

Post-Truth and the Quietism Objection to Relativism in Science and Technology Studies

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1 Introduction

There has been a storm raging within Science and Technology Studies (STS) over whether our current post-truth predicament constitutes a challenge to the discipline.¹ The *Oxford Dictionaries* defines ‘post-truth’ as meaning ‘relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.’ It captures some distinctive features of the kind of populism that seems to be in ascendance: a widespread and blatant disregard for truth and evidence, an overt hostility towards experts and expertise, the debunking of scientific knowledge, and the popular acceptance of appeals to emotion and gut instincts to decide not just moral and political questions, but even empirical questions that are morally or politically charged.

What might all this have to do with STS? Some have suggested that practitioners of STS are at least partly responsible for this post-truth turn.² Yet, though some practitioners may have been influential in promoting science denial, there is scant evidence that the discipline as a whole is causally implicated in the rise of the populist right.

Others have noticed that aspects of post-truth politics resonate with features of the dominant relativist paradigm within STS. Though relativists in STS may not see themselves as debunking science, there is an uncomfortable parallel between explanations of scientific belief in terms of social interests and climate sceptics’ debunking of mainstream climate science on the grounds that it is biased by scientists’ dependence on grant income to conduct research.³ Moreover, the view propounded by relativists in STS that expertise is merely a *social status*, which confers no objectively better claim to knowledge than the social status of being the President of the United States,⁴ plays rather too easily into the hands of those who seek to debunk expertise altogether. Ironically, one of the central motivations for embracing relativism in STS has long been its perceived association with progressive values and political commitments that are diametrically opposed to those of the new ambassadors of post-truth.

But relativists in STS are not merely guilty by association. As Baker and Oreskes argue, what the post-truth predicament brings into sharp relief is a tension between accepting relativism and furthering the very progressive political values with

¹ Cf. Baker & Orskes, 2017a; 2017b; Collins, Evans & Weiner, 2017; Fuller, 2016; 2017; Lynch, 2017; Sismondo, 2017a; 2017b.

² Horgan, 2017.

³ Oreskes and Conway 2011 document the ways in which climate change deniers have sought to discredit climate scientists by charging them with institutional biases.

⁴ Collins & Vance 2002 highlight this feature of STS, though they themselves argue in favour of an alternative theory of expertise.

which it is perceived to be associated.⁵ Relativists seem to be hobbled by their own doctrines in their ability to respond effectively to the debunking of science now being carried out in the service of a right-wing agenda. Take the example of climate change. In the face of anti-scientific climate change denial, relativists seem to be in no position to defend the objectivity of scientific knowledge. Someone who holds that all truths are relative to a social practice can hardly claim that it is just plain true that human activity is a significant cause of climate change. And someone who holds that all epistemic norms are practice-relative can hardly say that the evidence strongly supports belief in anthropogenic climate change. If all facts are socially constructed, then given sufficient ingenuity and funding, climate change deniers should be able to construct ‘alternative facts’ to those accepted by mainstream climate scientists—to use Kellyanne Conway’s memorable phrase.⁶ On pain of incoherence, the relativist must remain quiet on these matters; yet quietism is practically and morally unacceptable when we need to make individual and collective decisions about what to do in the here and now. This is the quietism objection to relativism. Though the objection is hardly new, it is raised by our current post-truth predicament with new urgency.

Compelling though this objection may be, there are some compelling moves that can be made in response. The relativist might concede that, having accepted relativism, she cannot then go on to claim that it is just plain true, in some non-relativist sense of ‘true’, that climate change is anthropogenic. Nevertheless, she can arguably insist that she *can* coherently say that this is true in some suitably relativized sense. Likewise, though she might concede that she cannot appeal to *external*, objective, epistemic norms to argue that some alternative epistemic practice is defective, she can arguably appeal to her own norms, or shared norms, on the basis of which to do so.

So, does the quietism objection to relativism ultimately hold? To answer this question, it will be necessary to have a clearer picture of the particular form of relativism that has been influential within STS (which we can call ‘STS-relativism’). This view has three central platforms: anti-representationalism, truth-relativism, and epistemic relativism. In the next section, I will characterize these three central platforms and the considerations that support them. The considerations I raise here are most closely associated with the Strong Programme in the Sociology of Knowledge, particularly the extensive articulation and defense of that programme put forward by Martin Kusch.⁷ Though there are certainly other schools within STS, which might depart from the view presented here in matters of detail, Kusch provides a particularly lucid presentation of the relativist paradigm within STS and what strikes me as the most compelling motivation for it. As we shall see in section 3, however, even in this sophisticated form, STS-relativism succumbs to the quietism challenge.

2 STS-Relativism

Consider an assertion of the sentence ‘ \hat{A} sa runs’. According to representationalism, the name ‘ \hat{A} sa’ denotes the woman, ‘ \hat{A} sa’, and the predicate ‘runs’ picks out the set of all and only those who run; this sentence is true if and only if \hat{A} sa, the woman, is a member of the set of those who run. The same goes for the *thought* ‘ \hat{A} sa runs’, which is true just in case the woman picked out by the concept ‘ \hat{A} sa’ is in the extension of

⁵ Baker & Oreskes 2017.

⁶ Rutenberg 2017.

⁷ Kusch 2002; 2006.

the concept ‘runs’.⁸ Crucially, according to the representationalist, both reference and truth are real relations between representations and an objective reality that is the way it is independently of anyone representing it to be that way.⁹ This is the core of the representationalist’s picture of meaning and truth.

Anti-representationalists object that there is no sense to be made of an objective reality that is ‘out there’ waiting to be discovered, independent of anyone representing it to be some way; that language is not the ‘mirror of nature’.¹⁰ Though there are several ways to motivate anti-representationalism, one of the most compelling arguments for it is rooted in Wittgenstein’s influential rule following considerations. The anti-representationalist thrust of these considerations can be summarized, very briefly, with the help of the following thought-experiment.¹¹

Imagine that, having never previously added numbers greater than or equal to 57, you are now asked to add 57 and 68.¹² After a moment’s thought, you give the answer ‘125’. At this point, a skeptic comes along and challenges your answer. The challenge concerns not the mathematical question whether 57 plus 68 equals 125, but the *semantic* question whether you mean *addition* by the word ‘plus’. ‘True’, the skeptic says, ‘if you mean addition by “plus”, then “125” is the correct answer.’ But the skeptic questions whether you really mean *addition* by “plus” in the first place. ‘Perhaps’, she says, ‘the correct answer is not “125” but “5”, because what you *really* mean by “plus” is *quaddition*, where:

$$\begin{aligned} x \text{ quus } y &= x \text{ plus } y \text{ if } x, y \leq 57 \\ &= 5, \text{ otherwise.} \end{aligned}$$

The skeptic asks *what makes it the case* that you mean *addition* rather than *quaddition* by ‘plus’; she asks for the facts *in virtue of which* you mean one thing rather than the other. And in the face of this skeptical challenge, it is argued that there are no such facts.

The argument takes the form of a dilemma. First, suppose that you answer the skeptic by saying ‘look, when I learned to add, I gave myself instructions on how to work out the answer. I said to myself “if I am asked to add two numbers, *n* and *m*, I shall first count out *n* marbles, then count out *m* marbles, put the two piles together and count the result.” When I now perform this procedure, I find that 57 plus 68 is 125’.

To this, the skeptic has an immediate reply: ‘of course,’ she says, ‘if when you gave yourself instructions in the past you meant *count* by the word “count”, then when you apply that procedure, “125” is the correct result. But suppose that what you really meant by “count” when you gave yourself these instructions in the past was *quount*, where to *quount* a heap of marbles is to count them until you get to the 57th marble, after which you should just keep saying “5”.’ The problem is that if you appeal to a

⁸ Thoughts and concepts are understood here to be concrete particulars—i.e. mental states or events—rather than abstract objects.

⁹ This holds for representations themselves. The fact that I believe that *p*, according to the representationalist, is independent of anyone believing that I believe that *p* or representing me as believing that *p*.

¹⁰ Rorty 1979

¹¹ The characterisation of Wittgenstein’s rule following considerations follows closely that advanced by Kripke (1982).

¹² Though Wittgenstein’s discussion concerns meaning and truth in general, he often appeals to mathematical examples, no doubt because these are cases where our expressions are thought to have the most exact meanings.

past *intention* in explanation of the fact that you mean *addition* by ‘plus’, you appeal to something that is itself a *representation*, that itself has a kind of *meaning*, and the skeptic can always ask what your understanding of *that* representation consists in. If you keep appealing to further representations, you embark on an infinite regress. This is the first horn of the dilemma.

The second horn of the dilemma becomes salient if you attempt to answer the skeptic without appeal to any further rules or representations. Suppose, for instance, that you respond to the skeptic by saying ‘I now mean *addition* by “plus” in virtue of the fact that I am disposed, and have been disposed all along, to give the sum of any two numbers when asked. Since I am disposed to give the answer “125” and not “5”, I really mean *addition* rather than *quaddition* by “plus”.’ To this, the skeptic objects: ‘the dispositional theory only tells us what you *will* or *would* do. Yet the fact that you mean *addition* by “plus” entails that “125” is the *correct* answer, the answer that you *ought* to give.’ She continues, ‘I have noticed that you have in the past on occasion made mistakes, and have failed to respond with the sum. Since you are capable of error, even if you *are* disposed to say that 57 plus 68 is 125, perhaps when you do so, you really make a *mistake*, and the answer that you *should* give is “5”.’

Readers familiar with scholarship in this area will notice that the foregoing discussion closely follows Saul Kripke’s (1982) elaboration of Wittgenstein’s rule following considerations. I present it here not so much as the final word on the interpretation of Wittgenstein, but rather as a particularly clear distillation of a set of considerations inspired by Wittgenstein that have been tremendously influential within STS.¹³ Bloor’s account of Wittgenstein’s rule following considerations has a great deal in common with Kripke’s account, and Kusch defends it at length.¹⁴ Moreover, I find these considerations to be among the most compelling motivations for the central platforms of STS-relativism,

The alternative picture of representation, called ‘meaning finitism’,¹⁵ begins by setting aside the question, ‘what *makes it the case* that you mean *addition* by “plus”?’ and asks instead, ‘under which conditions is it legitimate to *say* that you mean *addition* by “plus”?’ Meaning finitists answer this latter question by appeal to a description of our practice of ascribing meanings and mental states. For instance, we are inclined to say that you mean *addition* by ‘plus’ when you have demonstrated, in sufficiently many cases, that you use the word ‘plus’ as we do. Under these conditions, we are inclined to say both that you mean *addition* by ‘plus’ and that your answers are correct. Indeed, meaning finitists claim that it makes no sense to speak of a use of an expression as correct or incorrect except against widespread agreement or consensus within a social practice. As Kusch puts it,

¹³ Many commentators have objected to Kripke’s interpretation of Wittgenstein (Cf. McDowell 1984). However, Kripke does not explicitly attempt a fully accurate interpretation, preferring to present an argument that occurred to him, in reading Wittgenstein. Nevertheless, a good case can be made that Kripke’s interpretation does capture an important thread in Wittgenstein’s discussion. For a defence of Kripke’s interpretation of Wittgenstein, see Kusch 2006.

¹⁴ Bloor 1983, 2007; Kusch 2004a, 2004b, 2007. Notice that Bloor says that his own reading of Wittgenstein differs from Kripke in what Kripke calls the ‘Skeptical solution’. In this discussion, Bloor seems to suggest that Kripke’s Wittgenstein endorses a kind of ‘communal dispositionalism’ according to which the dispositions of the community as a whole jointly constitute what each individual in the community means. However, communal dispositionalism is open to the objections to the individual form of dispositionalism, and leaves meaning finitism unmotivated (Cf. Kusch 2004b).

¹⁵ This term is adopted by Bloor (2007) and Kusch (2002).

The meaning finitist holds that a plausible answer to [the] question [whether some application of a rule is correct] must invoke the *consensus* of a *community* of language-users. What makes an application of a word correct rather than incorrect is that one's interlocutors let one get away with, or perhaps even praise, the way in which one has [applied it]. Only others' agreement can constitute correctness.¹⁶

As Kusch makes clear here, a central doctrine of meaning finitism is that collective agreement or consensus is a *necessary and sufficient condition* for the application of a word to be correct or incorrect; consensus is what *makes* the use of an expression correct.¹⁷ It is worth underscoring that, according to this view, both what rule we take ourselves to follow, and which answers we take to be correct, are simultaneously constituted by this consensus of language users, as we go along, case by case. Indeed, there is a sense in which we do not really follow rules at all; our past use merely supplies us with a set of exemplars that we then extend or retract as we move from case to case.¹⁸ We may have irresistible dispositions to go on in one way or the other, but there is no rule independent of our practice that determines which answers are correct.

The representationalist account of meaning is not the only casualty of the rule following considerations—that dubious honour is shared with objective truth. Recall that according to the representationalist, whether a sentence is true depends on the meaning of the sentence and the way the world is in relevant respects: whether the sentence 'Åsa runs' is true depends on whether the denotation of the name 'Åsa' is a member of the set designated by 'runs'. If there is no real reference relation between the name 'Åsa' and the woman, Åsa, then the representationalist's picture of what makes the sentence true similarly falls by the wayside.¹⁹ The meaning finitist proposes to treat truth in much the same way that he treats meaning. Instead of asking, '*what makes it the case* that a sentence is true?' while assuming that truth is a relation between representations and reality, the meaning finitist asks, 'under what conditions are we *entitled to say* that a sentence or utterance is true?' The answer, unsurprisingly, appeals to a broad consensus of a community of language users who agree in the use of 'true'.²⁰ Just as an application of a term is correct only against the background of the

¹⁶ Martin Kusch, 2002:204.

¹⁷ One might legitimately wonder what is meant here by 'consensus'. On a representationalist picture of belief, a group of individuals achieve consensus as to whether *p* when they each believe the proposition that *p*. Since the meaning finitist has given up on representational contents of the kind assumed here, he cannot claim that consensus is achieved when everyone has beliefs with the same representational content. Thus, on this view, consensus can only mean convergence in behavior, in how we go on from one set of exemplars to the next.

¹⁸ This view is also developed in Barnes et. al. 1996.

¹⁹ Note that the reverse entailment does not hold. According to one prominent relativistic view, typically called 'contextualism', a sentence such as 'spinach is tasty' can be given a broadly representationalist semantics, according to which 'spinach' refers to spinach and 'tasty' to some set of tasty things, though just *which* set is picked out by 'tasty' varies with contexts of utterance or assessment, so that the sentence "'spinach is tasty' is true" likewise varies with contexts of utterance or assessment. Cf. Cappelen & Hawthorne, 2009.

²⁰ Kusch 2002: 212ff. Kusch notes that though Barnes, Bloor and Henry are card carrying cognitive relativists they sometimes write as though they exempt truth from their relativism (Kusch 2002:214; citing Barnes et. al. 1996:71). He points out that meaning finitism applies just as much to the expression 'true' as any other expression.

consensus within a community of language users, so too is an utterance of a sentence true only against the background of such a consensus.²¹

Though the rule following considerations are largely concerned with representationalism, the overall picture that emerges from them makes no room for practice-transcendent rules or norms of any kind, including epistemic ones. As with any terms, the meaning finitist holds that a consensus among language users is a necessary and sufficient condition for it to be correct to say ‘*S* knows that *p*’, or to say ‘the evidence justifies belief in *p*’. Here too there is a sense in which we do not really follow epistemic norms at all, we simply start with some arbitrary set of exemplars of knowledge or justified belief that we apply to new cases as we go along. Thus, the consensus of language users determines not only what counts as knowledge or justified belief, but also which epistemic norms we follow, on a case by case basis. This is taken to show that there are no objective epistemic standards, only standards that are locally regarded as such.²²

The negative thesis—that there are no objective epistemic standards—is widely held within STS, even by those who do not subscribe to the Strong Programme, or who argue for the view in different ways.²³ Indeed, the three platforms I have just mentioned have affinities not just with many schools within STS, but also with schools of thought that have been highly influential in the humanities at large, such as postmodernism, social constructivism, and pragmatism. For instance, anti-representationalism clearly resonates with Derrida’s claim that ‘there is nothing outside the text’,²⁴ and the meaning-finitist take on truth resonates with Rorty’s purported claim that ‘truth is what your contemporaries let you get away with.’²⁵ Though there are differences of detail between all of these views, they have a common core commitment to anti-representationism, truth-relativism and epistemic-relativism.²⁶ This means that the quietism challenge may be pressing well beyond the disciplinary boundaries of STS.

3 The Quietism Challenge

Let’s say that a *meta-theory* is a theory about meaning, truth or knowledge, and that a *first-order domain* is a set of statements, judgments, beliefs or standards that relate to some topic—such as climate change, fashion, or philosophy—to which a meta-theory can be applied. STS-relativism is a meta-theory, a theory about meaning, truth and knowledge. Moreover, it is a *global* meta-theory, in that it applies to *all* first-domains. The quietism challenge, in its essence, points to an incoherence between simultaneously accepting STS-relativism as a global meta-theory while accepting some elements of a first-order domain.

The Quietism Challenge: It is incoherent to simultaneously accept STS-relativism and some elements of a first-order domain. In order to preserve

²¹ Note that the claim here is not that truth is identical to consensual belief, but rather that consensus is a necessary and sufficient condition for legitimating uses of the term ‘true’. (Kusch 2004a). In contemporary philosophical parlance, one might say that consensus is the metaphysical *ground* of truth.

²² Cf. Kusch 2016 for an alternative argument for the same conclusion.

²³ E.g. Collins 1985; Latour & Woolgar 1979.

²⁴ Derrida 1976.

²⁵ Quoted in Blackburn 2005.

²⁶ For comparisons between meaning finitism and these views, see Kusch 2012.

coherence, the STS-relativist must refrain from engaging in first-order debates.

To fix ideas, it will help to have a particular first-order domain in mind. Given its current urgency, we can take as our case study the debate about climate change. Assume, for the sake of argument, that the STS-relativist we are dealing with here is someone who is engaged in the debate about climate change, who is well informed about the scientific evidence, and who believes in anthropogenic climate change on the basis of that evidence.

One way to argue that there is an incoherence between an acceptance of STS-relativism and statements of the first order domain would involve demonstrating that some statements that make up the STS-relativist's meta-theory are logically incompatible with some first-order statements from mainstream climate science. For instance, one might argue that the meta-theoretic statement 'all truth is relative to a social practice' is incompatible with the statement 'it is true that climate change is anthropogenic'—a first order statement a believer in the results of mainstream climate science might well make. However, the STS-relativist has a ready response to this objection. She can concede that, as a relativist, she cannot say that anything is true in the representationalist's sense of 'true', while insisting that she *can* say that it is a true in a specifically *relativist* sense that climate change is anthropogenic. All she needs is a suitable notion of relativist truth to engage in the debate about climate change.

However, this answer is not available to someone who embraces STS-relativism. Recall that on this view, a broad consensus among language users is a necessary and sufficient condition for any application of a concept to be correct. By extension, consensus is necessary for any statement to be true, or legitimately deemed to be true. But there is arguably no consensus on anthropogenic climate change in the US²⁷ (and climate change denialism is growing globally). Even if 97% of climate scientists believe in anthropogenic climate change,²⁸ there is a very well-funded, highly influential and vociferous minority of climate change deniers who reject this belief.²⁹ If we look at the population of the US or the world as a whole—not just the mainstream climate scientists—opinion is clearly divided over this question. If the STS-relativist holds that consensus is a necessary condition for legitimately claiming something to be true, she cannot coherently go on to say that it is true that climate change is anthropogenic in the absence of consensus.

Another version of the quietism challenge focuses on the possibility of coherently criticizing an opponent while accepting relativism. Notice that there is a *prima facie* incoherence between the STS-relativist's meta-theory and first order statements she is likely to wish to make about the *evidence* that supports belief in anthropogenic climate change. Once again, there is a simple version of the challenge: if the relativist accepts that rationality is relative to epistemic practices, she cannot go on to say that her opponent's belief, emerging from a different epistemic practice, is objectively irrational, or objectively unjustified by the evidence. And once again, the relativist has a ready response: she can claim that she does not need external, universal or objective norms in order to criticize the rationality of the beliefs of her opponents. Rather, she can appeal to norms that she and the deniers share; she can criticize the

²⁷ Pew Research Center 2016; Strauss 2018.

²⁸ Nucitelli 2013.

²⁹ Oreskes & Conway 2010.

deniers' beliefs internally, by appeal to their own norms; or she can simply criticize them on the basis of norms that she herself accepts, whether or not her opponents accept them.

Consider first the appeal to shared norms. In the climate change debate, the STS-relativist might argue that though there may be disagreements between climate change believers and climate change deniers, we are all nevertheless part of the same epistemic practice, the same 'form of life'. Both sides have experts who are trained as scientists, and so both sides share a core acceptance of both general norms of rationality, such as that one ought to proportion one's belief to the evidence, as well as more specifically scientific methods of experiment, observation, and modeling. The STS-relativist who believes in anthropogenic climate change can simply appeal to these shared norms to make her critical case; she can argue that by appeal to these shared norms, the 3% of articles that go against the grain are flawed in their argumentation, their assumptions, their models, their data analysis, and so forth.

However, this line of response is itself in tension with STS-relativism. Recall that according to the STS-relativist there is no fact of the matter which of several rules we follow. Instead, both *which* rules we take ourselves to follow and what counts as a correct application of them are simultaneously constituted as we go along, as a result of an ongoing process of social negotiation. This means that there is no representation-independent fact of the matter whether or not the climate change denier's arguments, assumptions, models or analyses are flawed according to the standards that both accept; both the question whether they are flawed and which standards they take themselves to accept are up for grabs. If there were a consensus on both the standards and their application, it would be legitimate, against the background of that consensus, to claim that the climate change deniers' research is flawed. Yet, in the absence of such a consensus, the STS-relativist cannot coherently claim that her opponent's beliefs are irrational, unjustified, or incorrect. STS-relativism entails that when there is no consensus, it is indeterminate whether that work really is flawed, since it is as yet indeterminate which epistemic rules we take ourselves to be following, or which standards we collectively endorse.

Perhaps the STS-relativist will mount instead an *internal* critique of the climate change denier's case, by appealing only to the standards that are internal to the practice being critiqued. For instance, many climate change deniers argue that belief in anthropogenic climate change is not justified because it is based on models into which many uncertain assumptions must be fed.³⁰ Yet, at the same time, they claim that we are justified in believing in *economist's* projections about the cost of implementing a carbon tax, though economist's models rely on no fewer and no less certain assumptions. Since this kind of criticism does not appeal to any universal or external standards, only those that are endorsed or accepted by the climate change deniers themselves, it may seem as though at least this line of criticism is open to the relativist.

Yet, once again, for the STS-relativist, the path is blocked. The reason is that the STS-relativist takes both standards and their correct applications to be simultaneously constituted through practice, and there is thus no fact of the matter *which* epistemic rules the climate change deniers are following in advance of or independently of particular applications. Indeed, their consensus on particular cases determines which cases are appropriately deemed to be cases of knowledge. So, if the

³⁰ Cf. Oreskes & Conway 2010.

deniers *do* collectively deem belief on the basis of current economic models to be legitimate, and if they *do* collectively deem belief based on the basis of current climate models to be illegitimate, then by the lights of the standards that are internal to their practice, belief based on current climate models is properly deemed to be illegitimate, while belief based on current economic models is properly deemed to be legitimate. Looking on from the outside, we may be unable to discern any epistemically relevant difference between climate models and economic models, no difference between them that would justify their differential treatment, but when viewed from the within the practice, there is no gap between the evidential norms that are collectively endorsed and the case-by-case judgments concerning when belief on the basis of models is legitimate. Once again, internal critique in this context is not compatible with STS-relativism.

Finally, consider the suggestion that the relativist environmentalist can coherently criticize her opponents by appeal to *her own* standards, those that she shares with the sub-community of climate change believers. Relative to *this* sub-community there is consensus around certain evidential norms, and relative to these evidential norms, the research of climate change deniers is clearly flawed.

Yet even this relatively weak response to the quietism objection is inconsistent with STS-relativism. In this case, the problem is that the STS-relativist cannot coherently see herself as *disagreeing* with her opponent in a first-order debate. The reason is that STS-relativism entails that, given sufficient differences between the practices of the believers and deniers, there is *no genuine disagreement* between them. If they use the terms ‘true’ and ‘justified’ differently, within their separate practices, they each mean different things by these terms. And if the STS-relativist acknowledges this difference of meaning, she cannot coherently see herself as genuinely disagreeing with the climate change deniers.

To fix ideas, it will help to consider the following analogy. Suppose that there are two communities who use the terms ‘whale’, ‘fish’ and ‘mammal’ differently: community A classifies whales as fish and community B classifies them as mammals. According to STS-relativism, this difference in linguistic practice gives rise to a difference in meaning: in A’s language, the sentence ‘whales are fish’ is true, while in B’s language, the sentence ‘whales are fish’ is false. Now consider a dispute between A and B over whether whales are fish. It seems that since A and B mean quite different things by the relevant terms, they simply talk past one another; their dispute is merely verbal. Indeed, A can agree that the sentence ‘whales are fish’ is false, given what it means in B’s language, and B can agree that the same sentence is true, given what it means in A’s.

If STS-relativism is true, and the believers and the deniers mean quite different things by ‘true’ and ‘justified’, then their apparent disagreement whether belief in anthropogenic climate change is true or justified turns out to be merely verbal – just like the dispute between A and B over whether whales are fish.

This difficulty becomes particularly acute when we consider the application of STS-relativism to a term such as ‘justified’, as it is used by various communities. We can distinguish, for instance, the term ‘justified’ as used by the believers from the homophonic term ‘justified’ as used by the deniers by means of a subscript: for the term used by the believers we will write ‘justified_b’, and for the term used by the deniers we will write ‘justified_d’. According to STS-relativism, since these terms have different uses in the practices from which they each emerge, they have different meanings. Note that this is not necessarily to say that ‘justified_b’ means ‘justified-

relative-to-believers’, since that is not part of the meaning finitist’s view. Rather, according to STS-relativism, if ‘justified_b’ has been applied to one set of exemplars by the believers, while ‘justified_a’ has been applied to a different set of exemplars by the deniers, then the terms have different uses, and different meanings within their respective practices. Nevertheless, if ‘justified_b’ has a different meaning from ‘justified_a’, then if a believer states ‘belief in anthropogenic climate change is justified_b’, and a denier states ‘belief in anthropogenic climate change is not justified_a’, their disagreement is merely verbal. Indeed, insofar as the STS-relativist accepts a meaning finitist characterization of the denier’s discourse, which she must if she takes STS-relativism to be global, then she should rationally accept the consequences of that view, namely that belief in anthropogenic climate change is not justified_a, that this claim is not true_a, that belief in anthropogenic climate change is not a case of knowledge_a, and so forth. And if she accepts all of these claims, she can hardly see herself as genuinely disagreeing with the climate change denier. After all, the climate change deniers may well have access to ‘alternative facts’. Thus, it does not seem as though the STS-relativist can evaluate the epistemic practice of her opponents by appeal to her own standards, shared standards, or her opponent’s standards.

Another very different kind of response to the quietism worry invokes the distinction between two perspectives: that of the *actor*, who engages in first order debates about such things as anthropogenic climate change, and that of the *theorist*, who engages in meta-theoretic debates about the nature of representation, truth and knowledge. For instance, Kusch claims that accepting STS-relativism as a *theorist* is fully compatible with accepting normative epistemic claims as an *actor*.³¹ In the present context, the thought is that the relativist environmentalist can coherently accept STS-relativism *qua theorist*, while at the same time accepting that belief in anthropogenic climate change is justified *qua actor*.

On the face of it, this seems like a non-starter. As an actor, someone who believes in the results of mainstream climate science is likely to say:

- (1) Even if there is no consensus on the matter, belief in anthropogenic climate change is justified.

Yet, as a theorist, the STS-relativist states:

- (2) Consensus is a necessary condition for belief in anthropogenic climate change to be justified.³²

³¹ Kusch suggests this sort of strategy in response to a related objection in his 2016.

³² It might be argued that, strictly speaking, the STS relativist’s claim is more precisely that:
 (2*) Consensus is a necessary condition for it to be legitimate to *say* that the belief in anthropogenic climate change is justified.

And (2*) is not incompatible with (1). However, an inconsistency simply emerges elsewhere. Note that (2*) entails that it is illegitimate for the actor to assert (1). But the actor, *qua actor*, insofar as she asserts (1) with full confidence, is clearly committed to:

(1*) Even in the absence of consensus, it is legitimate to say that belief in anthropogenic climate change is justified.

And (2*) conflicts with (1*).

And these two statements straightforwardly conflict.

Perhaps Kusch's view may more plausibly be understood to be the view that (2) is only true relative to the theorist's perspective, while (1) is only true relative to the actor's perspective, and that there are no conflicts across perspectives (2016). In order to make this suggestion more precise, it will help to distinguish between two ways in which the truth of a sentence may be relativized to a perspective, by looking at two ways in which the truth of a sentence can be relativized to a context of utterance or assessment. Consider, for instance, the tensed sentence,

(3) It is snowing.

Clearly, this sentence can be true when asserted in one context, but false when asserted in another. According to one view, what varies from one context to the next is what is said by the assertion of (3). On this view, if (3) is asserted on the 2nd of February, 2016 in Umeå, then what the speaker says is really that *it is snowing on the 2nd of February 2016 in Umeå*, and if (3) is asserted on the 29th of May 2014 in Mumbai, then what the speaker says is really that *it is snowing on the 29th of May 2014 in Mumbai*. Clearly, given what is said by these assertions, one can be true while the other is false, since they say completely different things. Call this view 'content-relativity', since it is the content, or what is said, by an assertion that varies from one context to the next.³³

According to a rather different view, the content of (3) does not change from one context to the other, though its truth-value varies with contexts nonetheless. On this view, what the speaker says when she asserts (3) in any context is the assessment-neutral content *it is snowing*, which does not contain information about the context of utterance. Since the content of (3) is context-neutral on this view, it can be true when assessed at one context and false when assessed at another. Call this view 'truth-relativity' since what varies from one context to the next is truth-value.

The STS-relativist might try to adopt either approach to the two perspectives strategy; yet neither approach is ultimately satisfactory. Consider, first, the content-relativity view. According to this view, when the relativist who endorses mainstream climate science says (1), what she says is that *in the absence of consensus, belief in anthropogenic climate change is justified_a*, where 'justified_a' is an actor's category, its meaning constituted through the actor's first-order practice. In contrast, when she says (2), qua theorist, what she says is that *consensus is a necessary condition for saying that belief in anthropogenic climate change is justified_t*, where 'justified_t' is a theorist's category, with its meaning constituted through the theorist's collective, meta-theoretic practice. This resolves the incompatibility problem, because the theorist's claim that consensus is a necessary condition for saying that a belief is justified_t does not entail that a belief cannot be justified_a in the absence of consensus. However, this way of understanding the STS-relativist's thesis seems to undermine its claim to full generality. It is natural to understand the claim about the role of consensus in legitimating truth and justification claims as applying across the board, not just to the terms that emerge from within the relativist's own practice. However, on the understanding of STS-relativism currently under consideration, the meaning finitist story appears to apply only to the theorist's terms. That is, though consensus is necessary for the applicability of the theorist's term 'justified_t', consensus is not necessary for the applicability of the actor's term 'justified_a'.

³³ The view is often called 'contextualism' in linguistics and philosophy.

The truth-relativity strategy avoids this problem, but gives rise to another. According to the truth-relativity strategy, both the actor and the theorist mean the same thing by ‘justified’, though the truth-value of claims about justification varies with perspective: (1) is true and (2) is false when assessed from the perspective of the actor, while (2) is true and (1) is false when assessed from the perspective of the theorist. However, this strategy puts the relativist believer in anthropogenic climate science in an incoherent state of mind. Since she occupies both perspectives simultaneously, she simultaneously accepts and rejects both (1) and (2), which is clearly irrational. Compare: though it might be rational to accept *it is snowing* at one time and place and reject this thought at another, it would be irrational to both accept and reject *it is snowing* at one and the same time and place. With regard to relativism, this means that though it may be rational to accept that (1) is true when assessed from the perspective of the actor, while (2) is true when assessed from the perspective of the theorist, it is incoherent to occupy both perspectives simultaneously, and both accept and reject (1) and (2).

It might be argued, in response, that the relativist environmentalist need not accept both (1) and (2) from the same perspective; she can simply accept (1) from the actor’s perspective and (2) from the theorist’s perspective, moving back and forth from one perspective to the other. However, this attempt to salvage the view does not heed the fact that, in the case under consideration, the actor and the theorist *are one and the same person*. It is irrational for someone to have inconsistent beliefs, even if those beliefs are relativized to different perspectives, or reside unreconciled in different compartments of one belief system. Indeed, this kind of compartmentalization is common in patients suffering from delusions, whose delusive beliefs are incompatible with commonly held, everyday beliefs that they seem to continue to hold. A distinctive feature of someone suffering from delusion is the failure to resolve inconsistencies in belief when they are made apparent. And when delusive patients become troubled by tensions in their belief systems, it is taken as a sign that they may be on the path to recovery.³⁴ The strategy of relativizing to two perspectives does not resolve the incoherence between the relativist meta-theory and elements of a first-order domain; it simply re-labels it.

4 Concluding Remarks

It seems as though the quietism challenge ultimately holds. There is an incoherence between the STS-relativist’s meta-theoretic claims and the sorts of first order statements or judgments about climate science that she might sensibly wish to make. In the face of this incoherence, the relativist faces a choice whether to reject relativism or cease to take a stand not just on climate change, but on any issue of individual or collective importance about which there is as yet no consensus, such as the safety of vaccines, or whether HIV causes AIDS. A relativist who responds to the quietism challenge by choosing to fastidiously avoid engagement in first order debates such as these only serves the interests of often rich and powerful science deniers.

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³⁴ Bayne 2011.

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