassen’s. Be this as it may, it is worth mentioning that philosophers who have tried out the stance-idea have typically ended up accepting something of a relativistic stand-off between philosophical positions (cf. Chakravartty 2017; Dilthey 1911; Simmel 1900).

## V

*Virtues and Vices.* I now turn to discussing Baghramian’s intriguing comments on the relationship between epistemic relativism on the one hand, and epistemic virtues or vices on the other hand. Baghramian starts from the observation that card-carrying relativists like Bloor, Code, Feyerabend, or Hans Kelsen (1948), frequently make the following two claims: first, that relativism motivates, or even embodies, certain epistemic virtues that everyone – relativist and absolutist – finds desirable; and, second, that absolutism tends to motivate, or even embody, certain epistemic vices that everyone finds undesirable. (pp. 6-10)

On Baghramian’s reading of these paradigmatic relativists, they take absolutism to be an ‘obvious vice’ that is best countered by relativism (p. 7). Relativists’ belief that ‘absolutism is an obvious vice’ is, as Baghramian sees it, underwritten by the idea that ‘political’, ‘religious’ and ‘philosophical absolutisms’ are closely intertwined. Baghramian supports her view with a passage from Kelsen:

[Political absolutism] has in fact the unmistakable tendency to use [philosophical absolutism] as an ideological instrument. ... [Moreover] almost all outstanding representatives of a relativistic philosophy were politically in favour of democracy, whereas followers of philosophical Absolutism, the great metaphysicians, were in favour of political absolutism and against democracy. (Kelsen 1948, pp. 909-911)

Baghramian is not convinced. In her view the philosophical absolutisms of, say, Frege and Hegel are not vicious. She also reminds us that many progressive thinkers (like Chomsky) have been anti-relativists, and that some fascists (like Mussolini) called themselves ‘relativists’ (p. 8).

Relativists might regroup and focus less on the alleged vice of absolutism, and more on specific epistemic virtues. Baghramian notes that Code and Feyerabend in particular present tolerance, open-mindedness and fair-mindedness as virtues that come natural to the relativist. Baghramian sums up the relativist’s train of thought as follows:

What better way to give at least some credence to the ideas and beliefs of other people ... than by accepting them as true or warranted relative to differing but equally legitimate contexts of assessment? (p. 9)

Some relativist authors also claim to be the true champions of ‘intellectual curiosity’ or the true opponents of ‘intellectual rigidity’. Again this is so because ‘the relativist gives equal credence to the truth (rational acceptability, justificatory standards) of differing positions and beliefs’ (p. 9). Arguments in favour of a close link between relativism on the one hand, and ‘intellectual humility and modesty’ on the other hand, take an analogous route. Baghramian even considers the possibility that relativists might claim to be ideally placed to combat testimonial injustice: ‘the relativist stance, in the sense of equal validity, ... will give credence to all testimony’ and thereby hear the voices of the marginalized (p. 11).

Baghramian rejects all of these proposals concerning a natural affinity between epistemic virtues and relativism. Relativism does not lead to open-mindedness since, for the relativist, her own beliefs are true ‘for herself’, and the points of views of others are true for them: ‘to each according her own epistemic stance’ (p. 10). This leaves everyone with their respective truths, and there is no need to ever transcend one’s own stance. To make matters worse, relativists tend to champion ‘incommensurability’; and once incommensurability is accepted, communication between different frameworks becomes impossible. (p. 10-1)

Baghramian suggests a similar argument against a natural fit between humility and relativism. EQUAL VALIDITY means not only that my viewpoint is *no better* than any other; it also means that my viewpoint is *no worse*. It is easy to see that this line of thinking must end up very far from humility. No-one has anything to learn from occupants of other frameworks. And what goes for humility also applies to curiosity (pp. 11).

As if all this was not bad enough, Baghramian goes further by insisting that relativism is prone to encourage epistemic vices. In suggesting that many unresolvable disagreements are faultless, relativists undermine the ability to ‘discriminate between good and bad, right and wrong, better and worse alternatives’ (p. 12). Relativists tend to lack conviction, to be irresolute, and to slide into ‘epistemic insouciance’. The last-mentioned category has been introduced by Quassim Cassam (2018). He defines it as ‘a casual lack of concern about whether one’s beliefs have any basis in reality or are adequately supported by the best available evidence’ (2018: 1). Cassam links this vice to ‘post-truth politics’ and Harry Frankfurt’s little classic *On Bullshit* (2005). The bullshitter ‘is neither on the side of the true nor on the side of the false. ... He does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly’ (Frankfurt 2005: 55-6; Cassam 2018: 4). Needless to say, it is all too easy to find this personality type in our current political world.

## VI

*Replies.* I now turn to some comments. I welcome reflection on the relationship between epistemic relativism and virtue epistemology, and Baghramian deserves credit for having opened up this interesting new testing ground for relativism and its



opponents. I also think it an excellent idea to connect the conception of philosophical positions as stances to the notion of virtues.

Going beyond Baghramian's paper, one might ask whether the clash between two epistemic frameworks is not often best rendered as a confrontation between different sets of epistemic virtues – rather than as a conflict between epistemic norms or beliefs. Consider for instance the standard test-case of relativism-debates, the conflict between Galileo Galilei and Cardinal Bellarmine. Paul Boghossian describes their differences by saying that Bellarmine accepted, while Galileo rejected, an epistemic principle to the effect that Biblical revelation gives us knowledge about the heavens (Boghossian 2006).

The virtue-theoretical alternative would focus instead on the different epistemic virtues and vices Galileo and Bellarmine valued or detested most. It seems plausible to say that for Bellarmine ethical and religious virtues (like faith, hope, and love) interacted closely with epistemic values, and made him give special weight to intellectual humility in astronomical and biblical matters (Broderick 1961). Galileo was also deeply religious but in studying the natural world he put great emphasis on the epistemic virtues of curiosity, freedom from preconceptions, boldness and courage (Blackwell 1991). Of course, Bellarmine and Galileo ultimately also differed in their beliefs about the heavens, but perhaps these differing beliefs were the result of the exercise of conflicting virtues. Or perhaps the two men were stuck in a regress of sorts: they were unable to agree on facts since they disagreed on epistemic virtues; and they were unable to agree on epistemic virtues since they disagreed on the facts.<sup>5</sup>

I am also in Baghramian's camp as concerns the links between philosophical relativism or absolutism on the one hand, and progressive, conservative, or dictatorial regimes on the other hand. It would be an interesting exercise to try to quantify the political allegiances of relativists and absolutists, but in the absence of such a study there is good reason to suspend judgment on this matter.

Turning from areas of agreement to more contentious issues, I struggle to concur with Baghramian's comments on Hegel and Frege. She refers to these two philosophers as evidence for the claim that not all forms of absolutism can easily be characterized as vicious (p. 8). I shall discuss the two men in turn, and begin with Hegel. Needless to say, I will only have space here to make an initial case for further investigation of the issue.

I am a bit at a loss as to what would count as 'vicious' for Baghramian in this context. But the following count as vicious in my book: Hegel sought to legitimize the repressive Prussian monarchy by declaring Prussia to be the most developed state in world history; his conception of world-history naturally lent itself to a justification of colonialism; he declared women to be naturally subordinate to men; and he compared women to plants, governed by feeling, not reason. The fact that Hegel presented these views as part of a philosophical system capturing the absolute no doubt helped in giving them considerable political and intellectual weight (Hegel 1970; 1971; 1991).

As far as Frege is concerned, I shall leave aside his notorious 1924 diary with its extreme right-wing political, misogynist and anti-Semitic views (Gabriel and Kienzler 1996). Truth be told, I find it difficult to connect these views to Frege's work in logic. But this does not let Frege escape scot-free. After all, there are first-rate logicians

who find Frege's logical absolutism deeply problematic. For instance, in his intriguing paper 'Logic and Reasoning' (2008), Johan van Benthem describes Frege's absolutist understanding of logic in this way:

... logical consequence is an eternal relationship between propositions, firmly cleansed from any mud or blood stains, smells, or sounds that human inferences might have ... in some eternal realm where the sun of Pure Reason never sets ... (2008, p. 68)

van Benthem goes on to argue that Fregean logical absolutism stood and stands in the way of logicians addressing a range of important topics that require a close interaction between logic, psychology and the social sciences. For van Benthem, and contrary to Frege, logic is the study of situational reasoning, often involving multi-agent interaction and group phenomena. Interestingly enough, there is a strong pluralism – if not relativism – in van Benthem's position:

My view is that there remains one logic, but not in any particular definition of logical consequence, or any favoured logical system. The unity of logic, like that of other creative disciplines, resides in the mentality of its practitioners, and their modus operandi. (2008, p. 82)

Of course, van Benthem is just one of many influential voices in logic today. But it is noteworthy that logicians disagree over the question whether Frege's absolutism is unproblematic.

Moving on from absolutism in general to epistemic virtues and vices, I am struck that in investigating the links between relativism, virtues and vices, Baghramian restricts her attention only to the most implausible versions of relativism, that is, versions committed to EQUAL VALIDITY and other unsavoury ideas. Moreover, I do not believe that relativism or absolutism can be distinguished in terms of virtues or vices like open-mindedness, tolerance, courage, steadfastness, or insouciance. There are many absolutists who display these virtues and vices, and many absolutists who do not. And the same is true for relativists. Neither absolutism nor relativism has a special claim to these virtues, and neither absolutism nor relativism is guilty of fostering these vices.<sup>6</sup> This is a big claim, and I will be able to offer only scant evidence.

Consider tolerance for example. Surely the absolutist can make it a matter of absolute principle to tolerate other people's views that contradict her own, and she can do so even while taking her own respective beliefs to be absolutely true. Or the absolutist might be a fallibilist or 'gradualist' by assuming that the beliefs of humankind will be absolutely true only in the long run. Even an absolutist skepticism might underwrite tolerance. The absolutist skeptic denies that we can ever discover the absolute truths that are 'there anyway'.

Relativism too can give support to tolerance, and without any appeal to EQUAL VALIDITY. Relativist tolerance might simply be motivated by the thoughts, first, that one's own beliefs are true or justified only relative to a framework of standards, virtues or values, and second, that similar such frameworks – especially those in the sciences – have frequently been overthrown in the past. Honestly facing up to the

existing problems in her own web of beliefs, and system of standards, the relativist might well have good reason to learn from others and even when their webs and systems are incompatible with her own. Not even a commitment to incommensurability need undermine relativist tolerance, at least not if we understand incommensurability with Kuhn, Feyerabend and van Fraassen not as something which makes communication impossible but merely as a phenomenon that makes communication difficult and challenging.

As we saw above, Baghramian goes out of her way to show that relativism undermines rather than supports open-mindedness. Her central premise in so arguing is that, for the relativist, all his views are true-for-him, and all others' views are true-for-them. And yet, if the relativist's views are already true-for-him, he has no reason to pay attention to what others believe. And thus there is no need for the relativist to ever transcend his own framework, there is no need for the relativist to be open-minded. The argument is valid, but the premise is too uncharitable for comfort. Baghramian ties the relativist to an implausible principle of self-vindication:

(SELF-VINDICATION) For every framework, all beliefs held by people using this framework are true relative to this framework.

At one stage she even commits relativism to a relativistic form of infallibilism (p.11):

(INFALLIBILISM) S's believing that p guarantees that p is true for S.

Did any relativist ever hold this view? Perhaps Protagoras did, but I cannot think of anyone doing so in the realm of epistemology ever since. Sensible relativists surely allow that one may be mistaken in one's judgement that a given belief is justified (by one's standards). Sensible relativists leave room for learning and for recognizing that their standards are inconsistent either with each other or with one of their beliefs, preferences or desires. Sensible relativists are thus ready to replace standards, and to incorporate standards or beliefs from other frameworks. Of course, in so doing, the relativist's epistemic actions are guided by (some) of her current standards.

It follows that, just like the absolutist, so also the relativist can be open-minded, and ready to 'transcend her own standpoint', if that means coming to realize – using one's own standpoint – that this standpoint does not work as well as one would like it to work. To make it a matter of definition that relativists cannot do so, is to deny that self-proclaimed relativists like Bloor, Code, Feyerabend or Field really deserve to be called 'relativists'. But again, if these authors do not qualify, who does?

Baghramian's case against relativistic humility and curiosity has the same problematic structure as her discussion of relativistic open-mindedness. Again the relativist is committed to EQUAL VALIDITY and SELF-VINDICATION, and again the conclusion is that the relativist has no reason to pay attention to the views of others.

Baghramian's attempts to show that relativism lacks epistemic virtues all assume that relativism is epistemologically vicious: a fully relativistic viewpoint has to be intolerant, close-minded, and rigid. As if this was not bad enough, Baghramian also ties relativism to other, further epistemic vices such as lack of conviction or epistemic insouciance. One might wonder whether she does not overshoot the target here: after all, she ends up committing the relativist to character-dispositions

that are incompatible. Thus when rejecting the relativists' claim to open-mindedness, she paints them as rigid, close-minded, and inflexible. But later, when reflecting on epistemic vices, she faults relativists for lacking conviction altogether. Perhaps these tensions do not worry Baghramian. Perhaps she can simply respond by saying: 'So much the worse for relativists! They cannot even develop a coherent set of dispositions.'

Baghramian is not alone of course in linking relativism to phenomena of 'post-truth', 'post-fact', or 'truth decay' in contemporary political culture, and especially in the U.S. Her main focus is on 'epistemic insouciance'. Her thought seems to be that since the relativist does not believe in absolute truth, he must end up thinking that 'anything goes'. And the person believing that anything goes naturally concludes that there is little point in finding out how things really are, little point to believe in facts, little point to rationally argue, and little point to relying on scientific experts' testimony. Instead, there is every reason to do and say whatever one feels like, and whatever serves one's short-term political or other interests. In other words, for Baghramian relativism is the *raison d'être* of politicians like Boris Johnson and Donald Trump. Or, as Daniel Dennett puts it in a memorable phrase: relativists should finally own up to the 'evil' they have caused (Cadwalladr 2017).

There is no denying that this analysis has become a familiar trope in much contemporary critique of post-truth politics. But is it true? The key question seems to be how we get from relativism to 'anything goes'. This could be discussed again in terms of EQUAL VALIDITY, but here I want to focus on a different aspect. The shortest route from relativism to 'anything goes' is to add a further element to relativism, namely ARBITRARY CHOICE:

(ARBITRARY CHOICE) Assume an epistemic subject S, information I, known to S, and a belief B that S would like to hold. S is epistemically blameless if S picks such epistemic standards E as make holding B epistemically rational. The choice of E is unconstrained by other epistemic standards.

Paul Boghossian and Crispin Wright see ARBITRARY CHOICE as an essential element in epistemic relativism (Boghossian 2001, pp. 30-1; Wright 2008, p. 388). And if relativists are committed to ARBITRARY CHOICE then it is natural for them to slide into insouciance. If you can make anything come out rational, all efforts to rationalize our beliefs will seem superfluous and silly. One might as well make it all up. All true – but, it seems to me irrelevant to the assessment of, say, the relativistic views of Bloor, Code, Feyerabend, Field (or my own). None of these authors accepts ARBITRARY CHOICE, not even Feyerabend. Feyerabend's slogan 'anything goes' does not say: do whatever you like, it's all justifiable; it says that all principles of scientific rationality have exceptions, such that it is sometimes rationally defensible – in order to achieve scientific progress – to intentionally go against them.

Bloor is not guilty of ARBITRARY CHOICE either, though he defends a principle that, read superficially, looks similar (Barnes and Bloor 1982):

(CONTINGENT CHOICE) Assume an epistemic subject S, and information I, known to S. Which beliefs S will take to be rationally permissible or obligatory will depend upon two interrelated sets of contingencies: the locally, socially and

historically entrenched and available epistemic standards E and the locally operative goals, values and interests of S and others in S's community.

This is not an epistemic principle telling epistemic subjects how to act; it is a descriptive claim and causal hypothesis about how epistemic communities function. It does not give us a licence to rationalize whatever we want to rationalize. It tells us how we reason when trying to convince one another. Reflecting on CONTINGENT CHOICE can help us understand what is wrong about epistemic insouciance: the bullshitter follows the absolutist critics of relativism in conflating contingency with arbitrariness. He thinks that unless there are absolutes and metaphysical necessities, nothing really matters. If there are no absolutes, everything is permitted. It's Karamazov all over again.

What can relativists do to defend our societies against the bullshitters? Should they go back to absolutism? Of course, relativists will answer 'no'. To go back to absolutism in order to defeat bullshitters would itself be to operate on the basis of ARBITRARY CHOICE. And this is not how epistemology functions in most of our philosophical traditions. Epistemology is not the slave of our political aspirations. We cannot pick our epistemic positions so as to defeat Johnson and Trump. This is not how we think about knowledge.

CONTINGENT CHOICE directs our attention elsewhere: we need to bring together and defend anew hard-won, but entrenched standards of virtuous epistemic conduct; we need to remind each other how and why these standards have proven useful in our past; and we need to update these standards in light of our current intellectual challenges. And, most of all, we need to understand the changes in our social fabric: the increasing polarisations (economic, political, ethnic) in our Western societies, the (at least initially) unintended blurring of the divide between opinion and fact in old and new media, or the decline in respect for, and trust in, politicians or the press (Kavanagh and Rich 2018). To defeat the bullshitters we need to dig deeper and deeper into these contingencies, these local and variable structures and values.

## VII

*Conclusion.* In this paper I have tried to comment on central themes of Baghramian's 'The Virtues of Relativism'. I have focused on EQUAL VALIDITY, stances, epistemic virtues and vices. I am only too aware that I have no more than scratched the surface of these complex issues. But I hope to have said enough to motivate further – and perhaps even a little more charitable – reflections on the relativist position.<sup>7</sup>

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#### Footnote

<sup>1</sup> David Bloor and Barry Barnes flesh this out as follows: 'For the relativist there is no sense attached to the idea that some standards or beliefs are really rational as distinct from merely locally accepted as such. ... he thinks that there are no context-free or super-cultural norms of rationality ...' (Barnes and Bloor 1982: 27). Barnes and Bloor's 'really rational' is another expression for my 'absolutely correct.'

<sup>2</sup> As we shall see below, very strong forms of EQUAL VALIDITY play an essential role in Baghramian's argument against the virtues of relativism.

<sup>3</sup> Baghramian's discussion of the virtues of absolutism seem to commit her to this view, even though she never states it explicitly.

<sup>4</sup> Put differently, the absolutist and relativist differ on the question of the extent to which there are neutral modes of assessment of stances. As well shall see later, Baghramian assumes that there are stance-neutral standards of virtue that allow us to adjudicate between the relativist and absolutist stances. The relativist insists that virtues too can only be understood and assessed relative to frameworks or stances.

<sup>5</sup> It is exactly such regress that Baghramian seems to ignore. She assumes that virtues form a neutral background for assessing relativism and absolutism.

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<sup>6</sup> I take this to be a disagreement between Baghramian and me. I take her to align relativism with epistemic vices, and to reject the suggestion that a relativist could do embody epistemic virtues.

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