



Pragmatism Versus Social Construction: A Reply to Shahryari

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Abstract

In a response to my recent article in this journal, Shahram Shahryari argues that I fail to present a third position between absolutism and relativism. He makes two points: first, that fallibilism is insufficient as an alternative, because it is compatible with both relativism and absolutism. The second point is that my argument that experience can lead to objective judgment without being a new absolute fails. I discuss these in turn, showing that both critiques fail and that pragmatism is a genuine alternative between absolutism and relativism.

Keywords Fallibilism · Relativism · Pragmatism · Social construction

1 Introduction

In response to my recent article in this journal, Shahram Shahryari argues that I fail to present a third position between absolutism and relativism (Stump 2022; Shahryari 2023). He makes two points: first, that fallibilism is insufficient as an alternative, because it is compatible with both relativism and absolutism. The second point is that my argument that experience can lead to objective judgment (pace the relativist) fails. I will discuss these in turn.

2 Fallibilism

First, Shahryari is correct in that some absolutists claim that their position is compatible with fallibilism. However, in saying that, they reject traditional absolutism, which is clearly contrary to fallibilism and was that to which I was referring. For example, what Harvey Seigel is talking about as fallible absolutes are not, by my lights, absolute at all (Seigel 2004, 769–770). Seigel argues, correctly, that one can transcend a framework, in the sense that you can come to see that your own framework is incorrect. As he puts it, saying that you must always be in some framework or other does not imply that one can only avoid relativism by claiming that some kind of absolute, universal viewpoint exists. “The neutrality required to avoid relativism is thus not some sort of *universal* neutrality—neutrality with respect to *every* possible dispute or *all* conceivable conceptual schemes—but

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only neutrality with respect to the issue at hand” (Seigel 2004, 752). I fully agree, so perhaps Seigel and I have a largely semantic difference. He wants to maintain that absolutes are possible, while acknowledging that what philosophers typically meant by absolute is impossible. I want to reject the label as well as the traditional views. There are no absolutes, or ‘fixed’ propositions that cannot change.

Second, the position that I put forward is that of the classical pragmatists, which includes not only fallibilism, but also a repudiation of all absolutes. So classical pragmatism is a third way, I argued, that is clearly different from absolutism. Therefore, while I may have overstated the power of fallibilism alone, the pragmatism that I advocate is adequate in that it includes the explicit rejection of all absolutes. I am not certain that I overstated the case for fallibilism, but the point is moot since the position I defend is against absolutes independently of whether or not that follows from fallibilism alone. However, let me explain my thinking on the issue of so-called fallible absolutes. I am most interested in the idea of conceptional change in science, the kind of revolution that Kuhn discusses. In that context, the whole point of claiming absolutes is to say that something is fixed, that it does not and cannot change. If you admit that it is fallible, you could be wrong, and therefore it could change, which undercuts the whole point of absolutes in the context of conceptual revolutions. As for specific arguments for so-called fallible absolutes, Shahryari says that “the epistemic absolutist believes in the existence of absolute criteria for knowledge” and then goes on to show that the claims selected by the criteria can be absolute but fallible (Shahryari 2023, 333). This is inadequate as a counterexample to my view that there cannot be fallible absolutes because it assumes that there are absolute criteria in order to make the case. My view is that everything is fallible, including criteria, so anything that follows from the criteria would not be absolute.

3 Relativism

The second issue that Shahryari raises refers to my criticism of the relativist’s argument. I claim that a pragmatic notion of experience, as recently rehabilitated in the literature on pragmatism, provides a non-absolute means to argue against relativism. However, my argument is more nuanced than Shahryari’s critique indicates. First, I would never call my position realism. It is certainly opposed to metaphysical realism, the view that there is an external world that we somehow convey with our theories. Second, my main argument is negative. I was pointing out was that those advocating relativism assume that the results in experimental inquiry are built into the system or framework and are therefore relative to it. Rather, I argue that while we frame the issues, raise the questions, create the vocabulary and the tools, both physical and conceptual, that are needed to inquire, the results are not given in advance. As I repeatedly said, all knowledge is situated. Knowers are in a particular time and place, they have presuppositions, emotions, etc. However, when they experiment, they can be surprised and, in that sense, judgments can be objective and not be built into the framework. I am not claiming that such judgments are grounded on an absolute, that they are universal or that ‘my tribe’ is correct, as Shahryari states. In his recent reformulation of realism, Hasok Chang puts the point nicely by saying that we frame experience, but we do not control it (Chang 2022, 124). I take this as equivalent to my saying, as William James said before me, that we can be surprised, that the results are not built in. Some experiments work and others do not. The point

that I am making is that this negative argument undermines the relativist's claim that all evidence is relative to the framework in which one is working, without which, the relativist cannot claim that science is always relative. They must look to particular examples to make their case. My view is that the results of experiment, or more generally, of experience, can explain why scientists adopt or reject a given viewpoint in many cases.

4 Social Construction

Shahryari complains that “[I]like many others, Stump presumes that relativists do not consider experience to have an objective role in justifying belief” (Shahryari 2023, 336). He sets out the relativist position as follows:

constructivist relativists generally do not deny or disregard the role of experience in creating or justifying belief, nor do they regard it entirely non-objective, or at least they do not have to do so to maintain their position. However, they do not consider it as a source of absolute justification. In other words, they do not consider experience sufficient to resolve trans-paradigm disputes (Shahryari 2023, 336).

While I can acknowledge that Bloor mentions experience, I point out that he undercuts its significance. My claim is precisely that experience is often sufficient to resolve disputes, even ones that are trans-paradigm. Bloor thinks that he can undercut any evidence from experience with an a priori argument from underdetermination—that there are always alternatives. He can then argue that any explanation of scientific judgement based on experiment is incomplete, because they cannot distinguish between the alternative possibilities. He claims that social factors need to come into play to fill the explanatory gap. I frankly do not see why social factors are any less underdetermined, but leaving that aside, is it true that there are always genuine alternatives? All that follows from underdetermination is that there are always alternatives in a logical sense, mere possibilities. Underdetermination shows that we can always make up a theory that accounts for all the known facts. However, this does not imply that we can always make up an alternative that is good enough to be a legitimate contender. As Pierre Duhem said in presenting underdetermination and his solution to it, “[t]he day arrives when good sense comes out so clearly in favor of one of the two sides that the other side gives up the struggle even though pure logic would not forbid its continuation” (Duhem 1906/1991, 218). Showing that there are always alternatives is not sufficient to undermine objective judgment. Social facts can explain some instances of scientific judgment, but success or failure of experiments, or experience more broadly, is a more common determining factor. As I explain in the original article, my negative argument undercuts the relativist general argument, but it does not prove that science is always objective. Without some general and a priori argument, Bloor cannot show that science is always explained by social factors. The argument then must proceed to individual cases so as an example I cited a case study showing that continuing negative experimental results settled a dispute between two competing groups of particle physicists (Galison 1987). I should also clarify that I am not claiming that there will always be agreement as it is quite possible that some will refuse to accept an experimental result. No one can force agreement, not even a traditional absolutist.

5 Pragmatism

One of the great lessons of classical pragmatism is that there are no strict dichotomies, rather, there is always a continuum of positions between two extremes. Shahryari sets out the argument that there is a simple dichotomy between relativism and absolutism as follows:

epistemic relativists also confirm that there are criteria for comparing and evaluating theories. However, the main difference between them and epistemic absolutists is that the former consider values and criteria dependent on epistemic systems and deny their universal validity, while the latter assume them to be absolute values independent of this or that epistemic system. Stump favors the absolutist in this controversy and shows that he assumes the values accepted in his tribe to be absolutely valid (Shahryari 2023, 336).

Shahryari here ignores the possibility that there can be evidence and criteria that are independent of the particular epistemic system in question without being absolute or universal. Yes, the evidence will be part of some system of practices, given that every experience that we have is so embedded, but this does not mean that you need a universal or absolute to make an objective judgement. Systems of practice can be epistemically independent of each other. I gave the example of using a microscope in biology, where it is presumed that the microscope gives accurate evidence. The justification for that will come from physics, not biology, so there is no question begging, no circle, that can be applied here. This of course assumes that science is disunified and that different branches can be epistemically independent of each other, which is a correct assumption given the last twenty-five years or so of research in the history and philosophy of science. Pragmatism is a genuine alternative, between absolutism and relativism.

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