Relativism and Truth

by Stanislav Solomovich (March 2015)

The idea that truth is a relative concept, that what is true for one person at one time in one place may not necessarily be true for another person living in completely different circumstances, is often met with bewilderment and hostility. As a student of the philosophy of William James, whose theory of truth endows the concept with a certain element of relativism, I'd like to make the case that truth is, after all, not always the same for everyone.

The first thing to realize, if we are to avoid a common error, inherent in the very way we speak, is that truth is not the same thing as reality. If truth were reality, then there wouldn't be a need to have two words where one would do. What truth is, is a property of ideas and beliefs, which they possess to a greater or a lesser extent. In an imaginary universe that contained no life, but were just like ours in other respects, there couldn't be such a thing as truth. Truth is a vital function, a function of living, sentient beings. To be even more precise, truth belongs to a living *mind*. Now if you accept this, if you agree that truth is an attribute of ideas, it remains to be determined just what it is: that is to say, what exactly distinguishes an idea (or belief) that is true from one that isn't. Here I think William James made a brilliant discovery, enough to rank him with Descartes as an original thinker about some of the most fundamental questions. His is a simple formula that actually represents a very difficult and novel idea, and it has often been given short shrift because it is susceptible of simplistic and uncharitable interpretation. The formula is that an idea is true if it is *useful*, if it *works*, in the broadest possible sense. Another way to describe it, which amounts to the same thing, is that truth is that which it is *rational to believe*.

Before this can be rightly understood, we need a little bit of insight from James's *Psychology*, in particular on the function of conception (*i.e.*, the forming of concepts). Dispensing with both naïve common sense and the prevailing rationalist theories, which speak of such things as "knowledge for its own sake," James put forth the idea that each one of our concepts is "a teleological instrument," which the mind fashions and perfects in accordance with its own needs, which needs stem from the supreme living need of putting oneself in a tolerable relationship with life, or with what Ortega called one's "circumstance." Since James's time it has become a commonplace that experience of the world originally comes to us as disorder, as chaos, or, as James himself put it in describing the sensations of a new-born infant, "a blooming, buzzing confusion." It is the persistent labor of our minds to turn this chaos into order, to reconcile seeming contradictions, to identify

similars, and to acquire thereby some measure of security, of control over our own experiences.

Just now I have used the word “tolerable,” and I’ve chosen such an imprecise term deliberately: for different minds tolerate different amounts of insecurity or inconsistency. That no mind is perfectly consistent is perhaps easier to see in our own time, when scientism and technologism reign supreme, and the common educated view that men are mere animals, acting on their basest instincts, and that art and love and all the higher sentiments and motives are illusions, or evolutionary tricks — this common educated view couldn’t possibly be acted on in the course of our private lives. Thus men treat their beliefs as if they were tools, belonging to different toolboxes for use on different occasions, and never to be confused with one another. And that’s just as it should be — the only way it *can* be — because life is too complex and too varied to be captured by a limited number of mutually consistent ideas. This is why science will never become the perfect reflection of reality itself. Scientific concepts, including all the laws of motion and thermodynamics and abstract quantum fields, are but man-made instruments answering a limited purpose. And the same is true of all our other concepts.

But if ideas and beliefs are at bottom tools, what is it that sets apart an intellectually honest man from one who is not? It is simply that he knows that his concepts can never be a complete substitute for reality, and can fail him at any moment. He is therefore ever wary, ever testing, attempting to ascertain, the limits of his instruments, and ever adding new ones to his inventory, better suited to meet all the novel circumstances and novel problems that life presents him with. And, as Ortega taught us, it is a basic characteristic of life that it is always presenting each one of us with novel problems. The guiding ideal of the intellectually honest man, then, is that no part of life should escape his just comprehension. The opposite sort of man is easily recognizable, though the epithets used to describe such people have changed. These days it is common to see intellectual opponents labeled as “ideologues” or “extremists.” What is meant by such terms, when anything at all is meant by them, is that the persons so designated are intellectually dishonest: they blatantly disregard certain parts of life, certain experiences, in order to gain a premature enjoyment of an internally consistent belief-system. This is why intelligent debate between committed adherents of different political belief-systems is so improbable: each side ignores different portions of experience the more easily to account for the remainder — and the remainders may not have much overlap.

We can now seriously consider the definition of truth, of which ideas are true and which are not. The naÏve position is that an idea is true if it “corresponds with reality.” The problem

with this is its imprecision: for what exactly do we mean by “corresponds”? I have a certain idea of the office building where I work, comprising a certain image of its exterior (a rather vague image, as I have a weak visual imagination), the appearance of its hallways and various rooms where I have been, a certain expectation of what sorts of people I might encounter there, and where the building is situated in relation to other buildings and the streets of my town. How can I say whether or not my idea corresponds with reality? The answer is that only by *acting* on it, and seeing whether it guides me aright or disappoints me, can I ever know whether it’s true or not. So far what has been said should not be particularly surprising: for this is just how scientists are said to verify or refute a hypothesis: by deducing its consequences and conducting experiments to see whether those consequences hold in fact. It took the genius of William James to realize that the consequences, the guiding function, are *all that we mean* by truth.

That ideas have consequences is often mentioned as if it were a rare piece of wisdom. Actually, as we have seen, ideas have not just consequences but *purposes*: good ideas are simply those whose consequences are *commensurate* with their purposes. And since purposes may vary, the criterion of working is context-dependent. The common-sense notion that the table I’m writing on is a solid material object, though contradicted by modern physics (according to which it is “mostly empty space”), satisfies all my workaday needs. Just so with the familiar idea that the Sun rises in the east and sets in the west. In these instances, demanding a finer instrument when the customary one is both adequate to the purpose and easier to use, is not the mark of the lover of truth but a pedant.

If different circumstances may call for different concepts, so may different tastes and different “subjective” preferences. Before I proceed, a comment is in order on the word “subjective,” which I use here with great reluctance. The problem with it is that, for reasons rather too complex to get into at the moment, having to do with democracy and the popularization of science, the word has come to be taken almost synonymously with “false”; while its opposite, “objective,” is treated as a synonym for “true.” Suffice it to say that this is a great error. Subjective facts are still facts, subjective reality is still reality. And objective statements about reality may turn out to be false. How, then, may different preferences call for different concepts? Einstein once said that a theory should be as simple as possible, but no simpler; and scientists are taught that, of two scientific systems that account for all the facts equally well, they ought to choose the simpler. Again, in law, when the prosecution and the defense have equally plausible stories that account for all the undisputed evidence, one is supposed to side with the defense. And if it has always been considered intellectually acceptable to choose one theory over another on grounds other than

mere consistency with particular facts believed-in (for facts themselves are often but beliefs, and beliefs as such have factual existence and factual force), then why should I not believe in one thing over another when to do so would better conduce to a healthy spiritual state, or peace of mind, or whatever "subjective" purpose may happen to stir me at the moment? Provided, of course, that the belief *is* consistent with what I take to be true and with what I sense to be probable.

Indeed, as William James pointed out in many of his writings, there is a type of belief that tends to bring about its own justification after the fact, lifting itself by its bootstraps, as it were. It is common knowledge that when you undertake any uncertain enterprise, you are much more likely to succeed if you think you will in fact succeed. Many beliefs spur the mind and the body to function at higher levels of efficiency than they would in the absence of those beliefs – or in the presence of contrary or competing beliefs. A preponderating obsession, like that of Captain Ahab for his white whale, will tear through all the mental inhibitions that normally keep a person's behavior within more or less predictable limits, and incite him not only to do what he otherwise wouldn't do, but what he otherwise *couldn't* do. Such obsessions, though real, are an extreme example of what is a quite usual phenomenon. The belief in your own potential, your own powers, the fundamental rationality of your endeavors, certainly belongs to this category, warranting the vulgar advice that "you should believe in yourself," or "have self-confidence."

Another self-supporting kind of belief, one without which no communal life would be possible, is trust in others. In life there are times when decency takes effort, when in order to meet our obligations to other people we must either resist temptation or do something inherently difficult or unpleasant to us. In such times, how we act may depend on our general belief about other people's decency: if my view of things should be that backstabbing and petty meanness is the norm whenever there is no threat of detection or punishment, I cannot but take a lighter view of my own moral obligations. We can almost say that decency requires, or at least takes for its nourishment, a preexisting belief in decency. And the same principle operates in division of labor, where trust in others is the glue that binds each individual effort to the common purpose. The more each member of a team is convinced that every other member will do his part, the more he will take pains to perform his own. Life is full of instances where believing one thing over another helps determine actual outcomes, instances where believing certain things would be more *rational* than believing others, for reasons other than mere consistency with previous knowledge.

Although we have seen that the truth of an idea is relative to the context, the context need not have anything to do with outward circumstances or the needs of the moment. The most

important context shaping the truth or falsehood of an idea is the entire conceptual scheme which the idea enters as a part. One of the distinguishing marks of a cultivated and powerful intellect is that its every idea shines light on every other idea. The ideal state of knowledge is a consistent whole, and ideas that would be true when considered as parts of the whole may be falsified for lack of sufficient context. Consider the worldview implied by the physical sciences, if we neglect to circumscribe their ideas with other ideas not proper to themselves. The world that appears to us is one where the only reality is matter and motion, to which everything else is reducible; it's a world where there is neither color nor heat nor sound, because such *secondary* qualities are not *in themselves* motions of particles; this world of science, with neither light nor life, will be for us the true conception of the world, once the illusions of sense are done away with. The corrective to such a bleak view lies outside of science itself, in the history of science and the history of ideas, in knowledge about the limiting assumptions and limited purposes governing science. A man who has a sound basic understanding of the scientific ideas of his time, and who can also look at science from the perspective of history, understands reflexively which ideas may be accepted as true more or less literally, and for all time, and which others may undergo considerable revision, and which should be taken with a grain of salt. He will not be easily impressed by the sensational reports of scientific journalism or the exaggerated claims made on behalf of science by scientists and their propaganda. The perfect seeker after truth may be likened to a good cook: he knows the exact amount of salt each idea requires, that it may yield the maximum of truth; and the sum total of his knowledge makes the best possible use of his ingredients. But to realize this is to realize that the cognitive value of an idea, its *truth*, depends on other ideas accessible to the mind at the same time.

The foregoing helps explain why new ideas appear on the world stage not in isolation, but in quick succession with one another, in groups. Human beings account for their experiences by making use of overarching conceptual schemes. If there were nothing new under the Sun, as the Hebrew sage taught, then one system of concepts might be found which would explain every aspect of the universe, prescribe rules for action in every circumstance, and be permanent. But as a later Hebrew sage, Henri Bergson, teaches, life is the continuous creation of the new; and the experience of living is one of encountering ever present novelty. And so we have *crises*, times when, in the face of novel facts, our old assumptions have stopped working, and our systems, without which we could not find our way in the world, fall apart. Thus, greater or lesser crises occur all the time, with perhaps a predictable regularity, in individual lives, as well as in politics, philosophy, art, religion, science. Whenever an entire system is overturned, every previous belief seems false, is false, because it no longer *fits* in the new intellectual environment. The most important crisis in modern history, whose repercussions

decide the world to this day, may be identified with the birth of the Romantic movement. It began largely in reaction to the 18th-century system which regarded the universe as a machine, a machine that operated according to a fixed number of *natural laws* and could be understood by way of exact mathematical reasoning – in other words, the system of science more or less as we know it – had ceased to serve a vital function. For the first time, a large number of thoughtful men began to despair of finding a purpose, or what Ortega called orientation, in the substitution for nature of rigid, mechanistic conceptions and technical invention.

Truth is something that is *always* useful for life. Being a species of good, truth itself cannot lead to despair. Despair is a condition of acute crisis. This pertains to individuals and to whole nations and civilizations. Only a new truth can furnish the means to overcome despair. There have been many moments in history when nations on the brink of despair, nations whose existence had become intolerable to themselves, created new truths which energized them and breathed fresh life into them. Think of what the ideas of Rousseau and the Enlightenment did for the French masses, what Romantic liberalism and nationalism accomplished for Germany or Zionism for the Jews. In each case, a despised and downtrodden people changed their collective character and became a formidable force in the world.

Just as it happens to nations, it happens to individuals, and much more often – typically after a religious conversion. The men who are most respected and reckoned with in the world are those whose stock of truths leaves no vital need unfulfilled. Such men know no longing or perplexity, they simply act, and they tend to act readily and effectively. When they show obvious intellectual deficiencies, when their truths are insufficient by our own lights, and they seem satisfied only because of the smallness of their souls, then we dismiss these men as fanatics. But suppose a man who is generous, intelligent, and intellectually honest, who can command all the best knowledge of the race and who takes into account the whole stock, so far as possible, of the experience thereof, and yet suffers from no perplexities, or inconsistencies or unfulfilled spiritual longings. His life would be characterized by apparently superhuman energy and activity, and he would radiate charm and inspiration to everyone he comes in contact with. This is what Napoleon and Caesar were to their contemporaries. This is man in that happy state of complete rationality, when life does not partake of absurdity and the search for truth itself has become superfluous. Happiness, broadly speaking, is the ultimate object of all our thinking, and truth, as that which it is rational to believe, is simply the capacity of an idea to lead to happiness, in the long run, as James often put it, and on the whole.

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