Radical Epistemological Relativism:
A Defense

by Agustín Moreno

Radical epistemological relativism (RER) is the view that every true proposition is true relative to at least some context or referential frame. The logical negation of such a thesis would be epistemological absolutism, according to which at least some true proposition is true independently of any context or referential frame.

The standard objection against RER is that it is logically incoherent and self-refuting, since if RER is true then it is true relative to some context or referential frame but false in others. Therefore, if RER is true, then it is false.

This objection is unwarranted, since it assumes that RER is true just in some context but not in every context. But this assumption is not known to be true and it is not required by RER. It is consistent with RER that some propositions, including RER itself, could maintain the same truth-value in every possible context or referential frame in which they are meaningful.

The objector could suggest that in such a case RER would be an absolute truth, not a relative one, since it would be true in every context or referential frame.

But this objection misrepresents what epistemological absolutism means. As explained above, as a logical negation of RER, epistemological absolutism asserts that at least some true proposition is true *independently of any* context or referential frame. But a true proposition which is true in every context or referential frame is not equivalent to a proposition which is true regardless of (or independently of) any context or referential frame.

The distinction is subtle but it is key to understand the logic of RER: a true proposition could be true in every context in which it is meaningful and still be relative to (and dependent of) at least some context or referential frame. Because to be "relative to at least some context or referential frame" just means that the truth-value of a proposition is not independent of any context whatsoever, that is, that the existence of at least some context or referential frame constitutes a *necessary* condition of the proposition being true. But this fact says nothing about the number

of contexts in which the proposition in question is meaningful and true, let alone the number of contexts in which that proposition maintains the same truth-value. RER does not imply that the truth-value of all propositions *must* change from a context to another nor that the same truth-value of some propositions cannot be maintained along every context in which these propositions are meaningful.

Critics of relativism often conflates the contextual dependence of the truth-value of every proposition (which is what RER holds) with the contingent property of *some* propositions in virtue of which they change their truth-value in different contexts (the latter is only a *sufficient* condition for a proposition being relative). The change of truth-values of certain propositions from context to another is, as said, just a contingent property of them which proves that these propositions are relative or context-dependent; but the absence of any change in the truth value of propositions from a context to another is not proof that these propositions don't depend, for their truth-value, on the existence of at least some context, which is everything what RER requires.

The omission of these subtle conceptual distinctions explains why some epistemological absolutists typically have employed propositions which maintain their truth-values along every context as an objection against RER. As a matter of fact, the epistemological absolutist is correct that if a proposition is absolutely true (i.e., true independently of any context), then certainly it will be true in every context, since it won't be affected by any particular context. The absolutist's mistake is to think that the reverse holds, namely, that whether a proposition is true in every context, then it is in virtue of being absolutely true. The latter reasoning, in addition to affirming the consequent, is also a *non-sequitur*.

The objector could still insist that if a proposition is true in every context, or at least in every context in which it is meaningful, then its truth-value is not affected by different contexts and this proves that the proposition is absolute in the sense of being independent of any context.

In response, we have to say that if a proposition maintains the same truth-value in every context, then certainly it shows that different contexts don't affect its truth-value; but it does not logically follow that the proposition in question could maintain the same truth value, or any truth-value for that matter, independently of (and hence, in the total absence of) any context whatsoever, which is what epistemological absolutism requires.

That a proposition maintains the same truth-value in every context is, at most, a necessary condition of epistemological absolutism, but not a sufficient condition of it. Because, as argued previously, it is consistent with RER that the truth value of certain propositions, while dependent of at least some context, as a matter of fact will preserve the same truth value along every context in which it is meaningful. Therefore, the number of contexts in which a true proposition maintains its same truth-value cannot settle the question whether such a proposition is absolutely or relatively true. It is still an open question whether the proposition's conservation of its same truth-value in all the contexts is a consequence of it being absolute (i.e., independent of any context) or simply a contingent manifestation or property of that particular proposition which, just as a matter of contingent fact, happens to maintain the same truth-value in all the contexts, despite not being independent of any context.

What epistemological absolutism asserts, and RER denies, is that the truth-value of some propositions is independent of any context at all. Therefore, in order to prove epistemological absolutism and refute RER, we have to find at least one proposition which is true, not merely in every context, but *independently of any context whatsoever*. And it is hard to think of any proposition which satisfies this requirement.

Perhaps mathematical propositions like 2+2=4 are thought as plausible candidates of absolutely true propositions. But as mathematicians have shown, a proposition like 2+2=4 is true relative to the context provided by standard arithmetic which depends on the conventional adoption of Peano's axioms. In alternative systems of arithmetic, for example in those which employ only negative numbers, the proposition 2+2=4 is not true. In fact it is meaningless, since in such a context positive numbers like "2" or "4" don't exist at all. Likewise, we can conventionally construct alternative systems of arithmetic, like the clock arithmetic that we use everyday, in which propositions like 24+1=1 are true and in which 24+1=25 (which in standard arithmetic would be necessarily true) is false.

Another plausible candidates of absolutely true propositions are the laws of classical logic. But the case for the laws of classical logic being relative and dependent on the context provided by structure of language, the particular neurophysiology underlying the *Homo Sapiens*' cognitive faculties and the overall nature of the human mind seems compelling. In addition, the relativism regarding

the laws of classical logic seems strongly confirmed by the development of alternative systems of logic, some of which, like dialetheism[1], reject even the most basic of the laws of classical logic, namely, the law of non-contradiction.

A possible rejoinder to the last view could be to offer a Platonic account of the classical laws of logic according to which such laws exist independently of any mind and, *a fortiori*, of any conventionally chosen perspective which, in turn, suggests that such laws are true independently of any context and, therefore, absolutely true. In response, we could say that the same Platonic account could be provided of non-classical, alternative systems of logic and the relativistic implications would surface again (in this case, suggesting that the Platonic realm embraces multiple *abstract* perspectives). On the other hand, the objections against Platonism regarding *abstracta* in general are very strong and there are a number of plausible anti-realist alternatives to account for abstract objects[2].

Another plausible candidate for absolutely true propositions are scientific propositions considered to be rock-solid, indisputable scientific facts like "The earth orbits the sun". However, as some of the world's greatest physicists have noted, the truth-value of such a proposition is relative to certain coordinate systems which are chosen by convention.

According to Albert Einstein and Leopold Infeld,

> **We shall then be able to apply the laws of nature to any CS [coordinate system]. The struggle, so violent in the early days of science, between the views of Ptolemy and Copernicus would then be quite meaningless. Either CS could be used with equal justification. The two sentences, "the sun is at rest and the Earth moves" or "the sun moves and the Earth is at rest" would simply mean two different conventions concerning two different CS" [3].**

Another world's leading astrophysicist, Stephen Hawking, has recently defended Einstein's reasoning:

> **Although it is not uncommon for people to say that Copernicus proved Ptolemy wrong, that is not true... [O]ne can use either picture as a model of the universe, for our observation of the heavens can be**

explained by assuming either the earth or the sun to be at rest" [4].

The intuition of epistemological absolutism seems to derive from the habit of holding beliefs and propositions to be true without reflecting sufficiently nor self-critically on the possible context (or contexts) implicit in them. If we add the human thirst for certainty and the fear that our cherished beliefs could be actually false in other contexts, then the psychological, emotional and intellectual motivation for epistemological absolutism seems understandable.

But we have seen that even the best candidates of propositions considered as absolutely true, when examined carefully and critically, are context-dependent and even capable of changing or losing its truth-value in different contexts. In addition, no single proposition has been indisputably proven to be true independently of any actual, possible or conceivable context or referential frame. This provides *prima facie* evidence for RER or, at least, to think that RER has not been definitively refuted. And this suggests, therefore, that RER is a plausible, reasonable and interesting philosophical thesis worthy of further development and exploration.

Footnotes

1. See Priest, Graham: *Doubt to be a liar* (Oxford University Press, 2008). For discussion, see Priest, Graham; Beall, J.C., and Garb, Armour (Ed.): *The Law of Non-Contradiction*. (Clarendon Press, 2007).

2. For an excellent critique of Platonism, see Cheyne, Colin: *Knowledge, Cause and Abstract Objects: Causal Objections to Platonism* (Springer, 2001). For a more recent and sophisticated criticism of Platonism, including a wide-range philosophical discussion of the multiple anti-realist alternatives regarding the ontology of abstract objects, see Craig, William Lane. *God Over All: Divine Aseity and the Challenge of Platonism* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

3. Einstein, Albert (ed.): *The evolution of physics* (Simon & Schuster, 1962, p. 212)

4. Hawking, Stephen and Mlodinow, Leonard: *The Grand Design* (Bantam, 2012, p. 41).

Email: philojuris@gmail.com