

“I Feel Like I’ve Heard All This Before,” A Reply to Stenmark and Lukes
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The question is almost inevitable in introductory classes in many humanities disciplines when an instructor begins to discuss the various ways in which we understand uncertainty about what is true and the nature of truth. A student, usually with a tinge of fear in her voice, asks, “But isn’t that relativism?”

Mikael Stenmark’s [article](#) is largely concerned with distinguishing different kinds of relativism, or at least different ways to understand it. Relativist accounts of knowledge and truth are usually raised as challenges to a social or political order that enforces a single account of the way the world is, as if it were the only valid account, the only account that is complete and true. The fear of those students who tremble at the prospect of a relativistic world is rooted in a basic human need for stability that we all, in a very basic sense, need. Those who are most troubled by relativist statements, or even statements that might give a naïve relativist some rope, are those who believe that knowledge must be grounded absolutely to be true. If knowledge in any way varies with physical, empirical, cultural, personal, or any other context, so this perspective says, then it was never knowledge, and was merely delusion. Unless knowledge has the stability and universality of “ $2+2=4$,” it is not true knowledge. So speaks the most intense fear of any relativism.

The most troubling form of relativism is moral relativism, and I will consider that context primarily here. The debates surrounding the relativism of scientific statements and facts are too bound up in complex controversies in philosophy of science for me to wade in with all that I have to say without writing a book. Moral relativism is also the closing topic of Steven Lukes’ [reply](#), and the topic about which he has the most constructive and hopeful things to say. When it comes to popular consciousness, science remains a discourse dominated by experts — even if those experts run the creationist museum. But the validity of morality and the correctness of moral truths is a topic on which all of us feel qualified to speak and contribute.

If Stenmark and Lukes agree on anything, it is the basic definition of relativism and the cause of the contemporary growth of relativistic perspectives. Relativism is the notion that what is true, or what constitutes true knowledge, is ultimately not a matter of objective fact rooted in the world beyond the partiality of people, but instead depends on your perspective. At least this is its strongest version, and Stenmark does an excellent job of breaking down this general thesis that truth is relative to a point of view. Stenmark’s Common Sense Appearance Thesis is that what appears obviously universally true is actually relative. His Expansionist Thesis says that more knowledge is relativistic than is commonly thought, quantifying the Common Sense Appearance Thesis. And his Constructivist Thesis locates the true ground for apparent universality in the general common values of each human community to which socialization habituates our thinking such that contraries intuitively seem silly or repugnant.

The reason for relativism's contemporary growth lies in Modernity, a term that has a hazy meaning, to say the least. But the definition they have given me to work with is excellent for this problem. Yet I also find that their definitions and concepts are not as complex as they could be. Consider that Karl Mannheim wrote in 1936's *Ideology and Utopia* that "Relativism is a product of the modern historical-sociological procedure which is based on the recognition that all historical thinking is bound up with the concrete position in the life of the thinker" (Mannheim 1954, 70). Compare Stenmark's Relativist Thesis, "What is true . . . is dependent upon (is relative to) person, group, community, context, society, culture and the like, and is not simply true in a universal way" (Stenmark 2014, 6). Almost 80 years ago, Mannheim had already uncovered the fundamental reason for this thought, that human knowledge and morality was produced through contingent historical development, that knowledge and life are inextricably bound.

Stenmark discusses Modernity as the era that pluralizes, such that "Relativism is a result of the cultural diversity or plurality — promoted by urbanization, global travel and the proliferation of communications technologies" (2). Quite literally, the popular belief in relativism is the result of communities becoming less homogeneous in their beliefs. If I can give my own perspective, Modernity is a social epoch that not only diversifies a community, but develops social norms for the peaceful co-existence of all these divergences. There has probably never been a human community that is homogeneous in every respect. However, one genuinely progressive human development is when we no longer respond to heterogeneity with pogroms, lynching, and forced conversions, but with dialogue, humility, and open minds. The relativism which most frightens that naïve young student is the equally naïve relativism that declares even the most absolutist beliefs to be valid, including those of people who would kill or maim her for her own beliefs. She is afraid of that the truth of relativism means that Fred Phelps was neither right nor wrong.

But Stenmark, Lukes, and I do not believe this. Stenmark and Lukes both describe ways to categorize knowledge according to its varying scope of relativity. If I may start with Lukes, he does not even attempt to call himself a relativist, though he admits that some truths (that Marko is tall but shorter than his apartment building, and my bank is to the left of the hot dog stand but to its right if I approach it from the north instead of the south) are relative to context and perspective. The debate over such simple truths began with a rhetorical flourish in Plato's *Theaetetus*, and because we still hear these troubling questions from students in introductory classes, it is clear that our society has not absorbed its lessons.

Even so, Lukes, in quoting David Wong, has at least moved forward from this quandary, insofar as he can distinguish facts that are relative to situations and perspectives from facts grounded in the nature of things. There is, as they say, a common storehouse of human goods: freedom from all forms of harm and violence, the satisfaction of needs,

care for physical health, intimacy, friendship, social status, intellectual stimulation. These are the inputs that keep human machinery running at optimal efficiency. But many moral systems can satisfy these needs.

So arguing over which particular moral and political principles are exclusively correct would not only be a useless conversation, but likely provoke verbal, social, and physical violence that would endanger these goods. We can, however, develop techniques to categorize, understand, and relate all our various moral principles abstractly and in their historical context, to see how best they can achieve those goods. This would literally be the science of morality, a project that Nietzsche first described.

Stenmark's article agrees with this. In fact, he does not even argue for any of the relativistic perspectives that he describes in his article. All he aims to do is systematize and precisely define a philosophically useful conception of relativism so that we avoid the troubling implications of the naïve popular concepts. Quite useful, but the most interesting part of Stenmark's article comes only in the very last paragraph, where he discusses briefly a framework to map the scope and degree of relativity inherent in various types of propositions. Of course, one paragraph is not enough to attempt even a general account of such categories and degrees of variation in the relativity of different truths. So if Stenmark wishes to follow up this inquiry (and I very much wish he does), he has a lot of work to do. And much of this work was done by Karl Mannheim.

Stenmark's last paragraph considers the relativity of facts like 'John is tall' compared to the objectivity of 'John is 190 cm.' But Mannheim devotes the second chapter of his book to developing a system of multiple categories to distinguish various kinds of historically-constituted truths (typically relative) from what he calls mathematical truths ($2+2=4$). It is a system that encompasses *Theaetetus*-style naïvely relative facts, facts about moral systems, facts about perception, and mathematical facts. If we include the early work of Bruno Latour and the anthropologists of scientific laboratories who followed him, we also have a huge set of categories for the variously relative facts that are produced in these contexts. There is a storehouse of knowledge to be found in the last 80 years of philosophically-minded sociological research. Instead of building categories for its most basic concepts, how about we push the question forward?

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