

Also by Stephen Law
The Philosophy Files

The Philosophy Gym

25 SHORT ADVENTURES IN THINKING

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INTO THE LAIR OF THE RELATIVIST

PHILOSOPHY GYM CATEGORY

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According to relativists, people who speak simply of what's 'true' are naive. 'Whose truth?' asks the relativist. 'No claim is ever true, period. What's true is always true for someone. It's true relative to a particular person or culture. And what's true for one person or culture may be false for another. There's no such thing as the *absolute* truth on any question.'

Is the relativist correct?

Introduction

Let's begin with a couple of illustrations of how appeals to relativism can creep into everyday conversation.

1. Olaf's Condemnation of Female Circumcision

Olaf: Female circumcision is wrong.

Mrs Barbery: Why?

Olaf: It dramatically reduces the possibility of a woman enjoying a full sex life. It has a major impact – a largely negative impact – on her existence. And it's forced on young girls. It's obviously *true* that compelling children to undergo such life-blighting surgery is morally abhorrent.

Mrs Barbery: You speak of what's 'true'. But whose 'truth' are we talking about here? You're judging another culture – that of certain Sudanese people, for example – by your own Western standards. But they have their *own* moral standards. What's 'true' for you is actually 'false' for them.

Olaf: You believe there's no objective, independent fact of the matter about whether female circumcision is *really* wrong? That moral 'truth' is always relative to a particular culture?

Mrs Barbery: Exactly. So it's wrong of you to judge.

2. The Great Mystica's Defence of Astrology

The Great Mystica: Do you want an astrological reading?

Fox: Definitely not.

The Great Mystica: You're hostile. I can tell from your aura.

Fox: There are no such things as auras. Aura reading, astrology, psychic powers, tarot cards – they're all bunk.

The Great Mystica: Why do you say that?

Fox: Because when these things are investigated scientifically, it turns out there's hardly a shred of evidence to support them. In fact, almost all the evidence points the other way.

The Great Mystica: I see the problem. You're applying a particular form of reasoning – Western scientific and logical reasoning – to New Age systems of belief. In fact, judged by their own *internal* standards of rationality, astrology and these other belief systems come out looking very sensible indeed!

Fox: But these other ways of thinking are flabby and not rigorous.

The Great Mystica: No, they're not. They're just *different*, that's all. We need to throw off the straitjacket of traditional Western thinking and open ourselves up to other modes of thought!

Fox: You believe these 'alternative' ways of thinking are equally valid?

The Great Mystica: Yes, I do. Each produces its *own kind of truth*. From your Western, analytical, science-based perspective, the claim that astrology works is false. But from the perspective of an astrologer, the claim is true. In fact, *what's false for you is true for me*. You shouldn't arrogantly assume that your truth is the only truth.

Fox: There's no single, objective 'truth'?

The Great Mystica: I see your chakras are finally opening.

Interesting v. Boring Relativism

In both of the above examples, it's suggested that a claim that is true for one person or culture can be false for another. I call this highly controversial form of relativism *interesting relativism*. Interesting relativism shouldn't be muddled up with *boring relativism*.

Here's an example of boring relativism. Suppose we both say 'I like sausages'. Despite the fact that we utter the same sentence, it may be that what I say is true and what you say is false.

Isn't this a form of relativism about truth?

Yes, in a sense. But it's relativism of a very dull and yawn-inducing sort. We can all agree that truth is 'relative' in the sense that one and the same sentence can be true as uttered by one person and false as uttered by another.

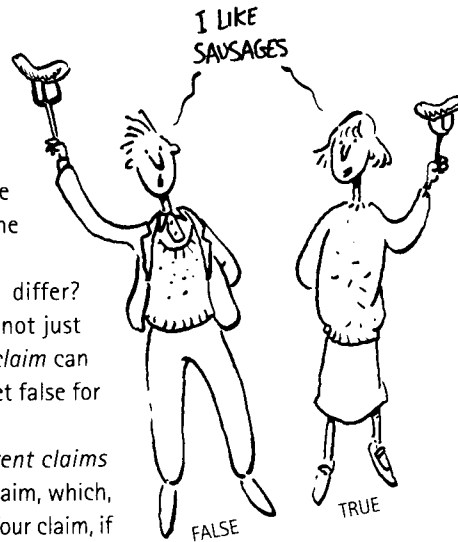
How does interesting relativism differ? Interesting relativism is the view that not just the *same sentence* but the very *same claim* can be true for one person or culture and yet false for another.

Notice that you and I make *different claims* when we say 'I like sausages'. I make a claim, which, if true, is made true by a fact about me. Your claim, if true, is made true by a fact about you. That's why the possibility that I might speak truly and you falsely is unsurprising.

When we're dealing with relativism of the interesting variety, on the other hand, we are dealing with a *single claim* which is true for one person and false for another. Take, for example, the claim that female circumcision is wrong. The suggestion that this very same claim is both true for Olaf but false for, say, certain Sudanese people is an example of interesting relativism.

Here's a way of bringing out the difference between interesting and boring relativism. Truths that are relative in the boring sense don't contradict each other. For example, the person who claims that she likes sausages and the person who claims she doesn't don't disagree. Both can happily accept that one of them likes sausages and the other doesn't.

Truths that are relative in the interesting sense, on the other hand, are incompatible. Olaf and a defender of female circumcision *really do disagree* about what's morally acceptable. Interesting relativism accepts that they disagree but nevertheless insists that the claim that female circumcision is wrong is true for Olaf and false for his opponents.



Thinking Tools: Interesting v. Boring Relativism

You can, if you wish, give yourself a quick test on the distinction between interesting and boring relativism. Which of the following are examples of interesting relativism? The answer is at the bottom of the page.

1. I say 'There's a bank in Bindford' and you say 'There's a bank in Bindford'. What I say is true and what you say is false. This is because we're using the term 'bank' differently: I'm talking about a financial bank and you a river bank.
2. Mary claims that Jesus is the son of God. Isaac, a Jew, denies this. Olaf insists that, though they disagree, Mary and Isaac are both right: that Jesus is the son of God is true from a Christian perspective but false from a Jewish one.
3. Dick and Dan are having a phone conversation. Dan is in Denver and Dick in New York. Both say 'It's raining here'. However, one of them is correct while the other is lying.

We are going to look at the issue of whether some or even all truths might be relative in the interesting sense. From now on, when I use the term 'relativism' I'll be talking just about the interesting variety.

Is All Truth Relative? – Plato's Objection

Relativism has a long history. For example, the ancient Greek Protagoras (c. 490–c. 421 BC) is portrayed in Plato's (c. 428–347 BC) dialogue *Theaetetus* as a relativist. Protagoras declares that 'man is the measure of all things' and so each person's opinion can be considered equally 'true'.

Those who believe that all truth is relative face a famous and powerful objection that also traces right back to Plato. The objection is as follows.

Think for a moment about the claim that all truth is relative. Is this claim supposed to be itself only relatively true? Or is it an absolute, non-relative truth?

Clearly, to claim it's non-relatively true that all truth is relative would be to contradict yourself. So a relativist like Protagoras must say that the truth that truth is relative is *itself* only a relative truth.

Only 2. is an example of interesting relativism.

Protagoras . . . is surely conceding that the opinion of those who make opposing judgements about his own opinion – that is, their opinion that it is false – is true.*

In other words, Protagoras must concede that if we take the view that truth is really absolute and Protagoras is talking rubbish, *then we're right*.

Moral Relativism

But relativism isn't quite so easily dealt with. One way in which a relativist can sidestep Plato's objection is to concede that not *all* truths are relative but still insist that *some* are. Then one can maintain that the truth that some truths are relative is one of the non-relative truths.

If not all truths are relative but some are, then that raises the question: *which* truths are relative? One of the most popular forms of relativism is with respect to *moral* truth. Here is a fashionable line of argument.

Historically, Western societies have tended to impose their own moral perspective on others. We have often arrogantly presumed the right to coerce others into adopting and conforming to our own views about right and wrong. We have assumed that we must be correct and everyone else incorrect.

More recently, however, we have begun to question our own moral supremacy. We have become increasingly aware not only that our own moral perspective is just one among many, but also that it is itself in a state of flux. We have also discovered that there can be much to learn spiritually and morally from other cultures.

But if this is true, then must we not at least accept relativism about moral truth? We might happen morally to disapprove of, say, polygamy. Other cultures happen to approve. For us, the claim 'polygamy is wrong' is true. For others, it is false. And surely there's no independent 'fact of the matter' about whether it is right or wrong really. Moral truth is relative. That's precisely *why* it would be wrong for us arrogantly to impose our own particular moral point of view about polygamy on these other cultures.

Certainly, it can be quite tempting to appeal to relativism – particularly moral relativism – in order to encourage people to be more tolerant and sensitive towards

other cultures. Relativists often present themselves as the defenders of open-mindedness, equality and freedom. Those who oppose relativism are often portrayed as arrogant, as believing themselves incapable of error, and as fascistically wishing to impose their own brand of 'absolute' truth on everyone else. Terms like 'cultural imperialism' get bandied about. Indeed, opposition to moral relativism is sometimes equated with racism.

This sort of political justification for relativism has a certain superficial appeal. It is quite popular in certain academic circles. But the fact remains that the justification is fatally flawed.

In fact, tolerance, sensitivity and open-mindedness are *not* the unique preserve of the relativist. Tolerance and sensitivity towards other cultures and moral points of view do not require that you accept that these other cultures or points of view are correct.

Ironically, it's only someone who *rejects* relativism who's free to consider tolerance and sensitivity *universally* applicable virtues. For what must the relativist say about, for example, a group of religious zealots who believe that tolerance is a bad thing and who execute all those with whom they disagree? They must say that, for these zealots, tolerance *is* a bad thing and they are quite right to execute dissenters!

Notice that to commit yourself to the existence of non-relative truth is not to commit yourself to the view that you are incapable of error. You can acknowledge that truth is non-relative yet at the same time also acknowledge that your ability to discover what's true may be quite limited. Those who reject relativism may show great humility, and may well arrive at their beliefs only tentatively.

Nor does the belief that truth is non-relative require that you believe that you have privileged access to it. You may think that there is a great deal to learn from others, and also that others may be in a position to correct your own mistakes.

In short, it's simply a mistake to suppose that anyone who rejects relativism must be an arrogant, jackbooted bully intent on ramming his beliefs down everyone else's throat. Let's all agree that sensitivity, tolerance, open-mindedness are virtues worth promoting. We can agree to that without embracing relativism.

Indeed, are any of us *really* prepared to accept that *all* moral truth is relative? I rather doubt it. Take slavery, for example. Surely even the most hardened relativist will concede that slavery as practised in the US was wrong *period*, and not merely wrong-as-viewed-from-our-current-moral-perspective but right-for-the-American-slave-owners. The same goes for genocide. Surely not even Mrs Barbery (who supposes that female circumcision is wrong-for-us but right-for-the-so-and-sos)

* Plato, *Theaetetus*, trans. John McDowell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), p. 170.

believes that the Jewish Holocaust was wrong-for-us but right-for-the-Nazis. While many take a relativistic line about the morality of polygamy and female circumcision, they often fail to apply relativism consistently. They pick and choose how they apply it. They condemn, say, the morality of Western multinational corporations while failing to notice that their own relativism, consistently applied, would entail that if the prevailing corporate culture deems it morally acceptable to cut down rainforests, poison the rivers and barbeque the indigenous population, then it's correct.

Rejecting the 'Tyranny' of Traditional Logical and Scientific Reasoning

We've seen that moral relativism, at least as it's usually formulated, is both pretty unpalatable and self-condemning. Let's now set moral relativism aside and consider whether there might be other areas where relativism might be more plausible. What, for example, about reason? Is that relative?

We saw at the beginning of this chapter that The Great Mystica defends astrology by insisting that, while astrology may not look particularly reasonable from a purely logical, scientific perspective, alternative belief systems such as astrology have their own *internal* standards of rationality, standards against which astrology comes out looking very sensible indeed. Yes, certain scientific claims might seem to force themselves on us if we adopt the standards internal to traditional scientific practice. But there are other, no less valid forms of reasoning. We need to be more open-minded. We should reject the tyranny of traditional logical and scientific thinking and immerse ourselves in these 'alternative' modes of thought.

In The Great Mystica's view, the 'truths' that Western scientific reasoning reveals are relative. What may be true from a purely scientific perspective may be false when viewed from another. Unfortunately, the arrogance of scientists tends to blind them to the possibility of these alternative perspectives.

Is The Great Mystica's defence of astrology cogent? When we try to justify reasoning in the way we do, we run into a notorious problem that might seem to lend The Great Mystica's relativistic views a degree of credibility.

Suppose I use traditional logical and scientific reasoning. And suppose I want to justify my use of this form of reasoning. I want to make a case for claiming that my way of reasoning is objectively the right way to reason. How do I do this?

You can see immediately that I face a problem. For, of course, I will *need to employ reasoning* to provide my justification. But if the form of reasoning I use in

trying to provide my justification is traditional logical or scientific reasoning, then won't my justification be unacceptably circular?

Yes, it seems it will. Here's an analogous case. Suppose Dave always trusts what The Great Mystica tells him. Dave believes that appealing to The Great Mystica is a reliable method of finding out the truth about anything. How might Dave justify his trust in The Great Mystica?

Clearly, it won't do for Dave to justify this trust by appealing to what The Great Mystica has to say about her own reliability. That would be an unacceptably circular justification.

The trouble is that my use of traditional reasoning to justify traditional reasoning seems no less unacceptably circular. A similar circularity would appear to plague any attempt to use a form of reasoning to justify itself. Of course, I could try to justify one particular form of reasoning – *A* – by appealing to another, different form of reasoning – *B*. But then *B* would itself stand in need of justification. So I would merely have postponed the problem.

It seems, then, that *no form of reasoning can be justified*. The most we can say is: 'This is how we *do* reason, how it *strikes us* that we should reason. But we can't *justify our reasoning* in this way.'

Many of those who defend relativism will derive comfort from this conclusion. 'You see?' they'll say. 'There's no rational reason to prefer one self-justified form of reasoning over another.' But while there clearly is a problem about justifying one particular form of reasoning as objectively the 'correct' form, we should remember that, even if no form of reasoning can ultimately be justified, it doesn't follow that none is objectively 'correct'. We have not established that relativism about reasoning is true.

The Collapse of the Case for Relativism about Reasoning

In fact, those relativists who want rationally to convince us that there's no objectively and universally valid form of reasoning themselves face a serious problem. For they are offering us an argument, an argument that makes use of certain principles of reasoning. And they believe we ought to agree with their conclusion. But *why do they believe we ought to agree if they don't believe that the reasoning to which they appeal has universal validity?* After all, if they're right, then their reasoning may be valid for them, but not valid for us. Doesn't the fact that such relativists believe we *ought* to agree with their conclusion – they believe we should recognise that they have a *good* argument – show that their attitude towards their own reasoning is

actually that it does have objective and universal validity? Yet this is precisely what relativists about reasoning deny.

So the relativist's case for why we ought rationally to accept their position also collapses.

Conceptual Relativism

Here's a rather different route into relativism. One of the most popular relativist arguments starts with the observation that there are many possible *conceptual schemes*.

When I look at what's on my desk, I see the large object directly before me as a computer. But not everyone would see things this way. For example, a jungle inhabitant unfamiliar with such technology and lacking the concept of 'computer' might simply see the object as a large, grey rectangular box.

Were I to enter the jungle, I might be able to make out only an undifferentiated mass of leaves, whereas a native would no doubt order what she saw in a much more sophisticated way, probably discriminating between leaves of many different species.

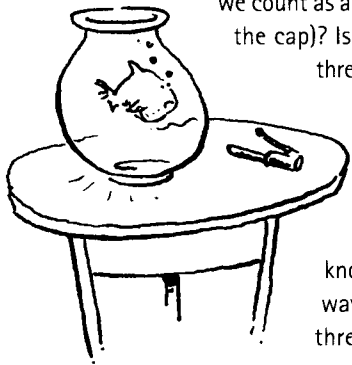
In short, the jungle inhabitant and I operate with *different systems of concepts* and that, in a sense, changes what we 'see'. Here's another example. Take a look at the objects on this tabletop.

How many objects are there? Clearly, that rather depends on what we count as an 'object'. Is the pen one object or two (the pen body plus the cap)? Is the goldfish bowl a single object, or does it comprise three objects: the goldfish, the bowl and a quantity of water?

Obviously, people will give different answers to the question 'How many objects are there?' depending on how they carve the world up into 'objects'. And there are innumerable ways of doing that.

But now suppose someone were to ask: 'Yes, I know that one can carve the world up in many different ways, so that from one person's perspective there are, say, three objects on the table and yet from another person's perspective only two. But how many objects are there *in*

fact? Which of these perspectives is actually correct? Which perspective reveals things as they *really* are?'



How should we respond to this question? You might well think the question involves a mistake. Surely there is no single 'correct' way of conceptually carving the world up into 'objects'?

Indeed, isn't it confused to talk of 'how things *really* are'? What the questioner tries to help herself to is a conception of the world *as it is anyway*, independently of *any* particular way of conceiving it. It's as if the questioner is trying to take a step back, with the world on one side and our differing ways of conceiving it on the other, so she can ask: 'Which of these differing conceptions captures the world as it *really* is, intrinsically?' But is such a conceptual vantage point really available? Many philosophers argue that it is not, for the questioner is now trying to *conceive the world as it is unconceived*, and that is the one thing one *can't* conceive. So the question about which conceptual scheme is 'correct' itself involves a conceptual confusion.

But if there's no uniquely 'correct' conceptual scheme, and if what's true and what's false differ from one scheme to the next, then it seems that truth is relative after all. Perhaps for me, given my way of conceptually carving things up, there are exactly three objects on the table. For you, there may be only two. And there's no fact of the matter as to which of us is 'correct'. All these 'truths' are relative.

Indeed, there's a sense in which, according to conceptual relativism, by bringing our concepts to bear, we are actively involved in 'making our world'. So cultures with radically different conceptual schemes inhabit different universes. It's hardly surprising, then, that what's true within one of these universes may be false within another.

Is Conceptual Relativism Boring Relativism?

The kind of conceptual relativism illustrated by my tabletop example does appear quite plausible. It also *seems* to require that truth be relative. But on closer examination the situation is not so clear cut.

I said at the start of this chapter that the *interesting* kind of relativism about truth is the relativism that requires that, where two people or communities are considering *the very same claim*, that claim may be true for one person or community and false for another. The two individuals or communities in question must actually *contradict* each other. Otherwise we merely have an example of boring relativism.

But now suppose that, because of our differing ways of carving the world up into 'objects', I claim that there are three objects on the table but you claim there are only two. Do we contradict each other?

Not if the difference in our judgements is simply down to the fact that we are using the term 'object' differently. I can say: 'Oh, you're using "object" to apply to just *those* sorts of thing. Then I agree: There are only two "objects" in your sense. But it's also true that, as I'm using "object", there are three.'

Given that we are using the term 'object' differently, the fact that I may speak truly and you falsely by saying 'There are three objects on the table' is not philosophically surprising. It's no more surprising than is the fact that, if one person uses 'bank' to mean river bank and the other to mean a financial institution, then one may speak truly and the other falsely when they say, 'There's a bank in Bindford.'

It turns out, in other words, that this example of conceptual relativism is actually an example of uncontentious, boring relativism after all.

Conclusion

Many are drawn to relativism. Often the attraction seems to be political: relativism is frequently perceived to be the only position able to promote tolerance, sensitivity and freedom. But we have seen that those who reject relativism are actually entirely free to promote these values. In fact, it's only those who *reject* blanket relativism who are able to consider tolerance, sensitivity and freedom universally applicable virtues.

Ironically, relativists can themselves be highly intolerant and judgemental, withering in their condemnation of those with whom they disagree. Mrs Barbery, for example, condemns Olaf for condemning those who embrace female circumcision, without realising that she's being a hypocrite.

Relativists also often fail to apply their relativism consistently, condemning as absolutely wrong the morality of the Nazis or Western multinationals on the one hand, yet taking a relative line with respect to non-Western moralities on the other.

In short, relativism, particularly moral relativism, at least as it's usually formulated, is often pretty unpalatable, regularly downright hypocritical and certainly extremely difficult to defend.

In short, there appears to be little to recommend relativism. Certainly the popular *political* reason for promoting relativism – that only relativists can embrace tolerance and sensitivity – doesn't stand up to close scrutiny.

What to read next

Moral relativism is also discussed in Chapter 20, Is Morality like a Pair of Spectacles?.

You may also wish to consider the following question. What if someone were to maintain, not that *all* moral points of view are equally 'true', but that *some* are? This is a more modest form of moral relativism. How plausible is it?

Further reading

Theodore Schick Jr and Lewis Vaughn, *How to Think about Weird Things*, second edition (California: Mayfield, 1999), Chapter 4.

Robert Kirk, *Relativism and Reality* (London: Routledge, 1999).