**The Objectivity of Truth, a Core Truism?**

**Abstract**

It is often claimed by theorists of truth that truth is objective. Upon reflection, however, this familiar principle can be understood in multiple ways. With this in mind, we have conducted empirical studies designed to elicit people’s responses to questions about the objectivity of truth. These studies suggest the following: (1) overall, individuals tend to endorse claims that are consistent with the objectivity of truth; (2) individuals’ conceptions of the objectivity of truth can be importantly different from one another; (3) philosophers and non-philosophers both endorse the objectivity of truth, but the apparent commitment of philosophers is stronger.

**1. The “ordinary” notion of truth**

While the *objectivist* about truth maintains that the truth of a claim is the same for all, regardless of one’s individual inclinations or cultural heritage, the *relativist* about truth objects that whether any claim is true or false depends upon cultural attitudes, historical circumstances, or individual opinion.[[1]](#footnote-2) For the truth relativist, to be true is to be “true for me” or “true for us.” Accordingly, the number of (relatively) true or false expressions multiplies, according to the interests of various epistemic, cultural, or historical communities. Moreover, these communities might themselves be thought of as something like opposed factions, each thinking that the opinions held by members of their own community are better or more privileged than those held by other individuals or groups.

If we are to believe anecdotal warnings about the dialectical impasse faced by philosophy instructors, then relativism about truth is a widely held view among the folk, particularly undergraduate students (cf. Beebe and Sackris 2016).[[2]](#footnote-3) But is this naïve truth relativism part of our ordinary pre-theoretic beliefs about truth? We think that philosophical theorizing is best conducted in a way that respects the views of ordinary folk.[[3]](#footnote-4) Our appreciation of the philosophical problems that arise from thinking about truth are deeply rooted in ordinary, pre-theoretic, views about truth. To discuss the nature of truth without appreciating the varied ways in which the notion of truth has been employed “in the wild” looks past the very complexity that motivates us to explore the philosophical concept in question. Traditional philosophical approaches often seek to theorize about *X* in harmony with the ordinary or everyday use of *X*, but they do little to actually discover what thatactually is. Without such an appreciation of where we are, there is no proper way to think about where we might want to go.

The ways in which ordinary people, non-philosophers, think about truth demarcate the complex terrain that philosophical theories must traverse and describe. We employ a distinct methodological approach that sets out not to resolve the philosophical question of whether truth, as it is understood by philosophers and non-philosophers, is relative or objective but, instead, to describe the ordinary person’s notion of truth the way an ecologist might offer a detailed description of an environment. We hope to uncover the topography of the conceptual terrain that shapes the ordinary notion of truth. We do so not by relying upon our own intuitive beliefs about what we think ordinary people believe about truth but by getting up from our comfortable armchair and actually asking people about their views. We ask the folk and then let the theoretical chips fall as they may; in this respect our approach is more modest, less contentious, and hopefully both informative and useful.

To anticipate the discussion to follow, what we claim to have uncovered is empirical evidence that ordinary persons aren’t nearly as keen to affirm relativism about truth as anecdotal evidence suggests. In section two, we discuss some philosophical attempts to characterize the concept of truth. In section three, we characterize how a sample of 295 self-reported non-philosophers responded to a series of questions designed to unpack how the ordinary person thinks about truth. For comparison, we also report how a sample of 58 self-reported professional philosophers responded to the same questions. In section four, we offer discussion of these results, and in section five, we consider some objections to our explanation of the empirical data.

**2. Philosophers’ Views on the Objectivity of Truth**

Philosophers working on truth often seem to assume that when a statement is true, it’s true for everyone; truth doesn’t depend upon consensus or agreement. It involves facts, and a true statement doesn’t need to be known or even discovered to be true. Michael Lynch nicely articulates this line of thought as follows:

If I know anything, it is that I don’t know everything and neither does anyone else. There are some things we just won’t ever know, and there are other things we think we know but don’t. Grant this bit of common sense, and you are committed to the first truism about truth: truth is objective. (Lynch 2004, 10)

According to objectivism about truth, whether a statement is true doesn’t depend upon whether or not it’s known, believed, or even knowable by an individual person, a culture, or people living in a particular time period. For example, think of the following two claims: (A) “there are an odd number of stars in the universe” or (B) “complete knowledge of every even integer greater than 2 can be expressed as the sum of two primes.” These statements aren’t like empirical statements such as “the sky is blue on a clear summer day” because statements (A) and (B) contain information about which we cannot have complete knowledge. (A), for example, may not ever be known since it is not practical to count all stars in the universe. (B) may not ever be known because we may never have *complete* knowledge of every integer greater than 2. Regardless, (A) and (B) could be true independent of whether any human believes any one of them.

To say that objectivity is a core truism is to say that objectivity is fundamental to the proper understanding of truth.[[4]](#footnote-5) Lynch formalizes his definition of the core truism about objectivity in a later work:

*Objectivity*: The belief that *p* is true if, and only if, with respect to the belief that *p*, things are as they are believed to be. (Lynch 2009, 8)

Two notable ways of rejecting the objectivity truism would be to take up the view that truth is relative or that truth comes in degrees.

A discussion of relativism about truth warrants two points before we set out our main discussion. On one hand, not all forms of relativism are of the simpleminded variety we summarized at the beginning of the paper, and, on the other hand, there have been sophisticated discussions of partial truths or verisimilitude. First, while the primary target of ridicule in discussions of relativism is the simpleminded variety, not all forms of relativism about truth are simpleminded. We merely need to call upon some of the recent work on sophisticated forms of relativism to see that many contemporary varieties of relativism are far from simpleminded. Each of these works has offered a defensible position that does not succumb to typical counter-arguments that show rather easily that simpleminded relativism is false (Cf. Cappelen and Hawthorne 2009, Richard 2008, Hales 2009, MacFarlane 2014, Rovane 2013, Scharp 2013).

Second, there is a growing literature, mostly coming out of the philosophy of science, on a sophisticated analysis of truth known as “verisimilitude,” according to which truth is not an all-or-nothing affair but something that comes in degrees and propositions are “truth-like.” Ilkka Niiniluoto (1987), Karl Popper (2002), and Pavel Tichý (1974) are early advocates of such a view, and more recently, Elijah Millgram (2009) and Stephen Yablo (2014) introduce some relatively novel arguments supporting a notion of partial or soft truth. Discussions of relativist and degree theories of truth are quite complex, and we certainly don’t want to overlook this as we move forward with our empirical analysis. Rather, we simply want to flag these theories as sophisticated philosophical avenues for resisting the objectivity of truth.

**3. Empirical Findings**

Experimental studies on the nature of truth among non-philosophers have revealed that the shape of ordinary judgments about truth is far from uniform. A quick survey of the empirical studies completed by Næss (1938a, b, 1953) reveals a lack of consensus on the nature of truth. There, Næss identifies at least thirteen different theories of truth that seemed to be the most popular among a sample of Northern Europeans (See also Rothenberg 1992). Recent studies in experimental philosophy have shown that pre-reflective intuitive responses to questions about truth, truth-aptness, and lying depend upon characteristics specific to sub-populations in the respondent pool or upon contextual features specific to the vignettes used in testing study participants (Barnard and Ulatowski 2013, Beebe and Buckwalter 2010, Turri 2013). In this study, we expand upon Næss’ early work and more recent empirical studies by examining respondents’ views on the objectivity or relativity of truth.

The general project of trying to make progress on a philosophical problem by adapting the methods of empirical social scientific research is known as “experimental philosophy,” and our methodological approach, though it fits within the parameters of this contemporary movement, capitalizes on the earlier work of Arne Næss and other Norwegian philosophers working on empirical semantics.[[5]](#footnote-6) Just as we survey terrain before setting off for a hike or look at a map prior to driving from one place to another, the ‘ecological’ approach in experimental philosophy collects data from a population to obtain a better sense of the contours of the philosophic concept under scrutiny. The ecological approach is importantly different from other approaches in experimental philosophy, especially in that its main goal isn’t to uncover the deep psychological structure underlying ordinary thinking about philosophical issues.[[6]](#footnote-7) Investigators employing the ecological approach provide an explanation of the collected data in their own work, but also await the results of subsequent experimental investigations.[[7]](#footnote-8)

A study conducted as part of the Yale University Experimental Philosophy Month surveyed approximately 350 people from diverse regions of the world who ranged in age from 18 to 65 years. Responses were collected using *Qualtrics*, an online survey tool, and participants were recruited by means of online announcements and through Amazon’s *Mechanical Turk* (“M-Turk”). M-Turk participants were compensated approximately $1.25 (USD) for 10 to 15 minutes of their time. We employed a within-subjects study design where participants were randomly assigned to one of nine different conditions. All participants were then asked to respond to 16 statements about truth using a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 (‘strongly disagree’) to 5 (‘strongly agree’).[[8]](#footnote-9) Four of the 16 statements were specifically designed to focus on the objectivity of truth. Demographic and educational attainment data were also collected.[[9]](#footnote-10) ANOVA analysis failed to show that any of the nine conditions had a significant effect on mean participant responses for the four statements testing for the objectivity of truth; results reported here aggregate responses from all nine conditions.[[10]](#footnote-11)

Our hypothesis was that pre-theoretic responses to statements focusing on the objectivity of truth would elicit more agreement than those prompts concerning relativism about truth. Further, contrary to anecdotal stories and our knee-jerk impressions that non-philosophers would tend to favour a simpleminded relativism, we observed that non-philosophers tend to have unexpectedly complex and nuanced views about truth.

Our observations in the present case focus on four specific probe statements that reflect positions within the objectivism-relativism debate that we described at the outset of the paper. Participants, non-philosophers and philosophers alike, were invited to express agreement or disagreement with each of four probe statements.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| U | When a claim is true, it is true for everyone. |
| A | If everyone agrees with a claim, then it is true. |
| F | When a claim is true, it expresses a fact. |
| O | When a claim is true, it would remain true even if no one had ever discovered it. |

*Table 1. Objectivity of Truth Statements*

The first probe statement (U) seeks to shed light on whether respondents believe a claim is true for everyone if it is true. The second probe (A) aims to discover how participants respond to the idea that agreement is sufficient for truth. The third probe (F) looks at whether participants take true claims to express facts and in turn, how they associate the concepts of truth and fact. The fourth probe (O) is intended to determine whether people accept that truths are found, not made—that is, whether there may be unknown, or even unknowable, truths. These probe statements were intentionally formulated to avoid technical philosophical terminology such as ‘proposition’ (See *Table 1*.).[[11]](#footnote-12)

In the experiment, responses to the four statements concerning the objectivity of truth were provided by roughly 290 participants who did not self-identify as a professional philosopher (see *Table 2*.).

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | U | A | F | O |
| 1 - strongly disagree | 18.4% | 57.2% | 4.2% | 6.3% |
| 2 - disagree | 29.9% | 22.5% | 8.0% | 7.6% |
| 3 - neither agree nor disagree | 14.6% | 9.5% | 13.9% | 12.2% |
| 4 - agree | 18.4% | 9.8% | 36.2% | 30.9% |
| 5 - strongly agree | 18.4% | 1.1% | 37.6% | 43.1% |

*Table 2. Responses of Non-philosophers, by probe statement.* (*N*=288)

Someone might contend that response “3 - neither agree nor disagree” fails to distinguish between those respondents who neither agree nor disagree with U, A, F, or O and respondents who either don’t care or don’t know what to make of the prompts. Because of this, these responses may be removed from the data to highlight responses indicating agreement and disagreement. ‘Agreement’ is indicated by those responding “4 - agree” and “5 - strongly agree,” and ‘Disagreement’ is indicated by those responding “2 - disagree” and “1 - strongly disagree.” When “3 - neither agree nor disagree’ responses have been removed, the following pattern of responses emerged:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | U | A | F | O |
| Disagree | 56.7% | 88.0% | 14.2% | 15.8% |
| Agree | 43.3% | 12.0% | 85.8% | 84.2% |

*Table 3. Agreement vs. Disagreement by Non-Philosophers.*   
(*N*=245(U), 258(A),247(F),253(O))

When we aggregate the data, self-identified non-philosophers tend to agree with F and O, they tend to disagree with U, and they clearly disagree with A.

The study population also included a number of self-identified professional philosophers, i.e., people who responded affirmatively to the demographic question: “Are you a philosopher by occupation?” The results reflect the percentage of philosophers’ Likert scale responses to each of the four statements (*Table 4*).

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | U | A | F | O |
| 1 - strongly disagree | 5.2% | 65.5% | 7.0% | 5.2% |
| 2 – disagree | 8.6% | 20.7% | 5.3% | 8.6% |
| 3 - neither agree nor disagree | 17.2% | 6.9% | 12.3% | 8.6% |
| 4 – agree | 22.4% | 3.4% | 33.3% | 25.9% |
| 5 - strongly agree | 46.6% | 3.4% | 42.1% | 51.7% |

*Table 4. Responses of Philosophers, by probe statement* (*N*=58)

As with non-philosophers, the “neither agree nor disagree” responses were withdrawn to capture agreement and disagreement. The following pattern of responses emerged:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | U | A | F | O |
| Disagree | 16.7% | 92.6% | 14.0% | 15.1% |
| Agree | 83.3% | 7.4% | 86.0% | 84.9% |

*Table 5. Agreement vs. Disagreement by Philosophers* (*N*=48(U), 54(A), 50(F), 53(O))

Just as with self-identified non-philosophers, self-identified philosophers tended to agree with F and O, but, curiously, 83% of philosophers tended to agree with U and overwhelmingly disagreed with A, 92.6%.

Our analyses employed a chi-square test comparing philosophers with non-philosophers for each statement; response patterns to A, F, and O identified no meaningful difference between philosophers and non-philosophers.[[12]](#footnote-13) For U, however, comparison of responses on Tables 2 and 4 found a statistically significant difference between philosophers and non-philosophers. Percentage responses for each group are found in *Table 6*.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Philosophers | Non-Philosophers |
| 1: Strongly Disagree | 5.2% | 18.4% |
| 2: Disagree | 8.6% | 29.9% |
| 3: Neither Agree Nor Disagree | 17.2% | 14.6% |
| 4: Agree | 22.4% | 18.4% |
| 5: Strongly Agree | 46.6% | 18.4% |

*Table 6. Responses to U* (*N* = 58 Philosophers, 287 Non-Philosophers)

When we compared the responses to U in Table 6, non-philosophers expressed significantly higher levels of disagreement than did philosophers (*χ2*=30.610, *df*= 4, *p*<.001, Phi = .298).

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Philosophers | Non-Philosophers |
| Agree | 83.3% | 43.3% |
| Disagree | 16.7% | 56.7% |

*Table 7. Agreement vs. Disagreement with U* (*N*=48 Philosophers, 245 Non-Philosophers)

Even if we remove the fine-grainedness of the full Likert scale employed in the study, the statistical differences between philosophers and non-philosophers’ responses remain. When we compared the responses to U from Tables 3 and 5 (*Table 7*.), which reflected a more coarse-grained analysis, there was a statistically significant difference in responses by philosophers and non-philosophers: non-philosophers tended to disagree with U more so than philosophers did. (*χ2*=25.775, *df*= 1, *p*<.001, Phi = .297).

We performed a series of pair-wise *χ2* analyses for probe statement U, by philosopher versus non-philosopher *(Table 8)*.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Non-philosophers | | | Philosophers | | |
|  | U vs. O | U vs. F | U vs. A | U vs. O | U vs. F | U vs. A |
| N | 287 | 286 | 284 | 58 | 57 | 58 |
| *χ2* | 68.015 | 87.460 | 40.094 | 71.243 | 33.563 | 18.046 |
| *df* | 16 | 16 | 16 | 16 | 16 | 16 |
| *p* | .000 | .000 | .001 | .001 | .006 | .321 ns |
| Cramer's V | .243 | .276 | .190 | .554 | .384 | .279 |

*Table 8. Comparison of responses to U with O, F, and A*

Generally, the differences in value between probe statement U and other probe statements were statistically significant. An exception was probe statement U versus A for philosophers.

**4. Discussion**

A survey of the findings presented above allows us to make some important but cautious claims about the character of the semantic topography of truth that appears to be operative, at least in this fairly representative and diverse sample of study participants. While we can never justifiably generalize from the study participants to the entire population, we believe that our empirical study is a first step towards coming to appreciate how the wider population employs terms like “truth” (and its cognates).[[13]](#footnote-14)

First, generally speaking, there seems to be very little difference between responses by philosophers and non-philosophers to F, O, and A, which suggests agreement between the two populations on the objectivity of truth. This assessment is supported by the fact that we found no significant difference when the data were analysed. Second, the divergent responses to U suggest a distinction between philosophers and non-philosophers. Here we did find a statistically significant difference. In this section, we argue for a view where ordinary people are sensitive to the “true for” locution such that they distinguish between “true” and “true for.”

There seems to be clear evidence that the ordinary person’s view of truth’s connection with mind-independent facts jibes quite well with the philosopher’s perspective. With respect to the prompt F: “When a claim is true, it expresses a fact,” the aggregated data show that 85.8% of non-philosophers and 86% of philosophers expressed agreement. Again, in the case of prompt O: “When a claim is true, it would remain true even if no one had ever discovered it,” the aggregated data show that 84.2% of non-philosophers and 84.9% of philosophers expressed clear agreement. In neither case was there a statistically meaningful difference between the groups. We think that the most natural interpretation of these responses would be that the conceptions of truth used by philosophers and non-philosophers alike comport well with the positions that a claim expresses a fact if true, and that a claim may be true even if it cannot be known by anyone.[[14]](#footnote-15)

Taken individually, if one were to claim, as a simpleminded relativist about truth might, that there is no connection between truth and facts because there is never any “fact of the matter,” then the responses to prompt F would suggest that the ordinary person’s conception of truth reflects a connection between truth and facts that a simpleminded relativist would deny. The relativist who maintains that truth is not objective may also be inclined to accept that there are no unknowable or unknown truths. The responses to prompt O strongly suggest that we ought not attribute a rejection of unknowable or unknown truths to the ordinary person’s perspective of truth.

Of course, there are deeper (well-known) philosophical worries about the epistemic and metaphysical status of facts (cf., e.g., Betti 2015, Künne 2003, Ramsey 1927, Russell 1962, Wittgenstein 1922) and about the conceptual distinction between truth and knowledge (cf., e.g., Chan 2013), but as one might expect, these more fundamental concerns cannot be adjudicated by exploring the ordinary conceptual terrain that serves as the foundation for an ecological reading. It is less speculative, perhaps, to take broad agreement with F as reflecting a person’s appreciation of the conceptual connection between a true claim and a fact. But, when this proposal about conceptual connections is combined with the claim that we sometimes do not know what is true, then the ordinary person’s judgment about truth seems to reflect a commitment to true claims being directed at some external, mind-independent thing or event, and the ordinary and familiar term for such a thing or event is ‘fact’.

The commonsense objectivity of truth is further reinforced by participants’ responses to A and U. One common expression of cultural or community-based relativism holds that a claim is true just in case it is what is accepted by the relevant group or community. If the ordinary notion of truth were relativist in this sense, then we would expect strong agreement with the prompt A: “If everyone agrees with a claim, then it is true.” This is not what was found. Instead, the responses show that 88% of non-philosophers and 92.6% of philosophers expressed clear disagreement. Again, while there was no significant difference between the groups, we tentatively extend our interpretation to include the position that the ordinary conception of truth is not relativist in the manner defended by what philosophers call ‘cultural relativists’ (cf. Rorty 1991).

To the extent that relativism implies that truth can be different for distinct people or cultures, the relativist is committed to a denial that truth is universal, the same for all. If the ordinary notion of truth were in consonance with simpleminded relativism about truth, we would expect to find that people disagree with the U prompt: “When a claim is true, it is true for everyone.” In fact, they did; only 36.8% of non-philosophers expressed agreement with U. If we look at the more fine-grained responses and only count clear expressions of agreement (agree and strongly agree) as endorsements of U, then 56.7% of non-philosophers failed to endorse U.

Of the four prompts we employed in this experiment, U is the only one whose results suggest, however tepidly, that the ordinary person’s view of truth aligns with some form of relativism. Besides that, only responses to the U prompt show significant statistical difference between the views of philosophers and non-philosophers. We found that 43.3% of non-philosophers and 83.3% of philosophers expressed clear agreement with U. This result compels further consideration in at least two respects: a) it might help to explain why there is anecdotal evidence that ordinary people are relativists about truth, and b) it raises some methodological worries for philosophers.

The conceptual topography we have described reflects how ordinary people conceive of truth and appears to favor an anti-relativist interpretation. While the non-philosophers’ responses to U raise an initial challenge for this interpretation, we would stress that their responses reflect a rather divided outlook. While 56.7% of non-philosophers disagree with U, the remaining 43.3% agree. The nature of truth is fundamentally different from the bread and circuses of American politics, so one shouldn’t leave the matter to be settled by such a slim majority. While there is a favored view among the participants who responded to our survey, there doesn’t appear to be a clear winner.

This disagreement suggests that the ordinary conception of truth is idiomatic in a way that has been previously underappreciated. The non-philosopher’s understanding of U appears to be both more unsettled and more nuanced than we had originally imagined. Alternatively, the disagreement may reflect a tension in how the prompt is being read. One reading of U, call it the “philosopher’s reading,” would interpret the prompt as saying this: Having settled the truth of a claim C, the truth of C is universal. Since this is a plausible reading, that this reading is available would explain why 83.3% of philosophers’ responses agree with U. It would also explain why 43.3% of non-philosophers agree with U. An alternative reading of U might interpret the prompt another way: “When I think that a claim is true, everyone must agree with me.” Call this the “subjective reading.” It is not uncommon to find people who disagree about the truth of a statement. If we adopt the subjective reading of U, then to disagree with U is simply to affirm that disagreement among persons over the truth of a statement that one believes is possible. If these two readings are indeed available, then it makes sense that some seemingly pro-relativist non-philosophers disagree with U. In disagreeing with U, these respondents are affirming that disagreement over a true claim is possible, and perhaps also that such disagreement can be reasonable. On the other hand, philosophers, who adopt a philosopher’s reading of U, will treat disagreement with U as a kind of affirmation of relativism about truth. In principle, it may be possible to tease apart and test these explanations, but the present study did not pursue those sorts of second-order questions. Further work is needed.

Responses to U, under at least one plausible reading, recommend that there is meaningful disagreement between non-philosophers and philosophers. The assumption that there is meaningful disagreement between the two populations depends upon the philosopher and the non-philosopher having the same interpretation of the prompt. If we assume that philosophers and non-philosophers read the question alike, then there is a significant difference in their response patterns. We can then infer that the ordinary notion of truth differs in certain respects from the philosopher’s conception. While the philosopher’s notion of truth appears to be deeply committed to objectivity as a core truism about truth, the non-philosopher’s allegiance to this fundamental concept seems to waver.

That philosophers and non-philosophers read the prompt the same way might not be something the philosopher cares to admit because a philosopher is an expert and expert interpretations come with a degree of complexity that is typically missing in the non-philosophers’ interpretations. If we allow that all or some of the differences in response are informed by different readings of the probe, then, to the extent that the different readings might reflect distinct conceptual frameworks, it looks like there is more than one notion of truth at work among philosophers and non-philosophers. This is, we believe, good news! Further, it is good news not only for experimental philosophers like us but for philosophers generally, even those who harbor a deep skepticism about the relevance of empirical findings in philosophic research. Disagreement between philosophers and non-philosophers reveals either a) distinct ways of processing information relevant to philosophical theorizing in different domains or b) substantive differences based largely in the training and practices employed by expert philosophers.

Our explanation of the distinct readings by philosophers and non-philosophers suggests that there are competing concepts between the philosophers and non-philosophers.[[15]](#footnote-16) For philosophers, a true statement is one that is true, regardless of who stated it or endorsed it. It doesn’t matter who believes the statement. Non-philosophers are sensitive to the difference between a statement’s being *true*, full stop, versus being *true for x*. Non-philosophers read U differently. Compare the following two statements:

1. The Red Sox have a deeper bullpen than do the Yankees.
2. It is true that the Red Sox have a deeper bullpen than do the Yankees.

For philosophers, the two statements are necessarily equivalent, i.e., it is impossible for one of them to be true and the other false. From the data we collected, we could speculate with some reasonable assurance that non-philosophers would agree that the two statements are necessarily equivalent. But, if we alter (2) slightly to the following:

(3) It is true *for everyone* that the Red Sox have a deeper bullpen than do the Yankees.

then we begin to see why non-philosophers might respond to U differently. For the non-philosopher to agree with a statement like (3), or U as it was in the experiment, is for them to hold that everyone agrees with the statement mentioned therein. Non-philosophers might be reluctant to ascribe truth to any person besides themselves for fear of not appreciating the nuances of others’ opinions. Of course, it may be that non-philosophers aren’t nearly so intellectually humble; that is something that deserves to be studied empirically, as well. A sizeable number of people are quick to dismiss the possibility of speaking for others than themselves, which seems to be an acknowledgement of intellectual humility perhaps uncommon among philosophers.

**5. Objections**

To our minds, there are three obvious issues a critic might raise to challenge our findings. A critic might be frustrated by the wording of the probe statements and contend that we haven’t discovered anything about an ordinary person’s appreciation of the objectivity of truth. We didn’t ask people to agree or disagree with: ‘Truth is objective’ or ‘A belief is true if, and only if, with respect to that belief, things are as they are believed to be’. Since this is the wording one would tend to use in discussing the objectivity of truth and since our experiment doesn’t include that wording, our experimental results fail to reflect an ordinary person’s views of the objectivity of truth.

That would be one possible way of proceeding, but it supposes that the philosopher’s rendering of the objectivity of truth is the only correct way of comprehending truth’s objectivity and picks out a concept that ordinary people would understand straightaway without any kind of training. Compare the present case with how Gettier (1963) cases are framed. In the original Smith and Jones get a job case, neither Smith nor Jones are asked if they “know.” The philosophical work of drawing a conclusion from the case is left to the philosophers after the fact. To our minds, the critic’s assumption here is doing quite a bit of intellectual heavy-lifting. We preferred to employ statements in plain language because statements with a degree of technical detail can only be properly understood by those with a sufficient amount of training.[[16]](#footnote-17) One readily vested with an interest in a philosopher’s vocabulary might generate the alternative objection: *well, people were confused by the philosophical jargon and any data collected using that technical jargon would be impotent*. Calling upon the work of previous experimental designs, we deployed a series of conditional statements we believed were compatible with how ordinary people tend to discuss topics associated with the objectivity of truth (or the lack thereof). Since we reject the idea that we can read the correct philosophical position off of how people respond to prompts, the demand for precision dissipates. Our aim, as we mentioned in the outset of the paper during our discussion of the ecological approach in experimental philosophy, is to gather information, so the prompts needed only to be sufficiently precise to stay in the truth domain. Finally, nothing here prevents anyone from asking the questions they want answered; we simply didn’t ask those questions.[[17]](#footnote-18)

Relatedly, a critic might worry whether the prompts U, A, F, and O, are about *objectivity*. Indeed, perhaps these prompts might have nothing to say about objectivity, per se. The objection is basically this: whatever the folk have to say about the prompts, whatever the difference between philosophers and non-philosophers with respect to prompt U, none of this is about the objectivity of truth.

The fundamental assumption of this challenge is that there is a single target: *the* objectivity of truth. When we originally framed the prompts, we reflected on the various things one might be interested in, if one were interested in the objectivity or relativity of truth. Do truths express facts? Are there unknown or unknowable truths? Is agreement sufficient for truth? Objectivity has many faces, and these prompts are designed to elicit information from responses about whether people embrace or reject various conceptions of objectivity. We began by being open-minded about whether objectivity was one notion or many, and now we see that it is many, or at least that is what our empirical data seem to suggest.

A final worry might run like this: *so what*? In some ways we are sympathetic. It can be hard to know what conclusions to draw about a theory of truth from results like those we have presented. We prefer to see these results as highly relevant pieces of information. Combining these results with philosophical theory can have the effect of bringing the details of how ordinary people think about truth into greater relief. For instance, we don’t believe it is sufficient to solely depend upon empirical data to map how ordinary people go about conceiving of and using the truth predicate. We need philosophical theorizing about truth to better understand how the different ways in which we may conceive of truth interact with other conceptions of truth, knowledge, fact, error, and other important epistemological issues. To leave these aside or, worse yet, to ignore these analyses is to overlook an important normative component. In this paper, we have tested whether philosophers and non-philosophers provide similar responses to probe statements on the objectivity of truth. Our data have shown that the views of philosophers and non-philosophers on the objectivity of truth diverge, at least with respect to statement U. While some ways of thinking about truth will come to seem more or less plausible in light of results like those we offer here, we believe that our explanation of the data set is adequate. Our view is that truth-theorists are well-positioned to compare and contrast the empirical data reported here with philosophical theories of truth to devise an optimally informed theory of truth consistent with how ordinary people conceive of truth.

**6. Conclusion**

Næss (1938a, b, 1953) calls into question the assumption that truth is a singular and simple monolithic notion. What becomes increasingly clear when one compares our findings with those of Næss is that there are further grounds recommending that there is more than one way in which we may characterize truth. In particular, the results we report here suggest that there are some ways of thinking about the objectivity of truth where the views of philosophers and non-philosophers align. Yet, for at least some instances, e.g., with respect to intuitive responses to U, the views of philosophers and non-philosophers tend to part ways. In at least one specific domain, there is a statistically meaningful difference.

Attributions of relativism about truth to ordinary people seem out of place, given what we’ve found in this experiment. On one hand, the clear preference among non-philosophers for other conceptions of objectivity--truth requiring facts, truth not being a matter of agreement, truth being independent from being considered--is compatible with the idea that objectivity is an important part of how folk think about truth. On the other hand, if objectivity requires that a truth for one be a truth for all and that such truths are neither subjective nor relative, then the majority of non-philosophers who reject the universality of truth should give us pause. What is more perplexing is this: the most plausible way of explaining away this difference requires that we attribute to the folk a nuanced sensitivity to and humility about disagreements over whether a given claim is true.

In light of these results, philosophers may need to rethink or make precise what they mean when they speak about the objectivity of truth. Likewise, the philosophical conception of objectivity may not comport well with the ordinary person’s conception of truth. The possibility of such a gap raises a curious problem: when we try, as philosophers, to better understand the views of ordinary folk, it may be that philosophy is what keeps us from understanding the ordinary conception of truth. Retuning our approach may be the best hope of bringing the philosophical approach into line with the ordinary concept of truth--if indeed there is one.[[18]](#footnote-19)

APPENDIX A: NINE PRIMING CONDITIONS

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Condition Name | Text |
| Anna | Anna has performed a simple calculation and discovered that 30 + 55 = 85. |
| Bruno | Bruno has just finished painting his house. Bruno painted his house the same color as the sky on a clear summer day. Bruno claims his house is blue. |
| Charles | Charles reads a lot. Charles has discovered the claim that aluminum is made by refining bauxite. He has never refined bauxite, nor is he an expert in metals. Charles thinks that aluminum is made by refining bauxite. |
| Donna “No German” | Donna is traveling in Germany, but does not speak German. She watches as a sailor asks for *der Stadtplan* and is handed what looks like a map of the city. Donna asks for *der Stadtplan* in a shop and is sold a city map. Donna still speaks no German, but believes that asking for *der Stadtplan* is a good way to obtain a city map from a German shopkeeper. |
| Donna “Only English” | Donna is traveling in Germany, and she only speaks English. She watches as a sailor asks for *der Stadtplan* and is handed what looks like a map of the city. Donna asks for *der Stadtplan* in a shop and is sold a city map. Donna still speaks only English, but believes that asking for *der Stadtplan* is a good way to obtain a city map from a German shopkeeper. |
| Erma “Agrees” | Erma lives in a town that is bounded to the north by a forest. Most people in town think that part of the forest must be cut down to prevent a disease fatal to trees from ruining the rest of the forest. |
| Erma “Disagrees” | Erma lives in a town that is bounded to the north by a forest. Most people in town think that part of the forest must be cut down to prevent a disease fatal to trees from ruining the rest of the forest. |
| Fred “Afraid” | No one ever goes into the cave near the top of Gorton Hill. Fred is especially afraid of caves and will never go there. Fred believes that the cave is home to a rare species of blind fish. Though no one has ever actually seen them, the cave on Gorton Hill is home to a rare species of fish that are also blind. |
| Fred “Speluncaphobic” | No one ever goes into the cave near the top of Gorton Hill. Fred is speluncaphobic. Fred believes that the cave is home to a rare species of blind fish. Though no one has ever actually seen them, the cave on Gorton Hill is home to a rare species of fish that are also blind. |

APPENDIX B: DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | N | Mean Age | Male | Female | Philosopher | Non-Philosopher |
| Total | 346 | 32.5 | 55% | 45% | 17% | 83% |
| Non-Philosophers | 288 | 32.76 | 52% | 48% |  |  |
| Philosophers | 58 | 31.2 | 69% | 31% |  |  |

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1. Our aim in this paper is to better understand the different views about the objectivity of truth. When we discuss relativism in this paper, we have in mind a non-technical or simpleminded relativism, i.e., the kind of relativism that professional philosophers might expect undergraduates enrolled in an introductory philosophy class or someone who has had relatively little formal education to hold, not the rather sophisticated forms of truth relativism defended in, e.g., Einheuser (2008), Kölbel (2004, 2009), MacFarlane (2014), and the edited volume García-Carpintero and Kölbel (2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Beebe and Sackris’ work has suggested that the rates of belief in moral relativism are higher amongst those of typical college age (17-29 years old). At the prompting of a referee, we tested whether our data on the objectivity of truth replicate the age effect reported by Beebe and Sackris in a study on the objectivity of morality. When we revisit our data set on the objectivity of truth, we find no statistically significant differences between college aged (18-29 years old) and post-college aged (30-65 years old) respondents. This means that our results fail to replicate the findings discussed by Beebe and Sackris in the non-moral domain. To engage in a bit of speculation that should be followed on by a more formal empirical study, there seem to be two insights we might draw from the failure to replicate Beebe and Sackris’ data: (i) ordinary non-philosophers’ views may vary according to moral versus epistemic beliefs or (ii) Beebe and Sackris’ results may fail to replicate in samples that are not both college-aged and college-enrolled. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. No doubt there will be people who disagree with our assessment, contending that the nature of truth is something only trained experts are capable of addressing. But our point is that expert analysis of the nature of truth should at least begin with views ordinary people have about it. Some theorists of truth have seemed to share with us this view. See Horwich (1998), Lynch (2009), or Tarski (1944). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Lynch further explains that:

   Core truisms about truth cannot be denied without significant theoretical consequence and loss of plausibility. If you do deny any one of them, you must be prepared to explain how this can be so in the face of intuitive opposition. And denying many or all would mean that you would be regarded by other uses of the concept as changing the subject. (Lynch 2009, 13) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. For an introduction to what experimental philosophy is and some influential work in experimental philosophy, see Alexander (2012), Sytsma and Livengood (2015). Moreover, for an overview of the Norwegian school of ‘empirical semantics” and its connection with the work of contemporary philosophy, see Chapman (2008, 2011, 2013), Chapman and Routledge (2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Space doesn’t permit us to individuate the ecological approach from other experimental approaches, so for a good overview of the distinctions between different programs within experimental philosophy, see Alexander, Mallon, and Weinberg (2010), Deutsch (2015), and Nado (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. What we call the ‘ecological’ approach in experimental philosophy was suggested by Næss. He used a qualitative survey to examine how non-philosophers thought about truth on the model of an observational experiment in plant ecology, but he didn’t discuss the metaphilosophical issues related to the adoption of this alternative methodology. A full discussion of this method and its applications to the nature of truth debate appear in Ulatowski (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Independent of the 16 statements, Question #1 was specifically associated with the condition and used to test whether the subjects were giving random responses. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. See Appendix B for demographic data. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. See Appendix A for description of the nine conditions. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. A referee has suggested that the prompts could have been stated in a more precise manner disambiguating between two different readings of (O), for example. The formulations of the prompts used in this study were vetted not only by philosophers for philosophical content but also by non-philosophers (in a pilot study) for comprehension of philosophically relevant concepts. Future empirical studies will drill down by testing alternatives to these prompts to see what they elicit from respondents. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. The χ2 statistics comparing philosophers to non-philosophers for A, F, and O were: A: χ2 = 5.129, *df* = 4, *p* > 0.27, *ns*; F: *χ2* = 1.754, *df* = 4, *p* > 0.78, *ns*; O: *χ2* = 1.896, *df* = 4, *p* > 0.75, *ns*. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Our empirical findings shouldn’t be relied upon to make general claims about the ordinary notion of truth because our sample size and the scope of the population in this study was limited. For example, one shouldn’t exclude the possibility that one might find cross-cultural differences in thought about the nature of truth. Despite this, we believe the population of the study participants to be general enough to make some preliminary claims about how the notion of truth operates. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. A reader has recommended that even if we tend to find agreement with O as evidence that people tend to think that if a claim *x* is true, then *x*’s truth-value isn’t affected by whether anyone ever actually discovers *x*, it is possible that people might think this yet also tend to think for *x* to be true, it must be knowable in principle. People could consistently endorse both this claim and O. We cannot rule out this interpretation of the data without running a follow-up experiment testing for what the editor has recommended. Perhaps we will do so in the future. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Max Kölbel has developed a view that presents what might be called a ‘two-concept’ approach to truth, i.e., there is a deflationary concept of truth *à la* Horwich (1998) as well as a more substantive but still deflationary concept that depends upon truth’s objectivity. While what we have shown in this paper appears sympathetic with Kölbel’s view that people may be employing “truth” ambiguously, this paper cannot directly address his ‘two-concept’ approach. First, our experiment did not set out to test the hypothesis that truth is largely deflationary in the way that Kölbel has argued. Second, our empirical program is primarily descriptive; we are not yet interested in offering a fuller account of, e.g., the psychological underpinnings of concepts in ordinary persons. That is to confuse our approach (what some have called ‘semantic mentalism’) with another approach in experimental philosophy: conceptual mentalism. Cf. Kölbel (2008a, 2008b). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. It would be inappropriate, for example, to design a questionnaire that employs technical notions of objectivity (e.g., cognitive command and width of cosmological role (Wright 1992)) since non-philosophers are very unlikely to have a clear grasp of the relevant concepts. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. An extensive follow-up study is underway asking study participants about statements like: ‘truth is objective’. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS SUPPRESSED. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)