



"That's True for You, But Not for me." (Relativism)

Paul Copan

'Behind this line is fine' is fine, says the relativist. 'As long as you keep your opinions to yourself then we'll all get along' But does the relativist stay behind the line when he tells you to?

Imagine a multiple car-car collision at a busy junction near your home. It's an occurrence that shouldn't be hard to picture. It may, in fact, strike a little too close to home, as it did for my family and me in June 1997. Now stretch your imagination further. Assume we live in a less lawsuit-happy world. Instead of all parties silently exchanging licence and insurance information and driving away without admitting even a sliver of blame, every one runs into the junction to explain his or her side of the story: 'You pulled out in front of me!' 'But / had the right of way. Don't you know that *red* means stop?' Pedestrians who witnessed the accident from the curb interject what they saw. A trucker with an elevated, commanding view of the junction weighs in. Then perhaps the guilty part steps forward: 'Well, actually, it was my fault. I was talking on my car phone. I wasn't paying attention to what I was doing. I caused the accident.'

For all the post-accident debate, when a police officer arrives and begins taking notes, one truth will be clear: an accident happened. And in time, other truths will be determined. Ultimately, a description of the accident will emerge that corresponds to reality.

We live our lives relying on the belief that objective truth exists – if only we can find it. We gather evidence; weigh credibility and truthfulness; make difficult judgements. In the end, we arrive at

a close proximity to truth. We can make truthful statements that describe with reasonable accuracy how events really happened. (Or, given the right evidence, we can determine truth regarding whether the car we bought was a lemon, or how our major life decisions were right or wrong, or if God is real.) We believe that if we had a helicopter over every junction and a video camera inside each car – to see who is on the phone, or shaving, or turning up the volume – we can even discover truth about 'accidents'.

Truth is more than our subjective reporting of a car crash. It has objective existence. It has universal application.

Truth is true – even if no one knows it

Truth is true – even if no one admits it

Truth is true – even if no one agrees what it is

Truth is true – even if no one follows it

Truth is true – even if no one but God grasps it fully

Although some local authorities have given up trying to figure out who to blame for car accidents (hence 'no fault' insurance), truth matters. And when the stakes are raised – when a child crossing the street is struck and killed, for example – finding the truth becomes essential. Serious circumstances remind us that the difficulty of finding the truth is no excuse for not looking.

Enter the relativist. To the relativist, no 'fact' is in all times and places true. He argues that because everyone's point of view is different, we can't ever know what really happened at the accident scene. In fact, the hard-core relativist says that given the slippery nature of what the rest of us mistakenly call 'truth', we can't even settle on the fact that the accident actually happened.

So some people, called 'relativists', would answer Pilate's question 'What is truth?' by saying that each person decides what is true for them. Jesus claims he is true-for-everyone and not just true-for-me.

What could a thoughtful person say in response?

§ If my belief is only true for *me*, then why isn't your belief only true for you? Aren't you saying you want me to believe the same thing you do?

§ You say that no belief is true for everyone, but you want everyone to believe what you do.

§ You're making universal claims 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. It claims there is *one* position that is true – *relativism!*

§ You're applying your view to everyone but yourself. You expect others to believe *your* views (the 'self-excepting fallacy').