

Good and Bad Relativism by Peter Gibson

Relativism may well be the most important problem in philosophy, and I believe it has a simple solution. We seem to live in a relativist age, and the great justification (and attraction for the young) of relativism is that it promotes tolerance. It is much easier to live in the post-Holocaust global village if there is equal respect for every one of the thousands of human cultures, and the millions of individual views of the world. Personally, I think full-blown relativism is too great a price to pay for the benefits of tolerance, but it is a price we can avoid.

My definition of ‘full-blown’ relativism is the claim that there is no such thing as truth. The most famous spokesman for relativism in the ancient world was Protagoras, who began his book on nature with the famous assertion that ‘Man is the measure of all things’. Plato and Aristotle tell us that what he meant was that all belief and knowledge are merely the point of view of one particular species – humans. Plato’s comment (*Theaetetus 161d1*) is that this view would give equal legitimacy to the point of view of a tadpole. The idea of relativism is that we are hopelessly trapped in our own (individual or cultural) viewpoint, and all attempts to state objective truth are doomed to distortion, and hence empty and pointless.

Relativism has been promoted in modern times by such luminaries as Riemann, Einstein and Gödel, with their relativisation of geometry, physics and arithmetic, but in philosophy the two greatest influences seem to me to be Nietzsche and William James.

Both seem to have been motivated by a desire for liberation. Nietzsche hated any moral theory that encouraged strict adherence to a rule (such as Kantian deontological ethics, or Benthamite utilitarianism), because each seemed based on some agreed truth, about what is rational to do, or what will promote human benefit. Nietzsche dreamed of new possibilities for human nature that were so far unexplored, and ‘truth’ seemed to be a tainted and conservative concept. He offered to replace it with ‘perspectives’, which in some way summed the multitude of human viewpoints.

William James was an American living at the moment when his country was emerging as a world economic power. The ultimate anathema for him would have been Aristotle’s vision at the end of *Ethics* (1177-8), of the highest human life as pure god-like contemplation. For James, the aim of life is to *do* things. He latched onto the musings of his friend Charles Peirce, and simplified them into the slogan that ‘truth is merely what works’. Richard Rorty is only the best known of many modern American philosophers who have accepted this view, and there is quite a strong tendency among modern Americans to laugh at the quaint old European idea of truth.

The point at which I began to think that such ideas were misconceived was while trying to understand the Gettier Problem. This (if you have not met it) is the problem that certain beliefs seem to be both true and justified, and yet not to qualify as knowledge. For example, I put my cup on the table; while I am out of the room, someone moves it to the window sill while they play cards, and at the end they replace it on the table; as I am about to enter the room, do I ‘know’ that my cup is on the table? I believe it is on the table, it is true that it is, and I am justified (because I left it there); however, I don’t know that for most of my absence it was *not* on the table. Most intuitions say I don’t know, even though I have a true justified belief. So what is knowledge?

Forty years of brutal philosophical combat arose from Gettier’s nice question, with the combatants dividing into ‘internalist’ and ‘externalist’ camps. (Internalists say justification is in the mind, externalists say it is in the circumstances surrounding the belief). A question that strongly caught my attention in the discussion of justification is ‘How high do you set the bar?’ The consensus on Descartes is that he had huge problems with his deceptive demon and his incredibly real dreams because he had set the bar very high indeed. Like a child who won’t stop asking ‘Why?’, the person who sets the bar to its maximum height will never be satisfied. If you simultaneously challenge the meanings of your own words, the existence of your own continuous self, the validity of your reason, and all of your sense experiences, the chances of emerging as a confident possessor of ‘knowledge’ seem to be nil. If, though, you just relax a bit, allow a footnote that says *Of course, you never know, we might be in virtual reality, maybe I am Satan without realising it etc., but we will ignore that for now*, and apply the normal criteria of evidence and reason, you seem to end up with heaps of excellent ‘knowledge’.

In other words, the solution to the Gettier Problem is to be found in locating the appropriate height for the bar. In the case of the cup on the table, the bar would be a fraction too low if you allowed that you *knew* where your cup was. The bar must be pushed up a bit. Who decides where to set the bar? This is the key question – you can’t allow individuals to set their own bar height – that would be like letting students set their own exams.

Setting the bar height for knowledge is a *social* matter – a matter of authority in some states and situations, a matter of consensus in others. And if justification is social, then justification is *relative*.

This fits neatly with some aspects of externalism about concepts, arising from Hilary Putnam's Twin Earth example. Putnam says he is happy to talk about elm trees, even though he can't identify one, because he means by 'elm' whatever experts mean by it. If he has to, he will look 'elm' up in a guide to trees. In this view, the meaning of our concepts, as well as the justification of our beliefs, becomes a social matter. (Wittgenstein's Private Language argument, emphasising the social nature of language, is also recruited to the cause at this point).

Interestingly, throughout the Gettier battle almost everyone agreed that the requirements for the proposition to be *believed*, and for it to be *true*, were unassailable. To know a falsehood seemed logically impossible; you just can't say 'p is false, and x knows p'; only truths are candidates to be known. The debate was entirely about justification. This is because if you raise doubts about truth, then the concept of knowledge collapses, because there are only beliefs.

When philosophers discuss the nature of truth they go into anguished paroxysms, but if they are discussing knowledge then the existence and nature of truth seem quite straightforward. Why is this? I think we come here to the heart of the problem. When discussing knowledge, all the anguish is about getting good justification for our beliefs. When discussing truth, the anguish is about whether we can ever attain such an elusive ideal. There is a temptation to downgrade truth (to a 'minimal', or 'deflationary', or 'redundancy' reading) in order to make it attainable.

The whole mess, in my view, results from the one major blunder which has dominated and obfuscated analytical philosophy for the last four hundred years – the confusion of ontology with epistemology. Ontology concerns how it is, epistemology concerns how we can know it. Truth stands outside these two activities, as the highly abstract and metaphysical notion that one will match the other, that epistemology will map onto ontology. Truth is an ideal to which we aspire. It is no more knowable than the mind of God is directly knowable to a monk. It is the aspiration, not the destination.

As I have said then, the solution to the relativism problem is simple. Justification is relative, but truth isn't. All the good things that follow from relativism, such as tolerance and respect, will follow from recognising that societies have complex reasons for setting the bar of justification at different heights in different areas of life. But in the middle of it all is the rock of truth. Truth is truth. There is a black pen in my drawer. If someone has stolen it, or I actually left it on the banister, or there is no pen because my existence is a dream, then it is not true. But if there *is* a black pen in my drawer, then it is *true* that there is a black pen in my drawer, and that goes way beyond any opinions or justifications I may have on the subject, or any other epistemological criteria my society may set for me.

The moral of my story is that if you wish to hang on to truth (and I think you would be mad not to), then you must loosen your grip on justification, and hence on knowledge. If you will, truth is an absolute, but knowledge is not. All the legitimate questions about the role of political power in education and science, asked by philosophers such as Foucault, can be addressed without a slide into relativism. They simply concern the height of the bar, and who controls that bar. The occurrence of miracles, for example....

Note 1: Although William James was a relativist, his brilliant pragmatist friend Charles Sanders Peirce was not. In 'The Fixation of Belief' he notes that 'As soon as a firm belief is reached we are entirely satisfied, whether the belief be true or false.' Peirce simply observed that belief is much more interesting than truth, because we act on belief, whereas truth is just a remote ideal.

Editor's note: The essay 'The Fixation of Belief' dates from 1877 and is collected in *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Blucher (Dover 1955). It can also be found at <http://www.peirce.org/writings/p107.html>

Note 2: Although analytical philosophers are inclined to see Foucault as the epitome of crazy French relativists, this was not so. Foucault was interested in what he calls 'games of truth' in a political context (even about mathematics), but he is emphatic that such games are *not* 'just concealed power relations – that would be a horrible exaggeration.' (*Essential Works* vol.1, Penguin, p.296).