

# TOWARDS A UNIFIED CONCEPT OF REALITY

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## Abstract

This is a study of the relativity of facts in relation to the frameworks of reference in terms of which those facts are established. In this early paper from 1975, intended for a less technical audience, the author proposes an understanding of facts and their associated frameworks in terms of complementarity. This understanding of facts leads to an integrated yet pluralistic concept of reality.

In the Addendum, readers will find a partial listing of related publications by the author that extend the research described in this paper.

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## TOWARDS A UNIFIED CONCEPT OF REALITY

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It is increasingly less appropriate or useful to speak of a single concept of reality which we generally share. We rather tend to acknowledge the existing heterogeneity of knowledge. Where Aristotle's logic possessed lone authority for some twenty centuries, there is now a growing multitude of distinct systems of logic. Euclid's geometry has become a special case in a family of divergent geometries. Newtonian mechanics remains no more than a reasonable approximation for the purposes of earth-bound engineers, and must be replaced by quantum theory in the domain of the very small, and by relativity theory in the domain of the very large. Etc. This expanding pluralism has been accommodated in a very natural manner by the "systems-approach", but without an attempt to articulate a unified concept of reality.

As a result of the increasing consciousness of pluralism, philosophical obituaries for the doctrine of absolute truth have gradually appeared, albeit prematurely. The doctrine does not give up its ghost easily, in spite of the popular tendency both to emphasize *conventions* and *language-games*, and generally to *relativize* in terms of *conceptual frameworks*. The near-deceased is bitter and ironic: "Without absolute truth, there can be no unified concept of reality."

Of course, the terminally ill egotist often posits his own indispensability — and here the malady is a solipsism in which the doctrine believes itself to be the sole true doctrine about truth. To argue with a dying doctrine is a delicate affair, but the truth is that the doctrine *is* dispensable and, ironically, laying it to rest opens the way to a unified concept of reality.

Perelman has observed that rhetoric has been criticized by those "for whom there was but a single truth in every matter." [p. 45]<sup>2</sup> This seems to suggest that rhetoric may sanction more than one truth in a single matter. Certainly this view seems to follow once one admits the existence of a plurality of sets of rational first prin-

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ciples, where each set provides a framework for an appropriate set of truths relative to it. Perelman's familiarity with formal systems and with variations in judgments from epoch to epoch, and from culture to culture, doubtless provides him with evidence for the existence of such a plurality. Furthermore, it is basic to his concept of rhetoric to "combat uncompromising and irreducible philosophical oppositions presented by all kinds of absolutism . . .". [p. 150]<sup>2</sup>

Perelman proposes the notion of the audience-relativity of meanings and usages. (For his remarks on the audience-relativity of rhetoric, see [pp. 121, 138]<sup>1</sup> and [pp. 7, 14, 19, 21, 39, 54, 65ff, 72, 110, 134, 507, and passim.].<sup>2</sup>.) His thesis immediately gives rise to the question whether there is but a single truth for all audiences, or whether there are various truths, each relative to some ideal group of similarly constituted individuals.

Although Perelman apparently wishes to avoid any form of absolutism, he does speak of "the universal audience" in terms of "that invariant faculty, present in every normally constituted human being, which is reason." [p. 127]<sup>1</sup> (Of course, what must be qualified as *normally* invariant is an odd "invariant" indeed!)

Perelman remarks:

When a stick is partly immersed in water, it seems curved when one looks at it and straight when one touches it, but in reality it cannot be both curved and straight. While appearances can be opposed to each other, reality is coherent: the effect of determining reality is to dissociate those appearances that are deceptive from those that correspond to reality . . . (B)ecause of their incompatibility, appearances cannot be accepted together . . . (p. 416)<sup>2</sup>

This concept of reason functions as a norm to eliminate or smooth out incompatibilities in "appearance" by distinguishing data to be retained as significant from data to be rejected as misleading. Such a norm opposes, in an absolutist fashion, the simultaneous truth of both terms of an opposition. The stick "cannot be both curved and straight."

Nevertheless, *in fact* what we see is curved, and *in fact* what we *touch* is straight, yet also *in fact*, Perelman says, the stick *really* is not bent at all. So we soon encounter the need for a good understanding of what a fact *is*. . . .

Before any thesis can be argued, some set of criteria of sound argumentation and some set of facts judged to be relevant must be accepted explicitly or implicitly in advance. Indeed, it seems to be fairly clear that in the selection of "relevant facts" certain of the

basic postulates of reasoning are already involved. In this sense, a fact bears witness to some fundamental postulates a function of which it is recognized to be a fact. In other words, a proposition can be claimed to assert a fact only in relation to some set of norms or standards which are ordinarily agreed upon within a given framework of reasoning. It follows that it must be in relation to such norms or standards that the concept of fact is best described.

We say that what a true proposition asserts is a fact. A proposition which is confirmed, provisionally or otherwise, is asserted to be true. (On presumed versus observed facts, see [p. 74]<sup>2</sup>.) Thus, "any truth enunciates a fact." [p. 69]<sup>2</sup> A fact is not only what a true proposition asserts but it is also what a false proposition denies. Facts are themselves neither true nor false, but they render assertions true or false. (For a related treatment of the concept of fact, see [pp. 177-281]<sup>3</sup> and [pp. 85ff]<sup>4</sup>.)

What makes a proposition true or false is expressed *via* assertions, denials, beliefs, etc. Thus, what makes it possible to identify a fact is a framework in terms of which relations can be established between an individual (who asserts, denies, . . . , a given proposition) and the world of things with which the individual is acquainted. In short, a pragmatism framework (one which, strictly speaking, coordinates persons, meanings, and events) is necessary in order that candidates for facts may be specified and become subject to methods of confirmation.

A framework adopted for the identification of facts defines the factually real in terms of the criteria which it may presuppose for discriminating between significant and misleading data. When we claim that any assessment of the truth of an assertion must take account of the context in which it is made, we adopt a point of view which is "framework-sympathetic". We realize that an examination of the context in which a proposition is asserted will frequently reveal the framework and presupposed standards for the recognition of facts, in relation to which coordinations between persons, intended meanings, and identifiable events are to be understood. A concrete description of such a pragmatism framework determines the ideal audience, to recall Perelman's language, relative to which a set of propositions is acceptable as true. It is an easy step, then, to extend Perelman's notion of audience-relativity and audience-pluralism, to a recognition of the relativity of facts to the ideal representation of a particular framework by an audience.

It is an immediate consequence of this framework-sympathy

that what is factual in relation to one framework may not be factual in relation to another. It is in this sense that relative to one framework for the identification of facts, the visual one, the stick is bent, whereas relative to a second framework, the tactile one, the stick is straight. (A similar example may be had in the contrasting facts ascertained about the nature of light by means of two different experimental apparatuses: one indicates light to be a particle-phenomenon, the other that light is a wave-phenomenon.)

It is tempting to ask how this can be when only one and the same stick (or physical phenomenon) is in question. But such a question is of the "How often do you beat your wife?"-type: it is excessively free in its presuppositions. It supposes that the two sets of facts refer, in fact, to the same thing. Sameness has always been philosophically slippery, and common sense yearns for *the same stick*. The result has been to smooth out the bothersome heterogeneity by an appeal to a higher-order framework capable of absorbing the different facts (I limit myself to "facts" since we are now beyond "appearances"). This leads to the tolerant synthesis: *real stick* — which can be both seen ("as if" bent when partly underwater, "as if" (?) straight when wholly in the air) and touched (normally straight). This move in itself is unobjectionable: we have merely developed a less simple understanding of sticks, water, and air, and feel assured in the precise vocabulary of refraction. But the move to a higher-order framework is accompanied by an exhibition of ontological snobbery: After all, the genuinely real stick concerns us, and not the misleading visual image. (The near-deceased raises himself on an elbow and smiles.)

But we are too hasty. The absolutist here neglects his facts: The stick which is visually perceived is *really* seen to be curved. That is a fact. In the interests of a unitary conception of reality, we have permitted ourselves to reject as misleading any factual variation — aberration — from a *norm*. Refraction theory provides a framework in which a set of facts may be interpreted. What is at issue is a *theory* — a system of interpretation — and not a dogma of revelation.

It is worthwhile noting how a theory succeeds in speaking of "the same thing" — be it a stick or a photon — from different points of view. A stick or quantum event is identified as a function of the operations employed to study it. Refraction provides such an identification procedure by describing, for example, how what we see is a function of the medium through which light passes.

The theory of refraction makes it possible to coordinate the bent stick that is seen with the straight stick that is touched, and to consider both to refer to the same object functionally defined by the theory.

From the standpoint of a theory adhering to the principle of non-contradiction, a proposition and its negation cannot both be true. In this sense, only one of the two propositions, 'the stick which is visually perceived is curved' and 'the stick which is visually perceived is not curved' may be considered to be true.

However, a proposition and its negation may both be confirmed in certain theories. But, as is always the case, attention must be paid to the contexts in which the propositions are ascertained. If each assertion is true relative to a different context of reference, then the facts asserted by the two propositions are called *complementary facts*. Facts asserted by contradictory propositions are complementary provided that each assertion is true relative to a distinct context of reference. Consequently, contradictory propositions which have been confirmed in relation to different modes of observation can be regarded as asserting a complementarity of the facts they refer to. (In relation to distinct experimental contexts of reference, the complementarity of predicates ascribable to light — 'is corpuscular'/'is not corpuscular' — has been observed.)

If it can be granted that there are numerous, distinct systems equipped to ascertain facts, formulate true propositions expressing these, and hence reach "objectively valid results", then we must also accept the fact this view brings to our attention: that there is a plurality of sometimes divergent facts, and that the relations between certain of these facts will be relations of complementarity.

Perelman has argued that "revision [of an axiom] cannot be effected by an argument developed within the system to which the axiom belongs." [p. 105]<sup>2</sup> Since Perelman is ambiguous in his apparent acceptance of the doctrine of absolute truth, it is difficult to be sure to what extent adherence to a view of the complementarity of facts diverges from the concept of rhetoric he proposes. It seems likely that some divergence is implied by Perelman's reference to "the problem that is raised by the incompatibility of appearances." [p. 419]<sup>2</sup> Several questions come to mind: Is there *in fact* an incompatibility of appearances? If there is, what is the nature of the incompatibility? Could it become problematic? If indeed it can, would a concept of reality which bases itself upon the doctrine of absolute truth resolve the problem satisfactorily? The



foregoing discussion should be able to throw some light on these questions.

I have suggested that when we speak of *appearances* as opposed to *reality* we frequently and mistakenly believe the reports of our senses to be in conflict and to require the kind of smoothing out which the application of a reality-standard is intended to provide. *In fact*, these reports are usually not in "conflict"; often, they yield a recognition of complementary facts. (We should need to stray far from "normal psychology" to find an example of this kind of conflict. I should have, e.g., to see the stick as at *once* bent and not bent. For the sake of simplicity, I have omitted any discussion of this dimension of time: If I see the stick now as bent and later in time as not bent, there is "conflict" between the two observations only provided absolutist reality-norms intervene. These would suggest that the two visual perceptions are of one and the same thing — that if the conditions of observations have not changed, then I am likely to have erred in judging that the stick I first saw was *actually* bent, etc.)

If we are persuaded to accept this view of complementarity, it is because we see that propositions asserting facts become incompatible only if they are ascertained from the standpoint of the same frame of reference, only if they are assessed in terms of the same standards of confirmation. If the propositions in question occur in essentially dissimilar contexts of reference, it will be illegitimate to place them on the same footing and to judge them with the same criteria. Thus, the question whether facts are incompatible or complementary will turn on whether the facts are ascertained in the same context, or in essentially different contexts.

It follows, then, that incompatibility between *facts* becomes problematic either when they are illegitimately treated by neglecting the dissimilarity of the contexts of reference relative to which they were ascertained, or when they are found to conflict in the same context. And, as I have tried to suggest, a doctrine of absolute truth is entirely unsatisfactory once a plurality of essentially dissimilar frameworks of reference is admitted.

It is therefore my contention that (1) there is frequently no need to discriminate against certain facts because of apparent incompatibility, (2) to do so is often illegitimate since (3) there is in fact a plurality of what I have, with deliberate vagueness, variously called rational first principles, criteria of sound argumentation, basic postulates of reasoning, or reality-criteria.

It is fortunate that theoretical developments have brought with them an unsettling pluralism. As variety is compounded, the desire to smooth out or to reject factual heterogeneity shows itself to be stubbornly and blindly dogmatic. There are many points of view, and many facts, perhaps not all of which can be accommodated within the compass of a single theoretical interpretation. But this does not imply that a unified concept of reality is impossible or unrealistic. We can dispense with the idea that unification is possible only at the expense of difference, and consider the sense in which complementarity can accommodate heterogeneity on the terms proffered by this new form of synthetic understanding.

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A freely downloadable collection of publications by the author, including many of the publications listed here, is available from the university research website: <http://www.willamette.edu/~sbartlet>.

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