

J. Adam Carter

Metaepistemology and Relativism. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016. Pp. xiv + 298. ISBN 978-1-137-33663-7.

The philosophical literature on relativism is a little like the philosophical literature on scepticism. The relativist, like the sceptic, is a foe to be vanquished. In the rush to condemn, it is often unclear which variety of relativism is under attack. One can be a relativist about *everything*. Or one can be a relativist about a *particular domain*, for instance, epistemology. Even within a domain, there are further choice points. One can be a relativist about *epistemic facts*, like the fact that I know the earth was created millions of years ago. Maybe this is a fact for the scientist, but not for the creationist. Or one can be a relativist about *knowledge attributions*. Maybe it is true for me to say “I know the earth was created millions of years ago,” but not for the creationist. J. Adam Carter’s new book discusses all of these forms of relativism. While he takes a critical line, he is a careful and patient philosophical interlocutor. He takes the time to formulate a variety of relativisms, before telling us whether he thinks they are ultimately plausible. He concludes that the most plausible form of epistemic relativism, relativism about knowledge attributions, poses an important challenge to contemporary epistemology, though not the challenge one would expect. Maybe this relativist is right that our knowledge attributing practice is relativistic. The problem for epistemologists is that their knowledge attributing practice isn’t. In this review, I will give a summary of the book, making some critical comments along the way.

Chapter 1 situates epistemic relativism as a view in *metaepistemology*. Metaepistemology steps back from particular substantive debates in epistemology and asks which commitments are shared by those engaging in epistemological debate (1). How does one go about identifying these commitments? As I read him, Carter proposes a kind of heuristic. Take some epistemological dispute D between A and B. A and B are committed to *p* if *p* is part of the common ground (in Stalnaker’s sense) in D. Carter uses this heuristic to argue that epistemologists are committed to there being *objective* epistemic facts (15). Skipping over some details, the key feature of objective epistemic facts is that they are *authoritative* in the sense that they imply reasons for subjects to behave (form beliefs, collect evidence, etc.) in certain ways irrespective of their wishes and desires (26). The *epistemic realist* holds that there are such epistemic facts. The epistemic relativist seems to challenge this. For the relativist, the authority of an epistemic fact seems restricted to those it is a fact relative to (29).

I want to register two worries here, and make a comment. The first worry is that Stalnakerian acceptance is quite a weak propositional attitude; we can accept that p , in Stalnaker's sense, without believing that p is true. Maybe epistemologists talk *as if* they believe in objective, authoritative epistemic facts. This doesn't mean they do.

The second worry is that, if Carter is right, then anyone who defends instrumentalism about epistemic norms—the view that we only have reason to follow epistemic norms because we want true beliefs and following them is a way of achieving true beliefs—is violating commitments shared in first-order epistemology. Maybe instrumentalism is false, but is it so unorthodox?

The comment is that we can formulate a kind of epistemological scepticism that is analogous to J.L. Mackie's moral scepticism. Mackie thought that, even though there are no (objective) moral facts, this is compatible with a fairly standard first-order ethical picture, on which some things are right and other things wrong. So consider the view that, even though there are no (objective) epistemic facts, we are still justified in believing some things and unjustified in believing others. One of the benefits of Carter's discussion of metaepistemology is that it explains why there is conceptual space for this kind of view.

Chapter 2 argues convincingly against global relativism. Carter uses this chapter to distinguish between two ways of thinking of relativism. According to the first way, relativism about some claim of the form “ x is P ”—e.g. “ S 's belief that p is justified”—should be construed as the view that the claim should be *replaced* with a claim of the form “ x is P relative to F ,” where “ F ” is something like a framework or epistemic system. According to the second way, claims of the form “ x is P ” are true or false only relative to F . The key difference is that the former view reconstrues the relevant claims so that they are true or false absolutely, whereas the latter thinks of the original claims as genuinely true or false, albeit relatively so (52–53). For the cognoscenti: this is the distinction between *contextualism* (Keith DeRose, etc.) and *assessment relativism* (John MacFarlane).

Chapters 3–5 argue against relativism about epistemic facts. The foremost proponent of this kind of epistemic relativism was perhaps Richard Rorty, according to whom epistemic facts—like the fact that some piece of information justifies some belief B —are relativised to frameworks or grids. Thus, while observation through his telescope may have justified Galileo in believing that the earth orbits the sun, it didn't justify Cardinal Bellarmine.

Chapter 3 focuses on the problem of the criterion, repurposed as an argument for relativism instead of for scepticism (60). The basic thought is that absolute epistemic facts about, say, justification require a criterion for distinguishing