

Autumn 2020: Issue 3

# NASCENT STATE

The Journal of Intuition

## Magazine

### In this issue...

#### Deception

We rarely spot a deception, because it is not obvious, so we have to rely on gut-feeling to tell us something is missing

#### Relativism

Relativism has been called a 'dangerous philosophy' because it encourages individuals to think for themselves

#### Dogma

Dogma, or the assertion of truth by an authority, prevents anyone from questioning that truth



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# NASCENT STATE

## Magazine



Diamonds are not black

### From the Editor

This autumn issue of Nascent State Magazine is dedicated to the question of truth, or rather our treatment of it.

To that end there are articles on Deception and how to see it; on Dogma, or the false assertion of truth, and on the philosophy of Relativism, which questions whether what we call truth is truth at all. To question truth is not to undermine it, but to bring us closer to understanding its nature.

It was Friedrich Nietzsche who said 'All truth is simple; is that not doubly a lie?'

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There is a halo around the word 'truth'. Our reverence for truth prevents us from questioning whether what we call truth is truth at all. We fear that if we question truth it will undermine its value, and we will be left with nothing more than expedience or raw power to govern life.

What we call truth is often not truth at all. We can mistake our own limited perception for truth. We can also accept the truth of an authority, whether religious or scientific, only to discover this again is not truth. Or perhaps we can learn to accept that we are human, that our view of the world is relative, and then seek to improve our understanding of truth.

This edition of Nascent State Magazine will examine these three aspects of truth; deception, or untruth disguised as truth; dogma, or the false assertion of truth; and relativism, or the acceptance that truth is provisional.

Nascent State Magazine is presented in a PDF, free-to-download format; download it and read it at your leisure. For enquiries, contributions and comments:

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# Deception

and how to see it



The Conjurer by Hieronymus Bosch, c. 1502  
(note the pickpocket behind the spectator)

A raggedy-man crawled through a desert and came upon a well, guarded by a well-keeper. 'Water,' gasped the raggedy-man. The well-keeper looked at the raggedy-man. 'This is my well,' he said, 'If you want water, you must pay me.' He looked down at the raggedy-man in his raggedy clothes. 'What can you pay me?' he said. 'I can teach you something,' said the raggedy-man. The well-keeper smiled. 'What use is knowledge in this desert?' he asked. 'This knowledge is very useful,' said the raggedy-man. The well-keeper narrowed his eyes at the raggedy-man and then drew water from the well and gave it to him. 'Now,' said the well-keeper, 'what can you teach me?' 'How to bluff,' said the raggedy-man.

We think we know what deception is. Deception is lying, and if we are sharp enough to spot a lie, we will avoid deception. And yet there is more to deception than lying; what is more, deception plays a much greater part in life than is generally imagined.

The progress of the modern era is based on the assumption that we are no longer governed by superstition or ignorance. And yet for all the progress of the modern era, deception remains a part of everything we do. It informs all aspects of life, from the personal to the political. It plays

a central role in the media, public relations, suggestive selling, business negotiations and military propaganda. It is employed in the curriculum vitae, personal relationships, public behaviour, reputation, morality and even law.

Rather than eradicating deception, we have incorporated it into modern life by calling it tact, diplomacy, tactics, manners or discretion; indeed, by anything other than its proper name. When Friedrich Nietzsche said 'the lie is a condition of life', he was not wrong.

In spite of the part played in life by deception this we know very little about it. It is not taught in school; we do not study deception as we might study language or mathematics, and so we know little about its function or its mechanics. We leave school largely blind to its nature and we learn how to cope with it in life much as we learn how to cope with relationships and marriage; by trial and by error, by drawing information from often doubtful sources, and by figuring it out as we go. Yet deception can be studied just as any other subject can be studied. What is more, those who understand its mechanics have a distinct advantage over those who don't.



American and Soviet War propaganda posters

There are those who not only understand deception, but practice it in a very deliberate manner, from stage-magicians to pick-pockets, confidence-tricksters, commissioned salesmen and public relations advisors. Indeed, it can be

said that the most useful material for any study of deception comes from those who employ it for profit. The need to earn a living means there is little in the way of theory, or at least little which does not produce a practical outcome.

The moral stigma accompanying deception means that few who practice it will admit it openly. The exception being stage magicians, who by virtue of the entertaining way the skill is employed, are most able to speak most frankly about its mechanics, its practice and its methods. What is more, the stage magician must practice their skill to perfection, whereas even a shoddy thief can steal a wallet.

## The sound of of one hand clapping

The emphasis on 'clapping' prevents us from seeing the word 'of' is used twice

The most commonly used method in stage magic is known as 'misdirection', whereby the attention of the audience is directed away from where the actual trick is occurring into an area of no particular importance. While other aspects of the stage magician's art - equipment, timing, presentation and conviction - are all worthy of study, for the most part they serve the purpose of misdirection.

The author and stage magician, Henning Nelms (1900 - 1986), who wrote *Magic and Showmanship: A Handbook for Conjurers* (1969), made the distinction between two types of misdirection, optical and mental. Of the two, optical misdirection is the easiest to define:

'We use optical misdirection when we fix the eyes of the spectators on one point in order to keep them from watching some other point.' [1]

Optical misdirection works because there is a difference between information and attention. 'Information' is the words on the page and 'attention' is the mind as it passes over them. The stage magician will direct the attention of the audience into an area where nothing particularly

is happening, and - if done skillfully - will make the area indicated look highly interesting. To do this successfully, it is necessary to control the attention of the audience and - most importantly - to do it effortlessly, so the audience doesn't suspect they are being manipulated.

Another example of misdirection can be found in the 'whodunit' or murder mystery novel, the author will introduce a 'red-herring' character early on in the story. The red-herring will bear all the hallmarks of being the real culprit, and all evidence will seem to point to this. Once the red-herring has been firmly established in the mind of the reader, the true culprit will be introduced, usually as an unremarkable character and of no particular consequence. The more the reader focuses on the red-herring, the less they see the real culprit, whose identity is then revealed in the penultimate chapter, more often standing behind the detective, holding a knife.

We might assume that misdirection is only employed in the context of the theatre or the penny crime novel, and yet the practice is actually quite widespread. A commissioned salesman will speak first of the benefits and the costs second, and if a slot machine did not display images of gold and wealth so brightly, no one would play it.



The slot machine or 'one-armed bandit'

An example of this can be found when the practice is employed by pick-pockets. A busy train station is a useful venue. The victim, or 'mark', will be singled out when they are buying a ticket. Once the mark has been chosen, an attractive woman, or a 'shill', will place herself just in front of the

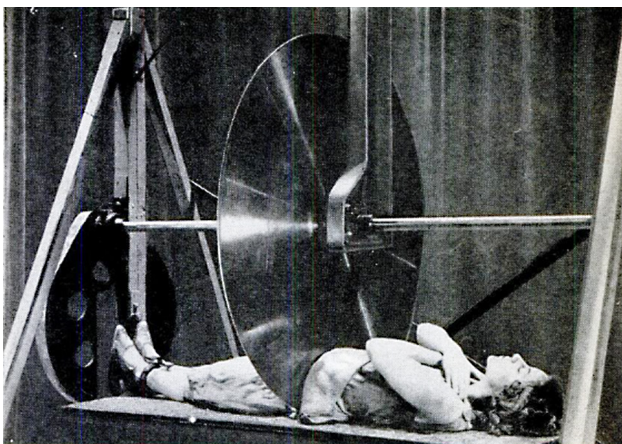


man as they queue to board the train. While they queue, she will begin to engage him in flirtatious conversation. As the queue moves forward, she will choose the right moment to stop abruptly, causing the man to bump into her. She will then giggle seductively, and at that moment the man's wallet will be picked by her accomplice, who will be standing just behind him.

The second form of misdirection outlined by Nelms, known as 'mental misdirection', has many of the same features, but it relies on psychology rather than spatial awareness. With mental misdirection, the expectations of the audience are primed so they interpret what they see wrongly. If a stage magician wants to produce a rabbit from an empty hat, they first have to convince the audience the hat is empty. Nelms describes mental misdirection in the following manner:

'Logic requires a 'frame of reference' or 'context'. A successful conjuring theme baffles logic by providing a false frame of reference.' [2]

A false frame of reference means we do not see the situation for what it is, but rather as it is presented to us. A false frame of reference can convince us that a woman can be sawn in half and then reassembled back into a single whole again. What matters is not what is happening, but how it is perceived.



The sawing illusion by Horace Goldin (1921)

An example of mental misdirection in life can be found in the method employed by the confidence trickster, or 'conman', who will actively take steps to win the confidence of the victim before robbing them. This works by the conman presenting themselves as a 'Good Samaritan' in order to establish a bond of trust between them and the victim.

Another example of mental misdirection can be found in the field of public relations, whereby what is known as the 'first story' plays an important part in the way an event is perceived by the public. If a politician is about to be exposed by a newspaper for having an affair, he will be advised to come forward first, before the newspaper publishes it, admit it openly and apologize without reservation. If he does so, then any further revelations will appear like heaping blame on a humbled man. If he does not do so, then any attempt to justify or explain his actions will look like the denials of a guilty man. In this way, the 'first story' sets the frame of reference.



The headline as a frame of reference

There is often a degree of overlap between the two forms of misdirection. If a forged banknote is passed off by a rough-looking man, it will be scrutinized and probably discovered. If the same note is passed off by a well-dressed and attractive woman, flustered that she is about to miss her train, it will go unchecked and unnoticed. With mental misdirection, what matters most is that what is presented is not questioned. This form of misdirection plays an essential role in propaganda, politics, spin, public relations and advertising.

We rarely get to witness the 'behind the scenes' activity that informs what is presented publicly; what is presented is - for the unquestioning at least - the whole of the truth. In the public arena, image is everything, and the success of a deception

depends very much on the unquestioning nature of the audience. Niccolo Machiavelli (1469 - 1527), the Renaissance thinker noted for his moral relativism, offered the following advice to Lorenzo de Medici in his book *The Prince*:

‘Men judge generally more by the eye than by the hand, because everybody can see you, but few come in touch with you. Everyone sees what you appear to be, but few really know what you are, and those few dare not oppose the opinion of the many, who have the power of the state to defend them.’ [3]



Niccolo Machiavelli by Santi di Tito

Walter Lippmann (1889 - 1974), an influential figure in the field of public relations, coined the term ‘pseudo environment’ to describe the phenomenon of a false frame of reference in the media. He had the following to say about the use of authority for creating a suitable context in his book *Public Opinion*.

‘The established leaders of any organization have great natural advantages. They are believed to have better sources of information. The books and papers are in their offices. They took part in the important conferences. They met the important people. They have responsibility. It is, therefore, easier for them to secure attention and to speak in a convincing tone.’ [4]

Deception works because, for all our logic and reason, no amount of evidence will cause us to question what is presented if we are not willing to do so. What causes us to question what is presented is not logic or reason, but something commonly referred to as intuition or ‘gut-feeling’.

Gut-feeling is generally regarded as something vague and undefinable and therefore not wholly reliable. With logic we can say with confidence what is right and wrong - a dog is an animal and not a vegetable - but intuition is like a whispering voice, like Echo to Narcissus, who speaks to us from somewhere beyond our direct attention. Gut-feeling appears ephemeral because it picks up on what is vague and ephemeral in the environment, and so draws our attention to what we do not see directly. Deception, by its very nature, is hidden from direct inspection, which is why we have to use gut-feeling and not logic to see a deception.

For all the rationalism of the modern era, the fundamentals of human nature have changed very little. Rather than freeing us from a superstitious past, technology has merely misdirected our attention away from something which should be central to any form of education, which is self-knowledge. What is required is not more technology, but more insight, and this can only come from developed intuition.

Seeing deception in life does not automatically turn us into cynics - unless of course we choose to become so. A white lie is not the same as a spiteful one, and we do know the difference. Once we see the part played by deception in life we can no longer live as children do, in the bosom of a trusted authority. The hallmark of a fool is not that they are stupid, but that they do not see their stupidity. To be wise is to see the world as it is, and to see the world as it is, it is necessary to see its blemishes as well as its beauty.

#### References:

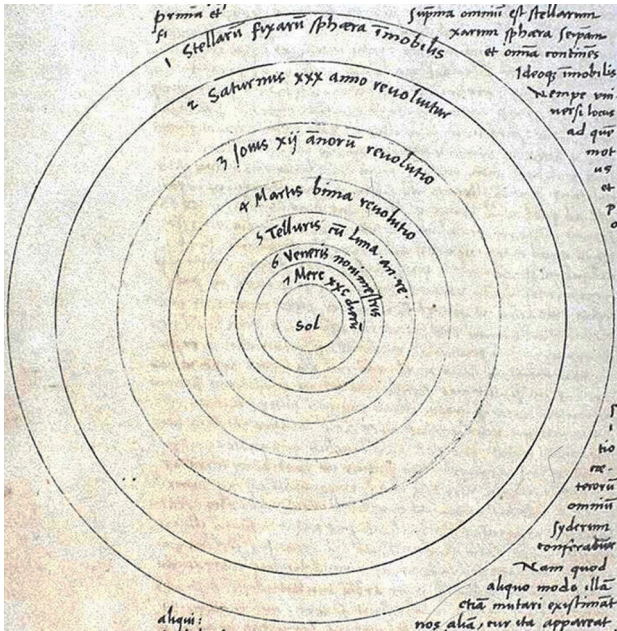
- [1] Henning Nelms, *Magic and Showmanship* (New York: Dover Publications, 1969) p.204
- [2] Nelms p.196
- [3] Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince* (London: Penguin Books, 2009) Chapter 18, p.38
- [4] Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Macmillan, 1929) p.248





# Dogma

## and the problem with truth



From *On the Revolutions* by Nicolaus Copernicus

Nicolaus Copernicus (1473 - 1543) is remembered for proposing that the earth is not stationary, but in motion around the sun. His contribution to astronomy is regarded as one of the most important developments in science. In the preface to his book *On the Revolutions* (1543), Copernicus expressed his disdain for an earlier commentator on the subject, Lactantius (c. 250 – 325), who was responsible for the assertion that the earth was flat. Copernicus referred to Lactantius as an ignorant ‘babbler’. [1]

It is a widely held misconception that the ancients believed the earth was flat. They did not, and the evidence for this can be found in the dialogue *Timaeus*, written by Plato, in 360 BC. Speaking of the creation of the world, he has the character of *Timaeus* tell us:

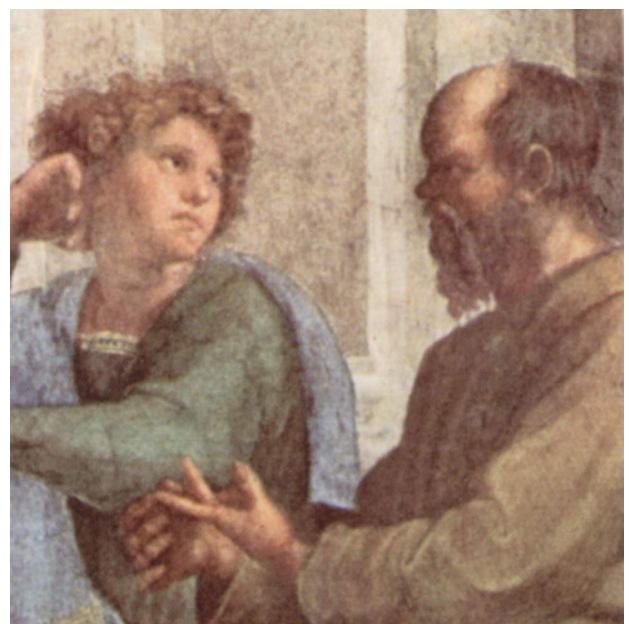
‘Wherefore he made the world in the form of a globe, round as from a lathe, having its extremes in every direction equidistant from the centre...’ [2]

The assertion of a flat earth arose because Lactantius was an advisor to the emperor Constantine I (272 - 337 AD). It was under Constantine that Rome adopted Christianity as its

official religion. Once this had happened, anyone who questioned the authority of the Church also questioned the authority of Rome. From that moment on, truth was no longer a philosophical pursuit, but an assertion of authority.

Dogma is defined as ‘a principle or set of principles laid down by an authority as incontrovertibly true.’ This means that to challenge a dogma - no matter how absurd - also means to challenge the authority behind it. Dogma removes the right of the individual to think for themselves, and to decide what is true or what is not. It is interesting, in this context, to note that the definition of a ‘heretic’ is ‘one who chooses’.

The modern era is founded on reason rather than on religion, and we might assume that we are now free from the constraints of dogma, but it is not so. The same outlook, which is that we must defer to an authority for advice on what we should think and believe, has been transferred from religion to science. The scientist now holds the same position as the priest, that of arbiter of truth, and where once there was religious heresy, now there is scientific heresy. If the modern era is free of anything, it is the dogmas of the past, but not dogmatism itself.



The Socratic Method

Dogma is the direct outcome of logic. Logic demands that what is true must always be true. It follows that if it is wrong to steal, then it is wrong to steal, even if it is a handful of potatoes in a famine.

One of the fundamental principles of logic is the Law of Noncontradiction, or the assertion that if A is A, then A can never be B. Without the law of noncontradiction, logic could not function. Computer code is a modern application of the same law, where a statement must be true or false but it cannot be both.

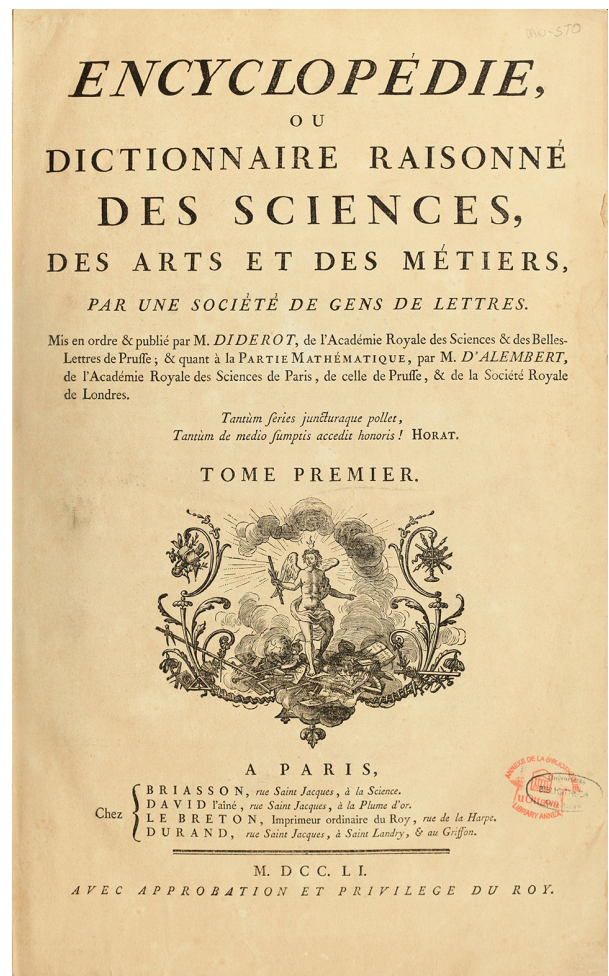
Logic has been dominant in Western culture since the time of Plato (423 - 347 BC) and Aristotle (384 – 322 BC) in ancient Greece. Plato gave us the notion of absolute truth, which means that truth is universal and unchanging. Aristotle studied under Plato, and provided us with the foundation for our understanding of logic through his collection of works known as the Organon. The association of Plato and Aristotle led to logic being regarded as the only means to arrive at truth. It followed that there could be only one truth, and if other truths existed, this would be a contradiction, and the other truth had to be proven wrong. The dialectical method of finding fault with others became the means to do this.

The same view of truth was adopted by Saint Augustine (354 - 430), one of the founding fathers of the Church. Augustine wrote the City of God (426 AD), in which he laid the foundations for the Vatican. He spoke highly of Plato, regarding him as the nearest of the ancients to come to the correct view of God. Once the Church had adopted the notion of a single and unquestionable truth, it followed that all other truths had to be attacked as untruths, and the means to do this was through the application of logic; Christianity became not just dogmatic, but highly intolerant.

We might assume that, with the decline of religion in Western culture, dogma is a thing of the past. But the same dogmatism found its way into the modern era through the rationalism of the Enlightenment. This came about through the efforts of the Encyclopedists, notably Denis Diderot (1713 – 1784), and Jean le Rond d’Alembert (1717 – 1783). Diderot and d’Alembert were both declared atheists, and their Encyclopédie (c. 1751) was intended to be more than simply a reference book, but a universal source of knowledge

intended to replace the Bible as the authoritative source of truth. This was stated by Diderot himself:

‘The goal of an encyclopedia is to assemble all the knowledge scattered on the surface of the earth, to demonstrate the general system to the people with whom we live, and to transmit it to the people who will come after us, so that the works of centuries past is not useless to the centuries which follow, that our descendants, by becoming more learned, may become more virtuous and happier, and that we do not die without having merited being part of the human race.’ [3]



Title page of the Encyclopédie (1751 - 1765)

The Encyclopédie was founded on the same notion of absolute truth. For all its admirable idealism, this came at the cost of replacing the dogma of religion with the dogma of materialism.

The dominance of logic in Western culture has ensured this assumption has informed all thinking, from religion to science, to economics, politics and law. It has resulted in a highly polarised approach to any subject of study, and has given us nature versus nurture, design versus mechanics, determinism versus free will, Communism versus



Capitalism, the individual versus the state, and science versus religion. Dogmatism ensures that if we regard our own point of view as true, it becomes necessary to attack any opposing point of view as untrue.

The adoption of dogma by science has given rise to Scientism, or the assertion that any scientific statement is absolute and incontrovertibly true. This provides no ground for new ideas and insights which might challenge the present paradigm. This means that anyone who questions a scientific assertion is charged with being 'anti-science', and therefore of being backward, superstitious and ignorant. It is interesting to note that the intolerance towards criticism is in direct contradiction to the Latin motto of the Royal Society - 'Nullius in Verba' - which translates as 'Take nobody's word for it'. The Royal Society took its inspiration from Sir Frances Bacon (1561 - 1626), who had the following to say about the problem of logic in his foundation work on science, *Novum Organum* (1620):

'As the present sciences are useless for the discovery of effects, so the present system of logic is useless for the discovery of the sciences.' [4]



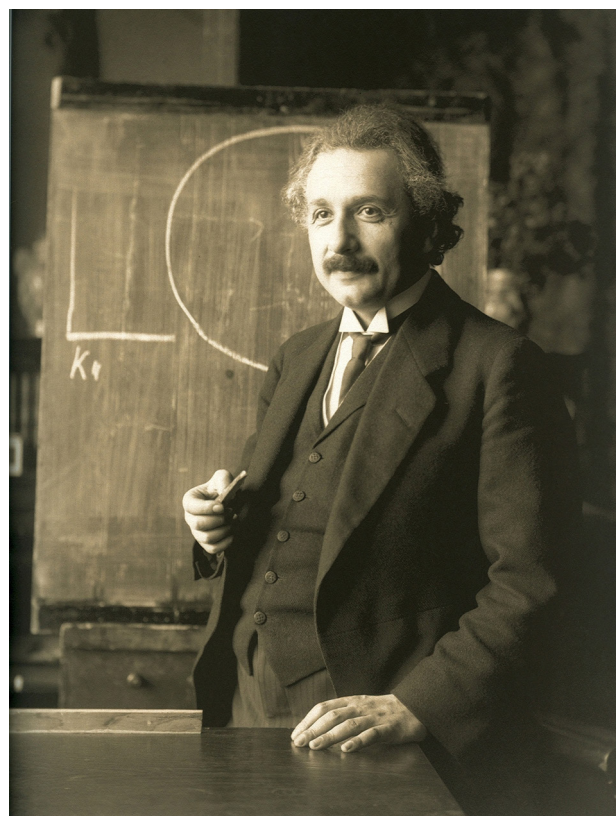
Motto of the Royal Society (1660)

While this is usually taken to refer only to religious dogma, it is quite clear that Bacon's contention was with dogma in general. Indeed, the whole of his approach - the Empirical Method - was based on unbiased, open-minded observation. Dogma, or the assertion of a singular and incontrovertible truth, does not allow for this.

An example of dogmatism in science can be

found in the book *The God Delusion* (2006) by Richard Dawkins. Dawkins states that one of the leading physicists of the twentieth century, Albert Einstein, was an atheist:

'Einstein sometimes invoked the name of God (and he is not the only atheistic scientist to do so), inviting misunderstanding by supernaturalists eager to misunderstand and claim so illustrious a thinker as their own.' [5]



Theoretical physicist Albert Einstein (1921)

This flatly contradicts Einstein's own statement on the subject. In answer to a question by the writer and journalist George Sylvester Viereck about whether or not he defined himself as a 'pantheist', or a person who believes in God, Einstein responded:

'Your question is the most difficult in the world. It is not a question I can answer simply with yes or no. I am not an Atheist. I do not know if I can define myself as a Pantheist. The problem involved is too vast for our limited minds.' [6]

It can be seen from this that Einstein was not a dogmatist, and Dawkins most clearly is. It can also be seen that Einstein was most certainly not an atheist.

The problem with dogma is that it seeks to limit our understanding of the world to a single view of truth. Rather than regard our view of truth as

provisional, open to question, and therefore open to improvement and learning - as Einstein clearly did - dogma asserts that our present view of the world is as truth itself and therefore it cannot be questioned.

It was Thomas Kuhn (1922 – 1996) who, in his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, introduced the concept of a ‘paradigm shift’ to explain why the dominance of a particular outlook can prevent a scientist from noting the significance of an observation. The Copernican revolution is the most notable example of this, but there have been other, less noted paradigm shifts, such as the Michelson–Morley experiment (1887), which established the constancy of the speed of light and led to the theory of relativity.



Galileo and the Roman Inquisition by Cristiano Banti, 1857

What leads to a paradigm shift is not the observation itself, but that it defies conventional wisdom. Many of the developments in science - Galileo’s observation of a pendulum, Newton’s observation of a falling apple and Tesla’s observation of rolling thunder - could have been made by anyone, but it was the willingness of the individual to question conventional thinking which gave rise to the subsequent development in science.

The problem with dogma is that, once a particular view of the world is deemed to be the truth, it cannot be challenged without questioning the very nature of truth itself. That is why the heretics of the Middle Ages were so cruelly treated; they dared to question the truth of the Church.

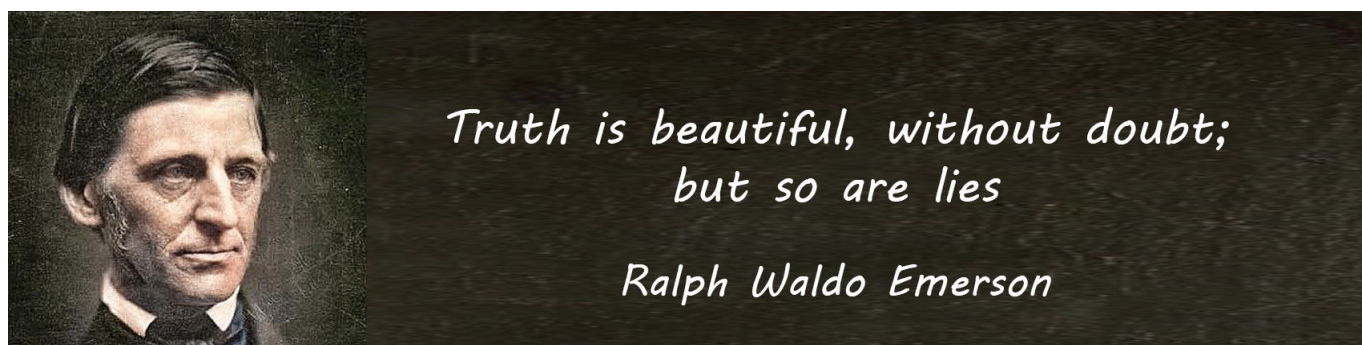
Genuine science demands an open mind. Any new developments in thought provide us with a view of the world which is, by nature, not wholly compatible with the existing paradigm. The most important developments in thought have come from new thinking rather than the defence of an existing outlook. Albert Einstein, in the interview ‘Death of a Genius’ in *Life Magazine*, 2 May, 1955, said much the same:

‘There comes a point where the mind takes a leap — call it intuition or what you will — and comes out upon a higher plane of knowledge, but can never prove how it got there. All great discoveries have involved such a leap.’ [7]

Dogma will not allow for any such leap of the imagination. Dogma, rather than being the truth, is a limited view of the world wearing the mantle of truth, and in that respect, it is a lie.

#### References

- [1] Nicholas Copernicus, *On the Revolutions* (1543), preface
- [2] Plato, *Timaeus*, trans. Desmond Lee (London: Penguin Classics, 1977 edition) 33b
- [3] Philipp Blom. *Encyclopédie: the triumph of reason in an unreasonable age* (London: Fourth Estate, 2004) p. 37
- [4] Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum*, ed. by Joseph Devey (New York: Collier, 1902) p. 12
- [5] Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London, Bantam Press, 2006) p. 13
- [6] G. S. Viereck, *Glimpses of the Great* (Macaulay, New York, 1930) p. 372-373.
- [7] *Death of a Genius*, (New York, *Life Magazine*, 2 May 1955) p. 64





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# Relativism

*the dangerous philosophy*

*Take three cups of water; one hot, one cold and one at room-temperature. Place the index finger of one hand in the hot water and the index finger of the other in the cold water. Leave them there for about thirty seconds. Then place both index fingers in the cup of room-temperature water. The same temperature will feel different for each finger.*

One of the earliest proponents of relativism was Protagoras (c. 490 - 420 BC), the leading Sophist of ancient Greece, who is remembered for the saying 'Man is the measure of all things'. By this he meant that what we call truth is merely our perception of it.

Little of what Protagoras taught has survived history, and what we know about his teaching has been handed down largely through the account of his opponents, the Platonists, who did not feel obliged to represent him in anything other than their own terms. The Platonic view of truth is that it is unchanging, perfect and absolute, and quite independent of what we think about it. From the Platonic point of view, if our understanding of truth is imperfect, then we must remove the error until we arrive at truth. It isn't surprising that the Platonists disagreed with Protagoras.

The Platonic approach to truth has been dominant in Western society ever since. If our view of truth is imperfect, it follows that in order to discover the flaws, we must test it through critical dialogue, whereby one point of view is pitted against another in order to reveal the flaws in the argument. Critical dialogue is applied so universally that it informs the whole of politics, education, science, religion and philosophy.

Relativism, on the other hand, adopts a wholly different approach. Relativism doesn't assert that truth is relative, but that our view of truth is relative; the exact nature of truth is unknown. Cicero, the Roman statesman and scholar, records that Protagoras wrote:

'Concerning the gods, I have no means of knowing whether they exist or not, nor of what sort they may be, because of the obscurity of the subject, and the brevity of human life.' [1]



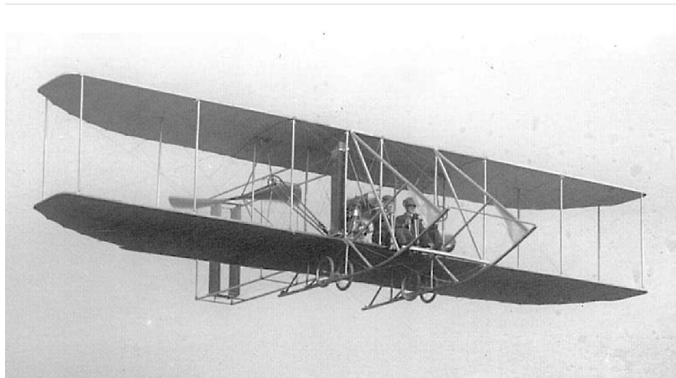
Democritus and Protagoras by Salvator Rosa, 1663

From a relativist perspective, the method of pitting one imperfect view of truth against another is futile, and Protagoras had little time for it. What is required is better perception, not better argument. The focus of relativism is therefore on improving perception, not on finding fault. Relativism, if widely adopted, would of course remove the right for any authority or individual to claim to represent the truth. It is not surprising that it is regarded by all governing authorities as a dangerous philosophy.

The reader might wonder how a two thousand year old dispute could possibly be relevant to the modern era.

The hallmark of the modern era is change. There has always been change - tyrants and kings and governments have followed one another throughout history - but what marks out the present era is the rate of change, which is unlike any other. While this is largely the product of technology, change itself is more than technology, and its most significant impact is on the social conditions, expectations and values of the day. Only a hundred years ago, H. G. Wells wrote:

‘In the eighteenth century the distance from London to Edinburgh was an eight days’ journey; in 1918 the British Civil Air Transport Commission reported that the journey from London to Melbourne, half-way round the earth, would probably, in a few years’ time, be accomplished in that same period of eight days.’ [2]



The Wright Flyer by the Wright brothers, 1903

Now it takes only a day, and the annual traffic through Heathrow alone is in excess of sixty million. The same rate of change has occurred in all walks of life. A generation ago, personal computers were a novelty; now they are as much a part of life as a house key. Ten years ago, the cashless society was an idea, now it is a reality. What makes the rate of change significant is the wider impact it has on society and on the way we think and act as individuals.

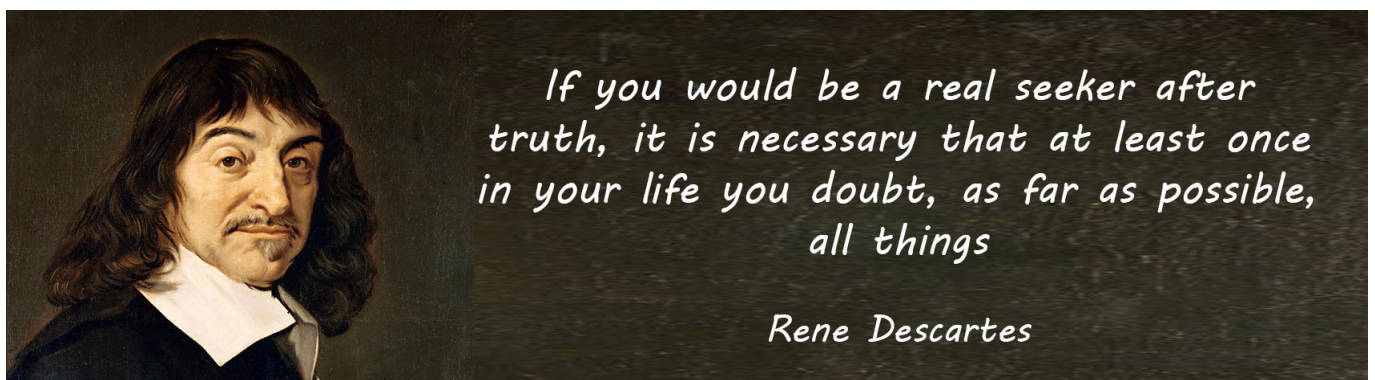
Slow change in society meant that what was true for one generation was also true for the next. Until the middle of the twentieth century, offices worked on pen and paper, factories were run by human beings, and messages were delivered by letter. The loss of electricity would have been seen as an inconvenience; now it would shut down whole cities. A generation ago, internet dating would have been an impossibility; now it is commonplace, and the advent of social media means there are now multiple sources of information, news and opinions.

We assume our values are based on universal principles. We assume that the concerns of one generation will be the concerns of the next. Change has made that assumption redundant. The problem is that we still think and act as though nothing has changed. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations in 1948, is an example of this. Article 2 of the Declaration stated:

‘Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.’ [3]



The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948

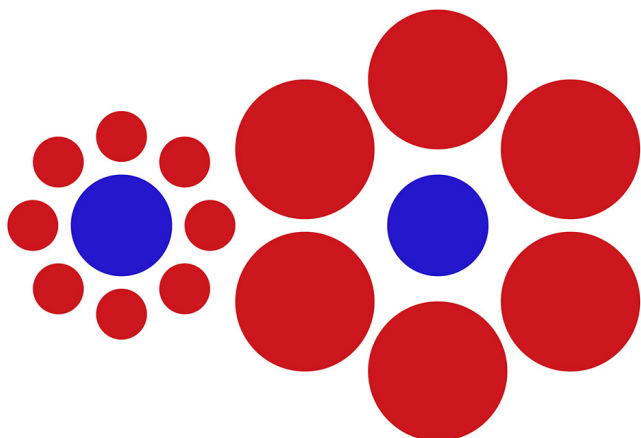




While the ideals are admirable, the Declaration was drafted under the circumstances created by the Second World War. At that time, poverty was an overriding concern; now excessive consumerism is a problem. At that time mass migration was not an issue; now it is possible to fly anywhere in Europe on little more than a day's wages. And at that time, most countries were homogenous, now multiculturalism is prevalent. Consumerism, mass migration and multiculturalism have all created problems of their own, from militant ecology to internal terrorism, and none of this could have been imagined when the UN charter was drafted.

Throughout history, Western culture has been governed by a single, overriding authority. The authority of the Pope gave way to the Protestant Synod, but the approach remained the same. Even the Enlightenment saw the same approach applied to secularism, with the Encyclopédie replacing the Bible as the authoritative source of reference. While there may have been conflicting truths, at any one time only one was dominant. For this reason we are not used to ongoing change, multiple truths and a loss of trust in authority. And yet it is this that defines the Modern era. As recently as 2016, the phrase 'post-truth' was chosen as the Oxford Dictionaries' Word of the Year. We are living in a post-truth era, whether we like it or not, and the older view of the world - one based on stability, permanency and slow change - is defunct.

Absolute truth, permanent and unchanging, cannot cope with a changing environment. A must always be A, without which we cannot say what is right or wrong. All of this means that, whether we like it or not, relativism is a necessity for the Modern era.

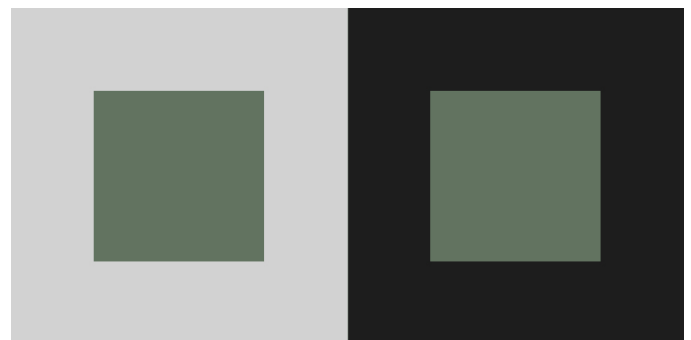


The blue dots are exactly the same size

The fundamental principle of relativism was stated by Protagoras in the dialogue of the same name, but conveyed through his opponent Socrates, and the meaning and significance did not make sense. In the dialogue of the same name, Protagoras states the following.

'For example, manure, which is a good thing when laid about the roots of a tree, but utterly destructive if thrown upon the shoots and young branches.' [4]

Relativism is based on contextual thinking; if the context changes, what is true also changes. We have never really thought about contexts, and yet contexts affect all that we think and do. In times of prosperity we will spend indulgently. In times of peace we will travel abroad. In times of youth we may live recklessly. In times of recession or war or old age however, all of this is regarded differently. We look back on slavery as an abomination and forget that future ages may look back on our carnivorousism with the same horror. While we regard our values as absolute, they are more dependent on context than we are willing to admit.



The green squares are exactly the same colour

At present we turn to science to provide us with a degree of certainty in a changing world, and yet science too is dependent on context. Thomas Kuhn, who introduced the term 'paradigm shift' to explain how one view of science can supercede another, stated in his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970):

'Normal science, the activity in which most scientists inevitably spend almost all their time, is predicated on the assumption that the scientific community knows what the world is like. Much of the success of the enterprise derives from the community's willingness to defend that assumption, if necessary at considerable cost.' [5]

While many still look to authority for guidance in their thinking and values, this is being continually

undermined by ongoing change. The problem is not that we are faced with a shift from one authority to another, but that we are faced with a shift from a governing authority to none at all. And we are little prepared for this.



Anti-lock down demonstration in Berlin, 2020

The loss of trust in authority is not an aberration but the inevitability of ongoing change. What is required is not a retreat to a bygone era, but a genuine, workable alternative. This can only come about through individuals taking responsibility for their own thinking. Authorities cannot adapt to ongoing change, but individuals can. We must learn to adjust to change, to conditional circumstances and to relative judgements.

If logic cannot deal with a changing environment, intuition can. Intuition is by nature conditional and fluid. The appropriateness of a response, the occasion for an action, the motivation for a new venture; all of this is dependent on intuitive judgement.

The fluidity of intuitive thinking has caused it to be dismissed as emotional and therefore unreliable. But eliminating emotion from our understanding of the world has led to a mechanistic outlook and a black and white view of life, one which excludes all that makes us human. For the absolutists, to allow emotions back into thinking is to allow all manner of superstition and ignorance to govern life.

The difference between logic and intuition is that intuition must be felt personally, by the individual. We can accept that a logical statement is true without being able to relate to it, but an intuitive idea must be experienced directly. Relativism is essentially intuitive, personal and conditional. Those who are most afraid of relativism are those who are afraid to think for themselves.

The relative stability of the last two thousand

years has led us to believe that the values we hold are absolute and unchanging. The rate of change in the Modern era is like no other. References to history cannot solve the problem of ongoing and constant change, simply because history does not provide any parallel. In order to cope with the Modern era, we must adopt a more relative view of morality, culture and even truth, and that means, at the most fundamental level, thinking for ourselves.

#### References

- [1] Cicero, de Natura Deorum, 1.23.6
- [2] H. G. Wells, The Outline of History (London: Macmillan & Co, 1920) Ch. 39, 1. The Mechanical Revolution
- [3] <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/> Article 2 <accessed 16/09/2020
- [4] Plato, Protagoras and Meno, trans. W. K. C. Guthrie (London: Penguin Books, 1956), p. 67
- [5] Thomas Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 2nd edn 1970 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press,



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