

**Absolute Truth:
or How to Live with the Natives
without Going Relativist**

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Abraham Lincoln was once standing by a donkey, talking to another politician. The conversation at one point went like this:

Sir, how many legs does this donkey have?
Four, Mr. Lincoln.
And how many tails does it have?
Why, just one, Mr. Lincoln.
Now, sir, what if we were to call the tail a leg; how many legs would the donkey have then?
Five, Mr. Lincoln.
No sir, for you cannot make a tail into a leg by calling it one.

In some years of using this dialogue in classrooms, I have found it causes disagreement among students. Occasionally I have taken votes. I wish I had been doing this for many more years and kept records. It would have been a barometer of the spread of the dark clouds of relativism. In recent years the vote generally goes against Lincoln.

The most obvious feature of truth and objectivity is that, whatever the subject matter, saying or thinking something does not make it so. Something independent of thought or statement determines whether what is thought or said is so. But there is a significant group of exceptions to that; and I must mention them only to set them aside. Standing before the altar or before the town clerk and saying 'I do' or 'I will' is not describing my marriage, it is

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perpetrating it. Similarly saying the words 'I promise' can make it true that I have promised. It is the umpire saying 'Out' or making some equivalent bodily gesture, which makes it true that you are out. In such cases, saying does make what is said so. These aside, I will proceed.

Truth and objectivity are bound up with what philosophers call the problem of 'the reality of the external world'. But it is worth mentioning, just to set it aside too, that mathematics is clearly an inquiry in which saying does not make things so; but it is problematic what the status of the things talked about is. Oversimply put, there is debate about whether mathematics is invention or discovery. I doubt if anybody in this debate would try to maintain that numbers are there like Everest is. Even so, that species of philosopher called 'Platonist' might say numbers are there in a far superior way. So there is a debate about that; but I am not going to say any more about it here. All would agree that numbers do not have natural histories like animal species, mountain ranges and plants, rivers and glaciers.

I used the well-known phrase 'the reality of the external world'. I do not like that phrase. It evokes a picture of our mind and consciousness as inside and the rest outside. This is a distortion of the nature of the relations between us and the rest of the world. It is a picture the Oxford philosopher, Gilbert Ryle, denigrated as being of a ghost in a machine. Its most recent version stems from Descartes but has earlier roots; it has a long history because it speaks to something almost certainly universal in human life. Wittgenstein thought it a picture which not only distorts understanding of our relations to the rest of the world; it also produces a diseased understanding of our inner or spiritual lives. It is part of what Wittgenstein called 'a picture which holds us captive'.

The picture has been more or less superseded by an image that is much trendier. This picture, which now holds many Australian and other philosophers captive, is that of the brain in a vat. It is manipulated by a computer program so that it will have the experiences we have, acquire the beliefs, feel the emotions and desires, the loves and hates, form the intentions and aims that we do, etc. It will be just like it is, but it won't be really. We are, in this horrendous vision, systematically deluded in our beliefs that we

are (complete) human bodies, and that there are other people. But dispute with the proponents of this neo-Cartesian vision—a vision that calls itself modern materialism, identifying our minds with our brains—is not my concern here, though some of what I say at the end will bear on this image. Anyway the materialists do not say things are like that; they only think it important to say that they could be; that has never diminished my distaste for taking the picture seriously. But enough of that. Proponents of this image and I are in agreement about the points I have so far made about objectivity and truth. And so we agree on such things as that the solar system and the galaxy were here before us and before any sentient life was here; and we are in agreement that plant life and geological activity went on on the earth before there was any sentience or any consciousness here; and we are in agreement that, unless the nuclear disaster we dread goes even further than we expect, much plant life and geological activity, even if no human life, will continue to go on.

My aim is to give the reader a glimpse of the current struggle over the idea of things being as they are whether we know it or not, whether we like it or not, and even whether we have developed, in our thought and our language, conceptions of how things possibly are or are not. Here is another philosopher speaking of the dark clouds of relativism:

If the people who share a civilization are no longer on the whole convinced that the form of life which it tries to realize is worth realizing, nothing can save it. If European civilization is a civilization based on the belief that truth is the most precious thing in the world and that pursuing it is the whole duty of man, an irrationalist epidemic, if it ran through Europe, unchecked, would in a relatively short time destroy everything that goes by the name of European civilization.¹

I have reservations about Collingwood's talk of 'the whole duty of man'. But bad enough if truth and its pursuit are not among the most important things in our civilization.

¹R. G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Metaphysics*, Oxford, 1940, p. 140.

Others, far less attractive to me than Collingwood, speak of faith in our civilization, our Christian civilization, of faith in God; and of how the loss of that faith will lead us into barbarism and chaos. Perhaps their concern and Collingwood's are connected. There is some connexion; for I think that philosophy has a task of providing a conception of reality as independently determining whether our thoughts and assertions are true or false; but a conception is needed which does not, covertly or overtly, fall back on the notion of God and a God's-eye view. God is dead, as Nietzsche said; and as Bernard Williams says, we ought to write his obituary and distribute his legacies.²

Where does the God's-eye view come into my discussion? It is a matter of supposing that truth and objectivity involve a point of view outside all our local points of view; that without such a viewpoint it is improper to speak of truth and objectivity. By 'local' I mean something historical and something relating to various ways of living on the contemporary surface of the earth. We should even think of life on earth as local because of the increasing fashionability (and conceivable truth) of the idea that there is intelligent life elsewhere in the galaxy or the universe. There is a temptation, in trying to formulate a conception of reality that meets this requirement of objectivity, to use the idea of an ideal observer, a knowing being who stands outside all our points of view. To do this is to extrapolate from such cases as that of the several blind men feeling an elephant and offering conflicting views as to what sort of thing it is. A sighted person watching and listening to the proceedings will be able to understand the differences among the reports of the blind men. In a dubious extrapolation, the elephant is the totality of reality, the blind men are various points of view, and the sighted observer, outside the whole show, is God. But to keep relying on such extrapolation in order to be confident about the possibility of objectivity is a kind of epistemological necrophilia. I shall later speak of some of what is involved in gaining a conception of objectivity that spares us the burden of the God's-eye view. But, before that, more about relativism.

I use the word 'truforism' for this relativism, and 'truforist' for

²Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, London, 1985, p. 33.

a supporter of it. I naturally hope that the barbarousness of the terms will discourage those they apply to from continuing in their ways. It is not rare to find in much conversation, and in many classrooms, the words 'true for us' or 'true for them', or 'true for Eskimos' or 'true for Buddhists', etc. Naturally, then, also 'true for me'; the end of this miserable journey is solipsism, the ludicrous idea that, for all I know, all there is to reality is myself and how the course of my sensory experience goes.

Among social anthropologists, at least according to one of the most distinguished of current ones, there is much talk of peoples who 'live in different worlds'. Dan Sperber writes:

In pre-relativist anthropology, Westerners thought of themselves as superior to all other people. Relativism replaced this despicable hierarchical gap by a kind of cognitive apartheid. If we cannot be superior in the same world, let each people live in its own world.³

If we take the idea of living in different worlds seriously, we must be puzzled by our ability adversely to affect the lives of other peoples, up to outright killing of them in large numbers. But if 'living in separate worlds' is just hyperbole for the banality involved in such thoughts as that the world of the actor is a different world from the world of the politician, it ought clearly to be acknowledged that nothing much is being claimed. (Some of us wish acting and politics were separate enough to have prevented an actor from influencing politics as much as one recently did.)

An initial response to relativist truism is that of my colleague David Stove. If 'It is true for them' means anything more than 'They believe it' what exactly is the more that it means? This is a good response. For there is an obvious difficulty about making sense out of 'it is true for them; but it is not true'; while there is no difficulty at all about making sense out of 'They believe it; but it is not true.' It is common as rain to be able to say 'It's raining, but they don't believe it' or 'It's not raining, but they think it is'.

³Dan Sperber, 'Apparently Irrational Beliefs', *Rationality and Relativism*, ed. M. Hollis and S. Lukes, Oxford, 1984, 179-80

Truformism is not new. It started in (at least) ancient Greece; and Plato tackled it vigorously as it was espoused by Protagoras. In its current outbreak it is probably largely a product of the spread of European civilization over the earth, with the attendant uprooting of civilizations older than itself and of traditional (what used to be called 'primitive') cultures. We are paying a heavy price for this often callous uprooting and there is no telling where it is all going to end. Sympathy for the people involved and concern about our crimes against them is widespread among members of our own civilization; and it is especially strong in many of the sensitive and intelligent young, such as my students. I do not, could not, despise this sympathy and this concern. Further, it goes with a commonly found idea that the very ways of living we have uprooted may be sources of enlightenment for us, either because we can better appreciate ourselves through comparisons or, dubiously, through attempts to adopt as our attitudes, attitudes those ways of life are informed by: in particular there is much interest in the attitudes toward the natural environment displayed by many traditional peoples. Adopting such attitudes toward nature (assuming we can even make sense of them) and doing so because we think it would help deter us from environmental vandalism is futile, even silly. These are not live options for us. And their not being live options very likely diminishes our ability clearly to understand them. This does not mean there is no point in the effort to do so. But trying to adopt the attitudes is rather like going to church on Sunday because you have decided that religion is needed as a kind of social cement. That is hardly a religious attitude even if it is true that, historically, religion has, in part, functioned as social cement.

I said I could not despise the sympathy and concern caused by our uprooting of other cultures. But how can we accommodate that concern without condescension and without lapsing into or being tolerant of truformism? For it deserves no sympathy whatsoever.

A start is to develop David Stove's point further. Instead of just insisting on being told of a difference between 'It's true for them' and 'They believe it', let us go further and notice these points: first, it is possible rationally to believe what is false. Second, it is possible irrationally to believe what is true. We can say, in many cases, 'They believe it; it is not at all surprising that they believe it given their life, environment and history; it is even justifiable on

their part to believe as they do. Nevertheless they are mistaken.' A famous example will help to make this clear.

It is not true (though lots of people seem to believe it) that everybody believed that the earth was flat until relatively recent times. Nearly everybody who was moderately educated, in, say, the fifteenth century, knew that the earth was round; what they believed that was false was that the sun revolved daily around the earth, a proposition of the best theory of the day, the Ptolemaic theory. Even so, Aristarchus, in ancient Greece, preceded Copernicus in theorizing that the earth revolved around the sun and that it rotated on its axis. His reasoning and his evidence for this were very good. Sadly, Aristotle said this theory had to be wrong. And he said so reasonably. His argument was that if Aristarchus was right, we couldn't stand up on the surface of the earth; the fierce wind due to the rotation would blow us away. Even after Galileo did much to support Copernicus's theory, it was not irrational to reject it. For, among other things, there was the problem of the stellar parallax. The fixed stars do not change their appearance to the naked eye during the year; nor to very powerful telescopes. To appreciate this point, think of a picket fence about a block long which you drive past at a distance of, say, 50 metres. It will undergo a distinctive change of appearance from one end of the block to the other. The fixed stars are comparable to such a fence and the revolution of the earth around the sun comparable to your journey past the picket fence. This made it seem ludicrous to believe that the earth had an orbit around the sun as large as Kepler and Copernicus attributed to it. This could only be so if the distance to the fixed stars was so enormous as to be merely arithmetically conceivable. The distance involved staggers the imagination. The enormously large and the incredibly small still boggle our minds. Most of us just accept the authority of scientists when they tell us about things with diameters so small that such a bit of reality stands to a grain of sand as such a grain of sand stands to the solar system, or even to the galaxy. It could easily have been unreasonable to accept a theory such as Aristarchus's or Copernicus's without being offered a powerful explanation of the apparent evidence against their views. This is enough to justify saying, as I want to say, that it was justifiable to deny truths and that it was justifiable to assert falsehoods. The very large has pretty well got itself accepted in modern thought. But the very small is still a topic of intense

controversy. There are respected philosophers of science (such as Bas van Fraassen at Princeton University) who maintain that the objects of micro-physics do not actually exist. The ideas of them are just useful instruments in methods of predicting what goes on among larger-scale, more directly observable objects.

It is quite impossible to write the history of science in any illuminating way if these points about rational false belief and irrational true belief are not recognized. Even the new discipline called Sociology of Knowledge wants to ask not only why false beliefs were so long sustained and give answers in terms of non-scientific interests that influenced people; that investigation also seeks answers to questions about why truths were discovered or accepted when they were. For example, I have been told that in Germany after the First World War, the indeterminacy involved in quantum mechanics appealed to many scientists because of the poignancy of the question 'How could Germany have lost the war?' There was no doubt solace in the thought that some things happen at random and can't be fully explained. There is no plausible way to connect the very small things of modern physics with larger things like tanks, bullets, or crushed and bleeding bodies; or the very short-term events of micro-physics with longer term events such as invasions and diplomatic meetings. But this fact about Germany at the time may still be significant in relation to the question of why a theory was attractive to some people.

But there is a stock (and vital) distinction between the existence of interests which explain people believing certain things because those interests and cares make the beliefs attractive; and things that relate to whether the beliefs are true or likely to be true. I doubt if any of the German scientists alluded to above would ever have argued (in, say, one of the scientific journals of the day) that Germany's loss of the war was an empirical confirmation of quantum mechanics. But in the case of the stellar parallax, the unchanging appearance of the stars throughout the year was evidence against Copernicus. Take a quite different case: we are unsurprised that the Pope believes that God exists. But even he, especially since the current one was trained in philosophy, would hardly argue like this: 'I am the Pope, therefore God exists', or like this: 'The fact that I am Pope increases the likelihood that God exists'. We certainly expect the Pope to believe in God. That a man

is Pope is a reason to believe that he believes. But it is not reason to believe what he believes. I expect the Pope knows that.

In discussing these examples, I have used the word 'true' in its everyday way. That way could be called absolute; for the word itself repudiates truth relativism just in the way it is used. So one could say that truth is just plain truth and no more needs to be said. Nothing is to be gained by adding 'absolute'. Indeed, it concedes to the opposition that there may be some point in speaking of relative truth, or something in the idea. But I must admit that there is something; which is to say that my diagnosis isn't yet complete.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, those philosophers called 'Rationalists' spoke of ideas ranging from being obscure through clear and distinct to what they called adequate. Their thought was that a circumstance, object or property of the world could be represented in thought or experience more or less adequately. For instance, feeling a pain in your foot is, according to them, a very obscure thought of the pebble in your shoe digging into the sole of your foot; or, to be grisly, when George Gershwin experienced the odour of burning rubber in the absence of burning rubber, he was having an obscure thought of his brain tumour. Or, if an eagle flies above at great speed, and I am without my glasses, I may see only a blur while my binocular equipped and ornithologically expert companion will see the glorious flight of an eagle. In such cases, we have different conceptions or ideas of just the same bit of reality. This is a very intriguing way to think. Spinoza, one of the three great Rationalist thinkers, was a precursor of writers on religion who interpret the ideas of traditional religion as seeing through a glass darkly what the more enlightened can see clearly. Karl Marx's idea of religion as the opium of the people and the heart of a heartless world is, in its way, a thought of this kind, though since it is metaphorical, it is hardly what a Rationalist would have called adequate.

Hegel, about whom I speak with trepidation, apparently thought that religion and art could produce conceptions about life and reality that would fall short of the conceptions of these things that philosophy—his philosophy anyway—could produce. But religious and artistic productions would express the same basic truths. He called the ideas, as philosophy would produce them, the

absolute truth. There certainly seems to be a parallel between his notion of the Absolute and the Rationalist notion of the Adequate (I give these mighty notions the dignity of capital letters).

Along such lines, we are able to make some sense out of the notion that what we now believe or know may in some way be inadequate or incomplete. But it is little solace for truforist relativism, except the sort that a diagnosis is for an illness. For these, I admit, intriguing and attractive, ways of thinking about our thinking do not in anyway threaten plain truth. For at bottom, no more (and no less) is involved than is also involved in the fact that 'the very large city on the east coast of Australia' may register someone having spotted that bit of the world which is more commonly registered by 'Sydney'. We may identify and describe something from different points of view. 'Point of view' here may be literal or figurative. A painter and mechanic opening the bonnet of a Porsche see the same thing. But their representation of it may be different indeed; that means no more (and no less) than that their interests in it may be radically different. The Rationalist notion of a range from obscure to adequate, then, cannot justify any relativism. It presupposes a way things are which can be better or worse represented by our thought. It takes for granted just the sort of objectivity we began by noticing.

The Rationalist way of thinking leads to many intriguing claims. I have already mentioned Marx's view of religion as consolation in the face of suffering. There is also the Freudian view that belief in God is obscure appreciation of the power of one's father. And there is the Durkheimian view that belief in God is obscure recognition and appreciation of our dependency on the social order. Such views seek to explain religious belief and its tenacity despite its literal content being false, or, in properly Spinozan terms, grossly inadequate but still onto something. Whatever the effectiveness of this diagnostic approach to the facts of religious belief—and my own guess is that religious thought may be more *sui generis* than any of these classical diagnoses allows—there is no help for truforism here. My point has been that some such notion of adequate, or ultimate, or absolute if you like, truth as opposed to obscure truth, as a part of our general intellectual apparatus, may help with the sympathy and concern we ought to have for the uprooted peoples for whom we have acquired many

grave responsibilities.

Recall that I am trying to salvage a conception of independent reality without indulging in a God's-eye view. One might even say I am trying to put more adequately what the idea of a God's-eye view expresses obscurely. I am, in effect, offering some ideas toward a theory of error. So far the examples used have been from our own history and culture. In order to address the question of other contemporary cultures I shall borrow from the anthropologist, Robin Horton.⁴ Horton belongs to the so-called Intellectualist camp in theoretical anthropology. He rejects the view that the fundamental thinking processes of the peoples he has studied are different from ours. They are significantly different and I will say how he thinks they are different. But, for Horton, the difference is not a matter of basic ways of thinking or a matter of (whatever that would be) their possessing a 'different logic'. I will not, for lack of space, say any more about the opposing camps in theoretical anthropology on this matter. The issue for all camps is the problem of making sense out of the wildly false propositions that traditional people seem to assert, and assert readily and often. They *say* a lot of utterly bewildering things. These peoples have cosmologies, large-scale views of how the world works and the place of human beings in it. Robin Horton believes that they arrive at their cosmologies in essentially the same way our science arrives at theories, of either the very large or the very small, by hypothetico-deductive reasoning and by analogy with the middle-sized. Unobservable things are postulated to explain what we do observe. Horton thinks this practice is universal. Such postulations get more or less confirmation from observations made as a result of expectations deduced from the postulations and other accepted beliefs. What is different is the content, not the form, of this approach. Horton, with many philosophers of science, holds that models of the unobservable are developed by analogy with things and processes that are observable. Here it is useful to think of those lectures on television (or in school) where ping-pong balls are made to bounce with increasing speed in moving cages. We are then invited to develop our understanding of water reaching boiling point on analogy with this process and these things. Most of us will recall the striking

⁴See Robin Horton, 'African Traditional Thought and Western Science', *Rationality*, ed. Brian Wilson, Oxford, 1970, 131-71.

similarity between models of the atom and its nucleus and the solar system. I remember being led into the wildest thoughts on that occasion, such as why couldn't our entire solar system be an atom in someone's baseball bat, about to be bashed by contact with a ball in some game going on in a larger and inaccessible reality?

Analogies and models have played a vital role in the development of our scientific theories. Of course, mathematics, with its army of equations and algorithms eventually takes over from the models; and the models come to be seen as stages on the way. This process is well suited to description in terms of the movement of thought from obscure through clear to adequate ideas which I have just been explaining. Let me say some more about the detail of Robin Horton's proposals in this area.

Horton adopts Bertrand Russell's idea of 'stone-age metaphysics'. In everyday life, among all peoples on earth, there are two dimensions to thinking and acting. First, everybody knows that if it's sharper it will cut easier; if it's heavier, you have to push or pull harder to move it; if it has a hole in it, it won't float; if it's coming at you, you'd better step aside; if you stab him he will bleed, etc. The second dimension of stone-age metaphysics involves noticing that people make things happen by such actions as giving orders, being sources of advice and authority and by intentionally moving their limbs or other bodily parts. People do the stabbing that makes others bleed and they bend things and break them. Their anger and their sadness also generate action (a kind of action at a distance) on the part of others; and their generosity, kindness or mercifulness produce effects in other people. Summing up these features of the two dimensions, they can be called the *mechanical* and the *agential*, (to coin a word from the term agency). All of this, Horton notes, goes on more or less within a range of things not much more than a thousand times smaller or larger than ourselves and the domain includes other animals as well as human beings as agents. But beyond stone-age metaphysics we encounter the problems of the very large and the very small. How is concern about the effects of these on our lives to take thought in those directions? How are we to gain understanding and some measure of control in the macrocosm and the microcosm?

According to Horton, we must do this by analogy with

something from our stone-age metaphysics. How else to get the enterprise off the ground? Horton's idea is that we, especially since the seventeenth century—but also in ancient Greece—had the good fortune to develop analogies with the mechanical dimension of goings-on in the everyday world. The Africans Horton studies on the other hand, developed their analogies from the other dimension, that in which agency and the powers of persons and social authority are salient. Analogy with that dimension was also common in European thought right up to the seventeenth century and a good deal of it persists in the form of superstition. Horton thinks that we got it right and he thinks it undeniable that we got it right. About the natural order, as distinct from the social or the cultural order, western science has hit on the right path. Horton makes the intriguing suggestion, however, that in the understanding of social relations and even in the area of psychomatic illness, the Africans may have an edge on us. That is, their social psychology may actually be, in significant ways, subtler than ours, due to profound and long term reflection on the nature of agency and interpersonal relations. Assessment of this striking suggestion would depend on more knowledge of Horton's field-work than I possess; and it is not necessary to what I am concerned with here.

So here we have an explanation of why people have beliefs about spirits and other agencies that account for crop failures, the efficacy of weapons, etc. The explanation makes it rational on their part to have such beliefs. And our sympathy and concern for them need not be diminished if we go on to say that, in such beliefs, they are mistaken.

One may wonder at this point, in relation to the natural order, what is so powerful about western science. With many recent thinkers on the topic, I would say it is that anyone will acknowledge that something has been got right when a way of describing things or processes in nature facilitates the reproduction of them, from the growing of crops to the splitting of atoms. Concomitantly, there is prevention in many cases, and the prevention of disease and crop failure is so obviously desirable that western technology was bound to make an enormous impact, both for good and not so good. Traditional people may have rejected too readily some of their own technology. After all, Horton's view does not make them ignoramuses in the mechanical dimension of

everyday life. Any theory which did would fail to appreciate how rich stone-age metaphysics is. These points should not be taken as implying that science is interested only in controlling things. That would be an insult to the contemplative, wondering strain in the lives of thinkers such as Newton, Faraday and Einstein, just to mention three. And also an insult to the non-utilitarian curiosity about their environment which many traditional peoples exhibit.

Contemplation and wonder need not abate when power comes on the scene. The contemplative strand makes no sense at all if a scientific theory is just a recipe for manipulation, either of nature or of the scientific and broader community. Contemplation makes no sense if theories are just tricks by professional scientists to gain prestige, authority among graduate students, or government grants. The fashionable view of the content of theory as so much steam puffing out of the engines of power and prestige must face the notoriously embarrassing question: what engine is that view of things itself puffing out of? This is not to deny that scientists may be corrupt in the ways indicated. Indeed, they may be corrupt and produce good theories, though it is to be hoped that this is rare.

Let us return to the problem of the God's-eye view. We want plain truth and independent reality without God. We want a conception of how things would be and would have been anyway, as it seems useful to put it. That goes with our understanding of what knowledge is.

Let me begin with a model which will work as an analogy. At first, it may strike the reader as too much like the earlier example of the blind men and the elephant. But presently I will say why it is different and how that difference is relevant to what I shall call the 'absolute conception'. The model is one which exploits our understanding of perspective in the literal sense of that word and then extends the idea. Suppose a cube to be suspended in mid-air, with people in all directions and at varying distances from it. Suppose the people to be asked to say how things look to them. They have not been told in advance what shaped body is there and they are asked to say how it looks to them from where they are. It is useful to think of cameras stationed at all the places where people are located. The result will be a set of representations. The diversity of representations will be large. But on the assumption that there is

a cube suspended as it is, all the representations can be ordered into a series. And the series will be coherent and consistent. Notice that we do not have to think of the assumption that it is a cube that is there as coming from outside. One of the participants, or a number of them, might very well try that hypothesis.

We can complicate the model, thus bringing it nearer to the actual problem about diversity of thoughts about reality, by thinking of the viewers as varying in the excellence of their eyesight. We can even suppose some of them to be members of cults that find the cube repellent, but the 3-d equivalent of a trapezoid divine. We can suppose some views to be interfered with by mist or tricky light. This will produce a complex diversity within the series of representations. And now the task of reconciling the representations will have something more like the difficulty the thing it is a model for has. This more complicated model helps us to see why we need a theory of error. After all, a mere diversity of literally understood perspectives is not even a difficulty in principle. Cubes suspended in mid-air and seen from different distances and angles had better look different. It would be all the participants saying the same thing that would be problematic.

What we are after in these cases is the relating of a lot of representations to each other in a way that renders their diversity intelligible and explicable. But we have not only the cube but all those representations of it to worry about. We do not want to say that the representations are somehow outside the world, hanging about in some ethereal mind-substance. These representations—we might say these representings—are themselves part of the very reality we are concerned with. We want to have a conception of reality which includes not only what is being represented, the cube, but also the episodes in the lives of people which are thoughts of representations of the cube. We are, as it were, moving up a level, to representations of representations. For what goes on at the first level will produce inconsistency. And that is where we need a theory of error. After all, even though some of the episodes of representation are mistaken, even these will still be occurrences within the world. For part of the point I want to make here, let me refer again to the English philosopher, Bernard Williams:

It is an important feature of modern science that it

contributes to explaining how creatures with our origins and characteristics can understand a world with properties that this same science ascribes to the world. The achievements of evolutionary biology and the neurological sciences are not vacuous.⁵

Williams is also my source for the expression 'absolute conception' which I introduced a while ago. The idea is maximum avoidance of perspective. We can describe a cube as a distribution of matter in space-time, and such a description will be unconcerned with how the thing looks or how, e.g., its corners would feel to any sentient being. And, crucially, this perspective-free description will significantly contribute to the explanation of the perspective-laden occurrences which must also be part of the story. A more complete explanation of these perspective-laden facts will contain much that is perspectival; for we are dealing with human psychology, with human society and human language. The absolute conception, as Williams offers it to us, does not secure the idea of how things would have been anyway for just any way things are. There is a long tradition, stemming from the Greeks, recognizing a distinction between properties of things such as their size, shape, motion and location and, on the other hand, their colour, taste, sound and smell. These latter are humanly perspectival. Modern science may force us to acknowledge more that is perspectival than we would have dreamed of centuries ago. For example, a bowling ball, blown up to the size of the earth with its surface unevenness kept intact would, I am told, have heights exceeding Everest. And that plays hell with words like 'smooth' and 'rough'.

So there are nonperspectival and perspectival materials to be related to each other. But the fundamental idea is, I hope, clear. Not a God's-eye view from somewhere else; rather the exploitation within our inquiring activity of those maximally non-perspectival materials which modern science has developed, especially the disciplines which have been able to use mathematical technique and its applications in explanation.

Because it is we human beings in our humanity which cause perspective in the sense of the term we are now using (one which

⁵Williams, 139-40.

obviously is a much extended use from that of different perspectives on a cube), the theory of representing that we need will be, in large part, a theory about linguistic activity. It seems implausible to suppose that theory here will just be a matter of how human bodies are stimulated by interrelations to other bodies when the stimuli are not conceived of as representations, but as only vocal blasts, noises emitted from apertures in human heads. I would myself reject the vision of language that goes with much modern materialism, which is that of a wheelbarrow for carrying the sands of thought from one skull to another; or, to use an image Wittgenstein used to criticize this view of language and thought, a drug whose purpose is to get you in the same state of mind that I am in.

The investigation of understanding and representation is, in part, investigation of the notion of truth itself, and of the problematic notion of meaning, which is probably, though not certainly, best elucidated in terms of truth. Such an investigation does not belong to the physical sciences. The investigation belongs, without at all being in conflict with the study of the human brain, to philosophy and to those inquiries that concern themselves with the communicative and cultural practices of human beings.

I would like to give Aristotle, who said truth was when things are as you say they are and falsity when they are not, the last word; which I invite you to hear as an extended metaphor:

There must be something which is unmoved outside an animal, supported against which the animal which is moved moves. For if that which supports the animal is always to be giving way (as when tortoises walk on mud or men on sand), then there will be no progression—that is no stepping forward, if the ground shifts, nor flying nor swimming, if the air or the sea should not offer some resistance. And that which offers resistance must be other than that which is moved, and wholly different from the whole of it and what is thus unmoved must be no part of what is moved. If not, it will not be moved.⁶

⁶Aristotle, *De Motu Animalium*, 698^{b15-21}, quoted in David Wiggins, 'What Would be a Substantial Theory of Truth', *Philosophical Subjects: Essays Presented to P. F. Strawson*, Oxford, 1980, p. 209.