

Is it all relative?

Stephen Law

According to relativists, people who speak simply of what's 'true' are naïve. '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. There's no such thing as the absolute truth on any issue.'

This sort of relativism is certainly popular. For example, many claim that we are wrong to condemn cultures with moral codes different from our own: their moralities are no less valid. Similarly, some claim that while astrology and Feng Shui might be 'false' from a Western, scientific viewpoint, they are 'true' when viewed from alternative, New Age points of view. What's 'true' and what's 'false' ultimately depend on where one is standing.

Is this sort of relativism about truth tenable?

Think autumn 2002 • 69

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 by your own Western standards. But those Sudanese people who practise female circumcision 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. Moral 'truth' is always relative to a particular culture?

MRS BARBERY: Exactly. So it's wrong of you to judge.

2. Mystic Madge's defence of astrology

MYSTIC MADGE: Do you want an astrological reading?

FOX: Definitely not.

MYSTIC MADGE: You're hostile. I can tell from your aura.

FOX: There are no such things as auras. Aura reading, astrology, psychic powers, tarot cards – it's all bunk.

MYSTIC MADGE: 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.

MYSTIC MADGE: 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 unrigorous and flabby.

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

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

MYSTIC MADGE: 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.

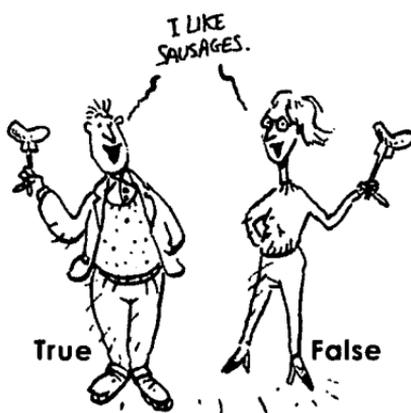
FOX: There is no single, objective 'truth'?

MYSTIC MADGE: I see your chakras are finally opening.

Interesting vs. 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.

Here's a way of bringing out the difference between interesting and boring relativism. Truths that are relative in the boring sense don't conflict. For example, the person who claims 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.

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 just be talking 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 *Theatetus* 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 that it's non-relatively true that all truth is relative would be to contradict oneself. So a relativist like Protagoras must say that the truth that truth is relative is itself only a relative truth. But as Plato points out,

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.¹

Interesting vs 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? (answers at end of article).

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 riverbank.
2. Mary claims Jesus is the son of God. Isaac, a Jew, denies this. Olaf insists that, though they disagree, both Mary and Isaac are 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.

Protagoras must concede that if we take the view that truth is really absolute and relativism is false, *then we're right*.

Moral relativism

But relativism isn't quite so easily dealt with. One way in which a relativist can side-step Plato's objection to Protagoras' relativism is to concede that not *all* truths are relative but still insist that *some* are. Then they 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 common 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.

Undoubtedly, it can be tempting to appeal to relativism – particularly moral relativism – in order to encourage people to be more tolerant of and sensitive towards other cultures. Relativists often present themselves as the defenders of open-mindedness and freedom. Those who oppose relativism are sometimes portrayed as arrogant, as believing themselves incapable of error, and as fascistically wishing to impose their own brand of 'absolute' truth on everyone else.

The above argument for relativism about moral truth has a certain superficial appeal. But it's fatally flawed.

Certainly, we should in many cases respect those whose opinions on moral issues differ from our own. We should

also acknowledge that we're *fallible*. We shouldn't just take it for granted that we're correct. Nor should we assume that we have nothing to learn from others. Certainly, simply to coerce others into adopting the same moral attitudes as ourselves is usually a mistake.

But the fact is that tolerance, sensitivity and open-mindedness are *not* the unique preserve of the relativist. To respect and tolerate someone else's point of view is *not* to say that they are correct. I respect and tolerate those who believe in reincarnation, though I believe they are mistaken.

Certainly, to commit yourself to the existence of non-relative truth is not to commit yourself to the view that that you are incapable of error. You can acknowledge that truth is non-relative while also acknowledging that your ability to discover what's true may be quite limited.

Nor is to believe that truth is absolute to believe that you have unique or privileged access to it. Those who reject relativism may well believe that there is a great deal to learn from others, and also that others may be in a position to correct their own mistakes.

So, contrary to what some relativists suggest, those who reject relativism need not be arrogant, jackbooted bullies intent on ramming their beliefs down everyone else's throat.

Indeed, it's ironic that, actually, *only those who reject relativism are free to consider tolerance and open-mindedness universally applicable virtues*. The relativist must accept that, for, say, religious zealots who believe tolerance is a bad thing, it *is* a bad thing. The relativists must say, 'If these zealots think tolerance should be suppressed and that those who oppose them should be hunted down like dogs, then, hey, that's true for them. Who are we to judge?' It is only those who *reject* relativism that can consistently condemn such intolerance.

In fact, are *any* of us *really* prepared to accept that *all* moral truth is relative? I rather doubt it. Take slavery, for example. Even the most relativistically-inclined among us will surely agree that slavery is wrong *period*, and not merely wrong-for-us. 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) believes that (to pick a clichéd example) the Holocaust was wrong-for-us but right-for-the-Nazis.

Interestingly, most of those who preach relativism tend not to apply their relativism consistently. Those keenest to defend the seemingly barbaric practices of a remote forest culture by saying 'Who are we to judge?' are often the first to condemn the corporate culture that thinks it acceptable to chop down the forest and barbecue its inhabitants.

'You shouldn't morally condemn the morality of others'

Most moral relativists face a further difficulty. A variant of Plato's argument comes back to haunt them. For most moral relativists take the view that *we are wrong to judge those who take a different moral stance*. For example, we saw that, on Mrs Barbery's view, it's wrong of Olaf to condemn those Sudanese who believe that female circumcision is morally acceptable.

This sort of relativistically-inspired condemnation is, again, quite popular. But it's also seriously confused. For *the condemnation is actually self-condemning*.

A person who morally condemns someone for morally condemning the morality of others is a hypocrite. For they are doing precisely what they insist one shouldn't: they are condemning the morality of others.

Mrs Barbery made precisely this mistake when she condemned Olaf. Those who point the finger at, say, Westerners outraged by the practices of some remote tribe and say 'It's wrong of you to judge!' are also being downright hypocritical.

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 typically self-condemning. Let's now set moral relativism aside and consider

whether there might be other areas for which relativism is more plausible.

We saw at the beginning of this chapter that Mystic Madge 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 upon 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.

On Mystic Madge'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 Mystic Madge'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 Madge'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 immediately see 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 Mystic Madge tells him. Dave believes that appealing to Mystic Madge is a reliable method

of finding out the truth about anything. How might Dave justify his trust in Mystic Madge?

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

The trouble is, 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 reason 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 reason 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 reason 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 reason is true.

The collapse of the case for relativism about reason

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 do not 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 reason deny.

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

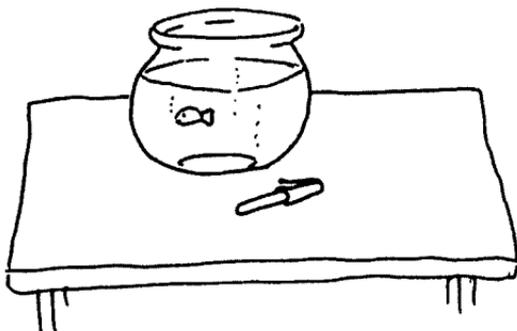
Conceptual relativism

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 top of my desk, I see the large object situated directly before as a computer. But not everyone would see things this way. For example, a jungle inhabitant unfamiliar with such technology and lacking the concept *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 one counts 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 singly '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 of 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 of 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 of 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 differs 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 only be 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 outlined, 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. You 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 per-

son uses 'bank' to mean riverbank 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 Binford'.

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

Conclusion

Despite its popularity, and the fact that it can *seem* to be the only position able to promote tolerance and open-mindedness, relativism is actually a rather unattractive position. Certainly it's extremely difficult to defend.

This is a chapter of The Philosophy Gym by Stephen Law, published by Headline, 3rd March 2003. First illustration thanks to Daniel Postgate.

Further reading

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

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

Notes

¹ Plato, *Theatetus*, trans. John McDowell, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), p. 170.

Answer to test: Only (2) is an example of interesting relativism.