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Speaking of “Relatively Speaking”: Comparing the Practicality of Relativism vs Absolutism

Simon Blackburn’s “Relatively Speaking”, published in *Think* in 2002, introduces its reader to the philosophical debate between absolutism and relativism. In his text, Blackburn uses both personal anecdotes and theoretical examples to illustrate the absolutist’s and relativist’s conflicting concepts of morality. After explaining both positions, Blackburn offers his perspective on the matter, claiming that absolutism must apply to more significant ethical dilemmas while relativism may suffice for more trivial issues. In this critique, I will judge Blackburn’s writing (focusing on audience and purpose) as well as his philosophical claim.

In terms of audience, Blackburn wisely addresses “Relatively Speaking” to a readership that extends beyond philosophy academics; in publishing his article in *Think* and using accessible language, he invites the educated but nonspecialized reader to consider a philosophical issue. In this regard, Blackburn succeeds; he effectively writes in an inclusive manner, encouraging anyone interested in absolutism and relativism to read on and learn more. Moreover, throughout “Relatively Speaking,” Blackburn writes with a purpose that is two-fold; firstly, he attempts to inform his reader on absolutism and relativism with objective descriptions; and secondly, he tries to convince the reader of his thesis. Unfortunately, Blackburn does not present information objectively, but instead describes absolutism and relativism with a clear bias towards absolutism. In fact, at the beginning of his text, Blackburn refers to absolutists as “philosophers” (Blackburn, 2002, p. 83) and relativists as “others” (Blackburn, 2002, p. 83).

Indeed, this demonstrates bias, because *both* absolutists and relativists are defined by their ethical beliefs and are widely considered to be philosophers. Furthermore, Blackburn's attempt to convince his readers that distinguishing between absolutism and relativism is only necessary depending on situational contexts is a valiant effort, but not without its flaws. For example, while Blackburn tries to draw a line between moral dilemmas and foolish arguments, such a stark contrast is not always evident. One may argue that sporting a Canada Goose jacket or a Colombia jacket is a frivolous decision of fashion, but others may point out that Canada Goose engages in unethical treatment of animals whereas Colombia does not. In this sense, a dilemma may be both insignificant *and* moral simultaneously. To summarize, Blackburn appropriately addresses his audience but fails to present information without bias or a fail-proof argument.

Beyond Blackburn's use of audience and purpose lies the content of "Relatively Speaking": his philosophical claim. First, in assessing the relativist's stance, Blackburn acknowledges that relativists have the advantage of tolerance. He says, "the relativist need not attack people for putting words like 'true' on their doctrines," (Blackburn, 2002, p. 84) and describes tolerance (referencing religious tolerance) as "a Good Thing" (Blackburn, 2002, p. 84). Yet, as Blackburn later points out with his fox-hunting example, correlating tolerance and good may be overly simplistic; perhaps tolerating an opposing view (for example, that fox hunting is ethical), is, fundamentally, tolerating the action that view represents: hunting. Blackburn's fox-hunting anecdote proves useful to his claim, because it logically demonstrates that one cannot assume tolerance is always virtuous. However, as Blackburn discusses the fox-hunting anecdote further, he extrapolates:

If Rosie thumps the table and says that tolerating Genghis is *really* good, then isn't she sounding just like the fetishists she mocked? She has taken the fact that there are no

absolute values to justify elevating toleration into an absolute value! (Blackburn, 2002, p. 85)

Blackburn's thinking here is illogical; he wrongfully describes Rosie as 'thumping a table' and presenting tolerance as an absolute value. In fact, on the basis of the prior information that Blackburn has provided, Rosie is *not* thumping a table; she is simply encouraging those around her to recognize that there may be "a plurality of truths" (Blackburn, 2002, p. 84). In other words, while Blackburn tries to depict Rosie as hypocritically presenting her relativist stance as fact, this depiction is inaccurate, as Rosie is promoting the virtues of respect and tolerance. Furthermore, when Blackburn concludes that Rosie's intervention in the fox-hunting debate serves merely as "a distraction," (Blackburn, 2002, p. 85) this claim does not support his thesis; even if Rosie's attempt to convince Blackburn and Genghis "to see that there is no real disagreement" (Blackburn, 2002, p. 85) between them is nothing more than a distraction, this does not inherently make it bad. Ultimately, Blackburn's bias towards absolutism leads him to unfairly describe the relativist's position with distorting and uncharacteristic attributes.

Blackburn introduces the absolutist's perspective with a basic theoretical example, explaining that although freedom may be the default in a liberal society, some actions must be forbidden. He describes that while many choices exist in such a society, "it is just not true that anything goes" (Blackburn, 2002, p. 86). He extrapolates, then, that conversation must include debate over "what to allow and what to forbid" (Blackburn, 2002, p. 86). Blackburn's theoretical framework here is solid. No reasonable person would argue that all actions are just or good; some actions must be outlawed. Moreover, Blackburn's assertion that "in moral issues we often cannot agree to differ" (Blackburn, 2002, p. 86) has some truth to it. For example, in the case of an impoverished, chronically ill child, whether or not the child receives medical care must be

definite. The stakeholders involved (parents, doctors, and other healthcare personnel), must grant the child treatment or deny care. There is no intermediary space. In a moral crisis, each party must take a firm stance and there is no room for a plurality of truths.

After describing both relativism (albeit unfairly) and absolutism, Blackburn claims that relativism may suffice for trivial disagreements, but absolutism must apply to moral or ethical crises. Unfortunately, he fails to define and distinguish between trivial disagreements and moral crises. Blackburn does not draw a line between the two scenario types, but instead he leaves his reader to guess at their vague identities. What constitutes a moral crisis? Ironically, this definition may be relative to each reader. Thus, Blackburn's claim itself may be relative to the reader. Although Blackburn tactfully includes his broad audience and provides original and relatable anecdotes throughout his text, his lack of clarity in defining concepts inhibits the coherence of his thesis.

Reference

Blackburn, S. (2002). Relatively speaking. *Think*, 1(2), 83-88. doi:10.1017/S1477175600000300