

How Relativism Contradicts Itself

It's often pointed out that relativism is becoming more prevalent in the West. In 2005, Pope Benedict XVI [claimed](#) that the West was building "a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one's own ego and desires."

But though an attitude of relativism may be growing in popularity, philosophically speaking, it's a very silly position. As numerous philosophers have pointed out, the central claim of relativism that "there is no truth" is actually self-defeating.

How so?

It's pretty simple, and I'm sure some of you are already aware of the following counter-argument to relativism. I'll rely here on [the analysis](#) offered by Edward Feser, author of several books and professor of philosophy in California.

Feser begins with establishing the traditional understanding of truth as "a matter of *conformity* or *correspondence* between thought and reality (and, by extension, between language and reality, since we express our thoughts in language)."

Translation: you see a flower in the field, you think "I see a flower in the field," you say "I see a flower in the field," and there is, in fact, a flower in the field.

Next, to the self-defeating character of relativism. If someone says that "there is no truth," then he is essentially saying "*It is true* that there is no truth." In other words, he is making a statement about reality, which proves his claim false. If he tries to backpedal and say that it's not true, then his statement is also false. Either way, the claim that "there is no truth" is self-defeating.

There are a couple of other ways the self-proclaimed relativist may try to backpedal.

He may try to reject the terms “true” and “false” altogether. Feser responds:

“The trouble with this response is that if the proponent... refuses to characterize his utterances as either true or false, then he cannot really claim to be asserting any proposition or statement at all, since a proposition or statement is susceptible of being either true or false. His utterance of “There is no truth” will therefore have to be taken as a mere string of sounds lacking meaning or semantic content—like a grunt or a moan—rather than as a literal English sentence. He won’t literally be saying anything with which we can intelligibly either agree or disagree.”

The relativist may also try to claim that the statement “there is no truth” is *true for him*, but not necessarily for other people. Again, Feser’s response:

“But that, of course, is completely trivial and uninteresting, telling us nothing we didn’t already know. Certainly it does not entail that there is no absolute truth. It’s just a report about some opinion the relativist finds he has floating around in his mind. And what more are we supposed to say to that than: ‘Um, thank you for sharing’?”

But it’s worse than that. For the proponent of [this argument] is not merely making the trivial assertion that he happens to have this belief floating around in his mind. He’s also denying that there is anything more to a belief’s being true than it’s being among the beliefs one has floating around in one’s mind.”

And even by making the claim that something is “true for him,” the supposed relativist still does not avoid making truth

claims about reality, because he is saying that *it is true* that something is only personally true for him.

To summarize, relativism is a philosophically incoherent position through and through. If its influence is increasing in Western society, it can only be a signal of a corresponding decrease in critical thinking.