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Home > Ultimate Questions in Philosophy of Religion > Chapter 6: Do Things Exist Only When

Perceived? > Realism Vs Relativism > Discovery Of The Fallacy Of Man And Animals' Different Feelings

And Visions

# Chapter 6: Do Things Exist Only When Perceived?

## Introduction

In the previous chapters we acknowledged that we are not sleepwalkers. We "think" and as such we must exist to be able to think. The next epistemological question is about our perception of the world beyond us. Our mind is the only means of knowing anything outside our mind i.e. 'the external world' including other people and 'their minds'. The question is how can we be sure of the accuracy of what our minds narrate? Let me explain myself with a few examples:

1) Have you ever wondered why you have to put on warm clothes and boots in winter while animals walk and fly naked in the snow and ice?! To us it is freezing cold, but to cats and birds it is not. Is there anything as 'cold' or 'hot' weather, or is that what we perceive?!





2) Look at these two pictures. The first one is a human view of the scene, and the second is a cat's view. Trees and lawns are yellowish if you are a cat, but green if you are a healthy human. The question is what is the real colour, or is there any real colour at all?!

There is a famous expression in English that 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder'. That means different people have different opinions about what or who is beautiful, as they have different opinions about different cuisines based upon their food tastes due to personal and cultural differences. A chicken curry may taste too spicy to eat by an Iranian, but not too spicy for an Indian!

This and many such differences have led some philosophers to believe that 'knowledge of anything outside one's own mind is unsure, as it might not exist outside the mind. The philosophical school of 'Solipsism' (literally 'self-alone') is the product of this method of thinking. Solipsism was grounds for 'relativism' which holds that 'truth and falsity, right and wrong, are products of different conventions and frameworks of assessment and hence are all equally and relatively correct/incorrect'.

Relativism is the most popular philosophical western doctrine in our time. Its defenders insist that it is the only ethical and epistemic stance worthy of the open-minded and the tolerant. Relativism has covered a wide spectrum from science to art, religion, politics and ethics. Perhaps one of the earliest references to solipsism and relativism is found in Hindu philosophy. We spoke about 'the parable of the elephant' in the fourth chapter according to the narration of Muslim mystics like Rumi. The following is the Buddhist narration of the story:

## The Parable Of The Blindmen And The Elephant

A number of disciples went to Buddha and said, "Sir, there are living here in Savatthi1 many wandering hermits and scholars who indulge in constant dispute, some saying that the world is infinite and eternal and others that it is finite and not eternal, some saying that the soul dies with the body and others say that it lives on forever, and so forth. What, Sir, would you say concerning them?"

Buddha answered, "Once upon a time there was a certain raja2 who called to his servant and said, 'Come, good fellow, go and gather together in one place six men of Savatthi who were born blind.., and show them an elephant.' 'Very good, sir, 'replied the servant', and he did as he was told. He said to the blind men assembled there, 'Here is an elephant.'

The first blind man put out his hand and touched the side of the elephant. "How smooth! An elephant is like a wall."

The second blind man put out his hand and touched the trunk of the elephant. "How round! An elephant is like a snake."

The third blind man put out his hand and touched the tusk of the elephant. "How sharp! An elephant is like a spear."

The fourth blind man put out his hand and touched the leg of the elephant. "How tall! An elephant is like a tree."

The fifth blind man reached out his hand and touched the ear of the elephant. "How wide! An elephant is like a fan."

The sixth blind man put out his hand and touched the tail of the elephant. "How thin! An elephant is like a rope."

An argument ensued, each blind man thinking his own perception of the elephant was correct. The raja, awakened by the commotion, called out from the balcony. "The elephant is big, "he said. "Each man touched only one part. You must put all part together to find out what an elephant is like."

# **Historical Background**

This ancient fable is the reflection of an ancient cognitive relativism by the ancient sophists, particularly Protagoras; a pre–Socratic Greek philosopher, who began his work '**Truth**' with the famous statement: "Man is the measure of all things–of the things that are, that they are, and of the things that are not, that they are not."https://www.iep.utm.edu/protagor/ [1]

The above idea was reviewed by skeptics such as Pyrrho who held that every object of human

knowledge involves uncertainty. Thus, he argued, it is impossible ever to arrive at the knowledge of truth. He sometimes suggested that the examples of an object which looks beautiful in the eyes of one, and ugly in the eyes of another (such as the tale of Layli and Majnoon), big in the eyes of one and small for another, tastes sweet for one person and bitter for another.

Pyrrhonists, therefore, suggest that we should never say "it is so", rather we should say "it seems so", or "it appears so to me".

**George Berkeley**; an eighteenth–century Irish philosopher and bishop of Cloyne, set a philosophical theory to answer skepticism, known as 'immaterialism' or 'mental monism' as it is referred to in our time.

This theory claims that everything around us is ultimately immaterial. In his most influential essay 'A *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*' in response to the question of "do things exist only when perceived?", he holds that the observer does not conjure external objects into existence, however, the true ideas of them are caused in the human mind directly by God. This system made him the founder of the modern school of idealism and eventually eliminated any possibility of knowledge of an external material world and thus he was regarded a foolish man by his contemporaries.

## Kant-Copernican Revolution: Mind Making Nature

Immanuel Kant is a German philosopher of the late eighteenth century considered one of the most influential philosophers in the history of western philosophy. Kant's answer to the question is complicated, but his conclusion in '*The Critique of Pure Reason*' (Translated by Werner Pluhar) is that we need to understand the proper function and domain of the various faculties that contribute to produce knowledge. We must recognize that we cannot know things as they are in themselves and that our knowledge is subject to the conditions of our experience.

The function of knowing according to Kant's theory is like that of the digestive system in which the food we consume breaks down into smaller and simple molecules that can be absorbed into the bloodstream. Digestion involves a mechanical phase such as teeth function, as well as a chemical phase– the function of enzymes – and it is impossible for the food to be absorbed into the bloodstream as it is before swallowing.

Similarly, we cannot know things as they are in themselves and our knowledge is subject to the conditions of our experience. At the same time, Copernicus recognized that the movement of the stars cannot be explained by making them revolve around the observer, it is the observer that must be revolving. Analogously, Kant argued that we must reformulate the way we think about our relationship to objects. It is the mind itself which gives objects at least some of their characteristics because they must conform to its structure and conceptual capacities.

With Kant's claim that the mind of a knower makes an active contribution to experience an object before

us, he formed his idea of what he calls 'transcendental idealism'. Kant holds that we cannot have knowledge of the realm beyond the empirical. That means, transcendental knowledge about God, souls and so on, is ideal, not real, for minds like ours.

## **Post Modernism**

The trend of skepticism from ancient time has renewed in the late twentieth century again by an application called 'Post Modernism or 'Deconstructionism'.

Post modernists such as Derrida, Heidegger and Feyerabend hold that *cultural biases have so seriously blinded us that we can never know the true nature of things.* Post–modernists hold this view for all areas of truth, including the rational, the religious and the moral. They argue that morality is not objective. Those who believe that cultural biases blind us are making a strong assertion about knowledge.

Post-modernists essentially believe that all claims to know objective truth are false because each of us is imprisoned in his own culture, incapable of seeing beyond the limits of his own biases. Therefore, truth is relative to culture and no objective standard exists.

Post modernism has penetrated into various faculties of knowledge from fine art to architecture, humanities, pure sciences and physics and even mathematics. For example, *Cubism* is a post–modernist approach in fine art in which a single viewpoint perspective is abandoned. The two drawings are examples of Cubist paintings. How many faces do you see?

## **Relativism In The View Of Muslim Thinkers**

Muslim theologians are also divided into two groups; *all opinions are right (Mosawebeh)*, *and only one is right (Mokhatte'*). The first group believed that whatever deduction a jurist is led to is correct and is real even though it contradicts the deduction of another jurist, as the number of truths vary according to the number of deductions. For instance, if a jurist deducts that something is permissible, it is really permissible. In the same token if another jurist deducts impermissibility of the same issue it is also really impermissible. Thus, there is no reality beyond individuals' deductions.

The latter by contrast, hold that there is only one true answer to a particular jurisprudential question and the rest are utterly false, though the holders of false opinions may be excused if their valid methodology led to their opinion.

## **Definition Of Truth**

Before investigating the accuracy of the idea of relativism, we ought to find the definition of 'truth' around which all the discussion rotates.

### 1) August Comnt

August Comnt has defined truth as: "A thought that all people at one time agree upon." According to this definition, the Ptolemaic system in which the earth was stationary was true, simply because it was nearly unanimously accepted by all people for centuries. Similarly, the Copernicus system is also true as it is accepted by all!

This relative definition for truth leads to a contradiction that an external phenomenon (galaxy system) is true in two opposite ways.

### 2) Pragmatism

Pragmatists like William James regard all theories as tentative hypotheses until they are practically found to be good and useful.

Suppose you are studying abroad, and it is the very stressful final examination season. At the same time unbeknown to you, your mother has passed away back home. You make a telephone call to your family for some emotional support for your studies.

To inform you of this sad news it may affect your exam results. According to the James definition of truth, the truth is that 'nothing has happened to your mother', for, this is a good and useful news that you need to hear!

This idea also leads to either relativism, as some of his critics asserted, or paves the way to pluralism which suggests that the world is far too complex for any philosophy to explain everything.

#### 3) Truth Is The Personal Experience Of A Knower Of The External World

According to this theory, the truth for the colourblind is what he sees and for the one with normal eyesight is again what he observes. Obviously, this is again a relative approach.

## 4) Truth Is Whatever Is According To The Reality As It Is

According to this theory, the belief that 'the Earth is revolving around the sun' and that 'two plus two equals four' are true statements, not because people agreed upon them, or they are useful, or we assume so, but because this knowledge is according to reality as it is. Thus, the Ptolemaic system was false even though it was regarded as true for many centuries.

# **Issues Of Concern**

There are four questions that need to be answered before discussing the validity of the idea of relativism:

- 1) Is there generally any truth, or are all human perceptions imaginary? The first two chapters dealt with this issue and we agreed against sophists.
- 2) What is the scale of distinguishing truth from falsehood?

After the axioms which need no scale except mental health and attention, logic is the main tool and the universal scale for distinguishing truth from falsehood.

3) Is it possible for one thing to be true and false under the same circumstances?

Logically, the answer is negative. For it would lead to the combination of contradiction, and its impossibility is self-evident as discussed earlier. I may however add a point that if it is correct that one thing can be true and false at the same time, this statement is also false!

The above statement is similar to the one where an Australian says: "All Aussies are liars"! This means that if he is telling the truth, it invalidates his statement. Such theorems are called in logic; *self-refuting:* 'theorems that if they are to be true, are false'

4) Is it possible for the 'truth' to develop?

Our answer to this question is also negative. If it is true that 'two plus two equals four', it cannot be truer.

- **Q.** We observe that scientists 'everyday' arrive at new discoveries about already existing facts by discovering new evidence. Does not this conclude that the truth is always developing? For instance, in the fable of the blind men and the elephant, each blind man had found part of the truth. Thus, if you add the experience of each blind man, the truth is developing.
- **A.** If 'two plus two equals four' there is no more or less truth about it. Once something is found true, it is only true.

The reality of more findings about a fact is, however, the gradual development of our knowledge, not that the truth is developing. In other words, every new piece of discovery about a fact is in fact another truth in itself- should it be according to reality as it is.

In the parable of the elephant, none of the discoveries are true on its own, for an elephant is not like a fan, spear or snake.

## **Realism Vs Relativism**

Based on the above explanation we can now unveil the fallacy of relativism.

According to relativism, as explained earlier, all that can be known of the external world is the ways in which 'they appear to us by experience', and since different people- due to different backgrounds- have various normal epistemic experiences, none is privileged over another, therefore they are all relatively true.

Imagine how cool it would be if a teacher would give the same mark to all answer sheets, as they are all relatively correct, and no student would be privileged over another!

We believe that one of the main problems of relativism is that it is **self-refuting**. If I assert that all judgements are only true relative to some non-privileged standpoints, the objection runs, I am implicitly claiming that this judgement-i.e. the thesis of relativism- is true in some non-relativistic sense. This means that the relativist must concede that from some points of view- which is as normal as relativism-relativism will appear false which concludes that relativism is both true and false!

As a matter of fact, relativism will not only lead to skepticism, but it will also end to sophism and finally to the pitfall of agnosticism.

Another problem of relativism is that all human endeavours in quest of truth and knowledge will be sacrificed before the thesis of relativism. For, whatever you perceive is 'truth', you need no further inquiry about the truth. This results in closing all scientific faculties and is the end of striving for knowledge! Be content with what you have perceived as whatever you realize is relatively true!

It is interesting to note that Plato in the dialogue of the *Theatetus*, argues against Protagoras' sophist view (as quoted earlier) that "if what he says is correct then how was Portagoras so wise that he should consider himself worthy to teach others and for huge fees?! And how are we so ignorant that we should go to school to him, if each one of us is the measure of his own wisdom?"https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-theaetetus/#RefTheKnoPer160186 [2]

## What Has Really Led The Philosophers To Relativism?

We propose one of the things which have really misled many philosophers to the pitfall of relativism is mixing up the two different human's perceptions of knowledge.

## **Constructional Perception V Real Perception**

According to the late Allamah Tabatabaei, a distinguished Muslim philosopher of our time, human knowledge is divided into two part: *Real perception* and *constructional perception* (*Edrakat E'tebari*).3

Real perception is our knowledge about an object that exists whether we perceive it or not. Like our knowledge about a tree, a building, or the sun in the sky.

Constructional perception is a type of knowledge that humans have constructed and agreed upon. Concepts such as tall or short, sweet or bitter, beautiful or ugly, ownership, language, money

transactions etc. are examples of constructional perceptions. These are relative concepts. For instance, our knowledge about the tree is a real knowledge, but whether it is tall or short is a relative concept.

Constructional perception is the function of two principles:

- 1) The principle of endeavour for life,
- 2) The principle of adaptation to environment.

Based on the above-named principles, humans living in the tropical regions look different to those in to a cold region. The body of the first group is adapted to certain food, weather, clothing etc. and are considered norms to them, whereas for the latter it is not normal. Thus, Indians and Mexicans for example, are accustomed to spicy foods as part of their stable diet from a very young age.

Similarly, they may hold different inclinations and feelings towards certain things in a way different from others for the same principles.

The examples of different perceptions suggested by the relativists are all in the realm of constructional perception.

#### **Characteristics Of Constructional Perception**

- 1) Constructional perception is contractual to resolve human needs.
- 2) Constructional perception has no logical value.
- 3) Constructional perception is the function of man's natural needs.
- 4) Constructional perception can be developed or changed.
- *5*) Constructional perception is relative and temporary.

#### **Subjective Existence And Objective Existence**

The second and perhaps the main problem of relativists lies under the lack of proper explanation for obtaining knowledge about the external world.

Khaje Nasir Toosi is perhaps the first Muslim philosopher who suggested that things have two types of existence; objective which is their real existence out of the mind of a knower, and subjective which is a mental existence of a known object in the mind of a knower.

When one perceives something, the real image of the known object prints in the mind of the knower. The printed one is the mental or subjective existence of the object, and the known object, is the objective existence of that object.

#### **Proofs for Subjective Existence**

- 1) Objects which have no existence or are impossible to exist can be imagined by the mind, such as 'a golden mountain' or 'two suns' or 'combination of contradiction'. Therefore, we perceive things which do not externally exist, resulting in another fact: 'There is another realm for objects i.e. the mind'.
- 2) We perceive 'humankind' which does not exist in the external world. What however exists are the examples and the samples of humans such as Tom, Dick and Harry.
- **3)** We perceive the adjectives of things without perceiving their objects. For instance, we perceive 'whiteness' without imagining a piece of white paper, snow or the like.

Therefore, it is not true that things exist only when perceived. For, firstly, there are things that exist whether we perceive them or not; objects out of our mind and perception. And secondly, there are things that we perceive, yet they have no objective existence such as geometrical perception of a circle, or two suns in the sky, etc.

#### **Discovery Of The Fallacy Of The Elephant**

The fabulist of the Indian fable has assumed the men were blind. A thesis which is based on mere assumption and a parable remains no more than an assumption and a tale. Remember an assumption is not necessarily true. You cannot prove or disprove a philosophical argument by mere parables. Or, we may well change the example and conclude differently.

As mentioned in the previous chapter Rumi, narrates the fable in his Mathnavi with a slight change. In his narration, the men were not blind, rather the room was dark. Thus, he does not conclude relativism. He solves the problem by suggesting that if they held a candle their disputes would vanish. The candle according to Rumi is intuitive knowledge.

## Discovery Of The Fallacy Of Man And Animals' Different Feelings And Visions

Science tells us that many mammals have extra fur and padding in their paws to help them from getting frostbite in the snow. Others which live in the cold areas are endowed with a built-in heating system like some Canadian geese.

As for different food tastes, food experts assert that spicy food lovers are not born with it. They have been eating them from a very young age and hence are desensitized to the heat.

Similarly, the difference in grasping different ranges of colours is related to special light catching cells called 'cones' that respond to colour. Most animals like dogs and cats have fewer cones than humans, and hence their colour vision is not as rich or intense as ours. On the other hand, there are animals like bees and butterflies that their colour vision is sharper than us. They can see ranges of colours that we

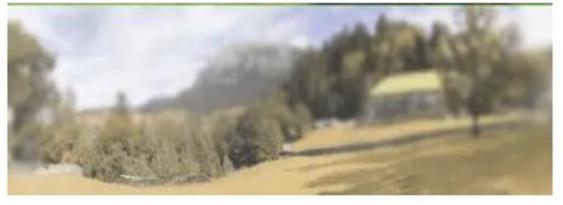
#### cannot.

Therefore, temperature does exist in the external world, as does colour although different species sense it differently according to their makeup.

- 1. An ancient city where Buddha had spent the last 20 years of his life.
- 2. An Indian king of prince.
- 3. Majmoo'e Rasael, 'A Discourse on Constructional Perception', p. 340

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