Relativism


Entry for the International Encyclopaedia of Organization Studies


[Version for publication on the SSRN.


For appropriate citation, please consult: Al-Amoudi, I. (2007). 'Relativism'. *International Encyclopedia of Organization Studies*. S. Clegg and J. Bailey (eds), Sage Publications.]


2012 words


**Definition**

According to standard dictionaries such as the *Oxford English Dictionary*, relativism is a doctrine that truth or morality is relative to situations and not absolute or universal. For example, a relativist would claim that statements such as "Peter works more than Sally" or "Peter acts badly" cannot be correct in themselves but presuppose that one already has some notion of how to measure an amount of work (e.g. number of hours; quality of output) and of what is morally right or wrong. In other words, a relativist believes that the value of epistemological and moral judgments depends at least in part on the person or group of persons who hold that claim. In the remainder of the entry, I explore the main philosophical positions identified with "relativism" and then examine the import of relativism for the study of organizations.


**Conceptual overview**

Ironically enough, the notion of relativism is particularly tricky to pin down. On the one hand, it generates important debate amongst social scientists, to the point of being more often than not used as a pejorative term that qualifies the theories of others rather than one's own. It follows that finding authors who claim to be relativists is more difficult than finding authors accused of relativism. On the other

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hand, the term "relativist" covers a relatively wide range of philosophical positions that may not be consensually identified as such.

The philosophical stances attached to relativism can be glimpsed by questioning further the type of definition offered by dictionaries such as the *OED*: 1) Shouldn't we treat separately relativism about truth and relativism about morality? 2) What is meant by seeing something in terms that are relative to situations? Does it mean that an insight about a situation cannot be generalised easily into another situation? Or that a statement may be true/ethical for one observer but not for another? 3) Does relativism mean considering that it is strictly impossible to discriminate between "better" and "worse" judgements? Or is it instead that such discrimination may be possible but that it is necessarily done through presupposing sets of values and bodies of knowledge which depend in turn on the person making such judgements?

A closer look at the notion of relativism in philosophy reveals that relativism about knowledge is not necessarily related to relativism about morality. Thus, although philosophers such as Hume or Rorty would be relativists about both and authors such as Descartes or Plato about none, it is also possible to find authors who are relativists about the one but not the other. For instance, Weber mixes a positivist approach to science with a strongly pluralist vision of ethics. On the other hand, Blaise Pascal can be read as a relativist about knowledge but not about morals.

Beyond the distinction between moral and epistemological relativisms, it may also be useful to distinguish between stronger and weaker forms of relativism. Strong relativism usually takes the form of scepticism about the possibility of inferring that a valid judgement in a situation or for a person can still be valid for another situation or person. Well known examples of strong epistemological relativism are Hume's proposition that it is not because the sun has risen yesterday that we can expect it to rise tomorrow and Protagoras' claim that man is the measure of all things. It is also common to interpret Nietzsche's affirmation that "God is dead" or Benedict's view that what is morally good for someone is what is habitual for him/her as strong versions of moral relativism.

Although most philosophers would argue that strong relativist arguments are ultimately auto-refutative, it seems that weaker forms of relativism are more defendable. For instance, in the postface to the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of *The Structure of*

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*Scientific Revolutions*, Kuhn responds to accusations of auto-refutativity by presenting the view that: i) Indeed, the very values that make a theory preferable to an other and that are embedded in its paradigm are relative to a scientific community. However, ii) once these values are set, they can then be used to discriminate rationally between various competing theories. Other epistemologies, such as sophisticated versions of realism (see *critical realism*), also attempt to reconcile the view that knowledge is socially constructed and inherently fallible (epistemic relativism) with the view that people debating a question may come up with socially constructed criteria, that allow them to judge whether some theories are "better" and yield more explanatory power than others (judgemental rationality).

## Critical commentary and future directions

Up until the end of the seventies, the field of organization studies appeared to be dominated by a functionalist paradigm (Burrell and Morgan 1979). Such functionalism, best exemplified by the Aston studies, is characterised by a) a positivist belief that "objective" knowledge is both possible and desirable and b) that society is better thought as a self-regulated system than as an arena for struggle. Burrell and Morgan also point out that other incommensurable paradigms could generate alternative theories of organisations that are fully valid in their own terms of reference.

Besides prompting defiance vis-à-vis positivism, relativism also has deep consequences for the way in which organisations can be consistently studied. For instance, the stronger forms of epistemological relativism mentioned above nourished postmodern perspectives on organisations such as those promoted by Burrell, Chia, Gergen, Hassard, Knights, Linstead and Grafton-Small. This diverse body of works is united by a common focus on the elusive, shifting and paradoxical aspects of organisations. Contrary to positivists, postmodernists exhibit distrust for the search for stable or generalizable meaning and consider that every form of knowledge (including the author's) is partial and political. In resonance with strong epistemological relativism, the purpose of organization studies is thus viewed to provide narratives rather than to investigate pre-existing truths.

It could also be argued that a form of moral relativism is also at play in the influential critique of "cultural management". In addition to the normative critique of the values promoted by managerial rhetoric and practice, such as that made by Alvesson in 1987, the field of organization studies also witnessed a critical assessment of cultural management that displaces the focus of the analysis away from the moral foundations of managerial values and towards the effects of these values regardless of their moral viability, as for instance in Willmott's 1993 work. In such enquiry, an *epoché* is thus placed on the validity of managerialist values and a relativist stance is implicitly adopted towards them.

Interestingly enough, the arguments that rage between philosophers are closely mirrored in organization studies. In particular, the question of the auto-refutativity of relativist stances seems central to recent debates between authors identified as (strong) relativists and authors criticising their relativism. Thus, authors such as Fleetwood in 2005, and Reed, in both 2000 and 2005, would criticise postmodernist approaches to organizations for glossing agents' experiences rather than explaining them. In the views of such critiques of strong epistemological relativism, the danger resides in forgetting that, although organisation studies are inherently fallible fictions, they are nonetheless distinguishable from other forms of fiction because of their concern with the truth of their claims. A similar line of criticism has also been made by Parker in 1995 and by Feldman in 1998, targeted towards perspectives on organisations that refuse to reflect upon and engage with ethical considerations: if (strong) forms of moral relativism undermine the principle of any moral or political agenda then on what basis can a relativist criticise or seek to ameliorate the state of affairs of any organization?

The various future directions that present debates may take will arguably have to deal with the tensions that surround the role and authority of the academic in relation to readers and to the agents s/he seeks to understand. On what grounds can authors claim to offer an understanding of any organisation that is more worthy than the conceptions of its participants? On what grounds can authors claim to know better than participants what actions they ought to pursue and what values they ought to promote? In this perspective, both Kuhnian and critical realist positions may be inspirational as they would lead researchers to acknowledge, on the one hand, that the very value of their claims is subordinated to the values

employed to judge them and, on the other hand, that these values must be shared amongst their community of discussants (which may include their intellectual adversaries as well as the members of the organizations they study). If this form of weaker relativism is taken seriously then, even from a realist stance, the uncovering of such shared values is integral part of a reflexive quest for truth and good.

## Cross-references

Critical realism, paradigm, corporate values, postmodernism, truth.

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