Memory puzzles for epistemic relativists

Epistemic relativism entails the following theses:

R "knowledge" sentences invariantly express propositions that have truth-values only relative to a given epistemic standard.

TN Believing a relativistic proposition is *alethically correct* iff the proposition is true relative to the epistemic standard of the believer.

I show that this leads to three problems once we accept the following picture of how (propositional) memory works.

The memory box model (MBM)

When we form beliefs, the content of these beliefs moves into what we may call a memory box. The belief may go away, but the content in the memory box remains. When we later try to remember things, we search through the memory box. We adopt the relevant belief iff the content in question is there.

Problem 1. Let K stand for some knowledge proposition. Suppose that S forms the belief that K in a context where K is true relative to S's present epistemic standard. Given the MBM, K will move into the memory box. Suppose that S tries to remember whether K later on. Given the MBM, S will search for K in the memory box. K is there, so she will form the belief that K. But let's stipulate that K is false relative to S's now present epistemic standard. Given TN, she will have formed an alethically incorrect belief. Situations of the envisaged kind should be realized frequently according to relativism; hence many memory-based knowledge beliefs turn out alethically incorrect.

Problem 2. Suppose we accept the following norm of belief in addition to TN:

RELIA A belief is *epistemically correct* only if it is based on a reliable belief formation process.

From a relativist perspective, a reliable belief formation process should be a process that leads to beliefs with contents that are true relative to the standard of the believer. Given

that, RELIA leads to the conclusion that all memory-based knowledge beliefs are epistemically incorrect. For given Problem 1, the memory process described by the MBM as applied to such beliefs doesn't meet the reliability constraint.

Problem 3. So far, the problems concerned only beliefs about what people know. A similar problem arises for beliefs *tout court* if the relativist accepts the following two principles. First, for at least most purely memory-based belief,

> $E_1 \geq E_2$ The subject's epistemic position regarding the belief in question isn't stronger than the epistemic position she had regarding this belief when the content of the belief was originally stored in the memory box.

Second, beliefs are governed by a relativistic knowledge norm:

> KN A belief that p on the part of a subject S in a context C is *epistemically correct* iff the proposition that S knows that p is true relative to S's epistemic standard in C.

Let p stand for some proposition. Suppose that S correctly forms the belief that p in a low standards context and that S's epistemic position is just barely strong enough to satisfy KN. Given the MBM, p will move into the memory box. Suppose further that S later tries to remember whether p in an epistemically more demanding context. Given the MBM, S will form the belief that p because p is in the memory box. By $E_1 \geq E_2$, though, S's epistemic position regarding this belief cannot be better than it was in the context where p was originally stored. By stipulation, this means that S's epistemic position falls short of KN in the new, more demanding context. Again, S ends up with an epistemically incorrect belief. As before, the relativist should grant that cases of the envisaged sort are frequently realized. Hence, an error-theory follows.

In the full paper, I respond to a number of possible rejoinders.