

Multiplicity in an Absolute

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I wish to begin with stating the Platonic notions of Truth and Goodness (Kraut, 2004). By the Platonic notion I understand that notions, such as ‘truth’ and ‘goodness’ are Absolute. Should the whole human race cease to exist, these ideals would still persevere. I would also like to show my disagreement with the notion that science¹ is the only means of acquiring truth. Moreover, I wish to pre-emptively reject the idea that being labelled a Platonist is somehow a detriment to the argument presented. Without this idea of Absolute, there is nothing stopping us from spiralling into relativism, where nothing is true and nothing is false. Thus, this argument is a two pronged attack against relativist philosophy and scientific dogmatism.

By accepting the premise of there being an objective truth, one must ask whether this truth can be arrived at through one means alone. It is highly unlikely that there is only one way to reach this truth. Even through a relativist philosophy, we reach the same conclusion that is that there is no singular manner in which to approach a particular goal. Science, therefore, is merely one way of interpreting the world; it cannot definitively explain phenomena that are beyond its capabilities. Examples of these phenomena would be: ethics, aesthetics, God, emotions and even psychology. All theories

¹ By science I understand the scientific method of empiricism, in a manner not dissimilar to the Bergsonian conception of ‘analysis’ (Lawlor & Moulard Leonard, 2004).

which stem from these varied topics cannot be falsified², such as the idea of a soul or Gestalt psychology. Does this mean they are meaningless? Yes, if we take science to be the only means of achieving truth, but this is not the case. Otherwise we would be forced to discard all advances made in not only all the fields mentioned above, but even of philosophy itself (which would render this journal absurd). Yet sectors of empiricism and science have attempted to answer such questions as what emotions are. We can say that emotions are a particular chemical in the brain. Yet is merely redefining a term such as love into dopamine really explaining what love is? It is simply replacing one term with another, equally ambiguous, term.

I will elaborate with an analogy; take the metric system and the practice of measuring a particular object. I can say that a particular object is 5 metres; I can also say that it is 5.47 yards. Furthermore I can say that it is 'y' arm lengths, or that it is the span of two lighters placed horizontally. Are any of these wrong? If you're meant to answer using metres (as was the case in primary school), then all those answers which are not in metres are incorrect. Yet fundamentally they are all merely different way of looking at the same entity.

The Platonic 'truth-value' would be that that body is fundamentally extended or even that the object simply is and is there, ready to be measured. If we abandon the idea of absolutes

² Falsification refers to the principle of falsification forwarded by Karl Popper, by which a scientific theory is only scientific if it can be potentially proved wrong (Cottingham, 2008, p. 455).

then there is nothing from stopping one person from saying that it is a bottle and another from saying it is a weapon or another from saying that it is art. However, how can these people communicate about that 'bottle' if they do not even agree on what it is? Surely, then, there is that entity which all observers perceive in the same way otherwise they would not be able to discuss it- common reference point. I can admire the bottle for the skill taken to create it, its aesthetic form, its contents, and its use as a paperweight or a weapon. None of these interpretations are wrong. If I need it as a paperweight, I do not care about the skill taken to make it. Yet, to ignore its capacities as a container or a weapon would be to limit oneself. How does this make me a Platonist? It is because I believe in the objectively timeless bottle that is there regardless of how I perceive it. The main reason for this point is not to prove the existence of the 'form of a bottle,' but rather to satisfy the need for an objective good, to show that in order to reach said objective good or truth one cannot solely take science, or any one interpretation.

The objective truth of a person's psyche cannot be found via science, the purpose of the bottle cannot be taken from science as there are facets which science cannot consider. Take my car, for example, science cannot explain the entirety of my car, it can explain the mechanics, how it runs, whether it will pass VRT or not, but not my emotional attachments to my car. As a result, this Platonic idea I am advocating is one that considers all of the facets of the object in question, in this case my car, in union, so that this Absolute notion is somehow a composite of all the various interpretations. Perhaps we cannot find a means of viewing all of these facets at once, which is fine, but we can employ a variety of

tools to understand them, a scientific viewpoint, an aesthetic viewpoint, etc. Just as in order to know the sides and angles of a triangle require the use of a variety of tools, such as ruler, protractor, pencil and formulae. These viewpoints or methods are means of understanding the Absolute in question.

That isn't to say that scientific progress is wrong, far from it. I am merely showing that even the notion of 'infallible science' has its limits. To paraphrase Whitehead, dogmatic belief in science is akin to the religious zealotry of the middle ages. Science has become "[a] mystic chant over an unintelligible universe," (Whitehead, 2011, p. 27). I find it humorous how we do not question a statement if it is followed by the prefix, "scientists say". The words that follow that phrase may be utter garbage or be the same 'fact' you heard a few days ago but dismissed as nonsensical. It is this attitude that I criticize; that we believe that science is the only way to reach the truth.

From a philosophical standpoint, those who take up the battle cry of science call for the removal of metaphysics. However, how is science meant to comprehend the human psyche: - by reducing man to a mere machine? To view the world in only scientific terms is to have a stunted view. A friend once pointed out to me, that knowing how a rainbow is formed should not detract from one's overall appreciation of it. It should not, but to view a rainbow solely in terms of its scientific properties is to only focus on one feature, or a singular perspective. I can admire a rainbow for a multitude of reasons, being colourful, because it follows rain, for the science behind it, its aesthetics or simply because it brings me

joy. Solely focusing on one is to miss the big picture. There is more to the world around us than merely the scientific. Can science explain the psychological joy I feel when seeing a rainbow? One could say perhaps it is because I recall fond memories because of this and that. However simply giving a chemical breakdown of the process is not really leading me to the whole truth of why I like rainbows. This is similar to a qualm I have with certain art historians, as they tend to focus solely on the historical aspect. An object cannot be reduced to a singular feature, such as its physical components.

Allow me to give a practical example, in Book 6 section 13 of his 'Meditations' Marcus Aurelius' advises the reader to take something that arouses a strong emotional response, such as copulation, and view it solely in terms of its physical components so as to dispel these passionate responses (Groff, 2004, p. 142). In our example, sex would be two bodies in friction ending in chemical discharge, hardly a turn on I'm sure you'll agree and furthermore it does not really explain our arousal at sex. Our traditional response to sex, arousal, ceases to exist when we refer to sex in this manner, although it must be noted that there are also different contexts in which one may talk about sex. However this 'redefinition' is not actually sex. For example, let 'p' be a particular phenomenon, in this case sex and 'r' be my usual response to 'p'. If I attempt to explain 'p' in a different manner, 'e', then we can say that 'p' is interchangeable and equal to 'e' (in the same way I can replace 2 with $(1 + 1)$ in an equation, or the author of 'The Bell Jar' with Sylvia Plath.) If this is so, then I should have the same reaction, 'r',

when referring to both 'p' and 'e'. This is not the case hence 'p' and 'e' are not interchangeable and hence not equal.

This particular redefinition stated above has removed the element of seduction, the passion involved and the mystery of sex. Surely the most Stoic among us would suggest that I simply include those features into the definition. However how can we even attempt to define something as ineffable as mystery and seduction? Once they are explained, they cease to be mystery and seduction but become bland fact. Part of their charm is that they cannot be known completely. Applying our argument to this example, sex, considered as an Absolute, would incorporate both the physical, scientific elements alongside the mystical attributes of sex.

I do not wish to replace science with metaphysics or with art, merely show that each method has its own particular merits. There is an Absolute Truth, however, and such a truth cannot be reached solely through one particular approach. Rather, just as a physical object cannot be fully understood through one interpretation, so too the Truth. One cannot say that they have been to Paris because they have roamed the streets using Google Earth, even if it should one day be as sophisticated as to show pedestrians walking around³. This type of analysis fails to grasp what that object in question truly is, in terms of the Absolute.

³ This is a modern adaptation of one of Bergson's old example of a city composed of juxtaposed photographs (Bergson & Andison, 1946, pp. 159-192).

A variety of means to reach the Truth does not suggest a multitude of truths, just as the multiple routes to the university do not imply more than one university. Rather, different means of reaching that same truth. However having multiple routes does not mean that they are equally correct as relativism would suggest, passing through Mosta and Birkirkara makes far more sense than driving along the perimeter of the island, through Mellieħa to reach University. One route makes sense if one wants to arrive quickly, whilst the other makes sense if one wishes to take a scenic route. What is needed is to accept the multiplicity and ever-changing nature of the phenomena that surround us. By adopting merely one means of looking at the world, we limit ourselves to that one way and come to forsake the vivacity that surrounds us.

∞ **References**

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