

Dr. Johannes Steizinger
University of Vienna
johannes.steizinger@univie.ac.at

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Title

*In Defence of Epistemic Relativism:
The Concept of Truth in Georg Simmel's Philosophy of Money*

Abstract

As one of the first modern philosophers, Georg Simmel systematically developed a “relativistic world view” (Simmel ³2004, VI). In this paper I attempt to examine Simmel’s relativistic answer to the question of truth. I trace his main arguments regarding the concept of truth and present his justification of epistemic relativism. In doing so, I also want to show that some of Simmel’s claims are surprisingly timely.

Simmel’s relativistic concept of truth is supported by an evolutionary argument. The first part of this paper outlines that pragmatic foundation of his epistemology. The second part of the paper shows that Simmel develops what today would be called a coherence theory of truth. He presents his coherentist view that every belief is true only in relation to another one primarily as a theory of epistemic justification. The third part turns to Simmel’s original way of dealing with the (in)famous self-refutation charge against relativism.

Introduction

The turn of the 20th century is of special interest for the philosophical debate about relativism. In 1898 Wilhelm Dilthey delivered a lecture on “The Culture of Today and Philosophy” in which he defined “the problem” of relativism as the “challenge of the epoch” (Dilthey 1898, 204). In 1900 Georg Simmel’s *Philosophy of Money* presented an interesting solution to that problem. As one of the first modern philosophers, Simmel systematically developed a “relativistic world view” (Simmel ³2004, VI) and directly addressed what his

contemporaries saw as the threat of relativism. His aim was to prove that relativism does not lead to subjectivism and scepticism. On the contrary, Simmel was convinced that relativism offers the only possibility of explaining the objectivity of cultural forms after the “historical dissolution of all substantial, absolute and eternal in the flow of things, in historical variability and psychological reality” (Simmel 1958, 9; translated by J.S.). Accordingly, the main question of the *Philosophy of Money* is how human achievements and practices with a contingent genesis can gain objective validity. Specifically with respect to values, Simmel wanted to show that their objective status is a result of their contingent genesis and that objectivity always rests on the interactions between subjective elements.

Chris Swoyer has called the question of truth the “Achilles’ heel of relativism” (Swoyer 2014, 94). In this paper I attempt to examine Simmel’s answer to the question of truth. I will concentrate on the systematic reconstruction of Simmel’s defence of epistemic relativism which is presented in the third section of the first chapter of the *Philosophy of Money* (see Simmel 2004, 101–130).

1. *The Evolutionary Argument*

Simmel’s relativistic concept of truth is supported by an evolutionary argument. Simmel claims that the totality of epistemic “norms and facts has validity only in relation to specific physio-psychological organizations, their conditions of life and the furthering of their activity” (ibid. 108). This view presupposes that the mechanisms of perception and cognition are natural properties which are products of evolution. Consequently, truth in its relation to the external world is conceived as relative to the specific needs of specific species. Simmel holds a pragmatic perspectivism in which the truth of a belief is determined by whether an action guided by the belief has useful consequences. Therefore, he identifies truth, first and foremost, with usefulness: “We dignify those representations with the name of ‘truth’ that, while active within us as real forces or motions, incite us to useful behaviour. Thus there are as many basically different truths as there are different organizations and conditions of life. The sense perception on the basis of which the insect acts properly would obviously not be true for the eagle.” (ibid.)

Despite the possibility of various “true” images of the very same world, Simmel denies that the value of these images is only subjective. Rather, he argues that the various different images of the world possess “normative stability” (ibid.) in themselves. This is because, for any species, what can count as “true” for that species is determined by its physio-psychological organisation. Simmel claims that “every perceiving being possesses a generally established ‘truth’ which his representation may grasp or miss.” (ibid. 107) And thus, the development of a knowledge within a certain species is defined as process of

selection. Simmel applies that pragmatic concept of truth only to the foundation of a whole set of knowledge. This is because he thinks: “Once these modes of representation have been finally established as expedient through selection and cultivation, they form among themselves a realm of theory that determines, according to inner criteria, the inclusion or exclusion of new representations.” (ibid. 108)

As I will show in the next section, Simmel develops what today would be called a “coherence theory of truth” which is supported by the evolutionary argument. Simmel’s evolutionary argument enables him to deal with a common objection against coherentist approaches: The “*isolation objection*” is that “there is little reason to think that a coherent system of belief will accurately reflect the external world” (Olsson 2014, 4). Simmel avoids the problem of a “missing guidance whatsoever to truth or reality” (ibid.), because every set of knowledge has an evolutionary foundation.

2. *The Coherentist Argument*

Simmel develops his coherentist view that every belief is true only in relation to another one primarily as a theory of epistemic justification. He holds the fallibilist view “that no belief [...] can ever be rationally supported or justified in a conclusive way” (Hetherington 2015). Since Simmel nevertheless does not doubt “that the truth of any statement can be known only on the basis of criteria that are completely certain and general” (ibid. 103), he has to provide sources for the justification of a belief other than an ultimate principle. Accordingly, Simmel traces the way in which a belief can be justified and concludes that the justification of knowledge can either follow the course of infinite regress (a) or constitute a circle (b). Simmel regards both the infinite construction and the process of reciprocal verification as sufficient accounts of justification, not least because they follow from the “decisive form” (ibid. 117) of the human mind: “The inherent necessity for our minds to know the truth by proofs either postpones the discovery of truth to infinity, or results in a circle, so that one statement is true only in relation to another one; this other one however, eventually only in relation to the first.” (ibid. 106)

Simmel develops these two forms of reflection subsequently and gives a wide range of examples to demonstrate their significance. In the following I shall leave aside the details of Simmel’s attempt to establish relativism as a “world formula” (ibid. 101). Instead I will only sketch the general outline of the further development of that distinction and concentrate on the reasons, why Simmel conceives regress and circle as legitimate strategies of justification:

(a) For Simmel, it is the *process of thinking* itself which has to be conceived as “continuous flux” (ibid. 115). From this observation Simmel concludes that, if cognition itself should offer an ultimate basis for knowledge, its justification forms a never-ending chain.

Even if we grant Simmel that epistemological reflection forces us to accept an infinite regress of justifications, there are serious doubts whether doing so could give us the kind of justification we need for knowledge. One could argue that, precisely because reflection forces us to accept an infinite regress, knowledge is impossible. Simmel answers this sceptical objection with a transcendental argument. He thinks that, on the one hand, we can never define an ultimate principle which gives our process of thinking an absolute basis. But on the other hand, we can assume that every process of thinking involves a principle which accomplishes the task of justification in that singular case. According to Simmel, it is not scepticism „if we admit that our knowledge may have somewhere an absolute norm [...], but that its content remains in constant flux because knowledge progresses“ (ibid. 104).

(b) Simmel presents the justificatory circle as another way of seeing “our knowledge as conditioned” (ibid. 105). He presents a holistic argument to show that the justificatory circle is not vicious. According to him, “it is not inconceivable that our knowledge, taken as whole, is imprisoned within this pattern. If one considers the vast number of hierarchically ordered presuppositions, stretching into infinity upon which all particular knowledge depends, it seems actually possible that the statement A is proved by the statement B, and the statement B through the truth of C, D, E, etc., until finally it can only be proved by the truth of A. [...] Cognition is thus a free-floating process, whose elements determine their position reciprocally, in the same way as masses of matter do by means of weight.” (ibid. 106)

Simmel thinks that the “reciprocity of proof” (ibid.) constitutes the relation among the *contents of thought*. Again a transcendental move enables the dissolution of absolute claims in the relation of mutual interdependence. Simmel defines “the final, highest abstractions, simplifications and syntheses of thought” (ibid. 110) as heuristic principles and claims that they always emerge in contradicting pairs. This idea is the foundation of his theory of world views which were more carefully elaborated in later works, especially in his treatise *Main Problems of Philosophy* (1910). Already in the *Philosophy of Money*, Simmel lists several examples of the reciprocal validation of opposing principles, like monism and pluralism or individualism and socialism. Since Simmel’s theory of world views needs a careful elaboration, I do not investigate it in this paper.

3. *The Reversal of the Self-Refutation Charge*

Simmel presents his defence of relativism as an original way of dealing with the (in)famous self-refutation charge against relativism. Consider the traditional form of the argument. Swoyer summarizes Plato’s “peritrope” in the following way: „Plato's argument against strong truth-value relativism is typically said to go like this: either the claim that truth is relative is true absolutely [...] or else it is only true relative to some framework. If it is true

absolutely, all across the board, then at least one truth is not merely true relative to a framework, so this version of the claim is inconsistent. Furthermore, if we make an exception for the relativist's thesis, it is difficult to find a principled way to rule out other exceptions; what justifies stopping here? On the other hand, if the relativist's claim that truth is relative is only true relative to his framework, then it can be false in other, perhaps equally good, frameworks." (Swoyer 2014, 95)

Simmel begins his defence of epistemic relativism with a criticism of other epistemological views, namely dogmatism, scepticism and criticism. He argues that they all have a problem when they are used to clarify their own presuppositions. In what follows Simmel shows that every epistemological view has to choose one of the horns of Plato's argument. And he concludes generally: "Epistemology here encounters a typical hazard. In analysing itself, it judges its own cause. It needs a vantage point outside itself, and is confronted with a choice between excepting itself from the test or rule imposed to all other knowledge [...]; or else subjecting itself to the laws and the process which it has discovered and thereby committing an act of circular reasoning, as is clearly illustrated by the self-negation of scepticism." (ibid. 117)

For Simmel, the typical danger which all epistemology faces is a problem of justification of knowledge. And Simmel has already introduced relativism as a solution to that problem (see section 2 of this paper). According to him, a relativistic approach can accept that knowledge cannot be justified in a conclusive way. Now, Simmel applies this thought to the justification of epistemic relativism. Unlike other epistemological principles, relativism is not destroyed if it is judged by its own principle, because it offers a solution to both horns of Plato's argument: Relativism can be held "absolutely", because this only means that a never-ending process of justification gets started: "Relativism strives to dissolve into a relation every absolute that presents itself, and proceeds the same way with the absolute that offers itself as the ground for this new relation. This never-ending process whose heuristic eliminates the alternative: either to deny or to accept the absolute. It makes no difference how one expresses it: either that there is an absolute but it can be grasped only by an infinite process, or that there are only relations but that they can only replace the absolute in an infinite process." (ibid. 117) The last argument makes clear that Simmel eliminates the absolute "as a conceptual counterpart to the relativity of all things" (ibid. 104). His relativistic account is not least an attempt to re-define what it means to be true across the board. Since all epistemological principles with a definitive statement end in self-contradiction, Simmel questions the possibility of ultimate justification in itself. Against this background, the problem with the traditional self-refutation argument is its requirements, i.e. what it accepts as a valid epistemic justification. Roughly speaking, from the perspective of the self-refutation argument epistemic relativism should meet the standards of an epistemic absolutism. In other words,

relativism is also expected to offer an epistemological principle “whose being and significance rests exclusively within” (ibid. 104) itself. But, as Simmel emphasises, “if the concept of relativity is construed in such a way that it requires an absolute, it is impossible to eliminate the absolute without self-contradiction”. (ibid.) For Simmel, it is this requirement which leads to the self-contradiction, also in the case of relativism. Thus, Simmel’s epistemic relativism has to be considered as an attempt to transform the standards of epistemology. He simply drops the requirement of an ultimate justification (see Geßner 2003, 89–90). Here, two already mentioned propositions are decisive: Simmel holds the view that all beliefs are only fallibly justified and claims that the fallibility of this belief itself is not a self-contradiction. In his terms, “[h]euristics, which is only the consequence or the application of the relativistic principle to the categories of knowledge, can accept without contradiction that it is itself a heuristic principle.” (ibid. 117)

This claim leads us to Simmel’s answer to the second horn: He thinks that relativism can exist in alternation with other, even absolute principles without losing its validity. This is because relativism expresses nothing other than the relativity of all justification, i.e. also its self-relativity. In the interaction with other principles, the process of justification is a case of circular reasoning which is allowed by epistemic relativism – in contrast to the absolute principles which have to cut “the continuing fruitful development of relations” (ibid. 117) and thus end in self-contradiction. But that the relativistic principle is valid only relatively, is exactly what the relativistic principle claims. In that case, it realizes its own proposition. Therefore, Simmel considers relativism as the only epistemological view which “proves itself by subordination to its own principle” (ibid. 118).

Conclusion

In this paper, I tried to clarify Simmel’s version of epistemic relativism. I presented the sketch of a reconstruction of his main arguments regarding the concept of truth and suggested that some of his claims are surprisingly timely. I think that Simmel’s general approach to developing a “relativistic world view” (ibid. VI) deserves further investigation, both from a philosophical-historical and a systematic perspective. Such an approach is still a desideratum in the studies about Simmel, not least because his philosophy suffered a common fate in the history of relativism: Because it was ‘tainted’ with the relativist label, Simmel’s work on philosophical concepts like truth was not taken seriously. For opponents like the Neokantian Heinrich Rickert, Simmel always remained a sceptic (see Simmel 1916, 637). And followers tried to save him from the relativist label and interpreted his world view as “relationistic” instead of “relativistic” (see e.g. Köhnke 1996, 480; Geßner 2003, 87–93).

Both accounts miss the peculiarity of Simmel's philosophical approach which consists of his attempt to develop "a relativistic interpretation of being" (Simmel ³2004, 56).

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