

SEARLE ON REALISM VS RELATIVISM

John Searle

**Is there such a thing as objective truth?
One of the world's most influential analytic philosophers
defends realism and philosophy's classical values**

I have been a professional teacher of philosophy now for 60 years. One persistent philosophical confusion I have discovered is the temptation among intelligent undergraduates to adopt a conception of relativism about truth. It's not easy to get a clear statement of relativism, but the general idea is something like this: there is no such thing as objective truth. All truth statements are made from a perspective and the perspective is inherently subjective and the result is that truth is always relative to the interests of the truth-staters. So what is true for me is true for me, and what is true for you is true for you. Each of us has a right to our own truth.

Part of the appeal of this view is that it seems both empowering and democratic. It is empowering because I get to decide what is true for me, and democratic because everybody else has the right to decide what is true for them.

I think this view cannot be stated coherently, and what I want to do is to expose its incoherence.

Let us start with objectivity and subjectivity. These notions are ambiguous between an epistemic sense and an ontological sense, where “epistemic” means having to do with knowledge and “ontological” means having to do with existence. If I say Rembrandt was born in 1606, that statement is epistemically objective because its truth can be settled as a matter of fact. If I say Rembrandt was the greatest painter that ever lived, well that is a matter of “subjective opinion;” it is epistemically subjective. Underlying this distinction is a distinction in modes of existence. Mountains and molecules have an existence that does not depend on being experienced by a human or animal subject; they are ontologically objective. Pains, tickles, and itches exist only insofar as they are experienced by a subject. They are ontologically subjective. Given this distinction, we can now state the thesis of the relativity of truth with a little more precision: granted that there is a reality that exists independent of human beings, all statements about that reality are made from a subjective point of view, and hence all statements are epistemically subjective. The ontological subjectivity of statement-making is sufficient to guarantee the truth of relativism. All statements are epistemically subjective because all claims are made relative to the point of view of the statement-maker, so there is no such thing as objective truth.

It should be apparent already that there is something fishy about relativism because it is confusing ontological subjectivity with epistemic subjectivity. All statements are indeed made by conscious subjects from their ontologically subjective point of view, but it doesn't follow that the statement made is about something ontologically subjective, nor does it follow that the statement made is thereby epistemically subjective. In a word, perspectivalism does not imply relativism. Every statement is indeed made from a perspective, but relativism does not follow.

There is a traditional, and I think correct, refutation of relativism, that goes as follows: how about the statement of relativism itself, is it objectively true, or is it just a matter of subjective opinion? If it is objectively true, then the thesis is self-contradictory because it is refuted by itself as an example of objective truth. If relativism is an objective truth, then why shouldn't there be a whole lot of other objective truths? If relativism is only a subjective opinion, then we have no more reason to accept it than its negation. Defenders of relativism feel that there is some sort of logical trick involved in


this objection, that it really does not get at the point behind the radical perspectivalism that motivates relativism. If all claims are only made from a perspective, and perspectives are inherently subjective, then relativism could still be true even though there are these logic chopping objections that can be made to it.

The real incoherence of relativism comes out in the following: there is an essential principle of language and logic sometimes called disquotation. Here is how it goes: for any statement 's', that statement will be true if and only if 'p', where for 's' you put in something identifying the statement and for 'p' you put in the statement itself. So to take a famous example, the statement "Snow is white" is true if and only if snow is white. This is called disquotation, because the quotes on the left-hand side are dropped on the right-hand side.

Disquotation applies to any statement whatsoever. You have to make some adjustments for indexical statements, so "I am hungry" is true if and only if the person making the statement is hungry at the time of the statement. You don't want to say "I am hungry" is true if and only if I am hungry, because the sentence might be said by somebody else other than me. But with such adjustments, disquotation is a universal principle of language. You cannot begin to understand language without it. Now the first incoherence of relativism can be stated. Given the principle of disquotation, it has the consequence that all of reality becomes ontologically relative. "Snow is white" is true if and only if snow is white. But if the truth of "Snow is white" becomes relative, then the fact that snow is white becomes relative. If truth only exists relative to my point of view, reality itself exists only relative to my point of view. Relativism is not coherently stated as a doctrine about truth; it must have consequences about reality itself because of the principle of disquotation. If truth is relative, then everything is relative.

Well perhaps relativists should welcome this result; maybe all of reality ought to be thought of as relative to individual subjects. Why should there be an objective reality beyond individual subjects? The problem with this is that it is now a form of solipsism. Solipsism is the doctrine that the only reality is my reality. The reason that solipsism follows immediately from relativism about reality is that the only reality I have access to is my reality. Perhaps you exist and have a reality, but if so I could never say anything about it or know anything about it, because all the reality I have access to is my conscious subjectivity. The difficulty with relativism is that there is no intermediate position of relativism between absolutism about truth and total solipsism. Once you accept dis-

quotation—and it is essential to any coherent conception of language—relativism about reality follows, and relativism about reality, if accepted, is simply solipsism. There is no coherent position of relativism about objective truth short of total solipsism.

Well what does all this matter? It matters because there is an essential constraint on human rationality. When we are communicating with each other, at least some of the time we are aiming for epistemic objectivity. There is no way we can state that two plus two equals four or that snow is white, without being committed to objective truth. The fact that such statements are made from a point of view, the fact that there is always a perspective, is in no way inconsistent with the fact that there is a reality being described from that point of view and that indeed, from that subjective point of view we can make epistemically objective statements. 

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