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Azande Witchcraft, Epistemological Relativism and the Problem of the Criterion

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Abstract

In this paper, I discuss the problem of epistemological relativism, which I take to be the problem of providing epistemic norms with an objective rational justification, rather than the problem of arguing for universality. I illustrate the idea of an alternative epistemic norm by means of Evans-Pritchard's discussion of the Azande poison-oracle. Though I take there to be a sharp distinction between relativism and scepticism, nevertheless I present an argument for relativism at the level of epistemic norms which employs the Pyrrhonian sceptic's problem of the criterion. I then attempt to show how a particularist response to the sceptic along the lines outlined by Roderick Chisholm may be combined with a naturalized view of epistemic warrant to ward off the threat of relativism posed by the problem of the criterion.

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