Convention: The Third Truth?

by
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Introduction

Recently, I heard a speaker discussing how subjective truth was becoming more pervasive at the expense of objective truth. One example given was "Creative Spelling", a class where students are allowed to spell creatively. Fore xzampel, thiss centents cud bee ritten liik thiss. My first thought was that this was a silly, yet somewhat dangerous, class to teach. I've seen enough of this type of spelling on the Internet and in E-mails without having teachers encourage this behavior. I wondered if the teachers also allowed the students to be creative with the way letters sound. After all, if you are going to change the rules of spelling, you might as well change the rules of phonetics, also.

The more I thought about "Creative Spelling" being an example of the erosion of objective truth, the more I realized it was no such thing. How we spell or enunciate words is subjective. Many people over many years made up language rules. Its subjectiveness becomes even clearer when you consider the many languages of the world. On the other hand, a given word in any language was created to mean something, whether it be a thing, an action, a descriptor, a concept, or something else. In this sense, it appears that language is objective. How do we resolve this seeming inconsistency? The answer is to introduce a third form of truth to stand alongside the two most well known truths: subjective truth and objective truth.

Subjective and Objective Truth

Subjective truths are those truths that are not the same for all people. For instance, if I ask a roomful of people if it is cold, some may say no and some yes. But they can all be telling the truth because the state of being cold is different for every person. Coldness is caused by many factors such as the ambient temperature, the humidity, the body's metabolism, the size of the body's pores, the amount of clothing being worn, the amount of air circulating, and so on.

Objective truths are those truths that are the same for all people. If I ask a roomful of people what two plus two is, four is the only correct answer. It is the same for every person. However, there is one caveat. How do we know that the word "two" means the quantity ** and the word "four" means the quantity ****? Isn't this subjective? Indeed it is. We could just as legitimately say that three plus three equals four as long as we make it clear that the term "three" means the quantity ** and the term "four" means the quantity ****. The defining of terms *must* take place because it is an objective truth that the quantity ** added to the quantity ** is always the quantity ****; however, it is a

subjective truth that "two plus two equals four", because it depends on how each person defines the words "two" and "four".

Convention: The Third Truth

This is where the third type of truth comes in to play. Let's call it *convention* (thanks to Roger Donway for suggesting this term). In essence, a convention is true because it is *defined* as such. In other words, it is a *definitional truth*. We have already seen how the summing of the quantities ** and ** results in the quantity ****. This is invariant and true for all people. It is therefore an objective truth. We have also seen that the statement "two plus two equals four" is subjective because it depends on how the terms "two" and "four" are defined. By defining the word "two" to mean the quantity ** and the word "four" to mean the quantity ****, we are able to link a subjective statement to an objective reality. Once we have defined the words "two" and "four" as per above, the statement "two plus two equals four" becomes an objective truth since we are in essence saying that the quantity ** plus the quantity ** equals the quantity ****.

As stated earlier, objective truth is that which is true for everyone, and subjective truth is that which can be different for everyone. Just as convention is a link between the objective and the subjective, its definition is a cross between that of objective and subjective truth. A convention is *a definitional truth that is inherently subjective but which should be viewed as objective*. In some cases, people accept conventions voluntarily. In other cases, people find it necessary to codify conventions into law.

Using the epistemological approach of Ayn Rand, what facts of reality give rise to the need for convention? There are three major ways in which conventions are in everyone's rational self-interest. Convention 1) provides a means for communicating objective reality, 2) provides order where there would otherwise be disorder, and 3) makes public life less offensive. I will discuss each of these in turn.

Conventions for Communicating Reality

There are three basic ways in which humans communicate with each other: writing, speaking, and gesturing. All of these are made possible by some form of language. Writing requires a set of symbols that can be combined in various ways according to a set of guidelines. Likewise, speaking requires a set of sounds that can be combined in various ways, and gesturing requires a set of body motions (via hands, arms, face, etc.) that can be combined in various ways.

These three language forms could be totally disconnected from each other. For instance, it is possible that a written language could have no rules of pronunciation and a spoken language could have no matching written symbols. However, it is much better to have a written language and a spoken language that are linked to each other. This requires that the symbols used in the written language be linked to certain sounds in the spoken language. This is called phonetics. With phonetic rules in place, there is a means of communicating identical ideas using the exact same words in both the spoken and the

written language. The same thing applies to gesturing. Sign language for the deaf is an example. It is best if this language connects in some way to a written and spoken language so that they are all interchangeable.

Notice that no language has a metaphysical existence in and of itself. All languages are human constructs or conventions. In some cases, such as onomatopoeic spoken words or gesturing that mimics something, language does have some basis in reality – it is objective. Gesturing languages tend to use mimicking more than do other language forms. However, languages are mostly subjective. So, while it is perfectly acceptable for every individual person to make up his own language, it is easy to see how it would not be in anyone's self-interest to do so as it would be impossible to communicate. Therefore, it is in everyone's interest to settle on a common language. When a group of people do this, they are accepting a convention.

Conventions for Providing Order

In society, people accept many conventions solely for the purpose of bringing order to their lives. One vivid example is traffic rules. People recognize that when many roads are built and many vehicles are traveling on them, there have to be some rules that all people obey in order to limit the number of accidents and the resulting injuries and death. Thus, we create rules requiring everyone to drive on the right side of the road, stop at a stop sign or red light, use caution at a yellow light, and proceed at a green light. But why these particular rules? Is there some metaphysical basis for them? By and large, there is not. People made them up. Even so, it is not wise for someone to become upset that he was not allowed to make up any of these rules and then decide to unilaterally make up his own. By driving on the wrong side of the road or running red lights, he would be endangering many other people. This cannot be tolerated. In fact, traffic conventions are so important we codify them into law so that we can punish those that do not follow them.

An example of a convention that makes society more orderly, but which is not codified into law is standing in line for an event. There is no law (at least I am unaware of one) that says you have to form a line ordered by arrival time. However, most people understand the importance of this convention and follow it voluntarily. Perhaps you have seen the wrath vented on a person who defies this convention and "cuts the line". No one likes the idea of someone who has just arrived getting into an event earlier than someone who has been waiting for a period of time. Generally, exceptions are made when a friend or relative is holding the person's position in line. However, there are a few people that don't even like this exception.

Conventions for Making Life Less Offensive

Most people are offended by certain actions of others within the public arena. Therefore, conventions have been developed to limit these offences. Many of these conventions are followed voluntarily rather than encoded into law. In addition, they are probably the most frequently broken, usually by those people who, for one reason or another, just enjoy

offending people. These conventions include such things as refraining, when in public, from 1) picking your nose, 2) relieving yourself, 3) breaking wind, 4) dressing inappropriately, 5) talking obnoxiously, 6) speaking freely about private matters, 7) being rude, 8) being nude, and 9) engaging in serious romantic activities. Many of these conventions are part of what we call "proper etiquette" and have been written about extensively by such people as Miss Manners.

Of course, most of these activities are permissible in private. Some notable exceptions are laws that prohibit, even in private, 1) certain types of sexual activities, 2) nudist camps, 3) nude bars, 4) certain types of speech. These laws have become more lax in recent times, but there are still some places where these laws exist.

Geographical Aspects of Convention

Even though you may agree with all I have said so far, you may be wondering why conventions vary from one location to another. After all, not everyone on the face of the Earth speaks or writes English. In some places, people drive on the left side of the road. In some tribes, public nudity is perfectly acceptable. So what gives? If conventions are, as I said earlier, definitional truths that are inherently subjective but which *should be viewed as objective*, then why is it that different groups of people follow different conventions? Isn't this counterproductive?

Keep in mind that it has only been recently in the history of man that global interaction between many different people in many different countries has proliferated. In the past, there was interaction on a limited basis mainly between governments and traders. Since conventions are *inherently subjective* and man-made, it is to be expected that diverse groups of people having little contact would create a wide variety of conventions. This is perfectly acceptable since conventions are only applicable to people that must interact to some extent. Also, it is significant that all groups of people have recognized the importance of conventions and have incorporated them into their societies.

Many of the problems we now encounter when interacting with other countries or cultures only validates the need for conventions. In fact, the need for global conventions is gradually pushing diverse people into accepting conventions foreign to their own. For instance, two conventions that seriously affect globalization are language and measurements. When companies from different countries do business, it is imperative that they know what each other is saying and how much of some product they will be receiving or shipping. Of course, translators and conversion tables can be used, but it is far more efficient to just use the same language and standards of measurement. For this reason, de facto standards are emerging. English is becoming the international language of choice, and the metric system is becoming the standard for weights and measures. Just as it has been difficult for Americans to totally switch to the metric system, so has it been difficult for other countries to switch to the English language. However, it has become ever more important for different countries to accept common conventions. In fact, some non-English-speaking countries now require citizens to learn English as a second

language. And as an engineer that knows both the English and the metric system of measures, I much prefer the metric system because it is more logical.

Recent technologies have been developed for global usage from the get-go. For instance, the Internet uses a convention for communication called TCP/IP. This protocol is a standard all around the world. World Wide Web documents are written in a language called HTML. This is true for all countries. While there are still language barriers on the Internet, the means by which Web pages are written and transmitted are the same for everyone.

As technology progresses and people of all nations increasingly interact with each other, we will continue to see changes in existing conventions and the merging of conventions across the world. This will happen because most people understand that this is in everyone's self-interest. Nowadays, it is wise for the international traveler to become familiar with the customs of other countries so as not to accidentally offend the natives by violating a convention in their country that does not hold true in his own country. Perhaps sometime in the future this will no longer be necessary. However, by that time we may have to start worrying about violating the conventions on the home planets of the alien species with which we will then have contact.

Objective Elements of Convention

While it is true that convention is inherently subjective, it is also true that some conventions can have an element of objectivity. For instance, the standard shipping lanes on our oceans are a convention. However, they are not totally arbitrary. For many years, seamen have known about certain currents in the ocean and the air that allow for faster and easier travel. It only makes sense to choose these lanes when standardizing the paths along which ships will traverse. Also, the distance from one port to another is important. You wouldn't want to arbitrarily route a ship from England to America via the South Pacific.

Although using the color red to indicate stopping may have been totally arbitrary, once it has been established as a convention, it wouldn't make sense to use this color on stop signs and a different color on traffic lights.

There are many more examples of objectivity playing a role in the development of conventions. In fact, this would make an interesting topic for an article or even a book. If anyone is interested in pursuing this venture, I suggest the title "Objective Elements of World Conventions".

Limitations of Convention

It is important to realize that most conventions, if not all, will have some limitations. In language, for instance, you may find that there are frequently no words that effectively express a feeling you are having. Recently, on a television drama, a teenage girl received her first kiss. She said that a word should be invented to describe how people feel just

before getting their first kiss. She likened it to a bird first realizing it can fly. Of course, someone could invent a word for this feeling, but it would require an understanding and acceptance on the part of many people for it to become a full member of the English language convention. However, it happens all the time. New words or new meanings for words come into vogue and older ones retreat into the past.

Another thing to remember is that no matter how much a word has been used and how many people agree with its definition, there can always be subtle differences in the exact meaning of a word. And sometimes an exact meaning is necessary when discussing the fine points of certain topics. Therefore, if there is any question about the meaning of a particular word used in such a discussion, it may be necessary for the people involved to state their definition so there is no misunderstanding. Ayn Rand said it this way: "Define your terms."

Sometimes conventions are found to be inconsistent when related to other conventions. For instance, the English system of weights and measures has an inconsistent hierarchy of values (i.e.- fractions of inches as multiples of a half, 12 inches to a foot, 3 feet to a yard, 1760 yards to a mile; also, 16 ounces to a pound, 2000 pounds to a ton; etc.). Given that we use a base 10 numbering system convention, it makes more sense to use multiples of 10 for the hierarchy of values. More about this later.

Dangers of Convention

One very important aspect of conventions is that they must not usurp rationally determined moral codes. For instance, in countries where slavery is legal, citizens might say that this is just a convention or a custom and as such should be tolerated by everyone else. Nonsense! Immoral behavior can never be justified by calling it a convention. Likewise, so-called conventions that limit the ability of people to be moral are not really conventions either. Conventions can only legitimately be applied to amoral areas of life. For example, there is nothing either moral or immoral about the English language or any other language. Whether I call a chair a "chair", an "asset", or a "butt-supporter" has nothing to do with morality. Any term is acceptable as long as interacting people use it for communication and understand its meaning. So, one danger of conventions is that some people will try to use them to justify evil behavior. We must stand firm against such usage. In fact, I believe this particular aspect of conventions is a ripe topic for much research. It is important to know which aspects of society can appropriately have conventions applied to them and which cannot.

Another danger is the result of convention being subjective. There will always be those who will challenge or even subvert certain conventions for no other reason than to make a point that they are not written in stone. Whoopee! Everyone already knows that. So challenging or subverting existing conventions is counterproductive unless there is a compelling reason for doing so. For the reason to be compelling, it must be shown that the challenged convention causes harm or is immoral. Also, an alternative convention may be more in everyone's self-interest than the original convention.

Yet another danger of conventions is that some can become so ingrained in the psyche of the people that it becomes nearly impossible to break free of them when circumstances dictate changes to or elimination of the conventions. Sometimes this is simply due to people having become so habituated to the convention that it has become somewhat addictive. Other times, conventions can be falsely elevated to the position of moral code. In other words, what started out being a convention became so important that to not comply with the convention became viewed as immoral behavior rather than unconventional behavior.

When Conventions Need To Be Changed

As mentioned earlier, when conventions are objectively immoral or hamper people from being moral, they need to be changed or eliminated entirely. Of course, such conventions are not really conventions according to the criteria I have set forth. However, this will not prevent people from calling them conventions. Thus, when any "non-conventional conventions" are discovered, they should be modified or destroyed.

Sometimes conventions that were seemingly fine in the past are found to be incompatible with other conventions. As mentioned earlier, the English system of weights and measures does not accord with the base 10 numbering system convention. However, the metric system does accord with this numbering system and makes much more sense from a compatibility perspective. However, the English system of weights and measurements is one of those heavily ingrained conventions that will take some time to change. Yet, this process is slowly underway.

Some people may have a problem with definitional truth, or any kind of truth for that matter, varying with time. However, even objective truth can change over time. The measurement of weight and height are objective. For any given instance in time, the weight and height of a person are certain measured values. But the weight and height of a given person changes with time. So, just because something is true today does not mean that it will still be true tomorrow.

Conclusions

So, in conclusion, subjective truth is that which is different for each person. Objective truth is that which is the same for everyone. Conventions allow these two forms of truth to be linked via a third form called definitional truth. Conventions provide a way to communicate objective reality and make public life more orderly and less offensive.

There is much research that could be devoted to the topic of conventions. For those who care to conduct research on this topic, here are a few questions that may help spur you on:

Is the definition of the term "convention" given in this article sufficiently detailed? Is it sufficiently accurate? What changes could be made to this definition to make the concept of "convention" more understandable?

Is it valid to use conventions for the three reasons detailed in this article? Are there other areas in which it is appropriate to apply conventions?

Are there ways in which languages can be made more objective? If so, how would you go about implementing these changes?

What conventions are used in various cultures to make life more orderly? Which ones are valid? Why? Are there others that could be appropriately implemented to make life even better?

What conventions are used in various cultures to make life less offensive? Which ones are valid? Why? Are there others that could be appropriately implemented?

How do conventions differ in various cultures? How are they similar? Which ones need to change?

When people of various cultures begin interacting to such a degree that differing conventions begin to be a problem, which ones should be changed? When is it appropriate to just let each culture keep its own conventions and put up with the differences? When conventions do need to be changed, what is the best approach to accomplish this? How can the change be made objectively? Are there methods for changing conventions swiftly, or must all changes proceed slowly?

What other limitations do conventions have? What can be done to limit the number of limitations?

What other dangers do conventions pose? Can conventions be implemented in such a way as to avoid these dangers and the ones mentioned in this article? If so, how?

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