1. Carving up the relativist landscape
   1.1. **Ontological relativism**
   
   *Ontological absolutism:* the position that there is a single, objectively true characterization of reality.
   *Ontological relativism:* the denial of ontological absolutism, i.e.
   - **Ontological subjectivism:** the position that there are no objectively true characterizations of reality; or
   - **Ontological pluralism:** the position that there are many objectively true characterizations of reality.

   Luper assumes that ontological absolutism is true (it doesn’t matter much for his arguments).

   1.2. **Epistemic relativism**
   
   *Epistemic absolutism:* the position that there is a single, objective standard for assessing epistemic merit
   - A belief has epistemic merit if and only if the belief is justified.
   *Epistemic relativism:* the denial of epistemic absolutism, i.e.
   - **Subjectivist (epistemic) relativism:** the position that there are no objective standards for assessing epistemic merit; epistemic merit is always assessed relative to subjective standards; or
   - **Pluralist (epistemic) relativism:** the position that there are many competing standards for assessing epistemic merit, each of which is objectively correct.

2. Relativism and skepticism

   **Radical skepticism:** no beliefs are justified.
   **Strong skepticism:** all beliefs are unjustified and should be abandoned.

   2.1. **Subjectivist relativism implies radical skepticism**
   
   1. If subjectivist relativism is true, then there are no objective standards for assessing epistemic merit.
   2. If there are no objective standards for assessing epistemic merit, then no beliefs are (objectively) justified.
   3. If no beliefs are (objectively) justified, then radical skepticism is true.
   4. ∴ If subjectivist relativism is true, then so is radical skepticism. (From 1-3)

   2.2. **Radical skepticism does not imply subjectivist relativism**
   
   1. It is possible that there is an objective standard for assessing epistemic merit, but no beliefs can meet this standard.
   2. If there is an objective standard for assessing epistemic merit, then subjectivist skepticism is false.
   3. If no beliefs meet the objective standard for assessing epistemic merit, then no beliefs are justified.
   4. If no beliefs are justified then radical skepticism is true.
   5. ∴ It’s possible that subjectivist skepticism is false when radical skepticism is true. (From 1-4)

2.3. **Subjectivist relativism implies that strong skepticism is false**

   1. If subjectivist relativism is true, then there are no objective standards for assessing epistemic merit.
   2. If there are no objective standards for assessing epistemic merit, then no beliefs are (objectively) justified and no beliefs are (objectively) unjustified.
   3. If no beliefs are (objectively) unjustified, then strong skepticism is false.
   4. ∴ If subjectivist relativism is true, then strong skepticism is false. (From 1-3)

2.4. **Pluralist relativism is compatible with either skepticism**

   …provided that there are multiple objective epistemic standards, and each standard condemns all claims as unjustified. (This is a weird form of skepticism.)

---

1 A parallel argument can be made to show that strong skepticism does not imply subjectivist relativism.
3. Argument for Epistemic Relativism

3.1. Some preliminary vocabulary

The defense tenet: It is rational to use a standard only if it is defensible, and an adequate defense cannot involve circularity, arbitrary assumptions, or dialectical deadlock.

A claim is in dialectical deadlock if it is disputed for intelligible reasons and the controversy has not been resolved on grounds acceptable to all sides.

3.2. The pincer argument

1. Either the defense tenet is correct or it is not.
2. If the defense tenet is correct, then no standard is defensible. (standard skepticism)
3. If the defense tenet is incorrect, then defenses that are circular, arbitrary, or in dialectical deadlock are acceptable, and virtually any epistemic standard is defensible. (standard credulism)
4. ∴ Either standard skepticism or standard credulism is true (the disjunctive parity thesis, from 1-3).
5. A standard is objective if and only if it can be adequately defended (verificationism).
6. ∴ Either no standard is objective (subjectivism) or nearly any standard is objective and justification varies according to the standard in play (pluralism). (From 4,5)
7. If subjectivism or pluralism is true, then absolutism is false and relativism is true.
8. ∴ Absolutism is false and relativism is true. (From 6,7)

4. Traditional arguments against epistemic relativism

4.1. The No-Deadlock Argument

1. If \( x \) is defending her position to \( y \), then \( x \) must justify her position only using claims that \( y \) accepts. (No deadlock principle)
2. Absolutists do not accept relativism.
3. ∴ In defending their position against absolutists, relativists must not justify relativism using relativist claims. (From 1,2)

4.2. 1st Objection to No-Deadlock

1. If \( x \) is defending her position to \( y \), then \( x \) must justify her position only using claims that \( y \) accepts. (No deadlock principle)
2. Relativists do not accept absolutism.
3. ∴ In defending their position against relativists, absolutists must not justify absolutism using absolutist claims. (From 1,2)

4.3. 2nd Objection to No-Deadlock

1. If \( x \) is defending her position to \( y \), then \( x \) must justify her position only using claims that \( y \) accepts. (No deadlock principle)
2. Relativists need not accept the no-deadlock principle.
3. ∴ In defending their position against relativists, absolutists must not justify absolutism using the no-deadlock principle. (From 1,2)

4.4. No-Ties Argument

1. If the defense of standard T is no better than the defense of an alternative standard, then there are inadequate grounds for accepting the objectivity of T. (no ties principle)
2. The defenses of both subjective and pluralist relativism are no better than defenses of objectivism.
3. ∴ There are inadequate grounds for accepting the objectivity of subjective and pluralist relativism.

4.5. Reply to No-Ties Argument

Neither subjective nor pluralist relativists must accept the no-ties principle.

- Subjectivists can argue that one’s choice of relativism over absolutism is subjective (a matter of taste)
- Pluralists can argue that any defense of pluralism might be matched by an equally good defense of absolutism.
5. **The Skeptic’s Prediction**

5.1. **The Skeptic’s Argument**

The first three premises of the Pincer Argument rest on a skeptical argument:

1. It is rational to use a standard only if it can be given a defense that does not involve arbitrary assumptions, circularity, or dialectical deadlock (the defense tenet)
2. No standard’s authoritativeness can be defended without arbitrary assumptions, circularity, or dialectical deadlock (skeptic’s prediction)
3. \( \therefore \) No standard’s authoritativeness can be adequately defended (standard skepticism).

Note that if one denies the defense tenet, then standard credulism follows (premise 3 in the pincer argument); so the traditional resistance to skepticism comes by criticizing premise 2 in the Skeptic’s Argument. If this is true, then we can maintain the defense tenet without falling into standards skepticism.

Luper is going to be untraditional, and critique the defense tenet without falling into standard credulism.

6. **How do defend absolutism**

6.1. **Clarifications**

A standard is bundle of rules, which can be of two kinds:

- *Belief management rules (a.k.a. warrant standards)* are rules by which we assess how probable it is that a claim is true, and how to base our beliefs on these probabilities, with the aim of maximizing true beliefs and minimizing false beliefs.
- *Rule management rules*: are rules that tell us whether to maintain or revise other management rules, with the aim of maximizing true beliefs and minimizing false beliefs.

A standard is *authoritative/objective* if it is truth-conducive; its application tends to yield true beliefs and avoid false beliefs in a wide variety of circumstances.

*Epistemic absolutism*: there is a “core” epistemic standard that is found in all highly truth-conducive standards we might adopt.

A *defense* of absolutism shows that applying a single epistemic standard \( T \) will help us reach the truth, and that \( T \) is at the core of any truth-conducive standard we might employ.

6.2. **The Ordinary Standard**

O1. Do not reason in ways that violate deductive logic.
O2. Other things being equal, retain beliefs prompted by your senses.
O3. Other things being equal, believe the best explanation of your data.
O4. Continue to believe what you do unless you have good reason to stop.
O5. Other things being equal prefer (as more authoritative) one management rule over a competitor when you have good reason to believe that it is more truth-conducive.
O6. Continue to operate these six management rules unless you have good reason to stop.

**Argument:**

1. If the world is shaped the way that commonsense beliefs say it is, then the Ordinary Standard is truth-conducive. *(Uncontroversial claim, p. 286)*
2. The world is shaped the way that commonsense beliefs say it is.
3. The Ordinary Standard is truth-conducive. *(From 1, 2)*

6.3. **Skeptical objection**

O4 and O6, respectively, should be replaced with:

S4. Adopt or retain a belief only if you can provide an adequate justification for it, i.e. one that does not involve circularity, arbitrariness, or dialectical deadlock.
S6. Adopt or retain a management rule only if you can provide an adequate justification for it, i.e. one that does not involve circularity, arbitrariness, or dialectical deadlock.

---

2 There is a (rough?) analogy between Boghossian’s epistemic systems and Luper’s epistemic standards. Similarly, Boghossian’s epistemic principles loosely correspond to Luper’s management rules (especially belief management rules.)
6.4. **Luper’s rebuttal**

1. If the Defense Tenet is true, then S4 and S6 are true.
2. If S4 is true, then we can have no beliefs (true or false) about the world at all.
3. If S6 is true, then we can have no epistemic standards (objective or not) at all.
4. We can have beliefs about the world and epistemic standards.
5. ∴ The Defense Tenet is false (From 1-4)

6.5. **But what about credulism and pluralism?**

- Many standards will not be truth-conducive, so that substantially limits the kinds of pluralism available to the relativist.
- Authoritative/objective standards must only be truth-conducive in the actual world. Consequently, the Ordinary Standard is (at best) contingently authoritative, not necessarily so. However, this means that many other standards will not make the cut.
- Not many people depart from the Ordinary Standard. Hence, disagreements happen at the level of beliefs, but not at the level of rules.