



Received: 19 October 2015
Accepted: 13 March 2016
Published: 04 April 2016

*Corresponding author: Howard Darmstadter, 1159 Rock Rimmon Road, Stamford, CT 06903-1210, USA
E-mail: hdarmstadter@gmail.com

Reviewing editor:
Peter Stanley Fosl, Transylvania University, USA

Additional information is available at the end of the article

PHILOSOPHY & RELIGION | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Relativism defended

Howard Darmstadter^{1*}

Abstract: I argue for a type of relativism that allows different people to have conflicting accurate representations of the world. This is contrary to the view of most Anglo-American philosophers, who would, with Paul Boghossian in *Fear of Knowledge*, deny that “there are many radically different, yet ‘equally valid’ ways of knowing the world.” My argument is not a metaphysical argument about the ultimate nature of the outside world, but a psychological argument about the mental processes of representation. The argument starts from a few principles of naïve (or folk) psychology, but is later extended to apply to mechanisms that do not have a “psychology.” Finally, I briefly discuss the anti-relativist impulse in philosophy, with particular reference to Boghossian’s example of non-scientific beliefs regarding Lakota origins. I argue that both we and the Lakotas have good reason to reject such beliefs while still remaining relativists. Being a relativist does not mean that you get to believe whatever you like.

Subjects: Epistemology; Metaphysics; Philosophy

Keywords: relativism; belief systems; models; representations; Boghossian

1. Fact objectivism and fact relativism

Most of us believe the standard archeological account that “humans first entered the Americas from Asia, crossing the Bering Strait some 10,000 years ago” (Boghossian, 2006, p. 1; recent research suggests that humans may have been in the Americas as early as 15,500 years ago (Waters et al., 2011)). An alternative account has been offered by Sebastian LeBeau, an official of the Cheyenne River Sioux, a Lakota tribe based in Eagle Butte, South Dakota, that

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Howard Darmstadter is a retired philosophy professor and lawyer with more than 70 publications in philosophy, psychology, law, and public policy.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Relativism—the view that different people can have conflicting accurate representations of (i.e. beliefs about) the world—is a position with few friends in the philosophical establishment. But the argument for such relativism is straightforward, proceeding in easy steps from premises about human psychology that have widespread acceptance. Moreover, the standard arguments deployed against relativism—that it is internally inconsistent, that it doesn’t distinguish between accurate and inaccurate representations, or that it doesn’t allow us to question other people’s views—seem wrongheaded. Being a relativist does not mean that you get to believe whatever you like. Rather, relativism gives us a way to understand why we often don’t agree, and how we might resolve belief conflict.

We know where we came from. We are the descendants of the Buffalo people. They came from inside the earth after supernatural spirits prepared this world for humankind to live here. If non-Indians choose to believe they evolved from an ape, so be it. I have yet to come across five Lakotas who believe in science and in evolution. (Boghossian, 2006, p. 1, quoting *The New York Times*, 22 October 1996, p. 1)

For me, and I imagine for most of you, this sounds quite daft. Nonetheless, the LeBeau account is said to draw support from some social scientists and philosophers who argue that knowledge is “socially constructed.” It’s not that they share Mr. LeBeau’s beliefs, just that they admit that, as Paul Boghossian describes it, “there are many radically different, yet ‘equally valid’ ways of knowing the world, with science being just one of them.” (Ibid, p. 2) So, one view for us scientifically minded types and another equally valid view for Mr. LeBeau and the Lakotas. Live and let live.

Boghossian will have none of it. In *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism*, he attacks social constructivism, devoting the first three chapters to what he calls “fact constructivism”—the denial that there is any “objective fact of the matter” (Ibid, pp. 3, 25)—and the remainder to what he considers a less extreme view, “epistemic” relativism.

I agree with Boghossian’s assessment of the LeBeau view, and I share his suspicion of the more radical forms of social constructivism. But I think Boghossian’s proposed solution misguided. Far from being an inconsistent view, I believe that something like fact constructivism may be the near inescapable consequence of some of our fundamental beliefs. I shall propose a non-technical argument for a type of relativism that resembles fact constructivism in holding that different people can have conflicting accurate representations of the world. The argument will proceed in easy steps from premises that most readers should find uncontroversial.

For a fact objectivist like Boghossian, things are simple: There is a fact-of-the-matter “out there” to which the scientific account of Lakota origins probably does, and the LeBeau account almost certainly does not, conform.

Things are more complicated for a relativist: Yes, there is a fact-of-the-matter, but both the scientific and the LeBeau views can “represent” it, though in different ways. The relativist is not denying the existence of an external reality, but making a point about the psychology of mental representation. This cryptic description will become clearer as my argument progresses. (In the following, I shall generally use “relativism” as a shorthand for the kind of relativism I propose here, and “realism” for what Boghossian might call “fact objectivism.”)

The difficulty for the realist is explaining how only a single set of beliefs can “conform” to reality; the difficulty for the relativist is explaining how he can justify accepting one set of representations while rejecting another. For example, I shall eventually have to square my defense of relativism with my favoring a more standard archeological account of Lakota origins. But first I shall set out my argument for relativism. I’ll return to Mr. LeBeau and the Lakotas at the end, and realists may then take what joy they can from my Houdini-like performance.

Before plunging into my argument, I should say something about the stakes involved. Boghossian notes three aspects that are essential to belief: “Any belief must have a propositional *content*; any belief can be assessed as *true or false*; and any belief can be assessed as *justified or unjustified, rational or irrational*” (Boghossian, 2006, pp. 10–11, emphasis in original). A relativist would deny the last two, at least in the sense Boghossian intends. But much of current epistemology involves an attempt to construct standards of justification, and that construction relies for the most part on a non-constructivist view of truth. If the relativist is right, then much of this epistemological project is wrongheaded. Boghossian says that “there is one humanities discipline in which [the hold of constructivist ideas] is actually quite weak, and that is in philosophy itself, at least as it is practiced within the mainstream of analytic philosophy departments within the English-speaking world.” (Ibid,

p. 7) So relativism isn't just one philosophical position among many, but an attack on much of philosophy as currently practiced. Sorry about that.

2. Starting from folk psychology

My argument starts with a few premises of naive (or folk) psychology:

We have beliefs and desires.

We take actions based on our beliefs in order to achieve our desires.

We do not all have the same beliefs and desires.

Unsophisticated perhaps (or not—see Pinker, 1997, pp. 60–64), but it's the model we use most of the time. Once I have developed my argument, I'll try to extend it so that it relies less on these folk-psychological premises.

3. Inconsistent models

The next building block of the argument will be less familiar:

We use “models”—that is, simplified belief systems—to achieve specific desires in specific situations. These models are often inconsistent with the models we use in other situations or to achieve other desires.

As an example, suppose Archie's car won't start. In explaining why the car won't start, Archie may use a model that contains his belief that a car with a dead battery won't start. Once convinced that the battery is indeed dead, he may shift to a model containing his belief that a car with a dead battery will start if you give it a push. But note that the second belief—that a car with a dead battery will start if you give it a push—is logically inconsistent with the first belief, that a car with a dead battery won't start. (Formal logic requires that for a contradiction, we must also assume that some cars with dead batteries have been pushed, which should present no difficulties.) Each of these beliefs is part of a (different) simplified model, or schematic, of our complex world. Each model is useful only in certain situations to achieve certain desires. Each model is likely to be internally consistent, but inconsistent with other models used in other situations or to achieve other desires. In the example just given, the model Archie used to explain why his car wouldn't start was different from, and inconsistent with, the model Archie used to get the car started. As we navigate our days, we continually shift from model to model to deal with the contingencies of daily life.

It might be objected that the beliefs that Archie seems to deploy in daily life are not his real beliefs. That is, while it might seem that Archie in one situation believes that a car will not start with a dead battery, and in a different situation holds the inconsistent belief that a car with a dead battery will start if given a push, what Archie actually believes in both situations is that all other things being equal, you can't start a car with a dead battery, and that all other things being equal, a car with a dead battery can be started by giving it a push.

Such a proposal saves consistency only in the most evanescent sense. On my account, Archie, in certain situations uses a model with the belief that you can't start a car with a dead battery. On the alternative proposal, in those same situations Archie first judges that all other things are equal so that he can use a model with the quasi-belief that you can't start a car with a dead battery. He then switches situations, again judges that all other things are equal for the new situation, and switches to the quasi-belief that you can start a car with a dead battery by giving it a push. But on the alternative proposal, it is the quasi-beliefs that do all the work because it is the quasi-beliefs, unlike the all-other-things-being-equal beliefs, that have the interesting logical consequences. The alternative proposal saves consistency by making our “real” beliefs largely irrelevant to our lives. (I develop a fuller argument for this premise in Darmstadter (1971)).

4. Representational accuracy: Models and maps

The next premises in my argument may surprise:

Our models (that is, our simplified belief systems) are representations that can be more or less accurate.

One thing accurately represents another thing when there is an isomorphism between the two things; the more “complete” the isomorphism, the more accurate the representation.

“Surprise” because these premises seem to be a statement of realism. But as I argue below, the premises are compatible with my kind of relativism.

An isomorphism obtains when various points and relations of one thing correspond to various points and relations of another thing. The relation of a road map to the road system mapped provides a nice illustration. Suppose Archie, who wants to drive to Onionville, consults a road map. The map is useful because Archie has certain beliefs about the relationship of road maps to roads. In particular, Archie believes that dots on the map labeled with the names of cities and towns correspond to actual cities and towns with those names, that lines on the map correspond to roads, and that distances on the map are scaled to highway distances. The map enables Archie to form new beliefs (“I-84 will take me almost all the way to Onionville”) so that he can act to achieve his desires. But Archie’s model of the terrain derived from the map is vastly simpler than the world, since the map itself is vastly simpler than the world. The map doesn’t show traffic conditions, stop signs, toll booths, potholes, dead zones for cell phones, and many other features that Archie might want to know about in planning his trip. On the other hand, Archie can fold the map up and slip it into his pocket, something he can’t do with 2,500 square miles of actual countryside.

If Archie’s situation were different, he might be better served by a different map/model. For example, if Archie was traveling by bicycle rather than car, then his model will likely not contain the belief that I-84 will get him to Onionville—Sorry, no bicycles on the Interstate—which is inconsistent with Archie’s beliefs in his let’s-go-by-car model.

Of course, maps can be inaccurate. If Archie’s road map is not isomorphic to the real world because the dot on the map labeled “Onionville” is in fact Petuniaville, then Archie’s attempts to get to Onionville, whether by car or bicycle, are likely to fail.

Because I may have different desires and be in a different situation than you, the belief models that help me attain my desires may be inconsistent with the belief models that help you attain your desires.

This isn’t a premise, but a straightforward consequence of what’s gone before: If Archie uses models that contain beliefs that are inconsistent as between models, then some beliefs in Archie’s models are likely to be inconsistent with some beliefs in Betty’s models. Consider our road map example: If Archie is going to Onionville by car, while Betty is going by bicycle, then Betty’s let’s-go-to-Onionville model may well contain beliefs that are inconsistent with the beliefs in Archie’s let’s-go-to-Onionville model.

(A similar argument—that different situations call for different models—is made by Paul Krugman regarding conflicting economic models:

[The Samuelsonian] approach ... combines the grand tradition of microeconomics, with its emphasis on how the invisible hand leads to generally desirable outcomes, with Keynesian macroeconomics, which emphasizes the way the economy can develop magneto trouble requiring policy intervention.

It's a deeply reasonable approach—but it's also intellectually unstable. For it requires some strategic inconsistency in how you think about the economy. When you're doing micro, you assume rational individuals and rapidly clearing markets; when you're doing macro, frictions and ad hoc behavioral assumptions are essential.

So what? Inconsistency in the pursuit of useful guidance is no vice. The map is not the territory, and it's OK to use different kinds of maps depending on what you're trying to accomplish: if you're driving, a road map suffices, if you're going hiking, you really need a topo. (Krugman, 2010)

Always nice to have a Nobel laureate in your corner).

5. There is no universal model

This is not (yet) a complete argument for relativism. For it may be that beyond the jangling fragmentary models we use there stands a single all-inclusive non-contradictory model—the true belief system—that would help us achieve any desire in any situation. Motorists and cyclists could then wend their separate ways to Onionville with a single map package that works for each of them.

The argument between realists and relativists thus comes down to this: Is there a single completely accurate—i.e. isomorphic—belief system. While such a system may be too much for any person, perhaps the entire human community, aided by libraries, data banks, and other repositories of information, could collectively possess such a system.

The problem, however, is not that we can't have an accurate belief system, but that unless we restrict the sorts of relationships we allow among elements in the world almost any belief system can be shown to accurately represent the world. Put another way, the correspondence theory of truth cannot work: If we are allowed to limit in advance the relationships that can obtain among elements of the external world, then correspondence/isomorphism cannot be an independent test of truth. But without such prior limitations, the world will be underdetermined by accurate representations. A somewhat technical proof appears in Darmstadter (1974) as part of a general attack on the correspondence theory of truth.¹ (For those who might still think that we can possess a single all-encompassing model, Section 8 contains an independent argument against that view).

6. Do I contradict myself?

This may be an appropriate point to consider two criticisms that are commonly made when relativistic theses are proposed. First: If, as I claim, most of our thinking involves the use of simplified models of the world, what can we say about the argument I am putting forward here? Isn't it just another simplified model?

Of course!—except for that “just.” The model of belief proposed here leads to relativistic conclusions. There will, of course, be other models that lead to non-relativistic conclusions. Thus, my argument cannot settle the issue. But I hope that my argument will be persuasive because it rests on premises that many will find congenial—indeed, inescapable—and has consequences that are consistent with our experience. Relativism, I will contend, is a very useful model.

7. Philosophy in the psychological mode

Second: To talk about models and their representational accuracy, we have to talk about the relationship of beliefs and other mental elements to the world. But how can we talk about the relationship of our inner mental world with the outside world? Isn't that to assume a God-like overview? For example, at some points in the argument, I confidently talk about beliefs accurately representing an external world, but at others (as in my proof, referenced above, that the correspondence theory cannot work) suggest that we should not assume anything about that world, as when we limit the kinds of relationships permitted for an isomorphism.

If I were to remark that I believe it to be raining outside, my remark would normally be taken by listeners in the everyday mode, as an alert to the possibility that stepping out may get you wet. In this everyday mode, listeners may wonder if I have misread the signs—those puddles may be leftovers from last night’s rain or this morning’s street cleaning—but not whether I am deluded about the existence of the outside world. The everyday mode of speaking and thinking assumes a good deal about our everyday world.

Alternatively, listeners may view my remark in a psychological mode, and wonder about the mental processes that culminated in my belief. In the psychological mode, we again assume a great deal about our everyday world, but take a more sophisticated view of mental processes.

Finally, there is a metaphysical mode in which the listener may wonder if the rain or I really exist, or if we exist, what relation we might have to the listener’s thoughts. In the metaphysical mode, we cannot simply assume that there is an everyday world.

I intend for readers to understand my argument in the psychological mode. I have characterized the third mode as “metaphysical” rather than “philosophical” because I believe the psychological mode is an honorable mode in the history of philosophy—the mode of the British empiricists and American pragmatists.

In speaking of metaphysical and psychological modes I am obviously oversimplifying. There are no doubt numerous other modes or submodes. My concern here is not to present a taxonomy, but merely to allow for multiple modes of discourse and to give a rough survey of the ground upon which I propose to pitch my tent.

“Mode” has the same root as “model,” and speaking of metaphysical and psychological modes comports nicely with my view that we use inconsistent models in our dealings with the world. Philosophers of a metaphysical bent have different interests than philosophers of a psychological bent.

It’s not always clear whether a statement is intended in the psychological or the metaphysical mode. Consider this passage from Nelson Goodman:

Now as we thus make constellations by picking out and putting together certain stars rather than others, so we make stars by drawing certain boundaries rather than others. Nothing dictates whether the skies shall be marked off into constellations or other objects. We have to make what we find, be it the Great Dipper, Sirius, food, fuel, or a stereo system. (Goodman, 1996, p. 156; as quoted in Boghossian, 2006, p. 33)

I take Goodman to be speaking in the psychological mode: Just as we group certain stars together as the Big Dipper because, seen from our solar system, they appear to have a particular form, so all the objects of our world are simply our assemblages based on how things appear from our particular vantage point.

Boghossian, however, appears to take Goodman’s statements in the metaphysical mode:

If our concepts are cutting lines into some basic worldly dough and thus imbuing it with a structure it would not otherwise possess, doesn’t there have to be some worldly dough for them to get to work on, and mustn’t the basic properties of that dough be determined independently of all this fact-constituting activity? This basic dough can be quite spare. Perhaps it is just the space-time manifold, or a distribution of energy, or whatever. Still, must there not some such basic stuff for this picture even to make sense? And if there is, doesn’t that put paid to a generalized description-dependence of facts? (Boghossian, 2006, p. 35)

According to Boghossian, if we're interacting with some stuff "out there" that exists independent of what we believe about it, then there must be some "facts" about that stuff independent of our beliefs, and the existence of these facts must be incompatible with relativism.

Distinguishing between different modes of discourse may explain what some readers may find puzzling, namely my failure to directly confront any of Boghossian's arguments. Operating in the psychological mode, my fundamental building blocks are "beliefs" and "representations" rather than Boghossian's metaphysical tool-kit of "truth," "knowledge," and "facts." Similarly, for most other contemporary philosophical writings on relativism, which likewise speak in the metaphysical mode, and which I likewise do not confront (e.g. Rovane, 2013; or the papers collected in Krausz, 2010).

In employing different modes of discourse, Boghossian and I are no doubt talking past each other. But note that if we were to take Boghossian's argument in the psychological mode, it would fall apart. In the psychological mode, we can admit—indeed, insist—that there is some basic "dough," namely the elementary particles of physics. Or, rather, we can insist on integrating the models of physics into our models of thinking. Taken in the psychological mode, the view that there is a "dough" out there composed of quarks or super strings or whatever, far from being inconsistent with relativism, will form part of my argument for it (see Section 8). (As it happens, two physicists have advanced a position—"model-dependent realism"—somewhat similar to the kind of relativism I argue for (Hawking & Mlodinow, 2010)).

Speaking and thinking in the psychological mode, we can imagine Mindy, a twenty-second-century psychologist who is investigating the fine structure of Archie's and Betty's brains and mapping their beliefs onto the external world. In doing so, Mindy will assume a certain structure for that world, namely the structure of her own belief system. Thus, for Mindy, many potential relations among elements of the world, and thus many potential isomorphisms, will not be permitted. Mindy can therefore conclude that Archie's beliefs are accurate representations of the world while Betty's are not. If other psychologists accept Mindy's structure for the world, there may be widespread agreement about which representations are accurate. In this sort of situation, realism becomes an attractive proposition. But the distinction between accurate and inaccurate representations depends critically on agreement among the psychological community about the relevant beliefs; Mork, a visiting psychologist from the planet Ork who has quite different beliefs about the world, might permit isomorphisms that Mindy would not allow, and thus see Betty's beliefs as accurate and Archie's as inaccurate.

8. One isomorphism to rule them all?

It might seem that since in the psychological mode we are allowed to start with a relatively full-blown set of beliefs about the world, then there might be a unique isomorphism that is consistent with some "core" set of generally agreed beliefs. For example, we might assume that theories and facts in physics, while perhaps not the ultimate Truth About Things, are at least the best currently available model of the world. Still, it seems unlikely that even limiting our isomorphisms in this way will give us a unique isomorphism.

Physics tells us that the world is made up of many small things, and that these things have properties and interact in ways that are consequential for the larger world. Indeed, if these micro goings-on did not have macro effects, we would never have discovered them. The upshot is that there is no way a belief system that does not track everything in the world will allow us to make totally accurate predictions. Therefore, the best course for each of us is to have a belief system that allows us to make the best possible predictions for our particular desires and situations. Since our desires and situations differ, it seems likely that our belief systems should differ as well. It thus seems unlikely that even agreement about core scientific beliefs can provide a unique isomorphism with respect to beliefs about other areas—medicine, politics, philosophy, art, religion. When it comes to achieving our different desires, there is no best-for-everybody belief system.

There was a time when philosophers imagined that all our beliefs might be reduced to beliefs about fundamental particles, but few today believe such a reductionist program can be made to work. The depressing fact is that the amount of stuff in the world that must be mapped is vastly greater than the elements of even the composite belief system of many believers.

9. Relativism without psychology

Some readers may have realized that my argument can be broadened; in particular, it doesn't depend on the premise I borrowed from folk psychology, namely that people have beliefs and desires. That was convenient to develop the argument, but I now hope it can be seen that the argument applies to any system that tries to achieve various states by relying on internalized representations (models, pictures, maps, or schemata) that are isomorphic to the objects represented (modeled, pictured, mapped, or schematized).

Imagine that during the dark days of the cold war, America and Russia each develop chess-playing computers (CPCs). Each country's CPC is designed to defeat the human chess players of the other country, thus demonstrating the technological prowess of the country fielding the winning CPC. Each country quickly discovers that brute force methods—tracking the possible consequences of each move and position—do not work because of limitations of computer memory and processing power. (These limitations may now have been overcome (Kasparov, 2010)). Accordingly, incomplete information about the consequences of various moves is supplemented by tactical and strategic maxims that operate as accurate, though not infallible, predictors of situations many moves in advance.

As it happens, American and Russian human chess players have different “styles.” That is, in similar situations, Americans and Russians make different moves based on different strategic principles. The CPCs are programmed with strategies to counter these styles of play. In the event, each country's CPC proves highly successful in defeating the other country's individual players, but less successful against players from its own country. The programmed strategies of the Russian CPC that work against the American players don't work as well against Russian players, and vice versa.

Each CPC has been designed to achieve a certain result—checkmate—that it occasionally fails to reach because of the mechanism's internal limitations. Accordingly, the program is not fully adequate: The CPC is more effective against some types of players than others.

A CPC may be said to have desires—the desires of its designers—and beliefs—the programmed strategic principles for the CPC—but such references to desires and beliefs are merely analogical. But insofar as we want to liken the internal states of the CPC to beliefs, then we can say that the conflicting beliefs of the Russian and American CPCs may be equally accurate.

The upshot is that while my argument depends on its folk-psychological initial premises, those premises may be seen as a way of stating more general principles that hold even for entities that do not have a “psychology.”

10. The anti-relativist impulse

Where does all this leave us? With a multitude of representations, some better suited (because more accurate and more relevant), or worse suited (because less accurate or less relevant) to our particular situations and desires. The argument preserves a part of realism—the distinction between accurate and inaccurate representations—and suggests that it is the accurate representations that are most useful. But it diverges from realism in allowing a multitude of divergent accurate representations.² I've argued elsewhere that this result doesn't have the baleful effects usually credited to relativism (Darmstadter, 2007), but here I merely want to comment on the anti-relativist impulse in philosophy.

Epistemologists have often seen their discipline as questing after standards of truth, or right reason, or warranted assertability, or whatever, that will enable us to separate good theories from bad.

We imagine that we can acquire the tools to deliver crushing ripostes to all sorts of deviant thinkers and intellectual fraudsters; faced with epistemological criticism, they will stand dumbfounded, embarrassed by their own inadequacy. Having arrived at such standards, epistemology can pack its bags and go home, mission accomplished.

Years ago, as an undergraduate, I realized that this quest was quixotic. The spur to this realization was reading the conclusion to Quine's "Two Dogmas of Empiricism":

The totality of our so-called knowledge or beliefs, from the most casual matters of geography and history to the profoundest laws of atomic physics or even of pure mathematics and logic, is a man-made fabric which impinges on experience only along the edges. ... A conflict with experience at the periphery occasions readjustments in the interior of the field. Truth values have to be redistributed over some of our statements. ... But the total field is so undetermined by its boundary conditions, experience, that there is much latitude of choice as to what statements to re-evaluate in the light of any single contrary experience. No particular experiences are linked with any particular statements in the interior of the field, except indirectly through considerations of equilibrium affecting the field as a whole. ... Any statement can be held true come what may, if we make drastic enough adjustments elsewhere in the system. ... Conversely, by the same token, no statement is immune to revision. (Quine, 1961, p. 46)

So if I feel that intelligent design theory is hogwash or our drug laws barbaric, there is no argument I can deploy or evidence I can muster that will convince everyone. Indeed, I don't believe there is any argument or evidence that is likely to quickly convince very many people who believe in intelligent design or the rightness of our drug laws.

This doesn't mean that all beliefs are created equal. Just as we strive to improve our beliefs to better realize our desires, so we are allowed to point out to others that their beliefs may not be optimal for them. And while we normally think of beliefs as instrumental to desires, the process of argument can change desires as well. Humans differ, but usually by not that much, so there's always the chance to convince others, or to have them convince us (we often refer to the latter phenomenon as "learning"). You don't have to win the argument to come out ahead. Arguments over beliefs and desires should be viewed less as contests than as mutual help, a sort of intellectual grooming in which we try to pick out the bugs and parasites from each other's intellectual coats.

11. But what do we do about the crazies?

An anonymous reviewer for this journal remarked that my "benign relativism" (the reviewer's term) might be OK where the different models aren't all that different, but won't work where the models diverge more radically—for example, fundamentalists as opposed to evolutionary biologists, or Quakers as opposed to the Islamic State. As to the latter opposition, "embracing relativism at this point is deadly" wrote the reviewer.

Yes, there are people whose beliefs will not yield to argument or experience, and some of these people may be determined to make our lives miserable. Their models may (temporarily) work for them, but the incompatibility between their models and ours means that we can't live together. Relativists tend to be tolerant of diverse viewpoints (and people with a tolerance for diversity tend to be attracted to social constructivism), but nothing about relativism bars us from taking protective measures, from quarantines to drone strikes, against those who intend us harm.

For a relativist, the flaw in antisocial models is not that they do not "correspond to reality," but that the models can't take their believers where they want to go. In the late 1930s, lots of Germans accepted the Nazi picture of the world, but by 1946, confronted by catastrophic experience, almost all Germans had abandoned those views. They'd had a learning experience. The jihadi picture of the world is probably headed for a similar bad end, for much the same reason: If you make war on everyone, don't be surprised if they make war on you.

But Nazis and jihadis are extreme outliers. For the most part, our society can tolerate radically different models of the world: Our evolutionary biologists, for example, are generally not troubled by our fundamentalists, or vice versa. For both groups, their views on Darwin don't have much effect on their interactions in day-to-day life; where they do, we've agreed to settle the disputes through a political process that emphasizes compromise. We can get along, most of us. Indeed, we have to get along if we want a society that will allow human flourishing, however variously that goal may be defined.

12. Sitting down with the Lakotas

Which brings us back at last to Sebastian LeBeau's assertion that the Lakota are the descendants of the Buffalo people, who came from inside the earth after supernatural spirits prepared this world for humankind to live here.

While views like this tend to make most readers of this journal splutter, our sense of the outrageousness of LeBeau's account is not an argument, let alone an argument likely to convince a Lakota. If we're talking about 1491-vintage Lakotas, the LeBeau account may have been the most useful likely to be generated in 1491 Lakotaland, given the limited resources of Lakota society and its isolation from 1491-vintage Western science.

But for modern Lakotas, who watch TV, drive pickup trucks, and probably don't want to live like pre-Columbian Lakotas, Mr. LeBeau's anti-scientific model is likely to be counter-productive. It's not that the archeological model conforms to the world and the LeBeau model does not; it's that the archeological model conforms to the world in a way that is likely to prove fruitful for twenty-first-century Lakotas, while the LeBeau model, whatever its virtues for fifteenth-century Lakotas, is likely to be suboptimal for today's Lakotas. The Lakota world has opened up in a way that offers more useful models.

In particular, modern Lakotas have the opportunity to become part of a vastly wider belief system, albeit one that rejects much of the Lakotas' traditional beliefs. The wider belief systems that characterize larger societies can offer the Lakotas much that they want—those TV sets and pickup trucks—but it's hard to enter those systems and retain the traditional beliefs for very long.

So the "social constructivist" view might be restated as "for different people in different situations, different models may be most successful in helping them achieve their goals." But if we accept this formulation—and I do—it does not follow that anything goes: The twenty-first century is not the fifteenth century, the new belief systems now available to the Lakotas may serve them much better than their traditional systems, and it is not cultural imperialism for us to point this out. Common sense, not to mention good manners, obviously require that such criticism be advanced with some delicacy, but—*pace* the more radical forms of social constructivism—to refrain from such criticism does the Lakota no kindness.

There's nothing for it: We shall have to engage with the Lakotas. They can explain the virtues of their beliefs, and we can explain why they should get their flu shots. Over time, I think they'll come around. (Though there may be a particular problem convincing a tribal official such as Mr. LeBeau: "It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends upon his not understanding it!" (Sinclair, 1935/1994, p. 109)).

Funding

The author received no direct funding for this research.

Author details

Howard Darmstadter¹

E-mail: hdarmstadter@gmail.com

ORCID ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3746-3458>

¹ 1159 Rock Rimmon Road, Stamford, CT 06903-1210, USA.

Citation information

Cite this article as: Relativism defended, Howard Darmstadter, *Cogent Arts & Humanities* (2016), 3: 1166685.

Notes

1. In his 29 December 1976 Presidential Address to the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association.

tion, Hilary Putnam announced his own rejection of the correspondence theory (Putnam, 1977).
2. This is close to Nelson Goodman's view. "The movement [of philosophy] is from unique truth and a world fixed and found to a diversity of right and even conflicting versions or worlds in the making." (Goodman, 1978, p. x). My discussion of isomorphism also owes much to Goodman (1951, ch. 1).

References

- Boghossian, P. (2006). *Fear of knowledge*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199287185.001.0001>
- Darmstadter, H. (1971). Consistency of belief. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 68, 301–310. doi:10.2307/2025272
- Darmstadter, H. (1974). Can beliefs correspond to reality? *The Journal of Philosophy*, 71, 302–314. doi:10.2307/2024739
- Darmstadter, H. (2007). Relativism and progress. *Reason Papers*, 29, 41–57.
- Goodman, N. (1951). *The structure of appearance*. Cambridge: Harvard U. Press.
- Goodman, N. (1978). *Ways of worldmaking*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.
- Goodman, N. (1996). Notes on the well-made world. In P. McCormick (Ed.), *Starmaking: Realism, anti-realism, and irrealism* (pp. 151–160). Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Hawking, S., & Mlodinow, L. (2010). *The grand design*. New York, NY: Bantam.
- Kasparov, G. (2010, 11 February). The chess master and the computer (review of D. Rasskin-Gutman, *Chess metaphors: Artificial intelligence and the human mind*). *The New York Review of Books*, 57, 16–19.
- Krausz, M. (Ed.). (2010). *Relativism: A contemporary anthology*. New York, NY: Columbia U. Press.
- Krugman, P. (2010, November 26). *The instability of moderation, The conscience of a liberal*. Retrieved from Krugman's blog: <http://krugman.blogs.nytime.com/2010/11/26/the-instability-of-moderation/>
- Pinker, S. (1997). *How the mind works*. New York, NY: Norton.
- Putnam, H. (1977). Realism and reason. *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 50, 483–498.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3129784>
- Quine, W. V. O. (1961). *From a logical point of view* (2nd ed., rev.). Cambridge: Harvard U. Press.
- Rovane, C. (2013). *The metaphysics and the ethics of relativism*. Cambridge: Harvard U. Press.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674726062>
- Sinclair, U. (1935/1994). *I, candidate for governor: And how I got licked*. Berkeley: U. California Press.
- Waters, M. R., Forman, S. L., Jennings, T. A., Nordt, L. C., Driese, S. G., Feinberg, J. M., ... Wiederhold, J. E. (2011, March 25). The buttermilk creek complex and the origins of Clovis at the Debra L. Friedkin Site, Texas. *Science*, 331, 1599–1603.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1126/science.1201855>



© 2016 The Author(s). This open access article is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) 4.0 license.

You are free to:

Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format
Adapt — remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially.
The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms.

Under the following terms:

Attribution — You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made.
You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.
No additional restrictions

You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits.



Cogent Arts & Humanities (ISSN: 2331-1983) is published by Cogent OA, part of Taylor & Francis Group.

Publishing with Cogent OA ensures:

- Immediate, universal access to your article on publication
- High visibility and discoverability via the Cogent OA website as well as Taylor & Francis Online
- Download and citation statistics for your article
- Rapid online publication
- Input from, and dialog with, expert editors and editorial boards
- Retention of full copyright of your article
- Guaranteed legacy preservation of your article
- Discounts and waivers for authors in developing regions

Submit your manuscript to a Cogent OA journal at www.CogentOA.com

