

## GLOBAL RELATIVISM AND THE PROBLEM OF SELF-REFUTATION

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**Abstract.** *The main task of this paper is to present and examine the self-refuting position of global relativism in epistemology. We start from the earliest formulation of relativistic teaching that belongs to the ancient philosopher Protagoras. Even in antiquity, the self-refuting viewpoint of global relativism was observed. The position of global relativism is difficult to defend because universality requires that the very claim that expresses relativism be included in the general relativization. In the paper, we consider the notions of pluralism of truth and perspectivism. In the end, we conclude that the self-contradictory position of global relativism can be removed only if relativistic teaching is set up as a meta-theory in which the object level and the meta level are distinguished.*

**Key words:** *relativism, global relativism, truth, pluralism, meta-theory, perspectivism.*

### 1. THE EMERGENCE OF RELATIVISM IN ANTIQUITY

We can find the sources and beginnings of the relativistic theoretical point of view in antiquity. Namely, it seems that two philosophical attitudes, present in antiquity, were stimulating for the development of relativistic teaching. The first is the questioning of the reliability of sensory cognition, and the second is the attitude about the subjective character of our knowledge.

The first point of view is based on criticizing and rejecting sensory knowledge as unreliable. Namely, in such teachings it is pointed out that sensory knowledge is subject to errors and the creation of illusions, and therefore only knowledge that is based on our mind is reliable. This idea has been present since the very beginnings of philosophy, as pointed out by the teachings of the Ionian physicists, the teachings of the Eleatic school, Democritus' atomism, Plato's division of the world into the world of ideas and the world

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of the senses, etc. Within this point of view, the value of all human cognitive powers is not diminished, but only the cognitive contributions of sensory knowledge are denied.

We must note that philosophy begins with the conviction that the essence of nature should be reasoned with the mind. Although it starts from direct sensory perception, it is necessary to rise to mental reasoning. In an attempt to explain the multiplicity in nature, as well as the continuous coming into being and disappearing, to which the senses direct us, the first Greek philosophers assumed that behind all the diversity there must be one eternal and unchanging nature. Namely, they believed that there is no absolute creation and disappearance. Everything originates from a permanent basis, which persists in all changes, and returns to it. They come to this conclusion about the true nature of things not on the basis of sensory experience, but on the basis of mental insight that abstracts from all changes and differences, looking for the One in the multitude.

The second position, which we can consider as a stimulus for the development of relativistic teaching, emphasizes the subjectivity of human knowledge. The subjectivity of knowledge can refer to the individual position of a person or to the subjectivity of the opinion of the entire human race. The development of this theme, which appeared back in antiquity, is flourishing in modern philosophy. Further development of the thesis about the subjective character of human cognition led to the most diverse types of problem solutions, as well as different philosophical directions and orientations. From the initial thesis about the subjective character of our knowledge, conclusions were drawn not only about the impossibility of objective and true knowledge, but also solipsistic and anti-realist attitudes that refused to consider the question of the existence of the external world. However, this direction of philosophical consideration of the problem of cognition, despite the assumption of the impossibility of objective knowledge, tries to ensure generality and necessity, clarity, precision, scientific character and exactitude to knowledge understood in this way. For this purpose, various philosophical methods are used: the method of doubt, the method of critical analysis, the phenomenological method, etc. On the other hand, in an effort to understand the subjective, internal, and unspoken, the hermeneutic method is applied, or perspectivism and the contextuality of thought and events are always taken into account when interpreting text and speech.

Therefore, it is not surprising that relativist teaching took its clear form back in antiquity. In the dialogue *Theaetetus*, Plato presents and analyzes Protagoras' thesis (from the lost work *The Truth*): "His claim, I think, is that the 'measure of all things' is a human being, 'of the things that are, that they are, and of the things that are not, that they are not.'" (Plato, *Theaetetus* 152a, 1–5). In the case where two people have different experiences regarding the same sensory phenomena, Protagoras will say that both sides are right. In a dispute about sensory impressions, the conflict is resolved by a relativist theoretical position that does not give an advantage to either side in the conflict. Therefore, based on the argument from the conflicting phenomena, or the problem of perception, we cannot conclude who is telling the truth. More precisely, we can claim either that everyone is telling the truth, or that no one is telling the truth, or that someone is certainly telling the truth but that we are currently unable to decide who, because we do not have a reliable criterion as a measure for assessing whose claim is true.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> We will ignore the discussion regarding the question whether this attitude of Protagoras refers only to the phenomena that we register with the senses or it can also refer to the sphere of moral questions and dilemmas.

Perhaps the most significant objections to Protagoras's relativism came from Plato himself. Plato, in the dialogue *Theaetetus*, made a key objection to relativism, that this position is self-contradictory. In *The Theaetetus*, Socrates concludes that Protagoras' relativism means that no one is wiser than anyone else. Since anyone who disagrees with Protagoras is just as right as he is, anyone who denies his relativism must also be telling the truth.<sup>2</sup> Hales points out that this, of course, implies that Protagoras is wrong about this position. And yet the doctrine holds that Protagoras, along with all others, must be right in his opinion; therefore Protagoras' relativism is true (Hales 2006, 99). Many later philosophers used Plato's arguments to argue against global relativism, i.e. point of view that all claims and all knowledge are relative.

In the text "Varieties of Relativism and the Reach of Reasons" Michael Krausz enumerates several important platforms from which a relativistic theoretical position can be built. Considering the type of reference frame, relativism can be conceptual, cultural and historical. If we open the question of its domain, one can distinguish a cognitive, moral or aesthetic plan. The level of philosophical consideration can be ontic or epistemic. In relation to the values that are evaluated, we can make relativistic judgments about the beautiful, good and truth. The relativistic theoretical position can be viewed in the relation of opposition to three absolutist positions: objectivism, foundationism and universalism (Krausz 2011, 70–71).

Paul Boghossian points out that few philosophers have been relativists about absolutely everything. Protagoras is one of them. On the other hand, many of them have been relativists in specific areas and domains that are normative in nature. Gilbert Harman, in the sphere of morality, Richard Rorty in the framework of epistemic justification, and Crispin Wright in the domain of judgments of taste. Galileo discovered that the motion of an object is always relative to a changing frame of reference. And Einstein discovered that the mass of an object is always relative to a changing frame of reference (Boghossian 2006b, 13). Since this text analyzes epistemological relativism, other potentially interesting perspectives and dilemmas opened up by the relativist position remain aside.

## 2. EPISTEMIC RELATIVISM

Boghossian says just as there are moral relativists who believe that there are no universal moral facts, there are also epistemological relativists who believe that there are no universal epistemological facts. That is, he argues that the facts about what belief is justified by evidence can vary from community to community. If these latter philosophers are right, Boghossian argues, then different people can rationally reach opposite conclusions, even when they admit all the same data (Boghossian 2006a, 58–59).

James McAllister in the text "Relativism" defines that epistemological relativism, or the relativism of truth as it is called, is the teaching that our attitudes have no absolute truth value, but that they can be called true only from a certain theoretical position (McAllister 2000, 405). Therefore, none of the rules and methodological procedures have any advantage in establishing the truth. Maria Baghramian in the text "Relativism About Science" argues that epistemic relativism is the view that claims about knowledge are always determined by specific cultural and conceptual frameworks and are true or legitimate only in

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<sup>2</sup> Steven Hales points out that this implies that Protagoras is wrong about this position. Nevertheless, the doctrine holds that Protagoras, along with everyone else, must be right in his opinion; therefore Protagoras' relativism is true (Hales 2006, 99).

relation to the conditions of their production. Epistemic relativism also includes relativism towards science, which argues that scientific knowledge is the product of specific social, economic, and cultural conditions and therefore cannot achieve the universality and objectivity to which it aspires (Baghramian 2008, 236).

Generally, within the framework of the relativistic theoretical point of view, the position is advocated that there is no neutral or absolute position from which certain concepts, values and norms can be evaluated, but that their status depends on the conceptual framework and social-historical circumstances that determine their appearance in the vision and understanding of the one who interprets. Relativism questions the existence of one correct viewpoint or truth and makes them dependent on the time, place, person, dominant theoretical framework, context and culture in which something is perceived and understood.

Hales asks the question: if truth is not only relative to time, context and possible worlds, but also to individuals, culture, research paradigms and abstract perspectives, how does this affect the validity of truth itself? Maybe there is no single property that corresponds to “being true” and instead we should adopt a pluralism of truth according to which there are a multitude of different validities that correspond to the role of truth (Hales 2011b, 6). The contextual solution says that multiple theoretical solutions can be appropriate. According to contextualism, epistemic standards are relative to different contextual features such as the assumptions highlighted in the conversation, interests for knowing the characteristics etc.

Harvey Siegel raises the question of whether knowledge (truth or justification) is relative and whether it depends on where, when, in what theoretical framework and by whom it is counted as knowledge. Do these historical, social, personal, conceptual and cultural conditions act together and whose effect is decisive? According to relativists, knowledge is relative because different societies accept different criteria and standards for evaluating knowledge. Therefore, the basic relativistic thesis about the status of knowledge (or truth or rational justification of the possibility of such knowledge) is relative to the standards used in evaluating such claims. Such alternative standards cannot be evaluated neutrally (Siegel 2011, 201). Siegel points out, if a relativist believes that his epistemic position is not superior to other positions, then it is difficult to understand his dispute with non-relativists. If the relativist does not defend his position, because he does not consider it epistemically superior to non-relativism, then it is not clear why his position should be considered relativistic (Siegel 2011, 204).

Let us analyze how the relativism of truth is founded. Most often, epistemological relativism or relativism of truth was based on ideas from a solipsistic position or an anthropologically based relativism of the kind where the limitations and specificities of the individual or the entire human race were emphasized in the process of knowledge. Relativism relied on the unreliability and deceitfulness of human senses, so the emphasis was often shifted to higher cognitive powers such as reason or mind. Also, the growing emphasis on subjectivity in knowledge and the limitations of our cognitive powers ended in skepticism. The effort to reach some stable support in subjectivized cognition led to the important notion of frame of reference. This conceptual framework is presented as a theoretical pattern woven into our cognitive apparatus. According to some theorists, it is formed in the physiological development of our senses and it can be given as a specific linguistic system that forms and shapes our perception and thinking. Therefore, our cognition can be determined by: individual nature, excellent qualities, the language we speak, theoretically determined perception, dominant views of the world. In the twentieth

century, significant efforts were made to construct an ideal formal language and translation scheme that would overcome the appearance of relativism.

We will consider the views of Steve Fuller from the book *Philosophy of Science and Its Discontents*.<sup>3</sup> The main emphasis is on the analysis of the relationship between relativism and objectivism. Objectivists point out that relativism has historically grown as a methodological framework for determining standards of cognitive authority in different societies. For each society, the relativist can at least in principle identify the relevant group and the reach of its cognitive authority. The constitution of the group and the nature of their expertise varies from society to society. The objectivist can deconstruct the relativist's position by emphasizing that the relativist, although he rejects the idea of physical reality, is committed to an objective representation of social reality, in which the idea that there is a "factual state of affairs" related to who has cognitive authority in a given society is considered comprehensible. The relativist can retort by pointing out that the very idea of objective reality only makes sense in relation to beings whose cognitive power of understanding sometimes reaches far. A significant thesis of the relativist against the objectivist is that only sentences can be true or false, that is, to refer to some extra-linguistic reality or not. Therefore, all natural languages are equally suitable for the needs of the respective communities. Each language articulates a different world, which makes it difficult to translate.<sup>4</sup> The objectivists claim that the image of science that relativists build is superficial, and that they only assume, but do not prove, the thesis that differences in languages are directly maintained in terms of concepts and understandings. According to them, relativists ignore continuities in our cognitive endeavors as well as long-term interests in the representation of reality. In the end, Fuller points out that the idea of reality nevertheless persists independently of our conceptual formations, as well as that certain things escape our understanding and attempts to transform them (Fuller 1993, 65–72).

### 3. GLOBAL RELATIVISM AND THE PROBLEM OF SELF-REFUTATION

For our discussion, we need to emphasize the difference between local and global relativism. The main difference between local and global relativism is in the scope of validity, whether relativism extends to all areas or only to one specific segment. The doctrine of global relativism is the view that all truths are relative, that nothing is absolute and indubitable. Global relativism claims that there are no absolute standards of evaluation for any area. While local relativists claim that such absolute standards do not exist only for some areas. A local relativist in a particular field holds the view that true statements about that field are essentially determined and conditioned by some parameter or measure. Standards are relative to perspective, conceptual scheme, theoretical standpoint, etc.

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<sup>3</sup> In this book, Fuller links the debate between relativism and objectivism with the debate between realism and anti-realism and suggests that these discussions be conducted together or even merged into one. By comparing them, he will find similarities between realism and objectivism, and anti-realism and relativism. Realism and objectivism share the view that science can provide and explain much more than the scientist and the scientific community can perceive. Anti-realism and relativism are united in denying this claim. Although many interesting questions arise from discussing either of these positions, none of these problems bring the debates closer to a solution. Steve Fuller suggests that perhaps we should find a point outside the terms of these debates that would help us resolve the confusion (Fuller 1993).

<sup>4</sup> As evidence, he states that it is easier for a bilingual speaker to switch from one language to another in speech, than to translate from one to another.

Some philosophers believe that relativism can be coherently applied only locally, to a special region and domain that has a normative character, e.g. to moral justification or a question of taste, because every global relativist position can be objected to as self-contradictory. This doctrine, global relativism, is considered self-contradictory because it implies that this claim itself is relatively true and that in this sense we must understand it conditionally. This teaching does not support itself. It refutes itself. Boghossian points out that global relativism is fundamentally incoherent and meaningless. Namely, every global relativist thesis points to the existence of at least one absolute truth. Relativism always implicitly implies absolutism. On the other hand, local relativism in a particular area may not be particularly plausible; but it seems coherent. Namely, if relativism is absolutely correct then it self-destructs, because it allows for at least one absolute truth. If a relativist claims to be only relatively correct then we can simply ignore him, because it is only a report of what the relativist considers acceptable to say (Boghossian 2006a, 52–53).

If relativism is only relatively true, does that mean that we relativize the area of validity of a principle or its content? Relativism that is valid only in some area (e.g. morality) is global for that area, all phenomena in that domain are subject to it. It is local because it is valid only in one area, but in that area it is valid globally, for all members of that class of entities.

Hales, in the text “Consistent Relativism”, presents important insights into the relationship between relativism and absolutism. Hales starts from the thesis of relativism that *everything is relative*. In doing so, absolutism can be characterized as a denial of this, or as a denial that everything is not relative. By “everything is relative”, Hales means that every statement is true from one perspective and false from another. It follows that absolutism can be defined as follows: there is at least one statement that has the same truth value from all perspectives. There are then two options: either the relativism thesis is absolutely true (true from all perspectives) or this thesis is only relatively true (true from some, but not all, perspectives). If we start from the assumption that relativism is true from all perspectives, then there is a statement that has the same truth value from all perspectives – namely, the relativism thesis itself. That is, if there is some statement that has the same truth value in all perspectives, then it is clear that absolutism is true. Based on the derived statements, Hales draws the complete conclusion, if relativism is true in all perspectives, then absolutism is true; accordingly, if relativism is true in all perspectives, then it is shown, by reduction, that relativism is false (Hales 1997, 35).

Hales then considers the second assumption. He starts from the thesis that relativism is not absolutely true, but that relativism is only relatively true. It follows that there must be at least one perspective in which relativism is not true, that is, at least one perspective in which absolutism is true. This means that in one such perspective, in which absolutism is true, at least one proposition must be absolutely true, that is, true by all standards. Hales then argues that this is impossible. In support of this, he says that if there are perspectives in which relativism is true, then the truth value of each proposition will vary depending on the perspective. It follows that there is no proposition that is true in all perspectives, that is, for every proposition there are perspectives in which it is true and perspectives in which it is false. Hales then concludes that if relativism is true in all perspectives, then that means relativism is false. “Thus it seems that relativism can be neither absolutely nor relatively true. The claim that everything is relative must be false.” (Hales 1997, 35–36)

Max Kölbel, argues against these views of Hales in the text “Saving Relativism from Its Savior”. He considers that the argument Hales makes is incorrect. Hales ultimately concluded that relativism is absolutely false, because it is neither absolutely true nor relatively true. Kölbel claims: “The second part of this argument is fallacious. For “given the assumption that there are perspectives in which relativism is true”, we are not “guaranteed that the truth value of every proposition will vary across perspectives”. We are merely guaranteed that according to those perspectives in which relativism is true, the truth value of every proposition varies across perspectives (Kölbel 1999, 94–95).

Michael Krausz claims that a relativist believes that whatever standard an absolutist impose then that would have to be a principle that is arbitrary and without content. Arbitrary because the process of justifying this principle would lead to a continuous justification that could only be terminated by self-justification. Such a principle would have to be without content because it can be informative only if it is general and vague (Krausz 2011, 71).

In *Relativism and the Foundations of Philosophy*, Steven D. Hales seeks to defend a form of relativism applied to philosophical claims. His main thesis is that philosophical propositions are true in some perspectives and false in others. He believes that most arguments for relativism are not convincing, and that relativists try to prove more than is possible. In the physical sciences, mankind has made obvious progress in advancing knowledge. If relativism were true, such progress would be impossible (Hales 2006, 1).<sup>5</sup> Since the main objection to relativism is that the global version is incoherent and self-refuting, he thinks it necessary to formulate the most comprehensive kind of relativism that can be consistently maintained. Therefore, he gives up asserting the view that every proposition is true in some perspectives and false in others. The main thesis becomes the position that absolutism is false for a certain class of claims, namely, philosophical ones (Hales 2006, 99).

#### 4. RELATIVISM, PLURALISM, AND PERSPECTIVISM

Let us consider the problem that arises from the thesis that relativism has universal validity. If the universal form of relativist teaching is supposed to be true, then it must be admitted that we are advocating the existence of one correct universal standpoint. But such an observation contradicts the content of relativist teaching, which allows for the truth of every teaching, and not just one. Namely, if relativist teaching is true, then based on its content it must follow that the rival teaching or any other teaching concerning the same issue is also true. Then the teaching that advocates the existence of absolute truth is also true. If the thesis that every teaching is relative is valid, then every teaching is valid including the rival teaching that says: *truth is not relative*. Therefore, relativism simultaneously claims that rival teachings are and are not true. The rival teachings are not true because these teachings contradict the very content of the relativist thesis, because they advocate the opposite opinion. But rival teachings are true because the relativity of truth allows every teaching to be true. The following thesis can be objected to relativism: if all teachings are relative, then this relativistic teaching is also relative. However, it should not be considered wrong for that reason, because that would degrade the universal

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<sup>5</sup> A similar view is expressed by Brown: “No one familiar with the amazing achievements and spectacular progress of the natural sciences has a kind word for relativism. And rightfully so” (Brown 1994, 86).

position that it is trying to take. But this does not mean that, if relativism is a true position, then opposing views are not also true. We conclude from the above that relativism has as a necessary consequence the advocacy of a pluralism of different teachings.

Does relativism of truth necessarily lead to pluralism of truth? Michael Lynch in the text "Truth Relativism and Truth Pluralism" says that the principle that most traditional theories of truth have, when it comes to monism of truth, is that there is only one property of a judgment that makes a judgment true. Of course, there were disagreements about what that property is: agreement with reality, coherence, etc. But most theories agree that it is one property. If one denies the absolutism of truth, one must also deny the monism of truth. Therefore, there are good reasons to believe that if someone is a relativist, he must also be a pluralist of truth (Lynch 2011, 87-88). Max Kölbel in the text "Saving Relativism from Its Saviour" argues that a relativist in terms of truth is someone who not only introduces an additional perspective parameter, but also denies that only one perspective is correct. An absolutist, according to this view, can accept the perspective parameter, but will claim that only one perspective is correct (Kölbel 1999, 102).

If a relativist presents his position as relatively true, then he believes that his teaching is sometimes valid and sometimes not. That is, this teaching is valid in certain areas and not in others. Its validity is local. The main thesis of relativism understood in this way says that the content of every proposition is true in some perspective and false in another. In other words, there are perspectives in which the relativist thesis is true and there are those in which it is not true. Also, there is a perspective in which absolutism is true and relativism is false.

Siegel asks a question: Is it even possible to transcend a perspective? He believes that is never possible to completely escape from some perspective, frame of mind, conceptual scheme and expectations that are present in a given viewpoint. But from the claim that we cannot escape all perspectives it seems a short step to the relativistic conclusion that what we can know, or what can be true or justified, is itself relative to the schemes, frameworks or perspectives that inevitably limit our judgment. Since there is no judgment that is given outside of every perspective, then there is no possibility of attaining a perspective that would allow us to unconditionally compare and evaluate judgments made from different perspectives, as well as alternative perspectives themselves. Siegel believes that the claim that all judgments inevitably arise in the context of some perspective and are determined by such perspectives does not, however, lead to relativism. Although we cannot achieve a "perspective without perspective," in a relevant sense we can still "transcend" our frames and perspectives (Siegel 2011, 209–210).

## 5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

According to the traditional argument, a relativist can present his position as absolutely true or as relatively true. If we say that a thesis is absolutely true, then it means that it is valid always and everywhere without exception. If we claim this, then we refute what we just claimed, because we would have to admit at least one absolute truth. This global position is the position of absolute validity. The thesis of absolutely valid relativism is a thesis that says that an absolute principle is valid regardless of its content. By its scope of validity this principle is absolute, and by its content it speaks of the relative validity of all principles. If relativism is absolutely true, then it is wrong because its content claims that nothing is absolutely true. Any global thesis, if it is global, indicates that there is at least



one absolute truth, and yet what global relativism claims in its content is that there are no absolute truths. Therefore, relativism is necessarily incoherent. Namely, if this principle applies in general, then that principle contradicts its own content. Therefore, the content of this term challenges the global validity of its scope.

Every form of relativism presupposes absolutism as an imaginary or ideal standpoint in relation to which things that are valued seem relative. However, the position of global relativism is that there are no absolute truths. Therefore, global relativism is incoherent. Any teaching about how knowledge is formed, if it aspires to universality and absolute validity, must include and explain itself, so it is self-referential. If we want to promote a principle related to the way of establishing knowledge, then that principle itself must be based on the principle we are advocating. A rule that tends to encompass all forms of knowledge or claims to truth must also apply to itself. This class has itself as a member. However, the problem arises if the explanation about the nature and origin of knowledge talks about the general relativity or conditionality of every form of knowledge. Is relativistic teaching valid when universally posited and if in that case it applies to every form of knowledge? In all relativistic and skeptical teachings, the problematic and paradoxical nature of this situation can be observed. The universal relativistic principle in general relativization relativizes the content of its claim. When it is insisted that scientific theories are relative and conditioned by a series of socio-historical factors, then the epistemic learning itself must be viewed as relative and in that sense as one that is not universally valid. Therefore, if all knowledge is relative, then knowledge about it is also relative. Relativistic teaching is self-refuting, it refutes and undermines itself. McAllister believes that this self-contradictory position can be avoided if we make a difference in levels between the statements that makes the relativistic claim and those to which those claims refer (McAllister 2000, 405).

In order to solve the situation in which the epistemic teaching that talks about relativity, or any kind of conditionality of knowledge, is self-refuting, the only way out is to take a theoretical position outside any form of determinism (in this case also outside one's own point of view, which is still difficult to do). Therefore, in order for a theory that propagates general relativism to be grounded, it should place itself in a theoretical position that is outside the class to which its rule applies. In this case we need to include the distinction between object-level and meta-level. It remains for us to conclude that the theoretical position that advocates general relativism can only be grounded as a meta-theory, that is, only if it is outside the relativistic position that it advocates.

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## GLOBALNI RELATIVIZAM I PROBLEM SAMOPOBIJANJA

*Osnovni zadatak u ovom radu je da se predstavi i ispita samopobijajuća pozicija globalnog relativizma u epistemologiji. Polazimo od najranije formulacije relativističkog učenja koja pripada antičkom filozofu Protagori. Još u antici je uočeno samopobijajuće stanovište globalnog relativizma. Stav globalnog relativizma je teško braniti jer univerzalnost zahteva da se u opštu relativizaciju uključi i sama tvrdnja koja izražava relativizam. U radu ukazujemo na pojmove pluralizma istine i perspektivizma. Na kraju zaključujemo da se samopobijajuća pozicija globalnog relativizma može otkloniti samo ako se relativističko učenje postavi kao meta-teorija u kojoj razlikujemo objekt nivo i meta nivo.*

Ključne reči: *relativizam, globalni relativizam, istina, pluralizam, perspektivizam, meta-teorija.*