Introduction

Philosophy as Careful Commonsense

Both the title of this introduction, and of these notes as a whole, arise from ideas of the recent American philosophy, W.V. Quine (1908-200) who observed that science was simply "careful commonsense," and (citing a metaphor of Otto Neurath) claimed that our belief system as a whole was a like a boat which one had to repair while remaining afloat in it. I'll discuss this metaphor in detail in due course. Since I (like Quine) think of philosophy as by and large continuous with science, the same remark in my mind applies to philosophy.

This commitment to commonsense is not in the least a commitment to all or even most commonsense beliefs, very many of which will be severely challenged in the course of our discussions. It's simply a commitment to some of them, and, in particular, to basing any challenge to any specific commonsense belief ultimately on some other beliefs or reasonings that can be shown to be perfectly commonsensical. The important point of grounding challenges in this way is to be sure that any claims that are made are ones that you, yourselves, would find reasonable to accept, at least on careful reflection. Nothing in this course should be regarded as to be taken "on faith." Everything is open to question, doubt, and argument --although, not of course, all at once (you can hardly answer a question if nothing is at least provisionally taken for granted). I may not always be able to provide the specific reasons for a particular claim. Oftentimes I, like everyone else, have to rely on the testimony of others, alive or dead, who have tested the claims themselves (but I will have to have reason to take their testimony seriously). But I will be able to direct you to the appropriate sources for the further reasons, which you should follow up if you're in doubt. In this way, I hope to encourage in you the life of reason to which philosophy aspires.

One of the chief morals of my treatment will be to learn to resist the siren call of philosophy. Many people think that they need to take stands on the Big Issues: the nature of truth, knowledge, the nature and origin of the world, the existence of God, the nature and purpose of life, the nature of mind, etc. The history of philosophy has shown, I think, that the answers to these questions is either VERY EASY --or VERY HARD. The very easy issues, I shall argue, are questions about the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, the purpose of life: here the answers are simply obvious and negative. Putting aside "faith," there is no reason whatsoever to believe in god, an immortal soul, or purpose to life beyond the purposes of human beings. Of course, showing that these answers are obvious may not itself be obvious, and so I will address the issues in due course.

OR: as I say, the questions are very hard, too hard for any one to settle in the near future, and too hard to have one’s lief depend upon. These are questions about the nature of reality --is it all “physical,” and “material” or are there “abstract” things like numbers and structures and properties? A particularly difficult area is the nature of mind, which, I shall argue, is far more opaque to us than we are ordinarily inclined to suppose.
1. Realism and Truth

1.1 Belief

The basic item of concern in epistemology is belief. It would be wonderful to provide a good definition of this basic item, but, as we’ll discuss later (§3.6), definitions of important notions are much harder to come by than is ordinarily supposed –usually a good definition will require a whole theory of the phenomenon in question, and this is not something we would want to undertake here. As with any discussion we have to take some things for granted at the start, even if we find we have to revise them later (cf. an issue to which we will repeatedly return in this course).

For purposes here, we may provisionally rely on a good approximation to belief, namely avowables (which I’ll sometimes call simply "avowals"). A person's avowables are all those sentences he or she would sincerely assert or agree to if asked. Thus, my own avowables include such sentences as “College Park is a town in Maryland,” “The earth is roughly spherical,” “Eating broccoli diminishes the risks of cancer,” “11+11=22,” “Torturing small children is wrong,” “Bach’s music is terrific.” As this tiny sample is meant to indicate, they can be about anything. All that is required is that they be expressed by an indicative sentence.

Avowables may not coincide with genuine beliefs for any number of reasons: (i) many people are not very articulate, and find they have trouble putting their beliefs into words; indeed, (ii) people often misstate their beliefs; indeed (iii) they often deliberately do so, adjusting what they say to the particular circumstances (the audience, the occasion) in which they find themselves (think of how you might alter what you assert as your belief, depending on whether you're in court, or up late night with a friend, or speaking to a child); (iv) psychological research has shown that people can be mistaken about their own beliefs, confabulating stories about themselves when they think they are innocently introspecting. A famous experiment showed that people's willingness to come to the aid of someone in a subway accident was inversely proportional to the number of people at the scene. However, when asked why, in a crowded scene, they didn't help out, people would make claims about their lack of medical knowledge, the risk of interfering—and deny that the number of other people had had any effect! (See Nisbett and Wilson (1977) for a review of a great many results of this sort.) Moreover, it will in fact be an interesting theme in our course, as it has been in much of the history of philosophy, that one comes to discover what one believes by careful reflection: the things one blurts out in perfectly sincere avowals may well be withdrawn after consideration of obvious consequences that simply didn't come to mind initially (many people, for example, will readily avow a "relativism" about truth that I will shortly show they very likely don't really believe). So there's no question that avowals aren't the same as beliefs. But for convenience for the purposes of this course we will provisionally assume they are, and we will take the words `think`, `believe`, `avow` as near synonyms, unless we explicitly note otherwise.

1.2 Relativism and Fallibility

A jesting Pilate is said to have asked Jesus, "What is truth?" Unlike Pilate, we will stay a little for an answer, although, for our purposes, the answer will not take as long, or be as difficult, as one might fear.

Many people have been tempted to define truth in terms of what we think or believe, in such a way that often invites relativism with respect to truth: thus, one often hears the claims, "Truth is whatever anyone takes to be true," "What's true for one person isn't always true for another." Although we'll see that there is an insight to be had in many relativistic claims (§2.4 below), it is important at the outset to guard against a number of confusions in this regard.
The first point to be made here is an absolutely crucial point for this course, and, I think, for the whole of philosophy, a point so important that I want to dignify it as a principle, to versions of which we will return many times:

**(FP1) The (First Person) Fallibility Principle:**

I could be ignorant or mistaken about most anything.

Note that I qualified this claim with the word 'many': in §2.4 below, we'll consider some important classes of apparent exceptions to this principle. But we'll see that they are somewhat rare and special. Most of the claims that readily come to mind in thinking of typical declarative sentences certainly seem to be ones that, speaking for myself, I could certainly be wrong about. For example, I've heard that broccoli prevents cancer and have come to believe it, sufficiently so that I try to eat lots of it. But I could be wrong about this. After all, maybe the article I read was written by a quack, or the relevant experiments weren't well performed. I also believe that Columbus sailed in 1492; but that, too, could be wrong (maybe it really was 1493). And so on; I could proceed through belief after belief, and usually, with a little reflection, I could see that I could be wrong. (This applies, by the way, to most of the claims I will make in this course, so that you should feel free to question anything I say, as you should (as they say) question any authority."

Principle (FP1), this First Person Fallibility Principle, begins to express the seed of an idea that is of tremendous importance in philosophy, and that is the idea of Realism, or the idea that the way things are is by and large independent of my thoughts and beliefs about them. We'll see that this idea is subject to some qualifications, and has been open to dispute in certain domains -for example, with regard to ethics and aesthetics- but it's important to keep in mind its enormous plausibility about the kind of ordinary claims I mentioned in the last paragraph. Speaking for myself (and I suspect for you as well), I'm a realist about whether broccoli prevents cancer, or Columbus sailed in 1492: whether it does, or he did, is a matter that is completely independent of what I happen to think. I could be wrong about both of them.

Of course, from the fact I could be wrong about something, it doesn't follow that I am wrong: from the fact that I might be wrong in thinking broccoli prevents cancer it doesn't follow that it doesn't do so (merely that something's possibly false doesn't mean that it actually is). Indeed, so far as I know, I have absolutely no reason to believe broccoli doesn't prevent cancer. I have no reason to believe I am wrong. But my admitting to the possibility can be important none of the less: it makes me open to reasons that might be adduced to the contrary. Recognition of one's fallibility is important to being a rational creature; but it doesn't mean giving up one's beliefs -to the contrary, maintaining plenty of beliefs may also be crucial to being rational.

Now, I don't think the plausibility of principle (FP1) is limited to me. I think it really applies to everyone. I think it's true of most people, and, moreover, that most people think it is -that is, they think it applies to themselves as well. Think about it in your own case: don't you also find that, for many claims you can think of, you could be wrong about them? Or at least you could be ignorant, having either the wrong view, or no opinion at all about a matter, for example, about the causes of cancer or the exact age of the universe. After all, it's precisely because one takes oneself to be ignorant of many matters that one reads books, newspapers, talks to other people, and takes courses in college. Imagine someone who thought they could be ignorant about nothing, that merely their believing something made it true: I think we would find such a person madder than a hatter. Even the craziest paranoid thinks they at least might be wrong about something --if only the time of day.

Consequently, I think we can put forward a slightly stronger principle:

**(FP2) The General Fallibility Principle**
Anyone could be ignorant or mistaken about most anything.

or (to put it in the way philosophers like to talk):

For any person, x, and most any claim, p:
  x could be ignorant or mistaken about p.

that is:
  It's possible for p to be true and yet x not believe p (ignorance)
and
  It's possible for x to believe p, yet p not be true (mistake)

(In philosophy, when we want to talk about just any claim, irrespective of its content, we indicate it by a small case letter, by convention, starting with 'p' and continuing with 'q', 'r' and 's', which is usually all we will need. Such letters can be thought of as standing in for standard declarative sentences in English, such as 'Snow is white', 'Snow is black', 'Columbus sailed in 1492'.)

Now, as soon as we appreciate this General Fallibility Principle, and the basic Realism that goes with it, we can see a conflict with at least one common version of Relativism, which might be expressed as:

(R1) Crude Relativism:
  What's true is entirely relative to a believer.
  Indeed: x believes p if, and only if, p is true for x.

Why do (FP2) and (R1) conflict? Well, suppose someone, say, Sam, believes that Columbus sailed in 1492, but also allows that he could be wrong. Well, to allow he could be wrong is to allow that he could believe it and it not be true that Columbus sailed in 1492 --and he allows this "for himself": he could say to himself, as an expression of (FP2), "it could be wrong for me that Columbus said in 1492." That is, he would bedenying Crude Relativism, since he would be allowing that it's at least possible for him to believe something, but that thing still not be true for him.

Or take the "Flat Earthers" --people who believe (and there apparently are some) that the earth is flat. They think it's flat not only "for them," but for everyone --indeed, they think everyone else is mistaken. Presumably no one really thinks that the earth is in fact different shapes for different people, and that when, say, people come to change their minds about its shape, this actually brings about a corresponding change in the shape of the earth itself --that, amazingly, the very effect of someone's changing their belief from it's being flat to it's round was to cause such massive geological upheaval!

Of course, some might protest that, if a person changes their mind, then the same things really aren't "true for them." And I think, in a way, they'd be right, but that's because the expression 'true for them', or, more generally, 'true for x' is a confusing expression: it looks like it concerns truth, but on reflection, we realize all it really has to do with belief: 'p is true for x' is just another way of saying 'x believes p'. But if this is so, this makes (R1) into the vacuous (R1')

(R1') if x believes p, then x believes p

It certainly does not have the intended import of relativising truth, saying nothing about truth in the sense operating in (FP2). In order to focus on that notion, it will be best to banish from our talk this confusing expression 'true for'.

1.3 Metaphysics vs. Epistemology
What makes 'true for' especially confusing, and what is a prime source of confusions underlying many forms of relativism, is a confusion between two fundamentally different topics in philosophy: metaphysics and epistemology: the difference between what the world is like ("metaphysics") and what people think, believe or expect the world is like ("epistemology"). To a first approximation, Realism is the view that these two topics are at least sometimes independent of each other. It is the idea that underlies (FP1) and (FP2): for the most part, there is no necessary connection between the way the world is and what anyone happens to believe about it.

(Don't be daunted by the rather heavy terms here. The word 'metaphysics' is popularly used as a word for a very mysterious and arcane investigation into special features of the world, unknowable by normal science. In contemporary philosophy of the sort we'll be pursuing, the word has no such connotations: it simply indicates the totality of claims about the way the world is, which might include physics, biology, sociology --and even mystical claims about a supernatural realm, if such there be. 'Epistemology' comes from a Greek word for knowledge, 'episte', and instead of the cumbersome 'epistemological', philosophers sometimes use the shorter 'epistemic', meaning roughly, pertaining to knowledge and belief.)

Many proposed definitions of truth are defective because they fail to observe the distinction between metaphysics and epistemology. (R1), for example, suffers from this defect, but so do the following variants of (R1):

(R2) (Cultural Relativism):

\[ p \text{ is true for a culture } C, \text{ if, and only if, } \]
\[ p \text{ is believed by (most?) people in culture } C \]

(R3) (Scientific Relativism):

\[ p \text{ is true (for a set of scientists and their disciples?) if and only if } p \text{ has been proven (by that set of scientists) } \]

Here, again, we can insist that it's at least possible that everyone in a culture -even everyone in our own culture, including the scientists- could be mistaken (indeed, most serious scientists are only too well aware of how easily mistaken they may be, and so often insist on "replications" of experiments, and read each other's work to update their views).

Certainly there are plenty of truths that no one has ever proven: for example, either (P1) or (P2) is certainly true:

(P1) The number of stars is even
(P2) The number of stars is odd

But I gather no one has proven which one. The truth here, as about many other things, is simply unproven and unknown, and, if you think about it, probably always will be. And, again, this serves to remind us that, by and large, metaphysical issues, like the numerosity of the stars, or when Columbus sailed, are independent of epistemic ones like who's proven what.

On the face of it, it consequently seems like a serious mistake to try to define truth in terms of what people think, believe, expect, or have proven, instead of what Realism and the Principles of Fallibility suggest, namely, a more metaphysical definition, in terms of the way the world is.

None of this should be taken to suggest that there is no connection between epistemic and
metaphysical notions. In the first place, there are some epistemic notions that are, by their very meaning, keyed to truth. There are, for example, so-called "factive" words, like 'know', 'appreciate' which presuppose that the thing known or appreciated is in fact true (no one can know or appreciate that 2+2=5, given that it isn't). But even here the connection is only partial: although if something is known it follows that it is true, the converse doesn't hold: there are zillions of things that are true that are not known (the numbers of trees in Canada; whether there is life on other planets; how many freckles Julius Caesar had; where I left my umbrella last week). Secondly, there are various kinds of issues about which people's beliefs seem very close to definitive: for example, with regard to the rules of some human institutions, such as the law, some of the beliefs of the managers of those institutions can be constitutive of the truth of those rules; or, to take another kind of case, it's very hard to imagine someone believing herself to be in excruciating pain, but failing to be so. We'll return to discuss these special cases in §2 below.

1.4 Distinguishing Realism from Truth

Our belief in our ignorance and fallibility seems to require that we at least keep open the possibility of realism about some topic, and that is a reason, then, to reject purely epistemic definitions of truth, since if we tied the truth too closely to what people believe on some topic, then it would seem impossible to allow people to be mistaken about it. So perhaps we should opt for a more metaphysical definition, some definition in terms of how the world is, leaving it to metaphysicians about some particular domain (e.g. physics or ethics) to decide whether or not the way things are in that domain does or does depend upon human thought.

But we need to be careful here: Although, for the reasons we've discussed, 'truth' shouldn't be regarded as an epistemic notion, it isn't quite a metaphysical one either, since it is, first and foremost, a property of things we say, specifically sentences of the sort we utter. It's called a semantic property, or a property involving the meanings of words. But it's certainly nearly correct to think of this semantic property of truth as intimately tied to metaphysics, since it's the property of sentences by virtue of which, intuitively speaking, they "correspond" to metaphysics, i.e. to the way things are in the world, to, as we might say, the facts. Indeed, this idea gives rise to perhaps the most natural definition of truth, the "correspondence theory."

1.5 The Correspondence Theory of Truth

Many philosophers have tried to capture the metaphysical notion of truth by a "correspondence theory of truth."

(TC) A sentence is true if it corresponds to the facts

It turns out, however, that, as plausible as this definition sounds, it's really quite problematic. The main problem is that the terms used in it cry out for just as much, if not more elucidation as the word 'true itself. For example, 'facts just seems like another word for 'truths; and 'corresponds opens a horrible can of worms: what sort of correspondence is the right one? Falsehoods, after all, "correspond" to facts as well --I could associate with every falsehood the "corresponding" fact it gets wrong: e.g., 'Paris is not in France' could be put into correspondence with Paris being in France. The correspondence here would be "negative", not the "positive" one we want for truth. Indeed, correspondences could be set up between sentences and situations in the world in any of an infinite number of ways. How are we to specify the correspondence we want for truth --without using the very notion of truth we would be trying to define?! I, myself, join a lot of philosophers in thinking there is something right and important that substantial correspondence definitions are getting at, but I'm afraid I despair of spelling it out adequately in my lifetime --certainly not in the course of this semester.

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However, it turns out that there is an immensely clever way of capturing one important idea behind the correspondence theory without actually solving these philosophical problems, and this is set out in the "Redundancy Theory" of truth.

1.6 The Redundancy Definition of Truth

1.6A The Definition Itself

Given the difficulties of sorting out realism in different domains, and the further difficulties of setting out a notion of "fact" and "correspondence" that might capture a non-epistemic notion of truth, what are we to say? Well, fortunately, it turns out that the notion of truth happens to have a curious property that will permit us at least a provisional rule for its use, a rule that will suffice as a definition, at least for the purposes of this course (there are a number of major philosophers who have recently argued that it will in fact suffice for all serious purposes, but we needn't endorse this controversial view here). I need to warn you that it is a startling simple definition, so simple you'll think it's empty and silly and not worth the price of a college education. However, be patient. I'll explain shortly why, despite its trivial appearance, it's actually quite interesting, and entirely appropriate for our purposes.

The definition on which we will rely throughout this text is the so-called Redundancy Definition of Truth. It is nothing more than the claim that saying such and such is true is simply an emphatic way of saying such and such by itself. For purposes of this course, we may provisionally put it this way:

For any indicative sentence of English, p:

(T) 'p' is true if and only if p.

For example, to say "Snow is white' is true" is equivalent to saying snow is white; i.e. the sentence 'Snow is white is true if and only if snow is white. 'Snow is black' is true iff snow is black. And to say that a sentence is false is to say it is not true. Thus, since snow isn't black, the sentence 'Snow is black' isn't true; and so it's false.

(Note the quotation marks around 'p'. This is a way of referring to the sentence itself instead of actually using it to refer to whatever the words in it happen refer to. Of course, the letter `p' itself is not a sentence, but here I must beg the reader's indulgence and simply understand it as a variable, standing in for any indicative sentence of English, just as in "for any x, x+1=1+x", the letter `x' is a variable standing in for any number. This issue –as well as exactly what the phrase `if and only if' means will be discussed shortly in chapter 2; for now, just rely on your pretty good intuitive understanding of what's intended here).

1.6B Virtues of the Redundancy Definition

Now, as I said, this definition will probably seem preposterously trivial. But, as with a surprising number of claims in philosophy, it is not the claim itself that is interesting, so much as the work that the claim can be shown to do. It may well be that (T) does most of the work any definition of 'truth may need to do. Anyway, it is important to appreciate some of the virtues of this definition, and the ways in which it allows us to proceed in the discussions of this course without needing to decide many of the questions that philosophers have traditionally associated with the notion.
(i) The definition is non-circular

In order to appreciate some of the virtues of (T), it is important to pay close attention to the specific way in which it is phrased. To make it clearer, let's again substitute a particular sentence, 'Snow is white, for 'p' and obtain:

(T1) 'Snow is white' is true if and only if snow is white.

(left side of definition)                                   (right side)

Notice that on the left side, but not on the right side, of the definition we placed the sentence in quotation marks. This is a way of talking about the sentence, 'Snow is white' - i.e. the sentence spelt ess, en, oh, double-yew, space, aye, es, space, double-yew, aitch, aye, tee, ee. We are mentioning the sentence, not using to say anything, as we do when, without quotation marks, we might use to talk about snow being white-which is what we are doing on the right side. That is, the subject matter on the left is different from that on the right: on the left we are talking about a sentence having a certain property, while on the right we are talking about a substance having a certain color. What greater difference between things could there be? In any case, (T1) is saying something very different from the following clearly vacuous claims:

(U1) Snow is white if and only if snow is white.

(U2) 'Snow is white' is true if and only if 'Snow is white' is true.

(U1), of course, says nothing about truth, and is useless for our purposes. And, although (U2) does talk about truth, it does so in a completely circular way: it uses on the right side of the definition the very same concept that is being defined on the left. Anyone who didn't know what the word 'true' meant would not be any wiser from reading this definition. (Compare:

(U3) 'Snow is white' is glick if and only if 'Snow is white' is glick.

If you don't know what 'glick' means, (U3) isn't going to help you find out.)

However, (T1) is decidedly not circular: the subject matter on the left and right sides of it are decidedly different. Again, the left side talks about a sentence and its having a property of truth; the right side about snow and its having a property of being white.

(ii) The definition is unusually clear

It is very important to note the wonderful clarity of the redundancy definition. In particular, it doesn't use any notion remotely as unclear or problematic as the notion of truth that it attempts to define (in this way, it is an improvement on the "correspondence theory," (TC), that we considered earlier). The concepts employed on its right side:

(T) 'p' is true if and only if p

(left side)                                   (right side)

can be as clear and simple as you like; they can be about the color of snow, the nature of love, the existence of God, or how many peanuts Bob ate at the ball game. After all,

(T4) 'Bob ate twenty bags of peanuts' is true if and only if Bob ate twenty bags of peanuts.
Indeed, we could always limit (T) to those values of ‘p’ that someone understood: we can in effect make (T) as clear as anything could be to anyone who understood basic English grammar and at least one English sentence! One can easily imagine introducing the word 'true in this fashion to a child. Notice that we didn't need to use the familiar word 'true', but could have introduced 'eurt' instead:

\[(T5) \quad \text{'p' is eurt if and only p.}\]

(T5) gives you a very clear way to apply the word 'eurt' even though you've never seen or heard it before. But, of course, it means exactly the same as 'true'.

(iii) The definition is non-epistemic

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly for philosophical purposes, this definition captures a notion of truth untainted by any epistemological considerations. There is no easily refutable talk of what anyone knows, or can prove, or of what society has agreed to; and it allows the important possibility that we captured by our General Fallibility Principle, that people can be mistaken.

Of course, since (T) is intended merely as a definition of 'true, it does not of course tell us just which sentences in English are true, any more than a definition of 'bachelor would tell us which human beings are in fact bachelors. The definition provides a clear rule for using the word; it does not, nor does it need to, perform the actual application of it to individual cases. A philosophical theory (or analysis, or explication; see §) of 'truth is not supposed to tell you then and there what is true, but only what it is to be true. If you want to know what sentences are true by this definition, then you should probably consult experts in the specific subject matter that appears in ‘p. For example, if you want to know whether the sentence ‘Snow is white is true, then, according to the definition, you should find out whether snow is white. You might try asking ski instructors; or looking for yourself. Surely it would be inappropriate for a definition of 'truth to decide that matter, just as it would be inappropriate for a definition of 'bachelor to single out some particular man.

(iv) The definition captures English (almost) perfectly

Thirdly, the definition seems to capture perfectly the ordinary use of the English word 'true. Tarski (1944/1949), who takes the claim as a point of departure for his more elaborate theory of truth, remarks:

If we ask a high school boy, or even an adult intelligent man having no special philosophical training, whether he regards a sentence to be true if it agrees with reality, or if it designates an existing state of affairs, it may simply turn out that he doesn't understand the question. ...Therefore, I was by no means surprised to learn (in a discussion devoted to these problems) that, in a group of people who were questioned, only 15% agreed that 'true means for them "agreeing with reality," while 90% agreed that such a sentence as ‘It is snowing is true if, and only if, it is snowing. Thus, a great majority of these people seemed to reject the classical conception of truth in its "philosophical" formulation, while accepting the same conception when formulated in plain words. --Tarski (1949:p70)

Whether or not Tarski's little survey establishes the fact, it does draw attention to the blinding obviousness and (near) adequacy of the proposal.

I say "almost" perfect, and "near" adequacy. It turns out, as Tarski famously went on to show, that there are some nasty technical flaws in (T), stated in the bald way we stated it. I'll mention them briefly here only to convince you that (T) is not nearly as empty as it looks, and to give you a feel
for the peculiar difficulties with which philosophers contend.

1.6C Surprising Problems with the Redundancy Definition

In the first place, there is the very embarrassing fact that (T), as stated, doesn't make any grammatical sense!! For think very carefully about what it says:

(T) 'p' is true if and only if p.

It seems to say that a certain letter of the alphabet, the letter 'p' is true iff p! But the letter 'p' is not remotely a sentence of English. To be sure, you've probably understood quite well what I meant to be getting at by (T) -you know that 'p' is meant to be some kind of variable ranging over sentences, so that (T) expresses a generality; and so it suffices for the nonce. But in order to avoid this technical problem, we would need to set out Tarski's full "Recursive" definition of truth, which enumerates, first, how simple sentences are true according to it, and then how complex ones are true by virtue of the way they are constructed (out of habit, I'll sometimes use odd looking "square quotes" instead of the usual ones to partly get around this problem; if you're interested in how they work, come see me). This full definition is presented in standard courses in symbolic logic (e.g. Philosophy 270, 273 in this department), and, so long as you see this little difficulty, needn't concern us further here.

Tarski's "recursive" definition also enabled him to avoid another notoriously vexing problem with the redundancy theory as we've stated it. It is a problem that, on the one hand, is regularly noticed by many children, but, on the other, taxed the minds of some of the greatest philosophers and logicians of the 20th century (and continues to tax many into the 21st!). This is the so-called "Liar Paradox," or "Epimenides Paradox" (named after Epimenides, a 4th Century BC Cretan who, according to the Bible, (Titus 1:12) said "All Cretans are Liars" -which philosophers have (mis-)interpreted as his saying 'I am presently lying': i.e. `What I am presently uttering is not true'). The paradox arises all too easily from (T), by considering a simple, but slightly peculiar substitution for 'p', which we'll indicate by naming it with name. Some people name their dogs and cats; philosophers sometimes like to name their pet sentences. Here's one favorite sentence of mine, which I call `Sam':

Sam: Sam is not true.

Substituting this very sentence for 'p' in (T), we get:

(TL) 'Sam is not true' is true if and only if Sam is not true.

So far so good. But, unfortunately, the sentence, 'Sam is not true' is, of course, the very sentence Sam itself! That is:

Sam = 'Sam is not true'

Now, as Shakespeare noted, "a rose by any other name would smell as sweet": whatever is true of a rose is true of it even if it were called 'a schmose'. So if something is true of sentence Sam, then it's true of that very sentence, 'Sam is not true'(i.e. the sentence spelt, captial es, ee, en, tee, ee, en, ...). Well, (TL) says of that very sentence, 'Sam is not true', that it is true if and only if sentence Sam is not true. So (TL) implies:

(TL') Sam is true if and only if Sam is not true.

But this is a patent contradiction!! I may as well have said, "The number of stars is even if and only if it is not even." There is no way for (TL) to be true. Something has gone wrong.

Well, as I said, Tarski's "recursive" definition of truth permits us to state the redundancy idea
in such a fashion that at least begins to avoid this problem. But to appreciate how it does so, you need to study a little symbolic logic, which you can do by signing up for one of the department's regular courses in it next term.

(I'm afraid I can't resist indicating to you just how nasty this little problem can become. The following is called the "Strengthened Liar Paradox." Consider what happens if one were to try to say something very tempting here and, throwing up one's hands in despair, dismiss sentence Sam as neither true nor false. After all, if it's being one or the other leads to a contradiction, then surely the next best thing would be to think it is neither, no? Well, easier said than thought: for if sentence Sam is neither true nor false, then, of course, it follows that it's not true (if some bizarre organism is neither a plant nor an animal, then it follows it's not an animal, right?). BUT THAT'S JUST WHAT SENTENCE SAM SAYS!, namely:

Sam is not true!

So, if Sam is neither true nor false, then it's true after all!! Um, but wait a minute: if it's true, then it's not true... eek!! Welcome to philosophy --and to what remains a surprisingly difficult problem in logic.) This is as good an example as any of the ways in which commonsense can very quickly begin to be critical of itself, which is the conception of philosophy I am trying to advance in these notes.

In any case, I hope I've convinced you that, although the Redundancy definition looks silly and empty, it actually has a number of virtues -and some surprising problems that show that, in any case, it's far from empty. Despite the technical problems I've mentioned, the redundancy theory will be tremendously helpful to us. For our purposes, all that is important is that we have a notion of truth that is relatively clear and allows for falsehood and error. We'll see that it also suffices for various other logical distinctions we will want to draw, ones that will help us evaluate the merits of various sorts of arguments.

1.7 Truth and Toleration

The rightness and wrongness of views can sometimes be confused with another issue that seems to go by the same name, a person's right to believe a certain claim. Now, even if someone does happen to know a truth, that still doesn't license them bonking you over the head with it. It is one of the fundamental precepts of our society that they should be allowed to do so, that no one should be forcibly required to have any particular belief. It is a precept to which I, myself, am deeply committed, and hope that nothing in my lectures suggests otherwise.

However, toleration of belief does not entail any sort of endorsement of it. The right to believe p must be distinguished from p itself being right. The right to believe is a political issue, which has been settled in the United States by the First Amendment. The issue of whether a belief is right, or true-- is usually not the sort of thing that is settled by politics. The most politics can do is to settle on what betaken to be true for various political purposes.

Of course, truth and falsity have something to do with what might be called a person's "epistemological right" to believe something: if we have reason to think something is false, then we have reason to disbelieve it. As we'll see in §2 below, having reasons is having reasons or evidence that increase the probability of our beliefs being true. In this course, we'll be discussing at length the probability of beliefs about, for example, religion and ethics being true, given the evidence, arguments, and reasons that have been adduced for them. But even here, notoriously, all of us can go wrong. Probability is not certainty, and even the most perfectly decent, good, intelligent people with the best reasons in the world can still be wrong. The best any of us can do is adduce the best reasons we can.
1.8 Objectivity and Restricted Relativisms

It might be felt that the redundancy definition of truth completely misses what worries people (certainly what probably worried Pontius Pilate) when they seek a definition of truth, or grapple with the issue of whether truth is "absolute" or "relative." And it certainly does do that; but only because reflection suggests that those worries are misplaced. It's not the definition of truth that is really the appropriate object of concern.

There are actually a number of different issues that concern people when they worry about truth, and I'll touch on a few of them here. I've said there are some exceptions to our Fallibility Principles, (FP1) and (FP2) (pp1-2 above). These fall into two kinds: (i) cases in which the truth in a certain domain is constituted by what people think, and (ii) cases of "subjectivity" in which people happen to be in an unusually privileged position with regard to certain truths. I'll discuss domain constitution first, and then turn to the issue of the peculiar kind of subjectivity and authority that seems to be involved in knowing one's own mind.

1.8A Domain Constitution

One source of a certain sort of infallibility arises in cases in which a certain domain is constituted by people's beliefs in that domain. The more a domain is constituted by people's judgments, the more "subjective" it is; the less it is so constituted, the more "objective." One way to assess the relative subjectivity vs. objectivity of a domain is to ask oneself, along the lines of the issue raised by (FP1) and (FP2), whether it makes sense to suppose that people could be wrong about it. I'll consider four illustrations, the first two at opposite ends of the subjective/objective spectrum, and the third and fourth at different places in between:

(i) Personal Taste

Perhaps the clearest case of a subjective domain is the domain of personal taste. Suppose you think chocolate ice cream is better than rum raisin, and I think the reverse. Well, superficially it would appear that we can't both be right; but is one of us really wrong? Does it really make sense for to think that I could really be mistaken in thinking rum raisin is better than chocolate? In this sort of case, it would appear that there is "no fact of the matter". Certainly there is no issue worth arguing about. De gustibus non est disputandum ("about tastes, there is no disputing"). What, after all, is there to say about ice cream flavors?

Well, maybe there is something to say, in which case, fine, I was wrong and this is not such a simple case, and I apologize to those connoisseurs of ice cream among you who are
appalled by my philistinism. But in any case what distinguishes such connoisseurs from me and (I think) most people is that we think that there is no more to one ice cream flavor being better than another than a person's thinking it is. The domain of ice cream evaluation is constituted by what a person prefers, and there's nothing more to it than that. Such a domain would seem "purely subjective."

However, not every issue of taste is entirely "subjective." For there seem to many people to be at least semi-objective questions of value, questions that are the subject matter of aesthetics. But before we consider them, it will be useful to consider two other cases, natural science, which is arguably at the other extreme and seems totally objective, not in the least constituted by what anyone thinks, and legality, which is arguably constituted by what certain people believe and say.

(ii) Natural Science

The best examples of entirely objective domains are ones from the natural sciences, such as physics, astronomy, geology, biology. Consider, for example, astrophysics: here one physicist may believe there was a "Big Bang," and another that there wasn't. Here too they can't both be right; but here, unlike in the case of ice cream flavors, one of them is surely wrong. There is surely a fact of the matter, and it makes perfect sense to do investigations --undertake empirical research, make arguments, provide reasons for thinking one way rather the other-- to find out. Such a domain would seem to be "entirely objective" if anything is. The bulk of the questions considered in physics, geology, botany, biology seem to be objective in this unqualified way: it seems to make perfect sense to think that even the best chemists, biologists, geologists could be wrong about their claims. As we move over to the "softer" social sciences, things get less clear: could everyone be wrong about the mind, or society? Well, maybe. In my own professional work I vigorously defend the objectivity of psychology; but there are many serious philosophers who disagree with me.

(iii) Legality

A particularly striking example of a domain constituted by at least certain people's beliefs is legality, or what is a civil law (in contrast to "natural" laws of the sort discovered e.g. by physicists or biologists): something is illegal if and only if some specific set of people (e.g. kings, elected officials) have decreed that it is illegal. Of course, this means that the domain isn't purely subjective, since (as many of us know only too well) it's very easy for most of us non-officials to be ignorant or mistaken mistaken about the law. But while this may be true for most of us, it can't be true of everyone throughout history. Some official had better have been right about it for some amount of time, if there is to be any legal system at all. It makes no sense to suppose that everyone has always been mistaken about the law, in the way that everyone might always have been and continue to be mistaken about the age of the universe.
(iv) Euthyphronic Questions

One way to bring out issues about what constitutes truth in a certain domain is to ask a peculiar kind of question—many call it a "Euthyphonic" question, since it was first asked by Plato in his dialogue, the "Euthyphro" (named for the Athenian who is the "straight man" in the piece). The general form of a Euthyphonic question is:

(E) Is something X because Ys think it is, or do Ys think it is X because it is?

The examples we have considered so far lend themselves to fairly clear answers. Thus, we might ask:

(E-PT) Is an ice cream flavor good because someone thinks it is, or does someone think it is good because it is?

(E-NS) Is something true in natural science because scientists think it is, or do they think it is because it's true?

(E-L) Is something legal because the lawmakers have declared it to be, or do lawmakers declare it to be, because it is legal?

I submit that a moment's reflection reveals that, by and large, the correct answer to (E-PT) and (E)-(L) is the first option. An ice cream flavor is good simply because someone thinks it is. And this is reflected in the fact that it would seem silly for someone to wonder, "I know I like cherry ice cream; but is it really good?" In the realm of ice cream, there seems no room for a discrepancy between what a person likes and what is good—which is why we might well add, "good, relative to that person's tastes."

Similarly, it seems to make no sense to suppose that someone something is legal because the lawmakers declare it to be. It's they who have to make up their mind about whether, for example, it's legal to turn right on red. And this is reflected in the fact that it would make no sense for someone to say, "I know that the lawmakers have declared turning right on red illegal: but is it really illegal?" The law just is what the (designated) lawmakers declare it to be.

(v) Ethics

The cases considered so far are relatively easy to locate on the spectrum between personal subjectivity, social constitution and pure objectivity. It is time to consider the notoriously hard case of ethics. Now, it is a deep and impressive fact about (most of) us that we do think of
ourselves as fallible about ethics. That is, we can easily think:

**I could be ignorant or mistake about matters of ethics**

(You should pause and think about whether you do actually accept this possibility, and why. Think of various different ethical cases that have been historically very controversial --racism, sexism, abortion, capital punishment, euthanasia-- and think of how you have perhaps come to reconsider your views on these matters as a result of further evidence or argument.)

Note that the relative objectivity of ethics and aesthetics is different from that of legality. First of all, let's be clear that ethics is not the same as legality. They sometimes overlap: it is presumably both immoral and illegal to torture innocent children. But many things that may be immoral --e.g. lying to a friend-- might not be illegal; and many things that are illegal may be (independently) immoral: it is illegal to drive on the left hand side of the road, but, apart from our obligation to obey the law, it is surely not immoral to do so.

Now some have held that morality is simply a matter not of human, but of divine law. And it as this issue that Plato was addressing when he asked (very nearly) the original Euthyphronic question:

(E) *Is something good because God declares it to be,*

*or does God declare it to be because it is good?*

(Plato actually asks it about --the Greek translation of-- "piety"; but most philosophers have taken the question to be about the good.) Here it doesn't seem right to answer take the first option. For let's suppose that God exists, and that he is good. But recall from the Bible that he ordered Abraham to kill his son Isaac as a sacrifice. So imagine the moment when Abraham, knife in hand, is hovering over Isaac's body, about to slit his throat. Unlike the case of legality, here it seems at least *make sense* for him to wonder, "I know God said I should do this; but is it *really* a good thing to do?" The concept of goodness seems to go beyond the declarations of anyone, including God. God may well be good; but this would be because he is *wise and knows the good,* not because the good is *whatever he declares it to be.* --Indeed, imagine that in one of his (in the Old Testament) not infrequent bursts of anger, he orders all little children to be slowly and systematically tortured: surely that wouldn't *make* the torture of children a good thing --in the way that the lawmakers can *make* turning right on red illegal simply by so ordering.

Saying clearly, however, just what *does* make something good is no easy matter. We seem to be pulled in two different directions: we want the good to be objective, but on the other hand we don't want it to be too far divorced from our thoughts and interests, so that it could turn out that *everyone is forever* hopelessly mistaken about it as they could be about physics. Just how to reconcile these different pulls is a topic, though, for a course in meta-ethics, not epistemology.
(vi) **Aesthetics**

In aesthetics philosophers are concerned not only the relatively simple case of personal
tastes in food, but highly sophisticated judgments in art, music, literature. In these latter cases,
unlike personal taste, it also appears to make sense to many of us to think ourselves fallible in
these areas. I.e. it seems to make sense to think:

**I could be ignorant or mistake about matters of aesthetics**

Here again, you should think about how you and others may have "failed to appreciate"
Rembrandt, Picasso, Jackson Pollack, Bach or the Rolling Stones; and why you might therefore
take courses or read books by intelligent critics to make up for this lack. To the extent that people
think it's worth educating themselves about these things, they do not regard them as completely
subjective.

However, it's not clear that they are completely *objective* either. While it does seem to
make sense that any individual person could be wrong about some aesthetic judgment, is it really
possible that *everyone*, even the most sensitive of experts, could be forever incapable of
appreciating the worth of some work of art? Could it turn out, for example, that, really, "Three
Blind Mice" is a vastly greater piece of music than the Bach b minor mass, although no one will
ever think so? Again, notice this kind of possibility does seem to arise in the case of the purely
objective: it could turn out that human beings are simply not smart enough to understand the
really correct theory of the physical universe, which as a matter of fact is incomprehensibly
different from what the best possible scientific theories will ever say. That's just what it means to
think of the physical universe as entirely objective, entirely independent of human belief. But it's
hard to believe that this kind of objectivity arises in the case of aesthetic phenomena, in the case of
the comparative worth of different paintings or pieces of music. Although these phenomena may
be independent of any particular individual's judgments at a particular time, it is hard to regard
them as completely independent of everyone's capacities throughout all time. To this extent, then,
aesthetic phenomena are to a certain degree non-objective: the truth and falsity of the judgments
might be relative to something like the human species.

**1.8B Epistemic Distance and Self-Knowledge**

We have seen that truths in certain domains are constituted by those domains, and so give
rise to certain restricted relativisms, and to certain corresponding qualifications to our Fallibility
Principles. Another source of qualifications to those principles has to do with a peculiar kind of
authority we seem to enjoy with regard to our own mind. A useful way to think about this is in
terms of a notion to which we will return a number of times in our discussions, a notion I call
'epistemic distance.'

(i) **Epistemic Distance**
In a way, epistemic distance is just a supplementary notion to our Fallibility principles, adding to them the idea that our fallibility with respect to a certain claim adits of degrees. Specifically, we can define:

\[
\text{Epistemic Distance of } p: \text{ the inverse probability of } p's \text{ being true, given merely that someone believes it.}
\]

or, for our purposes, equivalently:

\[
\text{how easy it is for someone to wrong about } p, \text{ given merely that they believe it.}
\]

Thus, the distance is small where the probability of a belief's being true, given merely that a person believes it, is very large. For example, the epistemic distance of your beliefs about where you presently are, your plans for the day, the names of your parents and friends, is fairly small: it's extremely unlikely that you're mistaken about these things. On the other hand, the epistemic distance of your belief, say, that the earth goes round the sun is quite large: the probability of it being true merely given that you believe it is really quite small.

A recent example that should make particularly evident the notion of epistemic distance is afforded by the case John Nash, the brilliant, but schizophrenic mathematician who was the subject of Sylvia Nasar's book *A Beautiful Mind* (which was made into a recent popular movie). Nasar recounts a meeting between Nash and a Harvard professor, George Mackey, who had come to visit Nash in a mental hospital:

Mackey finally could contain himself no longer. His voice was querulous, but he strained to be gentle. "How could you," began Mackey, "how could you, a mathematician devoted to reason and logical proof...how could you believe that extraterrestrials are sending you messages? How could you believe you are being recruited by aliens from outer space to save the world? How could you...?"

Nash look up at last and fixed Mackey with an unblinking stare as cool and dispassionate as that of any bird or snake. "Because," Nash said slowly in his soft, reasonable Southern drawl, as if talking to himself, "the ideas about supernatural beings came to me the same way that my mathematical ideas did. So I took them seriously." --(Nasar 1998:11 based on interview with Mackey, Harvard, 12/14/95)

Much needs to be said about the origin and epistemic distance of mathematical ideas, and how they are justified (and we'll discuss frequently in this course with this quote from Nash in mind, see e.g. chapter 6 below). Suffice it to say that, for the most part, even most mathematical ideas are just justified by simply "the way they come". But, whatever the truth about mathematics, it seems patently clear that claims about extraterrestrial --in real space and time! -- are not justified in this way. Nash should have been more attentive to the epistemic distance of his supernatural
ideas. It's just not the least bit likely such claims are true, given merely his finding himself believing them.

Still another kind of case is the epistemic distance between a parent's belief that a child is ill and the child's being ill is probably fairly small. On the other hand, the distance between the parent's belief that the child would make a good lawyer and this being actually true of the child, is a great deal larger. (We'll discuss such cases further when we discuss "intuition" in chapter 3 (§3.4).)

We measure epistemic distance by asking: How easy would it be for someone to be wrong about this? How likely are other explanations of one's believing something other than its being true? How likely is it that one's belief may be due, e.g. to bias, wishful thinking, believing merely what's commonly, but uncritically believed? To anticipate a discussion we'll be having shortly, we need to make "an inference to the best explanation (what gets called an "abduction") of our beliefs: what is the best explanation of our having them? In the case of the parent's belief about his child's illness, the best explanation may be that the child is really ill; whereas in the case of his belief about her becoming a great lawyer, it may simply be wishful thinking.

One area where people are notoriously uncritical about epistemic distance is in regard to religion. For here the devout are often heard to claim that they "just know" on the basis of "religious experience" or "revelation," for example, that an omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent God created the entire universe, and that everything has a purpose in His plan. Now perhaps such a belief is true. But, epistemically, it doesn't seem much better off than Nash's belief about extraterrestrials. Imagine someone --say, some scientist even madder than Nash-- saying he "just knew" the universe was created 57 billion years ago by twelve Big Bangs set off by dwarf extraterrestrials. Unless he could supply further evidence --or had some idea where it could be found-- this would be absurd, since the epistemic distance is about as great as any could be: the probability of such a claim being true, given merely that they believe it, is virtually zero. Each of these people, Nash, the mad scientist and the devout, may be correct about their having those thoughts and experiences. However, the epistemic distance of the corresponding epistemic claims is simply too vast to be settled merely by having those thoughts and experiences. (Whether religious beliefs can be justified in some other fashion is a further question that we may leave open here, although we will touch upon various methods in the course of our discussions of knowledge and justification generally.)

(ii) Self-Knowledge

As I said, though, we may suppose that Nash, the mad scientist and the devout who base their claims on revelation may be perfectly right about the character of their thoughts and experiences: presumably the ideas about extraterrestrials did impress Nash in the same way mathematical ideas did. But even here we ought to be cautious. Does Nash really know where his
mathematical ideas "come from" (as he actually put it)?

In an important review article, the psychologists Richard Nisbett and Timothy Wilson call attention to a large number of experiments in which it certainly appears that people have a lot less access to the reality and origin of their ideas than they ordinarily suppose. After citing anecdotal reports of famous thinkers as to how the production of ideas seems to them entirely unconscious, they go on to cite a classic 1931 experiment of N.R.F. Maier in which two cords were hung from the ceiling of a laboratory strewn with many objects... The subject was told that his task was to tie the two ends of the cords together. The problem in doing so was that the cords were placed far enough apart that the subject could not, while holding one cord, reach the other. ... After the subject had been stumped for several minutes, Maier, who had been wandering around the room, casually put one of the cords in motion. Then, typically, within 45 seconds of this cue, the subject picked up a weight, tied it to one end of the cords, set to swinging like a pendulum, ran to the other cord, grabbed it, and waited for the first cord to swing close enough that it could be seized. Immediately thereafter, Maier asked the subject about his experience of getting the idea of a pendulum. The question elicited such answers as "It dawned on me," "It was the only thing left," "I just realized the cord would swing if I fastened a weight to it." ... Persistent probing after the free report succeeded in eliciting reports of Maier's hint and it utilization from slightly less than a third of the subjects. ... [Regarding a useless cue of twirling a weight on a cord that Maier had also presented to some subjects], all of these subjects reported that the useless cue had been helpful and denied that the critical cue had played any role in their solution. --(Nisbett and Wilson 1977:241, emphasis mine)

Indeed, Nisbett and Wilson observe this sort of "confabulation" about one's own inner thought processes across many different kinds of task and situations. They report the work of Latane and Darley (1970) who have shown in a large number of experiments in a wide variety of settings, that people are increasingly less likely to help others in distress as the number of witnesses or bystanders increases. ... Latane and Darley early became intrigued by the fact that their subjects seemed utterly unaware of the influence of presence of other people on their behavior. Accordingly, they systematically asked the subjects in each of their experiments whether they thought they had been influenced by the presence of other people. "We asked this question in every way we knew how: subtly, directly, tactfully, bluntly. Always we got the same answer. Subjects persistently claimed that their behavior was not influenced by the other people present. This denial occurred in the face of results.
showing that the presence of other people did inhibit helping."
–(Nisbett and Wilson 1977:241, emph mine)

A particular amusing instance of this confabulation occurs in one of Nisbett and Wilson's own experiments. Pretending to be taking a survey in a department store:

passersby were invited to evaluate...four identical pairs of nylon stockings... [and] were asked to say which [sock] was the best quality and, when the announced a choice, were asked why they had chosen the article they had. There was a profound left-to-right position effect, ... the right-most stockings being preferred over the left-most by a factor of almost four to one. When asked about the reasons for their choices, no subject ever mentioned spontaneously the position of the article in the array. And when asked directly about the possible effect of the position of the article, virtually all subjects denied it, usually with a worried glance at the interviewer suggesting they felt that they were misunderstanding the question or were dealing with a madman. –(Nisbett and Wilson 1977:244, emp mine)

Nisbett and Wilson conclude from these and some dozen or so other experiments that:

When people are asked to report how a particular stimulus influenced a particular response, they do so not by consulting a memory of the mediating process, but by applying or generating causal theories about the effects of that type of stimulus or that type of response. They simply make judgments, in other words, about how plausible it is that the stimulus would have influenced the response. –(Nisbett and Wilson 1977:248)

This rather suggests the following startling idea: at least with regard to mental processes, our understanding of other people is not based upon a prior, special understanding we have of ourselves; rather our understanding of ourselves is based upon our understanding other people!

Whether this audacious hypothesis is actually true needs to be examined in much more detail than anyone has yet undertaken (I plan to teach a seminar on the topic next Fall). It invites further questions about the extent of self-knowledge: Could people, for example, be mistaken even about the character of their experience? (Consider mistaking infatuation for love, anger for depression, or, to take a purely sensory case, the smell of basil for the smell of sage.) Or about what they are presently thinking, intending to say, or intending to refer to? All these are subtle and sometimes questions about epistemic distance, to which we will return many times in this course.
1.8C Summary

Summarizing the discussion so far: a fundamental principle of rational thought is the general Fallibility Principle, that people can be wrong about many things. However, there are some restrictions on the principle: errors in certain domains by certain individuals or groups don't seem to be genuinely possible, because the domains are constituted by certain people's beliefs. These domains may enjoy a certain restricted relativism, a relativity to specific groups, societies, or to humanity as a whole. And we have also seen that it may not be possible for individual human beings to be mistaken about certain features of their personal experience: the epistemic distance may too slight.

There may well be other restrictions that I haven't mentioned. The best way to proceed in considering whether a domain of judgments is "relative" or not is to consider different individuals and groups and ask whether it makes sense to think that it's possible for that individual or group to be mistaken in their judgments. That is, one considers the General Fallibility Principle in its philosophical form:

it's possible for x to believe p and p not be true.

and considers a domain of judgements as values of p, and different individuals or groups of individuals as values of x, and wonders whether it really holds for that domain and those individuals. A domain, d, of sentences is constituted by the beliefs of a person or group, T, if and only if it is not logically possible for the members of T to be wrong about the sentences of d. Thus, legal claims are constituted by the opinions of legal officials, but biological claims are not constituted by the claims of biologists.

In the light of these qualifications, it becomes essential in discussing either realism or relativism, to indicate the domain of sentences and the group of people involved. In general:

Realism about a domain d with respect to a group of thinkers, T is the view that: it is possible for everyone in T to be ignorant or mistaken about d

Relativism about a domain d with respect to a group of thinkers, T, is the view that: It is NOT possible for everyone in T to be ignorant or mistaken about d

Thus, on the face of it, it seems to be reasonable to be a realist about physics and biology with respect to anyone -in these cases it seems perfectly reasonable to be an utterly unqualified realist. (I should emphasize that this is a provisional definition of realism. A crucial word here is `possible’, of which we’ll see there are, crucially, many different interpretations; see §?? below.) But it also seems to be reasonable to be a relativist about personal taste with respect to oneself, legality with respect to the lawmakers, and morality, perhaps, with respect to the entire human race. Anyway, I will make these reasonable assumptions in much of the discussion in this book, at least provisionally (until I hear a good argument as to why I shouldn't).