



*The World's Largest Open Access Agricultural & Applied Economics Digital Library*

**This document is discoverable and free to researchers across the globe due to the work of AgEcon Search.**

**Help ensure our sustainability.**

Give to AgEcon Search

AgEcon Search

<http://ageconsearch.umn.edu>

[aesearch@umn.edu](mailto:aesearch@umn.edu)

*Papers downloaded from **AgEcon Search** may be used for non-commercial purposes and personal study only. No other use, including posting to another Internet site, is permitted without permission from the copyright owner (not AgEcon Search), or as allowed under the provisions of Fair Use, U.S. Copyright Act, Title 17 U.S.C.*

*No endorsement of AgEcon Search or its fundraising activities by the author(s) of the following work or their employer(s) is intended or implied.*

# WIDER WORKING PAPERS

*Objectivity and the Science/Ethics  
Distinction*

*Hilary Putnam*

WP 70

August 1989

OBJECTIVITY AND THE SCIENCE/ETHICS DISTINCTION

by Prof. Hilary Putnam  
Department of Philosophy  
Harvard University  
USA

# OBJECTIVITY AND THE SCIENCE/ETHICS DISTINCTION

BY HILARY PUTNAM

## **The fact/value dichotomy: background.**

The Logical Positivists argued for a sharp fact-value dichotomy in a very simple way: scientific statements (outside of logic and pure mathematics), they said, are “empirically verifiable” and value judgments are “unverifiable”. This argument continues to have wide appeal to economists (not to say laymen), even though it has for some years been looked upon as naive by philosophers. One reason that the argument is naive is that it assumes that there is such a thing as “the method of verification” of each isolated *scientifically meaningful* sentence. But this is very far from being the case. Newton's entire theory of gravity, for example, does not *in and of itself* (i.e., in the absence of suitable “auxiliary hypotheses”) imply any testable predictions whatsoever. (Cf. Putnam, 1974) As Quine has emphasized (Quine, 1951), reviving arguments earlier used by Duhem, scientific statements “meet the test of experience as a corporate body”; the idea that each scientific sentence has its own range of confirming observations and its own range of disconfirming observations, independent of what other sentences it is conjoined to, is wrong. If a sentence that does not, in and of itself, by its very meaning, have a “method of verification” is meaningless, then most of theoretical science turns out to be meaningless!

A second feature of the view that “ethical sentences are cognitively meaningless because they have no method of verification” is that even if it had been correct, what it would have drawn would not have

been a *fact-value* dichotomy. For, according to the positivists themselves, metaphysical sentences are cognitively meaningless for the same reason as ethical sentences: they are “unverifiable in principle.” (So are poetic sentences, among others.) The Positivist position is well summarized by Vivian Walsh (Walsh, 1987): “Consider the ‘putative’ proposition ‘murder is wrong’. What empirical findings, the positivists would ask, tend to confirm or disconfirm this? If saying that murder is wrong is merely a misleading way of reporting what a given society believes, this is a perfectly good sociological fact, and the proposition is a respectable empirical one. But the person making a moral judgement will not accept this analysis. Positivists then wielded their absolute analytic/synthetic distinction: if ‘murder is wrong’ is not a synthetic (empirically testable) proposition it must be an analytic proposition, like (they believed) those of logic and mathematics in effect, a tautology. The person who wished to make the moral judgement would not accept this, and was told that the disputed utterance was a ‘pseudo-proposition’ like those of poets, theologians and metaphysicians.”

As Walsh goes on to explain, by the end of the Fifties “most of the theses necessary for this remarkable claim” had been abandoned. The positivist theory of “cognitive significance” had fallen. The absolute analytic/synthetic distinction was seen to fail as an account of how scientific theories are actually put together. Writing in a volume honoring Carnap (Quine, 1963), Quine summed up its demise, writing “the lore of our fathers is black with fact and white with convention, but there are no *completely* white threads and no quite black ones.”

Explaining the impact of all this, Walsh writes: "Another retreat, forced upon logical empiricism by the *needs* of pure science, opened the way for a further rehabilitation of moral philosophy. The old positivist attack on the status of moral judgements had required the claim that each *single* proposition must, at least in principle, be open to test. It became evident that many of the propositions of which the higher theory of pure science are composed could not survive this demand. Theoretical propositions, the logical empiricists decided, became 'indirectly' meaningful if part of a theory which possessed (supposed) observation statements which had empirical confirmation to some degree (never mind that the theoretical statement/observation statement dichotomy itself broke down!); but the clear fact/value distinction of the early positivists depended upon being able to see if *each single* proposition passed muster. To borrow and adapt Quine's vivid image, if a theory may be black with fact and white with convention, it might well (as far as logical empiricism could tell) be red with values. Since for them confirmation *or* falsification had to be a property of a theory *as a whole*, they had no way of unraveling this whole cloth. Yet even today economists whose philosophical ancestry is logical empiricism still write as if the old positivist fact/value dichotomy were beyond challenge."

The collapse of the grounds on which the dichotomy was defended during the period Walsh is describing has not, however, led to a demise of the dichotomy, even among professional philosophers. What it has led to is a change in the nature of the *arguments* offered for the dichotomy. Today, it is defended more and more on meta-

physical grounds. At the same time, even the defenders of the dichotomy concede that the old arguments for the dichotomy were bad arguments. For example, when I was a graduate student, a paradigmatic explanation and defense of the dichotomy would have been Charles Stevenson's. I attacked Stevenson's position at length in a book published some years ago (Putnam, 1981). When Bernard Williams' last book (Williams, 1985) appeared, I found that Williams gave virtually the same arguments against this position. Yet Williams still defends a sharp "science-ethics" dichotomy; and he regards his science-ethics dichotomy as capturing something that was essentially right about the old "fact-value" dichotomy.

Something else has accompanied this change in the way the dichotomy is defended. The old position, in its several versions emotivism, voluntarism, prescriptivism was usually referred to as "non-cognitivism". "Non-cognitivism" was, so to speak, the generic name of the position, and the more specific labels were the proprietary names given the position by the various distributors. And the generic name was appropriate, because all the various slightly different formulations of the generic product had this essential ingredient in common: ethical sentences were "non-cognitive", that is to say, they were neither true nor false. Today, philosophers like Williams<sup>1</sup> do not deny that ethical sentences can be true or false; what they deny is that they can be true or false *non-perspectively*. Thus, the position has been (appropriately) renamed: while the proprietary versions of the new improved drug still have various differences one from the other

they all accept the name Relativism. *Non-Cognitivism has been rebaptized as Relativism.*

### **The entanglement of fact and value.**

Just why and how non-cognitivism has given way to relativism is a complicated question, and it is not the purpose of this lecture to explore it in detail. But one reason is surely an increased appreciation of what might be called the *entanglement* of fact and value. That entanglement was a constant theme in John Dewey's writing. But this aspect of pragmatism was neglected in Anglo-American philosophy after Dewey's death, in spite of Morton White's valiant effort to keep it alive (White, 1956), and it was, perhaps, Iris Murdoch who reopened the theme in a very different way.

Murdoch's three essays, published together as (Murdoch, 1971) contain a large number of valuable insights and remarks: two have proved especially influential. Murdoch was the first to emphasize that languages have two very different sorts of ethical concepts: abstract ethical concepts (Williams calls them "thin" ethical concepts), such as "good", and "right", and more descriptive, less abstract concepts (Williams calls them "thick" ethical concepts) such as, for example, *cruel* , *pert* , *inconsiderate* , *chaste* . Murdoch (and later, and in a more spelled-out way (McDowell, 1978 and 1979)) argued that there is no way of saying what the "descriptive component" of the meaning of a word like "cruel" or "inconsiderate" is without using a word of the same kind; as McDowell put the argument, a word has to be connected to a certain set of "evaluative interests" in order to function the way such a thick ethical word functions; and the speaker has to be



aware of those interests and be able to imaginatively identify with them if he is to apply the word to novel cases or circumstances in the way a sophisticated speaker of the language would. The attempt of non-cognitivists to split such words into a "descriptive meaning component" and a "prescriptive meaning component" founders on the impossibility of saying what the "descriptive meaning" of, say, "cruel" is without using the word "cruel" itself, or a synonym. Secondly, Murdoch emphasized that when we are actually confronted with situations requiring ethical evaluation, whether or not they also require some action on our part, the sorts of descriptions that we need --- descriptions of the motives and character of human beings, above all ---- are descriptions in the language of a "sensitive novelist", not in scientific or bureaucratic jargon. When a situation or a person or a motive is appropriately described, the decision as to whether something is "good" or "bad" or right" or "wrong" frequently follows automatically. For example, our evaluation of a person's moral stature may critically depend on whether we describe her as "impertinent" or "unstuffy". Our Life-world, Murdoch is telling us, does not factor neatly into "facts" and "values"; we live in a messy human world in which seeing reality with all its nuances, seeing it as George Eliot, or Flaubert, or Henry James, or Murdoch herself can, to some extent, teach us to see it, and making appropriate "value judgments" are simply not separable abilities.

I confess that when I read *The Sovereignty of "Good"* I thought that Murdoch gave a perceptive description of the sphere of private morality (which is, of course, the sphere with which a novelist has to

deal), but that she too much ignored the public sphere, the sphere in which issues of social justice arise and must be worked out. But more recently I have come to think that a similar entanglement of the factual and the ethical applies to this sphere as well. It is all well and good to describe hypothetical cases in which two people “agree on the facts and disagree about values”, but in the world in which I grew up such cases are unreal. When and where did a Nazi and an anti-Nazi, a communist and a social democrat, a fundamentalist and a liberal, or even a Republican and a Democrat, agree on the facts? Even when it comes to one specific policy question, say, what to do about the decline of American education, or about unemployment, or about drugs, every argument I have ever heard has exemplified the entanglement of the ethical and the factual. There is a weird discrepancy between the way philosophers who subscribe to a sharp fact-value distinction *make* ethical arguments sound and the way ethical arguments *actually* sound. (Stanley Cavell once remarked (Cavell, 1979) that Stevenson writes like someone who has *forgotten* what ethical discussion is like.)

### **Relativism and the fact-value dichotomy.**

According to Bernard Williams, a properly worked-out relativism can do justice to the way in which fact and value can be inseparable; do justice to the way in some statements which are both descriptive and true (“Caligula was a mad tyrant”) can also be value judgements. The idea is to replace the fact-value distinction by a very different distinction, the distinction between *truth* and *absoluteness*.

Although Williams does not explain what he understands truth to be very clearly, he seems to think truth is something like right assertability in the local language game; i.e., if the practices and shared values of a culture determine an established use for a word like "chaste"; a use which is sufficiently definite to permit speakers to come to agreement on someone's chastity or lack of chastity (or whatever the example of a "thick ethical concept" may be), then it can be simply true that a person in the culture is "chaste" (or "cruel", or "pious", or whatever). Of course, if I do not belong to the culture in question and do not share the relevant evaluative interests, then I will not describe the person in question as "chaste", even if I know that that is a correct thing to say in that culture; I will be "disbarred" from using the word, as Williams puts it. As he also puts it (with deliberate paradox) that So-and-so is chaste is possible *knowledge* for someone in the culture, but not possible knowledge for *me*.

If truth were the only dimension with respect to which we could evaluate the cognitive credentials of statements, then Williams would be committed to ethical realism or at least to the rejection of ethical *anti* - realism. For, on his view, "Mary is chaste", "Peter is cruel", "George is a perfect knight", can be true in the very same sense in which "Snow is white" is true, while still being ethical utterances. But there is an insight in noncognitivism, these philosophers claim, even if noncognitivism was mistaken in what it took to be its most essential thesis, the thesis that ethical sentences are not capable of truth (or, alternatively, the thesis that an ethical sentence has a distinct "value component", and this "value component" is not capable of truth).

That thesis (or those theses) are rejected by Williams. As I said, he accepts the arguments of Murdoch and McDowell against the "two components" theory; he recognizes the way in which fact and value are entangled in our concepts; and he agrees that ethical sentences can be true. How then can he maintain that there was an insight contained in non-cognitivism? What *was* the insight that the fact-value distinction tried to capture?

According to Williams, there are truths and truths. If I say that grass is green, for example, I certainly speak the truth; but I do not speak what he calls the *absolute* truth. I do not describe the world as it is "anyway", independently of any and every "perspective". The concept "green"(and possibly the concept "grass" as well) are not concepts that finished science would use to describe the properties that things have apart from any "local perspective". Martians or Alpha Centaurians, for example, might not have the sorts of eyes we have. They would not recognize any such property as "green" (except as a "secondary quality" of interest to human beings, a disposition to effect the sense organs of *homo sapiens* in a certain way) and "grass" may be too unscientific a classification to appear in their finished science. Only concepts that would appear in the (final) description of the world that any species of determined natural researchers is destined to converge to can be regarded as telling us how the world is "anyway" ("to the maximum degree independent of perspective"). Only such concepts can appear in statements which are "absolute". And the philosophically important point ---- or one of them, for there is something to be added --- is that while value judgements containing thick ethical

concepts can be true, they cannot be absolute. The world, as it is in itself, is *cold*. Values (like colors) are *projected* onto the world, not discovered in it.

What has to be added is that, on Williams' view, values are even *worse off* than colors in this respect. For the discovery that green is a secondary quality has not undermined our ability to use the word. We no longer think that colors are non-dispositional properties of external things, but this in no way affects the utility of color classification. But the realization that value attributes, even "thick" ones ("chaste", "cruel", "holy"), are projections has a tendency to cause us to lose our ability to use those terms. If we become reflective to too great a degree, if we identify ourselves too much with the point of view of the Universe, we will no longer be able to employ our ethical concepts. The realization that ethical concepts are projections places us in a ticklish position: we cannot stop being reflective, but we cannot afford to be (very much of the time) too reflective. We are in an unstable equilibrium.

The reason for this difference between ordinary secondary qualities like green and thick ethical attributes like chastity, according to Williams, is that the interests which color classification subserves are universal among human beings, whereas the interests that thick ethical concepts subserve are the interests of one human community (one "social world") or another. Even if different cultures have somewhat different color classifications, there is no *opposition* between one culture's color classifications and those of another culture. But the interests which define one social world may be in conflict with the in-

terests which define a different social world. And realizing that my ethical descriptions are in this way parochial (however "true" they may also be) is decentering.

Williams believes that coming to realize just how *far* ethical description misses describing the world as it is "absolutely" not only does but *should* affect our first order ethical judgements. There are *moral* consequences to the "truth in relativism" (speaking, of course, from within *our* social world). The moral consequence (and perhaps also the metaphysical consequence), according to Williams, is that moral praise or condemnation of another way of life loses all point when that other way of life is too distant from ours. (Too distant in the sense that neither way of life is a live option for the other.) It makes no sense to try to evaluate the way of life of the ancient Aztecs, for example, or of the Samurai, or of a bronze age society. To ask whether their ways of life were *right*, or their judgements *true* is (or should be) impossible for us; the question should lapse, once we understand the non-absoluteness of ethical discourse. And the fact that the question lapses *constitutes* "the truth in relativism".

### **Absoluteness.**

This dichotomy between what the world is like independent of any local perspective and what is projected by us seems to me utterly indefensible. I shall begin by examining the picture of science which guides Williams.

The picture of science is that science converges to a single true theory, a single explanatory picture of the universe. But one is hard put to know why one should believe this.

If we start at the level of common sense objects, say stones, it suffices to notice that, in rational reconstruction, we can take a stone to be an aggregation, or as logicians say a “mereological sum” of time-slices of particles (or, alternatively, of field-points ----notice that these are incompatible but equally good choices!) or we can take a stone to be an individual which consists of *different* particles in different possible worlds (and also occupies different locations in space in different possible worlds) while remaining self-identical. If a stone consists of *different* time-slices of particles in different possible worlds, then it cannot (as a matter of modal logic) be *identical* with an aggregation (mereological sum) of time-slices of particles<sup>2</sup>, and obviously it makes no sense to say that a collection of space-time points could have occupied a different location than it did. So, if it is simply a matter of how we formalize our language whether we say (with Saul Kripke) that stones and animals and persons, etc. are *not* identical with mereological sums at all, or say (as suggested in (Lewis, 1973)) that they *are* mereological sums (and take care of Kripke’s difficulty by claiming that when we say that “the” stone consists of different particle-slices in different possible worlds, then what that means is that the various modal “counterparts” of the stone in different possible worlds consist of different particle slices, and not that the self-identical stone consists of different particle slices in different possible worlds---and to me this certainly looks like a mere choice of a formalism, and not a

question of fact --- we will be forced to admit that it is partly a matter of our conceptual choice which scientific object a given common sense object --- a stone or a person --- is identified with.

Nor is the situation any better in theoretical physics. At the level of space-time geometry, there is the well known fact that we can take points to be individuals or we can take them to be mere limits. States of a system can be taken to be quantum mechanical superpositions of particle interactions (à la Feynman) or quantum mechanical superpositions of field states. (This is the contemporary form of the wave-particle duality.) And there are many other examples.

Not only do single theories have a bewildering variety of alternative rational reconstructions (with quite different ontologies); but there is no evidence at all for the claim (which is essential to Williams' belief in an "absolute conception of the world") that science converges to a *single* theory. I do not doubt that there is some convergence in scientific knowledge, and not just at the observational level. We know, for example, that certain *equations* are approximately correct descriptions of certain phenomena. Under certain conditions, the Poisson equation of Newtonian gravitational theory gives an approximately correct description of the gravitational field of a body. But the theoretical picture of Newtonian mechanics has been utterly changed by General Relativity; and the theoretical picture of General Relativity may in turn be utterly replaced by Supergravitation theory, or by some theory not yet imagined. We simply do not have the evidence to justify speculation as to whether or not science is "destined" to converge to some one definite theoretical picture. It could be, for example, that



although we will discover more and more approximately correct and increasingly accurate equations , the *theoretical picture* which we use to explain those equations will continue to be upset by scientific revolutions. As long as our ability to predict, and to mathematize our predictions in attractive ways, continues to advance science will “progress” quite satisfactorily; to say, as Williams sometimes does, that convergence to one big picture is required by the very concept of knowledge, is sheer dogmatism.

Yet, without the postulate that science “converges” to a single definite theoretical picture with a unique ontology and a unique set of theoretical predicates, the whole notion of “absoluteness” collapses. It is, indeed, the case that ethical knowledge cannot claim “absoluteness”; but that is because the notion of “absoluteness” is incoherent. Mathematics and physics, as well as ethics and history and politics, show our conceptual choices; the world is not going to impose a single language upon us, no matter what we choose to talk about.

### **More about absoluteness.**

The notion of absoluteness has further properties that we should be clear about. According to Williams, what makes the truth of a statement “absolute” is not the fact that scientists are destined to “converge” on the truth of that statement, that is to say, admit it to the corpus of accepted scientific belief in the long run, but the *explanation* of the fact of convergence. We converge upon the statement that S is true, where S is a statement which figures in “the absolute

conception of the world", because "that is the way things are" (independently of perspective). But what sort of an explanation is *this*?

The idea that some statements force themselves upon us because "that is how things are" is taken with immense seriousness by Williams: indeed, it is the center of his entire metaphysical picture. Sometimes when I don't want to give a reason for something I may shrug my shoulders and say, "Well, that's just how things are"; but that is not what Williams is doing here. "That is how things are" (independently of perspective) is supposed to be a *reason* (Williams calls it an "explanation") not a refusal to give a reason.

The idea that some statements get recognized as true (if we investigate long enough and carefully enough) because they simply describe the world in a way which is independent of "perspective" is just a new version of the old "correspondence theory of truth". As we have already seen, Williams does not claim that truth is correspondence---for him, truth is rather right assertability in the language game. But *some* truths --- the "absolute" ones ---- are rightly assertable in the language game *because* they correspond to the way things (mind-independently) are. Even if correspondence is not the definition of truth, it is the *explanation* of absolute truth. And I repeat my question: What sort of an explanation is *this*?

The idea of a statement's corresponding to the way things are, the idea of a term's having a correspondence to a language-independent class of things, and the idea of a predicate's having a correspondence to a language-independent attribute are ideas which have no

metaphysical force at all unless the correspondence in question is thought of as a genuine relation between items independent of us and items in language, a correspondence which is imposed by the world, as it were, and not just a tautological feature of the way we talk about talk. What I have in mind by this perhaps puzzling sounding remark is this: if you think it is just a *tautology* that "Snow" corresponds to snow, or that "Snow is white" is true if and only if snow is white, then you regard the "correspondence" between the word "Snow" and snow as a correspondence *within* language. Within our language we can talk about snow and we can talk about the word "Snow" and we can say they correspond. To this even a philosopher who rejects the very idea of a substantive notion of "truth" or a substantive notion of reference can agree. But if, as Williams believes, the fact that we are "fated" to accept the sentence "Snow is white" is *explained* by something "out there" and by the fact that the sentence corresponds to that something "out there", then the correspondence too must be "out there". A *verbal* correspondence cannot play this kind of explanatory role. Williams' picture is that there is *fixed* set of objects "out there" the "mind independent objects", and a fixed relation --- a relation between words and sentences in *any* language in which "absolute" truths can be expressed, any language in which science can be done, and those fixed mind independent Reals, and that this relation *explains* the (alleged) fact that science converges. If this picture is unintelligible, then the notion of an "absolute conception of the world" must also be rejected as unintelligible.

Now, I have argued for a number of years that this picture is unintelligible. First, I contend that there is not *one* notion of an "object" but an open class of possible uses of the word "object"----even of the technical logical notion of an object (value of a variable of quantification). The idea that reality itself fixes the use of the word "object" (or the use of the word "correspondence") is a hangover from prescientific metaphysics (Putnam, 1987). Secondly, the idea of the world "singling out" a correspondence between objects and our words is incoherent. As a matter of model-theoretic fact, we know that even if we somehow fix the intended truth-values of our sentences, not just in the actual world but in all possible worlds, this does *not* determine a unique correspondence between words and items in the universe of discourse. (Putnam, 1981) Thirdly, even if we require that words not merely "correspond" to items in the universe of discourse but be causally connected to them in some way, the required notion of "causal connection" is deeply *intentional*. When we say that a word and its referent must stand in a "causal connection of the appropriate kind", then, even in cases where this is true, the notion of "causal connection" being appealed to is fundamentally the notion of *explanation*. And explanation is a notion which lies in the same circle as reference and truth. (Putnam, 1989).<sup>3</sup>

But why should this be a problem? Why should Williams and other metaphysical realists not just say, "Very well, then. The ultimate description of the world ---the world as it is in itself --- requires intentional notions." (In fact, Williams does not say this; Williams ends his book on Descartes (Williams, 1978) with an endorsement of

Quine's criticism of intentional notions!). The answer, of course, is that a science of the intentional is a we-know-not-what. According to Williams, what gives the notion of an absolute conception of the world clout, what saves this notion from being a "we-know-not-what" is that we have a good idea of what an absolute conception of the world would look like in *present day physics*. But Williams does not expect present day physics, or anything that looks like present day physics, to yield an account of the intentional. He is thus caught in the following predicament: a correspondence theory of truth requires a substantive theory of reference. (And, I have argued, a belief in such a theory is hidden in Williams' talk of "the way things are" *explaining* why we will come to believe "the absolute conception of the world".) If we say, "Well, who knows, perhaps future science ---we know not how ---- will come up with such a theory" ---- then we abandon the claim that we know the *form* of the "absolute conception of the world" *now*. The absolute conception of the world becomes a "We know not what". If we say, on the other hand, "Reference can be reduced to physical parameters", then we commit ourselves to refuting the arguments (e.g., Putnam, 1988) against the possibility of a physicalist reduction of semantic notions. But Williams clearly does not wish to undertake any such commitment.

Instead, Williams' suggestion is that the intentional (or the "semantic") is itself perspectival, and the absolute conception will someday explain why this kind of talk is useful (as it explains why talk of "grass" and "green" is useful, even though "grass" and "green" are not notions that figure in the absolute conception of the world.) But

here Williams shows a wobbly grasp of the logical structure of his own position. For the absolute conception of the world was *defined* in terms of the idea that some statements describe the world with a minimum of "distortion", that they describe it "as it is", that they describe it "independently of perspective" --- and what does any of this talk mean, unless something like a correspondence theory of truth is in place? Williams tacitly *assumes* a correspondence theory of truth when he *defines* the absolute conception, and then forgets that he did this when he suggests that we do not need to assume that such semantic notions as the "content" of a sentence will turn out to figure in the absolute conception itself.

### **Metaphysics and entanglement.**

What led Williams to defend this complicated metaphysical theory was the desire to assert a "truth in relativism" while resisting relativism in science. But in the process of building up this intricate construction with its two kinds of truth (ordinary and "absolute"), its perspectivalism about secondary qualities, ethics (and, oddly, also about the intentional) and its anti-perspectivalism about physics, he often ignores the entanglement of the factual and the ethical --- although he himself stresses that entanglement at other points in his discussion. Consider, for example, the question as to whether we can condemn the Aztec way of life, or, more specifically, the human sacrifice that the Aztecs engaged in. On Williams' view, the Aztec belief that there were supernatural beings who would be angry with the Aztecs if they did not perform the sacrifices was, as a matter of scientific fact wrong. This belief we *can* evaluate. It is simply false; and

the absolute conception of the world, to the extent we can now approximate it, tells us that it is false. But we cannot say that "the Aztec way of life" was wrong. Yet, the feature of the Aztec way of life that troubles us (the massive human sacrifice) and the belief about the world that conflicts with science were interdependent. If we can say that the Aztec belief about the Gods was false, why can we not say that the practice to which it led was wrong (although, to be sure, understandable given the false factual belief)? If we are not allowed to call the practice wrong, why are we allowed to call the belief false? The so-called "absolute" and the ethical are just as entangled as the "factual" and the ethical.

For a very different sort of example, consider the admiration we sometimes feel for the Amish (traditional Mennonite) way of life. Even atheists sometimes admire the community solidarity, the helpfulness, and the simplicity of the Amish way. If a sophisticated atheist who felt this way were asked why he or she admires the Amish, they might say something like this: "I am not necessarily saying we should give up our individualism altogether. But the kind of individualism and competitiveness which has brought so much scientific and economic progress, also brings with it egotism, arrogance, selfishness, and downright cruelty. Even if the Amish way of life rests on what I regard as false beliefs, it does show some of the possibilities of a less competitive, less individualistic form of life; and perhaps we can learn about these possibilities from the Amish without adopting their religion." Now, Williams does not deny that we can say things like this; that we can learn from cultures to which we stand in the relation he calls "the

relativity of distance", cultures which are not "real options" for us. But how does this differ from saying, "Some of the Amish beliefs are false, but other of their beliefs may be true?" Many of Williams' examples load the dice in favor of relativism by taking science to consist of individual judgements which may be called true or false, while taking "cultures" to offer only "take it as a whole or reject it as a whole" options.

The problem with the whole enterprise lies right here: Williams wants to acknowledge the entanglement of fact and value and hold on to the "absolute" character of (ideal) scientific knowledge at the same time. But there is no way to do this. It cannot be the case that scientific knowledge (future fundamental physics) is absolute and nothing else is; for fundamental physics cannot explain the possibility of *referring to* or *stating* anything, including fundamental physics itself. So, if everything that is *not* physics is "perspectival", then the notion of the "absolute" is itself hopelessly perspectival! For that notion, as I have already pointed out, is explained (albeit in a disguised way) in terms of notions which belong to the theory of reference and truth, and not to physics. And the idea of a "relativism of distance" which applies to ethics but not to science also fails, because ethics and science are as entangled as ethics and "fact". What we have in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* is, in fact, *not* a serious argument for ethical relativism, but rather an expression of a mood. Reading *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, one gets the feeling that one is being told that ethical relativism is the "sophisticated" point of view, the "modern" point of view, and that what is being offered is a *sophisti-*



cated reflection on the consequences of this presupposition . But the presupposition itself does not stand up to any kind of examination --- or at least, the way Williams defends the presupposition crumbles the moment one tries to subject it to any sort of careful examination.

### **Entanglement and positivism.**

Relativism appeals to sophisticated people for different reasons. It appeals to Williams because the idea of ethical objectivity is metaphysically unacceptable. He does not see how we could *know* objective ethical truths if there were any. This metaphysical (or is it epistemological?) appeal is one I do not myself feel. It is not that I *do* know how I know that, for example, human dignity and freedom of speech are better than the alternatives, except in the sense of being able to offer the sorts of arguments that ordinary non-metaphysical people with liberal convictions can and do offer. If I am asked to explain how ethical knowledge is possible at all in "absolute" terms, I have no answer. But there are all sorts of cases in which I have to say, "I know this, but I don't know how I know it." Certainly *Physics* doesn't tell me how I know anything.

Another, very different, appeal is to those who fear that the alternative to cultural relativism is cultural imperialism. But recognizing that my judgements claim objective validity and recognizing that I am shaped by a particular culture and that I speak in a particular historical context are not incompatible. I agree with Williams that it would be silly to ask if the way of life of an eighteenth century Samurai is "right" or "wrong"; but the reason this is a silly question isn't that we are too "distant", or that becoming eighteenth century Samurai

isn't a "real option" for us. In my view, it would be a silly question if we *were* eighteenth century Samurai. Indeed, "Is our own way of life right or wrong" is a silly question, although it isn't silly to ask if this or that particular feature of our way of life is right or wrong, and "Is our view of the world right or wrong" is a silly question, although it isn't silly to ask if this or that particular belief is right or wrong. As Dewey and Peirce taught us, real questions require a context and a point. But this is as true of scientific questions as it is of ethical ones. Instead of trying once again to discover some deep truth contained in positivism-- in the fact-value dichotomy, or in "non-cognitivism", or in the verifiability theory of meaning --- we should break the grip of positivism on our thinking once and for all.

The failure of the latest attempt to find some deep truths in positivism is no accident. Although Williams tries to do justice to the entanglement of fact and value, he fails to do so; because positivism was fundamentally a denial of entanglement, an insistence on sharp dichotomies: science-ethics, science-metaphysics, analytic-synthetic. The science-ethics dichotomy that Williams wants to preserve presupposed the science-metaphysics and analytic-synthetic distinctions he rejects. This is why Williams' book-length attempt to spell out his position is either self-contradictory or hopelessly ambiguous at every crucial point.

Recognizing that the entanglement of fact and value, as well as of science and ethics, science and metaphysics, analytic and synthetic, is here to stay may also help us to see our way past another contemporary shibboleth: the supposed incompatibility of universalist (or

"enlightenment") and parochial values. Recently I was struck by something Israel Scheffler has written (Scheffler, 1987): "I have always supposed that the universal and the particular are compatible, that grounding in a particular historical and cultural matrix is inevitable and could not conceivably be in conflict with universal principles. I have thus belonged to both sides of a divide which separated most Jewish academics and intellectuals of my generation." When we argue about the universal applicability of principles like freedom of speech or distributive justice we are not claiming to stand outside of our own tradition, let alone outside of space and time, as some fear; we are standing within a tradition, and trying simultaneously to learn what in that tradition we are prepared to recommend to other traditions *and* to see what in that tradition may be inferior ---inferior either to what other traditions have to offer, or to the best we may be capable of. Williams is right when he says that this kind of reflection may destroy what we have taken to be ethical knowledge; it may certainly lead us to re-evaluate our beliefs, and to abandon *some* of them; but he is wrong when he fears that the most ultimate kind of reflective distance, the kind which is associated with the "absolute conception of the world", will destroy *all* ethical knowledge. Here he is worrying about a distance which is wholly illusory. No conception of the world is "absolute".

Williams describes the "absolute conception of the world" as something required by the very concept of knowledge. What this transcendental moment in Williams' argument shows is that, for him, there is no conceivable alternative to the idea of

an absolute conception of the world---or no alternative save, perhaps, a scepticism as total as that of the ancient Greeks. But we are not forced to choose between scientism and scepticism in the way Williams thinks. The third possibility is to accept the position we are fated to occupy in any case, the position of beings who cannot have a view of the world that does not reflect our interests and values, but who are, for all that, committed to regarding some views of the world ---and, for that matter---some interests and values---as better than others. This may be giving up a certain metaphysical picture of objectivity, but it is not giving up the idea that there are what Dewey called "objective resolutions of problematical situations" ---- objective resolutions to problems which are *situated* , that is in a place, at a time, as opposed to an "absolute" answer to "perspective-independent" questions. And that is objectivity enough.

---

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The philosopher whose views are closest to Williams is, perhaps, David Wiggins. Cf. (Wiggins, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> This argument is due to Kripke (in unpublished lectures).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. My writings from 1978 to 1989, listed in the bibliography.

## REFERENCES

- Cavell, Stanley, 1979. *The Claim of Reason* , Oxford University Press.
- Lewis, David, 1976. *Counterfactuals* , Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- McDowell, John, 1978. "Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* , suppl. vol. 52.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 1979. "Virtue and Reason," *Monist* , 62.
- Murdoch, Iris, 1971. *The Sovereignty of ' Good '* , London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Putnam, Hilary, 1974. "The Corroboration of Theories," in *The Philosophy of Karl Popper* , ed. P.A. Schilpp. LaSalle, IL: Open Court.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 1978. *Meaning and the Moral Sciences* , London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 1980. "Models and Reality," *The Journal of Symbolic Logic* , XLV (reprinted in *Realism and Reason* .)
- \_\_\_\_\_, 1981. *Reason, Truth, and History* , Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 1983. *Realism and Reason* . (vol. 3 of my *Philosophical Papers* . Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 1986. "Information and the Mental," in *Truth and Interpretation* , ed. E. Lepore, (Oxford University Press.)
- \_\_\_\_\_, 1987. *The Many Faces of Realism* . LaSalle, IL: Open Court.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 1988. *Representation and Reality* . Cambridge, Mass.: Bradford Books (a division of M.I.T. Press.)
- \_\_\_\_\_, 1989. "Model Theory and the Factuality of Semantics," in *Reflections on Chomsky* , ed. Alex George. Oxford: Blackwells.
- Quine, Willard V. 1951. "Two Dogmas of Empiricism", first published in *Philosophical Review* ; reprinted in *From a Logical Point of View* , (revised edition, 1961). Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 1963. "Carnap on Logical Truth," in *The Philosophy of Rudolf Carnap* , ed. P.A. Shilpp. LaSalle, IL: Open Court.

- Scheffler, Israel. 1987. *Teachers of My Youth* . (unpublished. Copyright, I. Scheffler.)
- Walsh, Vivian. 1987. "Philosophy and Economics," in *The New Palgrave: A Dictionary of Economics* , vol. 3. eds. J. Eatwell, M. Milgate, and P. Newman. London: The Macmillan Press and New York: The Stockton Press.
- White, Morton. 1956. *Towards Reunion in Philosophy* . Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Wiggins, David. 1987. *Needs, Values, Truth* . Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Williams, Bernard. 1978. *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry* . Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books.
- Williams, Bernard. 1985. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* . Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.