

## IS EVERYTHING RELATIVE, INCLUDING TRUTH?

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People sometimes say “Einstein showed that everything is relative”, and then – since the word “everything” obviously includes the notion of truth – conclude that Einstein showed that truth itself is relative?

In reality, Einstein neither showed, nor claimed to show, any such thing. And even if he had, his saying it wouldn’t make it true.

But what does it mean to assert that truth is relative? What does it mean to *deny* that truth is relative? And is the doctrine that truth is relative itself true or false?

### WHAT IS TRUTH?

Before asking whether truth is relative, an astute thinker will want to begin by asking what we *mean* by “truth”.

But even this question poses difficulties. After all, one of the *Bible* stories tells us that when Pontius Pilate asked the question “What is truth?” even Jesus (the “Son of God”) didn’t venture an answer.

It is easy to get one’s thinking about such abstract matters tangled up.

The ancient Greek philosopher, Socrates (477-399 BCE), liked to pose questions in abstract terms. What is Justice? What is Beauty? What is Goodness? And so on. Not surprisingly, many who tried to answer tied themselves up in knots. And so it is also with the highly general question: What is truth?

So let’s start with a simpler question. Instead of trying to think in terms of the abstract noun “truth”, let’s switch to thinking about the use of the adjective “true” as it occurs in sentences such as “That is a true statement” or “What you say is true”.

Our question now is: What does it mean to say that a statement (any statement) is true?

### THE NOTION OF SIMPLE TRUTH.

Socrates (470-399 BCE) had a distinguished pupil by the name of Plato (427 – 347 BCE) who left us with many reports of his master’s thinking.

And Plato in turn had a distinguished pupil by the name Aristotle (384-322 BCE), the philosopher who for a time was teacher of Alexander the Great. It was to Aristotle that we owe a beautifully simple and sound definition of what it means to say that something is true:

To say of what is that it is or of what is not that it is not, is true . . .

This, of course, is a strict translation of his words, so it sounds a bit foreign to modern ears. But we can convey his meaning even more simply by saying:

A statement is true if things are as it says they are.

Or, a bit more expansively:

A statement is true if things in reality are as the statement says they are.

There is nothing terribly perplexing about this simple definition, which philosophers sometimes call the “Simple” or “Realist” or “Objective” account of truth.

According to this simple/realist/objective/realist definition we obtain the following sorts of results:

- (1) It is true that snow is white if and only if snow is white.
- (2) It is true that John believes that the earth is flat if and only if John believes that the earth is flat.
- (3) It is true that the universe began with a Big Bang if and only if the universe began with a Big Bang.

And so on, for all the infinitely many possible statements that one can “plug into” the schema: “It is true that P if and only if P” (where the letter “P” stands for any given statement whatever).

The simple account of truth makes truth (and falsity) a function of (i.e., a consequence of) what the *world* is like, not of what we happen to believe about the world. It says that the truth or falsity of a statement is an “objective” matter. It is not a function of what we believe or perceive; i.e., it is not, in general, a “subjective” matter. Thus, even the truth or falsity of statement (2) – about what John believes - is a function of whether *in reality* John does have that belief. If it is true that John believes that the earth is flat, then it is *objectively* true that he has that belief. Likewise, on this account of truth, the truth or falsity of statement (3) – about the origins of the universe - is a function of whether in reality the universe did begin

with a Big Bang, even though we don't yet know for certain whether this (cosmological) theory is true or not.

In general, on the simple/realist/objective account, truth – unlike beauty, in some people's view – does not lie in the eye of the beholder. Nor does it lie in the *beliefs* of a believer, or in whether or not we *know* what the facts are. Believing something to be true does not make it true, for beliefs themselves can be false as well as true.

Most people, unless their thinking has been influenced by bad philosophy, will readily accept this simple/realist/objective notion of truth. Einstein was one of them. He believed in the existence of what he called "objective reality": a real world that exists independently of our subjective perceptions, conceptions, or beliefs. He believed that a statement is true if and only if objective reality is as that statement says it is. And he believed that the business of science is to discover truths about objective reality. As for Einstein's Relativity Theory: this is a doctrine about the relativity of inertial frames in physics. It is a physical theory, not a philosophical one. It has no implications whatsoever for the claim that all truth is relative.

### **THE ALLEGED RELATIVITY OF TRUTH.**

So why, apart from a misplaced appeal to Einstein's authority, do so many people – many philosophers included - insist that truth is relative?

To claim that truth is relative is to claim that the very same statement can be both true and false, depending on one's point of view.

Most of the reasons given stem from the fact that it is a simple, objective, truth that different people may differ from one another in the ways they perceive or conceive the world about them, and may differ, therefore, in the beliefs they have about the world.

### **Protagorean Relativism.**

Thus a pre-Socratic teacher by the name of Protagoras (approx. 490 – 420 BCE) came to the conclusion that all truth is relative on the basis of his observations about the relativity of human perceptions. What tastes sweet to one person may taste bitter to another. What sounds melodious to me may sound cacophonous to you. And so on.

Protagoras singled out one example in particular to illustrate his point. Suppose you and I are standing in the wind. Then it may well be true (objectively) both that

(4) The wind feels cold for me  
and that  
(5) The wind doesn't feel cold for you.  
Now it is clear that (4) and (5) are equivalent respectively to  
(6) It is true that the wind feels cold for me  
and  
(7) It is false that the wind feels cold for you.  
So far so good.

But then Protagoras draws a fallacious inference. He argues as if (6) and (7) were equivalent respectively to

(8) It is true for me that the wind feels cold  
and  
(9) It is false for you that the wind feels cold.

After all, (8) and (9) differ from (6) and (7) only in the placement of the little expressions "for me" and "for you". Yet (8) and (9) say something quite different from (6) and (7). According to (8) and (9) the very same statement

(10) The wind feels cold  
is both true and false. Protagoras expressed his relativistic conclusion in the famous words:

Man is the measure of all things, of the existence of things that are and of the non-existence of things that are not.

Protagoras, as it happens, was one of the first so-called "sophists", teachers who hired themselves out – usually for a large fee – to those who wanted to learn the art of persuasion, often for political purposes. They prided themselves on their ability to use language in such a way as to confuse their opponents, even to the extent of appearing to "prove" that black is white. Not surprisingly, their services were often sought in the law courts of Athens. Today, we use the term "sophistry" to describe the sort of fallacious inferences that characterised their arguments.

## **SOCRATES' REFUTATION OF PROTAGORAS.**

Socrates, who cared deeply about truth and was contemptuous of those who used words in careless ways, did much to expose the sophistical nature of Protagoras's reasoning. As portrayed by Plato in his dialogue *Theatetus*, Socrates refuted the notion that all truth is relative by means of a number of devastating criticisms:

- \* On Protagoras's own argument, truth is relative not just to man but to any sentient being whatever, even a tadpole.
- \* Protagoras, on his own showing, is no more of an authority about the nature of truth than is any other man, or even a

tadpole.

- \* If everyone is equally right about what is true, then no-one is ever either ignorant or mistaken in his opinions.
- If everyone's opinion is true, then so is the opinion of anyone who says that Protagoras's opinion is false. Hence the doctrine that all truth is relative is self-refuting.

### **RELATIVISM ABOUT TRUTH IS SELF-REFUTING**

The simple fact of the matter, of course, is that relativists who assert the truth of

(11) All truth is relative

really want us to believe that (11) is not itself a relative truth (since then it would have no more claims to being true than to being false) but an “absolute” (i.e., an objective) truth. They really want us to believe that all truths *other than* (11) are relative. But if all truths other than (11) are relative, then (11) is not true after all. Rather, it *must* be false.

### **MORAL OF THE STORY.**

The moral of this little philosophical story, of course, is that one must beware of generalizations such as “Everything is relative”. They can, and often do, lead to conceptual confusion and absurdity.