

THEORIES THAT REFUTE THEMSELVES

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Sometimes a non-philosopher who has gained the impression that it is difficult to get agreement in philosophy will, on learning that I am a philosopher, tease me with the idea that philosophy can never definitely establish anything. I then like to point out to my would-be tormentor that he has just unwittingly provided me with all the material I need to refute his own thesis. For the idea that it is impossible definitely to establish any philosophical thesis is itself a philosophical thesis (and, as it seems to me, one whose establishment would require also the settling of at least some substantive connected philosophical matters, concerning truth or knowledge or otherwise concerning our relation to the world). Therefore we can definitely establish that if he ever definitely established his thesis, that it is impossible definitely to establish any philosophical thesis, he would have refuted that thesis in establishing it. Thus we can definitely establish that one can never definitely establish that one can never definitely establish anything in philosophy. So we can definitely establish something.

In fact, we can definitely establish many similar things. For there are many philosophical theses, some of them with great undeserved influence, that when applied to themselves will instantly refute themselves and leave the denials of them definitely established.

Consider some advice that was popular in the 1960s, that one *shouldn't* make value judgments. Making value judgments was in some way *bad*. Well, if it was bad to make value judgments, then it must also have been bad to make the value judgment that one shouldn't make value judgments.

Let me try to be more specific about both my target and my criticism. My only interest here is in views of a type that would reject views that take themselves to originate from a neutral platform of objective validity. At the heart of the views that interest me is an insistence that no such objective platform could exist. And the fatal problem for any such view is that the view itself can have no sense unless it is conceived of as itself solidly based on the very sort of platform it would dissolve away. These views of such rejecters of views are therefore incoherent. And so our claim against them, that they refute themselves, is not just a clever trick, a turning of their own *words* against them. Our claim goes to the incoherent basis of these stances.

The self-refuting claim in the realm of values that one shouldn't make value judgments perhaps corresponds to a thesis in the realm of truth that nothing is true. If that were true, then it could not be true.

Next consider the thesis that there are no absolute principles. Is the principle that there are no absolute principles, that nothing is true without exception, itself true without exception? Well, if it is *not* true without exception, then of course it is false, because then there must indeed be some absolute principle to be the exception. But if it *were* true without exception, then too it would be false, because then it would itself be an absolute principle and it would therefore be false that there were no absolute principles, as well as false that it actually *was* true without exception.

There is an echo of the claim against absolute principles in a strangely popular idea that there is not possible any quality or situation with which there cannot be a contrast. But must there not then be a possible contrast with that? If all things are supposed to be, let us call it, "contrastable", then we must also suppose that there is possible a contrast with being contrastable, which of course would refute the notion that all things must be contrastable.

There is a self-refuting view, momentarily considered and rejected (on grounds other than these) by Descartes, that the only thing about which we can be certain is that nothing can be certain. If the obviously self-destructive claim of being *certain* that nothing can be certain is dropped, we may still be left with a merely *tentative* idea that there can be nothing about which we can be certain. Now, this idea is a more general version of the idea, in *its* tentative form, that nothing can be definitely established in philosophy. And my reply to this more general version is similar to what I said earlier about that one: We can indeed even now be certain that *if* nothing can be certain then we can never be certain of that. So we can be certain of something.

My strong recommendation is that whenever one comes across anything like an absolute rejection of everything that is absolute, one test that rejection against itself.

Sometimes such suspect claims may be expressed in terms of a specifically relativist rejection of objectivity. The claim may be that all truths are relative, true only in the context of a time or a culture or for a person, within a conceptual scheme. A proponent of such a thesis apparently hasn't noticed that any total relativism about truth, whether historical, cultural or personal, must refute itself in either of two ways: The supposed relativism must either rule *out* or else rule *in* its own objective (non-relative) truth. Either way it refutes itself. Even if relativism takes itself to be

renouncing its own objective truth it can only be doing so from an implicit position of assumed objective truth.

This is like what we've seen already. But in a relativist thesis we find also a new twist beyond the sort of rejection of the absolute we have so far encountered. For although relativism is a rejection of objectivity, it presents itself at the same time as an acceptance of all competing views as somehow equally true or valid. We might characterize the first positions we considered as sounding extremely negative. They wished to say no to any value judgment or any truth, any absolute principle or any certainty, or the establishment of any philosophical thesis. Relativist theses, on the other hand, may sound extremely positive. They seem to welcome every value judgment as valid, every proposition as true or every philosophical thesis as capable of being established. Yet the negative and the positive-sounding positions are closely allied. Both kinds of claims tend to appeal to the same people, as different ways of saying that nobody can occupy a privileged platform of objective validity. The positive-sounding claims of relativism, however, do render it distinctively vulnerable to a second layer of criticism as self-refuting. For, not only are such positions, in a fashion that resembles the self-refuting we have already seen, committed to rejecting their own objective significance, but, in addition, the relativist positions, according to their seeming tolerance and generosity, must welcome (as well as reject) any views that oppose them. Let me explain.

The truth of the view that all truth is relative (to times, to cultures, or to persons) must itself be merely relative if the view itself is to *be* true. But we can see that the truth of relativism *cannot* for itself be relative by noticing how relativism must, if merely relatively true, treat the opposing view, that truth may be objective across times, cultures, persons and all their conceptual schemes. If a time, a culture, or a person was objectivist, then the relativist, if he's a relativist about relativism, must grant the truth of the objectivist view within that time or that culture or for that person. Note that such a relative truth, the contradictory relative truth of objectivism, cannot be what the objectivist himself could count as the truth of his own theory--so by the objectivist's own standards, relative to him, he is not herein being granted any sort of truth for *his* theory at all. But the objectivism, even if we did allow that it could be true in some such merely relative fashion, would then only be true because the relativism was requiring objectivism's truth and its own falsity. And thus relativism must be regarding itself as governing truth (and therein as being true) even in those cases where the relativism itself is thus requiring that relativism not be true.

Total relativism cannot be taken by the relativist to be true only at a time or in a culture or for a person. Relativism, which is the rejection of objective truth, could

only be true, if it were true, objectively. Thus total relativism destroys itself by making the conditions of its own truth impossible.

Let's briefly consider what I regard as one of the main inspirations of relativism. An object like a hand can be viewed and described in many ways--some true and some false. It can be true at once both that this is a single hand and that it consists of a multiplicity of parts. A bad argument for idealism or relativism could run as follows: "A hand has at once the contradictory properties of unity and multiplicity. Which of these inconsistent properties it has depends purely on how you look at it. Seen one way it is one hand; seen the other way it is five fingers, a palm and so on. Now nothing *objectively* real could be at once one and five (so idealism is right). And neither of these descriptions, though both are 'valid' or true in the eye of the beholder, could be an *objectively* true description (so relativism is right)."

But no contradictory properties have really been discovered in that hand. If it is simply specified that the number is that of the hand and not the fingers, the number is definitely one. If the specification is of fingers and not hand, the number is five. The properties of being one hand and of being a multiplicity of parts not only fail to contradict each other; they mutually support each other. There *are*, of course, cases in which inconsistent properties are attributed to the same thing; but then, if the object is real, at least one of the attributions must be wrong.

Our relativist, then, whether or not he himself is clear about this, requires equally true *contradicting, inconsistent* descriptions of the world. But he cannot make use of the endless variety of *consistent* aspects of the world that an objectivist is happy to recognize. The objectivist knows that what one age or culture or person may perceive as true of the world may not be recognized by another, while what the other perceives may not be recognized by the first. As long as there is no contradiction between two such discoveries, there is no problem in the objective truth of both. A relativist would need them to be true but contradicting of each other.

An objectivist about values similarly must recognize that one and the same action may be in some respects morally bad while in others morally good. And regarding some issues of value he must allow room for differences in taste. What the objectivist about values rejects is the incoherent relativist endorsement of two *contradicting objective* assertions regarding value. Contradiction, after all, is the possession by a thing of properties that exclude each other; and no contradiction, therefore, could ever exist.

Neither objectivism nor relativism tells us directly what truth actually consists in. But the correspondence theory of truth is the one required by objectivism. This is the

view that a thought about, a sentence about or a representation of something is true if, and only if, that thing is really (objectively) the way that it is thought, said or represented to be.

Pragmatism is a rival theory of truth that waters it down. It is roughly the view that truth belongs to those beliefs that steer us through life most efficiently. (Note that we are not to think that this efficiency is owing to their truth but rather that their truth consists purely in the efficiency.) A pragmatist often has adopted his lower practical standard of truth in order to avoid the challenge of skepticism regarding our ability to establish whether we have satisfied the higher, correspondence standard. The skeptic says we are not justified in taking our beliefs to correspond to things, and the pragmatist answers that correspondence is not the point anyway.

But such a low view of truth is self-refuting, because it *cannot* and yet it *must* put *itself* forward as true by the higher standard that it rejects in its very essence. For a pragmatic theory of truth, when applied to itself, would require that the truth of pragmatism was merely pragmatic in character. Thus a *non-pragmatic* theory of truth, if ever it proved to be pragmatically superior, should then, according to pragmatism itself, be regarded as true in place of pragmatism. But if the non-pragmatic theory must thus be regarded as true only because it had satisfied a *pragmatic* standard, that must show that really pragmatism would still be true despite its *not* satisfying that pragmatic standard. So it's clear that pragmatism must view itself as having an objective correspondence with reality; but it cannot so view itself and be pragmatist.

The renowned pragmatist W V Quine famously claimed that in our proper theories of the world (all of whose statements, he thought, were merely pragmatically crafted and adjusted to each other) *no statement is unrevisable*. But isn't this statement, Quine's statement that *no statement is unrevisable*, meant by Quine to *be* unrevisable, that is, to represent always what is true about revisability whether or not there were pragmatic grounds for maintaining that supposed truth? (And in line with what I've said about pragmatism generally, all the other statements in Quine's pragmatist theory would also have to be meant by him to be similarly unrevisable.)

Anyway, in a manner something like that of the principle *there are no absolute principles*, Quine's statement refutes itself. As I've pointed out, it is obviously intended to be categorical. It isn't put forward as saying *no statement is unrevisable for as long as this statement is not revised*. And such a watered-down claim would be absurd, since any 'unrevisable' statement that was supposed to be countenanced only if and when a statement rejecting it was revised to remove the rejection could not be in any sense 'unrevisable'. So much, then, for Quine's statement as revisable. But if next we try to think of his statement as *unrevisable*, we find that it would of

course at the same time be false since it says there are *no* unrevisable statements. In both this case and that of *no absolute principles*, the assertion can't be vulnerable to the weakness it proclaims is universal and, as is required for it to be true, still get away with being strong. But neither can it retain its strength and yet be true in proclaiming the weakness to be universal. And finally, Quine's statement refutes itself, like *no absolute principles*, in terms of whether it allows exceptions. If there can be exceptions, that is, revisable statements, it is false for saying there can't be. If there can't be revisable statements, then it is itself unrevisable and therefore is false for saying that there are no unrevisable statements.

The undermining effect of this critique has a pretty wide reach. A few more examples:

Do Wittgensteinians want to say that their own description of language as a game is itself merely a set of moves in that game? Then if rival descriptions of language develop within the game, they should be accepted there just like Wittgenstein's. But the reason for this equal acceptance would have been dictated by Wittgenstein's description of language as a game, which would therefore actually still be holding sway over its rivals and quite apart from its role and position in a game. So the language game description must be regarding itself simply as true--as corresponding to what language really is.

Have the deconstructors of texts deconstructed their own texts recently? Do the Hegelian idealists think the mind whose thought defines all that is real is real itself only in its thinking that it is? It seems that every attempt to reject truth as objective correspondence to reality must run itself into the same brick wall.