



THE BEREA PAGE

“Examining . . . to see if these things are so” ~ Acts 17.11

On Relativism

A “There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative. If this belief is put to the test, one can count on the students’ reaction: they will be uncomprehending. That anyone should regard the proposition as not self-evident astonishes them, as though he were calling into question $2 + 2 = 4$. These are things you don’t think about.” ~ Alan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (Simon & Schuster, 1987), 25

B “Truth, declares a growing collective consciousness, is *relative*: what is true, right, or beautiful for one person isn’t necessarily true, right, or beautiful for another. *Relativism* says that truth isn’t fixed by outside reality, but is decided by a group or individual for themselves. Truth isn’t discovered, but manufactured. Truth is ever-changing not only in insignificant matters of taste or fashion, but in crucial matters of spirituality, morality, and reality itself. This is the postmodern consensus—that truth is a slippery thing. ~ Jim Leffel, “Our New Challenge, Post-modernism,” in Dennis McCallum, ed., *The Death of Truth* (Bethany House Publishers, 1996), 31

We Need to Talk About Truth

David Anguish

To illustrate the difference between objective truth and relativism and how understanding of the latter has changed over time, Os Guinness related the story of three umpires debating their philosophies for calling balls and strikes.

“There’s balls and there’s strikes,” says the first, “and I call them the way they are.”

“No!” exclaims the second umpire. “That’s arrogant. There’s balls and there’s strikes, and I call them the way I see it.”

“That’s no better,” says the third. “Why beat around the bush? Why not be realistic about what we do? There’s balls and there’s strikes and *they ain’t nothing till I call them.*”¹

Definition. As noted in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, relativism is not a new idea. The English word came into use in the latter 19th century, inherited from the German *relativismus* in the first half of that century. But the idea is much older. It is generally acknowledged that it originated with Protagoras of Abdera (c. 490-420 BC) who, according to Plato, thought that

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.... Each thing appears to me, so it is for me, and as it appears to you, so it is for you—you and I each being a man (from Plato’s *Theaetetus* 152a 2-4, 6-8).²

As Douglas Groothuis has explained, Protagoras understood that “we cannot break free of ourselves—our senses, our viewpoints, our values, even our ‘stuff.’” We all have unique perspectives and prefer some things over others (e.g., she likes blue; you like red). Our perceptions about reality do come from our experiences, background, where we’ve lived, etc. But contemporary relativism goes further, not measuring our perceptions against a larger reality, but claiming that *all* is a matter of perspective, that “there is no objective truth but only various views from various places at various times by various people” (see quotation C, p. 2).

C “Protagoras gives wings to an idea that many ponder: try our hardest (or not try at all), we cannot break free of ourselves—our senses, our viewpoints, our values, even our ‘stuff.’ The world is our judgment and nothing more. It does not await our judgment; it is our judgment. There is no objective truth but only various views from various places at various times by various people. Things are not our measure, but we are the measure of them. Hence, Protagoras is the spokesman for relativism, sometimes called nonrealism or perspectivism. It is not just that we have no (or limited) access to objective reality. That is skepticism. Reality is pretty much exhausted by our perceptions and thoughts. The real world is our world.” ~ Douglas Groothuis, *Philosophy in Seven Sentences* (IVP Academic, 2016), 15

D “The postmodern worldview operates within a community-based understanding of truth. It affirms that whatever we accept as truth and even the way we envision truth are dependent on the community in which we participate. Further, and far more radically, the postmodern worldview affirms that this relativity extends beyond our perceptions of truth to its essence: there is no absolute truth; rather, truth is relative to the community in which we participate. ~ Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Eerdmans, 1996), 8

E “Unless we are clear about what it means for something to be true, any religious or moral claim to truth—Christian or otherwise—will perplex more than enlighten.” ~ Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay* (InterVarsity Press, 2000), 23

In practice, this means truth must be self-defining (“my truth” / “your truth”) because, as Jim Leffel wrote, it “isn’t fixed by outside reality”; is not discovered, but invented; and is ever-changing, even “in crucial matters of spirituality, morality, and reality itself” (see quotation B, p. 1).

Effects. Allen Bloom referenced a real-world outcome of this idea 35 years ago in his 1987 book, *The Closing of the American Mind*. He noted that one thing college professors could be certain of was that “almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative. If this belief is put to the test, one can count on the students’ reaction: they will be uncomprehending” (see quotation A, p. 1).

A 2015 Barna survey lent credence to Bloom’s assertion, reporting that, “two-thirds of [all] American adults either believe moral truth is relative to circumstances (44%) or have not given it much thought (21%). About one-third, on the other hand, believes moral truth is absolute (35%).” The survey also indicated that younger respondents were more inclined to accept relativism than their older counterparts: 51% of millennials (b. 1984-98); 44% of Gen-xers (1965-83); 41% of Boomers (1946-64); 39% of Elders (pre-1946).³

Response. To begin, we should do more than pay lip service to the reality that our churches are not insulated from our culture’s pervasive view. The 2015 Barna survey also found that “practicing Christians (59%) are nearly four times more likely than adults with no faith (15%) to believe moral truth is absolute.” That’s encouraging, but we wonder: what do the other 41% of practicing Christians believe?

In the climate our churches currently inhabit, it will not suffice to periodically vocalize an affirmation that amounts to saying, “Truth is too objective and absolute!!” To equip today’s believers to give an answer, we should commit the time to define, explain, and elaborate what it means to say a thing is true (cf. Eph 4.12; 1 Pet 3.15) (see quotation E, p. 2).

www.davidanguish.com

Notes

¹ Os Guinness, *Time for Truth: Living in a World of Lies, Hype, & Spin* (Baker Books, 2000), 12.

² Maria Baghramian & J. Adam Carter, “Relativism,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2021/entries/relativism/>. Accessed March 1, 2022.

³ “The End of Absolutes: America’s New Moral Code, Research Releases in Culture & Media,” May 25, 2016, <https://www.barna.com/research/the-end-of-absolutes-americas-new-moral-code/>. © Barna Group, 2016. Age ranges for cohorts at <https://www.barna.com/glossary/>. Accessed May 30, 2022.

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