

# Azande Witchcraft, Epistemological Relativism and the Problem of the Criterion

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**Abstract:** This paper presents a naturalistic response to the challenge of epistemological relativism. The case of the Azande poison oracle is employed as an example of an alternative epistemic norm which may be used to justify beliefs about everyday occurrences. While a distinction is made between scepticism and relativism, an argument in support of epistemological relativism is presented that is based on the Pyrrhonian sceptical problem of the criterion. A response to the resulting relativistic position is then provided on the basis of a particularist response to scepticism combined with a naturalistic approach to the warrant of epistemic norms. It is argued that it is possible to comparatively assess the ability of epistemic norms to lead to epistemic aims. As against the epistemological relativist, it is possible to provide an objective basis for the choice between alternative epistemic norms.

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## 1. Introduction

According to epistemological relativism, it is not possible to provide epistemic norms with an objective, rational justification. A diversity of epistemic norms are and may be employed within alternative belief systems. Beliefs receive justification on the basis of the norms which are operative within particular belief systems. As a result, what is rational to believe depends upon and may vary with the epistemic norms and belief system which an individual or group adopts. While the same beliefs may be justified in different belief systems, in some cases beliefs that conflict with each other may be justified within different belief systems. Thus, the relativist holds that opposing beliefs may be justified on the basis of alternative epistemic norms and belief systems.

As an example of an alternative epistemic norm, I will employ Evans-Pritchard's case of the Azande poison oracle. The poison oracle serves as a norm on the basis of which Azande accept beliefs about events which occur in daily life. This norm is different from any norm that we possess. However, it does not suffice for relativism merely to provide an instance of an alternative epistemic norm. It must also be argued that rational justification is relative to the norms that are in fact employed within different belief systems. While I shall take pains to

distinguish relativism from scepticism, I will present an argument on behalf of epistemological relativism that is based on the sceptical problem of the criterion.

My aim in this paper is to propose a naturalistic response to epistemological relativism. I take the challenge of such relativism to be to provide epistemic norms with an objective rational justification, rather than to shown that there are universally operative epistemic norms. The response that I will propose to epistemological relativism is based on a particularist approach to the sceptic along lines advocated by Roderick Chisholm. I combine this particularist approach with a naturalized account of epistemic warrant in order to argue, as against the relativist, that appeal may be made to particular instances of knowledge as a basis for the comparative appraisal of alternative epistemic norms. Thus, there may be objective rational grounds to adopt specific epistemic norms in place of alternative norms with which they may conflict.

### **1.1 Azande witchcraft**

In his classic work, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*, the anthropologist E.E. Evans-Pritchard describes the beliefs and practices of the Azande, an African tribe of the Sudan. According to Azande belief, various misfortunes encountered in daily life may be attributed to the action of witches. Someone may fall ill, crops may fail or a hut may catch fire. Such events may be due to the magic of a witch who lives nearby. Azande witchcraft involves no rituals, spells or medicines. Evans-Pritchard describes it is a psychic act whereby “the soul of witchcraft” leaves a witch’s body and travels over not too great a distance to interfere with its victim (1976: 10-2). Witches inherit the property of being a witch from a parent of the same sex. Their bodies contain a “witchcraft substance” found in their belly, which is what makes them a witch. After the death of a suspected witch, it may be determined whether they were indeed a

witch by examining the contents of their intestines for the presence of witchcraft-substance (1976: 15-6).

The Azande employ a number of techniques to determine the action of unseen forces. One of these, which Evans-Pritchard calls the “poison oracle”, is used to answer a very broad range of questions not limited to witchcraft (1976: 122). The poison oracle is the preferred way for the Azande to determine whether a particular mishap is due to the action of a witch. In the poison oracle, a poisonous substance known as *benge* is administered to a chicken (1976: 134-8). A series of questions is posed. The chicken is either unaffected by the poison or, more frequently, has violent spasms. Sometimes the chicken dies. But just as often it survives. The manner in which the chicken reacts to the poison is interpreted as indicating the presence or absence of witchcraft. In certain circumstances, for example if a legal matter is at stake, poison is administered to a second chicken in order to confirm the result. When this is done, the questions are framed in such a way that, if the chicken dies the first time, the second chicken must survive, and *vice versa*.

The Azande’s use of the poison oracle is an example of an epistemic norm that differs from any norm that we employ.<sup>1</sup> For the Azande, appeal to the oracle provides reason to believe that a particular occurrence either is or is not the result of witchcraft. The oracle serves as an epistemic norm which operates in Azande society as the basis for beliefs about witchcraft. In this paper, I will use the Azande poison oracle as an example to illustrate the epistemological relativist claim that epistemic norms vary with belief system.

## 2. Epistemological relativism

Relativism comes in various forms. For example, there is relativism about truth, ontological relativism, conceptual relativism and moral relativism. My focus here will be epistemological relativism, by which I mean relativism about knowledge and rationally justified belief.

I will adopt the traditional assumption that knowledge is justified, true belief.<sup>2</sup> This permits a distinction to be drawn between two forms of epistemological relativism. *Strong* epistemological relativism says that knowledge is relative because both truth and rational justification are relative. *Weak* epistemological relativism says only that rational justification is relative. Weak epistemological relativism might also be called rationality relativism or relativism about rational justification.

My primary focus in what follows will be weak epistemological relativism, relativism about rationality or rational justification. I will sometimes speak of rationality rather than rational justification, but it needs to be borne in mind that I mean 'rationality' in an epistemic rather than practical sense.

### 2.1 What is a context?

The weak epistemological relativist claims that rational justification is relative to, depends upon, or varies with context. For example, it is rational for an Azande tribesman to believe that crops may fail due to witchcraft, whereas it is rational for a farmer in the Wimmera to believe that crops fail due to natural phenomena, such as drought. Both beliefs are rational in their respective contexts.

But what is meant by 'context'? Different authors say different things. Some say that rationality is relative to culture. Others speak of historical time-period, intellectual background, conceptual scheme, Kuhnian paradigm or Foucauldian episteme. But two key elements seem

particularly salient in most characterizations of the kind of context to which rationality is said to be relative. On the one hand, there is a system of beliefs which forms the background to any particular belief. On the other hand, there is a set of epistemic norms, which provides justification for a belief within the context of a given belief system.<sup>3</sup>

When rationality is said to be relative, this means that what is rational to believe depends upon the system of beliefs and epistemic norms within which one operates. For example, it is rational for an Azande tribesman to believe that his crops have failed due to witchcraft, in light of the outcome of a poison oracle and the background beliefs about witchcraft which he holds. So, while one might say that the rationality of the tribesman is relative to Azande culture, the real force of this claim is to say that the tribesman's belief is rational in light of the Azande belief system and associated epistemic norms.

## **2.2 Epistemic norms and relativism**

By an epistemic norm, I mean a criterion, rule or procedure that may be employed to justify a belief. Norms play a regulative role in the appraisal of beliefs. They are employed to determine whether a particular belief is worthy of acceptance. Beliefs which are licensed by an epistemic norm are thereby justified by that norm. Beliefs which fail to be licensed by any operative norm fail to be justified.

There are various kinds of epistemic norm, ranging from low level norms of common sense to abstract norms of science. Ordinary appeal to the evidence of our senses counts as use of a norm relating to sense experience as a source of knowledge. So, too, do considerations of the reliability of a witness on whose testimony we rely for information. Rules of deductive and inductive inference constitute norms which govern beliefs arrived at by means of reasoning.

Principles of experimental design or scientific theory choice are further examples of epistemic norms.

The relativist claims that there is no one set of correct epistemic norms. Instead, epistemic norms vary from culture to culture, or from paradigm to paradigm. When an epistemic norm is employed within a culture, paradigm, or other relevant context, I shall sometimes say that the norm is *operative* in that context. According to the relativist, what is rational to believe depends upon the background beliefs and epistemic norms that are operative in the context that one occupies. The result is that it may be rational for members of one group to believe one thing, and for members of another group to believe quite the opposite, if such opposing beliefs are justified by the alternative epistemic norms.

### **2.3 The role of examples of alternative norms**

To see how such a situation may arise, it is important for heuristic purposes to consider an alternative epistemic norm. The Azande poison oracle is an example of an epistemic norm that is different from any epistemic norm that we employ. The poison oracle may provide an Azande tribesman with reason to believe that a given mishap is due to witchcraft, whereas we would attribute the same mishap to other causes in light of the norms that we employ. But here two caveats are in order.

First, to provide an example of an alternative epistemic norm does not suffice to establish relativism. The relativist says that different and perhaps opposing beliefs may be rationally justified by means of alternative epistemic norms. But to provide an example of an alternative epistemic norm that is employed by some group does not establish that their beliefs are rationally justified. The mere fact that a norm is employed by some group does not establish that the norm is itself a justified norm that is capable of conveying epistemic warrant.

Second, nor is it necessary to provide examples of alternative epistemic norms in order to establish relativism. Even if we were unable to provide examples of epistemic norms different from our own, this would not show that relativism is false. The challenge of relativism is not to show that no alternative epistemic norms exist.<sup>4</sup> The challenge of relativism is to show that a system of norms, for example our own, may be provided with an objective rational justification. If we are unable to provide examples of alternative epistemic norms, this does not show that our own norms are rationally justified norms which provide objective epistemic warrant.

These two points explain why I said above that it is important for *heuristic* purposes to provide an example of an alternative epistemic norm. Providing such an example is neither necessary nor sufficient for establishing relativism. Nevertheless, it is important to have an example of an alternative epistemic norm to hand. It increases the sense of urgency which attaches to the problem of epistemological relativism if one can provide authentic examples of alternative epistemic norms. It is also helpful to be able to employ a concrete example of such a norm in the discussion of the issue.

### **3. Scepticism, relativism and the argument for relativism**

In this section, I will present an argument for epistemological relativism that draws on the Pyrrhonian sceptic's problem of the criterion.<sup>5</sup> Before I present the argument, I will comment briefly on the relationship between epistemological relativism and scepticism.

Relativism and scepticism pull in opposite directions.<sup>6</sup> The relativist asserts that we have knowledge and that our beliefs may be rationally justified. It is just that knowledge and rational justification are relative. By contrast, the sceptic denies that we have knowledge or that we are rationally justified in our beliefs. Thus, the sceptic makes a negative claim that we fail to have knowledge, while the relativist makes a positive claim that we have knowledge. However, the

sceptic and the relativist do agree on one thing. They agree that there is no such thing as knowledge or rational justification in any objective sense.

But, while scepticism and relativism pull in opposite directions, the relativist can learn something from the sceptic. In particular, the sceptical problem of the criterion can be employed to argue that the choice between alternative epistemic norms cannot be made on an objective, rational basis, but must instead be arbitrary or subjective.

### **3.1 The problem of the criterion**

Turning to the argument, I will assume that epistemic norms, such as the Azande poison oracle, constitute criteria in a sense that is sufficiently close to that intended by the Pyrrhonian sceptic, at least for the purposes of the problem of the criterion.<sup>7</sup>

Consider the justification of a belief by means of some criterion. The belief might be, for example, a belief about some immediately perceptible matter of fact, such as that there are now books on my desk in front of me. This belief is justified by means of sense experience, since I can see the books with my own eyes. In such a situation, the principle that one should believe the immediate deliverance of one's senses serves as criterion. But what justifies such a criterion? It might be thought that the principle is justified on the basis of our knowledge of the reliability of sense experience. But the sceptic will request justification of the claim that we know sense perception to be reliable, as well as of any further response that may be given. Thus begins an infinite regress of justification.

For any criterion proposed in support of a belief, the sceptic asks that a justification be given for the criterion. In response to the sceptic's request, one has a choice of three options. First, one may appeal to some further criterion which justifies the original criterion. In this case, the sceptic will request a justification of this further criterion. Such an attempt to directly

respond to the sceptic by justifying the original criterion will lead to an infinite regress. Second, in responding to the sceptic's request for justification, appeal might be made either to the original criterion, or to some other criterion to which appeal has already been made. If this occurs, then the justification proceeds in a circle, and thereby fails to provide an effective defence of the original criterion. Third, one might attempt to block the sceptical regress by adopting a criterion for which no further justification is provided. But if one adopts a criterion without providing a justification for doing so, then one fails to adopt the criterion on a rational basis.

In sum, the attempt to justify the criterion leads either to infinite regress, circularity or unjustified adoption of the criterion. This is the problem of the criterion. The sceptic concludes that knowledge is impossible because it is impossible to provide any belief with a rational justification.<sup>8</sup> This is where the sceptic and the relativist part company.

### **3.2 An argument for relativism**

The problem of the criterion provides the relativist with the basis for an argument that rational justification is relative to operative epistemic norms. The regress of justifications reveals that it is impossible to provide an epistemic norm with an ultimate justification that must be accepted by all parties. The regress may only be avoided by reasoning in a circle or by unjustified adoption of a norm. Since neither option yields justification, the decision to adopt a given epistemic norm is not one that may be made on a rational basis. Nor is it possible for any particular epistemic norm to receive greater justification than any other, since all are equally lacking in justification. Instead of being a rationally based decision, the adoption of a norm is rationally unjustified, a matter of subjective commitment or arbitrary convention.<sup>9</sup> It cannot be supported by appeal to objective reasons which reveal one set of epistemic norms to be better justified than an alternative set of such norms.

If no norm is better justified than any other, all norms have equal standing. Since it is not possible to provide an ultimate grounding for any set of norms, the only possible form of justification is justification on the basis of a set of operative norms. Thus, the norms operative within a belief system provide justification within that belief system. Those who adopt a different belief system are justified by the norms operative within their belief system. There is no sense in which the norms operative in one belief system possess a higher degree of justification than the norms employed in another such system. Justification is an entirely internal matter of compliance with norms that are operative within a belief system.

The relativist is now in a position to claim that rational justification of belief is relative to operative norms within a belief system. It is possible for there to be alternative belief systems with alternative sets of epistemic norms. As a result, what one is rationally justified in believing depends upon the belief system that one accepts and the epistemic norms which are operative within that belief system. There is no sense in which it may be said that any belief system possesses a greater degree of rationality than any other.

#### **4. Particularism and naturalism as a response to relativism**

In 'The Problem of the Criterion', Roderick Chisholm proposes what he describes as a "particularist" response to the problem of the criterion (1982: 69ff). He distinguishes three kinds of response that may be given to two central epistemological questions, the questions, "*What* do we know?" and "How are we to decide *whether* we know?" (1982: 65). The sceptic claims that neither question may be answered without first answering the other, and concludes that it is impossible to answer either (1982: 66). The position that Chisholm describes as "methodist" proposes to address the question of how we decide whether we know before turning to the

question of what we know. The starting point for the particularist is the question of what we know.

According to the particularist, we possess a great many specific instances of knowledge. Chisholm mentions G. E. Moore's claim that he knows he has a hand as an example. Against the backdrop of the many things that we know, we may undertake the task of formulating criteria that tell us "what it is for a belief to be epistemologically respectable" (1982: 70). We are aided in this task by being able to inspect the particular instances that we have of knowledge in the attempt to identify suitable criteria.<sup>10</sup> But the purpose of formulating such criteria is not to show that we have knowledge. According to the particularist, *that* we have knowledge is something we already know prior to the project of formulating epistemic criteria.

Chisholm claims the particularist approach has the capacity to resolve the problem of the criterion. But then he concludes with the following remark that may appear somewhat puzzling:

What few philosophers have had the courage to recognize is this: we can deal with the problem only by begging the question. It seems to me that, if we do recognize this fact, as we should, then it is unseemly for us to try to pretend that it isn't so.

One may object: "Doesn't this mean, then, that the sceptic is right after all?" I would answer: "Not at all. His view is only one of the three possibilities and in itself has no more to recommend it than the others do. And in favor of our approach, there is the fact that we *do* know many things, after all." (1982: 75)

This remark is puzzling because to say that we must beg the question appears to concede the point to the sceptic rather than to resolve the problem of the criterion. For it appears to concede precisely that it is impossible to resolve the problem of the criterion without begging the question, which is what the sceptic sought to show in the first place.

But the real import of Chisholm's remark is somewhat different from this. He rejects the methodist response because he takes it to be a mistake to think that the question of how to decide whether we know may be decided in advance of the question of what we know (1982: 67).

Equally, he takes the sceptic to be mistaken in supposing that the answers to the two questions presuppose each another (1982: 69-70). Instead, Chisholm takes the correct approach to be the particularist approach, which starts out with the fact that we know something, and then turns to the question of how we know based on consideration of what we know.

If one proceeds in a particularist fashion, the sceptical regress may be avoided because one does not attempt to justify the claim that we have knowledge by appeal to criteria. Rather, the claim to knowledge is something that has already been established before one begins the task of formulating criteria. Such a position begs the question against the sceptic by insisting that we have knowledge. Against the sceptic, the particularist holds that our having knowledge is not something that needs to be defended in terms of criteria in a way that would permit the justificatory regress to arise.

But, while putting one's foot down in this way may be a satisfactory response to the sceptic, it is less clear how the particularist approach may be employed as a response to the relativist. For the relativist's point is precisely that there may be alternative epistemic norms which warrant alternative claims to knowledge. How does being told that we just have to beg the question help with the problem of showing that some epistemic norms are objectively justified and others are not? If we beg the question on behalf of our own epistemic norms, this does not entail that alternative norms fail to be rationally justified.

#### **4.1 Naturalism and the empirical evaluation of norms**

If we bear in mind the difference between scepticism and relativism, it may be possible to present a reply to the relativist that builds on the particularist response to the problem of the criterion. For if Chisholm is right, there are particular cases of knowledge which we may employ as touchstones in the process of formulating and evaluating epistemic norms. The fact

that we have knowledge may be put to use in attempting to show that some epistemic norms have greater epistemic merit than others.

The particularist stance has a close affinity with naturalism in epistemology, which may be employed to good effect against the relativist. It is possible to combine a particularist stance with the naturalistic view that epistemic norms are subject to empirical evaluation. For if we think of epistemic norms as themselves subject to empirical test, then we are able to evaluate norms on the basis of knowledge that is obtained in an empirical manner. In this way, we may proceed in the manner suggested by Chisholm by appealing to particular instances of knowledge as evidence that may be employed in the evaluation of proposed epistemic norms.<sup>11</sup>

One such conception of the evaluation of epistemic norms takes them to be instruments of inquiry, which are employed in the pursuit of epistemic goals such as truth or empirical confirmation.<sup>12</sup> Insofar as the realization of these goals is empirically detectable, it may be possible to evaluate a proposed epistemic norm by determining whether it does in fact promote the relevant epistemic goal. 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. This procedure is characteristic of a particularist approach, since it draws on particular instances of knowledge in the evaluation of proposed epistemic norms, as suggested by Chisholm.

Such a naturalistic approach provides the basis for a powerful response to the relativist. For it 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. Where empirical evidence shows that use of a given epistemic norm does lead to a relevant epistemic aim, then use of that norm is rationally justified. Where no such evidence supports use of the norm to achieve the aim, use of the norm is not justified.<sup>13</sup> It might turn out that alternative and possibly

competing epistemic norms obtain an equivalent degree of empirical support, and therefore convey the same measure of rational justification. But, equally, it may turn out that some epistemic norms receive no empirical support or that they receive a lower level of support by comparison with alternative norms.<sup>14</sup>

In sum, it is entirely possible to employ a particularist approach of the kind proposed by Chisholm as the basis of a response to the relativist. The question that Chisholm thinks must be begged is with respect to our possession of particular instances of knowledge, rather than with respect to the evaluation of alternative epistemic norms. Knowledge comes first. The formulation of epistemic norms is a secondary task that may be undertaken on the basis of knowledge we already possess or are able to obtain. Rather than beg the question against the relativist, particularism provides an epistemological platform on the basis of which it is possible to compare and appraise alternative epistemic norms.

#### **4.2 Empirical evaluation of the poison oracle**

As an illustration of how such a response to the relativist might proceed, let us return to the example of the Azande poison oracle. As an epistemic norm, we may take the Azande poison oracle as an instrument that the Azande employ in an attempt to promote epistemic goals, such as truth or knowledge. When Azande pose questions to the oracle, they are employing the oracle in an attempt to obtain answers to their questions. The function of the poison oracle within Azande culture is to provide those who present questions to the oracle with a reason to believe in the truth of specific explanations which are proposed with respect to mishaps that occur in ordinary life.

We may, therefore, think of the poison oracle as an instrument of inquiry which is to be evaluated by measuring its efficacy in leading to the truth in relation to various everyday occurrences in Azande society. As such, empirical evidence of the reliability of the poison oracle is required in order to determine whether or not the poison oracle is an instrument that is capable of providing questioners with truth or knowledge in relation to the questions that are posed to it. In other words, it must be asked whether it is possible to subject the poison oracle to empirical test which would enable us to determine whether it is a reliable or efficacious instrument of inquiry.

This approach may at first appear to be somewhat implausible in application to the poison oracle because of the mystical and seemingly non-empirical nature of Azande beliefs about witchcraft. Because the action of a witch is not something that may be directly observed, and because many of the beliefs about witchcraft are metaphysical in nature, it may not be immediately apparent how to employ empirical considerations in determining the efficacy of the poison oracle.

But the poison oracle has a variety of practical applications which are not restricted to ascriptions of responsibility for mishaps to the action of a witch. Evans-Pritchard describes a number of different contexts in which the poison oracle is employed. The Azande employ the poison oracle in legal contexts, for instance, to decide charges of adultery (1976: 125). Evans-Pritchard provides a list of further circumstances in which the oracle is employed, which include questions relating to such matters as births and deaths, sicknesses, where to build a home, whether to take a job, how to end a drought, and so on. In many, but perhaps not in all, of the situations listed by Evans-Pritchard, 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.

It is therefore possible to conduct tests of the efficacy of the poison oracle in application to those situations in which an outcome may be empirically determined. For example, if a question of criminal responsibility is at issue, it may be possible to compare the outcome of the poison oracle with other empirical evidence that may either be or be made available. Eye witness reports or other physical evidence might be collected in an attempt to confirm or disconfirm the answers derived from the poison oracle. In this way, empirical evidence may be used to determine whether or not the poison oracle is a reliable indicator of truth.

Such an empirical test of the poison oracle in application to practical matters may not be of direct relevance to the issue of the reliability of the poison oracle in application to cases of witchcraft. But it seems clear that, if one is able to determine that the poison oracle fails to be a reliable indicator of the truth in a range of matters in which its reliability is empirically detectable, then this will serve to cast doubt on the efficacy of the oracle in application to matters purported to involve witchcraft. If it is possible to show that the poison oracle fails to be a reliable indicator of the truth in those circumstances in which such reliability is open to direct inspection, then it may be presumed to be an unreliable indicator in those circumstances, such as witchcraft, in which such reliability is not open to direct inspection. Of course, it might turn out that the poison oracle is a reliable indicator of the truth in empirically detectable circumstances, in which case there would be *prima facie* reason to expect its reliability to extend to unobservable circumstances such as witchcraft.<sup>15</sup>

In this manner, I suggest that it is possible to employ empirical investigation as a means of appraisal of epistemic norms. As a result, it is in principle possible to determine whether or not the epistemic norms employed in one culture or context have a comparable degree of epistemic probity to those employed in some other culture or context. It is simply not the case, as I take the relativist to maintain, that no epistemic norm has any greater degree of epistemic

merit than any other. Some epistemic norms may be reliable indicators of the truth, and, as such, they may be efficacious instruments of inquiry. But not all epistemic norms employed by all cultures are equally reliable indicators of the truth. It is because we know, contrary to the sceptic, that we have the capacity to acquire knowledge in concrete circumstances that we are able to use our capacity to acquire knowledge as a weapon against the relativist.

### 5. A relativist response: Peter Winch

It is, of course, possible for the relativist to object to the approach I have just presented. In particular, it might be objected that in proposing that an epistemic norm of the Azande be subjected to empirical appraisal, I am inappropriately imposing the scientific norms of our Western culture upon the non-scientific culture of the Azande. Issues of this sort were famously canvassed in a well-known paper by Peter Winch entitled 'Understanding a Primitive Society'. Winch takes Evans-Pritchard to task for his apparent assumption that Azande beliefs about witchcraft are "mistaken, illusory" (1970: 79).

At one stage in his discussion of Evans-Pritchard, Winch writes as follows:

The spirit in which oracles are consulted is very unlike that in which a scientist makes experiments. Oracular revelations are not treated as hypotheses and, since their sense derives from the way they are treated in their context, they therefore *are not* hypotheses. They are not a matter of intellectual interest but the main way in which Azande decide how they should act. If the oracle reveals that a proposed course of action is fraught with mystical dangers from witchcraft or sorcery, that course of action will not be carried out; and then the question of refutation or confirmation just does not arise. (1970: 88)

If Winch is right, then it would appear that my proposal to subject the poison oracle to empirical evaluation is in some sense inappropriate. For the function of the poison oracle in Azande culture is not an intellectual function, but a guide to action.

This might, of course, be a plausible interpretation of the use of the poison oracle, if the Azande employed the oracle in situations of random decision-making of the sort in which we

might roll dice or flip a coin. But it seems clear from Evans-Pritchard's discussion that the function of the poison oracle is indeed epistemic. For the Azande consult the oracle in an attempt to determine whether some mishap is due to the action of a witch, as well as to determine countless other matters of fact, such as matters of criminal activity. So to say that the poison oracle is not to be considered as an epistemic norm because it serves some quite different function within Azande society is implausible, at least in light of Evans-Pritchard's discussion of the oracle.

But apart from this, there is the question of the "spirit in which oracles are consulted". It might very well be the case that the Azande do not treat the oracle in the manner of a hypothesis, which is put to empirical test.<sup>16</sup> But the point of the strategy that I outlined previously is not that this is the strategy employed by the Azande when they consult the oracle. Rather, the point was that such an empirical strategy might be employed in an attempt to determine the truth-indicative nature of the oracle. And the point of that suggestion is that it is possible to empirically assess the differential epistemic credentials of alternative epistemic norms, such as the poison oracle.

Winch speaks liberally of alternative standards or criteria of rationality, as if to suggest that what it is to be rational may vary from culture to culture (1970: 97-100). This is suggested, for example, when he discusses Evans-Pritchard's comment on the failure of Azande to take seriously an apparent contradiction that arises from the possibility of a run of negative and positive outcomes of post-mortem examinations for "witchcraft-substance" (1970: 91-93; cf. Evans-Pritchard 1976: 3-4). Winch suggests that instead it is the European who is mistaken in "pressing Zande thought where it would not naturally go – to a contradiction" (1970: 93).

I have no objection to the idea that there may be cross-cultural variation of epistemic norms, or, 'standards of rationality', to use Winch's phrase. But I object to the thought that, as

Kuhn put it in a related context, “there is no standard higher than the assent of the relevant community” (1970: 94). We need to distinguish between the descriptive question of the operative norms employed in a community and the normative question of whether such norms are themselves rationally justified. It is entirely possible for the members of a community to justify their beliefs in terms of a set of norms that they possess. But for such norms to provide the beliefs with genuine epistemic support, the norms must themselves be able to convey epistemic warrant. Where an epistemic norm fails to be a reliable indicator of truth, compliance with the norm fails to provide rational support for beliefs which comply with the norm.

Winch may be right that “standards of rationality” vary with culture. But it is important to distinguish between a sense in which beliefs are rational given the operative norms of a culture, and a sense in which the norms are themselves justified and able to convey genuine epistemic warrant to beliefs that comply with the norms. In my discussion of a naturalistic approach to this issue, I have sought to characterize a way in which we might show that norms are themselves justified in this second sense.

## **6. Conclusion**

Before concluding, I will summarize the key points that I have sought to make in this paper. I have employed the case of the Azande poison oracle in an attempt to provide a concrete example of an alternative epistemic norm. I drew upon the sceptical problem of the criterion to present an argument for relativism about epistemic norms. I employed Roderick Chisholm’s particularism to argue, as against the sceptic, that we may be assured that we possess knowledge, to which we may appeal in response to the sceptic. I combined the particularist approach to scepticism with a naturalistic conception of the appraisal of epistemic norms. On the basis of the naturalistic conception of the appraisal of epistemic warrant, I then argued against the

relativist that it is possible to show that some epistemic norms possess a higher degree of rational justification than others. I indicated how this approach might be employed in connection with the Azande poison oracle. I responded to a number of potential objections to the position I have defended that may be derived from Peter Winch's famous discussion of the rationality of Azande witchcraft.

I conclude that, in the same way that the relativist can learn from the sceptic, so too can the anti-relativist learn from the anti-sceptic. The particularist and naturalistic stance that I have adopted reflects an attitude of robust common sense that is well-known to be inimical to scepticism. It is less widely appreciated that it is equally inimical to relativism. Thus, I propose that a unified approach be adopted to both scepticism and relativism. Naturalists have often said that the sceptic sets the standards for epistemic justification inappropriately high. In exactly the same naturalistic frame of mind, we may also say that the relativist sets the standards inappropriately low. From a naturalistic perspective, there is no more call to be a relativist than there is to be a sceptic.

## Endnotes

1. In this, I follow Boghossian who remarks that the Azande seem to employ “a significantly different epistemic principle” from us “with respect to a significant range of propositions: (2006: 71).
2. In the present context, the main reason for adopting the justified true belief analysis of knowledge is simply that it permits a clear distinction between relativism about rational belief and relativism about knowledge. As it happens, I believe there are more substantive reasons to do so as well. I endorse the view that the justification leg of the justified true belief analysis may be provided by a reliabilist account of justification. I also hold that, even if the justified true belief analysis fails, so that knowledge is independent of justification, nevertheless the justified true belief analysis is at least very close to the truth. Justification has a great deal to do with knowledge, even if it turns out that knowledge is strictly independent of justification.
3. Recent work in the history and philosophy of science suggests that practices might be included as well as belief systems and epistemic norms (e.g. Rouse, 1987). There is something to be said for this, since beliefs and norms are bound up with different practices in different cultural settings. But since epistemic rationality is presently at issue, it seems that belief system and epistemic norms should be given priority over practice.
4. The point that the challenge of relativism is not to show that there is no variation in epistemic norm is forcefully made by Laudan (1996: 167-8).
5. See, for example Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, I, 115-117, I, 164-9 and II, 20.
6. The point is well made by Jonathan Barnes in contrasting Pyrrhonian scepticism with Protagorean relativism. Barnes notes that relativism is in fact a form of dogmatism and so is opposed to scepticism: “For where the sceptic suspends judgement, there the relativist claims knowledge” (1988-90: 5).
7. Sextus speaks of a “criterion of truth” which is used to “judge of reality and non-reality” (Sextus Empiricus, *op. cit.*, II, 14-16). Since an epistemic norm is used to justify belief, and since belief involves belief in the truth of the content of the belief, an epistemic norm seems to play the same role as a “criterion of truth”.
8. Strictly speaking, the Pyrrhonian sceptic does not conclude that knowledge is impossible. This would be to adopt a stance of dogmatism characteristic of earlier Academic scepticism. Instead of such dogmatism, the Pyrrhonian advocates suspension of belief (cf. Sextus, *op. cit.* I, 25-28). Still, the stronger form of words employed in the text seems entirely defensible. Pyrrhonian scepticism leads to the rejection of knowledge on at least two counts. First, suspension of belief entails absence of knowledge. If belief is required for knowledge, and belief is suspended, then there is no knowledge, since there is no belief. Second, the Pyrrhonian problem of the criterion entails that beliefs may not be rationally justified. But since rational justification is required for knowledge, and there is no rational justification, there is no knowledge.
9. For a similar use of the regress of justifications, see Bartley (1984), who explores the issue in relation to irrational commitment in the context of Protestant theology. Bartley discusses the

manner in which the regress may lead to what he terms “ultimate relativism” (1984: 73). Bartley’s own solution to the problem is to reject the justificationist conception of rationality on which it rests in favour of a Popperian critical rationalism. There is much to be said on behalf of criticism as an important component of rationality. However, as will become plain later in this paper, I favour another response to the sceptical regress.

10. In further explanation of the relationship between particular instances of knowledge and criteria, Chisholm notes that: “... we will fit our rules to cases .... Knowing what we do about ourselves and the world, we have at our disposal certain instances which our rules or principles should countenance, and certain other instances which our rules or principles should rule out or forbid” (1982: 74). The point that criteria must fit with particular cases gives further substance to the notion of a particularist stance. It also suggests a parallel with the reflective equilibrium model of justification proposed by Goodman (1955: 63-4), though interestingly there is no suggestion that particular cases might give way in face of conflict with criteria, as there is with Goodman.

11. While there is a clear affinity between the particularist approach and the naturalism I here adopt, it should be noted that Chisholm himself favoured a traditional internalist epistemology (cf. Chisholm, 1989: vii). However, I do not see any reason to suppose that the particularist approach is necessarily wed to internalism. To the contrary, the internalist and the naturalist may both agree that we are able to recognize particular instances of knowledge.

12. For a classic source for the idea that epistemic norms are to be thought of in this instrumental fashion, though expressed in a pragmatist form, see Rescher (1977). Rescher speaks of methods rather than norms. But norms may be thought of as methods for the justification of beliefs, so there is no relevant difference in the present context. A naturalistic version of the idea may be found in Laudan (1996: chapter 7), who argues persuasively that the rules of scientific method are subject to empirical appraisal based on their track record in promoting epistemic aims.

13. It might be objected in reliabilist vein that justification does not require evidence that a norm lead to an aim. It suffices that the norm does in fact lead to the aim, whether or not there is evidence that it does so. But a reliabilist who raises such an objection is unable to provide a basis for adjudication between alternative epistemic norms in response to the relativist challenge. While there is much to be said for reliabilism, the challenge of relativism brings out a weakness in the reliabilist position. For in order to respond to relativism, it is crucial that evidence be available of the comparative reliability of epistemic norms, at least in principle.

14. The naturalistic approach to the appraisal of epistemic norms that I suggest places an emphasis on empirically ascertainable realization of epistemic aims. But naturalistic approaches typically appeal to the results of theoretical science over and above merely observable matters of fact. I do not oppose, indeed, I fully embrace such approaches. However, in the present context it is important to focus on something that may serve as common ground between the Azande and ourselves, which is why I focus here on empirical knowledge. It is important to establish the credentials of epistemic norms at a base level before one draws upon the theoretical knowledge that has been built on the basis of the higher level epistemic norms found in the sciences.

15. The strategy I employ here is a version of a strategy that Philip Kitcher has described in another context as ‘the Galilean strategy’ (2001: 173). When confronted with the problem of establishing the reliability of the telescope in the face of doubt, Galileo first employed the telescope in circumstances in which it was possible to employ empirical means to determine its reliability. Galileo pointed the telescope at distant buildings or ships entering a harbour in such a way that it was possible to subsequently verify by direct observation details which had at first been detected only through the telescope. Once the reliability of the telescope was established in circumstances which were amenable to direct empirical test, it was a simple matter of then extending use of the telescope to circumstances in which what was perceived through the telescope was not subject to direct inspection. Provided that there is no independent reason to expect the telescope to fail in such circumstances, the telescope is to be presumed reliable when applied in such further circumstances.

16. Indeed, Evans-Pritchard devotes the bulk of a chapter to the fact that Azande do not adopt an experimental attitude toward the poison oracle, as well as the various mechanisms at their disposal by which they may explain away one or another failure of the oracle (1976: chapter 9).

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