

## Relativism

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### Philosophical Concept

Someone who holds that nothing is simply good, but only good *for someone* or from a certain point of view, holds a relativist view of goodness. Protagoras, with his dictum that ‘man is the measure of all things’, is often taken to be an early relativist. Quite common are relativism about aesthetic value, about truth in particular areas such as religious truth, and (arising from anthropological theory) about rationality. There are also a number of ways of answering the question ‘relative to what?’ Thus something might be said to be relative to the attitudes or faculties of each individual, or to a cultural group, or to a species. Relativism therefore has many varieties; some are very plausible, others verge on incoherence.

#### 1. Grades of relativism

What people believe is affected by their circumstances. A twentieth-century business executive will probably not hold the same views on morality as a medieval peasant, nor a medieval monk the same views on the nature of the physical world as a twentieth-century physicist. An Indian is unlikely to have the same religious opinions as an Italian. This rather commonplace point is hardly exciting enough to deserve the name of ‘relativism’. Admittedly, some have concluded from it that there is no one truth about these things, only what seems true from certain perspectives. This argument has proved especially appealing in the case of morality, but it is quite certainly invalid. From the fact that two people hold (even predictably hold) different opinions on a question, it does not follow that there is no truth of the matter – only that, if there is, at least one of them has got it wrong.

But at least the idea that there is no one truth about things sounds closer to something which we might pointfully call ‘relativism’. And perhaps there are in some cases (morality looks, *prima facie*, a more promising candidate than physics) better reasons for believing it than this crude and manifestly invalid reasoning. For suppose two people each set themselves to think of a moral code, conformity to which will, in their differing cultural and economic environments, result in as much good as possible – may we not expect that the codes will differ? In widely differing circumstances, the same practices may have widely differing results.

The (moral) relativism which this argument yields is still a rather dilute one. It is fully compatible with there being utterly objective moral principles on which both our protagonists agree. The difference arises only when each asks what these principles dictate when applied to

their own situation. Similarly, we can imagine circumstances in which certain procedures were irrational (in the sense of being unlikely to lead to true beliefs) which are rational in ours. In a society whose members were much more wary and suspicious of strangers than they are in our own, it might be irrational to believe information from anybody one does not know. Again, the (epistemic) relativism here is superficial.

A fully-blown relativism denies that there is any such deeper unity beneath the diversity. There is simply what *they* consider right (or rational), and what *we* consider right, what passes for true among them, and what so passes among us.

## **2. The credibility of relativism**

Relativism in its strong form is a version of anti-realism, and how credible it is will depend very much on what we are asked to be relativists about (see Realism and antirealism). Few will have difficulty about ‘gastronomic relativism’: whether peaches taste nice or not is just a matter of how individuals respond to eating peaches. Many will not object to relativism about colour, according to which the colour of something is a matter of how an observer’s visual system responds to it (see Secondary qualities). Even if this does involve accepting that in some sense grass is not ‘really’ green, we can still react to colours, enjoy certain combinations of colour, attach emotive associations to colours, stop at red traffic lights, and in short go on as we always have.

With moral relativism things are more difficult. To hold that something is wrong for you, or in your society, but perfectly permissible for someone else, or in their society, and that *that is all there is to be said about it*, comes very close to giving up one’s own moral view. Are you really to think that there is nothing morally objectionable going on in that other society, just because it is that society? How are you to judge its members if their conduct comes to affect you? An uninvolved Olympian spectator (this may be why relativism sometimes seems easier while we are philosophizing!) might be able to see that there is no more to it than the different reactions and feelings of members of the two societies, but whether that can be believed from within the *melée* – even if it is actually true – is quite a different question.

Trickier still is the relativist doctrine that ‘true’ always really means ‘true-by-the-standards-of-X’, where X is some individual or group. An example might be a theory which understands truth in terms of what it is satisfactory to believe (see Truth, pragmatic theory of). Such a theory allows that truth may differ from group to group or from person to person, since social conditions, and individual psychology, may affect the satisfaction to be had from a given belief. Proponents of this kind of theory face various problems: have they anything at all to say to someone who questions whether the standards adopted by their chosen X are good ones? And are they offering their theory of truth as being itself true, or merely ‘true-by-the-standards-of-X’?

One response, favoured by many postmodernists, is to flit ironically from perspective to perspective, espousing none (see Postmodernism). Another response would be to say nothing. How many postmodernists have adopted this latter alternative is, from the nature of the case, hard to determine.

### **References and further reading**

Barnes, J. (1979) *The Presocratic Philosophers*, London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982.

(Chapters 23 and 24 discuss some ancient forms of relativism, moral and epistemic, including that ascribed to Protagoras.)

Hollis, M. (1994) *The Philosophy of Social Science*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Chapter 11 provides an introduction to relativism about rationality. Quite accessible, given that this is not an easy topic.)

Morton, A. (1996) *Philosophy in Practice: An Introduction to the Main Questions*, Oxford: Blackwell.

(Written in quite an unusual style for a philosophy textbook, with ‘reader-participation’. See pages 105–23 for an introduction to moral relativism.)

Williams, B.A.O. (1972) *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

(Pages 34–9 offer a brisk and hostile introduction to moral relativism.)

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