

YOUNG ON THE COHERENCE OF ANTI-REALIST RELATIVISM

In his paper, "Relatively Speaking : The Coherence of Anti-Realist Relativism"¹ James O. Young attempts to defend the position of anti-realist relativism against a series of arguments made by realists, attempting to establish the incoherence and self-refuting nature of the anti-realist relativist position. Young, after replying to the realist, says that if "realists are to confute anti-realism, they must demonstrate that it is an adequate semantic program, inferior to realism".² It is the aim of this paper to take the first steps towards such a demonstration.

For Young realism is "the doctrine according to which the truth of sentences is determined by the way things really are".³ Truth is a relationship between sentences and reality. Anti-realist relativism on the other hand holds that "truth results from a relation between sentences within a theory : a sentence is true if warranted by a correct theory".⁴ For the anti-realist, "[t]he truth of a sentence is not determinate but, rather, relative to the theory to which it owes its warrant".⁵

This form of relativism is thought by many of today's realists to be incoherent because it is allegedly self-defeating. The realist argues that if anti-realist relativism is by hypothesis taken to be correct, then it must be incorrect because it explicitly denies that any sentences, including the sentence expressing the position of anti-realist relativism, are true in virtue of reality. Therefore, the realist concludes, anti-realist relativism must be incorrect

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Young points out that this argument is unsuccessful because it begs the question of the "correctness" of the realist account of "truth." All the anti-realist relativist is claiming is that their theory is "correct" in their sense of the word, "true" only relative to some theory.⁶ They are not claiming that their theory is correct in virtue of reality.

What does the anti-realist relativist mean by the word 'correct' in his/her definition? We recall that for the anti-realist relativist, a sentence is true if warranted by a *correct* theory. The word 'correct' in this definition is important; if we were to say that a sentence is true if merely warranted by *a theory*, we would have a trivial definition of truth because then any arbitrary sentence could be shown to be true by choice of the right theory. On the other hand if 'correct' is taken to mean "true" again the anti-realist relativist is in trouble. If 'true' is defined in a realist sense, then the realist's self-refutation goes through. If 'true' is defined in an anti-realist relativist sense, then Young's definition is circular. It therefore seems that anti-realist relativism is incoherent.

One way in which Young could escape this dilemma is to give an *independent* definition of 'correct', a definition which is neutral between realism and relativism. The most plausible way to do this in my opinion is to say that a correct theory is one which satisfies various criteria of *justification*. These criteria may include high explanatory power, internal coherence, simplicity, problem-solving ability along with the critical ability to demonstrate inadequacies in competing theories. In this sense, anti-realist relativism is the position that a sentence is true if warranted by a *justified* theory. This is not an implausible position. Certain theoretical sentences in cosmology about black holes are taken to be "true" or probably "true", because they are deduc-

tions from a justified physical theory such as General Relativity and background statements.

Anti-realist relativism is not however an adequate general theory of truth. The reason for this is that anti-realist relativism begs important metaphysical questions which realism does not. My first objection is that there are many sentences which are intuitively "true" but do not have warrant from a justified theory, that is a unique theory. This is what I take 'a' to mean in Young's definition of anti-realist relativism. Now the sentence :

(1) There are objects in the universe

is an intuitively "true" sentence. This sentence may well have some deep metaphysical presupposition, but there is no reason whatsoever to believe that its "truth" is a function of being warranted by a justified theory because there are an indefinite number of justified theories from physics and sociology that would imply (1). There seems to be no *unique* theory which gives theoretical warrant to this sentence, unlike the example above about certain properties of black holes. The burden of proof is upon the anti-realist relativist to demonstrate that this is not so.

A second objection to anti-realist relativism is that there may be "true" sentences which are "true" as a brute fact and not because they are warranted by some justified theory. In a 'complete' explanation of nature it is not contradictory to suppose that certain facts about the world receive no answer, such as why the most basic of elementary particles have a certain physical property. If there are brute facts about reality then there will be intuitively "true" sentences which are not warranted by some justified theory. Again the burden of proof is upon the shoulders of the anti-realist relativist, this time to prove that there can be no brute facts about reality.

A third objection to anti-realist relativism is that it is logically possible for a maximally justified theory to be intuitively "false." This objection may seem to be based upon realist intuitions so it is necessary to advance this criticism with caution. Could there be a logical gap between "truth" and *justification*? Consider the hypothesis dear to the hearts of epistemological sceptics, that all of my external world beliefs are "false" because I am a brain in a vat being deceived by an evil scientist. If there was no external world at all, then many maximally justified theories would be false – namely all of those theories attempting to make sense of a non-existent external world. The evil scientist hypothesis is regarded by most philosophers as an invalid way of supporting epistemological scepticism because it is at best a bare logical possibility. Despite interesting and controversial arguments from Hilary Putnam attempting to establish that we could not possibly be brains in a vat,⁷ it is not unreasonable to suppose that the evil scientist hypothesis is a logically possible "truth". It is for one thing something which can be clearly conceived in the imagination, unlike a round square. Whilst the notion of a perfect deception may be of little epistemological interest, this thought experiment does show that there is a logical gap between "truth" and *justification*. Once more the anti-realist relativist must show otherwise.

I have given three reasons why I believe Young's form of anti-realist relativism cannot provide us with an adequate general theory of truth. My objections take the form of burden of proof arguments, so I cannot claim to have decisively refuted anti-realist relativism. Nevertheless, I do not see how the burden of proof can be discharged. Further, the mere fact that anti-realist relativism commits us to having to solve metaphysical problems shows that this position is not a completely general theory of

truth. But whether realism is defined by young satisfies the condition of generality is a question beyond the scope of this paper. Perhaps both theories will in the future be seen to be incorrect.

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NOTES

1. J. O. Young, "Relatively Speaking: The Coherence of Anti-Realist Relativism", *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 16, No. 3, September 1986, pp. 503-509.
2. *Ibid*, pp. 508-509.
3. *Ibid*, p. 503.
4. *Ibid*, p. 503.
5. *Ibid*, p. 504.
6. *Ibid*, p. 505.
7. H. Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, (Combridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981). Putnam's critique of metaphysical realism and defense of internal realism, has been criticised by many philosophers. This debate cannot be entered into here.

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