

WHY I AM A RELATIVIST



WHEN JESUS CHRIST was brought before Pontius Pilate, He said that He had come into the world to give testimony to the Truth. Pilate replied with the now famous question, “What is truth?”, and as Francis Bacon pointed out, the Roman governor did not actually wait for an answer from Christ, but went to the Jews and said, “Well, he seems harmless enough to me. A bit of a nutter, with this truth palaver, but he’s not exactly Osama bin Laden.” Now why didn’t Pilate wait for an answer? Probably because he didn’t think there *was* any Truth, as such. Maybe he was an out-and-out sceptic. But that would be a crass sort of opinion to attribute to a wily man like Pilate. I prefer to think of him as someone more subtle, more refined. I like to think of him as being a bit like me—a relativist.

I have not had a chance to do this before. The opportunity I have been given this evening is a valuable one. I have the chance, finally, to come off the fence and out of the closet, stretch my philosophical wings, nail my colours to the mast, and proudly declare: *I am a relativist; je suis un relativiste; ich bin ein Relativist*. Like Pilate, I too think the whole idea of Truth with a capital T is a big mistake, the greatest wrong turning in the history of philosophy. If you look for Truth, you will never find it. Opinions, ideas, viewpoints, positions, perspectives, angles, impressions—now *these* I can handle. They are to be found in abundance, and they’re virtually free, so why not help yourself to them?

Relativism is the only honest and consistent philosophical doctrine about truth. In short, what the relativist says is: “Absolute truth? That’s absolute nonsense. There is no absolute truth, it’s all relative.” Relative to what? you may ask. I admit, relativism breaks up into all sorts of varieties; there is no *one single theory* which counts as relativism among philosophers. But that’s fine, because what kind of relativism you’re discussing is, quite simply, relative—to which philosopher you’re talking to.

So what I propose for the purpose of tonight’s talk

is to defend a very general sort of relativism, of the kind most relativists would subscribe to in one way or another with the odd caveat here and there. I don’t want to get bogged down in controversies about this detail or that sub-clause. Relativists of goodwill differ, as do our enemies the absolutists, the ones who foolishly think they can find the Absolute Truth somewhere or other. Let them go on their wild goose chases. We relativists can sit back, relax, and enjoy our knowledge that, when the final argument has been fought and the last disagreement is but a distant memory, it was obvious all

along that *everything is relative*.

Acting now as a kind of representative of my fellow relativists, I will argue that everything is relative to one’s personal circumstances or opinions, or to one’s society or culture; sometimes even to human beings as a species. Protagoras the sophist declared to Socrates the famous proposition: “Man is the measure of all things; of what is that it is; and of what is not that it is not.” This is held to be the classic ancient statement of relativism, but I actually find it far too dogmatic and absolutist. Man is the measure of all things? Is what Man says the absolute truth? Does Man determine what is and what is not? What about sheep and horses? What about Martians? Don’t they have legitimate perspectives on things? Don’t their viewpoints count? So, adopting the broadest kind of relativism, I claim that everything is relative to some standard or other, and usually to many different standards at the same time. When a person makes a dogmatic claim of the form “So-and-so is such-and-such”, my and my fellow relativists’ immediate reaction is, “According to what standard or measure?”

LET ME ELABORATE by starting with the easy cases, before we move to the harder ones. Think about morality—the principles of right and wrong, good and bad. We relativists have known for centuries that this is the absolutists’ Achilles heel, so I intend to give it a good kick immediately. It

PHILOSOPHY & IDEAS

is notoriously difficult to argue conclusively about the rightness or wrongness of anything. People disagree extensively, the concepts of right and wrong are so slippery, there don't seem to be any hard and fast rules on which we can rely.

Take polygamy, for instance. In the ancient world, in modern Islam, in Africa, in many cultures throughout history, the having of multiple wives (at the same time, let alone serially) has not been considered morally wrong. In fact, one of the wisest kings who ever lived, and probably the second-greatest, King Solomon, enjoyed the company of some 700 wives, not to mention 300 concubines. (He followed the example of his father, King David, who we are told had many concubines and wives, and who was the greatest king who ever lived.) True, we also know that Solomon's wives led him astray into idolatry and other sins, and that God was not best pleased with him; but He did not lay him low with a thunderbolt either. Who are we, in the year 2002, to turn around and say that all these other cultures are just plain wrong? And for that matter, since serial polygamy seems now to be an accepted part of our culture, what right would some more monogamously-inclined culture—say, this country in 1853—have to criticise us?

The plain fact is, cultures differ over what they approve and disapprove of, and for *us* to judge *them* or vice versa is to indulge in what can only be called cultural imperialism—and that is absolutely not on. Surely it is *tolerance* that every culture must value; and tolerance means not judging other cultures, not setting the standards of one above those of another, and not trying to impose one's own culturally-bound values onto another society. As for polygamy, so for belching. I believe that in some societies letting out an almighty burp after a meal is a sign of politeness and gratitude. In our society it would be condemned as rude and uncouth. Who is right? How do we decide? Surely it is just a matter of which culture you are brought up in.

Take the case of the famous sociologist Margaret Mead, arguably the founder of modern cultural anthropology. In her celebrated book *Coming of Age in Samoa* she amazed the world with her finding that the inhabitants of the Polynesian islands had an almost idyllic set of social arrangements, accepting adultery and premarital promiscuity, and were generally free of the moral taboos that, at least in the 1920s, still controlled so-called "civilised" Western behaviour. Mead condemned the distinction between the "primitive" and the "civilised", and thought we could learn better values from the generally peace-loving, sexually liberated, unrepressed islanders of Samoa. Mead's research, especially her most famous book, was enormously

influential among anthropologists and philosophers. If it weren't for Mead and her followers relativism would not be nearly as dominant as it is today.

But I do have a bit of bad news to reveal. In the 1980s a professor of anthropology at the Australian National University, Derek Freeman, wrote a book that demonstrated pretty conclusively that Margaret Mead's research was scientifically flawed. In fact, in 1999 he published a revised edition of the book which argued that not only was her work unreliable due to bad research, but that the poor woman had actually been *hoaxed* by a number of the islanders she spent time with. The truth, according to Freeman, was that the Samoans actually *condemned* adultery and promiscuity and practised warfare far more than Mead believed. The Samoans had, it seems, been playing games with her. Now I confess, this is a bit of a problem for relativists like me. But it's not insuperable, because, as I will argue, even so-called "scientific facts" depend on your point of view. As I like to say, one man's hoax is another man's Nobel Prize.

*Even so-called
"scientific facts"
depend on your
point of view. As I
like to say, one
man's hoax is
another man's
Nobel Prize.*

But let's stick for the moment with morals and other values. Like most relativists, I have a problem about values. I mean, I can see a tree, and I can touch a rock, but I have never seen or touched a value. I have never run up against a moral value late at night in the high street, let alone broad daylight. What *are* these weird things called values? Where do I find them? Surely they are simply pumped into me by my parents, my role models, my society—I don't *find* them anywhere, I just *get* them. And I'm not even sure what *they* are, anyway. All I know is that my parents taught me not to steal, and so I don't steal. My teachers taught me not to make a racket when someone is trying to say something, so to this day when anyone is trying to say something, especially something important, I try to keep quiet, and even to listen. But I'm sure there are societies out there where the thing to do when someone is giving a lecture is to make loud clicking noises with one's tongue. Maybe it's a way of indicating agreement or disagreement.

Right and wrong are such elusive concepts that we simply *must* be tolerant of other people's values and the influences that have shaped their views of the world. Actually, the absolutists sometimes object that since we relativists don't believe in objective, absolute moral truth, there's nothing to stop us from imposing our own moral attitudes on others; if, as they say, it's all relative, what absolute moral principle am I violating if I grab you by the scruff of the neck, hold a knife at your throat and say: "You *will* cheat on your next examination. Any sign of your not cheating will be severely dealt with." All right, so absolutists are going to say that I'd be violating the principle that you should

never, ever intimidate someone into doing something wrong, like cheating. But I prefer to say that you should never, ever—I mean not, in some circumstances—I mean, that it’s a good thing—but not *absolutely* good, just relatively so—to respect other people’s values, and if you put a negative premium on having a knife held to your throat and being ordered to cheat, then, well, I’d better just respect that.

But I suppose there are cultures or social groups out there where cheating and threatening people with violence so as to get them to do something wrong are not exactly condemned, though for selfish reasons people try to avoid doing them if they’re worried about the consequences. What about the Mafia? They have a quiet admiration for that sort of behaviour, don’t they? So I guess if I joined them and immersed myself in their value system I could be quite happy threatening people with nasty outcomes if they didn’t do equally nasty things. And who could condemn me? It would be a lifestyle choice. I wouldn’t want *your* standards interfering with *my* lifestyle choice. All I ask, as a relativist, is *absolute tolerance*.

Now, maybe there are a couple of misguided absolutists among you. I bet you’re thinking dark thoughts like, “What about murder, and rape, and slavery, and child abuse? Is the fact that they’re wrong merely a relative matter? Are they merely wrong relative to our culture but right relative to another?” Well, do you want me to be some sort of mealy-mouthed, self-contradictory relativist, the kind who tries to weasel his way out of that sort of objection? No, I will not patronise you with clever evasions. I will put it to you straight.

Murder, rape, slavery and child abuse are only wrong relative to whatever societies happen to disapprove of them. And guess what? You’re in luck—every society I have ever heard of disapproves of them. Oh, slavery. Sorry. Yes, all right, it was heartily approved of once, but that was a long time ago in a land far, far away. At least 150 years, and so far away you had to cross the Atlantic to get there. Okay, so apparently some slavery still goes on in parts of Africa, and I’ve heard that poor Eastern European women are forced to act as prostitutes in London, but really we are only talking about marginal cases. By *far* the vast majority of societies and individuals throughout history, apart from the Mesopotamians, Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Muslims, Africans, and most European nations, have condemned slavery.

Let’s talk about something a bit easier, like rape. Now I know that one million or so German women were raped by Russian soldiers at the end of the Second World War, but I can’t believe most Russian people thought that was a good thing. I bet Stalin condemned it. And anyway, you have to understand the situation. War is hell, and it arouses strong feelings of revenge. We shouldn’t concentrate on those sorts of cases, since war is a separate system, almost a culture

in its own right, with its own values which we must respect. I am more concerned with peacetime.

Rape has always been out-and-out wrong as far as every society has ever been concerned. So that’s a good thing (not absolutely good, just relatively so), because if there was a lot of *disagreement* among societies as to whether rape was right or wrong, we’d think twice about that long-haul summer vacation. Such would be the price of tolerance. So I can confidently say that the reason why rape is wrong is that every society—I mean, every sane society that is thinking absolutely clearly about its values—condemns rape.

And absolutists need not worry about whether societies could all change their values overnight and start approving of rape, because that just never happens. Not that societies never change their values, but that they never change them overnight. It would take years, maybe decades. It took decades for divorce to be thought of in this country as pretty well normal, and sex before marriage, living together without being married, contraception, abortion, and other social practices.

Sure, values can change, but it takes ages. That would never happen with something like rape, or child abuse. As long as we’re all agreed, across the globe, and across history, that something is wrong, then it’s wrong—and that’s good enough for me. Like any faithful relativist I don’t go in for high-flown talk about violating a person’s bodily integrity, dishonesty, exploitation, violence, hatred, cruelty. Those terms sound far too absolutist for me. One man’s cruelty can be another person’s fun. One man’s exploitation can be another man’s opportunity. It depends on the value system; and if we’re all singing from the same hymn sheet, that’s all we need.

BY NOW you ought to be convinced that morality is all about culture and personal preference and nothing about so-called absolute truth. In fact I haven’t said very much about personal preference but you can see the idea. Cultures and societies are only collections of people with personal opinions, so when you get to rock bottom you must see that morality is about people’s personal opinions. Fortunately, people tend to shape each other’s opinions, which is why societies tend to be quite homogeneous, and we can work out what societies approve and disapprove of fairly easily. For instance, I imagine that 73 per cent of the population disapprove of lying, and so that’s why lying is wrong in our society. Actually I made that figure up, but I suppose something like it is accurate. Anyway, surely the vast majority disapprove of lying. How vast should that majority be? 50.1 per cent is not vast, though it is a majority. The French voted the Maastricht Treaty through on about 51 per cent, so maybe on a subject like lying or adultery 51 per cent would be acceptable.

But we relativists generally prefer a sizeable major-

ity before we decide what is right and wrong; though there is a split among us, since some of us favour surveys by Gallup and others prefer polls by ICM. They don't do a lot of polls on moral values, but we're trying to change that. One proposal I have made is that the worse something appears to be, the smaller the majority you need before you can decide that it's wrong. Rape is very bad, so as long as 51 per cent of the population disapprove of it I'll go along with them. Stealing a few pounds from your employer is not so severe, especially if the employer doesn't know the money has vanished, so I'd want to see a good 75 per cent of the population against it before I could definitively say, "Stealing from your employer is wrong—don't do it."

What if a person's own preferences go against what his society thinks? Suppose Fred believes child abuse is okay, even though 99 per cent of people in Britain think it's wrong. What should Fred do? Well, for society to impose its view on Fred seems a bit totalitarian to a peaceful relativist like me—remember, tolerance always—and obviously it would be wrong, relatively speaking, for Fred to impose his view on the rest of us. So I confess we have a bit of a dilemma. Maybe Fred should go along with society just for the sake of peace and quiet. Personally, I'd advise him to emigrate to a society where that sort of thing is not so frowned upon. And if he can't find that, he should at least go somewhere where he's not likely to get caught.

So that's disposed of morality—it's all relative. Hence I don't need to say much about that other thorny issue for absolutists, namely artistic values. Frankly I get bored very quickly listening to cultural totalitarians telling me that Michelangelo was a great artist and that no further argument is possible. I mean, I happen to think he's great too, but as a relativist I can see more profoundly how this greatness depends on the particular cultural heritage that has come down to us. I'm sure there are societies that would find his statue of *David* downright ugly.

And take the Turner Prize, for instance. Last Sunday I went with a friend to Tate Britain, and was hoping to see the four shortlisted works. I wanted to know what all the fuss was about. True, at the last moment my friend and I balked because neither of us was prepared to pay £3.50 to see what an evidently well-informed if intolerant spokesman for Her Majesty's Government had only a few days before described as "conceptual cow droppings". But I was open to the experience, and if it had been a bit cheaper I would have indulged.

There were many people queuing up to see the short-listed works, and I'm sure quite a few of them believed

the four pieces at least equalled, if not surpassed, the best work of Michelangelo. Despite my suspicions to the contrary, I would not want to contradict them because, as we relativists say, *de gustibus non est disputandum*. If you are an aesthetic absolutist, can you look me in the eye and seriously assert that a piece of elephant dung stuck to a brick wall is *inferior* to the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel? I could not think of anything more intolerant. In art there is no beauty and no ugliness. Art just *is*, and it is what we make it. I see art everywhere, in the trees and in the sewers, in the slums and in the mountains, in the palaces and in the tower blocks. Art has no transcendent value; it is what we decide it is. Artistic value is no more objective than the prohibition on eating bangers and mash with your hands.

SO HAVING persuaded you, I hope, to accept relativism in morality and in art, I will now move to a harder topic. Thoughtful absolutists say that when it comes to morality and art, people of goodwill can disagree reasonably over whether there are objective values, or whether values are subjective and relative to individuals and societies. However, they triumphantly add, when it comes to *factual questions*, to *observation*, and of course to *science*, there is no argument—the truth is obviously out there; it is utterly objective. I want to turn the tables on my absolutist opponent. I want to argue that morality and art are obviously relative, but when it comes to science there *is* a legitimate disagreement. And I think we relativists have the better of that dispute.

Start with observation, ordinary sensory experience of the world around you. You see a red rose. Is it really red? To a colour-blind person it is not. You hear a sound. Was it really out there? Not to a deaf person. You taste a lemon and it seems sour. Is it objectively sour? Brush your teeth, try it again and it tastes different. So how does it *really* taste? We cannot say. Give a lemon to a platypus and it might taste sweet, for all we know. Play a soft noise to a gerbil and it might sound loud, for all we can tell.

If you look at a flat surface through the fish-eye lens of a camera it looks curved, doesn't it? Well, fish have fish-eye lenses twenty-four hours a day, so all surfaces that look flat to us look curved to them all the time. So what is a surface *objectively*—flat or curved? Both? Neither? All we can say is that what is flat relative to us is curved relative to a haddock. How do flies see the world with their eyes that are structured so differently from our own? Whatever way they experience the world, you can be sure it's very, very different from the way we do. So what is *the objective world*? Whose world is it? Ours, the haddock's or the fly's? It is, say

So what is a surface objectively—flat or curved? All we can say is that what is flat relative to us is curved relative to a haddock.

we relativists, the same world for all of us, experienced in different ways. And if there were Martians, you can be sure their experience of the world would—assuming they were built very differently from us—be of a wholly foreign order to the way we experience it.

At this point the absolutists go a bit lame. They say things like, “We agree with you inasmuch as there are difficult philosophical questions to do with the way different creatures experience reality, but that doesn’t mean there is no single, objective reality.” How do they know? I grant that there must be something or other out there, I know not what, which presents itself in different ways to different creatures—in one way to the fly, in another way to the human—but by definition humans could never know what it is *really* like, even if it must *really* be out there.

Have I made a concession to the absolutist? I have, but not a substantial one. I am happy to concede there is *something* out there, but we can never know what it is. As for all the *phenomena* (to use the language of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant), they are no more deep than our own minds. The Second World War did not *objectively* happen, nor did the Battle of Waterloo. Columbus never *objectively* discovered America, and not just because others allegedly got there before him, because they did not *objectively* do so either! Only relative to us humans did any of this happen. In fact, relative to Martians there might not even *be* any humans—maybe if a Martian looked at us he wouldn’t see *us*, he’d just blend us in with the furniture and see one big blob.

Some absolutists say in reply to this line of argument: “Wait a minute. Haven’t you just described all these scenarios involving flies, horses, platypuses and Martians using *human* language and *human* concepts? How can you even make sense of such scenarios without presupposing that there really are, objectively speaking, flies, horses, platypuses and (maybe) Martians?” It sounds as though I’ve shot myself in the foot with my argument, doesn’t it? I don’t think so. All the absolutist has shown is that we are prisoners of our language and our concepts and cannot describe the world from the God’s-eye point of view. But you should still take my scenarios involving flies, horses, platypuses and hypothetical Martians seriously, because there really are such things—relative to us.

If we can put forward relativistic arguments like this against good old-fashioned observation of the world around us, what about the more complicated world of science? Here relativism can also be staked out, with a little bit of thought. We have a number of philosophers to be grateful for, towering figures like Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend, who either imply—or state

explicitly—that when it comes to science *anything goes*. Neither believed in genuine scientific progress. Kuhn spoke of “paradigms”, incommensurable scientific pictures which replaced one another via clashes of opposing socio-political forces. Feyerabend argued that in science there is nothing but *anarchy*. It might look rational and methodical, but in reality—or rather, relatively speaking—it is a mess.

Why did the heliocentric astronomical paradigm replace the geocentric one? Not because of greater scientific evidence believed to favour one over the other, but because the forces of the Church were in the process of being overthrown by those of the pre-Enlightenment Reformation and Renaissance. Why did Einstein’s theory of relativity replace the mechanics of Newton? Not because it was believed to provide superior scientific explanations, but because of a general intellectual rebellion against outdated absolutist concepts like that of a privileged frame of reference, or absolute motion and rest, and because ideas like that of the aether were thought to smack of theological obscurantism.

Anyhow, how can we say that what the scientist observes are the neutral, objective facts? Take a simple visual illusion like the famous Müller-Lyer illusion. Why do you think the line with the arrowheads pointing inward is longer than the one with the arrowheads pointing outward? Because your observation is conditioned by your assumptions and expectations. The heads pointing inward give a sense of greater length, and so you assume the line itself is longer when it isn’t. But, say we scientific relativists, all of scientific observation is like this: it is conditioned by the scientist’s preconceptions and theories about how the world is supposed to turn out.

It is for these reasons that, as a relativist, I do not believe in the objectivity of atoms, molecules, waves, energy, matter, space, time, water, fire, gases, radiation, or sunspots. Sure, if I were bombarded with gamma rays I would get sick and probably die. But what causes the death depends on your perspective. In our Western scientific paradigm we call it radiation. But there are communities in central America that would put it down to the operation of voodoo, and who am I to say that someone had not cast a voodoo curse on me?

Voodoo, science, witchcraft, animal spirits, chemistry, alchemy, fairies, physics—it’s all the same. What absolute standard can there be to judge between them? Any standard one comes up with will be one that can only be enunciated from *within* one’s own culture, and so it must be culturally relative. It is the paradigm within which scientists work that determines what counts as rational or reasonable, so there is no point in

There is no true logic, no true reason, and no true right and wrong, just the swirling systems and worldviews that give meaning to the life of each individual.

WHY I AM A RELATIVIST

arguing against the view of some hypothetical tribe that tuberculosis is caused by the ebb and flow of the tides from within *our* paradigm that says it is caused by a bacillus; for we can only argue against them by using the standards set by our paradigm, and our paradigm is precisely what they reject.

Now we can see what refreshing and far-reaching implications scientific relativism has for our understanding of the world. Take history, for example. Was the Norman invasion of England justified or not? How can that be evaluated from within our own contemporary perspective? We could only attempt to do it by imposing our own values on the people who existed then. How are we supposed to evaluate whether being a distant blood relation of St Edward the Confessor was of more weight than being acclaimed king by the most important people of England? How are we supposed to know how significant a factor was William's promise to do more for the good of the Catholic Church than Harold had done? We can say how significant such things were *to* the people whose concern they were, but we cannot say how significant they were pure and simple, in absolute terms.

Take Stalin's liquidation of the kulaks, or the Nazis' mass murder of the Jews. Don't we need to try to understand things from Stalin's perspective, and from the Nazis' point of view? How can we pass judgment on them without placing ourselves in their historical shoes, or at least doing our best to achieve this? History is an elusive thing, and as those of us relativists who have a streak of sympathy for postmodernism would contend, history is just words anyway; bits and pieces of old documents, handed-down stories, the odd footprint here or there. How can we raise a secure and objective historiographical edifice on such flimsy foundations?

If this can be said about history, how much more can we say it about religion? Surely it is impossible to decide which religion is the right one, and there is no way one can criticise another religion from within one's own religious worldview. But the same goes for non-believers, since how can *they* criticise *any* religion from within their own atheistic worldview? I know that some religious people say that since religions explicitly contradict each other, they cannot all be true. But from which absolute point of view can anyone say that two religions definitely contradict each other? Or maybe all religions are true relative to the perspective of someone who does not accept the totalitarian attitude which asserts that contradictions are absolutely forbidden. Or perhaps they are all false relative to the person who is unable to enter the religious mindset and see the world through the eyes of a believer.

I spoke of contradiction, but what is contradiction anyway? Do any two propositions actually contradict each other? If you say abortion is wrong and I say abortion is permissible, are we really contradicting each other or isn't it more a case of abortion's being per-

missible from my point of view but wrong from yours? And wouldn't the same go for the sorts of examples I mentioned earlier, such as slavery, child abuse and rape?

Logic is not an absolute system of rules that everyone *must* follow in order to think rationally. It has evolved over time, and if you look into the subject you will find a multitude of different logical systems including, sure enough, systems that allow propositions to contradict each other. In other words, how can anyone legislate against a system that allows you to say at the same time, "Last year Arsenal won the premiership and Fulham won the premiership", or "My dog has fleas and my dog does not have fleas", or "The cat sat on the mat and the cat stood on the mat—at the same time"? And for that matter, why can't two and two equal five? The great philosopher Descartes thought God could make that happen, so it must be a possibility. So why can't we devise a mathematical system that allows two plus two to equal seventeen, ten to equal zero and the square root of two to equal minus three? I am sure some unsung hero out there has already done it.

What is reason? What is rationality? Whose rationality are you appealing to when you say that I am talking nonsense by asserting that if my dog could speak French it would be a rhinoceros? Is it *your* standard of rationality, the one you got from your parents and your teachers, and from the particular books you just happened to read? Or is it *my* standard of rationality, the one I got from some rather quaint eccentrics at the local hospital for psychiatric disorders, and from the particular and rather flimsily spiral-bound manuscripts in very small handwriting that I just happened to have been handed by the excellent gentlemen of that august institution? As Thomas Szasz and R.D. Laing emphasised, mental illness is itself a myth, a mere means of social control and coercion. That the authors of those long manuscripts should be detained for even one second, or offered any assistance at all to think straight, is but a patronising attempt by the powers that be to impose their idea of what is normal and abnormal.

The relative fact is, there is no normal and no abnormal, just the sum total of our prejudices and preconceptions. There is no true logic, no true reason, and no true right and wrong, just the swirling systems and worldviews that give meaning to the life of each individual. Reality is never out there, it is always in the mind and in the culture. There can be no doubt about it—relativism is the absolute truth.

*This is an unedited transcript of a talk given to the Wotton Society of Eton College in November 2002, under the title "Is Truth Objective?". Dr David S. Oderberg is Reader in Philosophy at the University of Reading. His book **Applied Ethics** was named as one of the Books of the Year for 2000 in the **Spectator**.*