

Minding Meaning, Truth, and Knowledge as a Matter of Existential Concern

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I come from a school of philosophy wherein the question of meaning and truth is primarily an existential matter. Something that matters for me is meaningful to me. Such things stimulate a sense of security, belonging, alienation, fear, dread, vitality, happiness, or anxiety — all linked to how I perceive myself in life and world. From this stream of understanding, I ask Christine McCarthy: Why do our views or conceptions of meaning matter, especially in the field of education? Why should educators be concerned with meaning of meaning? McCarthy's answer seems to be right. She states: "One might think that linguistic/semantic conceptions of meaning, and nonrealist, coherentist conceptions of truth and knowledge could not actually do any real harm. But, this is an illusion." In her view, then, the coherentist and nonrealist account of truth does harm in that it "affects first...individual teacher's practice, and second, on larger issues of educational policy regarding curricula." Although she does not spell out exactly what the nature of such harm is to individuals and society, there are enough hints and allusions in the essay for the reader to form a mental picture, and the picture that forms for me is a familiar one. I will entitle the picture "fear of relativism." In the dominant academic culture, what McCarthy calls the nonrealist, coherentist position can slip into relativism, and relativism is both dreaded as an enemy of Reason and Progress and ridiculed as anti-Enlightenment and backward Medievalism. (In this response, I use "relativism" to represent an epistemological position oppositional to a related cluster of positions that McCarthy endorses, such as foundationalism and realism, and to which I also add positions like absolutism and universalism.¹) Many see that relativism spells an end to all that is rational, progressive, and decent. My impression is that McCarthy is vulnerable to this anxiety and fear. Indeed, we all are.

If we were to accept relativism, then, says McCarthy, "public education will have to be equally accommodating to the truths and knowledges of the various different cultural patterns of belief within a politically defined group, there being no possibility of justifying any one set as more worthy of promulgation than any other." Note the embedded thesis of cultural relativism here. An example of relativism that worries McCarthy in the context of education is a familiar one: the theory of evolution is no more "true," "justifiable," or "valid" than the doctrine of creationism. We can indeed endlessly multiply such examples. Astronomy is no more valid than astrology. Alchemy is no less valid than chemistry, and so on. If we accept relativism, then, to McCarthy and like-minded educators, there would be no intrinsic reason to teach chemistry and astronomy rather than alchemy and astrology in school. In the same vein, why exclude witchcraft and magic in the curriculum? If we adopted relativism, then our schools would soon look like Harry Potter's school of magic! Clearly an absurd and intolerable prospect, is it not?

For McCarthy, relativism is a flawed epistemological doctrine, and she bases her criticism of relativism on John Dewey's pragmatist epistemology. Dewey maintains, says McCarthy, that there is an *objective* relationship between what goes on in the mind and what goes on in the world. This relationship of representation, characterized as *correspondence*, is what *meaning* of anything is. To emphasize, the key feature of this representational relationship is *objectivity* — a concept that is crucial to McCarthy's argument. How are we to understand objectivity here? What makes meaning objective? McCarthy, a Deweyan realist, believes in the existence of independent and concrete external objects (things and events) "out there," as opposed to "in here" — in the mind or consciousness. The tree that I see is "real" in the sense that it has an independent existence outside my mental representation. To quote McCarthy's quoting Dewey, "Things are things, not mental states. Hence the realism." Indeed, do we not deem someone who cannot distinguish the mental from the physical "crazy"? From the realist epistemological perspective, it is the actual existence of *things* and *events* that renders our statements about these things and events objective and hence true.

The trouble with relativism, from the realist viewpoint (as represented by McCarthy), is that it seems not to accept the independent existence of things and events. Or, even if such existence is accepted, relativists argue that we have no way of knowing things and events independently of our (subjective) interpretative points of view. All knowledge is filtered through the mind. To accept this claim is to reject realism and embrace relativism.² Thus, relativism starts where objectivity ends; the thesis that our knowledge is mind- or consciousness-dependent (the nonrealist position) puts an end to objectivity. How does McCarthy counter this view of mind-dependent knowledge? She subscribes to some version of what I and others call the mind-brain identity theory. Citing Max R. Bennett and Peter Hacker, she states, "neural patterns of activity can have a 'representative role' *only* in the sense that they are causally correlated with features of objects perceived. Brain states 'represent' things, [Bennett and Hacker] argue, in the same sense that 'a wide tree ring represents a year of ample rainfall'."

Unfortunately, the above argument from mind-brain identity theory still does not defeat the mind-dependent view of knowledge. In any observations, including observations of physical brains, there has to be someone with consciousness that observes. Thus all knowledge claims, including this very one I am making here, are mind- or consciousness-mediated or dependent. Does this mean that I do not believe in the physical existence of anything, including brains? Can I differentiate what is physical from what is purely mental? Can I distinguish real fire from my image of fire? For sure! But I do not have to be a realist to tell them apart. From my epistemological position of mind-dependent knowing, no knowledge claims or views about physical entities and phenomena are independent of mind or consciousness. To a nonrealist, the difference between "real" fire and "imagined" fire is not that real fire exists outside the mind whereas imagined fire exists inside the mind. It is the difference in actual perceptions and sensations of any fire, real or imagined. "Real" fire is associated with certain sensations and perceptions, and "imagined" fire with others.

But does being a nonrealist make me a relativist? Let us recall the point I made initially, namely that I see McCarthy's worry about meaning and truth to be a worry about relativism and its implication for education. She seems to think that in order to avoid relativism and its imputed vices (which I also contest), we need to subscribe to realism. *This ain't so*. Realism can be construed to be compatible with relativism. One can be an epistemological relativist (all knowledge claims are mind- or consciousness-dependent) and an ontological realist (things and events exist independently of individual consciousness). However, I confess I am not a realist, even ontologically. I do not believe in the independent existence of anything, mental, physical, or psychophysical! The whole phenomenal world, of which my mind and body (and whatever else) are part, seems to me to be one big extremely complex, messy, con-fused web of confluent and coincidental causality. The Buddhists have a neat *pali* term for this: dependent co-origination (*Pratitya-samudpad*). Actually, today this is not as farfetched and weird as it sounds. In these times of quantum physics and complexity theory, many accept the nonrealist view on empirical grounds. What appear to be completely separate, independent physical objects are continually exchanging parts with each other and are continually changing.

Given my denial of realism and espousal of relativism, do I say that creationism is as good a modern scientific theory as evolutionary biology? Certainly not. Creationism is not a modern scientific theory, and if we want to teach modern scientific theory in schools, then we do not teach creationism as a scientific theory. This does not preclude, however, discussing philosophically creationism in a science class. In the same class, we could — and should if we are interested in critical understanding of society, culture, economics, and so on — debate about whether we should privilege teaching (modern western) science in school, a field of inquiry that requires students to accept (epistemological and ontological) realism. To see the world as a realist is to learn a certain habit of mind (and acquire a certain state of consciousness) wherein we think, see, and feel that the world outside is independent of us, and vice versa. The observed and the observer are epistemically and ontically independent of each other. Are there possibly harmful implications and ramifications of this realist position? I think so.

When we separate matter from mind, then we humans see the outside world as “other,” which is the beginning of marginalization, exploitation, and oppression. For me, then, it is not relativism but realism (in the way these terms are understood in this and McCarthy's essays here) that is worrisome.

1. Today, many distinguish relativism from pluralism, arguing that the latter does not commit the “sin” of opining that all views, positions, and knowledge claims in general are of equal value and that one view (position, choice, and so on) is as good as any. I shall point out that this sin is not inherent in relativism as relativism is simply the position or view that there are no universal standards that transcend the context of time and place (hence, culture, society, history, and all other matrices of humanity).

2. Like relativism, realism comes in more fine-grained labels such as ontological realism, epistemological realism, internal realism, external realism, and so on. Here I will use “realism” to mean the position that there are “facts” about the world, independent of human beings (and their minds, belief states, judgments, tastes, and so on).