

Absolute and Relative, Umberto Eco

Absolute and Relative

IF YOU ARE HERE this evening in spite of the terroristic title of my talk, that means you are prepared for anything—though a serious lecture about Absolute and Relative ought to last at least two and a half thousand years, as long as the debate itself. The title of this year's Milanesiana festival is "Conflict and the Absolute," and naturally I have been wondering what these words mean. It's the most basic question any philosopher must ask.

Since I haven't been to the festival's other events, I did a search on the Internet for pictures by artists who refer to the Absolute, and there I found Magritte's *La connaissance absolue*, as well as various works by others I needn't name—*Painting the Absolute*, *Quête d'absolu*, *In Search of the Absolute*, *Marcheur d'absolu*—and several advertisements like the one for Absolut vodka. The Absolute, it seems, is selling well.

The notion of Absolute also brought to mind one of its opposites, namely, the notion of Relative, which has become rather fashionable ever since leading churchmen, and even some secular thinkers, began a campaign against what they call relativism. It's a term that has become derogatory, used for almost terroristic ends, like Berlusconi's use of the word communism. But here I will limit myself to confounding your ideas rather than clarifying them, suggesting how each of these terms—depending on the circumstances—means many different things, and that they shouldn't be used as baseball bats.

According to dictionaries on philosophy, Absolute means anything that is absolute, free from ties or limits, something that does not depend on something else, which has its own inherent reason, cause, and explanation. Something therefore very similar to God, in the sense that he describes himself as "I am who I am" (*ego sum qui sum*), to which everything else is contingent and therefore does not have its own inherent cause and—even if it happens to exist—it could just as well not exist, or not exist tomorrow, as is the case with the solar system or with each one of us.

As we are contingent beings, and therefore destined to die, we desperately need to think there is something to fasten onto that will not perish, in other words, an Absolute. But this Absolute can be transcendent, like the biblical divinity, or immanent. Without discussing Spinoza or Giordano Bruno, with the idealist philosophers we ourselves enter to become part of the Absolute, since the Absolute (for example, in Schelling) would be the indissoluble unity of the conscious being and of such things that were once considered extraneous to the individual, such as nature or the world. In the Absolute we identify with God, we are part of something that is not yet fully complete: a process, a development, infinite growth, and infinite self-definition. But if this is how things are, we can never define or know the Absolute since we are part of it, and trying to understand it would be like Baron Munchausen pulling himself out of the swamp by his own hair.

The alternative, then, is to think of the Absolute as something that we are not, and that is elsewhere, not dependent on us, like the god of Aristotle, who thinks of himself as thinking, and who, according to Joyce in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, "remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails." Back in the fifteenth century, in fact, Nicholas of Cusa in *De docta ignorantia* wrote, "Deus est absolutus."

But since God is Absolute, said Nicholas, he can never fully be reached. The

relationship between our knowledge and God is the same as that between a polygon and the circumference into which it is drawn: as the sides of the polygon gradually increase, it comes closer and closer to the circumference, but the polygon and the circumference will never be the same. God, said Nicholas, is like a circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.

Is it possible to imagine a circle with its center everywhere and no circumference? Obviously not. And yet we can describe it, which is what I am doing now, and each of you understand that I'm talking about something to do with geometry, except that it is geometrically impossible and unimaginable. There is therefore a difference between whether or not we can imagine a thing and whether we can nevertheless name it, give it some meaning.

What does it mean to use a word and give it a meaning? It means many things.

A. To have instructions for recognizing such an object or situation or event. For example, the meaning of the word dog or stumble includes a series of descriptions, also in the form of images, for recognizing a dog and distinguishing it from a cat, and differentiating a stumble from a jump.

B. To have a definition or classification. Definitions and classifications are given to a dog but also to events or situations such as voluntary manslaughter, as opposed to involuntary manslaughter.

C. To know about other properties, facts, or encyclopedic details of a given entity. For example, I know that dogs are faithful and good for hunting or guarding; I know that a conviction for voluntary manslaughter can lead to a particular sentence of imprisonment, and so forth.

D. Where possible, to have instructions on how to produce the corresponding object or event. I know what vase means since I know how a vase is produced even though I am not a potter—and the same is true for terms like decapitation or sulfuric acid. Whereas for a word like brain, I know meanings A and B, and some of the properties in C, but I do not know how to produce one.

A magnificent case in which I know properties A, B, C, and D is offered by C. S. Peirce, who defines lithium as follows:

If you look into a textbook of chemistry for a definition of lithium, you may be told that it is that element whose atomic weight is 7 very nearly. But if the author has a more logical mind he will tell you that if you search among minerals that are vitreous, translucent, grey or white, very hard, brittle and insoluble, for one which imparts a crimson tinge to an un luminous flame, this mineral being triturated with lime or witherite rats-bane, and then fused, can be partly dissolved in muriatic acid; and if this solution be evaporated and the residue be extracted with sulphuric acid, and duly purified, it can be converted by ordinary methods into a chloride, which being obtained in the solid state, fused, and electrolyzed with half a dozen powerful cells, will yield a globule of pinkish silvery metal that will float on gasoline; and the material of that is a specimen of lithium. The peculiarity of this definition—or rather this precept that is more serviceable than a definition—is that it tells you what the word lithium denotes by prescribing what you are to do in order to gain a perceptual acquaintance with the object of the word. (Collected Papers, volume 2, paragraph 330)

This is a good example of a complete and satisfactory representation of the meaning of a term. But other expressions have a hazy and imprecise meaning—and lesser degrees of clarity. For example, even the expression "the highest even number" has a meaning, since we know it would have to have the property of being divisible by two (and we would therefore be able to distinguish it from the highest odd number), and we also have a vague instruction on how to generate it, in the sense that we

can imagine counting higher and higher numbers, separating odd from even . . .

Except that we realize we will never get there, as in a dream wherein we think we can grasp hold of something without ever managing to do so. But an expression like "a circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere" doesn't suggest any rule for producing a corresponding object. Not only does it fail to support any definition, but it frustrates every effort to imagine one, apart from making us feel dizzy. An expression like Absolute has a definition that is, all in all, tautological (a thing is absolute when it is not contingent; it is contingent when it is not absolute), but it does not suggest descriptions, definitions, and classifications; we cannot think of any instructions for producing anything corresponding to it, nor do we know any of its properties, except to suppose that it has everything and it is probably what Saint Anselm of Canterbury described as *id cuius nihil majus cogitari possit* (something beyond which nothing greater can be thought), which brings to mind the saying attributed to the pianist Arthur Rubinstein: "Do I believe in God? No, what I believe in is something much greater." What we can imagine at most in trying to conceive of God is the classic night in which all cows are black.

It is certainly possible not only to name but also to represent visually what we cannot conceive. But these images do not represent the unimaginable: they simply invite us to try to picture something unimaginable, and then frustrate our expectation. What we experience in trying to understand them is that very sense of impotence expressed by Dante in the last canto of Paradise (no. 33, lines 82-96, translated by Mark Musa), when he wants to describe to us what he saw at the moment when he fixed his gaze on the Divinity, but all he can say is that he cannot tell us, and resorts to the intriguing metaphor of a book with an infinite number of pages:

O grace abounding and allowing me to dare
to fix my gaze on the Eternal Light,
so deep my vision was consumed in It!

I saw how it contains within its depths
all things bound in a single book by love,
of which creation is the scattered leaves:

how substance, accident, and their relation
were fused in such a way that what I now
describe is but a glimmer of that Light.

I know I saw the universal form,
the fusion of all things, for I can feel,
while speaking now, my heart leap up in joy.

One instant brings me more forgetfulness
than five and twenty centuries brought the quest,
that stunned Neptune when he saw Argo's keel.

And the sense of impotence is no different when expressed by Leopardi seeking to describe infinity ("my mind sinks in this immensity: / and foundering is sweet in such a sea").¹

This is why it is artists who have come here, to this festival, to talk about the Absolute. Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite wrote that, since the Divine One is so distant from us that he can be neither understood nor reached, he must be spoken of through metaphors and allusions, but above all, as an indication of the paucity of our language, through negative symbols, contrasting expressions: "And they extol It also with names of the most remote things, sweet-smelling ointment, cornerstone, and they also clothe It in the form of a wild beast, attaching to It the

characteristics of a lion and a panther, and saying that It will be like a leopard and an angry bear" (Celestial Hierarchy, chapter 2).

Certain naive philosophers have suggested that poets alone can describe Being or the Absolute; but in fact they express only the indefinite. The poet Mallarmé spent his life trying to express an "orphyic explanation of the earth": "I say: a flower! and out of the oblivion where my voice relegates all context, insofar as something other than known calyxes is musically raised, an idea itself and gentle, the absence of all fragrance (Crise de vers, 1895).

This passage, in truth, is untranslatable. It tells us only that a word is chosen, alone in the white space that surrounds it, and it inevitably unleashes the totality of the non-said, but in the form of an absence. In fact, "to name an object, this means suppressing three-fourths of the enjoyment of the poem, which involves working it out little by little: to suggest, that is the dream" (Sur l'évolution littéraire: Réponse à l'enquête de Jules Huret, 1891).

Mallarmé pursued this dream throughout his life, but it eluded him. Dante had taken such elusion for granted from the very beginning, well aware that it is diabolic pride to claim that infinity can be expressed in finite terms, and he had avoided this inadequacy of poetry by making poetry out of such an inadequacy: his is not poetry that seeks to say the unsayable, but rather poetry about the impossibility of saying it.

It should be remembered that Dante was a believer (as were Pseudo-Dionysius and Nicholas of Cusa). Can you believe in an Absolute and claim it is unimaginable and indefinable? Certainly, provided the impossible thought of the Absolute is replaced by a feeling of the Absolute and therefore by faith, as "the substance of those hoped-for things and argument for things we have not seen" (Dante, Paradise, canto 24, lines 64-65). Elie Wiesel, during this festival, recalled the words of Kafka: that it is possible to talk with God, but not about God. If the Absolute is philosophically a night in which all cows are black, then for the mystic who, like John of the Cross, perceives it as a "dark night" ("O night that guided me / O night more lovely than the dawn"), it is a source of ineffable feeling. John of the Cross expresses his mystical experience through poetry: in the face of the indescribability of the Absolute, we may feel reassured by the fact that this unsatisfied tension can be materially resolved in a finished form. This enabled Keats, in his "Ode on a Grecian Urn," to see Beauty as a substitute for the experience of the Absolute: "'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,'—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."

And that is fine for those who have decided to follow an aesthetic religion. But John of the Cross would have told us that it was only his mystical experience of the Absolute that assured him of the only possible truth. This has led many men of faith to the conviction that those philosophers who reject the possibility of knowing the Absolute are automatically rejecting every criterion of truth, or by rejecting such a thing as an absolute criterion of truth, they are rejecting the possibility of experiencing the Absolute. But it is one thing to say that a philosophy rejects the possibility of knowing the Absolute, and another thing to say that it rejects every criterion of truth—even that relating to the contingent world. Are truth and experience of the Absolute then so inseparable?

Confidence that something is true is fundamentally important for the survival of human beings. If we were unable to consider that what others tell us is either true or false, society would not be possible. We wouldn't even be able to exclude the possibility that a box with ASPIRIN written on it didn't in fact contain strychnine.

A specular theory of truth is that it is *adaequatio rei et intellectus*, as if our

mind were a mirror that, provided it works properly and is not distorted or misted, must truly reflect things as they are. It is a theory supported, for example, by Thomas Aquinas, but also by Lenin in *Materialism and Empirio-criticism* (1909), and since Aquinas could not have been a Leninist, it ought to follow that Lenin was a neo-Thomist—without, of course, realizing it. In reality, other than in states of ecstasy, we are obliged to say what our mind reflects.

Nevertheless, we define as true (or false) not the things themselves but the assertions we make about how things are. Alfred Tarski's famous definition says that the statement "Snow is white" is true if, and only if, snow is white. Let us leave aside for the moment the whiteness of snow, which is more and more open to dispute, and consider another example: the statement "It is raining" (set between quotation marks) is true only if outside it is raining (without quotation marks).

The first part of the definition (between quotation marks) is a verbal statement and represents nothing other than itself, but the second part should express how things in fact are. Nevertheless, something that ought to be a state of things is expressed once again in words. To avoid this linguistic mediation we ought to say that "It is raining" (between quotation marks) is true if there is that thing there (and, without saying anything, we point to the rain that is falling). But although this way of indicating the evidence of the senses can be used with rain, it would be more difficult to do the same with the statement "Earth revolves around the sun" (since, if anything, the senses would tell us quite the opposite).

To establish whether the statement corresponds to a particular set of circumstances, it is necessary to have interpreted the word rain and to have formed a definition of it. It needs to have been established that (a) to talk of rain it is not enough to feel drops of water falling from above (as there could be someone watering flowers on a balcony above), (b) the drops must be of a certain consistency (otherwise we would talk of mist or frost), (c) the sensation must be continuous (otherwise we would say it was trying to rain but had come to nothing), and so forth. Having decided this, we have to pass on to an empirical test, which in the case of rain can be done by anyone (all we have to do is hold out our hand and trust our senses).

But in the case of the statement "Earth revolves around the sun," the ways for testing it are more complex. What meaning does the word true have for each of the following statements?

1. I have a stomachache.
2. Last night I dreamed that Mother Teresa appeared to me.
3. Tomorrow it will certainly rain.
4. The world will end in 2536.
5. There is life after death.

Statements 1 and 2 express a subjective fact, but the stomachache is a clear and irrepressible sensation, whereas when I recall a dream I had last night, I may not be sure the memory is accurate. What is more, the two statements cannot be directly verified by other people. A doctor would, of course, have certain ways of checking whether I actually have gastritis or whether I'm a hypochondriac, but a psychoanalyst would have more difficulty if someone tells him she has seen Mother Teresa in a dream, since she could easily be lying.

Statements 3, 4, and 5 are not directly verifiable. But whether it will rain tomorrow can be verified tomorrow, whereas whether the world will end in 2536 is rather more of a problem (and here we distinguish between the reliability of a weather forecaster and that of a prophet). The difference between statements 4 and 5 is that 4 will become true or false in 2536, whereas 5 will continue to remain empirically undecidable per saecula saeculorum.

Now let's consider these statements:

6. The sum of the angles of a triangle is 180 degrees.
7. Water boils at 100 degrees Celsius.
8. The apple is an angiosperm.
9. Napoleon died on May 5, 1821.
10. We reach the coast following the path of the sun.
11. Jesus is the Son of God.
12. The correct interpretation of the holy scriptures is decided by the teachings of the church.
13. An embryo is already a human being and has a soul.

Some of these statements are true or false according to the rules we have stipulated: the sum of the angles of a triangle is 180 degrees only in the context of a Euclidean system of postulates; that water boils at a hundred degrees at standard atmospheric pressure, that is, at sea level, is true not only if we accept a law of physics elaborated through inductive generalization, but also on the basis of the definition of degrees centigrade; an apple is an angiosperm only on the basis of certain rules of botanical classification.

Some require us to trust facts ascertained by others before us: we believe it is true that Napoleon died on May 5, 1821, because we accept what the history books tell us, but we must always recognize the possibility that an unpublished document discovered tomorrow in the British naval archives might show that he died on another date. Sometimes for utilitarian reasons we adopt an idea as true that we know to be false: for example, to find our way in the desert, we behave as if it were true that the sun moves from east to west.

As for statements of a religious nature, we shall not say they are undecidable. If the evidence of the Gospels is accepted as historical, the proof of the divinity of Christ would be accepted as such by a Protestant. But this would not be so for the teachings of the Catholic Church. The statement regarding embryos having a soul depends entirely on stipulating the meanings of expressions such as life, human, and soul. Thomas Aquinas, for example (see the essay "No Embryos in Paradise"), claimed that, like animals, they had only a sensitive soul and therefore were not yet human beings equipped with a rational soul, and would not participate in the resurrection of the flesh. Today he would be accused of heresy, but at that very civilized time they made him a saint.

It is therefore a matter of deciding each time which criteria for truth we are using.

It is on the very recognition of various degrees of verifiability or acceptability of a truth that our sense of tolerance is based. I may be obliged, from a scientific and educational point of view, to fail a student who claims that water boils at ninety degrees, like the right angle—as was apparently once suggested in an exam—but even a Christian ought to accept that for some people there is no other god than Allah and Muhammad is his prophet (as we likewise ask Muslims to do for Christians concerning Christian doctrine).

And yet, in light of recent controversies, it seems that this distinction between different criteria of truth, typical of modern thought and in particular of logical scientific thought, produces a relativism that is seen as a historical malaise of contemporary culture, which rejects all idea of truth. But what do anti-relativists mean by relativism?

Some encyclopedias of philosophy tell us there is a cognitive relativism, by which objects can be known only under conditions determined by human faculties. But in this sense Kant would also have been a relativist, and he certainly didn't reject the possibility of setting out laws of universal value—and what is more, he believed in God, if only on moral grounds.

Yet in another philosophical encyclopedia we find that relativism means "every idea that does not admit absolute principles in the field of knowledge and action." But it is a different matter to reject absolute principles in the sphere of knowledge or the sphere of action. There are people who are prepared to assert that the statement "Pedophilia is evil" is a truth relative only to a particular system of values, seeing that it was or is accepted or tolerated in certain cultures, but who are nevertheless prepared to assert that the Pythagorean theorem must be valid for all times and all cultures.

No one could seriously include Einstein's theory of relativity under the label of relativism. To say that a measurement depends on the conditions of movement of the observer is regarded as a valid principle for every human being in every time and place.

Relativism, as a philosophical doctrine as such, came into existence with nineteenth-century positivism, together with the claim that the Absolute is unknowable and, at most, is a movable limit of ongoing scientific research. But no positivist has ever claimed it is not possible to arrive at scientific truths that are objectively verifiable and valid for all.

A philosophical position that, on a cursory reading of the textbooks, might be defined as relativistic is so-called holism, according to which every statement is true or false (and acquires a meaning) only within an organic system of assumptions, a given conceptual scheme, or, as others have said, within a given scientific paradigm. A holist claims (rightly) that the notion of space has a different meaning in the Aristotelian system than it does in the Newtonian system, so that the two systems are incommensurable, and that one scientific system is as valid as the other to the extent to which it succeeds in explaining a series of phenomena.

But the holists are the first to tell us there are systems that cannot actually explain a series of phenomena, and that some are far better because they succeed better than the others in doing so. Thus even the holist, in his apparent tolerance, has to deal with matters that require explanation and, even when he doesn't say so, follows what I would call a minimal realism: the belief that things exist or behave in a certain way. Perhaps we will never understand it, but if we don't believe it exists, our research would make no sense, and it would make no sense to go on trying out new systems to explain the world.

The holist is usually said to be a pragmatist, but here again it is better not to be over-hasty in reading the textbooks: the true pragmatist, such as Peirce, did not say that ideas are true only if they prove to be effective, but that they show their effectiveness when they are true. When he supported fallibilism, namely, the possibility that all of our ideas could always be revoked in case of doubt, at the same time he stated that through the continual correction of its knowledge the human community carries forward "the torch of truth."

What gives rise to a suspicion of relativism in these theories is the fact that the various systems are incommensurable. Certainly the Ptolemaic system is incommensurable with the Copernican system, and only in the first do the notions of epicycle and deferent assume a precise meaning. But the fact that the two systems are incommensurable does not mean they are not comparable, and it is precisely by comparing them that we understand what are the celestial phenomena that Ptolemy explained with the notions of epicycle and deferent, and we understand that they were the same phenomena that the Copernicans wanted to explain according to a different conceptual scheme.

The holism of philosophers is similar to linguistic holism, wherein a given

language, through its semantic and syntactic structure, is said to impose a particular vision of the world in which the speaker is, so to speak, a prisoner. Benjamin Lee Whorf, for example, pointed out that there is a tendency in Western languages to consider many events as objects, and an expression such as "three days" is grammatically equivalent to "three apples"; whereas some Native American languages focus on the process—they see events whereas we see things. For this reason, the Hopi language would be better equipped than English for defining certain phenomena studied by modern physics.

And Whorf also pointed out that the Eskimos have four different words for snow, depending on its texture, and they would therefore see different things where we see only one. Leaving aside the fact that this suggestion has been disputed, a Western skier knows nevertheless how to distinguish between various textures of snow, and it would be quite enough for an Eskimo to meet us to understand perfectly well that when we say "snow" for the four things that he supposedly describes in different ways, we are behaving in the same way as a Frenchman who uses the word *glace* for ice, glacier, ice cream, mirror, and window glass—and the Frenchman isn't such a prisoner of his own language that he shaves in the morning looking at himself in an ice cream.

Finally, apart from the fact that not all contemporary thought accepts the holistic approach, holism follows the line of those perspective-based theories of knowledge according to which reality can be given different perspectives and each perspective matches one aspect of it, even if it doesn't exhaust its unfathomable richness. There is nothing relativistic in claiming that reality is always defined from a particular point of view (which does not mean subjective and individual), nor does the assertion that we see it always and only under a certain description stop us from believing and hoping that what we picture is always the same thing.

Alongside cognitive relativism, the encyclopedias refer to cultural relativism. First Montaigne, then Locke, had begun to understand, at a time when Europe was coming into more significant contact with other peoples, that different cultures not only have different languages or mythologies but also different conceptions of morality (all reasonable in their own context). It seems indisputable that certain primitive people in the forests of New Guinea, even today, regard cannibalism as legitimate and commendable (while an Englishman would not), and it seems similarly indisputable that certain countries treat adulterous women in a manner different from ours. But, first, recognizing the variety of cultures does not mean denying that certain types of conduct are more universal (for example, a mother's love for her children, or the fact that people generally use the same facial expressions to express disgust or delight), and second, it does not automatically imply that this recognition is tantamount to moral relativism, the idea that since there are no ethical values valid for all cultures, we can freely adapt our behavior to fit our personal tastes or interests. Recognizing that another culture is different, and must be respected in this, does not mean abdicating our own cultural identity. How then has the specter of relativism come to be built up as a standard ideology, the canker of contemporary civilization?

There is a secular critique of relativism, directed mainly against the excesses of cultural relativism. Marcello Pera, who presents his arguments in a book titled *Senza radici* (Without Roots, 2004), written jointly with the then Cardinal Ratzinger, is well aware that there are differences between cultures, but claims there are certain values of Western culture (such as democracy, the separation between church and state, and liberalism) that have proved superior to those of other cultures. Now, Western culture has good reason to regard itself as more developed than others in terms of these ideas, but in claiming that such superiority ought to be universally evident, Pera uses a dubious argument.

He says, "If members of culture B freely show they prefer culture A and not vice

versa—if, for example, there is a migrant influx from Islamic countries to the West and not vice versa—then it is reasonable to believe that A is better than B.” The argument is weak when we recall that the Irish in the nineteenth century did not immigrate en masse to the United States because they preferred that Protestant country to their beloved Catholic Ireland, but because at home they were dying of starvation as a result of potato blight. Pera’s rejection of cultural relativism is dictated by the concern that tolerance for other cultures degenerates into acquiescence, and that the West is giving way under the pressure of immigration to the demands of outside cultures. Pera’s problem is not the defense of the Absolute but the defense of the West.

Giovanni Jervis, in his book *Contro il relativismo* (2005), gives us a portrait of a relativist—a strange blending of a late Romantic, postmodern thinker of Nietzschean origin with a follower of New Age thinking—that seems to be constructed to support his arguments. This person’s relativism appears irrational, unscientific. Jervis denounces a reactionary quality in cultural relativism: to claim that every form of society is to be respected and justified, and even idealized, encourages the segregation of populations. Moreover, those cultural anthropologies that, rather than seeking to identify a continuity of biological characteristics and behavior between populations, have instead emphasized their diversity due to culture alone—giving too much importance to cultural factors and ignoring biological ones—and have indirectly supported once again the primacy of the spirit over matter, thereby supporting the arguments of religious thought.

It is therefore not clear whether relativism is contrary to the religious spirit or whether it is a disguised form of religious thought. If only the anti-relativists would agree among themselves. But the fact is that different people mean different things when they talk about relativism.

For some Christians there is a double fear: that cultural relativism necessarily leads to moral relativism, and claiming there are different ways of verifying the truth of a proposition casts doubt on the possibility of recognizing an absolute truth.

On cultural relativism, Cardinal Ratzinger, in various doctrinal notes of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, saw a close relationship between cultural relativism and ethical relativism, regretting that various people claim ethical pluralism to be the condition for democracy.

Cultural relativism does not, as I have already said, imply ethical relativism. Cultural relativism allows a Papuan from New Guinea to put a spike through his nose and yet, by virtue of an ethical principle that our group does not hold in question, it does not allow an adult (not even a priest) to abuse a seven-year-old child.

As for the contrast between relativism and truth, Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical *Fides et ratio*, stated that “abandoning the investigation of being, modern philosophical research has concentrated instead upon human knowing. Rather than make use of the human capacity to know the truth, modern philosophy has preferred to accentuate the ways in which this capacity is limited and conditioned. This has given rise to different forms of agnosticism and relativism that have led philosophical research to lose its way in the shifting sands of widespread skepticism.”

And Ratzinger, in a homily of 2005, said that “a dictatorship of relativism is being established, which recognizes nothing definite or allows as a single lone measure the personal self and its wishes. Yet we have another measure: the Son of God, the true man” (“Missa pro eligendo romano pontefice,” April 18, 2005).

Here are two opposing notions of truth, one as a semantic property of what is said

and the other as a property of divinity. This is due to the fact that both notions of truth appear in the holy scriptures (at least according to the translations through which we know them). Truth is sometimes used as a correspondence between something said and the way in which things are ("Verily, verily, I say unto you," in the sense of "That's truly what I'm saying") and sometimes truth is an intrinsic property of divinity ("I am the way, the truth, and the life").

This led many fathers of the church to positions that Ratzinger would now define as relativistic, since they said it was not important to worry about whether a given statement on the world corresponded to the way in which things were, provided it focused attention on the only truth worthy of such a name—the message of salvation. Saint Augustine, when faced with the dispute over whether the earth was round or flat, seemed inclined to think it was round, but recalled that such knowledge did not help to save the soul, and therefore took the view that in practice one was much the same as the other.

It is difficult to find among Cardinal Ratzinger's many writings a definition of truth that does not invoke the truth revealed and embodied in Christ. But if the truth of faith is truth revealed, why contrast it with the truth of philosophers and scientists, which is a concept of another sort, with other purposes and character? It would be enough to follow Thomas Aquinas, who, in *De aeternitate mundi*, knowing perfectly well that to support Averroës's view about the eternity of the world was a terrible heresy, accepted through faith that the world was created, but admitted that from the cosmological point of view it could not be rationally demonstrated either that it was created or that it was eternal. For Ratzinger, however, in his contribution to a book entitled *Il monoteismo* (2002), the essence of all modern philosophical and scientific thought is as follows:

Truth as such—so it is thought—cannot be known, but we can gradually advance only by small steps of establishing what is true and false. There is a growing tendency to replace the concept of truth with that of consensus. But this means that man becomes detached from the truth and thus also from the distinction between good and evil, submitting completely to the principle of the majority . . . Man plans and "builds" the world without pre-set criteria and thus necessarily exceeds the concept of human dignity, so that even human rights become problematic. In such a conception of reason and rationality there is no space left for the concept of God.

This extrapolation, which passes from a prudent concept of scientific truth as an object of continual investigation and correction, to a declaration of the destruction of all human dignity, is unsustainable. That is, unsustainable unless all modern thought is identified with this line of reasoning: there are no facts but only interpretations, which leads to the declaration that existence has no basis and therefore that God is dead, and finally that if there is no God, then anything is possible.

Now, Ratzinger and the anti-relativists are, generally speaking, neither fantasists nor conspiracy theorists. Quite simply, the anti-relativists whom I shall describe as moderate or critical identify in their enemy that specific form of extreme relativism whereby facts do not exist, only interpretations; those anti-relativists I shall call radicals extend this claim to the whole of modern thought, committing an error that—at least when I was at university—would have failed them in their history of philosophy exam.

The idea that there are no facts but only interpretations began with Nietzsche and is explained very clearly in "On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense" (1873). Since nature has thrown away the key, the mind works on conceptual fictions that it calls truth. We believe we are talking about trees, colors, snow, and flowers, but they are metaphors that do not correspond to the original entities. When faced with the multiplicity of individual leaves, there is no primordial "leaf," the model upon

which "all leaves were perhaps woven, sketched, measured, colored, curled, and painted—but by incompetent hands." A bird or insect perceives the world in a different way than we do, and it is quite meaningless to say which perception is more accurate, because to do so we would need to have the criterion of "correct perception," which does not exist. Nature "knows no forms and no concepts, nor even any species, but only an X which for us remains inaccessible and indefinable." Truth then becomes "a movable host of metaphors, metonyms, anthropomorphisms," of poetical inventions that have become rigid knowledge, "illusions whose illusory nature has been forgotten."

Nietzsche, however, avoids considering two phenomena. One is that, by adjusting to the constraints of our dubious knowledge, we manage to some extent to reckon with nature: when someone has been bitten by a dog, the doctor knows what sort of injection to give, even if he knows nothing about the actual dog that bit the person. The other is that every so often nature compels us to expose our knowledge as illusory and to choose an alternative (which is then the problem of the revolution of cognitive paradigms). Nietzsche is aware of the existence of natural constrictions, which appear to him as "terrible forces" that continually press in upon us, conflicting with our "scientific" truths.

But he refuses to conceptualize them, sensing that it was to escape from them that we built our conceptual armor, as a defense. Change is possible, not in the form of reorganization, but as a permanent poetic revolution: "If each of us had a different kind of sensuous perception, if we ourselves could only perceive things as, variously, a bird, a worm, or a plant does, or if one of us were to see a stimulus as red, a second person were to see the same stimulus as blue, while a third were ever to hear it as a sound, nobody would ever speak of nature as something conforming to laws." Art (together with myth) therefore "constantly confuses the cells and the classifications of concepts by setting up new translations, metaphors, metonyms; it constantly manifests the desire to shape the given world of the waking human being in ways which are just as multiform, irregular, inconsequential, incoherent, charming and ever-new, as things are in the world of dreams" (translation by Ronald Speirs).

If these are the conditions, the first possibility would be to take refuge in dream as an escape from reality. But Nietzsche himself admits that this dominion of art over life would be deceptive, though supremely enjoyable. Alternatively—and this is the real lesson that posterity has taken from Nietzsche—art can say what it says because it is the Individual himself who accepts whatever definition, since it is unfounded. This fading out of the Individual coincided for Nietzsche with the death of God. This enables some Christians to draw from this proclamation of death a false Dostoyevskian conclusion: if God does not exist, or no longer exists, then all is permissible.

But if there is no heaven or hell, then it is the nonbeliever who realizes it is essential for us to save ourselves on earth through benevolence, understanding, and moral law. Eugenio Lecaldano published a book in 2006 that claimed, with ample evidence, that only by leaving God to one side can we lead a truly moral life. I certainly do not intend to establish here whether Lecaldano and the authors he cites are correct; I wish only to point out that there are those who claim that the absence of God does not eliminate the ethical problem—and Cardinal Martini was well aware of this when he established a teaching post in Milan for nonbelievers. That Cardinal Martini did not then become pope may cast doubt on the divine inspiration of the papal conclave, but such matters go beyond my competence. Elie Wiesel reminded us, a couple of weeks ago, that those who imagined they could do what they liked were not those who thought God was dead, but those who thought they themselves were God (a common failing among dictators, great and small).

In any event, the idea that there are no facts but only interpretations is

certainly not shared by all of contemporary thought, the greater part of which makes these objections to Nietzsche and his followers:

1. If there were no facts but only interpretations, then an interpretation would be an interpretation of what?
2. If interpretations interpret each other, there would still have to have been an object or event in the first place that had spurred us to interpret.
3. If the individual were not definable, we would still have to explain who it is who is talking about it metaphorically, and the problem of saying something true would be shifted from the object to the subject of the knowledge. God might be dead, but not Nietzsche. On what basis do we justify the presence of Nietzsche? By saying he is only a metaphor? But if he is, who says so? And not only that, but even if reality is described using metaphors, in order to be elaborated there have to exist words that have a literal meaning and denote things we understand through experience: I cannot call a table support a "leg" unless I have a nonmetaphorical notion of the human leg, knowing its form and function.
4. And finally, in claiming that there is no longer a criterion for verification between one thing and another, we forget that what is outside us (which Nietzsche calls the terrible forces) every so often opposes our attempts to express that criterion even metaphorically—that, let us say, you cannot cure an inflammation by using the phlogiston theory, whereas you can with antibiotics; and therefore one medical theory is better than another.

Therefore, an Absolute does not perhaps exist, or if it exists it is neither imaginable nor attainable, but natural forces do exist that support or challenge our interpretations. If I interpret an open door painted in trompe l'oeil as a real door and go to walk straight through it, the fact that it is an impenetrable wall will undermine my interpretation.

There must be a way in which things are or behave—and the evidence is not only that all men are mortal, but also that if I try to pass through a wall, I break my nose. Death and that wall are the only form of Absolute about which we can be in no doubt.

The evidence of that wall, which says no when we want to interpret it as if it were not there, will perhaps be a fairly modest criterion of truth for guardians of the Absolute, but, to quote Keats, "that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."

[Lecture given during the Milanesiana festival of literature, music, and cinema, July 9, 2007.]

The End