

CHAPTER 8

My truth/  
Your truth  
Relativism

John Dickson

There are many kinds of eyes. Even the Sphinx has eyes—and consequently  
there are many kinds of 'truths', and consequently there is no truth.

*Frederick Nietzsche*

## INTRODUCTION

There is an ancient Indian parable in the Buddhist Scriptures, which tells how six blind men were once summoned to inspect an elephant and describe what they could feel. The first at the head declares, 'Sire, an elephant is like a pot'. The second feels the ears and exclaims, 'An elephant is like a winnowing-basket'. Another is led to a leg and insists it is a 'pillar' and the one holding the tail is sure it is a 'brush'. And so on. An argument breaks out over the identity of the object: 'Yes, it is!', 'No, it is not', and so on, till they came to fisticuffs over the matter. The whole thing descends into chaos. Then, reflecting on the parable, the Buddha compares the blind men to the many gurus of India: 'For, quarrelling, each to his view they cling. Such folk see only one side of a thing.'<sup>2</sup>

The point of the parable is that when it comes to matters philosophical, truth is in the eye of the beholder (or, in the case of blind men, the hand of the holder). In other words, your perspective determines your views. A person brought up a Christian will probably see things Christianly; a person brought up a Muslim will probably see things Islamically. One person views abortion as immoral; another views it as perfectly legitimate. No-one is right or wrong. It is just one's perspective or viewpoint.

Philosophers call this approach to life *relativism*. Officially defined, relativism is 'the theory of knowledge or ethics which holds that criteria of judgement are relative, varying with the individual, time, and circumstance'.<sup>3</sup> As a world view, relativism has impacted the range of human experience—morality, culture, religion, philosophy, science and the very notion of existence itself.

So where did relativism come from? What factors gave rise to this way of looking at life?

## HISTORY

The word 'relativism' first appeared in 1859 in the writings of Scottish philosopher Sir William Hamilton. More interesting than the origin of the word is that the idea goes back long, long before the big brains of the nineteenth century.

**Protagoras and Plato.** Scholars generally agree that the first 'relativist' was the ancient Greek philosopher Protagoras (approximately 490–421 BC). You might remember him from the chapter on humanism, with which he also has links. Protagoras was a 'Sophist', an itinerant teacher of grammar, literature and philosophy. His book, called simply *Truth*, opened with these words: 'Man is the measure of all things: of the things which are, that they are, and of the things which are not, that they are not.'<sup>4</sup> In other words, what is true and false is determined not by things outside of a person, but simply by a person's own perspective. As he explains later in the book, 'Things are for every man what they seem to him to be.'<sup>5</sup>

Not everyone was happy with old Protagoras. Perhaps no name is more associated with philosophical wisdom than the Athenian intellectual Plato (428–348 BC). Plato provided a devastating critique of Protagoras' idea that 'Man is the measure of all things'. If everything is relative to man's perspective, argued Plato, that must also apply to Protagoras' own idea that truth is relative. If so, his view is just an opinion and so not worth worrying much about. But if Protagoras really thinks it is true that things are only true according to a person's perspective, then, that would mean Protagoras' idea is actually false because at least one truth (Protagoras' idea) would then not be relative.

Most of the world was satisfied with Plato's arguments against Protagoras, and it was two millennia before people started to have another serious go at the relativist idea. Nevertheless, as time rolled on numerous cultural ripples gathered pace and came together to form a wave that many today enjoy riding. Some important 'ripples' in the wave of relativism include the following:

**1 | Philosophy.** The German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) argued that the true nature of reality was beyond our human senses. All we can deal with are the phenomena we see, smell, touch and so on. The deeper stuff of life, like God and morality, are inaccessible to our human senses, Kant said. Kant wasn't rejecting these deeper things (which he called 'noumena'). And he certainly wasn't a relativist. But the effect of his philosophy was that people who didn't believe in God and an Absolute moral code started to argue that only things you can see, touch, smell and so on are objectively real; all the other stuff was subjective speculation. Pretty soon, other philosophers

were arguing that the 'truths' of spirituality, ethics and culture were simply relative truths—true only within the framework of the society in which they were believed.<sup>6</sup>

**2 | Anthropology.** A major contributor to the wave of relativism was cultural anthropology, the comparative study of human societies. Early anthropologists assumed that Western culture was superior to all others. This assumption began to be challenged, however, by a new breed of anthropologists including the German-born Franz Boas (1858–1942) and the Americans Ruth Benedict (1887–1948) and Margaret Mead (1901–1978). These anthropologists insisted that no-one from one culture has the right to critique another culture. British ways are only 'truths' within British culture and have no relevance for assessing the cultures of, say, Native Americans (studied by Benedict) or Samoans (studied by Mead). In 1947, as the United Nations was developing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the American Anthropological Association even issued a statement challenging the whole project, arguing that moral values are relative to individual cultures and should not be thought to apply universally.

A third ripple joined the wave of modern relativism.

**3 | Psychology.** Many suspect that modern psychology played a part in the rise of relativism. A key insight of psychology is that many of our actions and beliefs are determined by patterns of thought that lie beneath the surface of our everyday consciousness (until they are uncovered at a counselling session). A big name here is the German father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). Among other things, Freud argued that the entire religious sentiment was the result of our infantile longings for a protective father figure and/or a regression to our earliest postnatal feelings of oneness with our mothers. Freud's views were speculative, but he and other early psychologists had a real impact on Western views of religious 'truth'. It could be argued that religion was an internal psychological phenomenon. Not only are religious beliefs social constructs ('true' only relative within a communal framework), they are psychological constructs as well ('true' only within the framework of the believer's mind). This relativising of beliefs to a psychological process seemed to establish Relativism itself as the grand Truth to which all other 'truths' had to bow.

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**TESTING THE CLAIMS OF RELATIVISM** | A diversity of truth claims in a pluralist setting is affirmed by relativism, yet such a claim frequently bumps up against (or smashes into) real life in a way that makes it hard to sustain.

The New York Times editorial shortly after the September 11 attacks admitted that the event shook the foundations of intellectual belief in the subjective nature of truth and ethical judgements:

'Such assertions seem peculiar when trying to account for the recent attack. The destruction seems to cry out for a transcendent ethical perspective. Even mild relativism seems troubling by contrast.'<sup>7</sup>

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## CENTRAL BELIEFS

### The three spheres of relativism

Once the wave of relativism got moving it swamped all before it: the catchphrase 'Everything is relative' is now a normal thing to hear. And while few of us really believe that *everything* is relative, there are at least three spheres of life that have come to be viewed relativistically: culture, morals and religion.

1 | **Cultural relativism** is the view that No-one culture is better or worse than another—just as the early anthropologists argued. The habits of one culture are true/valid *only within that culture* and are not necessarily true/valid for another culture. Let me give you a striking example of the way a hard-core relativist would argue. Female circumcision (the removal of the clitoris, usually of a teenage girl) is considered a noble tradition in Somali culture. However, in the West many condemn the practice as 'female mutilation'. A relativist stance on this issue insists that neither the Somali approval of female circumcision nor the Western disapproval of female circumcision is right in an ultimate sense. These viewpoints are both correct *within the cultural framework* in which they are held. Female circumcision is *right for Somalis* and *wrong for Westerners*.

In Australia in 2006, the Egyptian Muslim cleric Sheik Taj el-Din al Hilali was quoted comparing unveiled women to 'uncovered meat' inviting the attacks of prowling cats (meaning men). The uproar in the media was fascinating. While apologising for the offence to non-Muslim Australians, Sheik Hilali defended his comments on the grounds that they were intended for a Muslim audience. For Muslims, he believed, his teachings were culturally appropriate. Not good enough, declared Sophie Mirabella MP, who took the opportunity in Parliament to call for an end to this relativising of cultural values:

We are not going to stand by and let this man get away with it. There needs to be an end to cultural relativism ... There are basic laws that apply to all Australians and one Australian legal system should apply to every single Australian whether they be atheist, Christian or Muslim.<sup>8</sup>

2 | **Moral relativism** is the same logic applied to the question of right and wrong. For one person abortion is immoral; for another it is perfectly legitimate. No-one is right or wrong. Such views can only be evaluated relative to the framework of the person holding such views. A fascinating example of a thoroughgoing relativist is Lord Bertrand Russell (1872–1970), probably the greatest atheistic mind of the twentieth century. In 1948 Russell was invited to debate, live on BBC radio, the renowned Roman Catholic philosopher, Frederick Copleston (1907–1994). At one point, Copleston pressed Russell to explain what he thought was the basis of distinguishing right from wrong. Specifically, he raises the example of the behaviour of the Commandant of Belsen Concentration Camp during Hitler's Nazi rule. Russell admitted that, for him, choosing morality is just like choosing one colour from another.

*Copleston:* Yes, but what's your justification for distinguishing between good and bad or how do you view the distinction between them?

*Russell:* I don't have any justification any more than I have when I distinguish between blue and yellow. What is my justification for distinguishing between blue and yellow? I can see they are different.

*I think we do live in an age where we have slid too far into relativism, and there must be some absolutes in our society.*

Former Australian Prime Minister John Howard (Speaking against a bill to allow therapeutic cloning for embryonic stem cell research.)

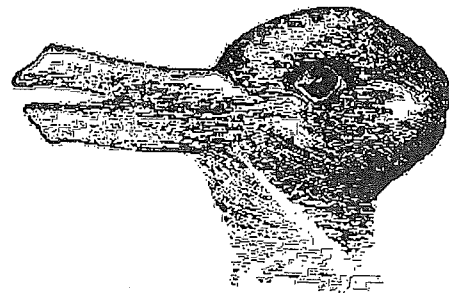
*Copleston:* Granted. But there's no objective criterion outside feeling then for condemning the conduct of the Commandant of Belsen, in your view?

*Russell:* No more than there is for the colour-blind person who's in exactly the same state. Why do we intellectually condemn the colour-blind man? Isn't it because he's in the minority?<sup>9</sup>

For the relativist, what is right and wrong comes down to the feeling of the majority: that's all there is. The Christian world view, by contrast, insists that the world was created by God and so reality is shaped by his own character (of justice, love, and so on). Ethics, then, are not a matter of feeling or democracy; they derive objectively from the One who stands at the centre of the universe. More about that later.

**3 | Religious relativism** is the view that religious claims are not true in any external way, but only within the belief system of the religious adherent. So, for instance, while it is true for Christians that God became a man in Jesus Christ and died on a cross,<sup>10</sup> it is true for Muslims that Jesus did not die on a cross and was only a human being.<sup>11</sup> No-one is right or wrong in an ultimate sense. Both groups are right about Jesus relative to their own religious framework. Such religious relativism is sometimes called simply 'pluralism', the view that religious truth is plural in form, not singular.

A modern version of the Buddhist Elephant parable is offered by a leading pluralist today, Professor John Hick of the University of Birmingham (UK). He presents us with a picture first used in early studies of illusion:<sup>12</sup>



The sketch, as you can see, shows an ambiguous figure drawn to look like both a duck (facing left) and a rabbit (facing right). Take a moment to see both for yourself. If shown to a culture that knew ducks but not rabbits, says Hick, the picture will be interpreted quite validly as a sketch of a duck.

If shown to a culture that knew only rabbits, however, the picture would be interpreted naturally enough as that of a rabbit. No-one is right or wrong, says Hick. It is simply a matter of perception. Likewise with religion, Hick argues. Muslims see Allah, Hindus see Vishnu, Krishna and so on, and Christians see Jesus. No-one's belief is true in an ultimate sense; but everyone's belief is true relative to their cultural framework.

## CONTACT AND DEPARTURE FROM CHRISTIANITY

John Hick's duck-rabbit analogy wonderfully illustrates not just religious relativism but cultural and moral relativism as well. Somalis see female circumcision as a noble practice; Westerners see it as mutilation. Pro-choicers see abortion as a woman's right; pro-lifers see it as the murder of a helpless human being. No-one is right or wrong; it is just 'ducks' and 'rabbits'. We just see life differently. That's all.

Or is it?

**1 | The presumption of relativism.** The duck-rabbit sketch unwittingly reveals a hidden assumption of relativists. In reality, the picture is not a sketch of a rabbit, or of a duck. It is a sketch deliberately drawn to look like *both* a duck and a rabbit. The unknowing subjects in the experiment might be justified in seeing either a duck or a rabbit, but the person showing the picture, the one conducting the experiment, knows full well this is a clever work of art designed to trick people. What does this say about the relativist? Well, for one thing, it reveals that the relativist is claiming implicitly to know something that the others do not: he or she apparently knows that people do not view things absolutely but only partially or relatively. Relativism, in other words, claims to be able to see the whole picture, while the rest of us see ducks and rabbits. Actually, this is exactly the point of Buddha's Elephant Parable, and he had the honesty to admit it. The Hindu gurus of India were blind to the total reality, whereas the Buddha knew the Truth. Whenever relativists say, 'Each person has their own truth—it's all relative', they are presuming to know there is an 'elephant' beyond the 'pot'. And they never stop to tell us how they know this.



**2 | Self-refutation.** A major problem with relativism is the one Plato raised almost two and a half thousand years ago. Relativism is self-contradictory. You cannot claim that truth is relative and expect people to accept what you say as 'true'. If the statement is true absolutely, it proves that not everything is true relatively. And, if the statement is only relatively true, we can dismiss it as an opinion.

If it is *true* that truth is relative, there is automatically one truth that is not relative (the truth of relativism). And, if you allow this exception, it's going to be very difficult to disallow other exceptions. And then the whole relativism wave crashes. Philosophers call this the 'exemption problem'.

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#### MEDIA

**BREAKING BAD (2008–2013)** | In the highly acclaimed TV show, *Breaking Bad*, we see an example, and the inherent contradiction, within relativism. Walter White, played by Bryan Cranston, on discovering that he has cancer, makes an amoral choice to begin making and selling meth.

As this previously decent man begins a descent into crime, we see him make increasingly desperate and immoral choices, while constantly justifying them to himself or others, with the constant refrain that he is doing this to ease the financial burden on his family. However, even as he does so, he continues to judge others for the choices that they make, or the attitudes that they have. Throughout the story arc of the show, there is no objective measure for White as to what is right or wrong, just how each decision might be justified by what is happening, and how to protect himself.

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**3 | Relativism and tolerance.** Probably the most attractive thing about relativism for the average person on the street is the seeming connection between relativism and tolerance. If I insist that moral, cultural and religious 'truths' are simply relative—that no-one is right or wrong—then this is likely to inspire tolerance toward other people's views. And God knows we need more tolerance today! This longing for tolerance is one thing the Christian world view shares with the relativist. But before we decide that tolerance

is best won through relativism it might be worth asking what we mean by tolerance. For many today, tolerance is little more than a willingness to accept every viewpoint as true and valid. But I want to suggest this is not tolerance at all, but simply a strategy for avoiding arguments. True tolerance does not involve accepting every viewpoint as true and valid; it involves treating with love and humility someone whose opinions you believe to be untrue and invalid. A tolerant pro-lifer, to give just one example, is not one who accepts as true and valid the pro-choice idea that it is OK to kill unwanted fetuses. No: the tolerant pro-lifer is one who, while rejecting abortionist arguments, nonetheless treats pro-choicers with kindness and respect. True tolerance is the noble ability to treat with grace those with whom you disagree. For Christians this ought to be second nature, since the Lord proclaimed in the Christian gospel, is the epitome of humility, love and gentleness.

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#### RELATIVIST DINNER PARTY

Jane: So Rob, how's your work for Vision of the World going?

Rob: I've just come back from Africa. It's going alright, but it gets pretty depressing at times. The amount of kids who are AIDS orphans is unbelievable. And you know really, when it comes down to it, it's so preventable. Fidelity or condoms will do the trick. Not to mention the drugs that the West could provide.

Garry: Hard to tell people how to live their lives though, isn't it? I mean, monogamy's just not part of the culture is it? Who are we to judge?

Rob: I guess. I just think about the kids though eh? It's really tragic. And these poor women who get it. It's not their fault.

Felicity: Yeah Rob, that must be tough. But I'm really conscious of not imposing our values onto anyone else. I mean how about that Christian politician banging on about therapeutic cloning for stem cell research on the news this week. Talk about living in the dark ages. How can she be so arrogant? Trying to stop legitimate medical research for the sake of her make-believe religion.

Rob: It's a complicated issue. I don't think you have to be religious to have your doubts about that one.

Jordan: But Rob, what right do others have to tell us how to live? I mean really! We don't all see the world in the same way.

Felicity: It's the twenty-first century for goodness sake. Anyone with half a brain or a conscience understands that we have to accept that what's right for you, may not be OK for me. We have to respect that. Appealing to some god, or the Bible or whatever fairytale you happen to like doesn't allow for tolerance. And without tolerance we might as well be back in the cave.

Garry: Speaking of the cave. How about those gang rapists trying to appeal their sentences? I reckon they should increase them.

Felicity: Absolutely! Lock 'em up for life I say. They don't deserve to see the light of day again.

Jane: No arguments about that one.

Jordan: More champagne anyone?

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**4 | To what are things 'relative'?** At the heart of relativism is the insistence that 'truths' are only true relative to a framework. The 'truths' of Jesus' deity and death, for example, are true only relative to the framework of Christianity (they are not true relative to the framework of Islam). The concern of relativism is to connect beliefs with their bases. Female circumcision has a basis only in reference to Somali culture. Morals have a basis only in reference to the society in which they are agreed upon. And so on. Admittedly, there is a truth here that relativists have highlighted: our beliefs must depend upon a framework; they must have a reference point. Otherwise, they are just random shots in the dark. This is a dangerous truth for relativists to uncover, for the question that comes immediately to mind is: upon what framework does relativism depend? Or, to what reference point does relativism refer? The answer is: none, except within the mind of the relativist.

The question of a reference point is one that presents itself to all claims about the world, whether scientific, moral, cultural or religious. In other words, every claim must have a basis. When traditional Somalis claim that it is a noble thing to circumcise a teenage girl they must, in a multicultural society like ours, be able to provide reasons why the practice is acceptable. Otherwise, they cannot complain when Westerners protest, 'This custom is a

violation of women's rights!' Of course, it is also true that Westerners must, likewise, provide reasons for their protestation. The reasons will indicate the reference point or framework.

So, for instance, Westerners might try to put forward medical, sociological and psychological arguments against female circumcision. But if it turned out that there were no reasons for the respective views, beyond saying 'this is what our culture thinks', then neither side of the debate would have any firm basis for critiquing the other. A kind of resigned relativism would then be advisable. My point is simple. If our views can be shown to correspond to more than the whims of human culture and mind, relativism loses its footing (if it had any) and relevance.

The larger point is worth pondering. Christians have reasons for thinking there is a God to whom we all belong. They have reasons for thinking God has revealed himself in the teaching, miracles, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And they have reasons for thinking the Bible is God's Word to humanity. Once persuaded of these things, Christians find comfort in the fact that their views are not determined by culture, tradition or psychological make-up. They live and think in accordance with the Absolute—an Absolute who has revealed himself on the human stage. This comfort is something relativism has no possibility of replicating.

## RESPONSE

### Question

- 1 | What would be a good slogan to sum up the underlying beliefs of Relativism?
- 2 | What is your response to the arguments of Anthropology that 'truths' within one culture have no relevance to assessing the values of other cultures? Do you detect limitations to this argument?
- 3 | What value do you see in a definition of tolerance that involves 'treating with love and humility someone whose opinions you believe to be untrue and invalid' (page 143)? Is this the version of tolerance you come across in daily life?

## Discussion

A | How do you explain the way relativism has become so pervasive and popular in our society?

B | The strength of relativism (in theory at least) is its willingness to acknowledge the vast array of perspectives that different people have when they look at the world. What are the limitations of such a stance? Where do you personally draw the line in terms of being able to say another person's outlook and actions are legitimate and justified?

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**RELATIVISING OURSELVES TO DEATH** | Sir Arnold Toynbee was a famous historian who in the 1940s wrote a massive study on the rise and fall of world civilisations. He based his study on twenty-one world civilisations—ranging from ancient Rome to imperial China, from Babylon to the Aztecs. Toynbee found that great societies are seldom simply overrun by some other civilisation. Rather, they commit a kind of cultural suicide. Toynbee located a series of characteristics that he claimed were typical of societies in decline.

One of these characteristics he said, was a promiscuity, which Toynbee meant not so much in the sexual sense, but as the indiscriminate acceptance of anything and everything, an unfocused eclecticism and uncritical tolerance. Toynbee described this promiscuity as 'an act of self-surrender to the melting pot ... in Religion and Literature and Language and Art as well as ... Manners and Customs', the triumph of a mass mind.<sup>14</sup>

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## Discussion

C | What danger do you perceive in an uncritical tolerance of everything?

D | Is such a thing applicable to our society?

## Perception

1 | What appear to you to be the most appealing aspects of relativism as a way of viewing the world?

2 | What are its most identifiable weaknesses?