

# **Two Plus Two Equals Relativism**

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## Two Plus Two Equals Relativism

A friend of mine recently had a discussion with a school teacher in our city about the nature of truth. My friend affirmed the universal nature of truth by making reference to what he assumed was a given, that two plus two equals four. The teacher responded, “Not necessarily.” Due to the relativistic nature of our society, we may hear this example used more and more by those trying to undermine the ideas of rational thought and universal truth.

While Bible believing Christians may think that questioning whether two plus two is four is so absurd that it does not deserve a response, we ought to be able to demonstrate to people why this type of thinking fails. Perhaps, in some contexts, a proper response would be to hand someone two apples, and then hand them two more apples, and ask them, “How many apples do you now have?” Unfortunately, for those who may have been trained more in depth regarding relativistic ideologies, even this will not suffice. After all, humanistic philosophy has been unable to justify the reliability of human perception. “Perhaps our perceptions of reality are distorted,” they may respond. Is there anything else we can say that will help people see the futility of this type of thinking?

To demonstrate what we may say in order to help people see the falsity of this thinking, we can examine a paper written by Alan J. Bishop, entitled, “Western Mathematics: The Secret Weapon of Cultural Imperialism,”<sup>1</sup> written in 1990. Bishop is Emeritus Professor of Education at Monash University, in Melbourne, Australia.<sup>2</sup> Below, I will briefly summarize his argument in this paper, and offer a few of the most significant critiques. For ease of locating the ideas that are summarized, I will use “p.” for the page number, and “para.” for the paragraph in which the ideas can be found on that page.

Let’s begin with a summary of the article. Bishop begins by contradicting the common thought that mathematics is neutral, universal, and culture-free (p. 51, para. 1). He refers to “western” mathematics as, “one of the most powerful weapons in the imposition of western culture,” (p. 51, para. 2). While many people may assume that truths like two plus two is four, that multiplying two negatives gives a positive, and that triangles have 180 degrees are universal (p. 51, para. 3), other mathematics exist (p. 52,

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<sup>1</sup> The article can be found in full here:

<http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.462.7279&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

<sup>2</sup> A brief biography of Bishop can be found here:

<https://www.mathunion.org/icmi/news-and-events/2015-10-28/alan-j-bishop-awarded-2015-felix-klein-medal#:~:text=Medal%20for%202015.-,Alan%20J.,education%20research%20and%20scholarly%20development.>

para. 3). After all, someone must have decided that triangles would have 180 degrees and not 200 (p. 52, para. 2). Bishop declares, “Mathematical ideas, like any other ideas, are humanly constructed. They have a cultural history,” (p. 52, para. 2). In some cultures people count on their fingers, in others they use body pointing (p. 52, para. 3). Some cultures believe that the idea of space is objective, while some, like the Navajos, think that all things, including space, are always in motion (p. 52, para. 4). Some have different systems of logic (p. 52, para. 4). This should lead us to wonder if alternative mathematics exist, which would bring into question the universality of truths like two plus two is four (p. 53, para. 1). Just like one language is not universally true, we ought to consider that one type of mathematics may not be universally true either (p. 53, para 1).

Bishop moves on to discuss the values that are behind western mathematics. He believes that since values exist behind it, this undermines the idea that it is universal, neutral, and value-free (p. 56, para. 3). The two most important values he wishes us to see are its rationalism (p. 56, para. 4), and objectivism (p. 57, para. 2). In the context of rationalism, he refers to a student who is said to have believed that the Bible is literally true and that God created all things in six days, *and* that life evolved over millions of years, along with a couple of other contradictory beliefs (p. 56, para. 4 - p. 57, para. 1). The student must have been surprised to find out his views were not rational according to the west (p. 57, para. 1). Regarding objectivism, Bishop refers to the philosophical controversies that took place in Ancient Greece concerning whether or not reality was objective or always changing (p. 57, para. 2). Not everyone has agreed with the western view that reality is objective (p. 57, para. 2).

In conclusion, Bishop believes we must look for what types of values are being pushed by certain mathematics (p. 60, para. 2, directly after the bullet points). We need to discover various cultural mathematics (p. 61, para. 1). We need to recognize that different cultures have different values and honor each (p. 62, para. 2). Finally we must reject the naive myth that mathematics is culturally neutral (p. 62, para. 3) and join the resistance (p. 63, para. 3).

Now, let’s examine the article and point out why it must be false. The impossibility of the truth of Bishop’s claims can be seen in five ways; (1) the understanding of his worldview, (2) the assertion of various logics, (3) the idea that all ideas are humanly constructed, (4) his own universal ethical claims, and (5) his assumption that the existence of various ideas means that not one of them can be True (notice the capital T). After we have critiqued the article, we will look at an important consideration concerning the Gospel as it relates these ideas.

First, we can clearly see that Bishop himself is not neutral in his critique of the non-neutrality of mathematics. At one point he objects to western mathematics based on “its clear rationalism, and cold logic, its precision, its so-called ‘objective facts’... and its thrust towards yet more secure knowledge,” (p. 59, para. 1). Apparently what we should want is ambiguous irrationalism, warm illogic, vague imprecision, subjective untruths, and uncertainty. By noticing this, we can recognize that Bishop’s entire critique is based on his worldview of what can be termed postmodernism, irrationalism, or relativism. He, like many in our day, does not believe that truth is universal and objective. If truth in general cannot be universal and objective, then neither can mathematical truths.

The problem for this way of thinking is its self-defeating nature. Notice, Bishop is trying to universally apply relativism in all fields. If relativism is assumed in ethics and politics, ought we not apply it to mathematics? But if relativism is true, why not apply relativism to ethics, but objectivism to mathematics, or why not objectivism to ethics and relativism to mathematics? There is no objective ground for choosing either approach. The very fact that Bishop believes relativism ought to be applied in all fields shows he is actually a universalist. He universally believes in relativism. But, as I am sure you have heard many times, if relativism is universally true then relativism is false. Truth is indeed universal. At least Bishop can be commended for attempting to apply the worldview of relativism in *all* fields of thought. As Christians we can be challenged by this. Are we ensuring a biblical perspective in all fields of thought, or just some? At any rate, Bishop’s relativism cannot be true.

Second, Bishop asserts that all ideas are humanly constructed. But if all ideas are humanly constructed, then so is the idea that all ideas are humanly constructed. In other words, Bishop’s own ideas have no reference to any universal standard of truth. He is simply constructing an idea that has no truth value. However, Bishop seems to believe that his ideas do properly represent the way things actually are. The tone of his argument is that his ideas are the properly *discovered* ideas, and are not merely human constructions or inventions. The very fact that Bishop makes an argument undermines his own claim.

Third, any claim to the existence of various logics must by definition be false. One of the most essential, if not the most essential, laws of logic is the law of non-contradiction. This law affirms that A cannot be both A and non-A at the same time and in the same

way. If I refer to a dog, then I do not refer to everything that is not a dog.<sup>3</sup> If other logics exist, and the law of non-contradiction is not universally true, then when I refer to a dog I also mean everything else in the universe that is not a dog. If a word means everything then it actually has no meaning. If the law of non-contradiction is not universal, then every word that Bishop wrote also means everything else in the world. Since they mean everything, they mean nothing. The result is that Bishop has actually said nothing, and nothing does not need to be refuted.

Fourth, Bishop assumes the universality of his own ethical views. He believes that imperialism is wrong, that mathematics has a rightful place, and that naivety ought to be rejected. But are not these simply humanly constructed ideas? Do not other ethics exist by which to judge these concepts that are equally valid? How does he know that imperialism and naivety are wrong? How does he know if he has discovered the rightful place of mathematics? In relativism, there is no rightful place, just different places. Bishop's own language reveals that he actually does not buy his own relativism. He knows universals exist.

Fifth, Bishop believes that the very existence of different ideas means that none of them are any more true than any other. He refers to the Navajos as having different views of space, the Greeks as having different ideas about core reality being objective or in process, the supposed existence of various logics, and therefore different mathematics. But where has Bishop shown that it is not that case that one of these views are true while the others are false? Has he actually established that no ideas are more true than any others, or has he simply assumed such? Just because many ideas exist, does not lead to the conclusion that therefore none of them are true. There are many ideas about relativism. So, on Bishop's own logic, would that not make relativism not universally true? Why then universally apply it to all fields of thought including mathematics?

All of these considerations show that Bishop's view cannot be true. His questioning of the universality of whether or not two plus two equals four ends up being a simple application of the self-defeating worldview of relativism. Once we identify that, we can have a much better conversation with the Bishops of this world.

It is important for us to consider how all of this relates to the Gospel. We do not want to discuss this type of thing with an unbeliever and not relate it directly to Scripture. First, notice that Bishop cannot get away from affirming universals. Throughout his argument

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<sup>3</sup> Gordon Clark discusses this in his book, *God's Hammer; The Bible and Its Critics*, (Unicoi, TN: The Trinity Foundation, 2011), 74.

he has assumed the universality of the evil of imperialism, as well as the universality of the law of non-contradiction, among other universals. Why is this? Scripture tells us that the creation most clearly reveals the eternal power and divine nature of God. One of the attributes of His divine nature is His universality (Ps. 139:7-12, Jas. 1:17, Rom. 3:4). No matter how much one tries, they cannot escape universality because they cannot escape God. They live in His universe and are made in His image (Gen. 1:26). Regarding the universality of ethics, God tells us that He has written His law in our hearts and consciences (Rom. 2:14-15). Certainly our sin distorts the ideas of right and wrong in our hearts (Jer. 17:9), but we cannot permanently shake an understanding that objective right and wrong exist. No matter how hard someone tries, they will always act as if morality is objective. God goes on to tell us that it is our sin that causes us to try to push away these ideas of the universality of God, and of His moral standards (Rom. 1:18, Ps. 2:1-3). As Christians, we know that no matter how much someone claims to deny these things, God's testimony of Himself is always echoing in their hearts.

In light of this, preaching the Gospel ought to be viewed as the most powerful thing we can do in order to counter these kinds of relativistic ideas. We can tell people that we know, on the authority of God's Word, that they actually understand deep down that the ideas they are expressing are incorrect. We can point them to one or more of the five critiques above to show them this. We can then explain to them why they believe what they do about these things. They believe them, because they are, like we were before God saved us, sinners that desire to free ourselves from the responsibility of being accountable to a holy God (Hab. 1:13, John 3:19). We believe these types of things because we desire to be the ones to decide right and wrong for ourselves. We desire moral autonomy (Gen. 3:5-7). In light of this, we can then point them to the marvelous work of Christ on the cross to bear the wrath of God for our sin (Rom. 3:25, Gal. 3:13, Col. 2:14, 1 Pet. 3:18), who rose again in victory over sin and death (1 Cor. 15:55-57, Eph. 1:19-21) so that we could be forgiven of our sin and have eternal life with Him (Rom. 4:6-8, John 3:16, 5:24, Rev. 21:1-4). We ought to exalt the loving-kindness of God in sending Christ to save us despite our rebellion against Him knowing that it is the kindness of God that brings us to repentance (Rom. 2:4, Tit. 2:11, 3:4). We can do so in the confidence that it is the Gospel that is the power of God to salvation (Rom. 1:16, 1 Cor. 1:24). We can do so knowing that the truths we confess are the most beautiful and majestic universal truths that one can possibly know and believe. We can do so in confidence that God will save all who believe Christ, and that *that* is the most precious universal and objective truth in which one can come to place their trust. We can do that, or we can hand out apples.