

The Baseline View

Beliefs may be *true or false*.

Knowledge is *only true*: we cannot know what is false. It makes no sense to say, “He knows x , but x is false.” It *does* make sense to say, “He *believes* that he knows x , but he does *not* know it because x is false (—since x is false there is no x to know).”

Truth just *is*, independently of what anyone believes about or knows of it. This, anyway, holds for *at least some* truths, for according to the Baseline View:

(A) The **truth** (or falsity) of beliefs about the shape of the Earth and the molecular structure of water is *independent of* our beliefs.

(B) The **truth** (or falsity) of beliefs about whether strawberries are delicious or whether it is appropriate to drive on the left side of the road is *dependent upon/determined by* an individual’s or a culture’s beliefs.

A philosophically interesting question:

Which truths, if any, are independent of an individual’s or a culture’s beliefs? Or do the beliefs of an individual or of a culture determine the truth, all truths? For example, if an individual or a culture believes that the earth is flat, is the earth therefore flat? If an individual or a culture believes that adultery is good, is adultery therefore good? The first of these questions (about the shape of the earth) refers to physical objects; the second (about adultery) refers to morality. Does the Baseline View apply to one (physical objects), to the other (morality), to both, or to neither? And what about, for example, math?

Objectivism/Realism: Truth is *independent of* an individual’s or a culture’s beliefs.

So: The shape of the earth just is what it is no matter what anyone believes about it. Certain actions just are good/bad, moral/immoral, no matter what anyone believes about them.

Subjectivism/Relativism: Truth is *dependent upon/determined by* an individual’s or a culture’s beliefs.

So: The earth is round if and only if an individual or a culture believes it to be round. Actions are good/bad, moral/immoral, if and only if an individual or a culture believes them to be so.

(Technically, the position that an *individual’s* beliefs determine truth is called *Subjectivism*; the position that a *culture’s* beliefs determine truth is called *Cultural Relativism*.)

N.B. Our *beliefs* are of course dependent upon ourselves and our culture—different individuals/cultures have different beliefs (about the shape of the Earth, about morality, etc). This is just the commonplace, philosophically *uninteresting* observation that we develop our beliefs under the influence of our culture (family, education, cultural assumptions, etc.).

The philosophically significant question is whether *the truth itself* is the same for all these different individuals/cultures no matter what they believe to be true (as the Baseline View says) *or* whether the truth is somehow dependent upon/determined by their beliefs?

Also: this is an *ontological*, not an *epistemological* question, i.e., the question is *not* whether we can *know* the truth, but whether there *is* a truth (a fact of the matter).