

Overarching aim: Global relativism is much more difficult to refute than is generally appreciated. After showing why extant attempts to pin a self-refutation charge on the global relativist miss the mark, I develop a new kind of argument – one that draws inspiration from Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty* – which holds up in ways that well-known and received arguments against the global relativist do not.

1. Notorious interlocutors

Both *global scepticism* and *global relativism* have implications for the *status* of the very kinds of claims we’d be inclined to appeal to in order to argue against them. (Compare: just as the sceptic may deny that you know your premises, the relativist may claim that your premises are false *for them*, even if they are true for you). And this fact makes *both* positions hard to non-question-beggingly refute.

2. ‘Refuting’ Global Scepticism

Consider first scepticism, and Moore’s attempt to refute it: “Moore doesn’t know his premise!” (Fara 2008); “Won’t convince a sceptic!” (Pryor 2004); “Doesn’t transmit warrant” (Wright 2007). Furthermore, as Sosa (2009) has argued, there is something question-begging about the *general* strategy Moore uses – *indirect realism* – of which his proof is an instance: the strategy of attempting to vindicate external world perceptual knowledge as based on inference from information about our experiences.

3. ‘Refuting’ The Global Relativist: ‘Knock-Downs’

Question: *Is it equally hard to non-question-beggingly refute the global relativist, as it is the sceptic?* Oddly, on this point folks seem to think it is easy! Consider some purported ‘knock-downs’, beginning with Sextus Empiricus.

(a) *Sextus’s knock down:* Sextus thought the Protagorean measure doctrine – viz., that ‘man is the measure or all things’ – boiled down to the radical subjectivist thesis that every *appearance* whatsoever is true (*simpliciter*) – a thesis that can, itself, *appear* false (a self-refutation, Sextus thought). Problem: the view is rather that every judgment is true *for* (in relation to) the person whose judgment it is.¹

(b) *Nagel’s knock-down:* Either the global relativist intends his own view to be absolutely true, or he intends it to be only relatively true, true relative to some theory or other. If the former, he refutes himself, for he would then have admitted at least one absolute truth. If the latter, then his own position is in some way ‘compromised’. *Compromised how?* Some common answers: (i) Gives you no reason to accept it! (ii) Putnam: ‘At this point our grasp on what the position even means begins to wobble’. (iii) Nagel: for then it is just a ‘report of what the relativist finds it agreeable to say. (iv) Doesn’t challenge the absolutist.

First problem: analogy with *pragmatic refutation of scepticism*. (Compare: if scepticism is true, there would be no point to assert anything! If scepticism were true, we’d always be violating epistemic norms! We couldn’t know it to be true, etc., it would be *hard* to satisfy the sceptic’s demands (D. Greco 2012.)

Second problem: the second horn of Nagel’s knock-down is a very similar position, against the relativist, as Moore’s Proof is, positioned against the sceptic. Compare: “A thinker who doubts global scepticism is false (e.g., takes seriously the matrix/dreaming scenarios) can’t justifiedly accept the denial of scepticism on the basis of appearances” and “A thinker who doubts global relativism is false (takes Protagoras seriously) can’t justifiedly accept the denial of global relativism on the basis of considerations (i-iv).”

4. ‘Refuting’ The Global Relativist: The *Peritrope*

“... it [The Truth that Protagoras wrote] has this exquisite feature: on the subject of his own view, agreeing that everyone judges what is so, he for his part [Protagoras] presumably concedes to be true the opinion of those who judge the opposite to him in that they think that he is mistaken... Accordingly, he would concede

¹ Cf. Gail Fine’s (1998) infallibilist reading of Protagoras.

that his own view is false, if he agrees that the opinion of those who think him mistaken is true.” (*Theatetus*, 171ab)”

(a) *Superficial gloss of Peritrope*. It looks, initially, like Socrates is charging Protagorean relativism with being what Max Kölbel (2011) calls *dialectically self-refuting*. But this cannot be so straightforward. Protagoras’s doctrine does *not* say that if someone judges that *x*, then *x* is true (full stop). Protagoras would be within his rights to respond to this charge as follows: ‘My doctrine might be false for my opponents, but that doesn’t mean it’s false for me!’

(b) *Burnyeat’s (1976) interpretation of Peritrope as successful*. Measure doctrine: ‘man (sc. each man) is the measure not only of what is (sc. for him), but also of what is not (sc. for him)’ (1976, 178).

- *No Mistakes (NM)*: If *S* believes that *p*, then it is true for *S* that *p*.

- *No Unbelieved Truths (NUT)*: If it is true for *S* that *p*, then *S* believes that *p*.

- *Protagorean Global Relativism (PGR)*: *S* believes that *p* if, and only if, it is true for *S* that *p*.

So (by NM) if Socrates believes that *p*, then it is true for Socrates that *p* and (by NUT) if Socrates does not believe that *p*, then it is not true for Socrates that *p*. Also, Protagoras is committed to acknowledging the contingent fact that Socrates for his part does *not* believe that anything *he* (Socrates) believes is *thereby* true. This, jointly with NUT, commits Protagoras to the following:

- *Interim Conclusion (IC)*: It is not true for Socrates that: if Socrates believes that *p*, then it is true for Socrates that *p*.

Burnyeat: thinks that Socrates getting Protagoras to admit to (IC) ultimately forces him into self-refutation! This point, he thinks, comes to light when we appreciate two things about PGR. First, that it is not merely a synonymy thesis – viz., that to say that ‘*x* is true for *S*’ is really just to say that ‘*S* believes that *x*’.² Rather – and this is the second point – it is a curious kind of *metaphysical claim*.

“Protagoras’s theory is, after all, a theory of truth and a theory of truth must link judgments to something else – the world, as philosophers often put it, though for a relativist, the world has to be relativized to each individual. To speak of how things appear to someone is to describe his state of mind, but to say that things *are for him as they appear* is to point beyond his state of mind to the way things actually are, not indeed in the world tout court (for Protagoras there is no such thing), but in the world as it is for him, in his world”. (*ibid.*, 181, my italics)

Metaphysical commitment of measure doctrine (i.e., the ‘secret doctrine’³): everyone lives in a world in which his mere belief in a proposition is a sufficient and necessary condition for its truth (in that world).

Burnyeat: In embracing IC, Protagoras is by his own lights committed to accepting that in Socrates’ world it is not a sufficient condition for the truth of a proposition that Socrates believes that proposition. And because Socrates also does not believe that ‘If he (Socrates) doesn’t believe something, then it’s not true for him’, Protagoras must grant that, in Socrates’ world, neither is it a necessary condition for the truth of a proposition that Socrates believe that proposition. So... by accepting the measure doctrine *and* (IC), Protagoras must agree that there is at least *someone* who is not a ‘Protagorean measure’ (e.g., there is someone, Socrates, for whom belief in a proposition is neither necessary nor sufficient for the truth of that proposition). But then, the measure doctrine, which implies *everyone* is a Protagorean measure, is false!

(c) *Problem with Burnyeat’s interpretation of Peritrope as successful*: The problem emerges when we zero in on the following question: is Protagoras meant to be articulating *his own measure doctrine* as relatively true, or by contrast, is Protagoras submitting his thesis as one he is purporting to hold for everyone?

Burnyeat: *must be the latter*.⁴ Burnyeat reads Protagoras accordingly as committed to the following

² Cf. Passmore (1970) and Grote (1865). What Burnyeat finds objectionable is the thought that ‘Protagoras [is] saying no more than that in discussing any proposition, the Measure doctrine included, all anyone can do is *express his own conviction*’.

³ For discussion, see Mi-Kyoung Lee (2005, 77).

⁴ According to Burnyeat, whereas ‘It is (absolutely) true that...’ can be iterated over and over, a relativistic prefix such as ‘It is true for Protagoras that...’ admits of only limited reiteration. At some point, though we may not be able to say just where, Protagoras must stop and take a stand.’ Failing to do so, he thinks, will be at the cost of ‘losing grip’ (p. 194) of relative truth.

translation principle: a proposition of the form ‘x is F’ is true (relatively) for person (a), if and only if, ‘x is F for a’ is true (absolutely). This is akin to the *replacement* model (e.g., Boghossian 2006). But, the global relativist could seemingly avoid Burnyeat’s twist on the *Peritrope* by pairing the measure doctrine with some form of ‘new age’ relativism (e.g., John MacFarlane’s (2014) assessment-sensitive (relative) truth-conditions) which rejects the replacement model.

5. A Different Refutation of Global Relativism

(a) Wittgenstein in *OC*: “If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything.” Compare: “If you tried to [sic. relativise] everything you would not get as far as [sic. relativising] anything.”

Let us suppose that Wittgenstein has cottoned on to something correct about the rationality of doubt. If so, then there is very plausibly a parallel kind of Wittgenstenian-style point that can be drawn out in the service of raising a problem for the global relativist who shuns the translation principle (i.e., the replacement model).

(b) *The guiding idea*: the very practice of *relativising* one thing to another requires that some things are not relativised, much as (as Wittgenstein suggests) the very practice wherein rational doubt is possible requires that some things are indeed *not* doubted. If this is right, global relativism is *incoherent* (or: at least as incoherent as attempting to doubt *everything*).

6. An application

Suppose the global relativist of the variety under consideration – call this *unanchored global relativism* – does not take for granted that there are any absolute truths (including about the measure doctrine itself, and facts about what one anyone judges to be so.).

Suppose further Socrates judges something to be false: he asserts ‘X is false’. From unanchored *PGR*, it follows that ‘X is false’ is true for Socrates *because* Socrates believes this.

Question: But what is the status of the claim operating in the background, *that Socrates believes what he purports to believe* e.g., that X is false? From *unanchored PGR*: *whether* Socrates believes that X is false is *itself* true (relatively) for Socrates depends on whether Socrates *believes* it to be so that he believes that X is false.

Observation: Belief does not automatically iterate (cf., Schwitzgebel 2008); it is very possible that Socrates just believes that ‘X is false’ *but does not believe that he believes that X is false*. But then, if he does not, then (by NUT) it’s not true for Socrates *that* Socrates believes that X is false. But if that’s right, then the unanchored global relativist’s original story about Socrates’ belief that ‘X is false’ unravels.

That story was premised upon the suggestion that Socrates’ belief that ‘X is false’ is *true for Socrates because Socrates believes that X is false*. But we’ve just established that by the unanchored global relativist’s own lights, the explanation here (e.g. that Socrates believes that X is false) might (given Socrates’ beliefs about his beliefs) be one that is *false for Socrates, even if* Socrates believes that X is false.

It is hard at this point not to feel the pull of the Wittgenstein-style point alluded to earlier. Just as the process of rational doubt requires that some things are in fact not doubted, it looks very much like a coherent picture on which one thing is relativised to another, requires that some things are not relativised; at the very least, some things – *in particular, facts about that which the object of relativisation is relativised to* – must be taken for granted in such a way that they are not regarded as of the *same degree of relationality* (i.e., arity, Spencer 2014) as the object of relativisation itself.

Otherwise, we end up in incoherence, as in the kind of situation just described, which is no less nonsensical than the corresponding example, in the practice of doubt, where something is submitted as a grounds for doubt which is less certain than that which it is calling into doubt (e.g., Wittgenstein’s case of the blind man).