

Is It Absolutely True that There Are No Absolutes?

BY FRED EDWARDS

HUMANISTS, AGNOSTICS, SKEPTICS, and others who don't believe in any ultimately objective, indubitable, final, or unchanging truths are often asked, "Do you know with absolute certainty that there are no certainties?" or "Is it an absolute truth that there are no absolute truths?"

This is an effort to stump them. But posed in this way, the question doesn't necessarily expose the implied contradiction. It more likely reveals a deeply entrenched presupposition of the questioner. This is because the question actually begs the question, presuming what it seeks to prove by taking words like "know" and "truth" to imply absolutes.

To make this clearer, let's uncover the unchallenged assumptions that often lie behind the question. They are these: to know anything is to know it with certainty, else it isn't knowledge; and things are either absolutely true or absolutely false, there being no middle ground between them. Obviously, if these are the ways a person thinks, that person is going to frame questions accordingly.

But what the questioner may not understand is that the doubter's non-absolutism is essentially a challenge to the very presuppositions upon which the questions are based: the existence of certain knowledge and absolute truth. The doubter is calling on the questioner to provide evidence supporting his or her presuppositions. And so the two go round and round, chasing each other's tails.

A way to cut through the confusion is to rephrase the language of the dialogue so that both sides understand each other better. Humanists can begin by noting that their position is *not* that there aren't any objectively knowable and absolute truths in the world but, rather, that philosophy and science have so far been unable to *establish* any. Because of this problem, Humanists *find* nothing they are able to call an objective, absolute truth or even an absolute moral value.

In other words, here we stand, like everyone else, trying to make sense of the world and the various competing explanations of it. And, up to this point, we have yet to find any absolutist claim that is compelling. Indeed, we wouldn't know what would constitute an objective truth because any appeal to our senses and intellect must necessarily pass through a flawed personal nervous system. Therefore, while we can't state it as an objective truth that objective truths don't exist, we can profess (1) our ignorance of and lack of

experience with any objective truths, (2) our inability to know, or our lack of sensible criteria for knowing, an objective truth even if encountered, and (3) the ineffectiveness (and sometimes blatant foolishness) we find in all arguments for objective truth of which we are familiar. (It is this last one that may account for occasional arrogance by some non-absolutists, leading others to have false assumptions about the nature of the argument.)

To sum this up in the language of philosophers, *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* says under "Objectivity" that "every method of knowledge, judgment, or even thought seems quite clearly to go on within the realm of subjective impressions" and one "cannot get out of one's subjective impressions, it seems, to test them for reliability." Thus, whether we like it or not, we find ourselves confined within this world of uncertainty.

Recognizing this will, of course, require a little more humility on the part of non-absolutists. Though many may be active in denouncing claims and views that the available evidence shows are false and harmful, a sensible epistemological position must, at root, remain passive. It cannot declare, in advance, that there are no absolutes. It can say only that none have made themselves apparent. Putting this in the American idiom (with apologies to Harry Truman), one can declare to the proponent of objective or absolute truth, "I may not be from Missouri but I still have to be shown." Or, more politely, "That's an interesting idea; what's your evidence?"

In other words, the burden of proof should be placed on the absolutist where it belongs.

I must hasten to add, however, that such epistemological passivity doesn't have to result in moral or social passivity. This is because, in life, humans (and other animals) are constantly confronted with decisions to be made, no matter how sketchy the available information. Humanists, therefore, while seeking to make those decisions using the best evidence and reasoning at their disposal, won't wait for certainty before taking action. ■

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