Constructively engaging with relativism

Markus Seidel: *Epistemic Relativism: A Constructive Critique*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, x + 284 pp, US$105 HB

Howard Sankey*

Traditional epistemology is haunted by the spectre of scepticism. Yet the more pressing concern in the contemporary intellectual scene must surely be relativism rather than scepticism. This has been the case in the history and philosophy of science since the work of Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend, to say nothing of the emergence of the sociology of scientific knowledge.

In *Epistemic Relativism: A Constructive Critique*, Markus Seidel comes firmly to grips with this modern spectre. Though Seidel devotes attention to other forms of relativism, the primary focus of the book is epistemic relativism, which he understands to be relativism about epistemic justification. Relativist or relativist-tending authors such as Kuhn, Nelson Goodman, Martin Kusch, Richard Rorty and Peter Winch receive some discussion (there is no mention of Feyerabend). But Seidel takes as his main relativist target the work of the founding figures of the Edinburgh "strong programme", Barry Barnes and David Bloor. While the aim of the book is to come to grips with epistemic relativism in its full generality, it does so by way of a sustained and detailed engagement with the work of these two authors.

Seidel works with a contrast between epistemic absolutism and epistemic relativism. On the one hand, "the epistemic absolutist holds that there are epistemic norms and epistemic systems that are absolutely correct" (p. 33). On the other hand, the relativist denies this: "all epistemic norms/epistemic systems are correct only relatively to a culture, society etc." (p. 33). The absolutist and relativist agree that it is possible for a belief to be justified on the basis of an epistemic norm. They disagree about whether the justification "can have an absolute status" (p. 41). Seidel agrees with Bloor that there is no in-between position. One is either an absolutist or a relativist. Seidel seeks to defend the absolutist position, though he thinks it is possible to preserve the intuition of epistemic tolerance that inspires the relativist (pp. 192 ff.).

In an earlier exchange, Seidel and I have disagreed with respect to whether the position that contrasts with relativism should be characterized in terms of absolutism.[1] I take the anti-relativist to be concerned to show that there are objectively justified (or warranted) epistemic norms rather than to show that there are absolutely correct epistemic norms. I can attach little significance to the idea of the absolute in this context beyond the denial of the relativistic claim that norms are only justified relative to some culture or other local setting.

* School of Historical and Philosophical Studies, Old Quad, University of Melbourne, Parkville, Victoria, Australia 3010 e-mail: chs@unimelb.edu.au

However, I accept that this may be merely a verbal difference and so I will adopt Seidel's contrast between the relative and the absolute for most of the sequel.

The strong programme notoriously claims that all beliefs, whether true or false, justified or unjustified, are to be explained in the same terms. I am inclined to understand this as a rejection of the idea that some beliefs are to be explained in a rational manner while others are to be explained in a non-rational manner. Understood in this way, the strong programme is a position that opposes rational explanation of belief rather than an epistemic relativist position as such. But Seidel makes a plausible case that the strong programme may be interpreted as an epistemic relativist position. After all, strong programmers deny that there are absolutely correct epistemic standards. Instead of absolute standards, "there are only standards of justification relative to – as Barnes and Bloor claim – the local acceptance of a culture or society" (p. 26).

On Seidel's analysis, there are two main lines of argument for epistemic relativism. The first is a species of the argument from the underdetermination of theory by observation. Given that empirical input from the external world does not determine theory, social factors influence choice of theory so that the factors ultimately determining choice of theory depend upon and vary with cultural context. The second line of argument is one that emerges from the sceptical tradition in epistemology. The attempt to provide an epistemic norm with a justification gives rise to an infinite regress which may only be avoided by circular appeal to the original norm or by acceptance of a norm without justification. Because no epistemic norm or system of norms may be justified, all norms and systems of norms have equivalent epistemic standing.

Seidel provides a long and detailed analysis of the argument from underdetermination. He distinguishes between several different forms that the underdetermination of theory by evidence might take. It might, for example, be transient or permanent, local or global. The relation of underdetermination might be a logical relation or an epistemic one. And it might arise in the actual practice of science or only in principle. At one point in the discussion Seidel remarks that in light of such distinctions it would be possible to construct forty-eight different underdetermination theses (p. 85). Seidel points out that the writings of Barnes and Bloor fail to come to grips with the complexity of the idea of underdetermination. As a result, it is unclear precisely how the idea is to be understood in the context of their claim that underdetermination requires that social factors play a role in theory choice. But while it is unclear precisely how to understand their view of underdetermination, Seidel argues that they are in fact committed to quite a strong reading of the thesis of underdetermination in order to sustain the conclusion that they draw from it. Though it ultimately remains unclear how to interpret their handling of the claim of underdetermination, Seidel shows that their use of the idea turns on a number of problematic epistemological assumptions that have neither been articulated in a clear manner nor adequately defended.

With the second line of argument, the focus of Seidel's analysis shifts away from narrow focus on the strong programme. Though there is some evidence that Barnes and Bloor draw on "the argument from norm-circularity" (pp. 143 ff.), similar patterns of

argument may be found in Kuhn and Wittgenstein. The argument that it is impossible to justify an epistemic norm or a system of epistemic norms without circularity goes back to the problem of the criterion which is associated with the Pyrrhonian sceptics of Greek antiquity. Though it was originally employed for sceptical purposes, it may also be employed to argue for epistemic relativism. For if no epistemic norm is capable of justification due to the circularity of any attempt to justify it, all such norms have the same status. Norms employed by one culture have no greater epistemic status than different norms employed by members of another culture. In criticism of this argument for relativism, Seidel challenges the idea that there are radically different epistemic systems in the first place. Drawing on considerations due to Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes, Seidel points out that there are restrictions on just how far purportedly epistemic norms may vary from our own while being legitimately regarded as epistemic norms at all.

With both lines of argument for relativism found wanting, Seidel concludes that we should reject relativism in favour of absolutism. And yet he allows that "the basic motivation and intuition behind epistemic relativism is correct and justified" (p. 192). At first blush, it may seem surprising to find one who rejects relativism in favour of absolutism allowing that the relativist view rests on a correct intuition. But Seidel's point is that the intuition behind relativism reflects an entirely sound attitude of epistemic tolerance. There is a sense in which members of different cultures may be perfectly reasonable in their adoption of the epistemic norms that are found in the cultures to which they belong. There is nothing blameworthy about using the norms that happen to be employed in one's own culture. To say that there is an absolutely correct epistemic system does not imply that those who work with different epistemic systems may not be reasonable in doing so.

In attempting to accommodate the relativist's intuition, Seidel makes an intriguing suggestion. There is a sense in which members of a culture who employ an absolutely incorrect epistemic norm may nevertheless be absolutely justified in doing so. This is because the use of such norms is justified on the basis of testimony. In adopting an epistemic norm employed in one's culture, the epistemic justification that one has for adopting the norm is due to the testimony of other members of the culture about the correctness of the norm. Since testimonial evidence is able to provide absolute justification, one may be absolutely justified in using an epistemic norm which may itself be absolutely incorrect. The basic idea is that the sense in which one might be epistemically blameless for adopting the norms that one finds being used in one's culture is the sense in which an epistemic subject may have justification by way of the testimony of others. In this way, Seidel draws on the resources of contemporary social epistemology in attempting to show what is right about relativism while rejecting it in favour of absolutism.

While this is an intriguing suggestion, Seidel may have gone too far in attempting to accommodate the relativistic intuition. He is no doubt correct to suggest that the explanation of why members of a culture are justified in adopting the norms of their culture may involve testimonial justification. But in allowing that the adoption of such norms may be absolutely justified even though the norms are absolutely incorrect, Seidel seems to me to go too far down the path of relativism. There is a sense in which the justificatory status of an epistemic

norm is more fundamental than the testimonial justification one has for the adoption of the norms of one's culture. To defeat the relativist, one must be able to say that there is a sense in which the justification involved in the use of such a norm is defective even though a person may be blameless in the adoption of the norm.

In my earlier exchange with Seidel, I introduced a distinction between weak and strong justification. Weak justification is justification of a belief on the basis of a given epistemic norm, whether or not the epistemic norm is itself justified. Strong justification is justification of a belief on the basis of a given epistemic norm, where the epistemic norm is itself justified. This distinction allows one to say that an epistemic subject may be weakly justified in holding beliefs licensed by the operative norms of their culture while at the same time denying that the beliefs are strongly justified if they are formed on the basis of unreliable epistemic norms. On my analysis, the epistemic relativist allows that there is weak justification but denies that there is strong justification. The advantage of the approach that I propose is that we may grant that there is a sense in which an epistemic subject is justified in holding beliefs on the basis of operative norms, but we may reject the view that all norms are on an epistemic par, since some norms are more reliable than others. My approach might be combined with Seidel's if we were to say that in some cases of weak epistemic justification, the justification involves testimonial justification to the extent that the subject adopts a norm on the basis of the testimony of other members of their culture.

It is important to emphasize that the justification provided by epistemic norms is more fundamental than that provided by way of testimonial justification. (To simplify matters, I ignore the possibility that there may be epistemic norms that govern testimonial justification.) The idea of testimonial justification allows us to make good sense of the way in which a member of a culture may be epistemically blameless in adopting the norms of their surrounding culture. But in order to meet the challenge of the epistemic relativist we must insist on the fundamental role played by epistemic norms in the justification of belief. The point may be expressed by means of an analogy with Alvin Goldman's distinction between conditional and unconditional reliability.[2] Conditionally reliable processes such as reasoning act on input from unconditionally reliable processes such as perception. No matter how reliable the conditionally reliable process, if the input is from a defective source then the output will be unjustified. Similarly, the output of a faulty epistemic norm will be unjustified even if the adoption of the norm from other members of one's culture carries testimonial justification. Even if we wish to allow that the members of a culture are blameless in the adoption of the norms of their culture, in order to defeat the relativist we must be able to deny that all epistemic norms are on a par. To do this, we must be able to say that the epistemic norms of one culture are objectively better than the epistemic norms of another. And to do this, we must be able to say that the norms of epistemic justification provide a more fundamental level of justification than does the testimony involved in the adoption of epistemic norms from one's fellows.

In the foregoing remarks, I have raised a concern that I have with Seidel's attempt to accommodate what he takes to be the correct intuition that lies behind epistemic relativism. But this concern should not be taken to imply any broader concerns with the level of

scholarship or philosophical argumentation found in the book. Seidel has left no stone unturned in his attempt to get to the bottom of the epistemic relativism of the strong programme. Though parts of the book are narrowly focussed on the strong programme, he manages to extend the scope of the discussion to cover other positions in the epistemic relativist landscape. The book is not an easy read. It can be heavy going. But it is for the most part clearly written and carefully argued. It is a sound contribution to the contemporary discussion of epistemic relativism which will have a lasting impact. Though not pitched at an introductory level, it would be a good way into the literature for an intermediate undergraduate or commencing graduate student. A more advanced readership will find much to ponder.

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[1] See my paper, 'How the epistemic relativist may use the sceptic's strategy: A reply to Markus Seidel', *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science A* 44:1 (2013), 140-144.

[2] See Alvin I. Goldman, 'What is Justified Belief?' in his *Liaisons: Philosophy Meets the Cognitive and Social Sciences* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), p. 117.