



The eye of the beholder

Description

Most liberal-minded people think they should tolerate the values, customs, and codes of others. People have different moral standards and we have to respect their views. The same applies to aesthetic values. Some regard Holman Hunt's "The light of the world" as beautiful. For others the painting is sugary and vulgar. And it's a commonplace that everyone has their equally valid opinion about particular buildings, and that every architect and designer ought to develop their own personal style. Tastes vary.

To assert as much is to embrace moral and aesthetic relativism. Allan Bloom (1930-1992) was conservative critic of liberal America. Writing in the 1980s he observed in his book *The Closing of the American Mind*

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.

Anti-intellectualism

In a university and professional context the disadvantage of relativism is that it diminishes reflection, scholarship, evidence and reason. Why settle on any conclusion, or even take the issues seriously, when even the experts disagree? as teachers still hear from time to time. It takes just a few more steps to conclude that nothing is of consequence, especially in fields such as architectural theory.



There are many dilemmas shared by both absolutism and relativism. A

relativist would probably draw the line somewhere. Few would grant that *everything* is a matter of opinion: that the earth moves around the sun, that murder is wrong, or that you need food to stay alive.

Many scholars have applied themselves to the issue of relativism, in part as a response to the conservative backlash to the supposed "relativism" of 1980s postmodernism. The philosopher Richard J Bernstein insists that relativism is a product of the "Cartesian anxiety": "the dread of madness and chaos where nothing is fixed, where we can neither touch bottom nor support ourselves on the surface. With a chilling clarity Descartes leads us with an apparent and ineluctable necessity to a grand and seductive Either/Or. *Either* there is some support for our being, a fixed foundation for our knowledge, *or* we cannot escape the forces of darkness that envelop us with madness, with intellectual and moral chaos" (p.18). Bernstein's excellent book *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* shows how to get out of this dichotomy.

Richard Rorty and Stanley Fish also argued against relativism. Here's a sample from Fish:

"No one can *be* a relativist, because no one can achieve the distance from his [sic] own beliefs and assumptions

which would result in their being no more authoritative *for him* than the beliefs and assumptions held by others, or, for that matter, the beliefs and assumptions he himself used to hold. **The fear that in a world of indifferently authorized norms and values the individual is without a basis for action is groundless** because no one is indifferent to the norms and values that enable his consciousness" (p.319).

Escape from relativism: ten steps

Here's a tentative guide for getting out of nihilistic relativism and joining the ranks of decisive 21st century thinkers.

1. From a **logical** point of view: It's paradoxical to state that *everything is relative*, as that's an absolute statement. That only some truths are relative doesn't get us out of the paradox, as that presumes there are some truths that are absolute. After all, absolutism only requires *one* fixed point.
2. **Pragmatic**: What's the practical value of the distinction between absolute and relative? Neither describes a fixed state of affairs. They are conveniences, or inconveniences, in language. Use

with caution. As Fish indicates we act anyway without the need for a fixed basis.

3. **Sociological:** We are creatures in society. Relativism is an individualistic concept. Society takes precedence, the arena where it contests and decides individuality, identity and truths. That doesn't make truths either absolute or relative.
4. **Hermeneutic:** Interpretation is neither absolute nor relative. Hermeneutical communities are not arbitrary. Everything is an interpretation, even scientific observations. That does not grant all interpretations equal weight or authority.
5. **Evidential:** Truths are contingent on evidence, claims to evidence, arguments and justifications. That doesn't mean truth is relative (or absolute).
6. **Ontological:** Absolutism and relativism are predicated on the idea that human beings are independent thinking subjects positioned in an object world. This is classic Cartesianism. Getting out of that dichotomy is a step towards escaping from relativism.
7. **Metaphorical:** Absolute, relative – they are metaphors. Absolute suggests solid ground. Relative implies a frame of reference that moves. Some metaphors are more helpful than others. Try different metaphors.
8. **Linguistic precision:** Opinion, tradition, truth, prejudice, style, specificity, indifference, the arbitrary, the subjective, the personal, the undecided, the contingent, the shared – these are not all the same. Relativism tends to group many terms together as if they all amount to the same thing. Greater precision in what we mean can help.
9. **Aporia:** Work with paradox, and against it, in the manner of a [Derridean](#) critique.
10. **Avoidance:** Simply avoid terms like absolute, relative, objective, subjective. Such avoidance leads to greater precision in thinking and writing in any case.

Relativism and its dilemmas are so ingrained that it takes time to get used to thinking otherwise.

Bibliography

- Barr, James. 1984. *Escaping from Fundamentalism*. London: SCM Press.
- Berger, Peter, and Thomas Luckmann. 1966. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. New York: Anchor.
- Bernstein, Richard J. 1983. *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Bloom, A. 1987. *The Closing of the American Mind*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.
- Fish, Stanley. 1980. *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Holloway, Richard. 1999. *Godless Morality: Keeping Religion out of Ethics*. Edinburgh: Canongate.
- Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. 1980. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press.
- Rorty, Richard. 1989. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Category

1. Architecture

Tags

1. Allan Bloom
2. critical theory
3. fundamentalism

4. objectivism
5. philosophy
6. relativism
7. Richard J Bernstein
8. Richard Rorty
9. Stanley Fish

Date Created

April 7, 2012

Author

rcoyne99

default watermark