

Knowledge, Reality, and Value

A Mostly Common Sense Guide to Philosophy

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ISBN: 979-8729007028

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Preface

Why Read This Book?

This is an introduction for students who would like a basic grasp of a wide variety of issues in the field of philosophy. There are many textbooks you could look to for this purpose, but this one is the best. Here is why:

- i. *The writing.* It is written in a clear, simple style. It should be easier to read and won't put you to sleep as fast as other textbooks. (On the other hand, if you *want* to fall asleep quickly, I suggest checking out an academic journal.)
- ii. *The topics.* I cover a broad array of big and interesting issues in philosophy, like free will, the existence of God, how we know about the world around us, and the existence of objective values. I don't spend too much time on the boring ones (which we won't even mention here).
- iii. *The price.* I just checked the prices of some traditional textbooks. I won't mention them by name so as not to embarrass their publishers, but I see prices in the range of \$50, \$80 ... one is even listed at \$140. (You know why they do this, right? They know that students don't choose textbooks. *Professors* choose them, and students just have to buy them. The profs may not even know the prices, since they get *their* copies for free. This is also why most textbooks are written to please professors, not to please students. But I digress.) If I'd gone with a traditional textbook publisher, I'd have no control over the price, and it would probably wind up at \$80 or something ridiculous like that.

I also wouldn't be able to write it like this. They'd say the style was too informal and flippant and demand that I write more "professionally" and lethargically.

- iv. *The author.* I'm smart, I know a lot, and I'm not confused – which means you can probably learn a lot from this book. You probably won't learn too many falsehoods, and you probably won't run into too many passages that don't make sense.

About the Author

I can hear you saying: “Oh sure, you *would* say that.” Okay, maybe you shouldn’t believe me yet, because you just met me, and maybe I’m biased. Maybe you want to know if I’m enough of an expert to write this textbook, especially since it hasn’t been certified by a big textbook publisher. So here is who I am, sticking just to objective facts:

I got my BA in philosophy from UC Berkeley. I got my PhD in philosophy from Rutgers University, which at the time was ranked #3 in philosophy in the United States (they’re now ranked #2).¹ I am a tenured full professor at the University of Colorado at Boulder, where I have taught philosophy for over 20 years. As of this writing, I have published more than 70 academic articles in a variety of journals, including most of the top-ranked philosophy journals. (In philosophy, by the way, the good journals reject 90–95% of submissions.) My publications span a wide range of topics in different branches of philosophy, including many of the issues I introduce you to in the following pages.

I have written seven books before this one and edited an eighth, all published with traditional, academic publishers (which is why they’re so expensive). Here are my earlier books, in case you want to look up any of them:

Skepticism and the Veil of Perception

Epistemology: Contemporary Readings (edited volume)

Ethical Intuitionism

The Problem of Political Authority

Approaching Infinity

Paradox Lost

Dialogues on Ethical Vegetarianism

Justice Before the Law

My Approach in Writing This

That’s enough about me. Now here are some comments about my approach in writing this:

1. I have selected a few very prominent issues in each of the biggest areas of philosophy – issues that are commonly addressed in philosophy courses and that philosophy students like to know about, like the existence of God, free will, etc.
2. I give a basic presentation of each issue, including what I consider the most important and interesting arguments that can be explained reasonably

¹ See the Philosophical Gourmet Report, <http://www.philosophicalgourmet.com/>. This is the most widely used set of rankings in philosophy.

briefly. (In each case, there are of course many more complicated and nuanced views and arguments to be found in the literature.) By the way, when you read these arguments, don't just memorize them and move on (as students sometimes do). Spend some time thinking about whether you agree with them or not.

3. All of these are issues that people disagree about. In each case, my presentation aims to be (and I think is in fact) *fair*, but not *neutral*. That is:
 - a. I give each view a fair hearing, presenting its case as strongly as I can (given space constraints), in terms that I think are faithful to its proponents' intellectual motivations. I do not select evidence, distort people's words, or use any other tricks to try to skew the assessment of any of the philosophical theories. (Those sorts of tricks are unsuited to a philosopher.)
 - b. I do *not*, however, promise a *neutral* presentation – one that just reports other people's ideas without evaluation (which I consider terribly boring). I am going to tell you what I think, and I am going to defend it with logical arguments that try to show you why that view is right.

If you don't like that, this isn't the book for you. Go get another book, like Stuart Rachels' anthology or something.²

Why Study Philosophy?

If you haven't studied philosophy, you probably don't know why you should. There are two main reasons to do it.

First, philosophical questions are inherently fascinating. At least, many of them are. I mentioned some of them above. If those *didn't* sound interesting to you, then philosophy probably isn't for you.

Second, studying philosophy helps you think better. Right now, you probably don't know what I mean by that, and I can't adequately explain it, but I will *inadequately* explain it presently. I can't prove it to you either, since appreciating the point requires, well, studying philosophy for a few years. So I'll just tell you my assessment based on my experience. I saw it happen to myself, and I have seen it happen to students over the years. I came to the subject, at the beginning of college, in a state of confusion, but I did not then comprehend how confused I was. I had some sort of thoughts about great philosophical questions, but these thoughts very often, as I now believe, simply made no sense. It was not that they were mistaken, say, because I was missing some important piece of information. It was that I did not even really know *what* I was thinking.

² *The Truth About the World*, ed. James and Stuart Rachels. I'm hoping Stu will give me kickbacks for this plug.

I used words but did not really know what I meant by them. I confused importantly different concepts with each other. I applied concepts to things that they logically cannot apply to. I might seemingly endorse a philosophical thesis at one moment, and in the next endorse a related but *incompatible* thesis, without noticing any problem.

I was not, I stress, an unusually confused student; I am sure I was much *less* confused than the average college student. It just happens that *virtually everyone* starts out *extremely confused*. That is our natural state. It takes effort and practice to learn to think clearly. Not even to get the right answers, mind you, just to think *clearly*. To know precisely what your ideas *are*, and not be constantly conflating them with completely different ideas.

By the way, it is not just studying in general or being educated in general that is important. The point I'm making is specifically about *philosophy*, and about a particular style of philosophy at that (what we in the biz call "analytic philosophy"). When I talk to academics from other fields, I often find them confused. That is a very common experience among philosophers. To be clear, academics in other fields, obviously, *know their subject* much better than people outside their field know that subject. That is, they know the facts that have been discovered, and the methods used to discover them, which outsiders, including philosophers, do not. But they're still confused when they think about big questions, including questions about the larger implications of the discoveries in their own fields. Whereas, when philosophers think about other fields, we tend to merely be ignorant, not *confused*.

Here is a metaphor (this doesn't *prove* my point; it just helps to *explain* what I'm saying): When we dream, we sometimes dream contradictory things, or things that conflict with basic, well-known features of reality, or things that just in general *make no sense*. You might, for instance, find yourself having a conversation with the color blue. (Okay, that is not a very typical dream. But that illustrates the idea of something that makes no sense in general.) And yet, almost always, we simply *do not notice*. We don't see the contradictions. We don't have any problem with talking to the color blue. Nothing seems odd. It is only when we wake up that the dream seems strange. Only then do we see all the ways in which it was impossible. We were confused, but we did not know it.

That is how most people are when they think about philosophical questions, if they have not studied philosophy. By studying philosophy, one gradually wakes up and stops saying the things that make no sense. That doesn't guarantee that one knows the truth, of course. But at least one learns to say things that have definite meanings and are possible candidates for being true. This book won't get you all the way there; no book will. But it will get you started, and it will give you some interesting things to think about along the way.

Note: I've included a glossary at the end, which contains all the important terms that appear in boldface throughout the text.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Ari Armstrong and Jon Tresan (especially Ari) for their helpful comments on the manuscript, which helped to correct numerous shortcomings. I'd also like to thank Iskra for supporting anything and everything I do; God, if He exists, for creating the universe; and Satan for not maliciously inserting many more errors into the text. Naturally, none of these people are to blame for any errors that remain. All errors are entirely due to the failure of a time-traveling, editorial robot from Alpha Centauri to appear and correct all mistakes before I uploaded the final files. If such a robot had appeared, there wouldn't be any mistakes.

1. What Is Philosophy?

1.1. The Ship of Theseus

Here is a classic philosophical problem. Note: I don't use this example because it's such an *important* problem; the reason I like it is that (a) it's easy to get people to quickly see the issue, (b) it is very clearly *not* either a scientific or a religious issue, or any other kind of issue besides philosophical. So it's good for illustrating what philosophy is.

Once there was a Greek hero named Theseus.³ He sailed around the Mediterranean Sea doing heroic things like capturing bulls, chopping heads off minotaurs, and abducting women. (Standards of heroism were a bit different back then.) As he was doing all this stuff, his ship suffered some wear and tear. When a particular plank of wood was damaged or rotted, he'd replace it with a new piece of wood. Just one at a time. And let's say that, after ten years of sailing, eventually every one of the original planks of wood had gotten replaced by a new one at one time or another.

Question: At the end of the ten years, did Theseus still have *the same ship* that he had at the beginning? Or was it a new ship?

Now for an amusing modification: Suppose there was someone following Theseus around all those years, collecting all the old pieces of wood as Theseus threw them aside. At the end of the ten years, this person reassembled all the original pieces of wood into a (tattered and ugly) ship. Was *this* ship the same as the original ship Theseus started with?

Notice how this is not a scientific question. It's not as if there's some kind of *experiment* you can do to figure out if it's the same ship. We could try getting a ship and swapping out its parts as in the story. But then what would we do? Observe the ship really closely? Weigh it carefully, observe it under microscopes, do a spectroscopic analysis? None of that would make the slightest difference. We already know the underlying facts of the case, because they're stipulated. We just don't know whether those facts *add up* to the ship being "the same ship" or not.

³ I've simplified the original myth of Theseus.

Notice also, though, that it's not as if there is nothing to say about the issue. You can see why one might think it was the same ship, and also why one might think it wasn't. It is odd to say that Theseus still had the same ship at the end of the story, since it has no parts at all in common with the original. If anything, the ship reconstructed out of the old planks seems to have a better claim to being the original ship, since it has all the same parts, in the same configuration, as the original.

But if we say that the ship Theseus had at the end of the story *wasn't* the same ship as the original, then at what point did it cease to be the same? Which plank was it whose removal gave Theseus a new ship? To make the argument sharper, let S_0 be the original ship, S_1 be the ship after one plank has been replaced, S_2 the ship after a second plank has been replaced, and so on. Assume the ship has 1000 planks, so the series ends with S_{1000} . Now, presumably replacing just *one* plank of wood doesn't give you a different ship. Therefore, $S_0 = S_1$. But then, by the same reasoning, $S_1 = S_2$. And $S_2 = S_3$, and so on, all the way up to $S_{999} = S_{1000}$. But then it follows that $S_0 = S_{1000}$.

So you can see that one can construct seemingly logical arguments about this question. We're not going to try to resolve the question now. But that is the sort of question philosophers address. Most people in intellectual life – people in other fields – would just try to *avoid* that sort of question. Philosophers try to actually figure out the answer.

By the way, “the answer” need not be one of the answers that the question straightforwardly seems to call for – it doesn't have to be “Yes, it was the same” or “No, it wasn't the same.” (Among philosophers, by the way, almost everything is up for debate, including the terms of the debate and the question being debated.) The answer could be “It neither was nor wasn't the same” or “It's a semantic question” or “It was the same in one sense and different in another sense” or “There are degrees of sameness, and the degree of sameness decreased over time.” This situation is fairly typical of philosophical questions as well: Most questions in other fields of study are meant to be answered straightforwardly in the terms in which they are posed – you're generally not supposed to say the question contains a false presupposition, or has no answer, or needs to be rephrased, etc. But in philosophy, those sorts of responses are on the table.

1.2. What's the Definition of “Philosophy”?

Sorry, I'm not giving you a definition of “philosophy”. It's a field of study, but it does not have a generally accepted definition that differentiates it from all other fields of study. Fortunately, however, people normally do not acquire concepts by hearing definitions; we acquire concepts by seeing examples. (For example: You acquire the concept “green” by seeing examples of green things, not by

someone trying to *tell you* what green is.) That's why I opened with an example of a philosophical issue. I'll give some more examples below. I will also offer some generalizations about how philosophical thinking goes, to help distinguish it from, e.g., science and religion.

1.3. Subject Matter & Branches

Most fields of study are distinguished by a certain subject matter (what they study). Biology studies life, meteorology studies weather, UFOlogy studies space aliens, and so on. It's hard to describe the subject matter of philosophy, because it is very wide-ranging. Here, I will just list the main branches (sub-fields) of philosophy, and what they each study. The first three (metaphysics, epistemology, ethics) are commonly considered the three central branches of philosophy.

- i. **Metaphysics:** Studies general questions about what exists and what sort of world this is. (Not *all* questions about what exists; only, well, the philosophical ones. Hereafter, I leave this qualifier implicit.) (Note: Terms in boldface, like that “metaphysics”, are important philosophical terms that appear in the glossary at the end of the book.)
Examples: Is there a God? Do we have free will, or is everything that happens predetermined (or random, or something else)? Is the future just as real as the present and the past? Do numbers and other abstract objects really exist? Is reality objective or subjective?
- ii. **Epistemology:** Studies the nature of knowledge, whether and how we know what we think we know, and whether and how our beliefs are justified.
Examples: What is the definition of “know”? How do we know that we can trust the five senses? How do you know that other people are conscious and not just mindless automata? Are all beliefs justified by observation, or are some things justified independent of observation?
- iii. **Ethics:** Studies right and wrong, good and bad.
Examples: Is pleasure the only good in life? Are we sometimes obligated to sacrifice our own interests for the good of others? What rights do people have? Is it ever permissible to violate someone's rights for the good of society? Do non-human animals have rights?
- iv. **Political Philosophy:** Studies good and bad social institutions, and how society ought to be arranged.
Examples: What gives the government authority over the rest of us? What is the proper function of government? What is the most just distribution of wealth in a society? When should the state restrict people's liberties for the good of society?
- v. **Aesthetics:** Studies art, beauty, and related matters.

Examples: What is art? Is modern art really art? Is beauty objective, or is it in the eye of the beholder? In what way, if at all, can we learn about reality from reading fiction? Is a work artistically flawed if it expresses immoral values?

- vi. **Logic:** Studies valid reasoning, certain general characteristics of propositions, and when propositions support or conflict with each other.

Examples: What are the rules for when an argument is valid? Must every proposition be either true or false? Can a proposition ever be both true *and* false?

- vii. **Philosophy of Mind:** Studies the nature of the mind and consciousness.

Examples: Is the mind just the brain, or is it some kind of non-physical thing? Why is there consciousness; why do humans (and most animals) have experiences that *feel* like something, rather than just being complicated mechanisms with no experiences? How is it that we can have states that are “about” something or “represent” something?

- viii. **Philosophy of Science:** Studies philosophical questions about how science works and the philosophical implications of scientific theories.

Examples: How do we know when a scientific theory is true? Why should we prefer simpler theories over more complex ones? Does quantum mechanics show that reality depends on observers? Does the theory of relativity show that the future is just as real as the past and present? Does the theory of evolution undermine belief in objective values?

Aside: You might have noticed that the above branches seem to overlap with each other in several ways. If you noticed that, you are correct. If you didn’t notice that, pay more attention!

1.4. Methods

You might also have noticed that the above list of philosophical questions overlaps with some religious and scientific questions. So now I’m going to tell you some broad ways that philosophy differs from religion and science, even when they are studying similar questions. Those differences have to do with *methods*, i.e., philosophers use different ways of trying to reach conclusions.

Religions typically appeal to *authority* and (alleged) *supernatural sources* of knowledge. Note: This does not mean that religious figures never appeal to ordinary observations or reasoning. Of course, they often appeal to observation and reasoning. It’s nevertheless true that appeals to authority and supernatural sources of knowledge play a crucial role in the world’s established religions. In other words, in traditional religions, there are key claims that one is meant to accept because they come from a particular person, or institution, or because they appear in a particular book, or something like that. And one is supposed to trust that person or institution or book because it (or its author) had a form of

supernatural access to the truth, something that goes beyond the ordinary ways of knowing that all of us have (such as reason and observation by the five senses). Thus, in Catholicism, one is meant to trust the Pope due to the Pope's special relationship to God. In Christianity more broadly, one is meant to trust the Bible because it is allegedly the inspired word of God. In Islam, one is meant to trust the Koran because it, again, allegedly derives from a divine revelation. Similarly for Judaism and the Torah. In Buddhism, one is meant to trust the Buddha's wisdom, because it allegedly derived from his attainment of Enlightenment, whereby he escaped the cycle of rebirth into Nirvana. (Aside: Buddhism is closer to the border between philosophy and religion than the other religions. In fact, some would call it a philosophy rather than a religion.)

Science, by contrast, does not appeal to supernatural knowledge sources to justify its theories. It appeals most prominently to observation, especially *specialized* observations. That is, it usually appeals to observations made by scientists that most people have not made but could make. These are usually observations that one has to collect by first setting up a very specific experiment. Example: If you apply an electric voltage to a sample of water, you can observe bubbles forming at both electrodes. If you are very careful and very clever, you can verify that the water is turning into hydrogen and oxygen gas. That is part of how scientists know that water is H₂O. You've probably never observed this, but if you set up the experiment in the right way, you could.

Not all scientific evidence depends on an experimental manipulation of the environment. For instance, the main evidence showing that all the planets orbit the Sun comes from meticulous observations of the positions of planets in the night sky at different times, made by incredibly patient astronomers. You probably haven't made these observations, but, again, you could.

By the way, I am not saying any of this for the purpose of either attacking or defending religion, or attacking or defending science. That is not my concern. I am just factually describing how these pursuits work and are generally agreed to work. My point is to explain how they differ from philosophy.

Philosophy (at least modern, academic philosophy) appeals to (allegedly) logical arguments, where the premises of these arguments usually come from common experience, including well-known observations or common intuitions (that is, roughly, things that just seem to make sense when we think about them). It will generally not require supernatural access to the truth, nor will it generally require experiments or other highly specialized observations.⁴

⁴ Exceptions: In philosophy of mind and philosophy of science, it is common to appeal to scientific discoveries. Even so, philosophers will typically not *themselves* make any specialized observations but will simply discuss how to interpret the observations and theories of scientists. More annoying exception: Recently, some philosophers have

1.5. Myths About Philosophy

Now I'll address some things that people sometimes think about philosophy that are false.

Myth #1: Philosophers sit around all day arguing about the meaning of life and the nature of Truth.

Comment: Well, the meaning of life is a philosophical question, and philosophers argue about any philosophical question. But “What is the meaning of life?” happens not to be a very widely discussed philosophical question – very few philosophers have ever written anything about it. Similarly for the question, “What is truth?” There are some philosophers who work on theories of truth, but relatively few. The questions listed above (section 1.3) are more commonly discussed.

This myth isn't very bad, though, because it's just a matter of emphasis. The next myth is worse.

Myth #2: Philosophy never makes progress. Philosophers are still debating the same things they were debating 2000 years ago.

Comment: No, that's completely false.

- a. On “debating the same questions”: Here are some things that philosophers were not debating 2000 years ago: Criteria of ontological commitment. Modal realism. Reliabilism. Semantic externalism. Paraconsistent logic. Functionalism. Expressivist metaethics.

You probably don't know what any of those things are. But those are all well-known and important topics of contemporary debate which any philosophy professor will recognize, and none of them was discussed by Plato, or Aristotle, or any other ancient philosopher. Though Western philosophy has been around for 2000 years, *none* of those issues, to the best of my knowledge, was ever discussed by anyone more than 100 years ago. And having seen that list, any professional philosopher could now extend it with many more examples.

- b. On progress: Here are some questions on which we've made progress:
 - i. Is slavery just? No joke! Aristotle, often considered history's greatest philosopher, thought slavery was just. No one thinks that anymore.
 - ii. Which is better: dictatorship or democracy? Seriously, Plato (also considered one of history's greatest philosophers) thought the

started practicing what they call “experimental philosophy”, which usually involves taking surveys of people's intuitions on philosophical questions.

answer was “dictatorship” (as long as the dictator is a philosopher!). No one thinks that anymore.

- iii. Is homosexuality wrong? Historically, philosophers and non-philosophers alike have held different views on this question, with many thinking homosexuality was morally wrong, including such great philosophers as Thomas Aquinas and Immanuel Kant. Today, almost everyone agrees that homosexuality is obviously fine.
- iv. Is nature teleological? Historically, many philosophers, following Aristotle, thought that inanimate objects and insentient life forms had natural goals built into them. Conscious beings had such goals too, and they didn’t necessarily correspond to what those beings wanted. Today, hardly anyone thinks that. (The small number who do are almost all Catholic philosophers, because that was what Catholicism’s greatest philosopher, Thomas Aquinas, thought.)
- v. What is knowledge? The orthodoxy in epistemology used to be that “knowledge” could be defined as “justified, true belief”. Today, basically everyone agrees that that’s wrong.

None of the above are minor cases. These are all significant changes on important issues. Granted, in some cases, philosophical progress consists in rejecting an old view about a question without achieving consensus on the correct view, as in case (v). But rejecting false views is an important kind of progress.

Some of the above examples might strike you as obvious, so you might be intellectually unimpressed. “Slavery is wrong. Well, duh”, you might say. But in fact that was not at all obvious to people 2000 years ago, not even to the smartest and most educated people. And it is a super-important discovery. And by the way, it almost certainly *wouldn’t* be obvious to *you*, if you hadn’t been taught that slavery is wrong by other people in your society.

Have we found the answers to every question? Obviously not. But have we made important progress? Obviously so.

Myth #3: Doing philosophy is all about giving your opinion, or saying how you feel about things.

Comment: I don’t know if many people think that, but it seems that some students think it. When you’re doing philosophy – like when you’re writing a paper, or talking in class, or talking with other philosophy buffs – no one wants to hear *mere* opinions. I mean by that, opinions that aren’t supported by evidence or logical reasoning. We do not just express our feelings; if you’re doing that, you’re doing it wrong. Doing philosophy is about thinking things through carefully.

Myth #4: In philosophy, there are no answers.

Comment: Philosophers disagree about a lot of things, but one thing almost everyone in the field agrees on is that the above statement is false. By the way, it's also incoherent, since it is itself an alleged philosophical answer. No, there are answers. If you're wondering whether we ever get any closer to *finding* those answers, see Myth #2 above.

That will do for an initial explanation of philosophy. I hope the above remarks gave you some sense of what the field is like. You'll get a better sense from reading about the philosophical issues in the rest of the book.

5. Absolute Truth

Beginning philosophy students sometimes want to know whether there is “absolute truth” or “objective reality”. These questions are not much discussed in contemporary, academic philosophy because there is not much disagreement about them among philosophy professors. Still, we need to discuss them here because students wonder about them, and how one thinks about them can affect one’s thinking about the rest of philosophy.

5.1. What Is Relativism?

5.1.1. *Relative vs. Absolute*

In philosophical contexts, to say that a thing is “**relative**” is to say that it varies from one person to another, or from one society to another (or perhaps from one species to another, etc.). To be more explicit, we sometimes say a thing is “relative to an observer”, “relative to a society”, and so on. By contrast, to say a thing is **absolute** is to say that it does *not* vary from one person to another (or one society to another, etc.); it is constant.

(By the way, notice how the definition of “absolute” exactly matches the definition of “relative”, except with a “not” inserted. This is deliberate. In philosophy, we commonly define two terms such that one simply covers everything that *isn’t* covered by the other term. That’s because we want to be sure that we’ve covered all the possibilities.)

For example, a proposition can be *certain* for one person but *uncertain* for another. If I’m in Paris and I see and feel rain falling on me, then for me it is certain that it is raining in Paris. On the other hand, if you are in New York at the time, and you cannot observe the weather in Paris, then for you it is uncertain whether it is raining in Paris. Thus, we can say that the level of certainty of propositions is “relative to an observer”.

Another example: Suppose you have some homework problems to do for your math class. It may be difficult for you to complete the problems, yet easy for the professor to complete those same problems. Thus, we can say that the *difficulty* of a task is “relative to an individual”.

Relativism about truth (a.k.a. “truth relativism”) holds that *truth* is relative to an individual. That is, the same proposition can be true for one person but not true for someone else. (What does it mean to be “true for” a person? More on that below.) Absolutism holds that truth is not relative: Propositions are simply true or false, not true *for* a person.

5.1.2. Subjective vs. Objective

Relativists also often say that “reality is **subjective**”. What this means is that the world (“reality”) is dependent on observers. That is, it depends on there being some people (or other beings with minds) to be aware of it. The contrast to “subjective” is “objective”. **Objective** phenomena exist on their own, independent of observers.

It is fairly uncontroversial that *some* things are subjective in this sense. For example, consider the property of being *funny*. A plausible analysis is that for a joke to be “funny” is for it to have a tendency to make ordinary humans who hear the joke laugh, feel amused, etc. – or something like that. Funniness isn’t an intrinsic property of funny things; it is in the ear of the observer. The funniness just *consists of* the tendency to provoke amusement in us.

Note: This is a *different sense* of “subjective” than the sense used in section 4.3 above. There, “subjective” was used for claims that require judgment and lack a decisive method of verification. Here, “subjective” is used for phenomena that constitutively depend on observers. Many words (within philosophy and outside it) have multiple senses, depending on the context. Get used to it.

Almost everyone regards some things as objective. For instance, for an object to be *square*, it is not necessary that anyone observe the object, feel any way about it, or have any other reaction to it; the squareness is just a matter of the spatial arrangement of the object’s parts, independent of us. The great majority of things in the world seem to be objective in this sense. Relativists, however, are known to deny this sort of thing, claiming instead that everything is in some way dependent on the mind.

5.1.3. Opinion vs. Fact

One way of understanding relativism is that it is the view that “everything is a matter of opinion”. But what does this mean? American high school students are frequently taught a distinction between *facts* and *opinions*; unfortunately, they are often taught a confused account that presupposes controversial views, and incorrectly taught it as if *it* were a matter of fact.

There are a few different distinctions in the vicinity. E.g., the distinction might be between things that are believed to be true and things that *are* true; or between our beliefs and the aspects of the world that our beliefs are *about*; or

between propositions that are conclusively verified and those that have not been (or cannot be) verified; or between propositions that are true and those that are false; or between propositions that are true and those that are neither true nor false (if there are any of those?); or between objective things and subjective things.

Notice that those are *six different* distinctions. Unfortunately, “fact” vs. “opinion” (or “matter of fact” vs. “matter of opinion”) appears to be a jumble of all these different distinctions. For this reason, I shall avoid talking about “facts” versus “opinions” in the rest of this discussion.

5.2. Some Logical Points

5.2.1. *The Law of Non-Contradiction*

As a preliminary matter – and this is really good background for any philosophical discussion – it’s worth reviewing some basic logical points ... starting with the most famous, basic principle of logic, the **law of non-contradiction**. This is, basically, the principle that contradictions are always false. Or: For any proposition A, $\sim(A \ \& \ \sim A)$.

A proposition of the form $(A \ \& \ \sim A)$ (read “A and it’s not the case that A”) is known as an explicit contradiction. (We also sometimes use “contradiction” to cover statements that are not already of the form $(A \ \& \ \sim A)$ but *entail* something of the form $(A \ \& \ \sim A)$; these would be implicit contradictions, not explicit.) Why is it that contradictions are never true?

The answer is basically “because of the meaning of the word ‘not’”. A proposition, A, has a certain range of possibilities in which it counts as true. (In some cases, the “range” might be empty, i.e., it never counts as true.) The negation of A (represented “ $\sim A$ ”), *by definition*, just refers to all the *other* possibilities. If you think you can imagine a situation in which both A and $\sim A$ are true, then you haven’t understood how the symbol “ \sim ” is used (or how the English word “not” is used). If A obtains in a certain situation, then $\sim A$, by definition, doesn’t. That’s just what “ $\sim A$ ” means.

Another way to put the point: If a person asserts A, and then asserts $\sim A$, then they are basically telling you that they themselves are wrong. That is, the second half of what they said was that the first half was wrong; therefore, overall, they’re guaranteed to be wrong. That’s the problem with contradicting yourself.

5.2.2. *The Law of Excluded Middle*

Now for the second most famous principle of logic, the **law of excluded middle**: For any proposition, either that proposition or its negation obtains; there is no third alternative. That is, for any A, $(A \vee \sim A)$. Why is this true?

Again, the answer is “because of the meaning of ‘not’”. We noted above that the proposition $\sim A$ is just defined as excluding all the cases in which A obtains. It is also defined as *including* all the *other* cases. If you think you’re imagining a case in which neither A nor $\sim A$ obtains, then you’re confused about the use of “ \sim ”. If A doesn’t obtain in a certain situation, then $\sim A$, by definition, *does*. That’s just what “ $\sim A$ ” means.

Another way to put the point: Suppose someone tells you that neither A nor $\sim A$ obtain. In that case, *one* of the things they are saying is that A doesn’t obtain. The *other* thing they are saying is that $\sim A$ doesn’t obtain. But “ $\sim A$ ” just means that A doesn’t obtain. So what they are saying is: $\sim A$, but also, $\sim(\sim A)$. But that’s an explicit contradiction.¹⁹

Caveat: The preceding points apply only when “ A ” picks out a definite proposition. If you have a sentence that does not have a clear enough meaning to assert any determinate proposition, then neither that sentence nor its negation will be true. Thus, “All blugs are torf” is not true, and neither is “*Not* all blugs are torf”, since “blug” and “torf” do not have definite meanings. For another example, suppose I announce, out of the blue, “He has arrived”. You ask whom I’m talking about, and where that person arrived, and I reply that I didn’t really have any particular person or place in mind. In that case, my sentence is neither true nor false. “He has arrived” isn’t true, and neither is “He has not arrived.”

5.2.3. *What Questions Have Answers?*

It is sometimes said that philosophical questions “have no answers”. (Almost no philosopher would agree with that statement, but often students and lay people say it.) What should we think about this view? On the face of it, it is hard to make sense of the idea.

Take the question of whether God exists, which is a good example of a philosophical question. Suppose someone says that this question “has no answer”. Now, it appears that the possible answers to the question would be “Yes, God exists” and “No, God doesn’t exist.” If either of those is correct, then the question has an answer. So to say the question has no answer must be to claim that neither of those answers is correct: It is neither the case that God exists, nor the case that God doesn’t exist. But that is just to say that it’s not the case that God exists, and it’s also not the case that it’s not the case that God exists. An explicit contradiction.

It doesn’t matter what question we pick. You can substitute the question “Do animals have rights?” To say this question has no answer must be to claim,

¹⁹ In spite of what I have said, there are some philosophers who reject the law of excluded middle, and even a few who reject the law of non-contradiction (but those who reject the law of non-contradiction *also* accept it!).

at least, that it's not the case that animals have rights, and it's also not the case that animals don't have rights. Again, an explicit contradiction.

But wait; there *are* ways that a question could lack an answer. One way is if the question is not sufficiently meaningful (compare the caveat about the law of excluded middle above). “Is the moon torf?” has no answer since “torf” has no meaning. “When is 14?” likewise lacks an answer since it doesn’t make sense. Also, a question might be said to have no answer (or maybe just no *appropriate* answer) if it contains a false presupposition. Suppose someone asks me, “Have you stopped stealing kittens?” If I have never stolen a kitten, then I can’t say “Yes, I’ve stopped”, but it wouldn’t really be appropriate to say, “No, I haven’t stopped” either.

However, neither of these things apply to typical philosophical questions. “Is there a God?” isn’t meaningless, and it doesn’t contain a false presupposition. So it remains unclear in what sense it could fail to have an answer.

Perhaps the idea is just that philosophical questions lack answers *that can be decisively verified*. If this what is meant, then “Philosophical questions have no answers” is a simple misstatement. Compare: If you don’t know who stole your cookies, you should *not* say, “There *was no* thief”; you should just say “The thief is unknown.” Similarly, if we don’t know the answer to a philosophical question, we should not say “There *is no* answer”; we should just say “The answer is unknown.”

All this is related to the question of truth relativism, because relativists often say that philosophical questions have no answers (or maybe *no* question has an answer?), and this seems to be intended as closely related to the idea that there are no “absolute truths”.

5.3. Why Believe Relativism?

5.3.1. *The Argument from Disagreement*

The most popular “argument for relativism”²⁰ begins by observing that there is a great deal of variation in people’s beliefs across cultures. Some cultures believe that when we die, we go to heaven; others, that we are reincarnated in this world; others, that we are simply gone forever. Some believe that polygamy is wrong; others, that it is perfectly cool. And so on. (Anthropologists like to go on and on about the variation among cultures.) Therefore, it is said, you can see that truth is relative to a culture. (Or, if you want to say truth is relative to an *individual*, start by going on about the variation in beliefs among individuals.) The argument appears to go like this:

²⁰ I use scare quotes because this isn’t much of an argument.

- P1. Beliefs vary from culture to culture. (Premise)
C. Therefore, truth varies from culture to culture. (Conclusion)

Is this argument sound? Certainly the premise is true; no one doubts that. Is the inference valid? Does it follow, just from the fact that beliefs vary, that truth varies?

No, it does not. It could be that beliefs vary across cultures, and yet there is only one truth; it might just be that most (possibly all) of these cultural beliefs are false. To make the argument valid, we would have to add a premise to it, something like this:

- P1. Beliefs vary from culture to culture.
P2. All beliefs are true.
C. Therefore, truth varies from culture to culture.

Now *that* is valid. C clearly follows from P1 and P2. But now the problem is that P2 is obviously false. Not all beliefs are true! I bet you can think of some times that you had a false belief.

We could try weakening the second premise to “All beliefs that vary from culture to culture are true” to make it slightly less ridiculous, but it would still be obviously false, or at best unjustified. We would need an argument that all these cultural beliefs are true.

In fact, the argument has a bigger problem than merely a false or unjustified premise: The first premise *logically contradicts* the second one. For in saying that beliefs *vary* from culture to culture, what is of course meant is that different cultures have *conflicting* beliefs – this is borne out by the standard examples. For instance, as noted, some cultures think that when we die, we go to heaven; others, that we are reincarnated in this world. Those two possibilities are incompatible with each other; we couldn’t be in both places at once. Some cultures think polygamy is wrong; others, that it is *not* wrong. Again, those are mutually inconsistent views. The fact that they are inconsistent just *means* that they can’t both be true. So P1, understood in the sense that it is intended, just directly entails that P2 is false.

5.3.2. The Argument from Tolerance

Why has anyone ever been a relativist? The original motivation appears to have been sort of political: Relativists think that *toleration* is an important virtue. We should not try to impose our practices or beliefs on other cultures or other individuals. It was thought that being a relativist was a way of expressing tolerance and open-mindedness. If you are an absolutist, after all, then you must think that other people and other cultures, when they disagree with you, are *wrong*. This sounds closed-minded and intolerant. It might be offensive to people

from other cultures. It could even lead to your trying to force the other people to conform to your beliefs. In the past, for example, people who were convinced that they knew the one true religion would try to forcibly convert others – this led to wars, inquisitions, torture, and lots of awful stuff like that. The best way to prevent that sort of thing, the relativists think, is to give up on thinking that there is any one truth.

Notice a peculiar feature of this argument: It is not actually an argument that relativism is true. It just says that it would be *socially beneficial* if people were to believe relativism. That's compatible with the theory being factually false. We could agree that toleration is good, and that being a relativist makes people tolerant, but also hold that relativism is false.

The other problem with the argument is that it overlooks other ways of promoting tolerance. Here is one way: We could adopt the view that tolerance is good. Maybe even *objectively* good. Wouldn't that be the most logical approach, if we're trying to promote tolerance? We don't have to go through any logical contortions trying to figure out how conflicting propositions can be simultaneously true. In fact, the people who accept relativism on the basis of the value of toleration have *already* accepted that toleration is good. They could have just stopped there.

Here is another, closely related possibility: We could hold that people have *rights*. Including, say, a right not to be coerced as long as they are not violating anyone else's rights. Philosophers have had a good deal of discussion and debate about exactly what rights we have, but we don't need to work out the details here. For present purposes, it suffices to say that, on pretty much anyone's conception of rights (among people who believe in rights at all), forcing people from other cultures to adopt your cultural practices or beliefs would normally count as a rights violation. We don't have to say that their cultural beliefs are all true; even if someone has false beliefs, you still can't use force against them without provocation. People with mistaken beliefs still have rights not to be coerced.

Notice how this is perfectly consistent with absolutism. The staunchest absolutist could (and most of them do) embrace the idea of individual rights and toleration. In fact, holding that individual rights are *objective* would presumably make one more inclined to respect them – and therefore, to be more consistently tolerant than people who don't accept any objective truths.

5.4. Is Relativism Coherent?

5.4.1. Conflicting Beliefs Can Be True?

Among professional philosophers, truth relativism is often seen as incoherent or otherwise absurd. For this reason, the view is rarely discussed in academic books or journal articles, unless it is to object to some *other* theory by accusing the theory of leading to relativism.²¹ Why are academic philosophers so anti-relativist?

Mostly because philosophers don't like inconsistency. Logic is kind of our thing. And the core drive of relativism seems to be to somehow embrace inconsistencies. We see a bunch of conflicting beliefs, especially beliefs of different cultures that contradict one another – e.g., some think polygamy is wrong, others think it's fine. The relativists see this, and they want to somehow *let everyone be right*. That motivation, just on its face, seems like a desire to embrace contradictions. The fact that two beliefs contradict each other *just means* that they can't both be right. If one belief says that x is wrong and another says that x is *not* wrong, then just by definition, the two beliefs can't both be correct (because of the meaning of “not”, as discussed in section 5.2).

It also seems as though relativists are allowing their politics (specifically, their desire to avoid offending people from other cultures) to override logic, as discussed in section 5.3.2.

That said, relativists try to avoid actual inconsistency precisely by holding that truth is relative. If you and I have conflicting beliefs, it would of course be contradictory to say that both our beliefs are simply *true*. So instead, the relativist says that the one belief is *true for me*, and the other belief is *true for you*. Of course, they're not both true for the same person, nor are they both true absolutely.

This formally avoids inconsistency. But it only helps if it's possible to say what expressions like “true for me” *mean*. Otherwise, we've just traded a contradictory statement for a meaningless statement. Unfortunately, relativists rarely have anything to say about what “true for me” means, which arouses suspicion that they don't actually mean anything by the phrase.

Sometimes, it sounds as though “ p is true for me” just means “I believe p ”. But then all the relativist is saying is this: When two people have conflicting beliefs, each belief is believed by that person. E.g., if I believe p and you believe $\sim p$, then p is believed-by-me, and $\sim p$ is believed-by-you. But this would *trivialize* relativism.

²¹ You can, however, find articles in *Teaching Philosophy*, an academic journal about how to teach philosophy, that discuss how to deal with the problem of “student relativism”. See Steven Satris, “Student Relativism”, https://www.pdcnet.org/teachphil/content/teachphil_1986_0009_0003_0193_0205.

Note

A thesis is said to be “**trivial**” when it is so obvious that it is not worth saying (especially if it is just defined to be true). For example, the thesis that *all tall people are tall* is trivial. To “trivialize” a statement is to interpret words in such a way that the statement would be trivial. Philosophers generally *reject* trivializing interpretations of our statements, because we want to be saying something that’s worth saying.

To put the point in more technical terms: Well, duh. *Obviously* each belief is believed by the person who has it. What’s the point of saying that? How does that help with the fact that the two beliefs contradict each other? It certainly doesn’t do anything to show how both beliefs could be in any sense correct. (See section 5.5 below for more on the meaning of “true for me”.)

5.4.2. Is Relativism Relative?

Perhaps the most popular objection to relativism is that relativism, if true, could only be *relatively* true, not absolutely true. If we say relativism is absolutely true, we contradict ourselves.

The relativist might respond: “Yep, the truth of relativism is relative! What’s wrong with that?”

Maybe the objection assumes that to call something *relative* or *relatively true* implies that it is *not really true*. In that case, a theorist could not hold their own theory to be relative. But the relativist would presumably deny that “relatively true” implies “not really true”; they would say that relative truth just is truth. So so far, the objection doesn’t show anything.

Here’s another try. If the truth of relativism is relative, that means it is only true *for relativists*. For the rest of us (i.e., for absolutists), absolutism is true. But it is very difficult to understand this. So, in the relativist’s view, it is true *relative* to absolutists that absolutism is true *absolutely* (and not just relative to them). Huh? I don’t know what it means for something to be true absolutely, relative to someone. That just sounds incoherent.

Whatever this might mean, if it means anything, it would not satisfy the aim of relativism to promote tolerance. For now the absolutists get to hold on to their absolutist view (it’s true for them!), which means they can go on oppressing everyone else (*if* indeed that was a consequence of absolutism in the first place). Just as relativism is supposed to stop us from saying that other cultures are wrong, it must also stop the relativist from saying that absolutism is wrong. But then, if they’re not rejecting absolutism, there seems to be no point.

5.4.3. Meaningful Claims Exclude Alternatives

To make a meaningful, informative claim is to exclude some alternatives. We can think of the range of possible ways the world might be, metaphorically, as a space, the “space of possibilities”. Making an informative statement (a statement intended to communicate some information to the audience) is drawing a line around a region in that space and saying “The actual world is in here.” If you then add, “But I’m not excluding the possibility that it might be outside this region”, then you rob your own statement of all content; now you’re telling your audience nothing. E.g., if you say, “The sky is blue”, you are conveying information about the color of the sky, which excludes the possibility that it’s green, or red, or yellow, etc. But if you then add, “... or it’s some other color, or no color, or maybe the sky doesn’t exist”, then you defeat the point of your own statement; now you’ve told us nothing.²²

The same point applies to philosophical beliefs. If I say that God created the world, I am excluding the possibility that the world always existed, or that the world was created by someone other than God, or that it was created by entirely natural forces. So if someone else believes one of those other possibilities, I am necessarily denying what they believe. If I say that I’m *not* ruling out any of those alternatives (nor any other alternatives), then I am essentially not saying anything about how the world did or didn’t come about.

What the relativist wants is to have his cake and eat it too: He wants everyone to be able to hold on to their own beliefs, but at the same time to not have to reject anyone else’s beliefs. That only makes sense if we have beliefs that don’t exclude any alternatives. That is, our beliefs must be meaningless. Since the relativist wants *everyone* to refrain from rejecting each other’s beliefs, what the relativist really wants is for all beliefs to be meaningless (including relativism itself).

5.4.4. Opposition to Ethnocentrism Is Ethnocentric

Ethnocentrism is the habit of regarding one’s own culture as superior to other cultures. Relativists, and especially cultural anthropologists, are famously opposed to ethnocentrism, which they associate with intolerance. They hold that toleration and belief in relativism are better than intolerance and ethnocentrism.

Now here is an interesting fact: Virtually all other human cultures have been intolerant and ethnocentric. People in other societies consider their own ways to

²² What about the case where you say that X is *probably* true but not certain? That’s meaningful even though it doesn’t *exclude* the possibility of \sim X, right? So is that a counter-example to my principle that meaningful claims exclude alternatives? No, because the claim “X is probable” *does* exclude alternatives. It doesn’t exclude \sim X, but it excludes the alternative [X is *improbable*].

be right and superior to those of other cultures. Attempts to subordinate other societies by force are extremely common in human history, all over the world. In fact, the belief in tolerance is a recent feature of our own culture, much more so than traditional cultures.

So if tolerance is better than intolerance and ethnocentrism, then tolerant cultures like our own must be better than intolerant, ethnocentric cultures (like almost all other cultures). From the premise that ethnocentrism is bad, we can infer that our culture is better than other cultures ... but that conclusion is itself ethnocentric! We seem to have arrived at incoherence.

The problem is the blanket assumption “ethnocentrism is wrong”. The correct insight in this area is this: You cannot assume, merely because some practice is the practice of your own culture, that it is the best. Your culture is not necessarily the best just because it’s your own. But here is the flip side: You also cannot assume, merely because some practice is the practice of your own culture, that it *isn’t* the best. Being part of your own culture does not automatically make a belief correct, but *nor does it make it not correct*. Ideas have to stand or fall on their own merits, regardless of what society or person they come from or don’t come from.

5.5. What Is Truth?

I don’t know how we’ve gotten this far without talking about the meaning of “truth”. To assess whether truth might be relative, surely we should say something about what truth *is*. Let’s get to that now.

5.5.1. *The Correspondence Theory*

The traditional account of truth is known as the **correspondence theory of truth**. It says that truth is correspondence with reality. That is, truth is understood as a certain relationship, a kind of match, between a sentence or a belief and the world: A sentence says that things are a certain way, or a person thinks that things are a certain way, and things *are* indeed that way. When that happens, you have a “true” sentence or belief.

Here is the most famous explanation of truth, which comes from Aristotle: “To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true.”²³

²³ *Metaphysics* IV.7, 1011b25.

5.5.2. Rival Theories

There have been other theories of truth. According to the pragmatic theory, truth is just whatever it is good to believe.²⁴ (It could be good for a variety of reasons, including that it makes you feel good. But it has to be good overall, in the long run.) According to the coherence theory, truth is what coheres (fits together) with our belief system. According to the verificationist theory, truth is that which can in principle be verified.

These theories make room for relativism, because they suggest a coherent interpretation of such phrases as “true for me”: Perhaps a proposition is true for me when it is good for *me* to believe it, or when it coheres with *my* belief system, or when *I* could verify it. Notice that the same proposition might not be good for you to believe, might not cohere with your belief system, or might not be verifiable by you. So the relativist could use these theories of truth to argue that truth is relative.

The only problem is that all these theories of truth are wrong. (Yes, some smart people believed them, and some still do. Smart people believe a lot of false things.) What? How do I know that? Because I understand the use of the word “true” in English. Here are two things you should accept if you understand the word “true” in standard English:²⁵

1. “It’s true that P” entails “P”.
2. “P” entails “It’s true that P”.

For example, if it’s true that cats eat mice, then cats eat mice. Also, if cats eat mice, then it’s true that they eat mice. These aren’t profound or controversial points that I’m making here; these are just the most basic, trivial points about how the word “true” works. If some philosopher doesn’t agree with these things, then that philosopher must be using some different concept, not the concept of truth as used in ordinary English.

But the above three theories of truth all conflict with these trivial principles. Take the pragmatic theory: Truth is that which is useful to believe. This implies: (Necessarily) it’s true that cats eat mice if and only if it is useful to believe that cats eat mice. But as we’ve already said, (necessarily) it’s true that cats eat mice if and only if *cats eat mice*. If we combine these two claims, we can infer: (Necessarily) cats eat mice if and only if it’s useful to believe that cats eat mice. That’s obviously false. Cats, alas, don’t care about us – they’re not going to hold off on eating mice depending on whether it’s useful for us to believe that they do it.

²⁴ See William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*.

²⁵ Read the quote marks as quasi-quotation marks, if you know what this means. So “P” in the text refers to the sentence that asserts proposition P, not to the letter “P”.

Maybe we're lucky: Maybe it turns out that for literally *everything* in the universe that happens it somehow is useful for us to believe that that thing happens. Even this amazing coincidence wouldn't really save the pragmatic theory. Because what the pragmatist is actually committed to (provided he accepts 1 and 2 above) is this: For every proposition P, "P" *entails* "It's useful to believe that P", and "It's useful to believe that P" *entails* "P". But both of those entailment claims are uncontroversially false. It is not logically impossible for cats to eat mice and yet for it not to be useful for us to believe that, or vice versa. (For another example: Suppose God rewards everyone who believes in Santa Claus with eternal life. Then it would be useful to believe in Santa. But this wouldn't make Santa pop into existence.)

Essentially the same point applies to the other two mentioned theories. The coherence theory requires us to accept that "Cats eat mice" entails "The belief that cats eat mice coheres with our belief system", and vice versa. The verificationist theory requires us to accept that "Cats eat mice" entails "We can verify that cats eat mice", and vice versa. Both false. (Granted, "We can verify that P" actually does entail "P", but not vice versa.)

Conclusion: We still have no good way of understanding the notion of relative truth.

5.5.3. Is Everything Relative?

Relativists hold that truth is relative. Given our above principles 1 and 2, that means that they would have to say *everything* is relative. For instance, if the *truth* of "Cats eat mice" is relative, then *cats eating mice* must be relative: Cats can't eat mice absolutely, they can only eat mice *relative to* some individual or culture.

If you're having trouble understanding what that means, join the club. I have no idea what it would mean for cats to eat mice *relative* to a person or culture. But we'd have to somehow make sense of that, to make sense of relativism.

In general, the relativist view (given principles 1 and 2 above) would have to be that *no* sentence in any language refers to a state of affairs existing in the external world, apart from us; rather, *every* sentence refers to a relationship between a person or culture and something else. "Cats eat mice" would have to refer to a relationship between a person/culture and ... (something to do with cats and mice). " $2+2=4$ " would have to refer to a relationship between a person/culture and ... (something to do with numbers). Etc. This would have to be the case, again, because the relativist would have to think that cats can only eat mice relative to a person/culture, that $2+2$ can only equal 4 relative to a person/culture, and so on.

So, is that true?

Um, no. *Some* expressions in our language refer to relationships to people. For instance, “difficult” refers to a relationship that a task bears to a person (as in, “Handstands are difficult for me”). “Useful” refers to another relationship that a thing can bear to a person (as in, “Popsockets are useful to me”). That’s why we have no trouble understanding statements like, “Handstands are difficult for me, but not for Jo” and “Popsockets are useful for me but not for my cat.” But obviously not *every* damn predicate in the language refers to a relationship to a person. “Square” does not refer to a relationship to a person; that’s why “This table is square for me but not for Sue” draws a blank; there is no clear meaning of that.

5.6. I Hate Relativism and You Should Too

Philosophy professors, at least those from major research universities, tend to hate truth relativism. (Sometimes, we wonder where students learned relativism and what can be done about it. It wasn’t from us! Maybe they learned it in high school?) Why should we hate relativism?

Part of the reason is that truth relativism is an extremely unjustified view, for reasons explained above. It seems to straddle the fence between being contradictory and lacking any clear meaning. The central motivations for the theory appear to be ideologically propagandistic (a desire to promote tolerance), rather than stemming from anything that on its face would appear to be evidence for the theory. It’s more than just that the theory isn’t true or justified (after all, nearly all philosophical theories are false, but we don’t hate them). It’s that the theory doesn’t even seem to be *trying* to be true or justified. Philosophers tend to place a high value on rationality and truth, so we tend to take a dim view of philosophical positions that do not seem to aim at rationally identifying any truths.

But it’s more than that. Truth relativism does not just fail to be true, and it does not just fail to aim at truth; truth relativism *actively discourages* the pursuit of truth. How so? The relativist essentially holds that all beliefs are equally good. But if that’s the case, then there is no point to engaging in philosophical reasoning. We might as well just believe whatever we want, since our beliefs will be just as good either way. But this undermines essentially everything that we’re trying to do. When we teach philosophy, we’re trying to teach students to think carefully, and rationally, and objectively about the big philosophical questions (which hopefully will help you think well about other stuff too). When we do research in philosophy, we try to uncover more of the truth about these questions, so that we can all better understand our place in the world. All of that is undermined if we decide that it doesn’t matter what we think since all beliefs are equally good.

Officially, relativism is a theory about the logical structure of the concept TRUTH (that this concept is relational and always contains an implicit reference to an observer or group of observers); unofficially, however, it is an attack on the concepts of truth and objectivity, which are perhaps the two most important concepts for all intellectual inquiry. Inquiry (including philosophy, science, and all other forms of investigation) is about trying to bring our beliefs into line with reality. The world is a certain way, apart from us, and we need to try to make our minds accurately represent it. That kind of correspondence is known as “truth”; that is, this is what the standard English word “truth” refers to. By proposing that there is no absolute truth but only different “truths” relative to different people, the relativist is erasing the whole bit about matching reality. Which is to say, erasing the actual point of intellectual inquiry. They might then propose some *other* purpose of inquiry, but they have no room for what the rest of us thought was the point of it.

Traditionally, it was thought that relativism promotes tolerance and open-mindedness, so at least it would have good effects on people. But that might not even be true; it might in fact do the opposite. First, relativism might have the effect of *closing* people’s minds, for the reason just discussed: It takes away the point of inquiry, thus potentially leading people to stop asking questions, stop trying to figure things out. That is the opposite of opening the mind.

Second, relativism might have the effect of promoting intolerance. For remember, the theory says that there are no objective/absolute/observer-independent truths. Whatever you believe is “true for you”, and it doesn’t make sense to question whether your beliefs are *really* true, because, on this view, relative truth is all there is. Therefore, you may as well stick dogmatically to your current beliefs. Furthermore, if *you believe* that you should oppress other people and force them to adopt your practices, then *that* belief, too, will be “true for you”. So why not oppress others? There would be no basis for saying that you shouldn’t really do that, because the theory has removed objectivity from the picture.

The only response I can see to this last problem would be if the relativist declares that people should not act on the basis of what is “true for them”, because it isn’t objectively true. But if *that’s* what they say, then they’d also have to say that *no one should act on anything* – that is, we should all be completely apathetic – because, remember, the theory says there is *nothing* other than relative truth. If relative truth isn’t a basis for action, then there is no basis for action, on the theory. Thus, truth relativism potentially has very serious negative consequences, both intellectually and practically.