



# Isms lead to misinterpretations of moderate concepts and frame debates

38<sup>th</sup> International Wittgenstein Symposium  
on „Realism – Relativism – Constructivism“,  
Kirchberg/Wechsel, 9-15 August 2015

**Helmut Hofbauer**

[www.philohof.com](http://www.philohof.com)  
[www.philosophieblog.de/philohof](http://www.philosophieblog.de/philohof)



**„Wir führen die Wörter von ihrer metaphysischen, wieder auf ihre alltägliche Verwendung zurück.“**

Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Philosophische Untersuchungen* 116

**Isms are not characteristic for everyday language.  
They rather pertain to academic and political discourse.**

# Moderate (or modest) concepts: Some concepts do not function well as isms!

Fernando Pessoa: *The Anarchist Banker* (1922)



It makes little sense to be an anarchist publicly; the police will keep an eye on you!

Ernst Jünger: *Eumeswil* (1977)



An „anarch“ is an anarchist who shrewdly hides her anarchism from the public.

**Possibly an arch can be imagined for every ist.**



# Properties of isms:

**Being an ist (=holding some ism) means believing/doing something:**

- repeatedly, often, constantly, always;
- openly, honestly, publicly;
- loudly, wholeheartedly, having made a personal principle out of it;
- wanting to convince as many people as possible to believe/do the same.

**Ismioning concepts means (over-)emphasizing them!**

# We have a tendency to think in isms!

- possibly because most discourses are public ones

## The Epimenides Paradox:

Epimenides the Cretan says, 'that all the Cretans are liars'.

- If Epimenides is telling the truth, then he is not a liar → that he is not telling the truth, for he is saying that “all Cretans are liars”, and he himself is a Cretan, too.



Resolution of the Epimenides Paradox: If Epimenides tells the truth, he might still be a liar!

**We tend to understand the „liar“ as a „liarist“,  
i.e. as somebody who always lies.**



# Moderate (or modest) concepts: „Skepticism“ is a contradiction in terms!

In skepticism a non-position is transformed into a position!  
(=effect of the ism-ending)



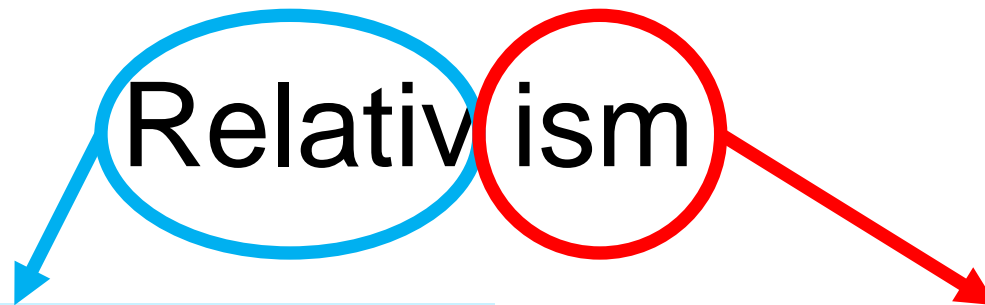
...means in everyday language:  
not being sure about something,  
refusing to take a stance on it.

...means in academic philosophy:  
being very sure about the fact that  
knowledge is impossible.

**Skepticism is the position that knowledge is impossible.**



# Moderate (or modest) concepts: „Relativism“ is a contradiction in terms!



...means: „My point of view is only relative to my perception; it cannot be generalized (=it is not strong enough to carry an ism).“

...means: „Everybody should always, constantly, honestly, openly, publicly hold and defend a relative point of view!“

“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.”  
(Sources: Wikipedia, American Heritage Dictionary)



# Framing:

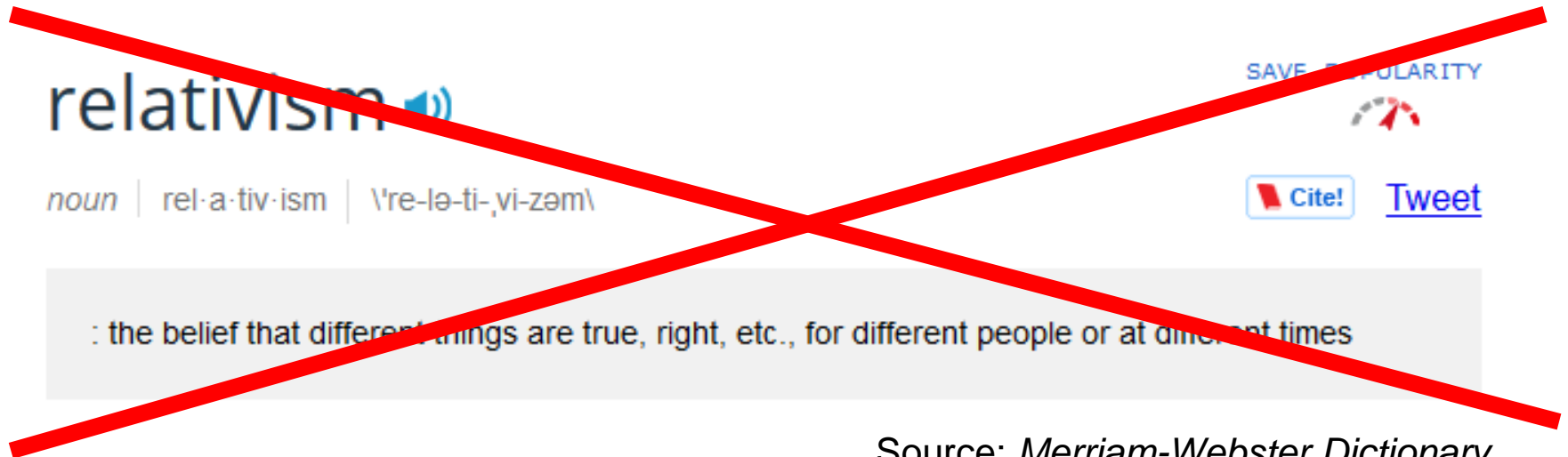


- The frame can be read as: „It is morally good to differentiate between morally good and morally bad!“
- **Hidden agenda:** We exclude all other things from our discussion which are good or bad in another sense.





# Conclusion: Isms do things to words/concepts!



Source: *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*

## Some concepts

- like anarchism, skepticism, relativism, individualism, and solipsism –  
just do not meet the requirements of isms.



# In philosophy people seem to think: The more isms the better!

foundationalism  
internalism  
externalism  
inflationism  
reliabilism  
coherentism  
deflationism  
naturalism  
reductionism  
contingentism  
indexicalism  
contextualism  
essentialism  
non-dualism

**Was there any consideration of the implications of  
ism-endings when these concepts were created?**

**Helmut Hofbauer: „Isms lead to misinterpretations of moderate concepts and frame debates“,**

**in: Christian Kanzian, Josef Mitterer, Katharina Neges (eds.): *Realism – Relativism – Constructivism. Contributions to the 38. International Wittgenstein Symposium. Volume XXIII.* Neulengbach 2015, p. 135-137.**