

## *Relativism*

The thought that beauty is in the eye of the beholder is often quoted and widely believed. In the area of beauty the tastes of connoisseurs, scholars and artists are denied any special authority, because perception of beauty is a private matter. This relativist view of beauty is often taken to have wider application, and full-scale Relativism applies this highly individualistic view to knowledge and truth. When two people hold conflicting opinions, relativists deny that at least one of them must be 'wrong', since there is no good way to compare such subjective matters. The background assumption of the relativist is either that truth itself is a variable matter, so that individuals can have their own private truth, or that there is no such thing as truth, if it is supposed to be some fixed ideal to which we all aspire. In modern times relativism is a popular view, because it prevents easy condemnation of rival views which seem unusual or too challenging; hence relativism seems to endorse the widely admired virtue of tolerance.

An ancient relativist slogan said that 'man is the measure of all things', meaning whatever we took to be the facts, or the truths, or knowledge, were just one particular point of view, which was that of **human beings**. Critics asked why we should stop there, and not allow tadpoles to be the measure of all things. This points to the central question in formulating an account of relativism, which is what truth and knowledge are relative *to*. The old slogan implies that there is a viewpoint which is developed and shared by human beings, leaving other animals or gods to have a quite different sort of knowledge. However, it was soon noticed that there is a large variation in beliefs between different **cultures**, and striking examples were cited, of cultures which accepted men wearing earrings or tattoos, and even prostituting their own daughters. If your culture is shocked by that last one, the modern relativist might say 'get over it!', and deny the existence of any common true standards that could condemn it. Hence we face cultural relativism, which divides humanity into groups of equally valid viewpoints. Recent relativists (especially in liberal societies) have increasingly favoured **individual** relativism, which places unique or rebellious views beyond the scope of criticism. Ultimate relativism is between different phases of an individual, meaning that I cannot even the condemn the view I held yesterday, having abandoned it this morning. Extreme relativism is thus a refusal to pass any judgements at all.

The commonest examples used to support relativism come from aesthetics and morality, which raises the question of whether we should be relativist about knowledge which is more normally taken to be objective. If we ask whether **arithmetic** or logic might be relative matters, they are so precisely defined that it seems unlikely to depend on personal viewpoint, but they might be true relative to certain conventional rules or axioms. If the rules or axioms are creations of communities of experts, that is a very specific form of cultural relativism. Anything which is the product of **conventions** seems thereby to be relative, and hence subject to the prejudices and interests of the group that create it. The physical **sciences** usually claim objectivity, in their observed data and mathematical descriptions, but the claim that observations are 'theory-laden' introduces the possibility that human concerns (rather than disinterested truth) may be driving science. Relativists tend to treat supposed objectivity as 'perspectival', or 'intersubjective'.

The **perspectival** view even introduces relativism into experience of everyday **objects**. We can never experience everything about a table, and our five senses limit what can be experienced, which encourages the idealist or phenomenalist views that a table is just a sum of past and/or future experiences. Hence our concept of the table may be nothing more than a set of viewpoints, with an existence relative to observers. If we are reluctant to become relativist about a dining table, it is still plausible to be relativist about its colour. Colour-blindness proves that people vary in their experiences of colour, and this is also true of taste and smell. Insects can even see ultra-violet light, and if you and I observe marigolds and violets, our colour experiences may even be entirely reversed. Hence these qualities of objects are certainly to some extent relative to observers, and comparison of them may be impossible.

An underlying idea behind claims of relativism is that individual people, or whole cultures, possess a '**conceptual scheme**', which imposes a way of seeing things on our experience. It may be that individuals, or cultures, or sub-cultures have a fairly well determined set of structured concepts, and that no understanding is possible without one. Optimists might hope to rise above a restricted scheme by deconstructing the schemes, comparing them, and choosing the best bits, but the relativist will (of course) reply that you are just adding one more conceptual scheme. Critics of relativism argue for a single conceptual scheme common to all humans, or argue that a shared external world forms a unifying bridge between our viewpoints.

An interesting potential source of relativism is the fact that people speak different **languages**. If people in northerly latitudes have many words for snow, this implies that they are more sensitive to its varieties than the rest of us, and may even 'see it differently'. A language with a large vocabulary may slice up reality more finely, and languages full of verbs will focus more on processes than on objects. The idea that something is always lost in translation is widely accepted. An extreme claim says 'your language *is* your reality', but it is more common to just concede that some degree of relativism creeps into human knowledge because of its varied expression.

People who are trying to reach a consensus about knowledge and what is true in areas such as chemistry, history and psychology (and even in philosophy and art history) find relativist views very frustrating. To spend ten years writing a rigorous scholarly book, only to be told that it is merely one individual's point of view, seems a bit unfair. But how can wholesale relativism be rebuffed, or even refuted? An ancient and familiar strategy is to '**turn the tables**' – to say that if we are assured that there is no truth, then relativism itself can't be true, and can certainly be ignored as just one point of view. We certainly cannot infer from relativism that we all ought to be tolerant, which could only be a duty if it were true. The challenge of relativism has motivated philosophical research into language, and the thought that while people may mean different things by a word or phrase when it is seen as inside a mind, if we attend to the phenomenon of 'reference' (picking out objects in the world), this may need to be plugged into a reality shared by all speakers. Similar claims are made about reason and truth – that they necessarily exist in a more objective way than relativists are willing to admit. Relativism is at the heart of many debates in modern philosophy.