

Relativism and Objectivism about Truth

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Truth, some say, is relative. Sharon believes in God; Todd's an atheist. Monique believes the official story about 9/11; Dan thinks it was an inside job. Jane thinks Donald Trump is doing a great job; Tara thinks he's a disaster. Who's to say who's right and who's wrong? We're tempted to answer: Nobody! When different people have different opinions, they're all right in their own way. Ben likes apples; Ryan prefers bananas. Neither one of them is *wrong*. For the **relativist**, all truth is like this—just a matter of perspective. There are no objective facts; there is no absolute reality. Truth is what you take it to be.

Relativism is an inviting way to think about the world. Suppose your friend goes to a psychic, and believes that this guy is the real deal. You're inclined to be skeptical about it, but how can you be certain that your friend is wrong? (How can you be certain about *anything*?) In a sense, we can say that it's *true for her* that he has psychic powers. Maybe it's not true for you, but if you can't prove that she's wrong, maybe it'd be best not to argue about it. So here are two payoffs of relativism:

Epistemic humility: We should always remember that no one's perfect. No matter how convinced you might be about something, it might turn out that you're wrong. Relativism seems to be a good way to keep this in mind; it makes us humble about our epistemic status—about what we know and don't know. (“Epistemology” is the philosophical study of knowledge, so “epistemic” is just a fancy way of saying “related to knowledge”.)

Tolerance: If we can never be certain that what we believe is the absolute truth, we shouldn't be jerks about our own idiosyncratic perspectives. Relativism reminds us that, since all truth is just a matter of opinion, there's no good reason to insist that we're right and others are wrong.

You don't want to be a jerk. You want to stay humble. Being a relativist seems like a good way to do this.

The Problem with Relativism

But let's think carefully about this. If something is "true for you", does that just mean it's something you believe, or does that mean that you *literally* make it true by believing it? Let's just, for now, take it literally. The problem with relativism about truth, if we take it seriously, is that it says reality depends on us—on our beliefs and our opinions. But experience shows us that's not really how the universe works. How would that work? Are you supposed to be some sort of wizard, who can just think facts into being? Imagine you get some bad news—say, you fail an important test. If relativism is correct, there's an easy solution. You might think you're going to have to put your nose to the grindstone, and really study hard if you want to get a good final grade. But relativism offers an easier solution: just *believe* that you aced the test, and it will become *true for you* that you did! By the magic of relativism, your *F* will have transmogrified into an *A*, and the rest of the semester promises to be a breeze.

Another problem with being a literal relativist is that it leads us into contradictions. Suppose that Sarah thinks dolphins are fish. She wasn't paying attention that day in biology class. She thinks they're fish, but you're pretty sure they're mammals. Now what does relativism have to say about this situation? Well, if truth is just a matter of what one believes, then that means dolphins really *are* fish (since that's Sarah's truth), but also that they aren't (since that's your truth). But that's ridiculous! They can't both *be* and *not be* fish at the same time!

Suppose I'm listening to you and Sarah argue about dolphins, and I'm interested. I didn't pay attention in biology, either. But I'm not sure what to think. "Listen," I say, "I know what the two of you believe about the subject, but I don't really care about that. What I want to know is: which is it? Are dolphins actually, really, truly fish, or are they mammals? **Separate from your beliefs, how are things with reality?** What the hell are dolphins?" The problem is, if I take relativism literally, these questions are nonsense. There *is* no truth separate from our beliefs— truth is nothing but a reflection of our beliefs. Maybe I decide to get to the bottom of things, and go out into the world and investigate. I talk to a biologist. I go to Wikipedia. I swim out into the ocean and examine the blowholes of annoyed dolphins. Again, though, from a relativist's perspective, there's no reason for me to do any of this: It makes no sense to try to get to the bottom of things, because there is no bottom. There's only what you and Sarah happen to believe. Why go out and investigate reality, if reality is only what we think it is?

So maybe we shouldn't take relativism literally. There's a nice way to point out the problem with this take. The relativist says, "All truth is relative." You reply, "Wait. I don't think I believe that. Is it actually true?" Now our poor relativist faces a dilemma. Think about it. If she insists that, yes, it is really true, even if I don't believe it, then she's given up on relativism! After all, relativism is supposed to say that if someone believes something, it's literally true for them. But she just said that something's not true (namely, your rejection of relativism), even though someone (namely, you) believes it. On the other hand, she can admit that, okay, since you don't believe it, all truth isn't actually relative. But she's gone and given up on relativism again! If all truth isn't relative, then relativism, taken literally, is false. I wish I could take credit for this clever bit of philosophical *jujitsu*, but the argument actually comes from Socrates, the great-granddaddy of Western philosophy. If it's making your head spin, here's a way to visualize the dilemma:

"All truth is relative."

Wait. Is *that* actually true, or is it just true-for-you?

"It's *actually* true!"

Conclusion: You've contradicted yourself. If the rule is that "all truth is relative", relativism itself can't be an exception to that rule.

"Er, I guess it's not *actually* true."

Conclusion: Relativism isn't really true—you've just admitted it!

Let's take stock. It's tempting to be a relativist, because that seems like a good way to avoid being a jerk. But if we take the idea that truth is relative literally, we quickly end up believing all sorts of ridiculous stuff: that we can make facts spring into being just by believing in them; that something can both be and not be a fish at the same time; that we have no reason to go out and do research to find out the truth. So, is there a way of thinking about this that *doesn't* lead to all this silliness?

Well, let's think again about this idea that some stuff might be "true for you", even though other stuff might be "true for me". In a sense, that seems reasonable, but we've seen that we can't take it literally. People like to say things that sound relativistic: "my truth"; "your facts"; "our reality". But truth isn't yours, and facts do not belong to

me—they belong to the world! Reality isn't ours; reality just... is. So, if we can't interpret these phrases literally, how can we interpret them?

Often, when people talk about *their truth*, they're speaking metaphorically. They don't think that they can change reality just by believing something to be true. Instead, what they're really talking about are their *beliefs*. "This is true for me" just means, "I believe this", "I accept this", or maybe even "This is a really important idea for me." The point is, when we talk this way, we're not talking about reality; we're talking about ourselves—our beliefs, our perspectives, our "truths".

Now what? Well, there are two lessons to take from this: First, instead of saying "This is true for me," maybe it's better to say, "I think this" or "I believe this" or even "I have good reasons to believe this". Now, not always. Your mileage may vary, and there may be some contexts where "true for me" is fine. You don't want to be the killjoy who always insists, "Well, *actually*, truth isn't something that we determine. Things are true whether we believe them or not. *Actually*, reality is independent of us. Facts don't care about your feelings." You might be technically correct, but people will stop inviting you to their parties.

But, hey, you're reading a philosophy paper right now. You're taking a philosophy class. Philosophers are sticklers for truth, and for speaking carefully. So, in the context of this class, it'd probably be best if we drop the possessives ("my", "your", "our") in front of our talk about the world ("truth", "facts", "reality"). You don't own reality, and you should speak in a way that respects that fact.

The second takeaway is that we should recognize that just because someone believes something, that doesn't mean that belief must be true. Even when that someone happens to be you. At some point in this semester—or anyway at some point in your college career—you will find yourself in the uncomfortable position of having one of your dearly held beliefs seriously challenged. (If you get through your entire college career without this happening, something has gone seriously wrong. Consider asking for a refund.) Maybe the challenger has presented a lot of evidence against your position, and you're not sure how to respond. If you're like a lot of students, you'll be tempted here to say something like, "Yeah, that's true according to *you*." I urge you to resist this temptation. It's a cop-out, because it amounts to saying, "This is all well and good, but at the end of the day, it's just *your* truth, and I have my own truth on the subject." As if things can only be true-according-to-you or true-according-to-me—as if that exhausts all of the possibilities, because there is no true-according-to-*freaking-reality*.

What else can you do, though? Well, see if you can find good evidence for your position, or maybe a problem with your challenger's logic. Or (gasp!) admit that you don't have a very good justification for your belief and that maybe (double gasp!) you

should change your mind about it. If this sounds right, and I've convinced you that you can't take relativism literally, perhaps I can interest you in a position called **objectivism** about truth. That's the view that there are some objective truths out there in the world, truths that simply are what they are, whether we believe them or not.

Being Objective

If we're objectivists, do we have to be jerks? Remember that the two big payoffs of relativism are 1) that it gives us epistemic humility, and 2) that it keeps us tolerant. Do we have to give these up when we give up relativism? Will we ever be invited to a party again? Relax, dear student. If we take objectivism seriously, we'll see there's plenty of room for both of these payoffs.

In a sense, the idea that we should be epistemically humble actually *presupposes* objectivism. Being epistemically humble means always keeping in mind the possibility that you're wrong. Well, why should you do that? It can only be because there's *something to be wrong about*—some truth about the world that doesn't depend on your beliefs. If you're really a relativist, it ends up that there's no reason to be humble, because there's no way for you to be wrong! Reality is, after all, whatever you believe. There's no room for error, no space for error to creep in between your beliefs and reality. But if you're an objectivist, there's plenty of space for getting things wrong.

This is why most objectivists are also **fallibilists**. Fallibilism is the recognition that, since we are all fallible, we should be open to revision in the light of new evidence. We've got to be open to the possibility that any of the stuff we believe now might turn out to be wrong. Objectivism and fallibilism make perfect sense together: If reality doesn't depend on my beliefs, how likely is it that all of my beliefs just happen to be true? Best for me to be open-minded and see where the evidence leads.

This line of thinking also explains why an objectivist should usually be tolerant of other people's beliefs: Maybe you and I disagree, but, hey, maybe I'm wrong, so I guess I should listen to what you have to say. Tolerance *can* be a noble motive: we don't want to seem like arrogant know-it-alls. But the point is that we can be okay with what others believe, and not be judgmental of them, *even if we think they believe false things, or things that we don't accept*. We can disagree and be nice about it. We can even discuss *why* we believe what we believe, and do that in a respectful, fair and accepting manner. We don't have to be jerks. If we want to be invited to parties, we need to be nice.

But also, hey, aren't there some beliefs that we really should *not* tolerate and accept? There are people out there who argue that the Holocaust never happened, who

think that we shouldn't teach about it in history classes. Should we just shrug and say, "Well I guess that's their truth"? No! Sometimes you have to stand up for the truth—and doing that requires that you understand there is an objective truth in the first place. Maybe sometimes we shouldn't even be all that nice. Some beliefs are very hurtful, and lead to all sorts of harms, all sorts of unfairness and injustice, and we shouldn't just let them slide.

A belief doesn't have to be morally abhorrent, though, to be worthy of our critical scrutiny. Think again about your friend who visits the psychic. Now there's nothing unethical about believing in psychics. Or in not believing in them, for that matter. But whether or not psychics are real is an important question—important enough we'd want to get a right answer to it. Because, if they are real, then that raises all these questions that are worth exploring: what would this tell us about the relationship between the brain and the mind, or the mind and the rest of reality? And more prosaically: if they're real, shouldn't I go see one, to get some advice? And if psychics *aren't* real, we'd also want to know. People around the world spend hundreds of millions of dollars on psychics every year; they could be spending time and money elsewhere.

A lot of questions are like this. What happened on 9/11? Is the Earth really getting warmer? Did we really evolve from apes? Do ghosts exist? Does acupuncture really work? The answers to these questions will tell us important things about the world, and give us important information when we're deciding how we're going to spend our time. Now it might be that we've caught a bad bit of epistemic luck, and the question of whether or not psychics (or ghosts or whatever) are real is one that we human beings will never be able to get to the bottom of. But we should keep an open mind about our capacity to figure things out. The point is this: If we use the tools of critical thinking (which, hey! I'm going to teach you!), we might be surprised by how many beliefs we can actually get right—how many strides we can take towards the truth of the matter. We can only do this, though, if we accept from the get-go that there really *is* a truth of the matter.



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