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**THE PEBBLE, THE PEBBLE: PUBLIC PHILOSOPHY**

**No, you are not entitled to your own opinion (the Pebble)**

POSTED ONFEBRUARY 14, 2021AuthorAdam Patterson

<https://peasoup.princeton.edu/2021/02/no-you-are-not-entitled-to-your-own-opinion-the-pebble/>

*Happy Valentine’s Day, all! Nothing spells romance like public philosophy and especially public philosophy concerning whether one is entitled to their own opinion. In our latest entry, Peter Gildenhuys, Associate Professor of Philosophy at Lafayette College, administers some tough love and denies that we are. Here he is now.*

We should get one thing straight upfront: you are legally entitled to your own opinion, at least in liberal states. Freedom of conscience is an important civil right: people should not be subject to state coercion merely for holding beliefs, no matter how awful. But even in the best legal regimes, there are plenty of actions that are legal that you nevertheless may not do: cheat on your spouse (in a monogamous relationship), falsely promise to drive your friend to the airport at 6am for the express purpose or causing them to miss their flight, reveal your friends’ secrets to their enemies, etc….What you are legally entitled to do, and what you are entitled to do tout court, are different things.

Holding an opinion about, or having a belief about, the state of the universe (or some part of it) means having a belief that you think everyone should share. Descriptive belief X implies that everyone ought to believe that X. There is, after all, only one universe. If you believe that your universe is thus and so, and your universe is my universe (hi there!), then you must (MUST!) think that I, too, should believe that our universe, the universe, is thus and so. If you encounter someone who thinks otherwise than you do, who believes not-X, then you must regard them as making a mistake. It is nonsense to say to someone who holds a descriptive belief incompatible with your own, “well, everyone is entitled to their own opinion.” You should instead tell them that they’re wrong. It is helpful to be polite about it.

“[You are entitled to your own opinion, but you are not entitled to your own facts](https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/8196430-there-s-a-wonderful-perhaps-apocryphal-story-that-people-tell-about),” said President Obama. Facts have nothing to do with it. A commitment to the universe being thus and so is a commitment to everyone should think that the universe is thus and so even for false commitments. Taking the view of Cardinal Bellarmine, that the sun orbits the Earth, means taking the view that everyone, Galileo included, should think so, too. With Bellarmine, as is so often the case, one mistake led to another. Bellarmine was wrong about two things: he was wrong that the universe was geocentric and he was wrong that everyone should think so, too.
The point about the irrelevance of the facts, of how things actually are, is a subtle one. You might think that someone’s opinions have to be true for it to be the case that everyone should believe them. But the point is about allegations. Alleging that the universe is thus and so means alleging that everyone should think so. The universe is the sort of thing that is the same for everyone. Saying of this sort of thing, a thing that is the same for everyone, that it has some feature means saying what everyone should think. It doesn’t matter whether you are right or wrong.

Another objection: Ice cream is good, but surely it is not the case that everyone must believe as much. That’s right, but only because ice cream is good is really a statement of preference. It just means, I like ice cream. You are entitled to your own preferences. It’s not like you think that eating ice cream is a moral imperative or anything; we’re not talking about that kind of good. The rules for descriptive claims differ from the rules for preferences (likes, desires, interests …): having a preference does not mean thinking everyone should share it, but having a belief does.

What about morality? Surely people are entitled to their own personal moral beliefs. You have not understood what morality is if you think this is so. The difference between a statement of preference and a moral claim lies precisely in the claimant’s wish to impose the moral constraint on other people. “Abortion is wrong” does not mean, “I don’t like to have abortions”. Personal moral belief is a contradiction in terms; if it’s really personal, it’s a preference and not a moral at all. Among our values, it is important to distinguish those that are just for us (no snacking after dinner), and those which are for everyone (no sex with children). Call the former preferences and the latter morals. Moral commitments are the ones that are just like descriptive commitments: they commit you to what everyone ought to believe. And you do believe that no one should have sex with children, and that everyone should recognize that it is wrong; no hiding behind some blanket subjectivism.

But don’t we have our own right roles, our own right responsibilities, our own right choices? No. Instead, there are moral hypotheticals that everyone should endorse, but which have practical relevance only to some people. If someone is a college professor, then they should teach their assigned courses is true for everyone, but it matters to the practical decision-making of only a few.

What about religion? Religions involve commitments about what the universe is like, what is morally good conduct, and what is preferable. The last of these is indeed personal, but beliefs about the content, features, and layout of the universe are in no way special just because they are religious. A belief is hardly exempt from the official rules about beliefs just because it comes with the label “religious” attached to it. If you think the number of gods in the universe is one (or zero, or seventeen, or whatever), then you must think that everyone ought to think so, too. There is your interlocutor, sitting across the table from you, in a universe with exactly one God in it, going on and on about how is there no God, all the while a God looks down upon them! If you think that’s what going on when you are talking to an atheist, what else can you rationally believe but that your atheist friend is wrong?

What about the opinion section of the newspaper? The bulk of the newspaper is dedicated to descriptive issues, reporting about what the universe is like. In the opinion section, authors take stands on normative issues. Surely these are labeled opinions precisely to distinguish them from the “facts” reported in the other sections on the newspaper. But equally obvious is that the opinion columnists think you should think the same way they do about the issues they discuss. Why else would they publish them in a newspaper? “Opinion” is just an awful label for “normative” used in journalism, and we’ve seen that normative commitments are just like descriptive ones: endorse a normative claim and you commit yourself to what everyone should believe.

It is important to recognize that some of the things we believe, we believe with moral certainty. These are cases where the risk of error is more or less infinitesimal, a risk which John Herschel tells us we can “make up our minds to disregard”: there have been black dogs, at least seven people have worn pants, the surface of the moon is not a pleasant place to safari …. There are other beliefs, not morally certain ones, to which we assign an intermediate degrees of confidence. These we should not seek to impose on other people, since our counterparts may have different, and better, evidence than we do. Being morally certain that the universe is thus and so means thinking everyone ought to think so, too; believing that the universe is probably thus and so does not.

Aren’t all our beliefs really ones to which we attach intermediate levels of confidence? No. Moral certainty is a real thing. There have been black dogs!

Sometimes, coming across someone with incompatible beliefs immediately causes us to lessen our confidence in our own views. This can be healthy. But we do each other no favors when we say that we are each entitled to our own opinions. Instead, you’ve got a date to have it out with anyone whose morally certain beliefs are incompatible with your own. Sure, you might need to just get through dinner, but there’s a bone to pick when you are done. Indeed, refusing to treat an interlocutor as wrongheaded amounts to demeaning their character, treating them as though they are incapable of having a civil argument, incapable of attending rationally to whatever reasons you and they may have for your incompatible stances. It makes you look bad as well; you act too proud or too scared to change your mind when you refuse to argue and instead cower behind the claim that everyone is entitled to their own opinion.