

Early Career Workshop on “Relativism, Pluralism and Contextualism”

Organized by the ERC Advanced Grant Project “The Emergence of Relativism”,
University of Vienna

Friday 24th February

9:30-10:00 Coffee

Panel 1: Epistemology

10:00-10:45 Anne-Kathrin Koch (University of Vienna)

From Skepticism to Relativism and Back Again

10:45-11:30 Dirk Kindermann (University of Graz)

Knowledge and Embedded Implications

11:30-11:45 Short break

11:45-12:30 Tom Fery (University of Vienna)

Contextual Epistemic Optimism

12:30-14:30 Lunch

Panel 2: Philosophy of Science

14:30-15:15 Lisa Heller (University of Bielefeld)

*Shifting Borders and Fading Frameworks: The Enabling and Restricting Context in Fleck's
and Feyerabend's Conceptions*

15:15-16:00 Matthew Baxendale & Michele Luchetti (CEU Budapest)

*A Domain-relative Account of the Constitutive Role of Levels of Organisation in Scientific
Inquiry*

16:00-16:15 Coffee break

16:15-17:00 Raffael Krismer (University of Vienna)

Pragmatism, Relationalism and Relativism

Saturday 25th February

- 10:00-11:00 Delia Belleri (University of Hamburg/University of Vienna)
(with coffee)
- 11:15-12:30 Elizabeth Nemeth (University of Vienna)
Some Thoughts about Career-Conditions in a Changing Academic World
- 12:30-14:00 Lunch

Panel 3: Ethics and Politics

- 14:00-14:45 Mirela Fuš (University of Oslo/University of St. Andrews)
Effects of Conceptual Deficiency: A Peculiar Case of Generics
- 14:45-15:30 Ladislav Koreň (University of Hradec Králové)
Empirical Boost to Modest Moral Relativism
- 15:30-16:15 Katharina Sodoma (University of Vienna)
Moral Relativism and Moral Progress
- 16:15-16:30 Coffee Break
- 16:30-17:30 General Discussion Session
- 19:00 Dinner at Rebhuhn

Abstracts

Keynote Lecture

Elisabeth Nemeth (Vienna)

Some Thoughts about Career-Conditions in a Changing Academic World.

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu reconstructed the University of the 1960s as a social field which is structured by two competing principles of legitimation (Homo academicus, 1984): the social one and the scientific one. While the former principle connects the academic field with the field of education, the latter principle connects it with the scientific field. While the central issue of the educational field is the reproduction of the social order, the stake of the scientific field is the production of new knowledge. The tension between the two principles of legitimation defines the scope of action of each agent in the academic field. Each person who seeks acknowledgement as a legitimate player in the academic field has, at least to a certain degree, to conform to both principles. Yet the extent to which each of the two principles determines her or his activities (and thereby her or his standing in the academic field) differs greatly among individuals as well as among departments, faculties etc. – Until the 1990s the fundamental structure exposed by Bourdieu was in place, not only in France but also in Austria and other European countries. During the last 20 years or so, the universities underwent important changes. Did these changes touch the fundamental structure described by Bourdieu? How can, against the background of Bourdieu's study, the constraints of today's academic field be described? And how do they determine the career-conditions of young researchers?

Panel 1: Epistemology

Anne-Kathrin Koch (Vienna)

From Skepticism to Relativism and Back Again

In this talk, I will explore the ties between epistemic relativism (ER) and skepticism. A widespread view on this issue is that skepticism -in the form of radical skepticism- becomes relevant for ER when ER must make use of it in order to present itself as a potential cure for it. This is then often said to be unsuccessful, and ER is said to collapse into radical skepticism. I will argue that instead of thinking of epistemic relativists as unsuccessful anti-skeptics in a picture that only recognizes one form of skepticism, we should think of them as potential allies to Pyrrhonian skepticism.

Dirk Kindermann (Graz)

Knowledge and Embedded Implicatures

How should we account for the contextual variability of knowledge ascriptions? Many invariantists try to resist any departure towards contextualism or relativism by adding an account on which such contextual variability is due entirely to pragmatic factors, leaving no interesting relativity in the semantic meaning of “know that”. In this paper, I reject this invariantist division of labor. I argue that pragmatic invariantists face a dilemma: Either they have no principled story of the whole variety of occurrences of “S knows/doesn’t know that p”, including occurrences embedded within larger linguistic constructions (e.g. conditionals, attitude verbs, evidentials, modals, comparatives, ...); that is, they face a distinctive version of the problem of embedded implicatures. Or they must opt for pragmatic accounts that undermine the invariantist dogma that there is one (semantic) meaning of “know” that captures knowledge (rather than some nearby epistemic relation). The paper sheds new and more systematic light on the interaction of knowledge sentences with embedding expressions as well as on the constraints we should respect when applying pragmatic accounts to the solution of philosophical issues.

Tom Fery (Vienna)

Contextual Epistemic Optimism

In recent years the debates surrounding peer disagreements and philosophical methodology have led to a revival of skeptical views. Agreement among experts on central questions of a specific area is taken by many to be a necessary condition for the possibility of knowledge. Accordingly, in areas in which there is no agreement among experts on the central questions, there is no knowledge on the debated matters. Philosophy is considered by many to be a case in point. I will call the view that there is no philosophical knowledge Pessimism.

Pessimism: There is no philosophical knowledge.

A range of popular views on the semantics and pragmatics of epistemic concepts such as “knows” has it that correct knowledge attributions depend on features of the context of utterance. On such a view, the sentence “S knows that p” can be true at one context C1 and false at another context C2, although the semantic values of “S” and “p” are the same in both contexts. I will call any view that allows for such contextually determined variations Contextualism.

Contextualism: The truth conditions of a sentence of the form "S knows that p" depend on contextual features.

In my talk I will first outline the main motivations for adopting Pessimism. Second, I will present a brief introduction of Contextualism. Third, I will show how Contextualism can be used in order to avoid Pessimism.

Panel 2: Philosophy of Science

Lisa Heller (Bielefeld)

Shifting Borders and Fading Frameworks: The Enabling and Restricting Context in Fleck's and Feyerabend's Conceptions

Relativity, in a literal and epistemological understanding translation, is asking necessarily for an entity to which different levels of knowledge-related human interaction is related. Commonly, such an entity appears as delineation or a set of convictions. The emphasis lies, with all problematic aspects, most often on the limiting capacity of this framework and its ability to cut down the demands for universal validity.

In my presentation, I will cast a look from the opposite direction: The restriction can also be interpreted as an enabling framework in which validity, stability and even durability of perception, facts, and even truth – in a modest understanding – can be claimed. Though, this even raises the requirements to the notion of the framework: the borders must be clearly cut or a distinct common core must be identifiable, in order to establish relatively stable validity claims. But is such a stable border or a common core conceivable?

I will discuss this question with a closer look to the respective formulation of this constitutive relativistic element in Fleck's and Feyerabend's conception and address some of the systematic and subsequent problems of the context-conception.

Matthew Baxendale and Michele Luchetti (CEU)

A Domain-relative Account of the Constitutive Role of Levels of Organisation in Scientific Inquiry

Levels of organisation provide a stratified structure to a given system, at a given scale. This might range from the world as a whole to a specific portion of it, such as a domain of inquiry or a specific subsystem. The most basic levels of organisation structure (LOS) identifies a specific kind of dependence relation between two Xs, such as part-whole or functional decomposition. The core of any LOS is a set of conditions for identifying a dependence relation between two Xs

– a set of conditions for specifying that X is on a different level of organisation than Y, thus different conditions, different LOS. What role, if any, do LOS play in scientific inquiry? In this talk we suggest that LOS are best understood as playing a constitutive role in scientific activity; that the set of conditions comprising an

LOS perform the same function as some principles described as constitutive principles in the literature. Recent trends in philosophy of science have analysed the function of some principles in constituting the object of inquiry in scientific theories (Friedman, 2001, Stump, 2003; 2015) or in grounding the intelligibility of epistemic activities (Chang, 2008; 2009). Constitutive principles thus play a preconditional role in framing scientific inquiry. We demonstrate how LOS can be understood as being constitutive in that the conditions that comprise them frame and guide empirical research in much the same way as principles previously analysed as constitutive. Considering LOS as constitutive means that

LOS inherit some interesting features. We conclude by highlight one such feature: rather than having universal application, constitutive principles perform their function within a limited epistemic domain. Thus, any given LOS must also apply only relative to a restricted epistemic project.

Raffael Krismer (Vienna)

Pragmatism, Relationalism, and Relativism

In the first part of my talk, I will briefly outline a pragmatist approach to the philosophy of science. In order to show that pragmatism is indeed a valuable addition to the philosophy of science, I will contrast Robert Brandom's *rationalist pragmatism* with some familiar positions in the realism debate. In the second part, I will use the example Richard Healey's (2011) pragmatist interpretation of quantum mechanics to illustrate some key features of a such a pragmatist approach. I will focus on his idea that quantum state ascriptions are *relational* or *perspectival*: they can only be made relative to an agent-situation, and observers that are situated differently will ascribe different states to the same system of interest. I will subsequently try to answer what kind of relativism, if any, these results may lead to. In the last part, I will try to connect these issues back to the larger context of the philosophy of science. The general lesson to be learned, I argue, is that pragmatism is hostile towards any kind of dualism of facts and values, and subsequently, I will ask whether this means that a pragmatist has something to offer to a relativist.

Panel 3: Ethics and Politics

Mirela Fuš (Oslo/St. Andrews)

Effects of Conceptual Deficiency: A Peculiar Case of Generics

The semantic value of expressions involving certain concepts can have bad effects. These effects fall into a category of conceptual deficiency that Cappelen (forthcoming) classifies as objectionable effects of semantic value. He further distinguishes between: (i) effects on theorizing; (ii) morally, politically, or socially objectionable effects; and (iii) cognitive effects. In the recent literature about generic statements there has been scant agreement. One reason for this lies in the difficulty of providing a unified semantics for generics (see Leslie 2007, 2008; Cohen 1996; Liebesman 2011; Asher and Pelletier (2012); Nickel 2008, 2016; Sterken 2015). Furthermore, there has been a burgeoning interest in how to treat generics such as “Blacks are violent” or “Muslims are terrorists.” They raise concern since their use is considered to pave the way for discrimination, stereotypes, hate speech, social injustice, etc. (see Haslanger 2011; Saul forthcoming; Leslie forthcoming; Anderson, Haslanger, Langton 2012). This is not surprising since, as I will show, generic statements can sometimes contain all three (of the above mentioned) effects, and in certain cases, one and the same generic statement may reflect all of them. In short, I believe that (i) our notion of generic operator Gen is deficient (this should hold for generics in general, regardless of what other concepts a particular generic statement may include); (ii) certain generic statements can also contain further deficient concepts (these are often generic statements that contain certain political, moral, religious, pejorative, racist, gender concepts); (iii) certain generics have negative cognitive effects (these often include generics from (ii)). I follow Cappelen’s classification and focus on detecting and disentangling these effects of conceptual deficiency for generic statements in order to shed light on some pressing problems for generics. I find this step to be necessary before considering options for their adequate treatment.

Ladislav Koreň (Hradec Králové)

Empirical Boost to Modest Moral Relativism

Sensible moral relativists, I take it, typically wish us to appreciate two things about morality:

- there is a plurality of moral sensibilities (value systems) that give rise to substantive judgmental differences in what is regarded good/bad, right/wrong, etc.
- these differences cut often very deep so that they could not be eliminated (adjudicated) by

reference to a set of values (or corresponding norms) supposed to form a universal “essence” of morality.

So construed, moral relativism might (perhaps should) allow for some universal values, if only because some commonalities might be needed to warrant us in identifying and interpreting a system of values as a "moral" system. That said, modest moral relativism groups together different moral sensibilities as variations on "roughly the same theme", without embracing the idea of the “essence” of morality (cf. D. Velleman, *Foundations of Moral Relativism*, OpenBook Publishers, 2013). In my talk, I selectively review recent empirical research that modest moral relativists might welcome as a grist for their mill. First, I review a research conducted by cultural psychologists and experimental philosophers indicating differences in moral judgements that reflect differences in value-orientations rather than “factual beliefs”. I then turn to a research in social psychology (Haidt’s moral foundations theory) that unambiguously gestures in the direction of moral pluralism that has a relativist spin. Finally, I review a research on folk moral judgments that indicates - contra the claims made by a number of moral objectivists or realists - a stable representation of moral-relativist intuitions in population (including a range of conditions under which they are likely to be elicited). I conclude with a couple of general comments on what lessons pertinent to the traditional debate about the nature of morality we are entitled to draw from these research trends.

Katharina Sodoma (Vienna)

Moral Relativism and Moral Progress

According to moral relativism what is morally right or wrong is relative to different “moral systems”. It is often taken to be a major problem for such a view that it cannot account for moral progress. Progress can be analyzed as “change for the better”. This analysis splits the notion into two components: a descriptive element of change and an evaluative element of goodness. A simple argument for why relativists cannot explain progress runs along the lines of the following: Relativists have to think of change in moral outlook as substituting one system for another system. But they are also committed to the claim that all systems are on a par. Therefore relativists cannot account for change being for the better (or worse).

However, all versions of moral relativism have to ensure that there is a plurality of alternative *moral* systems and that it is possible for agents to recognize systems other than their own as rival *moral* options. In order to achieve this, versions of moral relativism need to offer a sufficiently rich conception of morality as such. This idea will pick out something that all moral systems *qua*

moral systems have in common. One way to achieve this is by specifying a *function* morality has to fulfill. But as J. David Velleman has made explicit, any idea of morality of this kind will *ipso facto* contain resources for appraising change as more or less progressive. Based on this argument I will explore the possibilities for combining moral relativism with a substantial account of moral progress that is still relativistic in an interesting sense.