

# “Isms” Lead to Misinterpretations of Moderate Concepts and Frame Debates

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## Abstract

My paper draws attention to the fact that the use of isms predetermines the manner how we perceive the issues expressed by them. Realism seems to be diametrically opposed to relativism and constructivism, but it is of the same kind by virtue of being an ism. Isms accomplish to constrain our thinking by limiting the linguistic registers we are allowed to use when discussing a topic. They exclude registers that express e.g. restraint, uncertainty, attitudes of modesty or moderation, private opinions, and insincerity. This leads to misinterpretations of moderate concepts like “skepticism” and “relativism” which are actually contradictions in terms.

„Wir führen die Wörter von ihrer metaphysischen, wieder auf ihre alltägliche Verwendung zurück.“  
(Wittgenstein 1984, 116)

A possible approach to the topic of this year's (2015) Wittgenstein Symposium “Realism – Relativism – Constructivism” might be to ask: what is actually the difference between isms and not talking in isms?

## Properties of isms

It cannot be said that somebody is e.g. a socialist in one occasion but not in the other. Generally, Isms seem to have the following properties: They are opinions or attitudes persons or groups express publicly, openly, truthfully, repeatedly, always (without exemption), and wholeheartedly.

An ist is a person who does not just have the habit of thinking in a certain way but has made a principle out of it. Additionally isms seem to have an expansive component in the form that e.g. a socialist wants everybody to be a socialist and even takes action in order to convince people to become socialists.

## Anarchism as a contradiction in terms

In his tale *The Anarchistic Banker* (1922) Fernando Pessoa showed a case where an attitude (striving for a life free of domination) is in conflict with its ism-ending: if an anarchist expresses his anarchism in public action, he will provoke the opposition of society and end up being vigilantly controlled by the police. On the other hand, a bourgeois life in capitalist society (e.g. the life of a banker) seems to be the fullest realisation of the anarchistic attitude in practice. Anarchy then means doing anything one wants to do and trying not to get caught, if a law is infringed.

## The anarch

In his novel *Eumeswil* (1977) Ernst Jünger coined the term “anarch”. An anarch is an anarchist who, conscient of the fact that his attitude might provoke social repugnance, shrewdly hides it.

It seems that, basically, there is an arch to every ist (like there is an anarch to the anarchist), although not all isms may allow for an arch-form. “Skepticism” does allow

both forms, so that we could understand “skeptical” analogically to “anarch” and “skepticist” analogically to “anarchist”.

## Skepticism

Skepticism, especially in Analytic Philosophy, is understood as the position that knowledge is impossible. However, this seems to be a misinterpretation, for being skeptical about something means that one doubts that a belief is true; it does not mean that one is sure that it is not true. How does it come that the concept of skepticism has turned around 180 degrees, from doubting to being sure that knowledge is impossible?

The reason for this change might be found in the effect of the ism-ending onto the word. For explanation: being skeptical means to withhold taking a position, but ismioning a word requires the creation of a position. Consequently, withholding one's position is understood as one theoretical position among others. However, in reality being skeptical is a non-position (one refuses to take a stance). This is why it is fundamentally not possible to transform being skeptical into an ism. Nevertheless this was done; so we have with “skepticism” a concept that is a contradiction in terms.

## The Epimenides paradox

I suspect that use of ism-words inclines us towards an ism-way of thinking. However, the ism-way of thinking does not rely exclusively on the use of ism-words. An example for that can be found in the Epimenides paradox: Epimenides the Cretan says, that all the Cretans are liars, but Epimenides is himself a Cretan.

The Epimenides paradox relies on the belief that a liar always lies (doing something always, repeatedly, as the ism requires). However, this is impossible for a real liar who tries to mislead other persons' beliefs with the motive of generating an advantage for himself. He needs true statements to hide false ones between them.

From that follows that the liar in the Epimenides paradox is not a liar but a liarist (somebody who lies on principle) in order for the paradox to work. If he really were a liar, the alleged paradox would resolve itself as follows: When Epimenides, the Cretan, says that all Cretans are liars we cannot determine whether he is lying or telling the truth because there is no liar who always lies. Therefore, he

might well be lying, but it could as well be the case that he is telling the truth.

## Relativism

"Relativism is the concept that points of view have no absolute truth or validity, having only relative, subjective value according to differences in perception and consideration." (Wikipedia) Furthermore, relativism seems to be something bad for most philosophers: "But it is also true that most academic philosophers in the English-speaking world see the label 'relativist' as the kiss of death, so few have been willing to defend any version of the doctrine (there is less reluctance in some other disciplines)." (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

In the case of relativism ismioning the word has a similar effect like in the case of skepticism. In skepticism a non-position is transformed into a position, in relativism a position that refuses to be generalized is generalized.

A person with a relative worldview tries to form her beliefs according to what seems to be true or right from her personal point of view. She is cautious not to generalize her views from the very start because she is aware that she possesses direct access only to her own experience and that other people might have other experiences that bring other things into view and make them relevant.

A relative attitude is an attitude of modesty that blatantly contrasts to the self-assured position represented by relativism.

## Relativism is not relative, anyway

Furthermore, in contrast to the general understanding of "relativism", a relative position is not relative from the point of view of the person who holds it.

Such a person would say, "Anybody, who judges the issue from my point of view, would arrive at the same conclusion." This does not sound relative to me, but rather like one possible way of seeking universal truth.

In universalism or objectivism, the perspective is mostly one from above (Thomas Nagel's "view from nowhere"), whereas the perspective of the relative knower is one from now and here. It is like the painter who sets up his easel at one specific place and paints the landscape the way it looks like from that point of view. Actually, there is nothing subjective in the attitude of relativity: a camera put in the same place as the painter's easel could also depict the landscape only from that perspective and not from the view from nowhere.

If we ask ourselves, how we came to adopt the belief that relativism consists in its relativity, the issue of framing surfaces. Logical oppositions may contain hidden messages. For example, the logical opposition between "morally good" and "morally bad" contains the message that it is morally good to differentiate between "morally good" and "morally bad". Analogically, the message of the logical opposition between "relativism" and its opposite term "universalism" is that universalism is something good and that relativism is not so good.

The *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* (see the keyword: "Intellektualismus") reminds us that many isms originally carried a pejorative meaning, being coined in order to denominate an attitude that should be overcome.

## Individualism

Some people refuse the idea of individualism because it seems impossible to them to comply with the pretension dwelling in that notion, namely, that everybody should be unique and find ways to express his or her uniqueness publicly by ways of dressing, hobbies and life-style. However, this pretension is not the essence of the idea of "individualism" but is provoked by the ism-ending of the word.

From the perspective of the individual, the individual does not need to boast with her uniqueness or individuality, because she is already unique by the pure fact of being psychically separated from other human beings. Finding her individuality, therefore, is not a competition of winning a contest of glamour against others. In reality, the function of the term "individualism" seems not consist in offering an attitude they can adopt to individuals but rather in describing a specific structure of society in which individuals try to differentiate themselves from each other by acting in glaring ways. There are individualistic versus collectivistic societies.

The problem with the term "individualism" is that up to now individuals do not understand that its content is over-emphasized by its ism-ending.

## Epistemology

Isms are abundant in epistemology, especially in the epistemology of the Analytic School of Philosophy. Apart from realism, relativism and constructivism, there are internalism, externalism, reliabilism, coherentism, contextualism, essentialism, foundationalism, reductionalism and others. It has to be mentioned that they fulfil the latent function (see: the sociologist differentiation between manifest and latent functions) to exclude everybody from discourse who is not familiar with their meanings.

It is a typical strategy of scientific disciplines to coin terms for the exclusive use of the members of the scientific community. Everyday language, in contrast, tries to avoid uncommon terms as much as possible in order to augment the probability of understanding.

## Relativism was born at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century

The *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* states that the term „relativism“ became established only at the transition from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is interesting! Did the idea the term describes not exist before, throughout all history, e.g. together with skepticism? Was Plato's parable of the cave not already an early example of people judging reality relatively to their own point of view?

What was new at that time? The 19<sup>th</sup> century was the era of the emergence of great social movements and academic currents: marxism, socialism, liberalism, positivism, historicism, psychology and the like.

This hint might be useful for the interpretation of isms. An ism could be not just a point of view but a social movement created from a specific point of view. In this case, for a person to judge whether to hold a certain ism or not, does not only require making up her mind about the truth of the corresponding point of view, but also to decide whether she wants to join the movement.

Here lies another pitfall isms haunt us with, for not every person with a socialistic worldview might want to join the

socialistic party. Being convinced that socialism is right is compatible with the belief that the socialist party is wrong.

### The lack of ism-critique in Wittgenstein's philosophy

Isms were especially prominent at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. That means that Ludwig Wittgenstein was surrounded by isms in the social and the academic world. However, I do not have any notice of an analysis of isms in Wittgenstein's philosophy.

This fact is even more surprising as Wittgenstein's program of analysis of language designated him to study isms. He was inclined to analyze words from the point of everyday use. This inclination could have motivated Wittgenstein to criticize scientific language from the perspective of everyday language. He also advanced the concept of the language game. Why did he never ask who the winner was and who the loser in a specific language game? Why did he not ask how language games are utilized in order to exclude certain persons from discourse? He reflected on rule following. Why is there not any thought to be found in his writings about how we are urged to follow rules instead of being allowed to think for ourselves?

Maybe the reason for this fact was that Wittgenstein was preoccupied with certainty but not with freedom of thought?

### The lack of the keyword "ism" and of ism-critique in philosophical dictionaries and encyclopedias

A search in a number of philosophical encyclopedias, in the library as well as in the internet, yielded no result for the keyword "ism". There is just no such keyword and, correspondingly, no analysis of the phenomenon and of the history of isms in language. I do not know of and have not found any scientific or philosophical ism-critique either. Isms seem to be accepted as something entirely uncontroversial unproblematic.

Isms in encyclopedias are often presented as "doctrines" or as a "set of theories" omitting the expansive dynamics of isms highlighted by me in this paper.

### Conclusion

My paper shows that isms do something to words. They change their contents in a subtle and generally unobserved way. They predetermine how a word should be perceived without arguing themselves. Isms accomplish this by excluding private forms of expressing oneself and expressions that are formally or morally not apt for public announcements. They exclude linguistic registers from discourse that do not allow speaking aloud and in a self-assured way, e.g. expressions of restraint or uncertainty, attitudes of modesty, private opinions, and insincerity.

A problem arises with concepts that, within their core idea, express such a moderate register. Such concepts, transformed into isms, end up being contradictions in terms. The reason for that is that they express private attitudes, or attitudes that should better be hidden from the public, in public.

A reason for the widespread use of isms in current philosophy might be the conviction of many philosophers that philosophy should be a public discourse. Their concept of philosophy is opposed to the ancient concept of philosophy as a form of life (see Hadot 1981). Public philosophy is a constraint of what can be said to what can be said publicly.

The topic of this year's Wittgenstein Symposium seems to suggest that realism is diametrically opposed to relativism and constructivism. The aim of my paper was to show that, furthermore, these terms are all of the same kind by virtue of being isms. Ideas packed in the form of isms are delivered to us already together with an interpretation of how they should be understood and used in discourse. The ism-form deters us from reflecting upon the ideas expressed by them in a manner as if we were alone with an idea and able to find and express our attitude towards it as an individual.

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# Realism – Relativism – Constructivism

Contributions of the 38<sup>th</sup> International  
Wittgenstein Symposium  
August 9 – 15, 2015  
Kirchberg am Wechsel

Volume XXIII

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## Editors

Christian Kanzian  
Josef Mitterer  
Katharina Neges

WISSENSCHAFT · FORSCHUNG  
NIEDERÖSTERREICH



Printed in cooperation with the  
Department for Science and Research  
of the Province of Lower Austria

Kirchberg am Wechsel, 2015  
Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society