

The Refutation of Relativism

There are many different versions of relativism: ethical relativism conceptual relativism, and epistemic relativism are three. In this paper, I will be concerned with only one version of relativism, relativism about truth. As a preliminary formulation, I will define relativism about truth as follows: Relativism is the theory that the truth (or falsity) of any proposition is always relative to certain sorts of psychological attitudes on the part of the person who states, believes or otherwise judges the truth of the proposition. This is a bit vague but I think the idea is clear enough. A proposition which I state is true only relative to my interests or my point of view. Thus according to relativism so defined, a proposition might be true for me but false for you. Relativism is thus more than a syntactical claim that statements of the form "S is true" are disguised relational statements. It might be argued that such statements, though in their surface grammar they are in one place subject predicate form, are in fact two place relational statements. They are not of the form "a is f" but of the form "aRb". For example, this is claimed by the correspondence theory of truth. According to the correspondence theory, statement p is true iff p corresponds to a fact. This gives a relational version of truth but it is not a version of relativism about truth, as I am using that notion or as it is standardly understood by those who think of themselves as relativists.

Relativism about truth, so construed, is opposed to absolutism about truth. Absolutism, I will define as the view that there are a very large number of truth claims whose truth is in no way dependent on the feelings and attitudes of the people making or assessing the truth claim. I deliberately use the word "absolutism", because it is so politically incorrect, suggesting as it does some terrible form of oppression. I think this is, in a way, appropriate, because truth often is oppressive in the sense that there are many truths that we would rather not believe or accept, for example, the truth that the people we most love are all going to die.

There is a standard, and I think powerful, refutation of relativism. Here is how it goes: You can't even state relativism without denying it. Suppose you say

1. All truth is relative to the interests and perspective of the person making the truth claim.

or

2. There are no universally valid truths.

or

3. There are no absolute truths.

It looks like in each case you have to exempt the claim itself from the scope of its application. But then you have given up the claim, for the claim was supposed to be universal in its application. 1 is supposed to be interpreted in such a way that if I accept it then I need not accept any truth claim which it is not in my interest to accept. But then what is to prevent me from thinking it is not in my interest to accept 1?

The difficulty with 2 and 3 is even more obvious. Is 2 supposed to be interpreted so that it applies to itself or not? Either way you get inconsistency. If you say there are no universally valid truths except the truth that there are no universally valid truths, then you have already allowed for an exception and no reason has been given why there will not be other exceptions. If you say there are no universally valid truths including the claim that there are no universally valid truths, then you have contradicted yourself. You have said the claim both is and is not universally valid.

Such arguments seem powerful, and I do not see how a relativist could answer them. Until fairly recently relativism was mostly espoused by adolescents or other people inspired by Nietzsche or others outside of mainstream intellectual life. Recently it has reared its head as part of postmodernism. Why are the relativists not worried by the incoherence of their position? I don't know, but I think it is because they think they are possessed of an important insight, which is not touched by these logical worries. The insight has to do with the perspectival character of all knowledge claims. The idea is that all claims are made from a point of view, from some perspective or other and there is no superior or master perspective from which to judge all other perspectives. The relativity to perspectives is all the relativism they need and the fact that the judgment "all judgments

are perspectival" is itself perspectival does not seem to them a decisive refutation.

I think the situation with relativism is much worse than they or anybody else has said. The problem is not just that you can't coherently state relativism, the problem is that if you are a consistent relativist, you can't coherently state anything. Suppose you want to say that it is raining or that two plus two equals four or that Denver is the capital of Colorado or pretty much anything. How do you do it if you are a relativist? Suppose you say that it is raining (now, here). On a normal interpretation you are saying it is raining as opposed to It is not raining. That is, your utterance stakes out a territory in the space of possibilities, and thus excludes certain other territories. That is what you mean when you say it is raining. But how is it supposed to work if you are a relativist? You are supposed to intend you utterance "It's raining" in this way:

It is true that it is raining but that truth is relative to my point of view. So it is true for me but it might not be true for you.

And what is true of rain will be true of everything. So for example, if I say "2+2= 4", what I really means is, "It's true that 2+2=4, but that truth is relative to my own views. So it's true for me, but it might not be true for you." And so on with all other cases. But now we immediately have a difficulty with the logical law that for any statement S, that statement is true if and only if P, where for the letter S you substitute an expression identifying the statement, and for P you substitute the statement itself. Thus, to take a famous example, "Snow is white is true" if and only if snow is white. This law is sometimes called disquotation because the sentence or statement quoted on the left-hand side occurs on the right-hand side with the quotation marks dropped, hence disquoted.

The trouble is that disquotation makes not just truth but the rain itself, and everything else relative to me. So now I have to say

It is raining, but only relative to my point of view. (RMyPV).

And that is consistent with

It is not raining, relative to your point of view (RYourPV)

Once you grant that truth is relative to me then because of disquotation anything at all that can be ascribed *exists* only relative to me. Relativity about truth immediately implies relativity of all of reality. There is no intermediate position

of truth relativism or semantic relativism between absolutism and ontological relativism, the view that everything that exists only exists relative to my feelings and attitudes. The relativist has to give up on the idea that when he says it is raining he must mean that it is really raining as opposed to not raining, because it is only raining FHisPV and maybe not raining FMyPV.

The relativist began with the apparent insight that the real world can only be described from different points of view. The initial picture was that there is a real world, but our representation of it is always going to be relative to a point of view, because all representation is from some point of view or other, and this supposed to give him a relativism of truth but not of reality. But now he has to give up on his original idea that there is a real world that can be described from this or that point of view, because if truth is relative to his point of view then disquotation makes the real world dependent on his point of view.

Well couldn't he just accept that? Isn't that what the relativist should really want--that all of reality only exists from his point of view? Is that a coherent position?

I don't think it is. Just as there was no coherent position of semantic or truth relativism between absolutism and ontological relativism, so there is no coherent position of ontological relativism short of total solipsism. And the reason is that the people with points of view and the points of view themselves now have to be relativized to points of view.

If you go back and look at our original definition of relativism, the idea was to define truth only relative to people and their points of view. We then discovered that the relativity of truth implied the relativity of reality. But the original assumption behind our definition was that there really were people with different points of view, and that was an absolute assumption. Now we discover that relativism does not allow for the absolute existence of anything, not even people and points of view. So when the relativist says, You and I both exist with our points of view and maybe from your point of view it is not raining, even though from my point of view it is raining, he must mean "You and your point of view can only exist from my point of view."

What is going on here? I think it is this. The relativist would like to reduce

all utterances to the expression of preferences. Thus the model is, for example, the statement "chocolate tastes good," said by me, need not be inconsistent with the statement, "chocolate does not taste good" said by you. Because I might mean chocolate tastes good to me and you might mean chocolate does not taste good to you; and these are consistent positions. The good taste of chocolate only exists relative to tasters. Now why can't all utterances be like that? Why can't "it's raining" be read as "it's raining to me" and thus consistent with "it's not raining to you", just like the taste of chocolate? The answer is quite simple. The relativity of the goodness of the taste of chocolate only makes sense given the absolute existence of the tasters and the goodness or badness of their taste experiences. When you say chocolate tastes good, that is relative (we are assuming that is how you intended it). But when you say chocolate tastes good to me, thus identifying the relativity of the first claim, the claim of relativity cannot itself be relative. If it is relative, it cannot ground the relativity of the first claim. There is a deep point here that I want to make fully explicit: the relativity in question, relativity to preferences, attitudes, etc., is only intelligible if there is something that is not itself relative. It makes sense to say that my utterance of "chocolate tastes good" is true relative to me, but that is only because my existence and the way that chocolate tastes to me are absolute. There is nothing relative about either of them.

To see the slide of relativism into incoherence let us go through the steps.

1. Assume all truth is relative to preferences of the asserters of the truth. If S asserts p then p is true only relative to the interests of S.
2. By disquotation, if truth is relative then reality is relative.
3. If reality is relative it is relative to the existence of people and preferences
4. But if everything is relative, then existence of people and preferences must itself be relative. To what? There are two possibilities. Either we say (a) that people and preferences only exist relative to people and preferences or we say (b) that from my point of view, which is the only point of view to which I have access, people and preferences exist only relative to me. Let us go through each of these: Consider (a) first.

Proposition 1. It's raining

has to be interpreted as

Proposition 2. its raining but only relative to preference 1.

But of course proposition 2 is as relative as 1. It can only be interpreted as

Proposition 3. Proposition 2 is true but only relative to preference 2.

That is, It's raining relative to preference 1, but only relative to preference 2.

But Proposition 3, must itself be relative, as is stated by

Proposition 4. Proposition 3 is true but only relative to preference 3.

Thus its raining relative to preference 1, relative to preference 2, but only relative to preference 3.

The infinite regress follows automatically. Why is the regress vicious? Because it makes it impossible to give statement of anything. For any relativistic statement there must always be some other statement behind it which generates its relativistic interpretation, but that other statement is as much in need of a relativistic interpretation as was the original.

So let's try possibility b. If truth for me is relative to my preferences and thus everything that exists, exists only relative to my preferences, then you and your preferences exist only relative to my preferences. That is solipsism. My solipsism is coherent, but it makes it impossible to say anything to anybody else because there is nobody else and no public language to say anything. Your solipsism is immediately refuted by me, but that is because my existence is absolute and not relative to any preferences, mine or anybody else's. A consistent relativism makes it impossible to state anything because there is no end, there is indeed a vicious infinite regress of relativisms to relativisms. The way out of this, that is an implicit in the first person point of view of the relativist, is to insist that the relativism terminates in his existence and preferences. But then that is a form of solipsism, because everyone else exists only relative to his existence and preferences.

But then, why couldn't a relativist be more democratic? Why couldn't he stop half way and say, "Well, what's true for me is true relative to my preferences

and what's true for you is true relative to your preferences, but all of us are created equal, so all of us have an equal right to their preferences." The trouble with that is that it is an explicit denial of relativism. It is a form of absolutism. It says that people and preferences have an absolute non- relative existence. But then, if people and preferences have an absolute existence, why not all the other things such as mountains and waterfalls, rainstorms and prime numbers. If I grant that you have an absolute existence, then why not your clothing, your house, your car, your dog, and a whole lot of other things?