

# Truth in Context

An Essay on Pluralism and Objectivity



Michael P. Lynch

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## An Essay on Pluralism and Objectivity

Michael P. Lynch

A Bradford Book  
The MIT Press  
Cambridge, Massachusetts  
London, England

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This book was set in Sabon on Miles 33 by Achorn Graphic Services, Inc., and was printed and bound in the United States of America.

First printing, 1998.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lynch, Michael P. (Michael Patrick), 1966–

Truth in context : an essay on pluralism and objectivity / Michael P. Lynch.

p. cm.

“A Bradford book.”

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-262-12212-X (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Truth. 2. Pluralism. 3. Objectivity. I. Title.

BD171.L87 1998

121—dc21

98-18000

CIP

For Terry B., who put things in context in the first place



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## Preface

I first became interested in questions about truth and objectivity during an undergraduate year spent studying philosophy at the University of Glasgow. My intuitive belief then was that there could be more than one true account of some subject matter without that implying that every account is true. I still have that belief today, and I am even more convinced now that any sane human philosophy must account for this fact. This book is an attempt to sketch just such a philosophy—a view that allows for both realism about truth and pluralism about the world.

Philosophers generally have pretensions to populism, and I am no exception, but questions about truth and relativism are undoubtedly in the foreground of contemporary intellectual culture. Such questions are faced in literary criticism, history, and the sciences as much as they are in philosophy. So while this is undoubtedly a book in the area of “analytic” metaphysics and epistemology, my motivation for writing it was not simply the abstract pursuit of truth in those fields. My motivation was to clear conceptual space for a more general dialogue on how to reconcile pluralism and objectivity. Accordingly, I have tried to define technical terms and have confined more esoteric remarks to the notes. Even so, the reader less familiar with technical philosophy may find it useful to skip certain sections initially (e.g., 1.5, 4.2, and the latter half of 5.5), returning to them after having gained an overall understanding of my argument.

Many people have helped me find my way through this complex maze of ideas. First thanks go to William Alston, who deftly supervised my first fumbling attempts at understanding truth and whose own work has

deeply influenced my thinking on these and many other matters. Alston was also kind enough to provide extensive comments on a late draft of this book, which helped improve the text immeasurably. Mark Timmons, John Tienson, David Henderson, and Terence Horgan read an early version of the manuscript and met to discuss it with me over several weeks in the summer of 1997. I learned a huge amount during these sessions, and a much better book emerged as a result. Horgan, in particular, provided crucial advice and encouragement at every turn. Paul Bloomfield was kind enough to lend his services as a hardened realist and provided exhaustive commentary on the manuscript, helping me to avoid numerous mistakes. His support and friendship throughout have been invaluable. Special thanks go to my graduate and undergraduate students during the last two years, especially the participants in two seminars on truth and objectivity that I gave in the spring of 1996 and 1998. The first of these was where I initially tested many of my ideas on these subjects; the second helped to refine my presentation of them. Numerous others also provided helpful comments and conversations, including William Lawhead, John Post, Robert Neustadt, Ken Sufka, Michael Wakoff, John Hawthorne, R. M. Sainsbury, Alessandra Tanesini, Robert Westmoreland, Jennifer Case, Jose Benardete, Andrew Cortens, Hunter Hatfield, Karsten Steuber, Dave Truncellito, Howard Hewitt, and Terry Berthelot. To all the above, I express my thanks. What truth there is in what follows I share with them; the mistakes are my own.

Portions of chapter 2 are based on material that originally appeared under the title “Three Models of Conceptual Schemes” in *Inquiry* 40 (1998), no. 4. I am grateful to the University of Mississippi’s Office of Research for providing me with much needed Summer Research Grants for 1996 and 1997, and to my chair, Michael Harrington, for providing an excellent environment in which to work.

Finally, I thank my parents and older siblings for inspiration. Artists all, it is they who taught me to see.

May 1998

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# Truth in Context



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## Introduction

Up to about 1850 almost everyone believed that sciences expressed truths that were exact copies of a definite code of non-human realities. But the enormously rapid multiplication of theories these latter days has well-nigh upset the notion of any one of them being a more literally objective kind of thing than another. There are so many geometries, so many logics, so many physical and chemical hypotheses, so many classifications, each one of them good for so much and yet not good for everything, that the notion that even the truest formula may be a human device and not a literal transcript has dawned upon us.

William James

The idea that was dawning on William James and other philosophers at the beginning of this century is no longer novel as we approach its end. The notion of *pluralism* shines brightly within academia and throughout the culture at large. In its most general form, pluralism is the idea that there can be more than one true story of the world; there can be incompatible, but equally acceptable, accounts of some subject matter. There are no absolute facts but a diversity of truths, all of which equally clamor for our attention. Once a subject of discussion only in philosophy, variations on this theme have found their way into the disciplines of psychology, physics, history, and educational theory, to name just a few. Yet the many problems involved in trying to understand pluralism, the problems that so vexed James and his critics, remain. Chief among them is the problem of finding room for objectivity inside the pluralist's picture of the world; it is the problem of allowing for *different* truths without slipping into the nihilistic position that there is no truth at all. Pluralists, like overly permissive parents, always seem on the brink of allowing anything to be true—of saying that anything goes. Finding a solution to the

problem of how to reconcile pluralist philosophies with an objective notion of truth remains as the most pressing and difficult of the problems associated with such views.

Almost all of us assume in our everyday lives that pluralism and objectivity are compatible. In contemporary educational practice, for example, it is widely agreed that there is no one right way to teach a class, yet there are definitely wrong ways to do so, as many of us know from experience. We also tend to believe that there is no one best way to raise children, or to demonstrate romantic love for another, or to prepare a curry, although, again, there are mistaken ways of doing all these things. In our day-to-day lives, we find it natural and reasonable to assume that there can be a variety of equally good viewpoints, without feeling obliged to state that there must be a *best* viewpoint. It is as if (to use a simple analogy) we think there can be multiple winners despite the fact that there can be definite losers.

Yet even a little philosophical reflection dashes cold water on our intuitive conjunction of pluralism and objectivity when we try to extend it across the board. To begin with, the examples I have cited, while appealing, are examples involving actions and feelings. It is easy for most people to imagine more than one “right” way to act or feel in a particular situation. It is more difficult to understand how competing *descriptions of reality* could both be true. When we say that there could be more than one true account of the facts and yet that some accounts are mistaken, we seem to be trying to state the impossible. First, we seem to be saying that reality is *not* absolute, that there can be irreconcilable but equally true perspectives on the world; and second, that truth *is* absolute, that some perspectives are simply true, others are simply false. Many of the thinkers who reflect on this subject conclude that, in the descriptive sphere at least, pluralism and objectivity are inconsistent with one another. Such pessimism is not restricted to one particular side of the academic fence. It can be found, for example, on both sides of the increasingly shrill debate over the objectivity of knowledge and science. In the name of “postmodernism,” “historicism,” and “antirealism,” one side of the debate declares that we must embrace relativism and deems any talk of objective truth as philosophically naive. The opposition, invoking “realism” and “common sense,” argues that *any* relativism leads

to nihilism. There is objective truth, these theorists hold, and this means that there can be one and only one true story of the world. Both sides would appear to agree on one thing only: You can't have it both ways. Either there are different but equally true perspectives on the world and hence truth is not objective, or truth is objective and there can be but one true perspective on the world. There is no middle path.

This book argues that there is a middle path: a thoroughgoing metaphysical pluralism is compatible with realism about truth. In the game of knowledge and opinion, there may be multiple winners, but there are also definite losers. One can be a pluralist without having to believe that anything goes.

Metaphysical pluralism is *pluralist* because it implies that true propositions and facts are relative to conceptual schemes or worldviews; it is *metaphysical* because the facts in question concern the nature of reality—facts about God, mind, and the universe. Realism about truth, on the other hand, is the view that a proposition is true just when the world is as that proposition says it is. Truth, on a realist view like the correspondence theory, is a relation between the world and our thought, irreducible to epistemic concepts of justification or warrant—even justification or warrant in the long run or at the “ideal limit.” Philosophers generally assume that these two views are opposites: if the facts are soft, so must be truth. In arguing otherwise, my objective is to point out that we can avoid what Putnam has called the “recoil phenomenon”—the process by which philosophers bounce back and forth from an extreme absolutism and an equally extreme relativism.<sup>1</sup> The difficulty lies not in persuading people to take this middle path—for I think that many of us who are not prisoners of theory do believe that a middle way is possible—but in explaining *how* it is possible.

The compatibility of pluralism and objectivity is not only of academic interest. The problem of how to incorporate multiple viewpoints into one culture (or one culture into multiple viewpoints) is one of the most important political issues of our age. Metaphysics, as Kant knew, is important because it can help us understand the limits and structure of our moral and political problems and, to that degree, help us see our way through to a solution to those problems. As I shall argue, the ubiquity of metaphysical concepts ensures that a pluralism concerned with such



concepts has wider implications. Thus, getting straight on how metaphysical pluralism can be objective will hopefully allow us to make the same claims for pluralism in the normative realm.

But the immediate goal of this book is limited to showing that metaphysical pluralism and realism about truth are compatible. The first and most formidable task is to elucidate a plausible form of metaphysical pluralism. This must be done in the face of damning objections to the effect that the view is incoherent or, worse, simply trivial. Presenting a coherent metaphysical pluralism, and answering these objections, is the subject of the first four chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the debate and the main principles of metaphysical pluralism, according to which the contents of our thought and the very facts that such thought can express are intrinsically relative to one among many conceptual schemes. Chapter 2 looks into what a pluralist could mean by “conceptual scheme” and presents a new theory of the notion. In chapter 3, I argue that, understood properly, the pluralist doctrine of content-relativity presupposes the Wittgensteinian theme (also echoed in Putnam) that certain of our concepts—including concepts like *object*, *fact*, and *existence*—are indeterminate and open to being radically extended in new and unforeseen directions. For the pluralist, our most basic metaphysical concepts are *fluid*. Chapter 4 develops this theme in a way that allows the pluralist to answer some of the more troublesome objections to her view.

After I have sketched a coherent version of metaphysical pluralism, the next task before me is to explain and motivate realism about truth and to show how conjoining it with pluralism makes for an intelligible philosophical position in its own right. Chapter 5 discusses the two main theories of truth that pluralists have typically adopted in the past and argues that neither is particularly well suited for pluralism. Drawing on Alston’s minimal realism about truth, as well as some suggestive remarks of Crispin Wright’s, I spend the rest of the chapter developing a position that is at once realist and pluralist about truth. Chapter 6 concludes the book by answering a number of objections and logical paradoxes that face any combination of pluralism and realism.

This overall position, the result of combining pluralism and alethic realism, I call *relativistic Kantianism*—a term I first heard used by William Alston in relation to Hilary Putnam’s view in *Reason, Truth, and History*

(1981). This essay is very much influenced by Putnam's work in the last two decades. In fact, the pluralism I develop is deeply based on Putnam's own views. Yet what I call relativistic Kantianism is importantly distinct from his pragmatic realism. Most crucially, Putnam has denied that metaphysical pluralism (which he often refers to as "conceptual relativity") is consistent with a realist view of truth. It is precisely this denial that I aim to undermine. Furthermore, relativistic Kantianism, unsurprisingly, is more Kantian than Putnam's own position. To cite only one point, I argue that the pluralist metaphysician has nothing to fear from admitting the existence of what Putnam has derisively called *THE WORLD* and what Kant called the noumenal realm.

Throughout, I am concerned with showing that relativistic Kantianism is a viable philosophical position, one which makes a certain amount of sense, hangs together, is internally consistent, and is nontrivial. I am much less concerned to prove, via attacks on absolutism, that relativistic Kantianism must be true. Besides running counter to the spirit of the view itself, that is simply another project. One might be tempted to say that my focus is therefore defense, not offense, but in the end that distinction is too arbitrary to be of much use. Given the troublesome objections that face epistemic views of truth, showing that pluralism is compatible with *alethic* realism (realism about truth) is itself a vindication of pluralist metaphysics. Further, I argue that there is a connection between pluralism at the conceptual level and pluralism at the metaphysical level—an important fact since so many philosophers see pluralism about concepts as plausible. And, of course, one provides indirect support for a position by addressing and solving outstanding objections.

In the remaining pages of this introduction I would like briefly to touch upon two terminological issues not mentioned in the main body of the text. These points will be of interest primarily to the specialist; I urge those less interested in purely technical issues to skip ahead to chapter 1.

First, some readers may be puzzled as to why I am using the terms "pluralism" and "absolutism" rather than the more familiar "realism" and "antirealism." There are two reasons for this terminological decision. Most obviously, I need the realist/antirealist contrast for my discussion

of differing conceptions on truth, and it seems best not to spread these words around too much. Moreover, while I am fairly confident that my use of “realism” *with regard to truth* accords with how it is used in the literature on that particular subject, I am less sure that there is any common way of making the distinction between realism and antirealism *in general*. For instance, philosophers often use the word “antirealist” to cover positions as disparate as nominalism, idealism, and Dummettian verificationism. Some might label what I’m calling metaphysical pluralism as a general antirealism, but given that word’s wide variety of uses and given that many of the other views often labeled “antirealist” will turn out (as we shall see) to be absolutist in my sense, I think it best to use another set of terms entirely.

Second, the word “pluralism,” like any popular philosophical term, is unfortunately associated with a bewildering variety of positions on any number of topics. One can be a pluralist about education, history, morals, religion, scientific knowledge, or, as in the present case, metaphysics. But even when I stipulate that the field of interest is facts about what ultimately exists, I face ambiguity in the term. The chief problem is that there are several continua along which one can be a pluralist with regard to facts. In particular, we need to distinguish between *vertical* and *horizontal pluralism*.<sup>2</sup> Vertical pluralism is the view that there is more than one type of fact to be had in the world, and hence that different “levels” of fact-stating discourse may not be reducible to a more basic discourse. Vertical pluralism is radically nonreductivist about facts. The vertical pluralist, for instance, sees no reason to attempt a reduction of all facts to physical facts but rather holds that facts about, e.g., the mind, art, and morality hold an equal claim to ontological primacy.<sup>3</sup>

Horizontal pluralism, on the other hand, holds that there can be incompatible facts within a single level of discourse. Hence, a horizontal pluralist might hold that there can be incompatible but equally correct moral facts or physical facts or facts about the nature of the mind. Typically, this is described by saying that the facts in question are “relative” to worldviews, conceptual schemes, or the like. When I argue that metaphysical pluralism is compatible with realism about truth, this is the sort of pluralism I have in mind.

The logical relationship between different types of pluralism is complex. A vertical pluralist, someone who believes (for instance) that facts about morality can't be reduced to facts about physics, might still deny that there could be incompatible moral facts. Simply because you think that moral facts are autonomous from physical facts doesn't mean that you think that moral facts are relative. So vertical pluralism about facts of a certain type doesn't imply horizontal pluralism about facts of that type. The situation involving the converse, however, is more complicated. To get straight on this, we need another distinction: that between *global* and *local* forms of horizontal pluralism. A local pluralist restricts her view to a particular type of fact or discourse, such as moral facts. So a local horizontal pluralist about morality would believe that there are incompatible moral facts, while a local vertical pluralist about morality would believe that moral facts are not reducible to another set of facts. A global horizontal pluralism, on the other hand, is pluralism with regard to every type of fact; pick any type of fact you wish, there can be incompatible but equally correct truths of that type. And global vertical pluralism is the view that no type of facts reduces to any other type of facts.

With this distinction in hand, we may now ask whether a local horizontal pluralism entails a local vertical pluralism. Let us take moral facts as the example. Does horizontal moral pluralism entail vertical moral pluralism? The question, in other words, concerns whether moral relativism implies that the (relative) moral facts are irreducible to physical facts. To say that one type of facts is reducible to another type of facts is to imply that the former can be completely explained in terms of the latter. But once moral facts are relativized to cultures or practices, then it seems that no set of physical facts alone will be able to capture or explain what is the case at the moral level. For any explanation of the moral facts would have to appeal to the culture or practice those facts were relative to. Relative moral facts, then, would seem irreducible to underlying physical facts, and hence local horizontal pluralism would appear to imply vertical pluralism.

The situation is even simpler when we ask whether global horizontal pluralism entails global vertical pluralism. Suppose that every fact is relative. If so, then any hostility toward pluralism along the vertical

dimension would only be so much bluff. If there are no absolute facts, then there are no absolute facts about reducibility either, and hence, practically speaking, facts at different levels are autonomous. For all intents and purposes, a global horizontal pluralism ushers in global vertical pluralism as well.

In the terms of these distinctions, my focus is on a horizontal *metaphysical* pluralism, the view that there can be incompatible metaphysical facts. This is practically warranted as it allows me to deal with one of the more popular types of pluralism in contemporary philosophy. More important, metaphysical issues have pervasive consequences. As I argue throughout the book, metaphysical concepts and truths are interwoven into the fabric of our conceptual schemes at a very basic level. Thus if there is a plurality of metaphysical facts, facts about ultimate reality, then *prima facie*, at least, there could be a plurality of any sort of fact. Metaphysical pluralism plausibly implies global pluralism; in short, the metaphysical pluralist acts locally while thinking globally.

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