

The Riddle of Reality

Reality is a relationship. It consists not of one absolute thing but of two or more things in relation to each other. Fundamental to relationship is difference (the difference between two or more things), but difference is two-faced. It is both relative and absolute, and the reality that results from it is likewise both relative and absolute.

The Sphinx of existence has posed a riddle: “What is both relative and absolute at the same time?” Difference steps forward to answer it, but difference is two-faced and is therefore itself a riddle. Reality is a riddle but not just any riddle. It is the one, overarching riddle that if answered unlocks the door to everything. The secret to the riddle is difference. Difference is the answer and the answer is real, but difference is two-faced. The riddle of reality has an answer, but alas, the answer is itself a riddle!

The vast majority of people are in denial when it comes to reality. To take paradox seriously would be to stand what they think ought to be real on its head. Could reality be what people think it shouldn't be? It could! A world with its head at the top and its feet at the bottom, that is the expected world—the one nobody has ever experienced! The reason people's search for reality has been a failure is that they have expected to find what they were looking for. But instead of looking in front of them they should have turned to the right *and* to the left *at the same time!*

The world is both this way *and* that. When it's both right side up and up side down, *then* it is righted. If the player with a between-the-legs perspective and the man with the ball could *both* see out of the *same* pair of eyes *then* they would see reality! What people want is a straight answer. If it can't be one way then let it be the other, but PLEASE not both ways at once.

People have tried so hard to make things into what they want them to be. They've insisted, stamped their feet, and refused to take no for an answer. The result hasn't been pretty. It has left temples tarnished, vestments stained, and bodies strewn along the way. One-wayism has not just come to naught; it's been a mockery of everything people hoped for, of everything they thought worth hoping for.

People think the world ought to be simple, that "by rights" it should read like an open book. But it doesn't. The world, at least from people's point of view, is what it ought not to be, and its ought-not-to-beism has people in denial.

Officials' eyes are lowering, and steeple tops are squinching down. One-wayers are in retreat. A legion of Goliaths has been defeated—felled by a single paradoxical stone.

People have sown certainty and reaped paradox. They have planted straightforwardness and harvested equivocation. But who is surprised? Who thought it would be otherwise? And who is disappointed?

Let us not smile, and let us not smirk or be too quick to judge. Despite a thousand missteps and a thousand misgivings all is not lost. Something *is* real. Something *is* forever. Let us sing praises; let us raise our voices; and let us bow in reverence to ambiguity, enigma, and contradiction. *These* are real!

And I can show you they are real. I can prove it to you. Yes, I have proof—good old honest-to-goodness, old-fashioned, *experiential*, proof! Reality was there all the time. People were just looking in the wrong places and were looking for the wrong things. They forgot to check the trash. If *only* they had looked in the trash!

But not to worry, I have found it, dusted it off, cleaned it up, straightened its collar, and made it presentable. It comes with its best foot forward. So don't be bashful. Come take a look. You just might be surprised—very surprised! It's really not bad at all. Once you get to know it, you might take a liking to it.

Three Questions

Of the questions people ask, three stand out from among the rest. These are monumental, historic questions. They have been asked since the first humans stepped out of the bush and into the fray, albeit with considerable variation as to the language used to pose them and the understanding that people have concerning them. Here's how they are stated today:

1. Does God exist?
2. Is science true?
3. Is there life after death?

There are generally two differing attitudes regarding questions that people of every generation, of every culture, and of every religious or philosophical persuasion ask. The first is that they have long ago been answered. The second is that they have no answer. Convictions run strong on both sides of the answered versus unanswerable debate, yet neither side has been able to convince the other (or perhaps themselves) that either one is right. No one to date has come forward with an answer acceptable to all that puts these matters to rest. Nonetheless, the desire to reach universally acceptable conclusions regarding them continues unabated. The difficulty of the task does nothing to dampen the resolve of once and for all effectively addressing them.

The reason past answers get bogged down in controversy, contention, and at times to blows, is because people can't agree on the fundamentals. Until there is common ground, there is no common understanding as to the puzzle to be solved. Until agreement is reached on what is being

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asked, getting to the answers is, of course, out of the question.

Two steps are necessary for a consensus of opinion to be possible. The first is to identify principles that are in agreement with what people experience. The second is for people to take the time and make the effort to acquaint themselves with the principles. This last is, of course, a major hurdle. People's orthodoxy, whether of one stripe or another, leaves them stuck in their ways unwilling to consider new ideas. The net result is that the status quo remains in place.

There are, however, those more innovative persons (maybe one or two of every thousand or so) who consider a new look a meritorious risk if for nothing more than the mere adventure of it. They are usually the ones who have taken up the task themselves at various times before. Although less than satisfied with results so far achieved, they realize that past failures imply no guarantee that the future will be similarly rewarding. These are pioneers who break new ground.

To them I extend a hardy welcome! What follows is the chart that leads to the island and the treasure buried therein. I warn them beforehand that the route may seem circuitous, the waters rough, the shoreline treacherous, and once on dry ground the underbrush thick. And yes, the treasure is buried deep, very deep—a necessary precaution lest some hapless excavator unearth the profundity and haul it away before the adventurers arrive to reap their reward. The courageous seekers shall upon arrival at the treasure site, raise the box from the pit, secure it on level ground, oil the lock, insert the key, apply the crowbar, open the lid, and without further impediment or ceremony, reach out and enrich themselves!

Separability

Every society has roots that extend into the distant past, and people of every society maintain, in one form or another, assumptions and beliefs passed down to them from the past. Young people, looking at the world afresh, set out with what they believe is a clean slate to start anew. They fail, however, to take into account the impressions of childhood and adolescence that invisibly shape their attitudes, habits, and what they take for granted. They see themselves as pioneers and path-breakers while perpetuating beliefs the origins of which go back centuries, millennia, and beyond.

Modern people believe, along with their medieval, renaissance, reformation, and early modern counterparts, in a separation between right and wrong and truth and error. Promoters of modern ideologies, such as republicanism, communism, socialism, fascism, and even anarchism, assume that some things are true and others false. Modern classifications such as liberals versus conservatives are rooted in this belief. Today's society is divided into theists and atheists, evangelicals and evolutionists, Muslims and Christians, feminists and anti-feminists, pro-lifers and pro-choicers, gays and anti-gays, and so on. All such divisions are based on the premise that what is true is separable from what is false. Modern people believe in the certainty that comes from absolute truth. Advocates of causes, both liberal and conservative, carry banners, both visible and invisible, that read, I AM RIGHT AND YOU ARE WRONG.

As to the division between people who "believe in God" versus those who "believe in science," the latter, in modern times, has the upper hand. The reason is that in modern society people ask whether God exists, but nobody asks whether the world exists. Modern religion is founded on

the premise that people are dependent on God and modern science on the premise that people are dependent on the world. Modern people question the former while accepting the latter without question.

Of all the notions of certainty that shape modern culture and make it what it is, none is more fundamental and pervasive than modern assumptions that accept the world as a given. To moderns, objects are real. Humans live and die, but objects, people believe, are forever. People today have “faith” in God, “believe in” the immortality of the soul, but accept the ongoing existence of the material world without condition or reservation. People can’t “take it with them” when they “go” because they believe that “it” is one thing and they are another.

The chief god in the hierarchy of the modern pantheon of gods is the god of absolute separability. When the controversy over quantum physics and the “uncertainty principle” was raging in the 1930s and 40s, Einstein, even though he had been personally involved in the developments that led to the controversy, famously dissented. He couldn’t accept the uncertainty principle because it did away with the concept of absolute separability. Einstein knew that the concept was fundamental and that its elimination would be the end of science as it had been practiced since ancient times. And the dust from the Heisenberg bomb hasn’t settled yet. The bomb that destroyed absolute separability has exploded, and the fallout from the blast is still descending. It will effect personal beliefs, institutional ideologies, and public policies for centuries to come.

Separability is essential to modern cultural beliefs. It is fundamental to the religion that modernity inherited from the past. Modern monotheistic beliefs are founded on the doctrine of the separation of the creator and the created, of God and humans. Monotheism is separated into three parts: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Jews and Muslims are separated into numerous sects and competing factions as are modern Christians. Central to Christian doctrine is

the separation of the soul from the body at death, the separation of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, the separation of the righteous and the wicked in a separate heaven and a separate hell, and so on. In the structure of the Catholic Church the pope is separate from the cardinals, the cardinals from the bishops, the bishops from the priests, and the priests from the laity. Christian worship is separated into the liturgies of various churches. The Catholic mass is divided into separate parts. The Bible read by Eastern Orthodox Christians, Catholics, and Protestants is separated into books, chapters, and verses.

Separability is fundamental to modern science. The Copernican solar system and Kepler's laws of planetary motion assume the separation of the sun from the planets and the planets from each other. Newton's three laws of motion and law of universal gravitation assume the separability of cause and effect, matter and energy, and absolute space and absolute time. Electro-magnetic theory assumes a positive charge is separate from a negative charge in electricity and that a north pole is separate from a south pole in magnetism. Atomic theory assumes that atomic structure is separable into a hierarchy of particles, parts, energies, and functions.

Modern political theory is divided into any number of separate isms that advocate any number of separate ideologies. Modern peoples are divided into races, ethnic groups, religions, and political parties. Central to modernism are categories of occupations, e.g., doctors and nurses in health care; lawyers and judges in the courts; the boss and the boss's subordinates in business; administrators and staff members in institutions; inventors and marketers in product development; producers, writers, and performers in entertainment; and so on.

Up until 1900 modern people almost without exception undertook every action, thought every thought, and believed every belief assuming separability. Since 1900, however, attitudes regarding separability have begun to

change. Starting in 1905 the absoluteness of separability was successfully challenged in the sciences. Einstein developed both the special and general theories of relativity, which denied the absolute difference between time and space and matter and energy. Already mentioned is the development of quantum theory circa 1930 that denied the absolute separability of particles.

Separate but equal doctrines in regard to racial segregation were challenged by the civil rights movement in the 1960s. The separation of gender roles was challenged in the 1970s and 80s. Stigmas attached to homosexuality and the belief that homosexuals should be separated—singled out from the larger, heterosexual populace—began to be questioned beginning about 1980. In the 1990s people in communist countries began to erase the differences between communist, socialist, and capitalist economic theories and practices.

With the advent of the twenty-first century, beliefs based on absolute separability are being challenged on a wide variety of fronts. Nonetheless, up to the present, philosophies that assume separability are not generally questioned and many, if not most, of the assumptions inherited from the past regarding separability and inseparability are still in place today. The question of whether what is real is absolute and therefore separate from what is not real or whether reality is two or more things that are related to each other, has up to the present time been neither asked nor answered.

Relativism

Fundamental to the idea of relativism is relationship. Relativism is based on the interaction of two or more things in relation to each other. Relativism naturally arises out of experience, which is itself relational. Everything that is experienced is experienced in relation to something else that is experienced. No experience is of a single unit. One does not experience one thing by itself. One experiences two or more things in relation to each other or nothing at all.

Bipolarity. Coupled qualities appear within what is called a *bipolar unit*, which has poles that oppose each other like those of a magnet. One pole is positive and the other negative. The coupled qualities that oppose each other are called *bipolar qualities*. For each pair of bipolar qualities there is a corresponding bipolar unit.

Bipolar qualities are experienced by the senses, the emotions, and the mind. Examples of bipolar sensory qualities are *big* and *little* and *crooked* and *straight*. Examples of bipolar emotional qualities are *happy* and *sad* and *calm* and *angry*. Qualities experienced by the mind are of two kinds: interpretive or provisional and judgmental or evaluative. Examples of the first kind are *molecular* and *non-molecular* and *complete* and *partial*. Examples of the second kind are *true* and *false*, and *good* and *evil*.

A bipolar unit consists of three parts: two bipolar qualities and a force in between the two. This in-between force plays a dual role. In one it is relative in that it pulls the bipolar qualities together. In the other it is absolute in that it pushes them apart. The name of this force is *difference*.

<p>Bipolar Unit</p>

<p>Positive bipolar quality----Difference----Negative bipolar quality</p>

A Compound in One. As stated above, experience is relational; nothing is experienced by itself; and everything is experienced in relation to something else. For bipolar qualities to be experienced their relationship must be maintained. Their relationship is, however, founded on contradictory differential forces pushing and pulling against each other. To be experienced bipolar qualities must neither come apart nor merge together. Difference is the force that maintains this relationship. Difference's simultaneous relative and absolute forces produce a continuous dynamic effect within the bipolar unit. As a result of counteractive forces the bipolar unit is in a state of constant tension. Within it is a continuous tug of war in which differential forces are balanced, the one incapable of overcoming the other.

These two counteractive forces result in the simultaneous separability and inseparability of bipolar qualities. As absolute qualities they are separable; as relative qualities they are inseparable. Because bipolar qualities within a bipolar unit are both separable and inseparable at the same time, a bipolar unit is a "compound in one." As separable, the qualities are compound. As inseparable, they are one. As both at the same time they are a compound in one.

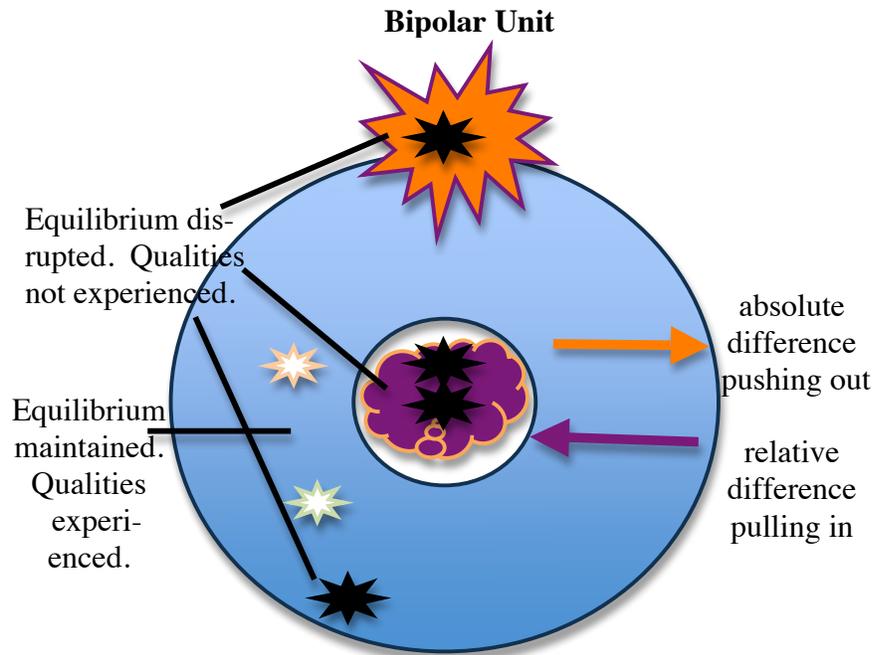
A simple example illustrates this point. The sky is up; the earth is down. The sky and the earth are in two separately distinct places. Up and down are two absolute, separate qualities. Because they are separate they are not one; they are compound. At the same time, however, the sky is up in relation to the earth that is down. If there were no down there would be no up. One is where it is in relation to where the other is. The one cannot be without the other. As relative qualities, up and down are inseparable. They are not compound; they are one.

As absolute, separable qualities, up and down are compound. As relative, inseparable qualities, up and down are one. Because they are both separable and inseparable they

are both compound and one at the same time. They are a compound in one.

A compound in one is a self-contradiction. It is an irresolvable paradox, an unanswerable riddle. It is this way and that way at the same time.

Because experience is relational it is possible only when the contradictory forces within a bipolar unit are in a state of equilibrium. Should the equilibrium be disrupted, should the force that pushes qualities apart overcome the force that pulls them together, the qualities will come apart and the unit will explode. Once the bipolar qualities have been separated they are not experienceable because the relationship between them has been disrupted. Should the force that pulls qualities together overcome the force that pushes them apart the qualities will come together and the unit will implode. Once the bipolar qualities have come together as one they are not experienceable because the relationship between them has been disrupted.



Objects and Modifiers. Qualities are modifiers. They are experienced in relation to objects. Objects function as *intelligibles* because the qualities that modify them have meaning (are intelligible) only in relation to the objects they modify. Qualities are experienced as modifiers of objects. No one experiences qualities such as *big* and *little* separately from objects. They are experienced as modifiers of objects or not at all. Similarly, objects are experienced only when they are modified. No one experiences an object that has no qualities. Qualities are inseparable from the objects they modify, and objects are inseparable from the qualities that modify them.

The bipolar qualities of a bipolar unit modify objects as both separable (absolute) and inseparable (relative) qualities at the same time. This means that an object may be experienced as big or it may be experienced as little—as one or the other. Nonetheless, when it is experienced as big it is also experienced as little and vice versa. That is, it is experienced as both big and little at the same time. For example, a dog may be big or it may be little, and yet if there were no little dogs a big dog would not be big. Bigness is possible only in relation to littleness, and therefore, a big dog is big only to the extent that it isn't little. In addition, a big dog is small in relation to a still bigger dog. A big dog is big in relation to a smaller dog, but small in relation to a bigger dog. Therefore, if a dog is, on the one hand, either big *or* little, it is, on the other, both big *and* little at the same time!

What this means is that in experience there are no absolutes. Nothing is experienced as absolute because everything that is experienced is relative. Nothing is absolutely big or absolutely little. A dog is only big to the extent that it isn't little and little only to the extent that it isn't big. If the bipolar unit big/little exploded both big and little would be separate absolutes and the difference between them would be negated. In this case there could be dogs but no big and little dogs because big and little are no longer related and

are therefore not experienceable. On the other hand, if the bipolar unit imploded, big and little would come together and, as before, the difference between them would be negated. In that case, as before, there could be dogs but no big or little dogs because big and little are no longer related and are therefore not experienceable. In neither of these two cases can big and little be experienced because they are no longer related.

Relativism today. There has long been an argument as to whether qualities, especially those associated with moral values, are relative or absolute. The dispute has been ongoing and seemingly irresolvable. Tradition has insisted that moral values are predetermined and therefore absolute or fixed. People today approach the subject with a great deal of uncertainty. Sensing the hazards of letting go of the absolutes their forbearers relied on and yet uncomfortable with the claims and potential consequences of absolutistic views, they tend to waiver.

Many people today hold mistaken views of what relativism is. They confuse relativism with equality of opinion. They think that relativism is the view that “one person’s opinion is just as good as anybody else’s.” That, however, is a description of a bipolar unit in an imploded state. If everybody is right and nobody is wrong then the difference between right and wrong has been negated. The two have merged together making a relationship between them impossible. In this state, right and wrong cannot be experienced.

Relativism doesn’t mean there is no wrong; it means there is no right except in relation to wrong and vice versa. It means that nothing is *absolutely* right. It means that something is right only to the extent that it isn’t wrong and vice versa. From relativism comes the conclusion that questions regarding right and wrong, truth and falsity, and so on can never be decided absolutely. They are instead forever open-ended.

As stated in the previous chapter, both religion and science as traditionally conceived rely on the principle of absolute separability. Relativism (or anti-absolutism) takes an opposing position. Relativism is contrary to *any* claims regarding absolute truth. It is contrary to all ideologies except one: relativism. From relativism comes the conclusion that no conclusions about anything can be made except one: that there are no conclusions. From relativism comes the ideology that there are no ideologies except the one that assures that there are no ideologies.

Science to an extent accords with relativism. It doesn't claim any absolute truths as to its theories or findings. It rather claims that all scientific theories and findings are provisional. It says that anything and everything scientific is open to question except for one thing. There is only one absolute that science insists on: that the natural world, the universe, is objective. It insists that the natural world is "out there" to be observed and, to the extent possible, understood. Science claims that what is understood concerning the world is not absolute but what the world is, in and of itself, absolute.

Every person who engages in science must hold to the assumption that the world is separate from the observer and that observations made regarding it, because they are of objective things, are objective. Science cannot tolerate or live with the notion that the world is separate from the observer only to the extent that it isn't one with the observer. It cannot live with the relativistic view that what is believed to be in the world is only *out there* in the world to the extent that it is not *in here* in the observer's mind and vice versa.

Science's insistence that the world is a separately-existing, objective entity raises a question about the relationship between the observer and the observed. If the two are related then the world cannot be a separately existing entity. If they are not related then what meaning could there be in observations made by an observer that is dis-

connected from what is observed? This is a problem science has left unresolved. Relativism is an answer to the problem, but not one that science can accept without major revisions in its traditional views as to what science is.

Metaphysics. Metaphysical reality is the sine qua non of existence. It is the fundamental upon which existence itself is founded. Modern people have made two opposing claims when it comes to metaphysical reality. Those who hold purest religious views claim that God is metaphysically real. Those who hold purest scientific views claim that the material world or universe is metaphysically real. Many people (including both Newton and Einstein) straddle the fence claiming that both God and the universe are metaphysically real.

Modern claims regarding metaphysics are assumptions only. They are not based on evidence. Rather, moderns begin with an assumption as to what is metaphysically real and then reason from there using the assumption as a basis for reasoning. Assuming that God is the only reality, one can reason, for example, that the universe was created by God, that God is the eternal lawgiver, and that therefore the laws of morality are absolutely fixed and certain. Similarly, if one assumes that the universe is an objective, always-existing entity, then one can reason from there that, for example, there are certain fixed laws or principles that govern the forces inherent within the universe.

The difficulty one encounters when one reasons from an assumed but unfounded starting point is that one is starting from a *tabula rasa*—a blank sheet. When no evidence is required as a basis for a starting point any starting point can be assumed. One can assume anything, and people over the ages have assumed many different things when it comes to metaphysical points of beginning. One group may smile at the assumptions other groups have made, but those other groups can smile back just as intently. Nobody has the upper hand when everybody is merely making assumptions. Here is an open playing field

with no rules or limits except one's inclinations, fears, hopes, desires, and so on.

All this changes when one looks to experience for metaphysical reality. When one looks to experience for the foundation, the *sine qua non* of existence, one need make no assumptions. The fundamental existent is there to be observed. It is unmistakable. It is real. It is self-evident. It is *difference*. Difference is the force that governs the relationship between bipolar qualities. It is the fundamental that makes experience possible. It is a given. No source of origin regarding it can be cited. It just is. Where it comes from or how it came to be nobody knows. It is a metaphysical reality that needs no justification for its existence other than that it is experienced. Everyone knows that it is and what it is because everyone experiences it.

Experience confirms that difference is a constant. It is the constant that maintains the stability of a bipolar unit. Within a bipolar unit differential forces are in a state of equilibrium. Outside of the unit difference either pushes harder than it pulls or vice versa. When one of the qualities of a bipolar unit crosses the outer boundary, the qualities separate and the unit explodes; when both qualities cross the inner boundary, and the two come together, the unit implodes. Despite the resulting destruction of the unit, however, difference remains unaffected. Although the unit has either exploded or imploded, difference remains intact.

Difference is the force that makes relationships possible. Experience is relational, and therefore, difference is the force that makes experience possible.

Difference is necessary for judgment to be possible. When one attempts to base one's judgment on only bipolar qualities that are the same rather than different, judgment becomes impossible. When the claim is made that either 1) a certain person is always right and never wrong or 2) that right and wrong are the same, what it means to be right or wrong vanishes. With that claim, the concept (bipolar unit) of right and wrong either explodes because one of the bipo-

lar qualities is no longer considered or implodes because the one is considered to be the same as the other. In either case no judgment is possible because in the process of denial regarding the absolute or relative difference between right and wrong judgment itself has been negated. Nonetheless, despite either the explosion or implosion of judgment (the bipolar unit) difference (between two bipolar qualities) remains constant. Judgment may be set aside but it can never be eradicated because difference is *always* present. Whenever the relative and absolute difference between bipolar qualities is acknowledged judgment is viable.

The point of beginning, the metaphysical reality, from which one reasons, is everything when it comes to the conclusions one reaches. The conclusions are inherent in the starting point. If one begins by assuming absolute, separately-existing entities such as God or the universe one will end with determinism. Modern views have been deterministic because they assume an absolute as a starting point. From a religious perspective God ultimately determines everything or else there is no God, and from a scientific perspective the universe determines everything or else there is no universe. One can combine these two views, but in so doing one will still end with deterministic conclusions, as many have.

Although moderns still adhere to absolutist views they do not do so unequivocally. Relativism has been equated with secularism, and the battle lines between relativism and absolutism have to an extent been equated with the division between conservatives and liberals in general. At times, relativistic views appear to be gaining an upper hand, and those with traditional views have interpreted those gains as evidence of a breakdown in moral values. They attribute the breakdown to the *panem et circences*, nihilistic views of a gadget-loving, freethinking, affluent, "soft," society that has lost its way.

Despite the intensity of the argument between liberals and conservatives their dialogue has not been significant

because both sides have failed to grasp the real significance of relativism. What neither side realizes is that *both* the religious views of the conservatives and the scientific views of the liberals are threatened by relativism. Both are ideologies, and all ideologies, except the one that says there are no ideologies, are denied by relativism.

Moderns have assumed that what is real is either the God who created them or the universe from which they naturally arose. What both of these assumptions have in common is that what is assumed to be real is believed to be separate from the experiencer. This belief in the absolute separability of the experiencer and the experienced is the basis of modern ideology. Moderns have made the assumption that either God or the universe is real and that therefore people are not real. According to moderns either God or the universe is original, and (in either case) humans are derivative.

Relativism changes all that. With relativism comes the view that bipolar qualities, at once separable and inseparable, are related and that their relationship is based on the simultaneous separability and inseparability of the two qualities. Difference pushes the two apart while pulling them together. They are a compound in one; they are two yet one at the same time. This means that humans are separable from whatever is apart from them only to the extent that they are inseparable from what would otherwise be apart from them. It means that the question of the separability or inseparability of humans and their environment can never be decided. The question of the sameness of or the difference between a person and the person's surroundings is open-ended. At times it will appear to be one way and at times the other but at no time will a conclusion one way or the other be reached. People can go on arguing about it forever because there is just as much evidence in favor as there is against. A "preponderance of the evidence" one way or the other will never be established. Ar-

guments on neither side of the question ultimately matter because no conclusion either way is possible.

Revolution. The consequences of the relativistic perspective are, to say the least, revolutionary. One could take the view that if there are no conclusions then, in the words of the preacher, "all is vanity." That attitude, however, is not a possibility because it is itself a conclusion. Whether existence is meaningful or not is, relativistically speaking, an open-ended question. The answer will be forever pursued, but it will never be reached.

What can be concluded is that life is a challenge that cannot be set aside. One cannot assume an absolute and then let things take care of themselves. That won't do because the absolute will always be questioned. It will inevitably slide back into relativism. If one says with the theist "God is in his heavens," one may be wrong. If, on the other hand, one says with the atheist "live for now because after death there is nothing," one may be wrong. What then shall one do? One thing is for sure: one cannot throw one's hands into the air. Giving up is not an option. No matter what people do they cannot rid themselves of the challenge of what it means to be alive. To do so would be to claim to reach a conclusion that can't be reached. Neither absolute affirmation nor absolute denial will achieve anything because the challenge still remains.

The only realistic approach is to face the challenge head on. The future may bring good things and it may bring bad. When I die there may be something or nothing. I don't know which way it is, and so I ask myself, how can I live beneficially under these circumstances? One thing is for sure; I must address every issue from the perspective that both sides of every question are possibilities. This both-sides-at-once perspective rules out the traditional dichotomy between liberals and conservatives because they both claim exclusivity. It does not rule out the possibility that either God exists or that science is true. It accepts both of these as possibilities. What is different about the relativis-

tic perspective is that it views these as possibilities among an infinite number of possibilities. The relativistic playing field is unlimited. From a relativistic point of view the bite or the sting goes out of traditional liberal and conservative positions because once neither one is considered to be exclusively the right one, both are negated.

Difference, a metaphysical reality that is both absolute and relative at the same time, negates the possibility of certainty. Only uncertainty is real. One faces right only to the extent that one does not face left and vice versa. One faces both ways at once, and in this both-ways-at-once position one encounters uncertainty. Whether and the extent to which uncertainty is good or bad is an open-ended question. From uncertainty come, on the one hand, hazards and risks and, on the other, freedom of choice and opportunity. Only one thing is for sure: that nothing is for sure. And so one continues on. One does so with difference at one's back. Differential winds fill one's sails and push one forward, but to where one does not know.

Beyond Experience

A signature, though often unnoticed, tenet of modern culture is the notion that reality is unknowable. Modern science and religion here find common ground. Both hold that human experience misses the mark, failing to reach up to either God or the universe. Reality, moderns believe, is beyond the limits of what people are capable of experiencing.

This belief is seldom openly spoken of, but it nonetheless constitutes the groundwork upon which modern society is founded. Despite the optimism that permeates modern outlooks there is an accompanying pessimism inherent in the underlying belief that the rewards of living are limited and temporary because reality, whatever it is, is unattainable.

While modern people applaud technological achievements and scientific advances, they are all too frequently reminded of the shortcomings and failings of modern science. They are anything but immune from the horrors, both potential and realized, of a technology that is equipped with catastrophic destructive powers, but which is beyond the ability of science itself to either understand or control. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is perhaps the most prominent of a long series of narratives that dramatize the terrors of technology gone wrong. The theme persists in the science fiction of today as it did in the popular literature of past generations.

Underlying the sense that modern science could be the destroyer rather than the savior of modern society is the belief that while scientists know how to make technology work they lack knowledge of what it is. Behind the Frankenstein story is a foreboding sense that scientists build better than they know. Mary Shelley's Victor Frankenstein is

able to create a monster, but from the moment of its creation on, its realm of existence is outside the jurisdiction of its creator. The monster is free to do whatever it wants, and its creator, though responsible for the monster's existence, is nothing more than a helpless bystander who watches in horror as the inevitable destruction unfolds.

There is an analogy, which Mary Shelley alludes to, that equates the Frankenstein/monster relationship in her book with John Milton's God/Satan relationship in *Paradise Lost*. The analogy can be taken one step further to include the God/human relationship as found in the writings of the Christian theologian St. Augustine and as depicted by the Michelangelo frescos on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. In each of these cases there is an impassable barrier between the creator and the created. Mary Shelley's Victor Frankenstein is a step removed from his creation. God in *Paradise Lost*, though he is the creator of the legions of heaven, can resist but not stop the uprising of the fallen Lucifer and his band of traitorous angels. And, as per the writings of Augustine and the artwork of Michelangelo, the omnipotent power of heaven looks down from on high as Adam, the first man, follows the woman who tempts him rather than the God who created him.

Mary Shelley brings science, religion, and philosophy together as she explores the question of the gap that modern society places between experience and reality. How can it be that reality could create non-reality and then divorce itself of any responsibility for having created it? That is the question that modern beliefs and attitudes pose. Mary Shelley doesn't answer the question; she rather dramatizes it in a story of death and destruction, the imprint of which is indelibly stamped on the guilt complex of modern people.

I say guilt complex because there is something obviously wrong with a species capable of creating something that has the power to destroy them, but which they, like Frankenstein the brilliant scientist and God the omnipotent

creator, cannot control. Modern people believe they know so much more than their ancestors, and yet they have been unable to free themselves from the trap set for them by their ancestors. The reason they have so ensnared themselves is because they, despite the “progress” of modern society and the “advance” of knowledge in modern life, are unable to rid themselves of the enigma their ancestors have passed down to them. Neither the people of today nor their ancestors of yesterday have an answer to the “reality problem” that has plagued modernity since its beginning. The problem accrues from the belief that neither experience nor the people who experience are real, and yet they are created either by God or by forces inherent in the universe that are real. Reality has the power to create, but what it creates isn’t real. That’s what moderns believe and from that belief comes the foreboding sense that whatever reality is it remains forever hidden from the less-than-real people who are unable to experience it.

Modern people can’t get past their dilemma because they insist that knowledge is objective. They believe that the only knowledge that is true is knowledge of objective entities. They believe that objective entities do not change. The ultimate objective entities are, according to modern beliefs, God, the universe, or both. Nonetheless, experience is relational, which means that what is experienced are things that are relative to each other. Relationships are dynamic; they change. The absolute is static; it remains constant. According to modern society, nothing that is constant is experienced because the objects of experience are changing. God and the universe, as defined by modern society, are absolute objective entities that do not change. They cannot be experienced because experience is about things that change. Modern society believes that what is real cannot be known because it isn’t experienced. How does modern society know that? If what is claimed to be real cannot be experienced how does anyone know that what is claimed to be real really exists?

That is the conundrum of modern society. It's the question asked but never answered. It is the conundrum modern society has ended up with in its attempt to avoid the conundrum of relativism. The difference between the two is that one results from what is not experienced while the other from what is experienced. A question moderns have not considered is whether one of these is preferable to the other.