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The Fallacy of Naturalism as a Response to the Relativist

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ABSTRACT: This article is a response to Howard Sankey's (2010) 'Witchcraft, Relativism and the Problem of the Criterion.' It seeks to refute two central arguments that are brought forward by Sankey. First, that the relativist is skeptic about norm-justification and second, that naturalism could serve as a response to the relativist. I will demonstrate, by the use of historical cases, that epistemic norms cannot be subjected to empirical evaluation without using the very norms that are the target of analysis. Finally, I will reject the assertion that the conclusion of my critique implies a form of equal validity.

KEYWORDS: Epistemic norms – equal validity – naturalism – objectivity – relativism.

1. Sankey's argument

In his article 'Witchcraft, Relativism and the Problem of the Criterion,' Sankey (2010) aims at a naturalist response to relativism. In doing so, he structures his argument into three parts. First, Sankey makes an argument for epistemic relativism by using the skeptic's strategy, arguing that, whilst "relativism and skepticism pull in opposite directions" (Sankey 2010, 4),

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they agree that "there is no such thing as knowledge or rational justification *in any* objective sense" (Sankey 2010, 4; emphasis added). To be more specific, Sankey argues that the relativist can employ the skeptical problem of the criterion, i.e. that "the attempt to justify the criterion leads either to an infinite regress, circularity or unjustified adoption of the criterion" (Sankey 2010, 5). Therefore, "Justification is an entirely internal matter of compliance with norms that are operative within a belief system" (Sankey 2010, 6). Secondly, to avoid the skeptical conclusion, Sankey uses Chisholm's (1989) particularist approach in which the "claim to knowledge is grounded in particular instances of knowledge which are established before one undertakes the independent task of formulating criteria" (Sankey 2010, 8) or epistemic norms which are employed to justify a belief. Through this move Sankey does not even allow the skeptic to get a foot in the door since, in contrast to a methodist approach starting with criteria for knowledge and epistemic justification, his particularist stance already starts with particular, uncontroversial cases of knowledge and only then seeks to identify criteria. Thirdly, Sankey argues that empirical evaluation can serve as a touchstone against which these epistemic norms can be tested.

2. The objectivities of knowledge and judgment for the relativist

To start with, I deem it necessary to emphasize Sankey's initial argument that the relativist, like the skeptic, denies that there is rational justification or knowledge "*in any* objective sense" (Sankey 2010, 4; emphasis added). In what follows, I will draw upon Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison's (1992; 2007; also Galison 1998) historical study on the notion of objectivity—an epistemic norm[2]—to demonstrate that the relativist can suggest that there is rational justification or knowledge in an objective sense, namely a relativistic one. On this view, the relativist/absolutist discussion must not be confused with a discussion about subjectivism and objectivism.

[2] I will sometimes also refer to epistemic virtues. For the sake of this article those two terms—epistemic virtues and epistemic norms—can be taken synonymously. This is also in line with Daton and Galison (2007, 40), who argue, "Epistemic virtues are virtues properly so-called: they are norms that are internalized and enforced."

"It is no good rejecting relativism merely on the grounds that one believes in the 'objectivity' of knowledge. Relativists can, and do, believe in the objectivity of knowledge. It is only when a case is made for absolute objectivity that relativism is challenged" (Bloor 2007, 256). In what follows, the use of Daston and Galison's illuminating study serves to highlight both the indispensability of the notion of objectivity for the relativist as well as its relativistic character. (I am well aware that Daston and Galison would object to my interpretation of their investigation since they strictly demarcate historicism from relativism; I will reject this demarcation below.)

In their work, Daston and Galison differentiate between three historical phases—the pre-19th, the 19th, and the 20th century—and illustrate the transformations and tensions of objective judgment within and between these periods. In particular, they focus on the question of how objectivity has been practiced, employed, and mobilized, or, in other words, how the epistemic norm of objectivity has been entangled with Western scientific and philosophical practice and thought. The pre-19th-century regime focused on the concept of truth-to-nature. A supposed genius, who was able to "extract a form more perfect than the best objects we find this side of our sensory limits" (Galison 1998, 352), seeks to show the hidden, true, metaphysical image of nature. The 19th century was characterized by a shift towards mechanistic objectivism. Scientists should refrain from any form of interpretation, speculation, and philosophical commitment. The task of a scientist was mechanistic, comparable to a machine. This period was characterized by "the modernity of manufacture, the dynamics of control, and scientific labor management" (Galison 1998, 352) seeking to create a mechanical image rather than a metaphysical one. The 20th century marked a radical shift, which was characterized by two new challengers to mechanical objectivity: structural objectivity and trained judgment. Proponents of the former (such as Frege, Carnap, Poincaré, or Russell) identified objectivity as abstract structures—structures that survive and are unaffected by "translation, transmission, theory change, and differences among thinking beings due to physiology, psychology, history, culture, language, and (as in Planck's fantasy) species" (Daston & Galison 2007, 256). The latter—trained judgment—emphasized that the idea to picture nature "as it is" and, thus, let her speak for herself, was no longer desired. Rather, trained experts created interpreted images through a process of judgment (based on training, familiarity, and experience). In contrast to the pre-19th

century, this image did not seek to display the true workings behind an observable nature, but rather to facilitate teaching, communication, and the summarizing of knowledge through exaggeration.

Without discussing these different knowledge regimes in any detail, what I take to be a crucial insight of this historical study of objectivity is that knowledge *must* always be objective to be recognized as such. Knowledge, in other words, implies objectivity. Neither would an expert, regardless how well-trained, be acknowledged to possess knowledge about nature in the 19th century when intentionally manipulating her empirical observations through exaggeration or any other form of interpretation; nor would a person, regardless how genius-like she might present herself, be acknowledged to possess scientific knowledge about nature in the 20th century without having undergone a pre-defined educational or training process. Thus, objectivity can be considered an epistemic norm that promotes epistemic goals such as truth and knowledge. This norm, however, is always produced and practiced within a particular belief-value system[3] (e.g. in the examples above, the pre-19th, the 19th, and the 20th century systems). In other words, *objective* justification—i.e. the compliance with this collectively and socially accepted epistemic norm—is inevitable for knowledge to be accepted as such within a belief-value community. Objectivity, however, is itself variable and relative to this belief-value system and its desires, fears, technological developments, self-conceptions, philosophical positions, and so forth. In this sense, "scientific theories, methods and acceptable results are social conventions (...), that is, the product of

[3] I use the term belief-value system, as opposed to the often-used notion of epistemic system, to highlight that epistemic concerns are highly interlinked with non-epistemic ones and cannot be strictly demarcated from one another. I doing so, I follow Kinzel and Kusch (2017, 18ff), who discuss Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer's 'Leviathan and the Air-Pump' (1985), which deals with the conflict between Robert Boyle and Thomas Hobbes. They stress that the controversy between Hobbes and Boyle concerned a range of inextricably linked questions including metaphysics, engineering, credibility, epistemology, aims, politics, and topics. In this way, Kinzel and Kusch seek to highlight that one cannot easily (or at all) isolate questions of epistemology from other concerns and dimensions. Hence, different systems—in which the epistemic norms of 'truth-to-nature', 'mechanistic objectivism', 'structural objectivity', or 'trained judgment' are produced and practiced—should be understood as coherent belief-value systems (as opposed to mere epistemic systems).

collective influences and resources and as peculiar to the culture and its present circumstances" (Bloor 1991, 43-44). 'Being justified' can therefore be understood dialectically; it is a "social status granted by others to the believer" (Kusch 2010, 878).

3. Remarks on Daston and Galison's *Objectivity*

To avoid being accused of putting my own words in Daston and Galison's mouth and giving the impression that they would docilely agree with my relativistic interpretation of their historical investigation, I deem it essential to comment on (one of) their expected objections. Both of them are eager to stress the non-relativistic nature of their historicist study of objectivity. In this context, they argue that "it is a misconception, albeit an entrenched one, that historicism and relativism stride hand in hand, that to reveal that an idea or value has a history is ipso facto to debunk it" (Daston & Galison 2007, 376). In the same vein, they continue, "far from relativizing these virtues, history exhibits their rationale. (...) Truth-to-nature, mechanical objectivity, and trained judgement all combat genuine dangers to knowledge" (Daston & Galison 2007, 376-377). These arguments, however, cannot be granted meekly. In his review on Daston and Galison's (2007) book *Objectivity*, Kusch (2009, 130) puts the main objections to their non-relativistic historicism straight:

> First, relativism is not skepticism; relativism does not equal "debunking." Second, to declare all epistemic virtues equally justified in light of timeless "dangers to knowledge" is to revoke the previous insistence on the historicity of knowledge. And third, and perhaps most importantly, Daston and Galison's quick way with relativism is ahistorical. Only a century ago, and thus very much in the period at issue in Objectivity, the relationship between historicism and relativism was extensively discussed among the likes of Dilthey, Heidegger, Husserl, Nietzsche, Rickert, Simmel, and Windelband. Whatever emerged from this eventually abandoned debate, it certainly included the insight that the historicist can avoid relativism only by either positing a telos of historical development or treating the views of different periods as components of one overall truth. Neither option now seems particularly attractive.

Kusch's third argument deserves further comments. The restricted scope of this article, however, only allows me to briefly sketch the cornerstones of an argument that seeks to reject models of scientific development that posit an overall truth or telos. In doing so, I will reproduce a model brought forward by David Bloor (2007).[4]

Imagine a line AB—A on the left and B on the right end of the line. AB represents knowledge. Add the point C somewhere in the middle. Now, A stands for a prior state of belief and C illustrates where we stand today. The question is obvious: what about B? The first option is to interpret B as absolute truth about reality. Thus, when we improve the accuracy of our theories or reject a hypothesis as false, C approaches B. However, since AB represents knowledge, i.e. beliefs about reality, reality itself can, in fact, not depict B. The line may presuppose reality, but it cannot express it.

> Treating reality as if it could be the end point of the line AB amounts to confusing reality with some theory or assertion about reality. But if the point B registers some theory of reality, then the interpretation of the diagram as a picture of progress is rendered circular. To say we are "getting closer" to reality depends on the tacit assumption that we already know the truth about reality, otherwise we could not enter it onto the diagram. "Getting closer" to B can only describe a process by which one piece of (assumed) knowledge gets closer to another piece of (assumed) knowledge, or one of our beliefs is brought closer to another of our beliefs. Equating B with "reality" is therefore, at best, a way of celebrating (and presupposing) the claims of the current state of understanding. (Bloor 2007, 266)

So, let's try another option. Instead of depicting the line AB of finite length, we can imagine it as being of infinite length. Hence, we can approach truth without running into the troubles of implicitly asserting to already know the truth about reality. However, also this attempt fails since ultimately it makes no sense and would not allow for any progress at all, because "an infinite quantity minus a finite quantity is still infinite" (Bloor 2007, 264). Therefore, instead of considering historical development or progress of knowledge as a progression towards a telos or one

[4] For more detailed discussions on this matter see Bloor (2007) or Kusch (2004).

overall truth, the more viable option is to regard it as "a move *away* from past problems and frustrations, not a move *toward* an unknown terminus" (Bloor 2007, 266). The conception of development or progress as heading towards an overall goal or foregone conclusion revives theological positions such as those of the religious detractors of Darwin's evolution theory, who could not accept it without construing something like a "biological heaven," an ultimate telos (Bloor 2007, 267). "Without realizing what they are doing, today's antirelativists are replaying this old scenario" (Bloor 2007, 267).

The 'move *away* from past problems and frustrations' is evident in Daston and Galison's study, for they demonstrate how the epistemic norm of objectivity and its transformations or transitions are rooted in historical fears. They also show, however, that overcoming fears produces new ones and that gaining knowledge is always tantamount with the production of new ignorance, "unknown unknowns" (Beck 2009), or "unrecognized ignorance" (Merton 1987)—conceptions that stands in stark contrast with the historicist idea of progress as heading towards an overall truth. The often-used metaphor of the light cone exemplifies this understanding of progress. The light cone itself demonstrates knowledge, whilst its border constitutes the unknown. As Albert Einstein put it, "as our circle of knowledge expands, so does the circumference of darkness surrounding it."

The pre-19th-century move away from the Enlightenment's notion of the self as passive, fragmented, and receptive resulted in an active interpretation and selection of sensations (i.e. truth-to-nature) "to bring them under epistemic control" (Kusch 2009, 127). Consequently, this constituted, amongst others, a starting point for a new epistemic fear in the 19th century, namely the danger of excessive interpretation. Mechanistic objectivity was a means to contain this danger. As a result, the rise of objectivity practiced as trained judgment in the 20th century included the claim "that mechanical objectivity had gone too far in excluding the scientific subject" (Kusch 2009, 128). To put the argument above straight, whilst overcoming past problems and fears, each transition and transformation of the epistemic norm of objectivity has also inherently brought about new forms of ignorance and epistemic fears (accompanied by new technologies, topics, politics, metaphysical assumptions, etc.) that have been unknown before. This argument *inter alia* draws into question the historicist idea of treating the different periods as components of one overall truth as well as the positing

of a telos and, therefore, also challenges Daston and Galison's demarcation of historicism from relativism.

4. The problem of the criterion and the fallacious naturalist response to the relativist

I will briefly restate what has been said so far. Objectivity is a socially and collectively accepted epistemic norm that always evolves in a particular belief-value system and can only be understood against the background of this system (which cannot be reduced to an epistemic system, but involves a range of inextricably linked questions including metaphysics, technologies, credibility, epistemology, aims, politics, topics, period-specific fears, self-conceptions, etc.). I have rejected the idea that the transformation or transition of these systems heads towards an overall goal—rather they move away from past problems and, in doing so, will encounter new ones (many of them created through the very transition). In doing so, I sought to highlight that historicism cannot avoid relativism. Hence, different belief-value systems (such as the pre-19th, the 19th, and the 20th century systems) produce different forms of objectivity (e.g. truth-to-nature, mechanistic objectivism, structural objectivity, or trained judgment). This understanding, however, does not diminish the central role of objectivity. Belief is only socially accepted as knowledge *iff* it entails objective justification, i.e. *iff* the believer complies with the collectively accepted social norm of objectivity. Hence, for the relativist, in contrast to what Sankey suggests, there is such a thing as knowledge or rational justification in an objective sense. The relativist only rejects the equation of objectivity and absolutism.

What does this tell us about Sankey's argument about the problem of the criterion? Indeed, not much new. Justification is, in this sense, still "an entirely internal matter of compliance with norms that are operative within a belief system" (Sankey 2010, 6) and, therefore, attempts to justify the criterion will sooner or later run into "an infinite regress, circularity or unjustified adoption of the criterion" (Sankey 2010, 5). Apart from the last aspect—the unjustified adoption of the criterion—I still agree with Sankey. To address this aspect, however, I first have to build up my argument. Therefore, for now, I will focus on Sankey's next *three steps*, which will

get us apart, and address the issue of justification subsequently towards the end of this section.

First, Sankey applies Chisholm's particularist methodical approach starting with "particular cases of knowledge that we possess in order to identify suitable criteria" (Sankey 2010, 6-7). *Secondly*, he argues,

> It is possible to combine a particularist stance with the naturalist view that epistemic norms are subject to empirical evaluation (...) When we proceed in this manner, we employ empirical knowledge which we obtain by means of experience as a touchstone against which epistemic norms may be tested. (Sankey 2010, 8-9)

Finally, he concludes that such a naturalist approach "enables a distinction to be made between epistemic norms for which there is an objective, rational justification, and those for which there is no such justification" (Sankey 2010, 9). In what follows, I will elaborate on these three steps one by one.

Let me start with the particularist methodology and remain with Sankey's example of the Azande's Poison Oracle.[5] The Azande, an African tribe of the Sudan that was studied in detail by Evans-Pritchard (1937), attribute various misfortunes in their daily-life to witchcraft. Additionally, they "employ a number of techniques to determine the action of unseen forces. One technique, which Evans-Pritchard calls the 'poison oracle,' is used to answer a broad range of questions not limited to witchcraft" (Sankey 2010, 2). Sankey argues that these questions include many situations in which "empirical matters of fact are of clear relevance to the question of whether the oracle is able to serve as a reliable guide to the truth" (Sankey 2010, 10). Let the following sentence be such a clear—and empirically verifiable—instance of knowledge: '*It was raining during the night*.' Let us

[5] As a side note, I would like to remark that, whilst representing a standard case in the literature, the Azande's Poison Oracle does not constitute an ideal example for epistemological questions, for it seems at least questionable whether the Oracle has *any* epistemic function at all. Recent analyses (e.g. Leeson 2014) rather suggest that the Oracle serves as a means for social cohesion. Nevertheless, in what follows, I take—for the sake of argument—the Oracle to have an epistemic function to establish a fruitful argument against Sankey.

further assume that the Azande's Poison Oracle states, '*It was not raining during the night*.'

Sankey's next step is to combine particularism with naturalism and to consequently subject the concrete instance to empirical investigation, which seeks to promote epistemic goals such as knowledge and truth. As has been argued above, knowledge, to be accepted as such, entails objective justification, but—and I am stressing this again—objectivity is itself relative to a belief-value system. This means that the result of an empirical test varies in accordance with the practice of the epistemic norm of objectivity (practiced within a belief-value system) as the latter always implicates specific methods. To test empirically whether the Poison Oracle's statement '*It was not raining during the night*' is objectively justified one could, for example, put a beaker outside and, if there is water inside in the morning, conclude that it was raining during the night. Thus, in this empirical evaluation, the conclusion that it was raining is based on a mechanistic measuring of the beaker. However, the same situation could be evaluated differently when being subjected to an empirical investigation that relies on an interpretative form of objectivity. In this case, it could be argued that putting a beaker outside and measuring it in the morning is not enough. The water could also have originated from morning dew or any other influences. In this case, to objectively justify whether it was raining, a trained expert would have to interpret the condition of the water found in the beaker using weather charts and other forms of interpretative means. Even if the empirical investigation based on interpretative objectivity would yield the same result, namely that it was raining, an empirical investigation based on an objective notion of truth-to-nature could still produce different outcomes. The true, metaphysical picture of rain would have to be exposed by a "genius" (e.g. a shaman, witch doctor, etc.). This conception is particularly relevant in the context of the Azande and their complex understanding of witchcraft including scenarios in which it was not the rain, but witches who could have filled the beaker or have made the soil wet.

The question then is: How could we test epistemic practices like the Poison Oracle or the measurement of the beaker, which are said to promote epistemic goals such as truth and knowledge and therefore constitute diverging epistemic norms, empirically without using diverging epistemic norms (e.g. objectivity based on truth-to-nature versus a mechanistic understanding of objectivity)? At first sight, this only seems to be an option

if we consider empirical evaluation universal, supra-historical, or absolute. I will not comment on this flawed comprehension of empirical evaluation since even Sankey explicitly rejects such a view and emphasizes that, because of this rejection, he prefers the 'objective/relative-dichotomy' rather than the 'absolute/relative-dichotomy.' It is worth quoting Sankey (2013, 143) at length here to understand his view on that matter:

> When we speak about absolute epistemic standards, or about standards being absolutely justified, this appears to suggest that epistemic standards are invariant or universally applicable. (...) It is difficult to reconcile such a view with the idea that epistemic norms may be subject to variation across historical and cultural context, as well as intellectual discipline. If we allow that methodological rules undergo variation in the history of science, or that standards of rationality may vary between cultures, this conflicts with the claim that epistemic norms are absolute in the sense of being invariant or applicable in all contexts. But no such problem arises if we work instead with a notion of objectivity. For while we may allow that there is variation with respect to the norms that are actually employed in different contexts, this does not require us to allow that all norms are objectively correct. Different norms may be employed in different periods in the history of science, or in different cultures. But some norms may be objectively better than others. (...) In short, my reason for preferring the idiom of objectivity is that it allows for the variation of norms. It enables us to say that different norms may be employed in different contexts, though not all norms employed in all contexts are equally justified.

Epistemic standards undergo variations across historical and cultural contexts, as well as intellectual disciplines and the notion of supra-historical or absolute norms must be rejected. No objections in this respect. But how, as Sankey (2013, 143) suggests, to assess whether "some norms may be objectively better than others"? The only way to do so is to evaluate norms via norms or objectivity via objectivity. Put differently, as I have tried to illustrate above, empirical knowledge is always obtained via the compliance with a particular epistemic norm of objectivity (e.g. empirical knowledge about the question whether it rained during the night already *entails*, in its method of investigation, a particular epistemic

norm, and thus empirical testing of such norms implies the employment of a norm in this process of testing). Hence, to test a norm via empirical evaluation, as Sankey recommends, implies that the empirical investigator already uses a particular norm. As a result, whatever may be demonstrated regarding an epistemic norm like objectivity, it can only be shown against the background of a particular belief-value system. As Rorty (2009, 9-10) puts it,

> The common message of Wittgenstein, Dewey, and Heidegger is a historicist one. Each of the three reminds us that the investigations of the foundations of knowledge or morality or language or society may simply be apologetics, attempts to eternalize a certain contemporary language-game, social practice or self-image.

To sum up, in contrast to Sankey's understanding of empirical evaluation, I have tried to show that to address the empirical question of whether the Poison Oracle provides objectively justified merits one inherently uses a relative form of objective justification. Put differently, the attempt to evaluate epistemic norms is itself based on the practice of epistemic norms and those, as has been argued, are relative. The empirical evaluation-efforts are therefore always relative to the empirical methods, which vary in accordance with the practice of the relative epistemic norm of objectivity. To conclude what has been said so far, I tried to argue that, contrary to Sankey's argument, a naturalist approach does not constitute a position that could depict the Azande as being unjustified in their beliefs, as an empirical evaluation that seeks to justify an epistemic norm objectively is itself always based on a relative conception of objective justification. Crucially, however, Sankey's (2010, 9) conclusion that a naturalist approach "enables a distinction to be made between epistemic norms for which there is an objective, rational justification, and those for which there is no such justification" must not right away be rejected. The same goes for his remark that the "variation with respect to the norms that are actually employed in different contexts (...) does not require us to allow that all norms are objectively correct" (Sankey 2013, 143). However, and this is the decisive point, we must add that, even if epistemic norms are not arbitrary (because not all knowledge about nature or society will prove socially credible as well as practically utile) fundamentally contradictory epistemic norms can exist.

Empirical evaluation (and justification) will always draw upon these norms and is therefore itself relative.

5. Consequences and equal validity

What are the consequences of the argument that we could not prove the Azande unjustified in their belief through empirical investigation (i.e. through the naturalist approach that Sankey suggests)? Do we have to accept epistemic norms such as the Poison Oracle as being equally valid to, let's say, weather charts or meteorological predictions? The answer to that question is an unequivocal no. I will not grant the Poison Oracle such as status. In this section I will, non-exhaustively, sketch an argument for my rejection of the Azande's Poison Oracle.

To begin with, I cannot grant Sankey's argument that the relativist has to regard epistemic norms (and thus epistemic justification) as merely arbitrary. According to Sankey, the skeptic is skeptical about both norm and belief justification, whereas the relativist is only skeptical regarding norm justification and differs from the skeptic in the sense that she holds on to the idea of belief justification.[6] Sankey therefore construes a position of a relativist who considers all norms equally good or bad, but who can still operate with the norms to justify beliefs. This construal of the relativist position, however, is fundamentally misleading. First, as I have argued, not all norms will prove socially credible in their local contexts even if contradictory norms can exist. As Bloor (1991, 43) puts it, not "anything can be made a convention. And arbitrary decision play little role in social life. The constraints on what may become a convention, or a norm, or an institution, are social credibility and practical utility." In this sense, and in contrast to

[6] Hence, belief justification does not imply norm justification. The argument that the relativist is *only* skeptical about the latter hints at the (correct) idea that she, in contrast to the skeptic, acknowledges that we *can* attain knowledge since we can justify our beliefs by using particular norms. At the same time, Sankey holds the (flawed) idea that the relativist arbitrarily picks any epistemic norm—since, according to him, she considers all of them equally good or bad—to justify a belief. Hence, following Sankey, the relativist can justify beliefs (and thus is not skeptical about belief justification and can attain knowledge) via the use of epistemic norms, which are themselves unjustifiable (thus, she is said to be skeptical about norm justification).

Sankey's understanding, the relativist is not skeptical with regards to norm justification. Norms can be justified, not in an absolute way, but in light of local causes of credibility.

Second, and perhaps most importantly, Sankey's argument only holds if the relativist accepts that all epistemic norms are equally good or bad, i.e. the claim of equal validity. However, cart-carrying relativists such as Bloor, Wittgenstein or Feyerabend have vigorously rejected the idea of equal validity. Whilst not denying that equal validity may be accepted in rare cases, such as beauty or taste, it cannot be formulated as an indispensable condition for relativism. Hence, even if objective, rational justification exists for two contradictory norms, it does not follow that they must be considered equally valid. The relativist can, and should, reject particular epistemic norms. This rejection, however, can never be based on anything absolute, but will always be made against the background of a particular belief-value system and will have pragmatic roots. In what follows, I will roughly outline such a point of view.

At this stage, it is fruitful to remind ourselves of the idea that holding knowledge is closely bound to the practice of specific epistemic norms or virtues. As has been argued, however, these epistemic norms are always produced within a particular belief-value system, which inextricably links epistemic and non-epistemic concerns. Let us briefly consider the 19th century belief-value system,[7] which has been discussed by Daston and Galison. Here, the epistemic norm of mechanical objectivity evolved within a complex network of epistemic (e.g. fears of excessive interpretation, attempts to establish common and comparable scientific standards) and non-epistemic developments (e.g. the invention of photography, new forms of labor management to increase economic efficiency, new dynamics of control, particular gender roles). With regards to the latter, Daston and Galison (2007, 202) argue, "the scientific selves (...) were doubtless inflected by local accents of class and gender: in the ethos of mechanical objectivity, for example, it is difficult to miss the Victorian admonitions to hard work or the masculine overtones of 'unveiling' nature (or in the exclusionary phrase 'men of science')." Hence, non-epistemic virtues or norms play a

[7] The term 19th century belief-value system is only used for the sake of argumentation and is a stark idealization. I will refer to these idealizations of belief-value systems briefly in my conclusion.

crucial role in the production of knowledge. Whilst this already insinuates that the distinction between epistemic and non-epistemic virtues is not as clear-cut as the name suggests, the distinction still provides a reasonable idea that is supportive for the sake of argumentation. Douglas (2000) argues that "non-epistemic values are required in science wherever non-epistemic consequences of error should be considered;" in this sense (non-epistemic) "value-free science is inadequate science" (Douglas 2000, 559). The non-epistemic consequences of the Azande's Poison Oracle are far-reaching:

> The poison oracle, *benge*, is by far the most important of the Zande oracles. Zande rely completely on its decisions, which have the force of law when obtained on the orders of a prince. (...) In many situations where we seek to base a verdict upon evidence or try to regulate our conduct by weighing of probabilities the Zande consults, without hesitation, the poison oracle and follows its directions with implicit trust. (...) No important venture is undertaken without authorization of the poison oracle. In important collective undertakings, in all crises of life, in all serious legal disputes, in all matters strongly affecting individual welfare, in short, on all occasions regarded by Azande as dangerous or socially important, the activity is preceded by consultation of the poison oracle. (...) I do not wish to catalogue all situations in which the oracle may be consulted since this would mean a list of social situations in every sphere of Zande life, and when each sphere is described the part played by oracles is more fitly recorded than in the present place. (Evans-Pritchard 1937, 121-122)

Non-epistemic norms or virtues (e.g. who has the legitimacy to decide important questions of social life) do not merely enter or disturb science at its outskirts, they do not simply serve as constraints for some scientific choices or internal scientific reasoning. They are an inherent part of knowledge production. In short, knowledge relies on the practice of epistemic and non-epistemic virtues. We have seen that the practice of epistemic virtues—such as objectivity—is relative. The same, of course, goes for non-epistemic virtues. Both are produced and practiced in a particular belief-value system. Crucially, however, this does not limit the relativist to define criteria for knowledge to be accepted as valid or rejected as invalid.

The pragmatic relativist weights knowledge in respect of practical considerations and potential consequences and, in doing so, she can reject epistemic and non-epistemic norms in light of her own belief-value system.

Hence, the relativism that I propose here makes a distinction between the agent and the evaluator—what Kusch (2017) calls a dual perspective view. The agent-perspective is based on our contingent historical circumstances and belief-value systems. We find ourselves in these circumstances—we are 'being thrown' into them, to use Kusch's existentialist argument—through socialization, education, and training. The norms of our belief-value community seem or appear to us compelling and without any alternative: "just like perceptual seemings justify perceptual beliefs, so intellectual seemings justify at least some epistemic justification for our [belief-value system][8]" (Kusch 2017, 4692-4693). The second perspective—the perspective of the evaluator as a sociologist or anthropologist, who steps outside her own system—presupposes self-reflection on the contingency of one's own belief-value system. This process of self-reflection will often yield the conclusion that "one's own position lacks a special privilege as compared with others" (Kusch 2017, 4693) and that although other beliefs outside our own system "do not seem right to us in light of our own [belief-value system], they are nevertheless justified given the other [belief-value system]" (Kusch 2017, 4693). Crucially, however, this does not mean abandoning the first perspective from which "our epistemic standards continue to strike us as right" (Kusch 2017, 4693) and which is therefore rational to use. Such a meta-alternation (see Collins & Yearley 1992) can lead to situations in which norms that cannot be shown to be unjustified are nevertheless rejected from our position as agents. The first part of this article was written from the evaluating position and has argued that we cannot prove the Azande unjustified in their belief via empirical investigation since our attempt to do so implicitly relies on the very norms that we seek to test. In what follows, I will argue from the perspective of the agent. It is from this perspective that the argument for equal validity can be rejected.

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[8] In the original quote Kusch uses "epistemic system." In order to avoid a terminological confusion and to stress the inextricable link between non-epistemic and epistemic beliefs, I deem it better to continue with the term belief-value system.

Whilst mainly focusing on non-epistemic virtues in this section, I would like to make one short remark about epistemic virtues of empirical investigations. I deem it important to stress again that my critique of Sankey's naturalist approach concludes that empirical knowledge is relative due to the relativity of the practice of epistemic norms or virtues, but this does not mean that it is impractical or merely arbitrary. Inductively, empirical knowledge based on interpretative judgment—an epistemic norm that, as I would argue, is currently predominantly practiced in most scientific disciplines in the Western hemisphere—has been practically useful and, in this instrumental sense, successful enough in the past. Therefore, I have no reason to reject it. Moreover, I have no reason for treating the Poison Oracle as equally valid in epistemic terms. This rejection may rest on considering the Oracle's predictions as relatively incoherent (by my own lights) and, in the context of the raining-example, as unable to guide me towards practically useful (local) decisions such as an answer to the question whether I should take my umbrella with me or not. The same is true for social inquiries. By my own lights, I clearly regard "a strategy that explicitly acknowledges the need to employ trained judgment" (Daston & Galison 2007, 311) as being superior to strategies such as the Poison Oracle, especially if trained judgment is critical about the "sharp dualism between lay and expert perceptions" (Jasanoff 1998, 98), engages in symmetrical investigations, and puts emphasis on experiences of people directly affected. In the same vein, I have used the term empirical *knowledge* deliberately to demarcate my position clearly from skepticism and to stress that we can gain knowledge through empirical investigation. We do so in a relative way.

Nonetheless, my rejection does not merely rest on epistemic concerns. The various methods of inquiry (e.g. poison oracle, beaker, weather charts), which different norms of objectivity imply, always evolve in particular belief-value systems and thus reflect the broader social climate of these systems. Put differently, they are inextricably linked with political, social, and historical ideas and values (as the gender example above sought to demonstrate). These social components do not pollute scientific knowledge, but are always constitutive of it. This does not imply that knowledge is purely social, but it highlights that the social component is always existent and must be recognized. As a consequence, my position as agent allows me to reject particular aspects of the Azande's belief-value system—such as certain non-epistemic norms—which implicitly constitute their (epistemic)

method of inquiry (i.e. the Poison Oracle). In doing so, I will draw on promising ideas of feminist epistemology.

Longino (1997, 21) outlines some virtues "that are taken as counting *prima facie* and *ceteris paribus* in favor" of a proposed explanation. She states that these virtues include "(...) novelty, ontological heterogeneity, complexity or mutuality of interaction, applicability to human needs, and decentralization of power (...)." Due to the limited scope of this article, I will only focus on one of these virtues, namely the decentralization of power, to outline one specific, but by far non-exhaustive, pragmatic way to reject the Azande's Poison Oracle. As has already been argued, the Poison Oracle as a practiced epistemic norm implicates non-epistemic consequences. In this context, the production of knowledge has significant societal implications. The acknowledgment of the decentralization of power as a crucial non-epistemic virtue in the production of knowledge and in evaluating proposed explanations demonstrates the profound shortcomings of an epistemic norm such as the Poison Oracle. It, thus, constitutes one criterion of its rejection. Evans-Pritchard (1937) exposes the Poison Oracle's centralized, hierarchical, and authoritative nature of producing knowledge as well as its hegemonic character vividly at various passages in his book. It is worth quoting these passages at length here:

> The poison oracle is always the final authority, and if the matter is one involving relations between two persons it must be consulted. For this reason, unless the matter is urgent, they bring all important social questions directly before the poison oracle (p. 168). When I say that the poison oracle, or some other oracle, must be consulted (...), I mean that if a Zande were not to consult it he would be acting contrary to custom and might suffer in social prestige. He might even incur legal penalties (p. 122). I found that when a Zande acted towards me in a manner that we would call rude and untrustworthy his actions were often to be accounted for by obedience to his oracles (p. 124). Some Azande have indeed explained to me their doubts about the honesty of the princes who control the oracles (p. 6). Members of the princely class, *the Avongara*, are not accused of witchcraft, for if a man were to say that the oracles had declared the son of a prince to have bewitched him he would be asserting that the king and princes were also witches. However much a prince may detest members of his lineage he never allows them to be

> brought into disrepute by a commoner. (...) There is an established fiction that Avongara are not witches, and it is maintained by the overwhelming power and prestige of the ruling princes (pp. 9-10). Governors of provinces, deputies of districts, men of the court, leaders of military companies, and other commoners of position and wealth are not likely to be accused of witchcraft unless by a prince himself on account of his own hunting or on account of the death of some equally influential commoner. Generally lesser people do not dare to consult the oracles about influential persons because their lives would be a misery if they insulted the most important men in their neighbourhood. So we may say that the incidence of witchcraft in a Zande community falls equally upon both sexes in the commoner class while nobles are entirely, and powerful commoners largely, immune from accusations (p. 10).

If we agree with Longino (1997, 25), as I tend to do, that knowledge production should "(empower) the many rather than (concentrating) power among the few" it is hard to see how one could practically accept norms like the Poison Oracle, in which knowledge goes hand in hand with a centralization of power, as being equally valid. Similar remarks could be made about practices of knowledge production that rely on the notion of truth-to-nature since, also in these cases, it is only "the moody brilliance of the genius" (Daston & Galison 1992, 83) that vouchsafes objectivity, which is necessary for knowledge to be accepted as such. Genius, however, can, in contrast to expertise for example, not be learned. Someone is born a genius, or she is not. Truth-to-nature, as well as the Poison Oracle, constitutes a practice of an extreme form of power centralization—the power to define and produce "knowledge." Hence, amongst others, the acknowledgment of the decentralization of power as a necessary non-epistemic virtue in the production of knowledge is conducive to the rejection of these and other (theological) accounts that ground knowledge on centralized, hierarchical, patriarchal, unapproachable God's-, Genius'-, Witch doctor's, or Prince's-eyes views. I do not acknowledge these accounts as being equally valid.

I doubt that my argument will convince Sankey, but if he wants to argue for a non-relativist position of knowledge he still owes an explanation that does not run into the problems that I have elaborated on. Thus, the ball is now in the absolutist's court again. All the relativist needs to say—and what

has been said in this article—is that epistemic justification is epistemically circular and that this circularity is not absolute. The relativist, however, does not have to grant all norms equal validity. She can and should define criteria for the validity of knowledge. Unsurprisingly, neither these criteria will ever have an absolute status.

6. Concluding remarks

In this short article, I tried to show that a naturalist response to relativism is fallacious. Needless to say, the argument developed here is not an argument against naturalism per se, but against naturalism as a response to the relativist. As Bloor (2007, 252) argues,

> Knowledge and belief, and the performance of those who know and believe, must be grounded in the natural world, and they are themselves things which are susceptible to scientific explanation. Cause and effect, materiality, the limits of space and time, biological evolution, the working of the brain, the interaction of human beings in society, these alone represent the framework of thinking, including our thinking about ourselves, our knowledge, and our morality. For the relativist, there can be nothing transcendental about the story of human achievement or failure. Neither knowledge nor morality can be supernatural. They are natural phenomena, and any attempt to evade this fact is a lapse into superstition and obscurantism.

In short, Bloor (2007, 252) emphasizes the importance to consider relativism "as the consequence of a yet broader, overarching perspective on the human condition;" a perspective that "might be called naturalism." In this sense, every analysis of the nature of cognitive achievements such as knowledge or justified belief should be both, naturalistic (e.g. taking on board insights from biologists) and sociological.

The relativist does also not fall into a state of illusion as the absolutist, and many forms of foundationalism, tend to do. She is clear about the fact that the assessment of cognitive achievements will always rely on those very achievements, or that the assessment of epistemic norms will always rely on epistemic norms. Should that bother her? I do not see why I should.

Of course, the "description of knowledge and science that results will be no more certain or secure than the scientific theories themselves" (Godfrey-Smith 2009, 150), but the relativist does not doubt that science can figure out something true about the world. In contrast to the skeptic's understanding, science *does* produce knowledge. "The claim is that we have no *absolute* knowledge (...). For the relativist, all our beliefs are the product of, and are relative to, the limits of human nature and our status as human, social animals" (Bloor 2007, 251).

Empirical investigations must always be practiced in an objective way to be granted scientific status. They are, however, never absolute as the very epistemic norms on which they are grounded (such as the practice of objectivity) are relative. Therefore, the principles for empirical assessment (e.g. objective observation) cannot be understood independently of the belief-value system in which they are *practiced*. In this sense, the transformation of objectivity is not merely a change in its wording or meaning, but a change in (cultural) practices. Since the epistemic norm of objectivity, which is inherent in the practice of empirical investigation, is relative, the same must be true for the empirical test result of whether the Poison Oracle is objectively true. Hence, we cannot, without circularity, prove the Azande to be unjustified in their belief. Crucially, however, we do not have to grant them equal validity, even if the rejection of the Oracle can never be based on anything absolute, but will have pragmatic roots in our own belief-value systems.

Finally, I deem it important to stress that the historical cases of objectivity that were discussed in this article constitute simplified, illustrative archetypes. The change of regimes or belief-value systems is never a clear-cut one, but rather a subtle transformation of "moralized virtues associated with active judgment" (Galison 1998, 333). In the context of the study of objectivity, the transformation depended on a variety of factors such as the understanding of the self, gender roles, images and metaphors about society-nature relations, controversies concerning objectivity versus subjectivity, contextual (epistemic) fears, technological developments (such as the invention of photography) as well as the institutionalization of the scientific enterprise and, as a result, a new form of scientific confidence. Whilst these factors are interrelated and often mutually reinforcing, they do not necessarily coincide. In this sense, a fully coherent belief-value system is a myth. The practice of different rationalities and norms overlap, intersect,

and—while still working on the same object of steering—can even contradict each other within one belief-value system (see Foucault 2003 on governance).

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