

# Dąbbska, Izydora

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## Conventionalism vs Relativism

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Izydora Dąmbska\*

## CONVENTIONALISM VS RELATIVISM [1938]\*\*

Occasionally you may find conventionalism described as being identical with relativism. Equating these two is probably unwarranted. In fact, conventionalism may furnish certain arguments that kill relativism. In what follows I am trying to prove these assertions. I also try to explain where that – probably erroneous – identification comes from.

To do that we need first to tell ourselves exactly what it is relativists assert and what do conventionalists say.

The thesis of epistemological relativism – for this is primarily the position we are looking at here – in its general and unspecific original wording reads like: *truth is relative or no absolute truth exists*. This may mean: *every truth is relative or there are relative truths, no truth is absolute or there are truths that are not absolute*. Substitute the expression *true proposition* for the word *truth* and you can get the thesis of relativism rephrased to *every true proposition is relatively true or there are true propositions that are relatively true*. Relativists commonly formulate their thesis as a general proposition, even though their arguments tend to justify what is a particularly quantified thesis. Let us then consider the relativists' thesis in its general wording. You may often find the same thesis phrased differently than we have just seen. Namely this way: *there are no absolutely true propositions, or every proposition is relatively true*. This wording is certainly more useful to relativists, even though it is a less accurate interpretation of the expression *every truth is relative*. I say it is a more useful wording because the former wording, *every true proposition is relatively true*, is either a tautology or contains an intrinsic contradiction. For what does it mean, *relatively true*. It means, *true in one case, and untrue in another, depending on circumstances*. Substitute this interpretation in the former wording and you get clearly a contradiction: *every true proposition is true in one case, and untrue in another, depending on circumstances*. If, in this sentence, the expression *true proposition* means *relatively true*, then we get an empty tautology: *every relatively true proposition is relatively true*. If a true proposition does not mean relatively but in some other way, that is,

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\*\* The paper appeared first as: *Konwencjonalizm a relatywizm* in: *Kwartalnik Filozoficzny* 15, 1938, pp. 328–337.

presumably absolutely true, then the afore-mentioned contradiction holds. The point here is not a rebuttal of the principle of contradiction, which relativists believe is a consequence following from their position, but that a relativist would be self-contradictory assuming something he or she rejects in the latter part of the same proposition. This discomfort is not found in the other wording, when it is said: *every proposition is relatively true, i.e., it is true in one case, and false in another, depending on circumstances*. Admittedly, the logical principle of contradiction is being rejected when one says that every proposition is true and false at the same time, or that no proposition is either true or false, but the speaker him or herself commits no contradiction. Let us therefore keep to the wording which is more useful to relativists.

Arguments relativists put forward when justifying their position are commonly known, as is the reasoning by which Twardowski<sup>1</sup> toppled those arguments. Just as a reminder, the gist of his reasoning is the observation that a proposition which is true to one person and is justifiably held to be true by that person may be just as justifiably held to be false by another person, and indeed even by the same person, depending on circumstances in which the proposition was formulated. Critics of this reasoning, in turn, hold that it is essentially not one and the same proposition that is stated in such cases, but two different propositions, perhaps expressed in same-sounding words, one proposition being true, the other false, always and everywhere. And that, perhaps, which of the two is true and which false may occasionally be impossible to resolve.

Conventionalism is an attempt to solve the problem of solvability of certain scientific propositions. Conventionalists hold that in empirical science, e.g., there are questions which appear to be empirical and unequivocal yet which cannot be answered on the grounds of experience alone. Such queries can only be answered when certain conventions are adopted which lay down the meanings of the words. The reply to such questions, then, depends on the conventions adopted. A new pick of conventions will produce a different answer to the same question on the grounds of the same experience. A radical conventionalist position, which is shared among others by K. Ajdukiewicz, is that no propositions exist such as can be resolved regardless of the pick of conventions to adopt<sup>2</sup>. Accordingly, when you consider a proposition true you do so on the grounds of such or other conventions, which prescribe the conceptual framework of the language the proposition belongs to. With another conceptual framework substituted, the same proposition in same-sounding words may not be recognised as true.

Does it follow, then, that the same proposition reasonably considered true in certain circumstances may as reasonably be considered false in other

<sup>1</sup> See K. Twardowski, *O tzw. prawdach względnych* in: *Biblioteczka Filozoficzna* No. 3, Lwów 1934 [Engl. transl. *On So-Called Relative Truths*, transl. A. Szylewicz in: K. Twardowski, *On Actions, Products and Other Topics in Philosophy*, (eds) J. L. Brandl & J. Woleński, Rodopi, Amsterdam 1999, pp. 147–169].

<sup>2</sup> See K. Ajdukiewicz, *Sprache und Sinn* in: K. Ajdukiewicz, *Das Weltbild und die Begriffsapparatur* in: *Erkenntnis* 4, 1934 [Engl. transl. *Language and Meaning*, transl. J. Wilkinson in: K. Ajdukiewicz, *The Scientific World-Perspective and Other Essays 1931–1963*, (ed.) J. Giedymin, D. Reidel Publishing Company, Dordrecht – Boston 1978, pp. 35–66].

circumstances, if the same question is answered  $p$  in one case and non- $p$  in another? Doesn't conventionalism aver the relativity of truth? It does not – and no one who understands that the *sense* of the question we want to answer depends on the choice of such or other conventions will draw such a conclusion. So, to the extent a change of convention does not change the sense of a question (in cases of equivalent conventions, say), such change does not affect the answer. However, once a change of convention modifies the sense of a question, the answer to that question, sounding the same as the previous one, gets a different sense. That answer, albeit expressed in the same words, is no longer the same answer. For, the question is no longer the same question. The thesis of conventionalism thus turns out not to be equivalent to that of relativism. Differences between the two positions are considerable, and they stand out clearly:

First, relativism is a thesis about the veracity of propositions, while conventionalism predicates solely the conditions necessary for propositions to be solvable.

Second, relativism rejects the principle of solvability, while conventionalism does not.

Third, relativism and conventionalism take different positions vis-à-vis metaphysical issues. Relativism infers, from the fact that depending on the circumstances the reality is this and not this at the same time in the same respect, and so it is intrinsically contradictory. Conventionalism satisfies itself with the assertion that there is a multiplicity of images of reality, a multiplicity of theories. Yet it stops short of inferring therefrom that reality is this and not this at the same time. A conventionalist has to consider the question about what reality is like *really*, i.e., apart from the conceptual framework applied to describe it, an insolvable problem<sup>1</sup>. This question in fact obscures a contradiction. For essentially this question asks this: what is the true image of reality, if no image of reality exists at all<sup>2</sup>? In that perspective, conventionalism is even concordant with positivism. Conventionalism, in comparison to relativism, thus appears a more cautious position. It ventures no metaphysical conclusion from its own assumptions.

As said at the outset, conventionalism not only is not to be equated with relativism but it may even help overcome relativism. To underpin this assertion it suffices to recall Kazimierz Twardowski's observations on one of the sources of relativism<sup>3</sup>. Twardowski in particular saw a source thereof in that relativists fail to distinguish between the utterance and its meaning, that is, judgment, and they seem not to realise that the same utterance may express different judgments depending on the circumstances in which the utterance may have been uttered. Conventionalists make it clear that the sense of a proposition depends on the convention adopted and that with a change of the

<sup>1</sup> See K. Ajdukiewicz, *Das Weltbild und die Begriffsapparatur*, pp. 278 sq.

<sup>2</sup> The contradiction inherent in that type of question was pointed out, in a different connection, by W. Witwicki in his treatise *Rozmowa o jedności prawdy i dobra* [*Conversation about the unity of truth and good*], Lwów 1936, p. 21.

<sup>3</sup> W. Witwicki, *Rozmowa o jedności prawdy i dobra*, pp. 9 sq.

conceptual framework changes the sense of questions we seek to answer. That way conventionalism removed the foundation on which relativism grew.

So, where do we get the semblance of sameness of conventionalism and relativism from? This seems to be so for two reasons. For one, the two positions are, in certain ways, similar to each other. And there are terminological misunderstandings as well.

Let us look at the former factor. If you do not take the propositions of relativists too literally and try to peek into their intentions, then you may notice the positions of conventionalists and of relativists are closely similar to each other. Conventionalism and relativism alike point out that when considering a proposition from the angle of its cognitive value it has to be related to certain factors which make such propositions meaningful. Conventionalists hold that what gives meaning to propositions are such or other conventions, while relativists believe it is the situation, in a broadest sense, in which any such proposition was formulated. This accurate point induced relativists to draw unwarranted conclusions epistemological and metaphysical, which is not the case of conventionalists. Protagoras' claim that man is the measure of all things may be interpreted either in the spirit of relativism (as did Protagoras himself and other sophists) or in the spirit of conventionalism. In the former case, man is the measure of all things in the sense that the truth or falseness of one and the same proposition depends on the thinking individual uttering it. In the latter case, Protagoras' claim can be interpreted in this line more or less: whether a proposition may be reasonably recognised as truth or falseness depends on the sense the thinking entity gives as it adopts such or other conventions. But, is man the measure of all things in the sense that the pick of such conventions is an entirely free act, one which depends solely on subjective preferences alone? Or, is that choice dictated by objective preferences alone? It seems that as long as you keep to a radical conventionalist position this question may be hard to answer, as no answer can be supplied without resorting to *regressus ad infinitum*. For if every question, this included, cannot be answered unless on grounds of certain adopted conventions, and these in turn are subject to questions about the criteria of choice. But maybe this comment is misguided? Radical conventionalism is a theory of language, not metalanguage. Once you ask a question about criteria of choice you step one level up, as you ask a question about metalanguage. Fair enough, this question has to be formulated in such or other language, that is, on grounds of a conceptual framework, yet that is no longer a conceptual framework of the same order of logic as the one we use in talking of the real world, and so the question about the solvability of propositions is given an entirely different meaning here. This issue, quite interesting in itself, strays from our proper question, i.e., the question of, whence the semblance of sameness, or equivalence, of conventionalism and relativism? We have noted one actual similarity of the two positions, which may be of some avail here. But there is another – apparently no less significant – similarity as well. Both conventionalism, in one of its forms, and relativism grow on grounds of criticism of the value of experience as a criterion of truth while at the same time professing empiricism, i.e., the view that any objective summary

judgments of reality are owed to experience. (Now I don't mean all conventionalists of course, as there are those among them who do not embrace empiricism in that definition, but there are also those that do so and who were therefore led up to conventionalism.) But then again, relativism, having assumed that experience is the only criterion of truth and having stated that experience is variable and subjective drew the conclusion that reality, too, is such as painted by the senses, that is, intrinsically contradictory, and any truth about it – relative; while conventionalism recognised experience as an insufficient criterion of solvability of truth, and thus as an insufficient criterion of solvability of propositions. Whereupon, having arrived at this point, conventionalism pointed at what, next to experience, is needed for empirical propositions to be solvable, namely the inevitable need to define propositions as relative to certain conventions.

Apart from the apparent similarity which may have induced some to hold relativism to be identical with conventionalism, there is perhaps another factor for that disposition to equate the two. The term *relativism* is ambiguous, as the term *conventionalism* tends to be misunderstood.

The term *relativism* is used not merely to denote the idea of relative nature of all cognition. It is sometimes used to denote an approach to the nature of comprehending real things, a view represented by certain older and more recent positivists<sup>1</sup>. One theory to subscribe to that view was Einstein's relativity theory. That theory brought to light strongly the conventionalist nature of physics, so in a cursory view of physics it was not unlikely that conventionalism could be mistaken for relativism in the latter sense. From there, unless a clear distinction is drawn between relativism in the former and the latter sense, further confusion is just a step away. What is that other meaning of the word *relativism*? This calls for an answer to the question of the object of empirical cognition. First, the concept we are talking about holds that what we get to know in an objective manner in the real world are exclusively relations and formal structures of objects, rather than their sensory properties. Sensory properties slip capture by objective cognition, because they are given solely through what are uncontrollable and incommunicable experiences. Second, whenever you get to know such structures and attribute certain objective properties to empirical objects you always do so with reference to such or other frame of reference. One such frame of reference, for instance, is the eye of the beholder (this last named idea must not be confused with the thesis of relativist subjectivism, which invokes precisely such differences between individuals in experiencing sensory qualities). Einstein's criticism of classical mechanics and his relativity theory are of course dominated by the definitive view that measurable properties may not be considered independently, in isolation from the reference system. Now that view accords with the tenet of conventionalism. For it follows that problems of mechanics

<sup>1</sup> This latter kind of similarity is noted by K. Twardowski, *O tzw. prawdach względnych*, pp. 39 sq. as he talks of mistaking the notion of relativism as introduced by Spencer with relativism proper, and Z. Zawirski in his study *Relatywizm filozoficzny a fizykalna teoria względności [Philosophical relativism vs the physical theory of relativity]*, Lwów 1921.

may not be considered unless on grounds of a definite system of measurement conventions. Who fails to draw a clear distinction between the epistemological assumptions underlying relativity theory and the Protagorean relativism is liable to end up equating relativism with conventionalism.

Another may be misled to equating these two by embracing a wrong interpretation of the word *conventionalism*. Some believe that what conventionalism does say is that all positions are equally valid. Everything is conventional, contractual, and thus arbitrary. You can do things one way, or another, yet always as you like. But why is that so? Maybe because there is no absolute truth. Such an understanding of conventionalism is – it seems to me – very wrong. First, because conventionalism is not a theory preaching what is permitted and what is not, but one that describes things as they are. That idea was born, in the minds of men like Poincaré, Duhem or Dingler, out of the analysis of scientific study and from the establishment of certain facts in natural science. It is a fact, for example, that in physics, the sense of many queries and replies depends on measurement conventions the physicist applies. Further it is a fact that the character of a scientific proposition being an empirical generalisation is one thing and the character of a complex definition equivalent thereto another. Conventionalism in its moderate Poincaré version essentially brought to light those *a priori* elements of theory that together with empiric data make possible the formulation of solvable problems. Radical conventionalism generalises that position. Neither moderate nor radical conventionalism claim that it is essentially of no avail what is being asserted, or that in science all positions are equally valid. Neither the view about the equal validity or the equal invalidity of various positions in the description of reality follow from the ground work of conventionalism. The only view that does follow is that what decides the choice of one or another position is not experience itself. The same empiric data can be reconciled, depending on the pick of conventions, with such and another picture of the world. The question of what is decisive about the choice of conventions, or the other normative question of what should be decisive about the choice of conventions, is an extremely important question of epistemology, yet basically it is independent of the thesis of conventionalism. This question has invited different answers. Therefore conventionalism fits well in various epistemological doctrines – from scepticism to criticism, from pragmatics to neopositivism. Your sceptic will consider all pictures of the world as equally unwarranted and will pick none, a follower of criticism will say the choice of conventions is decided by *a priori* forms of perception of the human mind and it is such forms that render the choice unequivocal and necessary. A pragmatist will point out that the way words are used, the meanings thereof, are determined by their potential practical utility. A neopositivist will be looking for the criterion of choice in the conformity of the image of the world with data of some inter-subjective experience, which is common to the general public, so he/she will tend to recommend the choice of conventions from that angle. Other criteria will be indicated as well: simplicity and the scope of application of conventions – these are frequent and remarkable points of view regarding the question discussed here, especially if you consider that those who quote

simplicity as a fitting criterion will often say that the simpler a theory is the less room does it provide for arbitrary working or auxiliary hypotheses.

These include various additional hypotheses which, next to formal non-contradiction and solvability criteria, have to be taken into account if you do not believe in the equal validity of all images of the world or, if you do believe in such equal validity, you want to account for the fact that science, for good or worse, basically does make a clear choice between the two.

If you transfer the conventionalist position on the level of meta-theoretical problems, you can say: the thesis that *a certain image of the world is valid* is insolvable as long as you have not defined it as relative to certain epistemological system<sup>1</sup>. But then an interesting fact may catch your eye. If we ignore the views of sceptics at one extreme and of various dogmatists at the other, you will notice that while various epistemological schools put forward different criteria of choice of conventions, and so of the image of reality, they are nonetheless generally one when it comes to the *scope* of the types of propositions. This observation would seem to support the idea that Pilate's answer, *What is truth?* is perhaps not just a rhetorical question after all. If we plunged into detail on that issue, however, we would stray away from the proper topic though. The relationship between epistemological relativism and conventionalism was all we set out to discuss here. Eventually it turned out, in my view, that: 1) these are different and non-equivalent positions, 2) conventionalism, by one of its assumptions (that about the dependence of the sense of propositions on conventions), may help explain away misunderstandings on which relativism is based, 3) the reasons behind a tendency to equate relativism with conventionalism should be sought both in certain real similarities between the two and in verbal misunderstandings to do with the meanings of the terms *relativism* and *conventionalism*, respectively.

*transl. by Z. Nierada*

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<sup>1</sup> See K. Ajdukiewicz, *Das Weltbild und die Begriffsapparatur*, p. 282.