

International Journal of
Philosophy

(IJP)

**A Ratiocinative Appraisal of Harvey Siegel's Critique of
Epistemological Relativism**



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A Ratiocinative Appraisal of Harvey Siegel’s Critique of Epistemological Relativism

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Abstract

Methodology: This work is expository, analytic, critical and evaluative in its methodology. Admittedly, there are a number of debates that are relevant to questions concerning objectivity in science. One of the oldest, and still one of the most intensely fought, is the debate over epistemic relativism. Epistemic relativism is the position that knowledge is valid only relatively to a specific context, society, culture or individual. The discussion about epistemic relativism is one of the most fundamental discussions in epistemology concerning our understanding of notions such as 'justification' and 'good reason'. All forms of epistemic relativism commit themselves to the view that it is impossible to show in a neutral, non-question-begging, way that one “epistemic system,” that is, one interconnected set of epistemic standards, is epistemically superior to others.

Purpose: In one sense, this work, in defense of Harvey Siegel, takes issue with anti-realist views that eschew objectivity. But, in another sense, it interrogates the epistemic absolutism of Harvey Siegel, showing some of its untoward implications for the furtherance of knowledge, as typified in most ambitious versions of foundationalist or dogmatic epistemology. Minimally, objectivity maintains that an objective gap between what is the case and what we take to be the case, exists. Plato was very clear in his claim that epistemological relativism was self-defeating in two ways. As reformulated by Siegel: First, arguments for relativism are either relativistically or non-relativistically sound. Second, relativism is either relativistically or non-relativistically true. Either choice commits the relativist to major concessions to his or her opponent. In each case, they are dialectically ineffective for the relativist.

Results: One cannot live reasonably as a relativist, because relativism leads to epistemic paralysis. Relativism is rationally indefensible, because it is incoherent. It is incoherent because it can be true only if it is false. Relativism has been, in its various guises, both one of the most popular and most reviled philosophical doctrines of our time. Defenders see it as a harbinger of tolerance and the only ethical and epistemic stance worthy of the open-minded and tolerant. Detractors dismiss it for its alleged incoherence and uncritical intellectual permissiveness.

Unique Contribution to theory, practice and policy: In the midst of different proponents of critical thinking, Harvey Siegel stands out in his attempt to address fundamental epistemological issues. He argues that discursive inclusion of diverse groups should not be confused with rational justification of the outcome of inquiry, and maintains that inclusion, as

an epistemic virtue, is neither necessary nor sufficient for rational judgment, and that in order not to become victims of relativism, certain criteria are needed to distinguish what is indeed rational. Insofar as relativism might be construed, by some scholars, as a gadfly (a gadfly is a person who interferes with the *status quo* of a society or community by posing novel, potentially upsetting questions, usually directed at authorities) against any form of dogmatism, in philosophy, the basic presuppositions of relativism are self-referentially inconsistent.

Keywords: *Appraisal, Critique, Epistemological, Epistemic Relativism, Ratiocinative, Rethinking.*

1.0: INTRODUCTION

Relativism is a family of philosophical views which deny claims to objectivity, within a particular domain and assert that valuations in that domain are relative to the perspective of an observer or the context in which they are assessed.¹ Epistemic relativism is typically defined as the view that there is more than one set of standards of epistemic justification, that there is no way to demonstrate that one's own set of standards is superior to any other set, and that knowledge claims are justified only relative to such sets. Relativism, roughly put, is the view that truth and falsity, right and wrong, standards of reasoning, and procedures of justification are products of differing conventions and frameworks of assessment and that their authority is confined to the context giving rise to them.² More precisely, "relativism" covers views which maintain that, at a high level of abstraction, at least some class of things have the properties they have (e.g., beautiful, morally good, epistemically justified) not *simpliciter*, but only relative to a given framework of assessment (e.g., local cultural norms, individual standards), and correspondingly, that the truth of claims attributing these properties holds only once the relevant framework of assessment is specified or supplied. Debates about relativism permeate the whole spectrum of philosophical sub-disciplines. From ethics to epistemology, science to religion, political theory to ontology, theories of meaning and even logic, philosophy has felt the need to respond to this heady and seemingly subversive idea. And yet, despite a long history of debate going back to Plato and an increasingly large body of writing, it is still difficult to come to an agreed definition of what, at its core, relativism is, and what philosophical import it has. What is it about relativism that justifies, or at least explains, its continued appeal in the face of relentless attacks through the history of philosophy?³

There seems to be an assumption, not always explicitly stated by its proponents, that the relativist stance leads to the cultivation of some key intellectual virtues: open-mindedness, tolerance, intellectual humility, and curiosity. But, whether or not such claims are justifiably true, remains uncertain. Factual relativism (also called epistemic relativism, epistemological relativism, alethic relativism or cognitive relativism) argues that truth itself is relative. This form of relativism has its own particular problem, regardless of whether one is talking about truth being relative to the individual, the position or purpose of the individual, or the conceptual scheme within which the truth was revealed. This problem centers on what Maurice Mandelbaum termed the "self-excepting fallacy."⁴ Largely because of the self-excepting fallacy, few authors in the philosophy of science currently accept alethic cognitive

¹Harold Zellner (1995) "Is Relativism Self-Defeating?" *Journal of Philosophical Research* 20: 287-290.

²Richard Booker Brandt (1984) "Relativism Refuted?" *The Monist* 67 (3): 297-301.

³Inkeri Koskinen (2011) "Seemingly Similar Beliefs: A Case Study on Relativistic Research Practices," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 41 (1):84-110.

⁴Michael Mandelbaum (1962) "The Self-Excepting Fallacy," *Psychologische Beiträge*, 6, 383-6; Reprinted in Michael Mandelbaum (1984) *Philosophy, History, and the Sciences: Selected Critical Essays* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), pp. 60-62.

relativism. Factual relativism is a way to reason where facts used to justify any claims are understood to be relative and subjective to the perspective of those proving or falsifying the proposition.⁵ Relativists characteristically insist, furthermore, that if something is only *relatively* so, then there can be no framework-independent vantage point from which the matter of whether the thing in question is so can be established. Relativism is a multi-faceted topic that ranges over a vast array of areas of human enquiry. It is one of philosophy's oldest, and most polarizing, concepts. It has captivated thinkers since the days of Protagoras (who supported the notion) and Plato (who did not).⁶ Relativism is not mainly an ontological position but it is drawn from Idealism, where the thinking precedes the object and reality is as a result of our constructions and interpretations. This makes reality relative. Relativism is assailed by most religious leaders as leading people away from absolute religious truths, and blamed by social commentators for many of society's ills. 20th-century philosophers grew to dismiss relativism as an obviously mistaken or even self-refuting concept. An example of such a philosopher is Harvey Siegel, who taught that epistemological relativism is highly problematic and should not play a role in an overall account of knowledge. He argues that to the extent that philosophers hold unto epistemological relativism, major revisions are required in their epistemologies. He concludes with an account of how a coherent epistemology can be constructed, that is free from the difficulties of epistemological relativism. But in the past decade, even its staunchest philosophical critics have come to realize that relativism is a legitimate option for explaining a variety of phenomena, including faultless disagreement, the utility of alternative logics, varieties of cross-cultural moralities, and differing ontological conceptual schemes.⁷ There are many contemporary sources and defenders of epistemological relativism: Davidson's challenge to the scheme/content distinction and thereby to conceptual relativism, Rorty's acceptance of the Davidsonian argument and his use of it to defend a relativistic position, Winchian and other sociological and anthropological arguments for relativism, recent work in the sociology of science, Goodman's novel articulation of a relativism of worlds and of world-making, and the plethora of relativistic arguments spawned by Kuhn and related literature in recent philosophy of science.⁸

1.1: WHAT IS EPISTEMOLOGICAL RELATIVISM?

Epistemology is the area of philosophy dealing with questions concerning the nature and the justification of knowledge. It examines issues such as, belief, truth, evidence, objectivity, justification, the requirements for the establishment of epistemic agency, and the challenge of skepticism. One of its main aims has been to produce a theory of knowledge and to answer

⁵Iris Einheuser, " (2005) Varieties of Relativism: Indexical, Propositional and Factual," from the *Logos conference on Relativizing Utterance Truth, Synthese*, Volume 170: 1–5.

⁶Ram Neta (2007) "In Defense of Epistemic Relativism," *Episteme* 4 (1): 30-35.

⁷Aaron Z. Zimmerman (2007) "Against Relativism [REVIEW]" *Philosophical Studies* 133 (3): 313-316.

⁸Gerald Doppelt (1980) "A Reply to Siegel on Kuhnian Relativism," *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 23 (1):117 – 121.

questions about the conditions under which knowledge claims can be made.⁹ Epistemology, since Plato, has been at the center of much of philosophy, and in modern philosophy, particularly over the last one hundred years, it has become intertwined with philosophy of science, and questions about the nature and scope of scientific explanations, the status of scientific laws, the appropriate methods for scientific investigations, etc. Epistemological relativism may be defined as the view that knowledge (and/or truth or justification) is relative to time, to place, to society, to culture, to historical epoch, to conceptual scheme or framework, or to personal training or conviction, in that what counts as knowledge (or as true or justified) depends upon the value of one or more of these variables. According to the relativist, knowledge is relative in this way because different cultures, societies, epochs, etc., accept different sets of background principles, criteria, and/or standards of evaluation for knowledge-claims, and there is no neutral way of choosing between these alternative sets of standards.¹⁰ So the relativist's basic thesis is that a claim's status as knowledge (and/or the truth or rational justifiability of such knowledge-claims) is relative to the standards used in evaluating such claims; and (further) that such alternative standards cannot themselves be neutrally evaluated in terms of some fair, encompassing meta- standard.¹¹ Epistemic relativism claims that what we know, or what we claim to know, is always bound up with particular historical, cultural and even individual perspectives and conditions and hence cannot be universal or non-contextual. The standard analysis of knowledge in philosophical literature takes the following form:

Subject S knows P (where P stands for a proposition or statement) If and only if S believes that P S is justified in believing that P and P is true.¹²

In other words, knowledge is justified true belief. Epistemic relativists claim that this abstract, non-contextual analysis of knowledge is deeply flawed. In particular, they maintain that only what counts as a true or false belief may be relative, but more significantly, what counts as acceptable justification can or does vary from culture to culture and there is no neutral method or criterion for adjudicating between different justificatory schemes.¹³ Thus, relativism about both truth and rationality could be seen as variants of epistemic relativism, for if the truth of what is known is relative to different contexts and cultures, then knowledge claims cannot be universal or absolute. Similarly, if standards of rationality were culture-dependent, then

⁹Hartry Field (1982) "Realism and Relativism," *Journal of Philosophy* 79 (10):553-5557.

¹⁰Jack W. Meiland (1979) Is Protagorean Relativism Self-Refuting? *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 9 (1):51-56.

¹¹Harvey Siegel (2011) "Epistemological Relativism: Arguments Pro and Con" in *Black-Well Companion to Philosophy: A Companion to Relativism*, Edited by Steven D. Hales (Oxford: John Wiley and Sons, Ltd., Publication), p. 201.

¹²Edward N. Zalta, (2007) "Analysis of Knowledge," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, available at:<https://leibniz.stanford.edu/friends/preview/knowledge-analysis/>.

Accessed on September 20, 2022, p. 2

¹³Howard Sankey (2013) "Methodological Incommensurability and Epistemic Relativism," *Topoi* 32 (1):33-35.

justificatory procedures involved in establishing claims of knowledge would also be relative.¹⁴ The relativists argue thus:

*T is claimed to be true in the context of paradigm P1, and -T is also claimed to be true in the context of paradigm P2. T and -T contradicts each other (or at least are mutually exclusive). We have no criterion to decide between T and -T. Therefore, T is true for P1, and -T is true for P2, and there is no more to be said about this.*¹⁵

Epistemic relativism receives its impetus from the considerations of the status of the knower, the subject of knowledge claims. The universality of claims of knowledge has been challenged strongly by focusing on the social, political and psychological conditions of the knowing subject. The epistemic subject, the knower, in traditional definitions of knowledge is generic and abstract. It is not embodied and has no gender, history, race, class, cultural background or sexual identity. The claim is that one knower is as good as another.¹⁶ Moreover, relativism begins from the observation that there is a variety of views about what we know. But there are still inherent challenges of deciphering what are good reasons, and how to address basic issues in crucially appraising claims to knowledge. From this, the relativists conclude that none of these views is better than any other. Thus, the case for any standard of knowledge cannot avoid begging the question and hence, no standard of knowledge is privileged.¹⁷

1.2: A BRIEF HISTORY OF EPISTEMOLOGICAL RELATIVISM

Undoubtedly, any attempt to write a history of relativism, especially a brief one, poses particular challenges as the blanket term ‘relativism,’ does not stand for a unified doctrine with a more or less discrete boundaries or intellectual genealogy. Relativism is not one but several loosely interconnected doctrines developed and shaped in response to a variety of philosophical concerns and unified more by what they deny, absolutism, universalism and monism, rather than what they endorse.¹⁸ The varieties of relativism are customarily individuated in terms of their domains, hence the customary distinction between ontic, cognitive, moral, and aesthetic relativisms, or their objects, for example, relativism about science, law, religion, etc., and each variety has a distinct, if occasionally overlapping, history. Different stories may be told about the philosophical pedigree of each various strands of relativism, but all these stories begin with the Ancient Greeks. The doctrine of epistemological relativism has been defended by a variety of thinkers stretching back to Protagoras of Abdera, who represents the first official voice of

¹⁴Steven Luper (2004) “Epistemic Relativism,” *Philosophical Issues* 14 (1):271–275.

¹⁵Philip Hugly & Charles Sayward (1987) “Relativism and Ontology,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 37 (148): 278-283.

¹⁶Myers-Schulz, Blake & Eric Schwitzgebel, 2013, “Knowing that P without Believing that P,” *Noûs*, 47(2): 371–375.

¹⁷Sebastiano Moruzzi (2008) “Assertion, Belief and Disagreement: A Problem for Truth-Relativism,” In Manuel García-Carpintero & Max Kölbel (eds.), *Relative Truth*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press) p. 207.

¹⁸Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes, *The Modes of Skepticism: Ancient Texts and Modern Interpretations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 130–135.

relativism. He considered man as “the measure of all things; of the things which are, that they are, and of the things which are not, that they are not.”¹⁹ Plato reports the dictum in the *Theaetetus*, and Sextus Empiricus tells us that it was the opening passage of Protagoras’ treatise on Truth (altheia). But, what exactly is Protagorean relativism? It is simply the view that ‘what seems true to anyone is true for him to whom it seems.’²⁰ Thus, since the final arbiter of truth and knowledge is the individual, there is no standard or criterion higher than the individual by which claims to truth and knowledge can be adjudicated.

Protagorean relativism casts its negative shadow on Aristotle’s work as well. In Book I of *Metaphysics*, Aristotle argues that relativism is tantamount to the denial of the principle of non-contradiction, for if man is the measure of all things, then different people would assign the value true or false to the same assertion, rendering it both true and false.²¹ Such a move, however, contravenes the principle of non-contradiction, the most certain of all basic principles and a presupposition of all thought and speech. The relativist, Aristotle argues, assumes that every utterance and its negation is true by the measure of its utterer.²² Therefore, the relativist is unable to make a meaningful statement, and even the very expression of relativism is meaningless since it does not exclude its denial. The relativist, then, by attaching the relativizing clause to all statements makes contradictions in principle impossible, and by so doing, all discourse is rendered devoid of content. But, generally, there are traces of relativism in post-Aristotelian Philosophy, Roman philosophy, early Christian philosophy, as well as modern and contemporary philosophy.²³ The most notable proponent of skepticism and relativism in the early modern period is Michel de Montaigne, whose work is the most significant link between the relativism and skepticism of the ancients, and the various relativistic doctrines developed by modern philosophers. Montaigne uses the argument schemas made familiar by the Pyrrhonian skeptics in support of relativism and skepticism.²⁴ Like Sextus, he points out that that with changes in our bodily and emotional conditions one and the same judgment may appear true to us on one occasion and false on another. Therefore, no absolute truths on such matters exist. He also cites the diversity of opinion on scientific issues, for instance, the Ptolemaic astronomers’ disagreement with Cleanthes or Nicetas and the Copernican claims that the earth moves, as evidence that we are not in a position to make

¹⁹Mi-Kyoung Lee, *Epistemology after Protagoras: Responses to Relativism in Plato, Aristotle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 85-86.

²⁰Plato, “Theaetetus” (1997) *Complete Works*, 170a, edited by John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishers), p. 302

²¹Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book I, 1011b, in *The Works of Aristotle*, Vol. VIII, translated by John Alexander Smith and William David Ross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908), p. 98

²²John Tasioulas (1998) “Relativism, Realism, and Reflection,” *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 41 (4):377-380.

²³Robert L. Arrington (1989) *Rationalism, Realism, and Relativism: Perspectives in Contemporary Moral Epistemology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), p. 102.

²⁴Robert Lockie (2003) “Relativism and Reflexivity,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 11 (3): 319 – 322.

well-grounded choices between conflicting scientific claims. In reviving the ancient argument for the relativity of sense experience, Michel de Montaigne says:

There is nothing in which the world is so varied as in customs and laws. A given thing is admirable here, which brings condemnation elsewhere: as in Lacedaemon cleverness is stealing. Marriage between close relatives are capital offences among us, elsewhere they are in honour.²⁵

Other philosophers, from the 17th and 18th centuries such as Giambattista Vico, Charles de Secondat Montesquieu, Francois Marie Arouet de Voltaire, and Johann Gottfried Herder, introduced the idea that an understanding of cultural outlooks and norms is possible only within their historical contexts, and hence, opened the way for a historicized and situational interpretation of cognitive and moral systems.²⁶ The age of Enlightenment is particularly important in the story of relativism, for fostering an intellectual climate inimical to ethnocentrism. The need for tolerance and respect for other cultures and beliefs are frequently used as key justifications for cultural relativism, the Enlightenment prepared the ground for this attitude of tolerance by turning alien cultures, habits and perspectives into central areas of literary and philosophical concern.²⁷ Kant's thinking on metaphysics and ethics was far removed from relativism; however, his distinction between raw experience and the conceptual principle for organizing them, introduced the possibility that a variety of equally acceptable incompatible schemes of organization could exist, to which ontology is relativized.²⁸

Like Kant, Hegel, the towering figure of nineteenth-century philosophy, could not be characterized as relativist. However, Hegelianism which itself was influenced by the counter-Enlightenment, through its emphasis on the historical dimension of human reason and understanding, gave rise to the idea that different histories, rather than the transcendental absolute idea of history, shape human understanding and knowledge in distinct ways. Hegelian historicism had a crucial influence on Marxist and neo-Marxist historical relativism and the relativistic Hermeneutics of Wilhelm Dilthey and his followers. According to Friedrich Engels' brand of relativism, truth and falsity have absolute validity only within an extremely limited sphere. Not only ethics, which varies greatly from society to society, but also even logic cannot give us conclusive truths and do not deal with unassailable universal principles.²⁹ Different

²⁵Michel de Montaigne, (1958) *The Complete Works. Essays, Travel Journal, Letters*, translated by Donald M. Frame, (Stanford: Stanford University Press), p. 77

²⁶Matthias Unterhuber, Alexander Gebharder & Gerhard Schurz (2014) "Philosophy of Science in Germany, 1992–2012: Survey-Based Overview and Quantitative Analysis," *Journal for General Philosophy of Science/Zeitschrift für Allgemeine Wissenschaftstheorie* 45 (1):71-76

²⁷Harvey Siegel, (1980) "Justification, Discovery and the Naturalizing of Epistemology," *Philosophy of science* 47 (2), 297-300.

²⁸Harvey Siegel and John Biro (2008) "Rationality, Reasonableness, and Critical Rationalism: Problems with the Pragma-dialectical View," *Argumentation* 22 (2):191-195.

²⁹David J. Stump (2022) "Fallibilism Versus Relativism in the Philosophy of Science,"

social systems, with their varying modes of production, feudal aristocracy, the bourgeoisie, and the proletariat, give rise to unique beliefs and practices, and therefore, knowledge claims, especially those concerning the historical or human sciences, are “limited to an apprehension of the pattern and the effects of certain forms of society and of the state that exists only at a particular time and for a particular people and that are by their very nature transitory.”³⁰ Nietzsche is possibly the most influential single philosopher in the recent history of relativism. His writings directly and indirectly influenced many varieties of contemporary relativism, but most notably foreshadowed and shaped key ideas of Postmodernism. Nietzsche agrees with Kant that we are incapable of unmediated knowledge of the world or the ‘thing in itself,’ but radicalizes this Kantian view by rejecting the very distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenal world.³¹ For him, this distinction has no coherent basis because to draw it is to presuppose the very thing Kant ruled out: the possibility of separating what the mind contributes to the world and what is in the world. All reports of so-called facts are statements of interpretation and can always be supplemented or replaced by other interpretations: “The world with which we are concerned is false, that is it is not a fact but a fable and an approximation on the basis of a meager sum of observations; it is ‘in flux’ as something in a state of becoming, as a falsehood always changing but never getting near the truth: for there is no ‘truth.’”³² All the Kantian categories, such as cause, identity, unity, substance, etc., arise from language. Language however, is not the simple means of describing what there is. Instead, it imposes its own interpretation or ‘philosophical mythology’ on our thoughts. All our conceptions and descriptions, even those in physics, the purest of all sciences, are only an interpretation and arrangement of the world (according to our own requirements) and not an explanation of the world.³³ Interestingly, contemporary relativism paradoxically also owes its origins to prominent strands of the Counter-Enlightenment of the eighteenth century and the ensuing Romantic movement of the nineteenth century. William Hamilton, in his work titled: “Relativity of Human Knowledge,” states:

We must, therefore, more precisely limit our sphere of knowledge, by adding, that all we know is known only under the special conditions of our faculties. "Man," says Protagoras, "is the measure of the universe" ... [he proceeded with a lengthy quotation from Bacon, and therefore concludes]...All perceptions, as well as of the senses as of the mind, are conformed to the nature of the percipient individual, and not to the true natures of the universe which distorts and

Journal for General Philosophy of Science/Zeitschrift für Allgemeine Wissenschaftstheorie 53 (2):187-191.

³⁰Martin Kusch, Johannes Steizinger, Katherina Kinzel & Niels Jacob Wildschut (Eds.) *The Emergence of Relativism: German Thought From the Enlightenment to National Socialism*, (London, New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 88-90.

³¹Howard Sankey (2015), “Markus Seidel: Epistemic Relativism: A Constructive Critique, [REVIEW],” *Metascience* 24 (2): 265-269.

³²Harvey Siegel (1986), “Relativism, Truth, and Incoherence,” *Synthese* 68 (2): 225-228.

³³Thomas L. Carson (1999), “An Approach to Relativism,” *Teaching Philosophy* 22 (2):161-164.

discolours the nature of things, by mingling its own nature with it.³⁴

Hamilton appears to be arguing that perceptual knowledge is relative to the individual. That is to say, in the perception of an external object, the mind does not know it in immediate relation to itself, but mediately, in relation to the material organs of sense.³⁵ The philosopher of science, Paul Feyerabend, for example, wholeheartedly embraced relativism at many points of his career. Feyerabend is accredited with the aphorism "potentially every culture is all cultures."³⁶ This is intended to convey the message that world views are not hermetically closed, since their leading concepts have an "ambiguity," that is, an open-endedness which enables people from other cultures to engage with them. It follows that relativism, understood as the doctrine that truth is relative to closed systems, can get no purchase. For Feyerabend, both hermetic relativism and its absolutist rival, serve, in their different ways, to "devalue human existence." Thomas Kuhn in his *Structure of Scientific Revolution*, taught that the truth of a claim, or the existence of a posited entity is relative to the paradigm employed.³⁷ However, it is unnecessary for him to embrace relativism, since every paradigm presupposes the prior, building upon itself, through history and so on. This leads to having a fundamental, incremental, and referential structure of development which is not relative, but foundational.³⁸ Richard Rorty, whose early work was committed to showing that philosophy's obsession with method, with refining our approaches to the real, suffers from the permanent problem of relativism, argues that:

To know what method to adopt, one must already have arrived at some metaphysical and some epistemological conclusions. If one attempts to defend these conclusions by the use of one's chosen method, one is open to a charge of circularity. If one does not defend them, maintaining that given these conclusions, the need to adopt the chosen method follows, one is open to the charge that the chosen method is inadequate, for it cannot be used to establish the crucial metaphysical and epistemological thesis that are in dispute. Attempts to substitute knowledge for opinion are constantly thwarted by the fact that what counts as philosophical knowledge seems itself to be a matter of opinion.³⁹

Rorty's central case is that any claim to know or have a reason or system of reasons, must itself have a story as to how it indicates the truth better than its competitors. However, the reasons justifying this commitment will come from the greater system, which is something any system can do on its own behalf. As a consequence, to judge one system (E1) better than another (E2)

³⁴William Hamilton, *The Metaphysics of Sir William Hamilton*, edited by Francis Bowen. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1861), pp. 91-92.

³⁵William Hamilton, (1861) *The Metaphysics of Sir William Hamilton*, edited by Francis Bowen. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon), p. 94

³⁶Paul Feyerabend (1999) *Knowledge, Science, and Relativism: 1960–1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 63

³⁷Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, 3rd edition, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 55-57

³⁸Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, 3rd edition, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 19-22.

³⁹Richard Rorty, (1996) "Pragmatism," *Philosophical Review* 105 (4): 560-561.

by El's standards is in the end arbitrary and intellectually vicious.⁴⁰ Philosophical views usually have some historical roots, and relativism as it appears in contemporary philosophy is no exception.

1.3: HARVEY SIEGEL'S CRITIQUE OF EPISTEMOLOGICAL RELATIVISM

Expectedly, relativism, unlike many other influential philosophical ideas, has often met with opprobrium, if not dismissive contempt, by professional philosophers. Siegel defines epistemological relativism in the following two-part fashion. First, there is a 'standard' conjunct which states: "For any knowledge claim P, P can be evaluated (assessed, established, etc.) only according to (with reference to) one or another set of background principles and standards of evaluation $Si...Sn$."⁴¹ Second, there is a 'no neutrality' conjunct which states:

And given a different set (or sets) of background principles and standards $Si,...Sn$, there is no neutral (i.e. neutral with respect to the two or more alternative sets of principles and standards) way of choosing between two or more alternative sets in evaluating P, with respect to truth or rational justification. P's truth and rational justifiability are relative to the standards used in evaluating P.⁴²

The key element of Siegel's definition is the notion of there being no neutral (i.e. non-question begging) standards by means of which to determine the 'truth or rational justification' of any knowledge claim.⁴³ Siegel's definition is particularly helpful in that it does not specify any particular standard, but leaves room for the application of any standard whatsoever. On this, he writes:

Knowledge and truth are relative to the person contemplating the proposition in question. P is true (for me) if it so seems; false (for me) if it so seems. Since the final arbiter of truth and knowledge is the individual, Protagoras' view [which Siegel had earlier condemned as an extreme version of relativism] denies the existence of any standard or criterion higher than the individual by which claims to truth and knowledge can be adjudicated.⁴⁴

Having given this definition, Siegel proceeds to state his argument based on the definition. Thus, he makes a case for the 'no neutrality, therefore relativism', and the 'no transcendent, therefore relativism,' forms of argument. Siegel's argument is presented as follows:

⁴⁰Stefaan E. Cuypers & Ishtiyaque Haji (2006) "Education for Critical Thinking: Can It Be Non-

⁴¹Harvey Siegel, (1985) "Objectivity, rationality, incommensurability, and more," *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 31 (4): 359-364.

⁴²Harvey Siegel, *Relativism Refuted: A Critique of Contemporary Epistemological Relativism*, (Dordrecht: Reidel Publishing Company, 1987), p. 46.

⁴³Harvey Siegel, (2006) "Knowledge and Its Place in Nature," *The Philosophical Review* 115 (2), 246-251

⁴⁴Harvey Siegel, *Relativism Refuted: A Critique of Contemporary Epistemological Relativism*, (Dordrecht: Reidel Publishing Company, 1987), p. 54.

1.3.1: It is impossible to have a 'No Neutral Judgment'

The neutrality required to avoid relativism is not some form of universal neutrality, neutrality with respect to every possible dispute or all conceivable conceptual schemes, but only neutrality with respect to the issue at hand.⁴⁵ Such neutrality, further, does not require that standards cannot discriminate better from worse competing views, but rather simply that such discrimination must be fair to competing views, that is, cannot be prejudicial towards or irrelevantly biased against one or another of them. There is no reason to think that this weaker sort of neutrality cannot, in principle, be had.⁴⁶ To authenticate his position against the claims of epistemic relativists, Siegel first of all states two arguments of the relativists, from whence he based his critiques. The two arguments are: the 'no neutrality, therefore relativism' and the 'no transcendence, therefore relativism' arguments.⁴⁷ The former begins with the assumption that there are no neutral standards between competing knowledge claims, and concludes that knowledge claims are relative to whatever non-neutral framework they were derived from. The argument is as follows:

There are no neutral standards by appeal to which competing knowledge claims can be adjudicated.

If there are no neutral standards by appeal to which competing knowledge claims can be adjudicated, then epistemic relativism obtains.

Therefore, epistemic relativism obtains.⁴⁸

According to Siegel, the relativists' use of this premise hinges on an ambiguity in the idea that there is no neutrality between competing knowledge claims. It may be the case that for any two competing knowledge claims, there may not be neutral standards. There may nevertheless be standards which are neutral in the weaker sense that they do not unfairly prejudice any particular live dispute. In addition, Siegel points out that there are in fact locally neutral standards by means of which one can evaluate competing knowledge claims.⁴⁹ However, the laws of logic themselves need not always be locally neutral, since knowledge claims about them may also be disputed. In cases where the laws of logic are being considered as true or false, one cannot appeal to the laws of logic as locally neutral arbiters in the dispute. There may in fact be competing knowledge claims about the laws of logic; in which case the laws of logic

⁴⁵Harvey Siegel, (2011) 'Epistemological Relativism: Arguments Pro and Con,' in Steven. D. Hales, (ed.) *A Companion to Relativism*, (Oxford: Blackwell), pp. 105-106.

⁴⁶Harvey Siegel, (2011) 'Epistemological Relativism: Arguments Pro and Con,' in Steven. D. Hales, (ed.) *A Companion to Relativism*, (Oxford: Blackwell), p. 206

⁴⁷Harvey Siegel, (1982) "Relativism Refuted," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 14 (2), 47-50.

⁴⁸Harvey Siegel, (1987) *Relativism Refuted: A Critique of Contemporary Epistemological Relativism*, (Dordrecht: D. Reidel/Springer), pp. 37-38.

⁴⁹Harvey Siegel, (2005) "Norms, Naturalism and Epistemology: The case for Science without Norms," *Mind* 114 (454), 424-428.

cannot function as locally neutral standards.⁵⁰

Furthermore, Siegel stated that besides the fact that the "no neutrality, therefore relativism" argument has an ambiguity at its core, that undermines its ability to support relativism, that is, there is no standard which is neutral generally (i.e. neutral with respect to all possible disputes). So, for example, in the case of Galileo and the Church, both Galileo and his opponents (the church) recognized Logic (broadly, 'reason') as a standard to which either disputant may fairly appeal.⁵¹ Both sides also agreed that, were Galileo able to adequately explain the workings of his newly invented telescope (something he could not do at the time of the dispute), that explanation might have undermined his opponents' rejection of the proposed Galilean' standard of telescopic observation.⁵² This is an acknowledgment of adequate explanation as a relevant meta-standard for evaluating First-order standards (i.e. those relevant to the resolution of First order disputes). Consequently, there is no reason to think that there were not, let alone could not be, neutral standards available, in terms of which both the first-order dispute between Galileo and his opponents concerning the existence of the moons, and the second-order dispute between them concerning the appropriateness of the various proposed standards, might be evaluated and, at least in principle, resolved.⁵³ Of course, the two meta-standards noted, logic (or "reason") and explanatory adequacy, are not neutral with respect to all possible disputes. In particular, they might fail to be neutral with respect to disputes concerning the character and force of logic, and to disputes concerning the character of explanation and the possibility of achieving truth.⁵⁴

1.3.2: Is it Possible to "Transcend" One's Perspective?

It is widely acknowledged that one can never completely escape one's perspective, framework, or conceptual scheme and achieve a 'God's eye view' or a 'view from nowhere,' and that all cognitive activity is inevitably conducted from some ongoing perspective or point of view.⁵⁵ A typical expression of this thesis is that of W.V.O. Quine:

⁵⁰Harvey Siegel, (2011) 'Epistemological Relativism: Arguments Pro and Con,' in Steven. D. Hales, (ed.) *A Companion to Relativism*, (Oxford: Blackwell), pp. 201–206.

⁵¹Luiz Carlos Mariano da Rosa (2011) THE "COPERNICAN REVOLUTION" (THE TRUE "TRANSCENDENTAL IDEALISM"), *Revista Opinião Filosófica / Sociedade Hegel Brasileira* 2 (2): 34-38.

⁵²Martin Kusch (2016) "Relativism in Feyerabend's Later Writings," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part A* 57:106-113.

⁵³Christopher W. Gowans (1985) "Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis," [REVIEW] *International Philosophical Quarterly* 25 (2):207-211.

⁵⁴Andrew Mclaughlin (1985) "Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics and Relativism," [REVIEW] *Philosophical Inquiry* 7 (1):60-63.

⁵⁵Andrew M. Koch (2000) "Absolutism and Relativism: Practical Implications for Philosophical Counseling," *Philosophy in the Contemporary World* 7 (4):25-28.

The philosopher's task differs from the others', then, in detail; but in no such drastic way as those suppose who imagine for the philosopher a vantage points outside the conceptual scheme that he takes in charge. There is no such cosmic exile. He cannot study and revise the fundamental conceptual scheme of science and common sense without having some conceptual scheme, whether the same or another no less in need of philosophical scrutiny, in which to work.⁵⁶

In addition to the 'no neutrality, therefore relativism' argument, Siegel presents a second argument, often used by defenders of epistemic relativism, the 'no transcendence, therefore relativism' argument. This argument runs as follows:

One cannot transcend one's perspective (framework/paradigm/culture).

If one cannot transcend one's perspective, then epistemological relativism obtains.

Therefore, epistemological relativism obtains.⁵⁷

In a way similar to that in the 'no neutrality' argument above, the 'no transcendence' argument hinges on an ambiguity in premise **i**. Siegel argues that this might be disambiguated by making a distinction between global and local perspectives. Siegel shows that it is quite common to transcend locally any particular perspective (and to improve that perspective) without global transcendence. Some examples of this include: the psychological development of children transcending their local perspective of not being able to grasp the concept of fractions, locally transcending the perspective that there are not things that cannot be seen with the naked eye, and locally transcending the perspective that women should be treated as mere objects. In each case, the person in the first local perspective simply moved into an improved perspective.⁵⁸ For Siegel, in as much as it is the case that we cannot judge from a perspective less perspective, it does not follow that our judgments are necessarily tainted by the fact that they are made from some frame work. On the contrary, we can and regularly do transcend our frameworks from the perspective of other 'roomier' ones, which can fit both our earlier ones and relevant rivals, and in this way, fair, non-relative evaluations of both our judgments and the frameworks from which they are made possible.⁵⁹ Siegel's examples show that although epistemic agents always judge from some perspective or another, there is no reason to think that they are trapped in or bound by their perspectives, such that they cannot subject them to critical scrutiny. Therefore, the 'no transcendence, therefore relativism' argument fails and epistemic relativism does not follow. On the whole, Siegel is of the opinion that epistemic relativism should be rejected on the following grounds:

⁵⁶Willard V. O. Quine, (1960) *Word and Object*, (Cambridge: MIT Press), pp. 275-276

⁵⁷Harvey Siegel, (2004) 'Relativism,' in Ilkka Niiniluoto, Matti Sintonen and Jan Woleński (eds.), *Handbook of Epistemology*, (Dordrecht: Kluwer), pp. 747–750.

⁵⁸Harvey Siegel, (1987) *Relativism Refuted: A Critique of Contemporary Epistemological Relativism*, (Dordrecht: Reidel Publishing Company, 1987), p. 17.

⁵⁹Forrest Wood Jr. (1995) "Beyond Relativism: Science and Human Values," [REVIEW], *Review of Metaphysics* 48 (4):911-912.

That relativism is self-referentially incoherent or self-refuting: Since the very truth of, tightness, and justifiedness is undermined, relativism cannot itself be true, right, or justified. The assertion and defense of relativism require one to presuppose neutral standards in accordance with which contentious claims and doctrines can be assessed; but relativism denies the possibility of evaluation in accordance with such neutral standards. Thus, the doctrine of relativism cannot be coherently defended.⁶⁰

There is no fact of the matter: According to Siegel, if people have different conceptions of truth and there is no question of any relative truth being epistemically superior to any other, then there is no acknowledgement of the philosophical issue that divides the relativist from his or her non-relativist opponent.⁶¹ For if there is no sense, according to the relativist, in which a given epistemological view is epistemically superior to its alternatives, then it is hard to understand the dispute between relativists and non-relativists. In this case, the relativist seems to be saying: "I am a relativist, you are not, but your view is just as good (epistemically) as mine."⁶² If the relativist says this, then it is unclear why he or she should be regarded as a relativist at all; let alone why the non-relativist should be bothered by such a seemingly inert challenge.⁶³ Thus, relying on the notion of relative truth, seems not to help the relativist. Finally, if the creed of epistemic relativism states that no case for an epistemic principle can avoid begging the question, therefore relativism is the only justified response, surely the argument must presuppose an epistemic principle according to which question-begging arguments do not yield justification.⁶⁴ In other words, if someone were to reject the requirement of not begging the question and argue that a given epistemic system E1 is better than all competitors, on the basis of E1's principles, that person would simply be a dogmatic enthusiast for the view over others, not a successful advocate. The argument for relativism presupposes that there is, indeed, a non-relative epistemic norm; the argument's conclusion is that adopting relativism is a *non-local epistemic success* and those who do not adopt it are failures. The case for relativism is thus posited on an assumption of its own falsity.⁶⁵

2.0: A RATIOCINATIVE APPRAISAL OF HARVEY SIEGEL'S CRITIQUE OF EPISTEMOLOGICAL RELATIVISM

As is typical in philosophy, the articulation or characterization of a controversial doctrine is

⁶⁰Harvey Siegel, (1987) *Relativism Refuted: A Critique of Contemporary Epistemological Relativism*, (Dordrecht: Reidel Publishing Company, 1987), pp. 15-18.

⁶¹Gerald Doppelt (2002) "Relativism and Reality: A Contemporary Introduction; Scientific Realism: How Science Tracks Truth," *Philosophical Review* 111 (1):142-145.

⁶²John Francis Metcalfe (2000) "Against Relativism: Philosophy of Science, Deconstruction and Critical Theory," [REVIEW], *Dialogue* 39 (3): 601-602.

⁶³Paul Demarco (2004) "Centore, F. F. Two Views of Virtue: Absolute Relativism and Relative Absolutism," *The National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 4 (4):830-832.

⁶⁴Jagdish N. Hattiangadi (1983) "Rationality and Historical Relativism," *der 16, Weltkongress Für Philosophie* 2:626-630.

⁶⁵François Récanati (2007) "Perspectival Thought: A Plea for (Moderate) Relativism," *Critica* 42 (124):77-80.

crucial to the assessment of arguments for and against it. Such characterizations are themselves controversial, but unavoidable, if philosophical scrutiny of such doctrines is to take place. In responding to anti-relativists, Steven Hales attempts to show how appropriate modal-logical machinery, on the basis of which relativism is understood on analogy with modal terms, can be utilized to avoid the self-refutation charge and establish "a consistent relativism," which holds not that "everything is relative," but that "everything true is relatively true."⁶⁶ The version of relativism that Hales articulates and defends holds that "philosophical propositions are true in some perspectives and false in others." He considers in detail three such perspectives, which are individuated and understood in terms of distinctive methods of acquiring the basic, non-inferential beliefs that constitute the ultimate, foundational considerations that purport to justify knowledge-claims within those perspectives. They are: analytic rationalism, resting on rational intuition; Christian revelation; and the ritual use of hallucinogens.⁶⁷ His thesis is that particular philosophical propositions are true in some of these perspectives but false in others. For example, the first perspective denies, while the second affirms, that "persons are partly or wholly composed of a non-physical, spiritual entity that survives the death of the body and lives forever,"⁶⁸ and that "all premarital sex is immoral."⁶⁹ On Hales' view, these claims are false in the first perspective and true in the second. That is, the truth of specific, particular philosophical propositions is relative to different perspectives. Siegel responds to this by saying that, Hales' argument considered above still hinges on either the more general "no neutrality" or the "no transcendence" (or both) arguments for relativism; and thus, is still problematic.⁷⁰ Siegel reiterates that, even if one or more of these arguments for relativism can be adequately repaired, it will still face the incoherence problem considered earlier, for how can the relativist regard one of these arguments, or indeed any argument, as rationally compelling, or supportive of its conclusion to any degree, given his or her rejection of non-relative standards of evaluation, an appeal to which is required in order to establish such rational compulsion or support?⁷¹ In endorsing one or another of these arguments as rationally compelling or supportive, such that it ought to be found (at least to some degree) persuasive by fair-minded students of the issue, the relativist seems forced to give up her commitment to relativism, according to which no arguments or standards have probative force beyond the bounds of the communities that endorse them. On the other hand, in acknowledging that these arguments have force only for such communities, the relativist explicitly acknowledges that she has no

⁶⁶Stephen Hales, (2006) *Relativism and the Foundations of Philosophy*, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press), pp. 77-78.

⁶⁷Robert Hanna (1984) "Beyond Objectivism and Relativism," *Review of Metaphysics* 38 (1):109-112.

⁶⁸Stephen Hales, (2006) *Relativism and the Foundations of Philosophy*, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press), p. 15.

⁶⁹Stephen Hales, (2006) *Relativism and the Foundations of Philosophy*, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press), p. 141.

⁷⁰Michael Watkins (1997) "Varieties of Relativism," *Review of Metaphysics* 50 (3):663-665.

⁷¹Harvey Siegel, "Epistemological Relativism: Arguments Pro and Con," in Steven D. Hales, (ed.) *A Companion to Relativism*, (Oxford: Blackwell), pp. 216-217.

reason to persuade his or her opponent to give up his or her non-relativist position and switch to the relativist's camp, or that he or she should persuade a fair-minded student of the issue to join that camp. Thus, whatever be the ultimate fate of the arguments for relativism we have considered, the relativist still faces the hoary and deep problem of incoherence.⁷² Harvey Siegel and other opponents of relativism have made many criticisms of the doctrine. However, despite these ancient and seemingly powerful criticisms, the past several decades has witnessed a resurgence of relativism. Contemporary versions occur in a wide variety of philosophical contexts and enjoy an equally wide variety of philosophical pedigrees.⁷³ Chief among them are versions of relativism spawned by Wittgensteinian considerations concerning language use, conceptual schemes or frameworks, and forms of life in the sociology of knowledge.⁷⁴ In fact, there are varieties of quite different positions which might be grouped together under the heading of contemporary neo-Pragmatism," and, perhaps most surprisingly, highly influential in the philosophy of science. However, it must be noted that even its staunchest philosophical critics have come to realize that relativism seems to be a legitimate option for explaining a variety of phenomena, including faultless disagreement, the utility of alternative logics, varieties of cross-cultural moralities, and differing ontological conceptual schemes. Two examples of arguments which are indisputably difficult to counter are: the 'Theory-Laden Perception' argument and the 'Incommensurability Theory.'⁷⁵

2.1: THE 'THEORY-LADEN PERCEPTION' ARGUMENT

The basic claim is that perception is not, contrary to what have been supposed, a neutral physiological process that leads all normal human beings to perceive the same thing in the same way when they gaze in the same direction. Instead what we see (hear, feel, etc.) in any particular situation is partially determined by the concepts, beliefs, and expectations we bring to the situation.⁷⁶

2.2: ALTERNATIVE FRAMEWORKS ARE INCOMMENSURABLE

Here, the arguments turn on claims about the meanings of words and concepts, but they are sometimes buttressed by claims about perception. For example, Feyerabend claims that "given appropriate stimuli, but different systems of classification (different 'mental sets'), our perceptual apparatus may produce perceptual objects which cannot be easily compared."⁷⁷

⁷²David B. Wong (1990) "A Relativist Alternative to Antirealism," *Journal of Philosophy* 87 (11): 617-618.

⁷³Achim Lohmar (2006) "Why Content Relativism Does Not Imply Fact Relativism," *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 73 (1):145-162.

⁷⁴Forrest Wood Jr. (1995) "Beyond Relativism: Science and Human Values," [REVIEW] *Review of Metaphysics* 48 (4):911-912.

⁷⁵Howard Sankey (2012) "Scepticism, Relativism and the Argument from the Criterion," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part A*, 43 (1):182-185.

⁷⁶Thomas L. Carson (1999) "An Approach to Relativism," *Teaching Philosophy* 22 (2):161-164.

⁷⁷Paul Karl Feyerabend, *Realism, Rationalism and Scientific Method: Philosophical*

Hence, if incommensurability arguments are sound, they support weak normative truth-value relativism, because they tell us that if two groups' concepts and beliefs differ in fundamental ways, the subject matters they can discuss are so different that they cannot be compared.⁷⁸ From the compelling arguments presented in this essay, one cannot totally reject the claims of the relativist and one cannot also reject the fact that there are some standards by which knowledge claims can be evaluated. The duty of a philosopher is to find ways by which puzzling questions can be answered and conflicting or contradicting opinions can be synthesized. With this realization, it is advisable, at this point to explore Alvin Goldman's proposed new form of relativism (Objectivity-based Relativism) which recognizes both objectivism and relativism.⁷⁹

2.3: THE WAY FORWARD: ALVIN GOLDMAN'S OBJECTIVITY-BASED RELATIVISM

In the attempt to strike a compromise between relativism and objectivism, Goldman proposes a new form of relativism. He calls it 'objective-based relativism. As its name suggests, this form of relativism presupposes the truth of epistemic objectivism. Nonetheless, it preserves some form of the pluralism associated with relativism. In other words, objectivity-based relativism allows the possibility that two people can reasonably disagree about a given proposition, even when they have equivalent evidence in relation to that proposition. Goldman advances a defense to this claim by presenting a scenario by which this can transpire:⁸⁰ Amanda and Jerome have the same evidence with respect to P, but different evidences about epistemic system correctness. In virtue of this evidence, Amanda is objectively justified in believing system E to be correct, whereas Jerome is objectively justified in believing E* to be correct. Finally the attitude required by E toward P (given the specified evidence) is incompatible with the attitude required by E.* Thus, Amanda is justified in believing that she is justified in adopting attitude D toward P whereas Jerome is justified in thinking that he is justified in adopting attitude D* toward P, where D and D* are incompatible.⁸¹ At the first order level of justifiedness, one of them is unreasonable, but at the second order level of justifiedness, both can be reasonable.⁸² Additionally, Goldman supports the significance of second-order justifiedness by saying that when considering the reasonability of someone's belief, its truth-value does not settle the issue. That is to say, a false proposition can be reasonably believed. What determines a belief's reasonability is the agent's evidence (or belief-forming methods), not the truth value of the belief.⁸³ Conversely, the actual tightness of an epistemic system does

Papers. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 116.

⁷⁸Paul Karl Feyerabend (1987), "Putnam on Incommensurability," *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, 38: 75–78.

⁷⁹Alvin I. Goldman (1986) "The Cognitive and Social Sides of Epistemology," *PSA: Proceedings of the Biennial Meeting of the Philosophy of Science Association*, pp. 295 - 298

⁸⁰Alvin I. Goldman (1987) "Foundations of Social Epistemics," *Synthese* 73 (1):109-112.

⁸¹Alvin I. Goldman (1987) "Foundations of Social Epistemics," *Synthese* 73 (1): 113.

⁸²Alvin Goldman (1991) "Social Epistemics and Social Psychology," *Social Epistemology* 5 (2): 121 – 125.

⁸³Alvin I. Goldman (2000) "Veritistic Social Epistemology," *The Proceedings of the*

not determine the reasonability of an agent's conforming to it. What is critical is the agent's evidence about its tightness.⁸⁴

3.0: A RATIOCINATIVE APPRAISAL OF SIEGEL HARVEY'S EPISTEMOLOGICAL RELATIVISM

In his arguments, Harvey Siegel recasts and presses traditional arguments against epistemological relativism, while treating the views of Plato, Protagoras, Karl Popper, Thomas Kuhn, Nelson Goodman, Israel Scheffler, Donald Davidson, Harold Brown, Stephen Toulmin, Jack Meiland, Harry Field, Gerald Doppelt, Larry Laudan, Edward Beach, and others. So much depends upon how one sets out the terms of a problem, and this seems especially so for the question of relativism.⁸⁵ The issue of relativism is implicated in its very formulation. If one concedes at the outset that there is no one essentialistically right way to characterize relativism (as Siegel seems to do, given what he says against foundationalism), then it is appropriate to ask why one should characterize relativism in the way Siegel does.⁸⁶ This question threatens to weaken the generality of Siegel's otherwise careful, informative, and altogether engaging critique. It is unfortunate that Siegel seemingly defines relativism in such a way that makes it less vulnerable to the charges of self-refutation and incoherence. Also, he defines relativism so indefensibly that his refutations turn out to be less of a feat than one might have hoped.⁸⁷ Epistemological relativism is not one thing, and Siegel seems to treat it as if it were. While refutations of his relativism might clear his decks, there are other decks with other relativisms on them, and it is an open question whether his refutations clear the others as well. But what is 'true relativism' or 'genuine relativism'? Siegel seems to define 'true relativism' in such a way as to preclude in any way the possibility of rigorous restraints, of standards of rightness, and of rationality.⁸⁸ In so doing, his treatment precludes rather interesting questions about relativist, yet rationalist epistemologies. More directly, in virtue of what argument, as opposed to stipulation, is rationality altogether dismissed from the relativist's landscape? Siegel begins his account by quoting Plato's characterization of Protagoras' relativism as holding that "what seems true to anyone is true for him to whom it seems so."⁸⁹ It is noteworthy that Plato's

Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy 5:107-111.

⁸⁴Harvey Siegel (2011) Relativism, Incoherence, and the Strong Programme, In Richard Schantz & Markus Seidel (eds.), *The Problem of Relativism in the Sociology of (Scientific) Knowledge*, (Heusenstamm: Ontos verlag) pp. 41-45.

⁸⁵Michael Krausz, (June, 1990) "Reviewed Work(s): Relativism Refuted: A Critique of Contemporary Epistemological Relativism by Harvey Siegel," in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 50, No. 4: 841.

⁸⁶Sun Si, (2007) "A Critique of Relativism in the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge," *Frontiers of Philosophy in China*," Volume 2: 115–118.

⁸⁷Philip Hugly & Charles Sayward (1987) "Relativism and Ontology," *Philosophical Quarterly* 37 (148): 278-282.

⁸⁸Andre Kukla (1995) "Is There a Logic of Incoherence?" *International Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 9 (1):59–61

⁸⁹Alex Long (2004) Refutation and Relativism in *Theaetetus* 161-171, *Phronesis* 49 (1):24-

ascription of such a view to Protagoras is itself contentious. It is contentious, for example, whether Protagorean relativism pertains to the human intervenability of truth conditions, rather than truth values. But, that is a separate matter of ancient scholarship. Understood as an extreme relativism of truth values, this Protagorean relativism denies, as Siegel says, "the existence of any standard or criterion higher than the individual by which claims to truth and knowledge can be adjudicated."⁹⁰ Siegel goes on to offer a more general characterization of epistemological relativism than Protagoras' relativism, by placing it at the level of standards rather than personal opinion, so as to capture more recent relativisms such as those of Kuhn, Barnes, Bloor, Winch, Wittgenstein, and others.⁹¹ Siegel's generalized characterization of Epistemological Relativism is as follows:

For any knowledge-claim p , p can be evaluated only according to (with reference to) one or another set of background principles and standards of evaluation s_1, \dots, s_n ; and, given a different set (or sets) of background principles and standards s'_1, \dots, s'_n , there is no neutral (that is, neutral with respect to the two (or more) alternative sets of principles and standards) way of choosing between the two (or more) alternative sets in evaluating p with respect to truth or rational justification. So, p 's truth and rational justifiability are relative to the standards used in evaluating p .⁹²

If relativism is the view that knowledge and truth are relative to framework, conceptual scheme, paradigm, cultures, personal predilection, etc., and there are no criteria or standards by which claims put forth by rival positions can be fairly, neutrally, or objectively judged, then absolutism should be understood as the (contrary) view that such claims can be evaluated in a non-question-begging way, and that objective comparison of rival claims is possible.⁹³ Yet, absolutism is taken by such thinkers as Plato, Frege, Popper, and others, to be a stronger thesis than that characterized by Siegel. It is often taken to embrace a logical space altogether outside the vagaries of historical or cultural contingencies, one in which claims of truth, rightness, etc., are logically grounded. Plato's forms and Popper's third world 'intelligibles', for example, are of this kind.⁹⁴ Depending upon what one considers as 'objective, fair, neutral, and non-question-begging,' such conditions may be met by non-absolutist epistemologies, perhaps relativist of a kind, and perhaps pragmatist. Only an extreme relativist will deny the existence of any rational grounds for adjudication. Siegel appeals to an argument of W.V.O. Quine, when developing his argument for absolutism, although it is neither a thoroughgoing anti-relativist nor an

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⁹⁰Steven D. Hales (1997) "A Consistent Relativism," *Mind* 106 (421):33-35.

⁹¹Harvey Siegel (1996) "Instrumental Rationality and Naturalized Philosophy of Science," *Philosophy of Science* 63 (3):124.

⁹²Harvey Siegel, *Relativism Refuted: A Critique of Contemporary Epistemological Relativism*, (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1987), p. 9

⁹³Achim Lohmar (2006) "Why Content Relativism Does Not Imply Fact Relativism," *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 73 (1):145-148.

⁹⁴Willard V. O. Quine, (1984) "Relativism and Absolutism," *The Monist* 67 (3):293-296.

absolutist argument. Siegel quotes Quine:

Truth, says the cultural relativist, is culture-bound. But if it were, then he, within his own culture, ought to see his own culture-bound truth as absolute. He cannot proclaim cultural relativism without rising above it, and he cannot rise above it without giving it up.⁹⁵

Yet, when Quine tells us that the cultural relativist cannot uphold cultural relativism without rising above it, it is obvious that the cultural relativist must rise above or transcend his or her own culture to do so. But, it does not follow from this that he must rise above culture-boundedness *per se*.⁹⁶ Put otherwise, the horizons of one's culture must be transcended for meta-theoretical remarks to be made about it.⁹⁷ But, that is a far cry from concluding that (irrespective of whether one is forced to think in one way or another within a cultural situation, as Quine suggests) one must embrace an absolutist position, one in which claims of rightness, etc., are grounded in some ahistorical or acultural logical space.⁹⁸ What must be given up, under the circumstances he considers, is a relativism that is tied specifically to the initially circumscribed cultural context of the relativist in question. Again, this is a far cry from absolutism, which sets epistemic requirements needlessly high.⁹⁹ Siegel's concluding suggestion is that the emphasis should be placed on "an account of the warranting force of reasons."¹⁰⁰ But while he makes such a suggestion "to secure absolutism," his position may be supported in order to generate the desiderata for which any rationalist epistemology should account. Whether such an account should be called absolutist, relativist, or neither, will depend upon what shape it takes. In any event, the account of reasons is of the first importance, while what it should be called is not.¹⁰¹ It is noteworthy that Siegel's detachment of the issue of fallibilism from relativism is commendable. He rightly shows that absolutism is compatible with fallibilism, rather, along Popperian lines. Fallibilism is the epistemological thesis that no belief (theory, view, thesis, and so on) can ever be rationally supported or justified in a conclusive way. Always, there remains a possible doubt as to the truth of the belief. Fallibilism does not entail relativism, and the indubitability of knowledge is no necessary condition for

⁹⁵Harvey Siegel, (1993) "Naturalized Philosophy of Science and Natural Science Education," *Science & Education* 2 (1): 57-60. [Cf. Willard V. O. Quine, (1960) *Word and Object*, (Cambridge: MIT Press), p. 277].

⁹⁶John MacFarlane (2007) "Relativism and Disagreement," *Philosophical Studies* 132 (1):17-21.

⁹⁷Rogério Passos Severo (2008) "Plausible Insofar as It is Intelligible: Quine on Underdetermination," *Synthese* 161 (1):141-145.

⁹⁸Brian Weatherson (2009) "Conditionals and Indexical Relativism," *Synthese* 166 (2):333-336.

⁹⁹Michael Glanzberg (2007) "Context, Content, and Relativism," *Philosophical Studies* 136 (1):26-29.

¹⁰⁰Willard V. O. Quine, (1960) *Word and Object*, (Cambridge: MIT Press), p. 168

¹⁰¹Michael Krausz, "Reviewed Work(s): Relativism Refuted: A Critique of Contemporary Epistemological Relativism by Harvey Siegel," in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 50, No. 4 (Jun., 1990): 841-845

absolutism.¹⁰²

4.0: CONCLUSION

Just as autocracy is political absolutism and political absolutism is paralleled by philosophical absolutism, democracy is political relativism which has its counterpart in philosophical relativism. It might be taken for a more or less superficial analogy between democracy and relativism that the fundamental principles of freedom and equality are characteristic of both; that the individual is politically free in so far as he participates in the creation of the social order to which he is subjected, just as the knowing subject, according to relativistic epistemology is autonomous in the process of cognition; and that the political equality of the individuals corresponds to the equality of the subjects of knowledge, which relativistic epistemology must assume in order to avoid solipsism and pluralism. But a more serious argument for the relationship between democracy and relativism is the fact that almost all outstanding representatives of a relativistic philosophy were politically in favor of democracy, whereas followers of philosophical absolutism, the great metaphysicians, were in favor of political absolutism and against democracy. This work has undertaken three tasks. The first was to advance a conception of epistemic relativism under which relativism is incompatible with objectivism. The second was to make a case for the self-refuting and the 'no fact of the matter' nature of relativists' claim, which is championed by Harvey Siegel. The third was to offer a ratiocinative appraisal of both the relativists' claims and Harvey Siegel's critique of epistemological relativists. Some attention was given to the limitations and conflicts between the relativists and the absolutists, and Alvin Goldman's position was used as a point of convergence between the truth of epistemic objectivism and some form of pluralism associated with relativism. Although this merger (compromise position) might not be the best panacea to the task at hand, it still provides the resources for a reasonable argument from both perspectives.¹⁰³

¹⁰²Harvey Siegel, (1997) *Rationality Redeemed?* (New York: Routledge), p. 168

¹⁰³Alvin Goldman, *Epistemology and Cognition*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 83.

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