



# Lecture 1: Epistemic Relativism



**Ontology** (ONTOS = Being, 'that which is'): the study of *reality*. What exists? What is real? What is the true nature of things?

**Epistemology** (EPISTEME = knowledge): the study of *knowledge*. How to get true and objective knowledge? How can we know that we really know the things that we think we know?

Example: Lots of people carry the corona virus without knowing it.

Ontological question: Does x carry the virus? Epistemological question: Does x *know* that they carry it?

## The Pre-Socratics and philosophy of nature

Greek philosophy before Socrates was concerned with *ontology*, or philosophy of nature (PHYSIS). They asked: What is the first principle of all things? What unites all that exists? What is the first cause? ARCHÉ = origin, first principle.

Change is a problem for ontology. The world is in constant change, making it difficult to extract universal and eternal truths. Any truth would be true only in an instant before it has changed again and become false. Example: it's raining.

Heracitus: 'Everything flows.' He thought that 'change is the only constant' and that 'no man can step into the same river twice'. Other pre-Socratics tried to find something *unchanging, eternal, fundamental and material* as the ARCHÉ.

Thales (624-546 BCE): Water is the basis of all things.

Anaximenes (585-525 BCE): Air, in various densities, is the basis of all the elements.

Pythagoras (582-496 BCE): Harmony and numbers are in everything (mathematics).

Democritus (460-370 BCE): Everything is composed of infinitely many tiny, indivisible parts in different shapes (atomism).

## The Sophist and their relativism

All the natural philosophers disagreed on the true nature of things. Theories come and go and many of them seem equally good. How can we choose between them? The Sophists saw that there are limitations to human knowledge. Even experts disagree over what is the truth.

The Sophists made the surprising conclusion: that there is no truth or falsity that is universal, eternal, independent or objective. No truth is better than another. This is called *epistemic relativism* (relativism about knowledge). Knowledge is relative to perspective, not objective or independent.

There is also the more radical relativism of *ontological relativism*. This view denies that there even is an objective reality to know about. This is also called constructivism, saying that we actually create our reality, rather than uncovering it.

Protagoras (490-420 BCE): "The human is the measure of all things." (HOMO MENSURA). This can be interpreted as individual relativism (true for me), conventional relativism (true for most people) or anthropocentric relativism (true from the human perspective).

If truth is relative to what perspective we take, then argumentation and rhetoric are important skills - especially so for democratic Athens, useful both in public trials and in politics. The Sophists were professional teachers of rhetoric and the first "lawyers",

or "advocates" (SOPHOS = wise). With rhetoric, any position can be made to sound true. The best argument wins.

## Socrates

Socrates (470/469-399 BC) challenged the Sophists' relativism.

Seeking true knowledge was the most important human activity, he argued. This must be done through dialogue, conceptual analysis and careful reflection. He walked around and engaged people in philosophical dialogue.

Socrates would ask general questions such as: *What is truth? What is justice? What is good? What is knowledge?* According to Socrates, universal knowledge lies already in our concepts and so we must seek truth within ourselves. "Know yourself."

To Socrates, searching for truth is recollection of what the soul already knew but forgot. He saw himself a midwife of knowledge, helping others to bring out the knowledge that is hidden in their souls. Socrates distinguished between true knowledge (EPISTEME) and strong belief (DOXA). *If I think I know something but later find out I was wrong, then I cannot say that I knew it, only that I thought I knew it. Most of the time, we only think that we know, but we really don't.*

The problem of knowledge can be summed up as follows: *How can we know that we have EPISTEME, and not only DOXA?* Socrates talks about the importance of being aware of the limits of our knowledge. If I know that I do not know, I will search for true knowledge, rather than falsely believing that I already know and therefore not search for knowledge.

In the end, however, Socrates was sentenced to death by poison for corrupting the youth and for blasphemy.

## The challenge of relativism

Epistemic relativism remains a challenge for scientific knowledge. Is there an objective truth to uncover? Today, we see a move back toward relativism, especially in philosophy of science.

Much of the history of philosophy can be seen as attempts to answer the problem of relativism. Philosophers have different answers to the question of how we get true and universal knowledge (EPISTEME). For instance:

Rationalism: True knowledge comes from thinking, abstraction and recollection, not from our senses. The highest form of knowledge is universal, ideal, unchanging and abstract. For instance, laws of nature, true under ideal conditions. (Plato, Descartes, Astell)

Empiricism: True knowledge comes from sense experience and observation. The highest form of knowledge are facts for which we have empirical evidence. Data first! (Hume, Popper)

Perspectivism: True knowledge is always from a certain situated perspective. There is no 'view from nowhere'. We cannot step outside our own boundaries and take on a God's view. (Kant, Kuhn, Feyerabend, Harding, Haraway)

This last position, perspectivism, comes in various degrees. Some perspectivists are strong relativist, saying that truth is relative to each person's perspective. Others say that all humans share a perspective. In-between these two, we also find combinations of empiricism and perspectivism.

**Repetition and discussion questions**

What is epistemology?

What is ontology?

What do you think is the relationship between ontology and epistemology? Is one more fundamental than the other?

What is epistemic relativism?

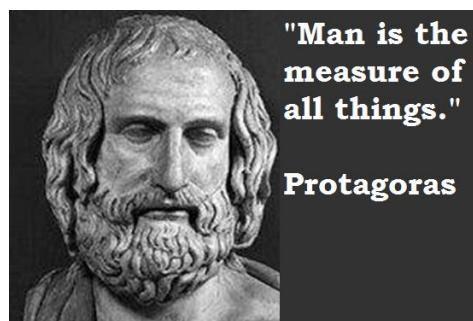
What is ontological relativism?

What do you think are the best argument for epistemic relativism?

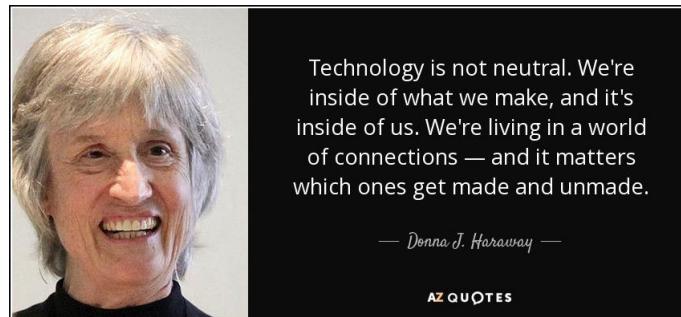
Why do you think philosophers have tried to prove that relativism is false?

Do you believe in a single truth or many?

Do you think there could be objective knowledge? Would that be a good ideal for science? Could there be science without it?



What do you think Protagoras meant by this?



Donna Haraway argues that all knowledge is situated and that people from marginalised groups in society have an 'epistemic' advantage to see the truth. What could this mean?



www.thestar.com, by Greg Perry



The sophist is a relativist, but Socrates is not.



Ontology is about the world: what really exists. Epistemology is about what we as humans can know. Photo: Pixabay

**Relativism in other traditions – Jainism (India)**

Relativism is also discussed in other philosophical traditions, including Jainism. This tradition has its origins in the eastern part of India, around the Ganges river, and arose in the period 700 – 500 BCE. It is considered to be one of the three ancient religions of India along with Buddhism and Hinduism.

The Jains accept all points of view. This non-onesidedness (*anekāntavāda*) or "theory of standpoints" renders truth a matter of perspective. It stems from the idea that all human knowledge is incomplete (we are not omniscient) and thus flawed. Furthermore, like Heraclitus, Jains see the world and objects in it as being in a constant state of change.

Podcast: **The Jain Theory of Standpoints** (20 mins)  
<https://historyofphilosophy.net/jain-standpoints>



Source: <https://jainismspecialproject.wordpress.com/2016/01/20/geography/>

This fact box is made by Maritza Ilich Mauseth