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RELATIVISM, TRUTH, AND INCOHERENCE

The doctrine of epistemological relativism – the view that knowledge is relative, either to time, to place, to society, to historical circumstance, to culture, to conceptual framework, or to personal training or conviction – has been defended by a variety of thinkers stretching back at least as far as Protagoras. For just as long, however, others have thought the doctrine to be incoherent. The last few decades have witnessed a revival of epistemological relativism. An obvious question is whether the charge of incoherence has been laid to rest.

In what follows I shall, after reviewing the debate between Plato and Protagoras regarding relativism and incoherence, consider a series of more recent defenses of epistemological relativism. A central focus will be the role that the notion of relative truth plays in the various arguments for relativism, both ancient and contemporary. However, a defense of relativism that eschews that notion, developed by Hartry Field, will also be considered. I shall argue that, like Protagoras, the recent defenders fail to meet the challenge posed by the incoherence charge, and that the doctrine of epistemological relativism remains untenable because incoherent.

PROTAGOREAN RELATIVISM AND THE SOCRATIC ARGUMENTS FOR INCOHERENCE

In the *Theaetetus*, Protagoras is portrayed as holding that "man is the measure of all things", and that any given thing "is to me such as it appears to me, and is to you such as it appears to you".1 In considering Theaetetus' suggestion that knowledge is perception, Socrates concludes that it is equivalent to Protagoras' view: "Then my perception is true for me, for its object at any moment is my reality, and I am, as Protagoras says, a judge of what is for me, that it is, and of what is not, that it is not".2 Protagoras holds, according to Socrates, that

Each one of us is a measure of what is and of what is not. . . . To the sick man his food appears sour and is so; to the healthy man it is and appears the opposite. Now there is no

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call to represent either of the two as wiser – that cannot be – nor is the sick man to be pronounced unwise because he thinks as he does, or the healthy man wise because he thinks differently. . . . In this way it is true . . . that no one thinks falsely. 3

Socrates encapsulates Protagoras’ relativism as consisting in the view that “what seems true to anyone is true for him to whom it seems so”. 4

Protagoras’ view is an extreme version of relativism: 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) 5 if it so seems. Since the final arbiter of truth and knowledge is the individual, Protagoras’ view denies the existence of any standard or criterion higher than the individual by which claims to truth and knowledge can be adjudicated.

Socrates offers several arguments against the Protagorean view. Two in particular will be of interest here. 6 The first questions the justifiability of Protagoras’ sophistical activity, given his doctrine:

If what every man believes as a result of perception is indeed to be true for him; if, just as no one is to be a better judge of what another experiences, so no one is better entitled to consider whether what another thinks is true or false, and . . . every man is to have his own beliefs for himself alone and they are all right and true – then . . . where is the wisdom of Protagoras, to justify his setting up to teach others and to be handsomely paid for it, and where is our comparative ignorance or the need for us to go and sit at his feet, when each of us is himself the measure of his own wisdom? . . . to set about overhauling and testing one another’s notions and opinions when those of each and every one are right, is a tedious and monstrous display of folly, if the Truth of Protagoras is really truthful. . . . 7

Here Socrates levels the first version of the incoherence charge. Protagoras is involved in the project of “overhauling and testing one another’s notions and opinions”. That is, he is engaged in the epistemological task of assessing the warrant and justification of knowledge-claims. However, his thesis undermines that very project, since if his thesis is right, then there is no chance of any thesis failing a test of adequacy, or being judged unjustified or unwarranted, because the rival theses “of each and every one are right”. If knowledge is relative, then the task of judging claims to knowledge is pointless. If Protagoras’ thesis is right, it cannot be right, for it undermines the very notion of rightness. Protagorean relativism is thus self-defeating – if it is right, it cannot be right – and so is incoherent. Let us call this first argument for the incoherence charge the ‘undermines the very notion of rightness’ (henceforth UVNR) argument.

The second argument for the incoherence charge focuses on the