True for You,

But Not for Me

Overcoming Objections to Christian Faith

Paul Copan

"Here are incisive and insightful responses to many of the most common misconceptions about Christianity and faith. I'm thankful for Paul Copan's uncanny ability to see through popular opinion and focus on answers that make sense."

—**Lee Strobel**, author of *The Case for Christ* and *The Case for the Real Jesus*

"In this engagingly written but intellectually rigorous book, philosopher Paul Copan tackles the challenges posed to Christian belief by the relativism and pluralism that are so widespread in American culture as to be almost assumed. Such assumptions often come to expression in mindlessly repeated one-liners. Copan's careful exploration of the rational foundations of such slogans will be of great practical help to anyone who finds himself confronted with these challenges to the Christian faith."

—**William Lane Craig**, Research Professor of Philosophy, Talbot School of Theology, author of *Reasonable Faith*

"When I first got a copy of the first edition of *True for You, But Not for Me,* I could not put it down. It was a thorough treatment of moral relativism and religious pluralism, and a great read at that. But this revised version is even better! It is significantly revised, expanded, and updated. Given the relativism ubiquitous in our culture, this book should be required reading in Christian high schools and colleges. And laypeople and parachurch ministries will profit greatly from its content."

—**J.P. Moreland**, Distinguished Professor of Philosophy, Talbot School of Theology, author of *The God Question*

"Paul Copan's *True for You, But Not for Me* is a must-read book for every believer. This fully updated and revised book is one of the best cultural apologetics books written in recent years. Copan equips Christians to know how to stand firm in the faith when non-believers throw out slogans like 'Who are you to judge others?' and 'That's just your opinion.' If you want to have a strong foundation of knowing how to take a stand for truth, read this book!"

—**Josh McDowell**, author of *More Than a Carpenter*

"Do you desire to be on the cutting edge of today's culture wars? In *True for You, But Not for Me,* philosopher Paul Copan treats us to a new edition

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of a much-needed text that addresses succinctly those bewitching topics that seem to most concern this present generation. Tackling relativism in its best-known forms, such as moral permissiveness and religious pluralism, Copan repeatedly points out many clearly recognizable false assumptions. Along the way he deals with numerous hot-button topics such as applying logic to life, intolerance, dogmatism, evangelism, arrogance, and the equality of all religions. Addressing more than two dozen popular slogans from current jargon, this handbook also provides helpful bullet points designed to summarize the most crucial discussions. This delightful volume moves quickly and is crucial reading for those who wish to address the most popular beliefs of an entire generation."

—**Gary R. Habermas,** Distinguished Research Professor, Liberty University and Theological Seminary

"Pilate once asked Jesus, 'What is truth?'. . . and here we are two thousand years later, educated, informed—and thoroughly confused about the very same question! In this book Paul Copan brings clear thinking to this critically important subject, and illustrates it in ways that any thoughtful reader can understand and embrace. So read this book; it's true for everybody!"

—**Mark Mittelberg**, author of *Choosing Your Faith . . . In a World of Spiritual Options,* co-author (with Lee Strobel) of *The Unexpected Adventure*

"*True for You, But Not for Me* is an outstanding book that every thinking Christian needs to read and carefully study. Copan's reasoning is informed by Scripture and his arguments are consistently clear, concise, cogent, and compelling. Yet his style of communicating evinces a winsome and gracious attitude toward those who have questions and objections regarding historic Christianity. This book will ably equip its reader to engage in effective apologetic evangelism to a culture saturated in relativistic and pluralistic thinking. Paul Copan is my kind of Christian thinker."

—**Kenneth Samples**, Senior Research Scholar for Reasons To Believe, author of *A World of Difference*

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"TRUE FOR YOU BUT NOT FOR ME"

Overcoming Objections to Christian Faith

PAUL COPAN

BETHANY HOUSE
MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

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To my dear, tenderhearted daughter Valerie,
A winsome witness
Whose life adorns the gospel of Christ.

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PAUL COPAN (PhD, Marquette University) is Professor and Pledger Family Chair of Philosophy and Ethics at Palm Beach Atlantic University. He is author of *When God Goes to Starbucks*; *Loving Wisdom: Christian Philosophy of Religion*; *"That's Just Your Interpretation"*; and *"How Do You Know You're Not Wrong?"* He has edited a number of other books, including *The Rationality of Theism*, *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Religion,* and *Philosophy of Religion: Classic and Contemporary Issues*. Paul makes his home with his wife and five children in Florida.

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CONTENTS*

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PART THREE: The Exclusivism of Religious Pluralism

PART FOUR: The Uniqueness of Jesus Christ: Myth or Reality?

PART FIVE: "No Other Name": The Question of the Unevangelized

*Questions for small-group discussion, Bible studies, and Sunday school classes/youth groups are available at www.paulcopan.com.

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

This second edition of *True for You . . .* is no superficial touch-up of the first. If you've read *True 1.0*, I want you to know that I've thoroughly updated this version, having gutted, revised, and expanded the original. Also, I've added a Further Reading section at the end of each chapter, included more than half a dozen new chapters, condensed some material, extensively trimmed endnotes, and moved the first edition's study guide for groups and individuals to an online version (see at *www.paulcopan.com*).

So this edition contains further concise responses to the increasingly common challenges of relativism and religious pluralism, as well as the assault on Christ's uniqueness. Some of the new chapters cover slogans like "It's all a matter of perspective," "Perception is reality," "That's just *your* opinion," "You can choose whichever religion you want," and "You can't legislate morality." I pray this book will continue to profit readers and be an instrument of God's Spirit to inform and encourage.

Overflowing thanks go to my splendid family, who have put up with an author who'd never realized how much labor goes into an honest-to-goodness second edition.

Paul Copan
West Palm Beach, Florida
Epiphany 2009

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INTRODUCTION

It's absolutely true that most American adults don't believe in absolute truth. They find it hard to believe that something can be universally true for all people. Different persons or cultures may disagree, but each belief is still true . . . well, *for them*! The same goes for morality: In 2002, the Barna Group found that 83 percent of American teenagers said moral truth depends on circumstances (only 6 percent said objective moral values exist); 75 percent of adults (ages 18–35) claimed to embrace moral relativism.[1]

That same year, the National Association of Scholars/Zogby International surveyed college students, of which 97 percent said their schools were preparing them to behave ethically in their future workplace. At first, this sounds fantastic—finally, a bit of good news, right? Keep reading: 73 percent of those said their professors taught that objective moral standards of right and wrong don't exist. Three out of four academicians believe that "what is right and wrong depends on differences in individual values and cultural diversity."[2] No wonder Harvard University's business school dropped its ethics course. It's hard to take business ethics seriously when the sponsoring institution endorses philosophical relativism.[3]

Americans have been stuck in the relativistic swamp for quite a while now. In 1955, when Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga attended graduate school at Yale University, his classmates looked like a zoo-full of diverse philosophical animals. But all this diversity—a happy elbow-rubbing of existentialists, pragmatists, positivists, and the like—had an

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unhappy side effect. Whenever the question "What is the *truth* about this matter?" came up, it was dismissed as naïve.[4]

Plantinga's experience illustrates a central point in Allan Bloom's (1930–1992) later landmark book *The Closing of the American Mind*: "There is one thing a professor can be absolutely sure of." Perhaps this is sounding familiar: "Almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative."[5] Relativism is a knowledge-denying claim: i.e., that truth-claims are really just opinions or culturally shaped perspectives. Facts, moral precepts, or values can be "true for you" and at the same time "not true for me." Relativists stoutly deny that objective universal truth exists.

At open forums on university campuses, in classrooms, in coffeehouse discussions, and during airplane conversations, I've heard tons of relativistic and "postmodern" slogans. So I've written in response to them, covering a wide range of catchphrases in my popular-level volumes (*When God Goes to Starbucks, "That's Just Your Interpretation," "How Do You Know You're Not Wrong?"*) and in this book.[6] In doing so, I have been seeking to respond to a desperate need. All too often, I find Christians scurrying for cover when fired upon with expressions like:

- "Christianity's true for you, but not for me."
- "That's just *your* perspective."
- "Who are *you* to judge that person?"
- "You can't legislate morality."
- "You can do whatever you want just as long as it doesn't hurt anybody."
- "Christianity is just one path among many to God."
- "Belief in Jesus as the only way to God is totally intolerant."

Many Christians struggle to respond to relativism, to express their faith boldly, and to live faithful lives in a morally discouraging culture. Toward that end and beyond, my books don't only address relativism and

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pluralism. I tackle questions on Old Testament ethics (e.g., slavery, the Canaanite question, "strange"/"harsh" levitical laws); science-and-God issues; the problem of evil; God as a psychological crutch; and theological issues (e.g., the Trinity, the Incarnation, predestination, the relationship between divine foreknowledge and human freedom, etc.).

In my own experience, a large proportion of people's pressing spiritual questions are connected to truth, goodness/morality, pluralism, Christ's saving uniqueness, and the question of the unevangelized. Christians, called to love God with all their *minds*, should respond graciously and intelligently to false, faulty aphorisms that often create barriers to hearing and responding to the gospel. Although many of these maxims have tended to be conversation-stoppers, they actually can open doors for further conversation. With patience, practice, prayer, and God's grace, believers can offer thoughtful responses to faith-challenges. These responses are not intended to be given as what cynics might call "sassy answers to stupid questions," but rather as encouragements to reopening conversation in an engaging, relational setting. After all, the holistic context of Christian friendship and community, a gospel-centered way of life, faithful prayer, and thoughtful answers are included in an appropriate believer's response.

For accessibility, I've organized the *True for You . . .* material as a sort of handbook; because each chapter is self-contained, you can dip into the book here and there. After presenting some brief background on each issue, I proceed slogan by slogan to unpack, step by step, each one's flawed assumptions and problem points, followed by bullet-point summaries and resources for further reading.

In brief, part 1 looks at the myth of relativism by answering basic questions about *truth*. Part 2 addresses *moral relativism*, arguing that right and wrong aren't culturally conditioned or mere matters of individual preference. Part 3 examines *religious pluralism*, the assertion that all paths lead to salvation or liberation. Part 4 analyzes *the unique claims and status of Jesus* in light of the various world religions. Part 5 considers

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the enduring question about the *unevangelized*: "What about those who have never heard of Jesus—what happens to them?"

The themes are closely interconnected. Each section paves the way for the next:

(1) Do truth and morality exist or are these matters of opinion/perspective?

(2) If there is truth, can we say that one particular religion offers saving truth? Are all faiths equally able to save or liberate us?

(3) If one faith can be savingly true in contrast to the others, do the unique claims of Jesus point us to the way of salvation?

(4) If Jesus is the *only* way of salvation, what about those who have never heard the gospel?

Furthermore, as the book progresses you'll notice an underlying theme: Much of relativism and pluralism is in fact *absolute* or *exclusive*. After all, the relativist believes absolutists are *wrong*; the religious pluralist believes the *exclusivist* views of Christians are *wrong*. Accordingly, how is it that their belief systems are popularly regarded as "tolerant" and "broad-minded," particularly over and against that of one who claims to have discovered the truth about God and the meaning of life?

In reality, the relativist's rejection of absolute truth can't escape a deep-seated belief in truth, and this is not surprising, for we're designed to be truth-seekers—and truth-finders—not truth-deniers. This turns out to be an excellent starting point for conversation as we endeavor to point others toward the One who claims to be *the* truth. For starters, let me offer just a few thoughts on seeking to reach a truth-denying generation.

Relativism Isn't Rooted in Logic or Intellectual Consistency

People tend to be relativists for personal reasons: They want to be in charge of their own lives. Philosopher John Searle notes the "much

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deeper reason" for relativism's appeal: "it satisfies a basic urge to power. It just seems too revolting, somehow, that we should have to be at the mercy of the 'real world.' "[7]

With this in mind, to relativists we should emphasize that God's commands aren't given to oppress but to help us live the way we're designed to live, for our own good (Deuteronomy 4:40; 6:24; 10:13). In addition, perhaps we can best challenge relativists not by putting down "bad things" or "sinful lifestyles" but instead, by emphasizing the effects of idolatry—making good things (like relationships, material resources, sex) into ultimate things, which leads to obsession, resentment, envy, and worry. In contrast, Christ not only forgives; he also sets us free.[8]

We Can Reach Relativists More Effectively by Cultivating Relationships and Living Grace-Filled Lives of Integrity and Authenticity

David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons surveyed those outside the church regarding their perceptions of Christians, and the picture, as shown in their book *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity . . . and Why It Matters* isn't pretty. Christians are perceived as hypocritical and judgmental, too focused on getting converts, rather hateful toward homosexuals, sheltered and simplistic, overly political, and too negative.[9] If we want to reach people, they need to know that we like them and that God is interested in them. Believers frequently have a reputation of holier-than-thou-ness rather than one of winsomeness and grace. Hopefully, authentic lives and the building of genuine relationships will help to reveal the beauty of a Christ-centered, well-lived life (John 13:35) even as it exposes the hollowness of living against God rather than for him.

So be quick to listen and slow to speak (James 1:19); pay attention to the relativist's story and to the reasons for her beliefs. We should be real, acknowledging our limitations and finitude. Let's beware of arrogance over being "saved," as if God's love is reserved for an exclusive club. We

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must remember that wretches like you and me have only been saved by his amazing grace.

Evangelism Is a Process, not an Event

Every person is a work in progress. We are on a pilgrimage, and none of us has arrived. Rather than presenting a one-size-fits-all message, we should keep in mind that individuals are at different stages in their awareness of truth, God, and the gospel. Some may be suspicious of any truth-claims, others may believe in a generic "something out there" that started it all, and still others may see that the Christian faith offers answers to life's deepest questions. Through authentic relationships that allow for lots of time and breathing room, God can use our lives to help people come a step or two closer to him.

An atheist or a relativist has a deeply engrained worldview. Moving from atheism to agnosticism is progress—an indication of God's grace at work! Go slowly and prayerfully, and then let the discussion begin.

Consider a Three-Tiered Framework for Sharing Your Faith: Truth-God-Jesus

I've found this model to be a simple and effective framework for pre-evangelism with unbelievers.

The first level has to do with *establishing the inescapability and undeniability of truth and, thus, the possibility of knowledge.* Without belief in objective truth, the gospel message will fall on deaf ears. Knowing that relativism is often a smoke screen, we might gently challenge the relativist's attitude: "Why the opposition to truth? Are you open to truth if it *does* exist?" If there is some openness, we can start at this basic level to show that truth is inescapable: The very denial of its existence ("there is no universal truth") is an affirmation of its reality ("that denial itself is a universal truth").

Having established that objective truth does exist, we can discuss the second level: *the fundamental alternative worldviews*. These tend to cluster around or resemble theism ("there is a God"), naturalism/atheism ("no

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God/everything derives from nature"), and pantheism ("all is God") or its Eastern variant monism ("there is only one reality [e.g., the impersonal pure consciousness, Brahman]; all else is illusory").

I discuss these alternatives at length in other books, proposing that theism offers us rich resources for responding to important questions: Why is there something rather than nothing at all? How did the universe begin to exist a finite time ago and come to be so delicately balanced? Where did our dignity, moral duties, and beauty originate? How could consciousness emerge from non-conscious matter?

A good, intelligent, powerful, personal Creator who made humans in his image offers a ready answer. Most Eastern religions (e.g., Buddhism, Taoism, Jainism, Shintoism, versions of Hinduism) reject this answer; thus, many arguments against naturalism likewise apply to these non-theistic systems.

As for the third level, beyond God's existence we consider which theistic alternative is most plausible: *Judaism, Islam,* or *Christianity*? This is where apologetics comes in: defending the reliability of the Gospels, weighing the evidence for the resurrection, examining the uniqueness of Jesus, and so forth. At this stage, a person is more likely to understand the gospel's presuppositions. For example, if a personal God exists, then miracles are possible; this furnishes the relevant context for the supernatural.

In Truth-God-Jesus, we work from truth to worldviews to theistic alternatives:

(1) *Truth* level: Truth is inescapable.

(2) *Worldview* level: Theism offers clearer answers than naturalism or pantheism/monism.

(3) *Theistic* level: Christianity is more plausible than Judaism or Islam.

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PART ONE

ABSOLUTELY RELATIVE

Imagine a multi-car collision at a busy intersection near your home. Our family experienced three auto accidents within eighteen months—none our fault. One high-impact crash while we lived in Wisconsin almost wiped us all out. The other driver, trying to avoid a dog, swerved into oncoming traffic, slammed into us, knocking us down a thirty-foot ravine. Despite her immediate apology, afterwards she sought—for a brief time—to take us to court!

In post-accident scenarios, debates may break out between involved parties, each claiming right of way and denying fault. What's undeniable, though, is that an accident actually happened, and often the subsequent descriptions are accurate—meaning they match up with reality. That's what truth is—a belief, description, or story that matches the way things truly are. Compare it to a socket wrench (belief, statement, story) that fits onto or corresponds to a bolt (reality); the connecting relationship between them is truth.

"Brown cows give chocolate milk" is a false statement. Why? It doesn't match up to reality. Keep in mind that this applies to all reality, not just the physical world. "God exists" or "angels exist" is true, since

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these statements match up with reality. (See the hefty endnote for a bit more elaboration.)[1]

Like it or not, we keep on bumping up against reality—traffic jams, financial hardships, debilitating sickness, the certainty of death. What's more, we take truth for granted. We embrace certain views—presumably because we think they're true—and we reject others. We may dispute another's perspective. We gather evidence. We weigh credibility and authenticity. We make difficult judgments. Herein we are affirming that we have a belief in truth. That there are differing perspectives (think of the car-accident scenario) doesn't necessarily doom us to never knowing what really happened.

Despite our biases and limitations, objectivity is possible. That is, lots of things are true, regardless of our perspective:

Something can be true even if no one knows it.

Something can be true even if no one admits it.

Something can be true even if no one agrees what it is.

Something can be true even if no one follows it.

Something can be true even if no one but God grasps it fully.

Keep in mind that ours is a God of hope. With societal, moral decline often come the greatest opportunities for the gospel. Let's not adopt a potentially idolatrous "preserve Christian America" mindset or a "get back to our founding fathers" mantra; these mentalities often are motivated by fear and a desire to preserve fading cultural power. Rather, let's think in terms of living first and foremost as citizens of God's kingdom, as salt and light in a spiritually flavorless and darkened culture.

Relativism in Perspective

The culture war between truth and relativism isn't all that new. The belief that universal objective truth does not exist (alethic skepticism), or cannot be known (epistemological skepticism), is no latecomer to Western civilization. The sophist Protagoras (born c. 500 BC) maintained that the *human community* is the standard of truth. Plato cited him as

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saying, "Man is the measure of all things." As such, any given thing "is to me as it appears to me, and is to you such as it appears to you." That has a surprisingly contemporary sound.[2]

Although relativism has intermittently appeared and reappeared throughout history, its dominance of a culture *is* new.[3] As Christians, we're likely most aware of how relativistic opinions about truth damage society's attitude toward religion and its truth-claims. Today faith increasingly is pushed aside by secularizing influences such as the university, the media, and politics. Rather than having a significant voice in public life, religion has been relegated to the private and the personal. The Christian faith isn't public truth to investigate but simply one's individual perspective. Beyond the religious, relativism implies that the pursuit of *any* truth is an exercise in futility.[4]

Truth and Knowledge

Knowledge involves (1) *belief* that is (2) *true* and (3) has *warrant* for being believed. For example, if your belief is false (e.g., "I believe the earth is flat"), it's not knowledge; we would think it ludicrous to say, "I *know* the earth is flat." Nor is it knowledge if a true belief isn't warranted. For instance, you don't *know* something if your belief, though true, is accidental or fluky.

At any rate, relativism is a knowledge-denying enterprise. If you say you *know* something, you're not really a relativist. When speaking at universities (where, presumably, people go to gain knowledge), I've been told that knowledge is unattainable (though one wonders how people *know* such things). "Objective relativism" tells us no truth is universally, objectively true or false. One person's "truth"—which amounts to opinion—can conflict with another's "truth" and still be valid.

Religion

Religious relativism—not the *pluralism* we'll later discuss—maintains that one religion can be true for one person or culture while untrue for another. Accordingly, religious beliefs are simply an accident of birth:

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If a person grows up in America, chances are good she'll become a Christian; if in India, then a Hindu; if in Saudi Arabia, then a Muslim. Who's to say one person's perspective on God or salvation is preferable to another's? Since religious belief is the product of historical happenstance, the argument goes, no single religious belief can be universally or objectively true.

Morality

Moral relativism rejects any abiding moral values for all, maintaining that there is no objective ethical right and wrong and that morality is an individual or cultural matter, none more binding than another. Philosopher of science Michael Ruse refers to the once widespread Indian practice of *suttee* (or *sati*), the burning of a widow on her husband's funeral pyre: "Obviously, such a practice is totally alien to Western customs and morality. In fact, we think that widow sacrifice is totally immoral."[5] While that may be what Westerners think, though, he says it's wrong to judge *suttee* as objectively bad.[6]

Elsewhere Ruse says we merely think morality is objective; it's really just a powerful illusion. "If you think about it, you will see that the very essence of an ethical claim like 'Love little children' is that whatever its truth status may be, we think it binding upon us *because we think it has an objective status*." Morality is a corporate illusion that has been "fobbed off on us by our genes to get us to cooperate."[7] Although we may not like certain practices or actions (e.g., female genital mutilation, rape, slavery, racism), moral relativism informs us that no universal moral standards exist by which we can praise some and condemn others.

Beauty

Aesthetic relativism assumes that one person's trash might be another person's art—the standards for art each one holds are equally valid. Postmodern art tends to include abandonment of objective truth, rejection of the created order, and devaluing of human beings; postmodern artists often thrive on offending the very audiences whose tax dollars support

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their work. Such "art" can be destructive, degrading, and senseless. The audience's emotional reaction becomes part of a "work of art"—whether this is photos of the artists' own bowel movement (Gilbert and George), a crucifix immersed in urine (Andres Serrano), or a "performance artist" having himself crucified to the roof of a Volkswagen Beetle (Chris Burden).[8]

As Jacques Barzun (b. 1907) argued in *From Dawn to Decadence*, human creative energies have turned from the fixed realities of the created and moral order, first to frivolity and then to self-destruction.[9] Postmodern artists shun such standards as technical excellence, creativity, and the capturing of universal truths and enduring human experience. But beauty *isn't* merely personal. Surely J. S. Bach's *Goldberg Variations* are aesthetically superior to the "chance music" of John Cage. And if a person can't see the supreme beauty of a tropical sunset, of snowcapped mountains, of rushing waterfalls, or of grand canyons over an "artist's" pile of tennis shoes, he needs aesthetic and spiritual therapy.

Relativism's Implications

It's one thing to discuss a definition and offer descriptions of relativism. We must proceed beyond this, though. If relativism is an assault on truth, goodness, and beauty, what are the cultural implications?

One—at least on the religious front—is that *persuasion is prohibited*. On many university campuses, evangelism (the taboo word is *proselytizing*) is viewed as "cramming your religion down someone's throat." Obviously, trying to persuade—to tell someone about the good news of Jesus—gets some people upset. Evangelism implies that you believe your news is *true* and, what's more, that you believe your hearers should turn from (change) their present way of life.

A second implication is this: *To be exclusivistic is to be arrogant*. Given the variation of religious beliefs in the world, claiming to know something others don't *must* be wrongheaded and erroneous. Moreover, many people convolute exclusive claims—especially about Christ's saving

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uniqueness—with colonialism and imperialism, seeing them as nothing more than Western bigotry and narrow-mindedness being imposed on unknowing or unwilling hearers.

To be sure, in some cases non-Christians have good reason to be critical of us. We invite criticism when we shout that Christianity alone is true—and equally loudly proclaim that other views contain no truth at all. All truth is God's truth, and moral truths, for instance, can be found outside the Bible, just as truths from mathematics, history, and science can be. Christians can discerningly affirm and learn from non-Christians when they rightly appropriate God's general revelation (see part 5)—even if we disagree with their rejection of his supreme authority and disbelief in his saving grace.

A third implication is that *tolerance* is the cardinal virtue. Implying that someone is wrong sounds terribly intolerant when tolerance popularly (but mistakenly) is defined as "being open to or accepting of all ideas." What homosexual activists call *tolerance*, for example, is unconditional acceptance of their lifestyle as legitimate and right. As we'll see later, this disposition of open-mindedness turns out to be inconsistent: Such activists, for instance, don't consider the one holding the traditional view of marriage to be legitimate and right. They are open and accepting (what they call *tolerant*) toward those who *agree* with their argument. In the words of Allan Bloom,

> Openness used to be the virtue that permitted us to seek the good by using reason. It now means accepting everything and denying reason's power.[10]

A final implication of relativism perhaps best explains how disputes over truth can begin to feel like a war: *Absent the possibility of truth, power rules the day*. That is, once truth is whatever we say it is, asserting power over others is a natural next step. The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) wrote that the obliteration of God—and therefore the objective standard for truth and morality—would usher in an age of

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nihilism, the rejection of all objective meaning and value.[11] All that is left is what's known as the will to power, by which only the fittest survive. Nietzsche said truth is a kind of illusory rule-following, the purpose of which has long been forgotten; it's a "mobile army of metaphors" that become "enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically" by people.[12] Truth is manipulated by those in charge.

The pragmatist Richard Rorty (1931–2007) was known for having said that *truth is what your peers let you get away with saying*.[13] Herein, "truth" is what power is able to reinforce. In fact, good old-fashioned commonsense truth is utterly "un-Darwinian,"[14] for the Darwinian pursuit is survival, which includes pushing people out of the way, if necessary, to get what we want. Many (though not all) special interest groups operate this way: Without objective standards of truth and goodness, they can push and push to grab power and strengthen their influence. In this way societal structures and political parties can become little more than weapons.

Though more embedded today, power-playing has been around for ages. In another of Plato's dialogues, the *Gorgias*, Callicles asserts that justice is only the rule of the powerful over the state's citizens.[15] As such, whatever is best for the rulers is naturally "just." Morality is arbitrarily reduced to power. *Might makes right*.

This is the environment into which we speak—power-focused and hostile to truth-claims (especially those that flow from faith). Though relativism claims ownership of "tolerance," our critique will reveal just how incoherent and self-contradictory a philosophy it is. Ironically, it's more dogmatic than the Christian faith it criticizes—a faith that actually serves as the basis for true tolerance, respect, and compassion.[16]

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1

"THAT'S TRUE FOR YOU, BUT NOT FOR ME."

On its surface, relativism sounds relaxed and easygoing. Only when we think through its implications and apply them rigorously to life do we see the pitfalls of being so "accommodating." As Alister McGrath (b. 1953) writes,

> It is utterly wrongheaded to say that something is "true for you but not for me." For example, what if I think fascism is true and you think liberal democracy is equally true? Should the fascist's repression be tolerated by the believer in liberal democracy? If not, on what grounds? Why not permit Stalinism or Satanism or Nazism? Without criteria to determine truth, this relativism fails miserably.[1]

Most of us don't want to live in that world. And relativism isn't just offensive emotionally. It also doesn't hang together logically; as a worldview it can't be sustained. To get along, one has to be a *selective* relativist.

Self-Contradiction

In Titus 1:12, Paul gives some advice to his "son in the faith," who is ministering to the people of Crete. Titus is in the thick of hostile ideas; in describing the antagonists, Paul quotes the *Cretan* philosopher-seer Epimenides (sixth century BC):

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> Even one of their own prophets has said, "Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons."

You catch the irony: If all Cretans are liars, can Epimenides himself really be trusted?

There's a familial resemblance between Epimenides' statement and relativism. Epimenides purports to speak the truth about the inhabitants of Crete, yet some will charge him with contradiction: He's telling the truth about himself by calling himself a liar. (It's like the command "Don't believe a word I say.") Likewise, relativism claims to speak universal truth about at least *one* thing—namely, that someone's "truth" can be someone else's falsehood—and thus contradicts itself by claiming nothing is true or false. Why believe the relativist if he has no truth to utter?

Relativist claims are like saying, "I can't speak a word of English" or "All generalizations are false." Our most basic reply to the relativist is that his statements are self-contradictory. They're self-undermining; they self-destruct. The relativist falsifies his own system by such self-referential statements as "Everyone's beliefs are true or false only relative to himself."[2] If claims are only true for the speaker, then his claims are only true for himself, and it's difficult to see why they should matter to the rest of us.

To be consistent, the relativist must say, "Nothing is objectively true—including my own position. So you're free to accept my view or reject it." Normally, when the relativist says, "Everything is relative," he expects his hearers to believe his statement and embrace his view of reality. And he expects his statement to pertain to all statements except his own.

Self-Exception

Of course, the relativist doesn't likely believe his relativistic position is true simply for himself. Thus, he commits a second error—*the self-excepting fallacy*—by claiming a statement holds true only for everyone else.[3] Oddly, the relativist is unwilling to *relativize* his own relativism,

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just as he is unwilling to *generalize* his relativism (since he makes himself an exception).

It's fair to point out to him that statements like "That's true for you, but not for me" are both self-contradictory (which means they aren't meaningful; they don't make sense) and guilty of the self-excepting fallacy. However, while doing so often has shut the door on further conversation, it need not! Again, relationships built on respect are important. If a true-for-you-er is willing to listen, an appropriate response might be: "You assume the following statement is universally true: 'Something can be true for one person and not for another.' But you believe it applies to everyone's beliefs except yours. If your statement is only true for you, then I see no reason to think it applies to me."

Relativism fails on a crucial test of internal consistency. "Something can be true for one person but false for another" fails to meet its own criterion for truth. Think about it: While a worldview can be internally consistent or logical yet still be false, no worldview can be true if it contradicts itself.

A relativist might attempt to avoid the charge of self-contradiction by conceding, "Everything is relative *except this statement* (which is absolute)." Once he admits this, though, he's given away the store. We could ask, "Why just this one exception? Why can't there be two or three more such sweeping truths?" Possibly he'll reply, "Because humans tend to make mistakes, and there are too many differences to know which are right and which are wrong. So this conclusion is safe."

How is our "sort-of relativist" inconsistent?

- He arbitrarily sets down this one absolute—and absolutely no more.
- He *knows* humans always make mistakes (excluding himself, apparently).
- If he is able to detect many mistakes and errors, he presumably knows many true things in order to achieve this detection.

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- He believes that laws of logic are universally binding—which is why he wants to avoid contradiction.
- He assumes his mind is in working order, enabling him to detect errors.

And the list of presumed truths goes on.

The relativist idea that "it's just a paradox you have to live with" (as opposed to a contradiction) is interesting; even the relativist is concerned about avoiding contradiction. He believes logical laws are absolute, and so he wants to avoid being guilty of sloppy thinking. But isn't "his logic" just "true for him"?

Here's the difference between paradox and contradiction. A *paradox* involves tensions or categories not easily unified or resolved. A *contradiction* renders itself incoherent (e.g., the truth that there is no truth). Such evasions and distortions don't form a rationally serious argument.

However, keep in mind that self-ascribed relativists aren't interested in internal inconsistencies, which they may simply shrug off. Hopefully, through relationships and modeling authentically lived lives, we can connect with them on deeper levels, both by shining light on truth and by contrasting it with falsehood. I know plenty of people who have abandoned relativism because it's a half-baked existence that flies in the face of how we were designed to live—namely, as truth-pursuers and goodness-seekers.

Relativism . . . or Rights?

In addition, the relativist might benefit from being informed, graciously, that his paradigm is only a part-time occupation, for, again, one has to be a selective relativist to make it in this world. He's counting on *his* belongings not being stolen, *his* Jaguar not having a sledgehammer taken to it. Sure, "it's all relative" when it comes to chastity or income-tax reporting. But what if someone violates his *rights*?

We know the answer, and an angry relativist is a strange phenomenon. Why get uptight if another person is intolerant? After all, maybe

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intolerance is "true for *him*." Besides, if relativism is correct, "rights" don't exist. A relativist living under the Taliban's tyranny won't be saying, "Your rules are true for you, but not for me." He'll know his rights are being violated. Oppressors have a knack for de-relativizing relativists.

Consider an additional realm of selectivity—fixed facts that don't really affect one's life. On the one hand, relativists don't question the truth of Paris's being in France, of yesterday's baseball scores, or of the law of gravity's relevance. On the other hand, in areas that personally matter, depending on what's true about them—God's existence, a moral standard, and so on—these are where people decide facts are relative.

Nevertheless, whether or not we admit it, our lives rely heavily on the convictions that truth exists and that truth matters. All of us implicitly trust that certain things *are*.[4]

Summary

- If my belief is only true for *me*, why isn't your belief only true for *you*? Aren't you saying you want me to believe the same thing you do?
- If you say no belief is true for everyone, you're making a universal claim that relativism is true and absolutism is false.
- You can't in the same breath say, "Nothing is universally true" *and* "My view is universally true." Relativism falsifies itself.
- The relativist applies his view to everyone but himself ("self-excepting fallacy").
- "Relativists" who say there's just one absolute—that everything *else* is relative—must address a host of inconsistencies (e.g., arbitrariness, knowing that people make errors, confidence in the universally true laws of logic).
- Relativists who call their view *paradoxical* presuppose the absoluteness of logic. They don't want to be guilty of contradiction.

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- Relativists are selective, picking and choosing when "it's all relative" and when it's time to "stand up for rights."
- Relativists don't question many certain truths—usually just God/morality issues.
- Living life depends on belief in truth.

Further Reading

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