

Voltaire Lecture 2001: Does Relativism Matter?
presented by Professor Simon Blackburn, at Kings College London, 13 December, 2001

September 11th, we are told, changed the world. That may be true, at least because it has changed how many people perceive the world. And a change in peoples' ideas is a change in the world. We should not, however, expect many of those changes to be for the better, since it must be a general rule that when people are angry and afraid their ideas and actions go worse. In 1726, we may recall, Voltaire was exiled from France to London, where he was amazed and enchanted by the freedoms of the English. He was lucky not to be exiled here in the twenty-first century, and still less to the United States of America. As a foreign national, he would now risk indefinite arbitrary detention, the abrogation of habeas corpus, a secret hearing with no right of representation, and a right of review only by the same tribunal. In the USA he could face state murder: the death penalty by majority vote of a secret military tribunal from which there would be no appeal.

But one change since September 11th, perhaps for the better, is that more people seem prepared to think about meanings: the meaning of a society, the meaning of a civilization, the meaning of toleration and the meaning of respect, the meaning of standards and of values. Before September 11th such thoughts might have seemed airy-fairy, un-British, the playground of the effete chattering classes. Since then, it is no longer quite so unfashionable to sit up and listen.

Unfortunately however, the voices the public hear have been less than impressive. The debate in this country, and still more in the United States, too often aligns itself around a simple polarity. Are we to be religious? In that case, it is assumed, there are real truths, real standards, real values which we can use to guide our own behaviour and that of others. Or, are we to be atheists or agnostics? In that case, it is again assumed, there are no real truths or standards or values, and we fall prey to a variety of ailments: materialism, cynicism, nihilism, relativism.

There is almost nothing that is right about this way of drawing up the issue, and the philosophical tradition has abundant resources to show that there is almost nothing right about it. Yet this tradition seldom gets its voice heard. It is not allowed on "Thought for the Day", where bishops and rabbis and mullahs are given their daily, publicly-subsidized, advertising time. But let us start with the tiny bit that is right. This is the association of religious belief with dogma, intolerance, and illiberalism, and the corresponding association of atheism and agnosticism with liberalism and toleration. The very word 'sectarian' alerts us to this, and a religion is only a sect with an army. The "real standards" of religions, as Voltaire saw all too often in his own lifetime, are those of authoritarianism and separatism, of conformism within and persecution without.

It would be easy to fill a volume with the horrors of monotheistically inspired ethics: the ethics of the sadistic God. But the only charge I shall press is this. The first and all too often the last virtue of any of the monotheistic religions is faith, because it is faith that holds the flock together, and defines Us, inside, against Them, outside. But faith is not a virtue. Faith is credulity: the condition of believing things for which there is no reason. It is a vice, and it inevitably encourages other vices, including hypocrisy and fanaticism. It needs to be said, loudly, that it makes no more sense to talk of faith-based schools or faith-based education than it does to talk of superstition-based science or terror-based debate. There have, of course, been educated and enlightened people who profess faiths, but their education and enlightenment happened despite their superstitions, and not because of them. Faith is by its essence the enemy of education, which teaches people to base beliefs on reason and on reason alone.

We need look no further back than the mid-nineteenth century to remember that even in England, when they could, the churches stifled freedom of thought. When Richard Cobden, the great reformer, looked back on his campaign for public schooling, he said:

"I took the repeal of the Corn Laws as light amusement compared with the difficult task of

inducing the priests of all denominations to agree to suffer the people to be educated.”

But this is not how the popular debate lines up. Partly this is because in one of the most bare-faced takeover bids in the history of thought, the western churches have pretended to take on the mantle of liberalism and toleration themselves, going into happy-clappy denial about their dreadful centuries of internal and external persecutions. It is declining power that forces upon them these pacific and ecumenical gestures, just as, conversely, the increasing power of Islam aligned so notably with increasing military and persecuting tendencies during the life of the prophet. Islam at least tries to preserve consistency, so that when in Sura 9.5 Muslims are told to “kill unbelievers wherever you find them,” the consensus is that this time, late in Muhammed’s life, the archangel Gabriel meant exactly what is said, and that earlier verses counselling toleration are thereby cancelled. It is of course only by a very narrow escape that it is still legal to say aloud that such a doctrine is hateful.

But toleration, which is often, although not always, a good thing, is not the same as relativism, which is never a good thing; and it is vital to understand the difference. In the intellectual world, toleration is the disposition to fight opinion only with opinion: in other words, to protect freedom of speech, and to confront divergence of opinion with open critical reflection rather than suppression or force. The first great champion of toleration in this sense was John Locke, and his successors included not only famous liberals such as John Stuart Mill, but men with a rather more direct impact on human affairs, such as Thomas Jefferson. Toleration entered political life with the Enlightenment. It is a characteristically secular virtue: there has never been and never will be a theocracy that can wholeheartedly applaud it. For the religious mind, many sayings are not to be assessed at the bar of truth or falsity, but at that of blasphemy, and to hold that a person blasphemes is to hold that that person’s sayings at least, and the person for preference, must be suppressed.

Toleration gives us the dictum attributed to Voltaire: that I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it. Relativism, by contrast, chips away at our right to disapprove of what anybody says. Relativism names a loose cluster of attitudes, but the central message is that there are no asymmetries of reason and knowledge, objectivity and truth. There are two relativistic mantras: ‘Who is to say?’ (who is to say which opinion is better?) and ‘That’s just your opinion’ (your opinion is on all fours with any other). There are only different views, each true “for” those who hold them. Relativism in this sense goes beyond counselling that we must try to understand those whose opinions are different. It is not only that we must try to understand them, but also that we must recognize a symmetry of standing. Their opinions “deserve the same respect” as our own. So, at the limit, we may have western values, but they have others; we have a western view of the universe, they have theirs; we have western science, they have traditional science; and so on.

There have been many philosophical attempts to refute relativism, beginning perhaps with Plato’s encounter with sophists such as Gorgias or opponents such as Theodorus in the *Theaetetus*. Theodorus defends Protagoras’s doctrine that “Man is the Measure of All Things”, which Socrates takes to imply relativism. The central tactic Socrates uses is to query whether the relativistic doctrine applies to itself. If it does not, then it seems that there is at least one non-relative, absolute truth. If it does, then indeed relativism may be true for Protagoras, but remains untrue for Socrates and the rest of us who agree with him. Here is Socrates:

“...there is a second consequence, which is exquisite. In saying that everyone believes what is the case, he is conceding the truth of beliefs which oppose his own; in other words, he is conceding the truth of the opinion that he is wrong.”

Socrates implies that this is a problem, indeed an “exquisite” problem for Protagoras. However, it is not very clear what kind of problem it is. A determined Protagoras seems well able to bite the bullet, since Protagoras is only conceding that it is true for Socrates that he, Protagoras, is wrong, and by Protagoras’s own account that can coexist perfectly happily with whatever he believed in the first place. William James says as much two millennia later:

“But can there be self-stultification in urging any account whatever of truth? Can the definition ever contradict the deed? ‘Truth is what I feel like saying’ – suppose that to be the definition.

'Well, I feel like saying that, and I want you to feel like saying it, and shall continue to say it until I get you to agree.' Whatever truth may be said to be, that is the kind of truth which the saying can be held to carry. The *temper* which a saying may comport in an extra logical matter."

By the *temper* James means the force or zeal or conviction that the relativist brings to his position. Plato, together with modern followers such as Thomas Nagel, holds that force and zeal can only coexist with belief that what you say is true, meaning absolutely true, true for everybody here and elsewhere, now and forever. Plato and Nagel agree with Hilaire Belloc, in having no time for the:

Don different from those regal dons
With hearts of gold and lungs of bronze
Who shout and bang and roar and bawl
The absolute across the hall.

James, and Protagoras by contrast, allow force or zeal or conviction to coexist with the relativistic doctrine.

Once this is the debate, it is not at all obvious who wins. But I want to highlight something curious about both positions, and hence about the shape of the debate about relativism. It is as if each participant sees talk of truth, (together with its partners reason, proof, evidence, probability) as something with which we clothe ourselves, an *extra* layer which we like to put on. Then the absolutist thinks that truth gives us, as it were, clothing of state. Truth and the rest are the symbols of authority. Like professional judges, until we don them we are not suitably clothed, not speaking with the full *ex cathedra* dignity we need. By contrast, the relativist sees the clothing as a mask. We put it on in order to disguise the naked realities of power and persuasion, rhetoric and ideology, spin and agendas.

In this is the landscape, the two sides are very apt to talk past each other. I illustrate this in my book *Being Good*. There I tell a story about this which I very much like, and at the risk of boring anyone who has read that book, I would like to tell it again here. It concerns a friend of mine, who was present at a high-powered ethics institute which had put on a forum in which representatives of the great religions held a panel. First the Buddhist talked of the ways to calm, the mastery of desire, the path of enlightenment, and the panellists all said "Wow, terrific, if that works for you that's great". Then the Hindu talked of the cycles of suffering and birth and rebirth, the teachings of Krishna and the way to release, and they all said "Wow, terrific, if that works for you that's great". And so on, until the Catholic priest talked of the message of Jesus Christ, the promise of salvation and the way to life eternal, and they all said "Wow, terrific, if that works for you that's great". And he thumped the table and shouted: "No! It's not a question of it if works for me! It's the true word of the living God, and if you don't believe it you're all damned to Hell!"

And they all said: "Wow, terrific, if that works for you that's great".

The point here is that the relativist will only hear the shouting and roaring and bawling of the Absolute in his own way. His ear is cocked so as to hear only ideology or politics, not the intended claim to absolute truth. It is no good insisting upon truth, objectivity, or reason when ears are so cocked, for such ears only hear more of the same, but louder. Incidentally, we might note that while in this story the relativists are of the happy-clappy disposition, they are not always so. Those who think of claims to truth and objectivity as masks do not always relapse into happy-clappy pluralism. They may find the masks hateful, and are probably equally likely to lapse into snarling cynicism; this is particularly so when it is supposed that the appeal to objectivity and the rest disguises colonial or patriarchal or other takeover bids.

But should this be the landscape? I said that in talk of truth and the rest, one side sees robes of state, while the other side sees only masks. But suppose each of them is wrong? The shared assumption is that talk of truth and the rest is a kind of optional extra, about which the absolutist is unashamed but about which the relativist is modestly diffident. Yet this assumption is false. This was pointed out both by the great German philosopher of language,

Frege, and by the Cambridge philosopher Frank Ramsey. They point out, in effect, that in the ordinary practise of advancing and then either accepting or rejecting claims, we do not raise the temperature by talking of truth. If someone tells me that the price of gas is rising, and I reply "that's true" or "that's right", I am simply expressing agreement. I am not adding an extra pat on the back to the original remark. If I don't believe the original remark, I can say that it is not true, or that we have to wait and see. If I do this, then we have to set about determining whether the price of gas is rising, and it may turn out either way. We do not *in addition* have a different question on our plate, namely, whether it is true that the price of gas is rising. Our only problem is set by what we say. It is the issue that is the issue, not anything further.

How does this affect the relativist? Protagoras said that man is the measure of all things. Well, suppose the issue is a nice one of measurement. What time is high tide at Newhaven tomorrow? I could have an opinion about that. But unless I have done my homework, it would not be likely to be reliable. Homework here means consulting tide-tables. Or, if it is my business to produce timetables it may mean something more direct, such doing some calculations, or perhaps going down to Newhaven with a measuring rod and a clock. It is true, of course, that a particularly awkward customer may dislike this measurement process, and it is open to him to argue for another. Like any human process, even simple measurement is fallible and may be conducted more or less well. But at the end of the day either the water stops rising at a given time, or it does not. Tide tables have their prestige not because of social and political machinations, but because they are reliable. Were there a competition, a marketplace for rival tables, success would eventually winnow out those that work from those that do not. Hence, Protagoras got only part of the way. Man indeed lies behind the measurement, but that does not mean we can conduct the measurement any which way. If we do, our ships go aground, and our projects are thwarted.

When I said that the issue is the issue, this is what I meant. To make an assertion at all is to put a view into public space, up for acceptance or rejection. That public space will be replete with more-or-less articulate norms: things that count for acceptance or rejection. In the case of the height of the tide, those norms determine what counts as an answer and what counts as a reason for an answer. There is no question either of putting on a mantle of robes of state, or of seeing the same mantle as nothing but a mask. There is just the question of when it is high tide at Newhaven, and our best methods for settling it.

Here we meet a sudden gestalt switch. We find that the relativist, at first blush a tolerant, relaxed, laid-back, pluralistic kind of person can suddenly seem to be a kind of monster. If I say that high tide this afternoon at Newhaven is at two o'clock, I do not want to be met with the patronizing response that if that works for me that's great. That might be appropriate if I had just said something that strongly suggested I was mad, or if I were uttering the sentence in something like the spirit of a poetry recital, not as something to be accepted or rejected, but perhaps as something to be tasted and savoured. But this is not what I am doing when I voice some commitment. I expect my audience to engage with the commitment itself. To hear my saying just as a symptom, perhaps of my class or race or history, is failing to do this. It is regarding me as a patient. It is to think of me, in Peter Strawson's wonderful phrase, as someone to be "managed or handled or cured or trained". It is relativism itself that is here dehumanising.

As an aside, I should mention that this is why the "science wars" generate such heat. The science wars arose when scientists found sociologists and historians of science apparently rubbing a lot of the bloom from the scientific enterprise itself. In good relativistic fashion the sociologists and historians and cultural critics bracketed science's claims to objectivity and truth, and regarded the enterprise purely in an anthropological spirit. Scientists became a tribe whose structures of authority, of peer group acceptance, of prestige and funding, were to be investigated in the same spirit as those of the medicine men of the Azande or the Navaho. In particular the historian or sociologist had to eschew any issue of truth or falsity. In the words of the so-called Strong Program:

"Our equivalence postulates that all beliefs are on a par with one another with respect to the causes of their credibility. It is not that all beliefs are equally true or equally false, but that

regardless of truth and falsity the fact of their credibility is to be seen as equally problematic. The position we shall defend is that the incidence of all beliefs without exception calls for empirical investigation and must be accounted for by finding the specific, local causes of this credibility. This means that regardless of whether the sociologist evaluates a belief as true or rational, or as false and irrational, he must search for the causes of its credibility....all these questions can and should be answered without regard to the status of the belief as it is judged and evaluated by the sociologist's own standards."

This might sound innocent enough: merely a clinical or detached standpoint of objectivity. But from the standpoint of the scientist it is outrageous in exactly the way that I have been describing relativism as outrageous. From the practitioners' point of view, all beliefs are not on a par with respect to the causes of their credibility. The reason an astronomer believes that Jupiter has four moons is he has seen or calculated or inferred from other data that Jupiter has four moons. The reason he issues these tide tables is that calculations, shown to be reliable by centuries of experience, enable him to issue them. In successful science there is no gap, of the kind Barnes and Bloor insert, between the causes of belief and its truth.

In other words, the posture of neutrality means that the sociologist appears like the kind of nightmare psychoanalyst who looks for the causes of my believing that there is butter in the fridge in my childhood or my parents or my sex life—everywhere except in the fridge. From my point of view there is only one reason why I believe there is butter in the fridge, which is that I went and saw it was there. If the psychoanalyst "brackets" that fact then nothing he says can be of value to describing me. In other words, we can only bracket questions of truth when what is to be explained is delusion and error, or a remarkable selection of one truth from others, or in some other way an aspect of the enterprise which is inexplicable by the standards of truth-seeking. Thinking that scientific results and theories are inexplicable by the standards of truth-seeking is seeing the scientific endeavour as more akin to a poetry reading or a piece of political rhetoric than an investigation into moons, and tides, and for that matter the place of the butter.

Of course, this is not to deny that science, again like all human enterprises, can go wrong. A proper modesty is always in place: the scientist need not be bent on shouting, banging, roaring and bawling. Nor is it to deny that patterns of enquiry and interest will often be set by outside forces: military funding, drug company money, or political expediency. But in spite of these suspicious partners, the particular glory of science is its self-corrective nature, to which I shall return in time. Meanwhile the emotions involved in the science wars bear full witness to the dehumanising nature of the enterprise of explaining the shape our minds take without caring to enter into the reasons why they take the shape they do.

Many of you will be thinking that this is all very well when it comes to simple physical measurements like the height or time of the tide. But can we say the same when values swim into view? It is essential that we can. If I hold that capital punishment ought not to be allowed, and you hold that it can be, we disagree. Once more the issue is the issue: should we or should we not allow capital punishment? We might find the issue hard, and we might find ourselves entangled in uncertainties when we pursue it. We will need to think about things like the rights of members of a state, the rights of the state, the consequences of actions, the emotion of revenge, and many others. That only shows that it is not a simple issue. But as we pursue it, the relativistic voice (who's to say? That's just your opinion!) is once more purely a distraction. It is we who are trying to say, and when we voice an opinion we try to put it in such a light that it is not "just" our opinion, but an opinion with weight behind it. When I voice my opposition to the abrogation of civil liberties, here and in the United States, it is not "just" my opinion. It is at least the opinion of centuries of jurisprudence, and the rule of law. If we like, it is the voice of humanity's bitter experience with Inquisitions and secret hearings and the power of the executive. When I say such things, just as surely as when I talk of high tide, my opinion is put into public space for acceptance or rejection or debate. I do not voice my mind in the spirit of a poetry reading or still less as a way of manifesting medical symptoms. I voice it with the intention that we come to one mind about this, and this is the way I would like our one mind to be. Given that this is the project, the relativistic voice merely as a nuisance or a distraction, and can subside into the shadows.

We still have to be sure of our epistemology. We want our opinions to deserve assent, which means finding considerations in their favour to which, we hope, reasonable people must listen. Here, philosophy can also help. Principally, I want to argue, it steers us between exaggerated hopes and exaggerated pessimism. The exaggerated hope is for something akin to proof. We would like a demonstration that one opinion is correct: a demonstration to which everybody must listen, on pain of forfeiting any claim to rationality. In ethics, this Holy Grail was sought most successfully by Immanuel Kant, who found it in the formula that I should act only in such a way that I can also will that the maxim should become a universal law.

Few doubt that Kant has seized on something important, and indeed something that structures a great deal of our practical reasonings. Indeed, it is implicit in the very notion of the public space of reason that claims can be assessed from a common point of view. A powerful way of making someone worry about our patriotic anti-terrorist laws is to ask how they would like it if British or American citizens faced the possibility of such tribunals whenever they travelled abroad. It is, indeed, precisely because religious conviction suppresses that procedure—since to the true believer the project of accommodating the point of view of the unbeliever remains a sin—that religion remains the greatest enemy of ethics. Nevertheless in the end I believe we have to judge that Kant fails. There is no proof or algorithm waiting to drum dissidents—such as religious people or patriotic people brainwashed into thinking in terms of an Us and a Them—into the ranks of the virtuous.

But we do not have to recoil from this into any kind of scepticism. Human nature and human need fills the gap that reason alone cannot fill. The common enterprise of practical reasoning has plenty of data. We know when life is going well and when it is going badly, and we know what to admire and what to reject. The virtues of courage and intelligence, patience and concern, are virtues the world over. It is usually not the values that are difficult, but the practical problem of how best to implement them.

There is a final point about relativism that needs to be understood. Frege and Ramsey show us that truth is not a good point of focus. For to wonder whether p is true is no more than to wonder whether p . And the meaning of p , all by itself, determines the norms of assent and verification. If p is a scientific claim, the procedures of science will be needed; if it is a historical claim, the procedures of the library and the archive. If those procedures are themselves contested then we have to step back and discuss methods of inquiry, trying to line our procedures up with our own best sense of our own reliability. If the issue is ethical or political, we summon up our best understandings of what it is for life to go well or badly, admirably or distressingly.

But all this leaves space for some to worry about the concepts that may be used in framing an issue. The vocabulary in which we frame our issues, they point out, is *our* vocabulary. Our eyes and ears are twenty-first century eyes and ears. And then the thought may arise that there could be other vocabularies, other concepts or ways of organizing our mental responses to the world, shaping other perspectives. And then from those other perspectives perhaps our concerns will seem primitive or regrettable, easily by-passed, fogged up by mists that engulf our particular time and place. Perhaps our concepts are (merely) Western, or patriarchal, or bourgeois or scientific. Perhaps we are trapped in our own histories, prisoners of forces of which we know next to nothing. Some contemporary philosophers, notably Richard Rorty, believing himself to voice a tradition stretching back to Dewey and Wittgenstein, think the only response to this thought is a kind of weightless irony; a disengagement from issues that, one day, may seem not to have been worth taking seriously. Rorty thus takes the same view of the landscape as Plato or Nagel, but, fearing distance from the absolute, feels unable to shout or bang or roar or bawl, or indeed say anything at all except with the ironic snigger attached.

Once more, however, the tradition enables us to put more backbone into the picture than this. The weakness in this conceptual relativism is its transition from a bare possibility to a piece of practical advice. The premise of bare possibility is fine but weak. There is, we should admit, a bare possibility of better ways of looking at things. There is the possibility of improving our ways of thinking, just as there is the possibility of getting worse. But what is the implication of that? While improvement remains a bare possibility, we have no option but to stick with what we have. There may be a future in which people do not sail, or sailors do not need to take

account of tides. But that is not our world, and in the meantime those who sail the seas need an answer to the time of high tide. Treating the question, or its answer, with light irony is foolish. There may come a time when scientists no longer think in quantum mechanical terms. But meanwhile there are lasers and scanners and cameras and computers to design, and quantum mechanics is the only game in town. Equally there may come a world in which political currency changes, and our ways of living are no longer discussed in terms of equality, justice, deprivation, resources, or education or freedom or oppression. Meanwhile there are scholars sentenced to death for saying things that are true, women who are denied education or security or medical aid, we have assaults on our freedoms, and rampant inequalities of resources and opportunities. The idea that we should not care about any of that just because one day we might come to think in other terms would be ludicrous if it were not tragic.

I begin my ending by bringing in a cousin of relativism, and one perhaps more associated with Voltaire himself, which is scepticism. In the public mind they are not sharply separated, I suspect, since the relativist, like the sceptic, is supposed to suspend judgement in places where other, more red-blooded people, like Belloc's dons, want belief and conviction. But in reality they are diametrically opposed. According to the relativist belief and conviction fly out of the window because truth is, as it were, too cheap to care about. There is too much of it about: your truth, his truth, and my truth. For the sceptic belief and conviction fly out of the window because truth is too rare. We cannot care about it because we cannot find it; we cannot even search for it because we cannot tell when we are getting closer.

Unlike the relativistic frame of mind that of the sceptic is often admirable. The relativist reflection, we have seen, is dehumanising. Its attitude, including its light irony, is the stance of someone above the fray, someone who has seen through the debates and engagements of ordinary participants. But this stance, I have argued, is demeaning and impoverished, a mere distraction from whatever issue concerns us. By contrast the sceptic makes no attempt to bypass or sideline the issue. The issue is the issue, and so is truth. It is just that according to the sceptic, we cannot find the truth. We must moderate our opinions, confess to our ignorance, avoid conviction and dogma because we recognise the inadequacies of our investigations or our methods.

The British, fortunately, have strong sceptical leanings, which is partly why the roaring and bawling of the present government is so despised. Americans by contrast have a natural appetite for belief. According to one account I have read, it is not only that around 90% believe in the literal truth of Christianity, but 49% believe that people are sometimes possessed by devils, and three and a half million believe *themselves* to have been abducted, at some time or another, by aliens. This is disturbing, for none of those beliefs are guaranteed to remain inert, especially when times are fearful: we may remember those unfortunates a year or two ago, who believed that the Hale Bopp comet was a spiritual recycling facility for dead Californians, and killed themselves so as to go to join it. As Voltaire also said, those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities.

Nevertheless, scepticism has its limitations, and I would like to close by exploring one of them. Let me start with a complaint. Earlier this year the great American philosopher Willard van Orman Quine died. His death prompted an ignorant and shameful article in *The Times* by their journalist Simon Jenkins, lamenting that Quine was the kind of philosopher who lived and wrote remote from the everyday: a typical example of the useless intellectual. And indeed, unlike the Balliol dons we have already met, Quine trumpeted few absolutes. Yet neither was he a sceptic. So what good did he do?

Well, Quine was probably the most important theorist of knowledge of the latter half of the twentieth century. He gave a subtle, original, and comprehensive theory of the proper process whereby experience should be transmuted into theory. Quine knew that none of the avenues to knowledge is simple, or infallible, or immune to endless revision and question. Neither the senses, nor testimony, nor history nor theory nor reason itself gives us bedrock. In his favourite metaphor, borrowed from the positivist Otto Neurath, we are like sailors condemned to rebuild our boats at sea. No part is immune to critical inspection, and each part can be replaced, but we must stand on other parts as we do it. The only rational process is to discover what works, and to warp our scientific heritage as cautiously as possible to cope with the

recalcitrant experiences nature brings our way. This is the way of science, with its virtues of observation and experiment, of conjecture and refutation, of open debate. Science should be seen as a Darwinian process whereby a plurality of theories compete for credibility, and only the fittest survive, perhaps only for one lifetime, in the endless process of self-correction.

In saying these things Quine was partly echoing the American pragmatist C. S. Peirce, famous for the much-criticized definition of truth as the opinion which the progress of science is fated to converge on in the long run. But the long run is only an imaginary focus: the process is itself guaranteed to yield improvement at each step on the way. It is because he believed in this process that Quine was not a sceptic.

There is, however a place where a different set of processes enter. Peirce and Quine are perhaps apt to describe science as a kind of self-enclosed enterprise, driven by an inner logic, and needing no support from its surroundings. But it is of the utmost importance to see that this is false, and false in many dimensions. It is most obviously false because institutional science needs support. It needs the leisure of inquiry, which in turn needs investment. It is false too because the whole Darwinian process only works given virtues of integrity, communication, toleration, and open-mindedness. Science could only flourish when religion lost the power to stifle those virtues, and it still cannot flourish where religion or other forces retain that power. Science, in other words, needs an entire cultural and political matrix in which to grow properly, and nothing in that matrix can be taken for granted.

We see small examples of this in particular parts of the scientific enterprise, perhaps most notably medicine. The wise, Hume told us, lend a very academic faith to any report that flatters the passions of the reporter. Few of us are taken in when the American psychiatric association voted to medicalise naughtiness, inventing instead attention deficit disorder, and so opening the way for one in seven children in the country to be regularly and profitably prescribed Ritalin, a class-A drug with sedative effects. When the government here refused a foot-and-mouth inquiry, they instead appointed old friends and colleagues to report on the virtuous conduct of old friends and colleagues, and Hume's dictum predicts the way such an "inquiry" will be received. More insidious cases of mass hallucination probably depend in the first instance on institutional needs of particular sciences. So, for instance, The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has relentlessly issued graphs and reports testifying to the imminent and catastrophic effects of global warming. For the scientists on the panel such claims justify further funding, not to mention increased institutional power, computer time, and first-class air travel to exotic conferences. The passion that makes us receive these reports, like those of other environmental disasters, so avidly is, I suppose, that of guilt. For there is in fact only the poorest evidence of any atmospheric warming, and excellent evidence that there is either none or next to none, just as there is no evidence of rising sea levels and none of increased climate violence (the poor evidence for derives from arbitrarily scattered surface measurements; the stronger evidence against derives from satellite data that covers virtually the entire globe, and meteorological balloons).

My purpose here is not to qualify my message by belittling science. On the contrary the data are the result of painstaking, excellent, impeccable science. But a public statement can sit on the top of a mountain of science without adequately reflecting that science. It is the public statements, whether of the American Psychiatric Society, the Government, or the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change that need to be taken with a generous pinch of salt. Hume also quotes with approval a saying of La Rochefoucault that there are many things in which the world wishes to be deceived. The religious impulse is one manifestation of this truth. But another is the impact of emotions, including fear and guilt, upon belief, and this is the mechanism that leads us to receive messages of doom and disaster with our critical faculties asleep. And this brings us back to a question close to that of relativism, which is the issue of confidence with which I shall end.

The west, it is sadly said, has lost confidence in the Enlightenment. It is quite common to see intellectuals state as a fact that the Enlightenment project has been tried and failed. This is a lie. There never was one single Enlightenment project, and of the Enlightenment projects that there were, many have succeeded beyond the wildest hopes of their proponents. The Enlightenment provided the matrix I have talked of, in which scientific enterprises could

flourish. Now, our understanding of the world is better because of physical science. Our understanding of ourselves is better because of biological science. We live longer, and we feed ourselves better, and 'we' here includes not only people in first world countries, but countless people in the third world. We look after the environment better, and in time we will manage our own numbers better. Outside the theocracies of the east more people have more freedoms and enjoy more education, more opportunities and may even have more rights than ever before. We owe this progress entirely to the culture forged, in the west, by Bacon and Locke, Hume and Voltaire, Newton and Darwin. Humanism is the belief that humanity need not be ashamed of itself, and these are its great examples. They show us that we need not regard knowledge as impious, or ignorance as desirable, and we need not see blind faith as anything other than blind.

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