

AN ANSWER TO RELATIVISM?

Does relativism matter? This may seem an odd question, since intense debate between the several varieties of objectivism and the several varieties of relativism is a prominent feature of the contemporary intellectual scene. Many conservative objectivists see the pervasive relativism in the academy and modern culture as a threat to civilization itself. Writers like Derrida and Foucault are seen as a pan-disciplinary plague, sweeping into disciplines like literary studies, philosophy, and sociology, but also into unexpected areas like accountancy, architecture, and law. A critic like Allan Bloom in *The Closing of the American Mind*, for example, sees the relativistic attitudes of teachers in the humanities as a threat not only to scholarship but to fundamental cultural values.¹

On the other side of the fence many radical intellectuals have embraced what they see as the fundamental pluralism and relativism of 'postmodernism'. The postmodern condition is one in which intellectual work is no longer constrained by prescriptive and scientific methodologies or dragooned by totalizing discourses that seek to prescribe a necessary future and a 'progressive' social role for the intellectual. The free play of discourse, the breaking-down of the boundaries between criticism and creativity, between the pretensions to a purely logical discourse and writing, are the gains of postmodernity. It is those committed to an Enlightenment conception of knowledge as emancipatory truth or to the positivist vision of science as value-neutral objective research who are trying to sustain an obsolete myth of the role of the intellectual. It is a myth that can avoid putting knowledge at the service of domination only by the intellectually tyrannical device of imagining a necessary future and the essential role of knowledge in bringing about that future and 'setting us free'.

Conservative objectivists and radical postmodernists both link their discussions of the place of the intellectual to epistemological questions. I shall argue that whilst linking the two sets of questions is necessary, their ways of doing so are unhelpful in mitigating the consequences of relativism. Both sides in the debate tend to overblow the contest into a battle for the future of civilization.

Like most debates in which the 'future of civilization' has apparently been at stake, nothing much actually happens. Civilization doesn't end. It needs more than squabbling intellectuals to bring that about. Most disciplines can survive

a superstructure of methodological and meta-theoretical debate. It is only in knowledges and disciplinary areas that are in grave trouble anyway that interminable and corrosive methodological struggles break out and come to inhibit other activities. The other reason nothing much happens is that most of the 'debates' are inextricably confused. Imaginary enemies are created and then defeated; the complex varieties of relativism get lumped together and attacked and then defended in turn as if they represented a homogeneous 'problem'. Most relativists are not stupid enough to believe the positions ascribed to them, and most 'refutations' of relativism are so meretricious that intelligent people who have other reasons for saying what they do simply carry on regardless. Few disciplines are strongly enough controlled by explicit methodological protocols for a methodological debate to be decisive in its effect on their activities. Most disciplines have largely unexamined presuppositions or founding myths that make rational conformity to a methodological programme impossible, particularly to one imported from outside.

Many knowledges' general doctrines are in practice curious amalgams of universalistic and relativistic, objectivist and conventionalist arguments. Only in the field of pure epistemology and general methodological doctrines can clear, abstract positions be taken on one side or the other of the relativist and objectivist divide. But then such positions are uncontaminated by and therefore also less effective on the messy necessities of intellectual work. Social anthropology is a good example of this complex crossing of relativist and non-relativist arguments in a definite discipline. A certain relativism is virtually constitutive of modern social anthropology. Anthropology exists by virtue of cultural difference, radical divergences in cultural values and social ways of living. It explores those differences as the product of social relations and socially conditioned beliefs. It is compelled to consider socially and culturally specific beliefs, values, and knowledges as consequential for social activities. It follows that, considered from the standpoint of social relations, certain activities are socially necessary and a sufficient degree of conformity to them is a condition for the continuance of the social order. Anthropology is condemned to see both sides of the Pyrenees as living by codes appropriate to their conditions. If it does not, it gradually shades into some other discipline or activity, one which acts to reduce difference according to a general programme of its own rather than to reflect it.

But anthropologists are not constitutively committed to a methodological relativism that reduces knowledge to a mere perspectivalism. Some radical relativists do argue that cultural difference is not merely an object of knowledge but necessarily enters into knowledge itself. Societies can be known only in terms of their own meanings and these meanings are incommensurable with our own and cannot be fully translated into our own language. Such a view explodes anthropology as a social science; instead it becomes a series of mutually incompatible and socially conditioned societal perspectives. It is ultimately destructive of anthropology itself, since by denying any comparability or generalizability of anthropological knowledge, it makes difference absolute and incommunicable. But anthropologists opposed to this perspectivalism are not thereby committed to some particular objectivist epistemological

doctrine or to a strong form of universalism in which anthropology is seen as part of a unified scientific enterprise using one set of common methodological protocols. To refuse the consequences of one position does not necessarily imply embracing its mirror opposite.

THE PRE-MODERN CONDITION

Anthropology is not alone in being constituted by a certain type of relativism. The Jesuit missionaries of the seventeenth century recognized the necessity of accepting, understanding, and adapting to cultural difference. God had created a world where the institutions sustaining Christendom were confined to certain localities. The Christian message was, however, universal and Christians must preach it to all. How then to deal with stable, well-governed pagan societies like Japan and China whose civilized elites had developed their own codes of ethics and beliefs? In order to carry the Christian message elsewhere its envoys had to adapt it to other beliefs, other institutions, and other expectations, to render it intelligible and acceptable. This led to the subversive conclusion that God's message had itself been adapted to its first receptors and that the Bible was an amalgam of eternal truths and an expository content adapted to the people to whom they were revealed.² In like manner the different classes and conditions of persons in Christian society needed a message and a set of religious practices adapted to their different circumstances. Haughty but delicate aristocratic ladies needed quite different penances from peasants, for example. Jesuit casuistry, sophisticated in its relativism and complex in its application to different conditions, repelled many of the more fundamentally and puristically pious. Pascal's *Provincial Letters* are a devastating criticism of Jesuit casuistry, but founded on a pious incomprehension of the necessities driving the Jesuits towards such a practice.³

This reference to the Jesuits should remind us that the fear of relativism is nothing new. Relativism usually springs from a set of differences that cannot be eliminated by argument or evidence alone. Such differences are not merely intellectual, they include not only quite distinct forms of or approaches to knowledge, but different patterns of social belief and different institutions. Relativism of a non-meretricious kind usually stems from the recognition of such difference as inescapable, or, where relativism is conceived as a form of pluralism, as actually beneficial. Anti-relativism, on the contrary, often stems from a commitment to one of the different forms in contest and at worst leads to a wish to eliminate the others.

The modern world is not the first to experience radical difference in knowledge, belief, and institutions as both a fact and, for some, a problem. People who regard the 'postmodern condition' as unique generally seem to believe the world began in 1900. Well, it did not, and laments about a world in which radically incompatible ideas, beliefs, and institutions exist are not new. Late antiquity involved a fundamental conflict between a highly developed but narrowly elitist pagan high culture and Christianity, a conflict reflected graphically in Augustine's *Confessions*.⁴ Again, the seventeenth century presented a problem to sophisticated Christian intellectuals: the problem of an

absent God (*deus absconditus*). God had revealed His message to man in the Bible, but He no longer spoke directly to man. How then to divine His purposes and reach Him in a world of conflicting religious doctrines and radically different beliefs about His motives and purposes? This was a problem as tormenting to Catholics like Pascal as to Calvinists like Pierre Bayle. Uncertainty was created, not merely by the fact of religious difference but by the impact of philosophical scepticism on both sides of the religious divide. Pascal offered a thoroughly 'modern' solution in the form of his 'wager'. The essence of Pascal's dilemma: uncertainty and sceptical belief lead to eternal damnation if God exists, whilst belief leads to eternal felicity. Even if the probability that God exists is small, the costs of not wagering that He does exist are incalculable if we do at last come before Him. Belief is thus a rational decision even in a situation of extreme doubt and uncertainty.

Pascal was trying to rescue faith from uncertainty, from the corrosive effects of a plurality of religious systems, but by intellectual means far removed from the certainties of traditional faith.⁵ Bayle, unlike Pascal, does not seek to overcome scepticism but rather to use it to explore and explode the confusions created by religious doctrines for religious belief itself. Bayle showed, for example, the impossibility of arriving at a satisfactory theodicy and of resolving the problem of evil by means of reason. Faith could be found only by individuals. Therefore, all forced conversion to religious doctrine as a way of resolving religious differences was not merely unjust but ineffective. Bayle produced the best and most thoroughgoing arguments for religious toleration of his time. Religious toleration and the insistence, on religious grounds, of freedom of individual conscience in matters of religion, offered a way out of the impasse of contesting religious dogmas. A plurality of doctrines each claiming to be the true faith and each in bitter contest to extirpate the others could only ruin religion.⁶

The difference between the seventeenth century and today is not that of a plurality of incompatible views, but rather that our incompatible views are about quite different things, such as economic policy or lifestyle politics, and that where differences about religion remain they are in an entirely new context. Modern intellectuals are even more confused than were seventeenth-century thinkers like Bayle. We are no longer predominantly concerned with the question of which is the true faith. Modern intellectuals are far more diverse in aims, methods, and social positions than were the theologians representing the contesting Christian confessions in the seventeenth century. However, what turning to the example of thinkers like Pascal and Bayle shows is that often the most effective way of coping with radical differences in ideas is to side-step them. Pascal's 'wager' and Bayle's use of scepticism to reveal the impossibility of arriving at a consistent religious doctrine, and, therefore, the unjustifiability of compelling observance of such doctrine, are precisely such strategies for overcoming conflicts.

A plurality of religious beliefs mattered in the seventeenth century because religion remained the predominant human concern. Today the situation is more complicated. We have multiple domains in which there are pluralities of view, and it is difficult either to rank or to separate them. Indeed, these

distinct domains are often aggregated by people who think the world is going to pot because we do not stick to the old verities. But what are the old verities and do they in turn hang together? Why should we aggregate together people who subscribe to Paul Feyerabend's relativistic anti-methodology⁷ and people who believe in multicultural education? Presumably one can be an unreconstructed Popperian and yet believe in multicultural education - it may even count as 'piecemeal social engineering'? Curious amalgams are built up on both sides of this 'debate'. 'Western' values, objective scientific truth, and the institution of the 'bourgeois' family add up to a consistent whole to some, and are seen as threatened by subversive 'relativist' arguments. The assumption here is that we can reconstruct a homogeneous cultural and social world - an assumption which, moreover, makes it possible to be simultaneously and connectedly worried about epistemological doctrines and whether gay activists have too much influence on children.

COMPETING METHODOLOGIES AND THE DISCIPLINARY FIELD

If one chooses to remain at the level of abstract epistemological doctrines the battle-lines between relativism and objectivism are clear, but the underlying sources of the conflict are less intelligible. For example, many people have subscribed to Thomas Kuhn's views in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* about incommensurable paradigms and scientific change through revolution⁸ for reasons that have little to do with its merits as an account of the history of science and a great deal to do with their generally radical political views or with the internal politics in their own discipline. Epistemological conflicts are so often a displaced forum for other differences. If anything it is fields that are radically unlike the major natural sciences - sociology, for example - that are most influenced by methodologies derived from the philosophy of science.

Prescriptive and objectivist epistemological doctrines are effective only in so far as they inhibit what can be said or done in a particular disciplinary field, by imposing a single model of what knowledge should look like. In so far as that model is in conflict with the objectives and actual working methods of members of the discipline these members will resist it in various ways, including producing relativist or conventionalist arguments to counter the legislative pretensions of the epistemological doctrine in question. Relativism is thus in part a by-product of objectivism and universalism imposed in the form of prescriptive methodological protocols. Epistemological arguments are inherently indecisive precisely because generalized methodological doctrines cannot actually 'guarantee' standards of validity or procedures of research in particular fields. These standards and procedures have to be developed at a quite different level and may have little connection in practice with the prevailing doctrine of which they are supposed to be exemplars.

Likewise relativistic arguments, even if they deny the relevance of prescriptive epistemological doctrines, are effective only in terms of their impact on a particular disciplinary field. This impact can be beneficial if it preserves the autonomy of work in a certain area, or detrimental if it undermines research by problematizing its status. Many Marxists in the west

opposed Popperian and logical positivist models of knowledge based on the natural sciences precisely because they saw them as means of relegating Marxism to the junk-heap category of unverifiable or unfalsifiable metaphysics. Often they did so by means of relativistic arguments and by conceiving Marxism as a humanistic intellectual activity quite distinct from the supposed positivism of the natural sciences. This has also been the tactic of sociologists seeking to avoid the model of valid knowledge as the discovery of general laws.

An example of a disastrous form of relativism is to be found in the sociology of deviance. The tactic here is to demonstrate that as standards of conduct differ between societies and different historical periods in the same society, the currently prevailing conceptions of crime, delinquency, mental illness, etc., are merely 'normative expressions' of our society and lack objectivity. As a tactic in questioning uncritical positivists in criminology or medicine, who identify their own actions with objectivity, this has at best limited value. It becomes absurd when one moves beyond such criticism to ask 'What then *should* one do?' We are not helped greatly by being told that things were done differently in medieval Europe or that quite different conceptions prevail among the Hopi, and that our ways of doing things are historically limited and not inevitable. True, but we are trying to deal with certain problems of conduct and are not living in a perpetual sociology seminar. As the relativism of anthropology indicates, certain beliefs and activities are necessary to certain social relations. The sociologist cannot pretend to be an indifferent observer or a merely clever academic critic of his or her society for ever, without paying the price of being seen as such and dismissed as an irrelevancy.⁹

POLITICS AND KNOWLEDGE IN A PLURALIST ERA

Relativist arguments *can* be intellectually destructive but so can the use of objectivist epistemological doctrines as part of an intellectual 'police action', putting certain theories, methods of working, and objects of knowledge in the category of the impermissible. The problem is that despite this we *do* need to differentiate between valid and invalid theories, knowledges, and ideas. And not only in the academy. A world in which 'anything goes' might be all right so long as all participants accepted that that was so; one would have to tolerate things one felt were silly but at least one would be tolerated in turn.¹⁰ But some participants in such a world would abuse the liberty of 'anything goes' to impose their own views, certain of which would be simply intolerable: for example, the parading of race prejudice as if it were objective scientific knowledge. In such a relativist Utopia creationists would enjoy *de facto* equal regard with evolutionary biology in educational establishments.

We cannot abandon the search for specific standards of validity as if they were no more than an old-fashioned nineteenth-century positivist illusion, out of date in a world of multiple perspectives and the creative use of whatever discursive resources we please. Validity - the determination of whether a belief or a knowledge claim is justified or not - is an issue that predated modern science, nineteenth-century positivism, and the Enlightenment. As we have

seen, in the seventeenth century the issue of the validity of forms of *faith* was a central question. In the seventeenth century this issue of the validity of faith was the burning question of knowledge: far more important than the validity of propositions about the natural world. Today the political sustainability of beliefs in a pluralist era is far more central to the issue of relativism and validity than any purely methodological dispute about academic disciplines.

Validity is as much a political issue as it is an intellectual one. What beliefs are taken as valid determines the whole tenor of the social order. Some beliefs may be legally tolerable as private eccentricities. I can believe the earth is flat; but this belief would be deleterious if I should become a successful educational reformer seeking to give this view equal time with other views in schools. Certain beliefs have not merely to be struggled against intellectually, to be *shown* to be wrong, but also legally proscribed in order to prevent them from having social effect. If it is objected that this is illiberal, the answer is that certain beliefs *are* wrong and that their propagation has had or could have disastrous consequences, as the example of scientific racism demonstrates. To claim to be justified in legally proscribing the active advocacy of race supremacy, we must, however, feel justified in the belief that scientific racism is not valid.

Any society sets limits to beliefs. In societies where there is the presumption of freedom of opinion and toleration of different views, the suppression of belief needs to be based on more than an opposing belief, on righteous prejudice. It must be based on the justifiable claim that the belief subject to challenge is unjustifiable, invalid, and harmful. Liberal societies have to be pluralistic and relativistic, but within limits. If they concede that 'anything goes' in the matter of opinion and that one person's validity is another person's trash, and so be it, then they are in danger of dissolution.

A liberal polity has to keep well away from righteous prejudice, but it cannot evade the question of the validity of its members' beliefs and the consequences arising therefrom. It will not be greatly helped in this by philosophical epistemology or methodological doctrines developed in the philosophy of science. To this an objection may be raised: 'How then *is* the validity or invalidity of a belief to be assessed?' The answer is simple, by arguing and showing it to be valid or otherwise. This task has always to be accomplished by arguments and evidence appropriate to the specific case in question. If these demonstrations or demolitions work, they work; there are no general 'guarantees' other than the specific processes of arguing and showing that will make them work. To ask 'How do we know that our arguments are valid, our evidence is sufficient?' is to pitch us back into the domain of 'guarantees' and into the morass of philosophical epistemology. We can answer the question only by hammering out the arguments and amassing the evidence.

But surely people can agree to be convinced by bad arguments and unsatisfactory evidence? Yes, they do so all the time, often in pursuit of conformity with methodological protocols. Consensus is usually the product of forces other than methodological argument and usually reflects a wider consensus with other determinants. What if we are convinced in matters of

validity merely as a matter of convenient consensus, if all we have is an agreement to agree that x or y is or is not the case? Such agreements to agree are not a general problem; they can be a specific problem but they can also be part and parcel of a sustainable intellectual and social order. Some agreements to agree are inescapable, even if they rest on social consensus rather than quality of argument, on the acceptance of the validity of certain beliefs determined by unexamined presuppositions and myths. All disciplines and societies have some elements of such agreements to agree as a constitutive part of their activities. If they become self-defeating, if irreconcilable differences arise, then arguments about validity break out. We may be victims of our own assumptions about method and the entities that exist in our world but we can never be wholly free of such assumptions. This is one of the greatest illusions of legislative epistemology, that we can ground by pure philosophy how we know that we know without error, illusion, and compromise.

Indeed, one can say that the worst sort of agreements to agree are not those that arise from unargued presuppositions but, on the contrary, those that would arise from the conviction that we possess general and satisfactory methodological protocols. If one thinks a particular epistemological doctrine is a sovereign remedy against methodological error then one is in grave danger of such a dangerous consensus breaking out. In fact the general acceptance of such a doctrine could itself be the product of an agreement to agree, which would then determine in a general way what are to count as good and bad arguments. How then would we verify those claims? We could not; we would be the victims of our own invincible methodological ignorance.

Actually, this form of invincible ignorance has seldom been stabilized for long. We do not have one dominant epistemological doctrine but a plurality of doctrines, each of which jostles the others for priority and each of which provides counter-defences against the presumptions and partialities of the others. Methodological pluralism is a fact of life. It also provides resources for a mutual check on the pretensions as to standards of validity that each epistemological doctrine necessarily shares.

Usually, this methodological pluralism enters into contests about standards of good and bad argument only by providing general 'philosophical cover': arguments about validity are actually conducted at a less general level and hinge on specific issues and focuses of dispute. Trying to establish the validity of beliefs by specific processes of arguing and showing is no guarantee against falsehood. But endlessly posing the general question 'How do you know that you know?' and seeking a general philosophical answer is no guarantee either. Arguing and showing are, of course, single words for a multiplicity of styles of reasoning and forms of evidentialization.¹¹ The form of argument or the type of evidence used will depend on the case at issue, the discipline in question, and the broader social and political implications of the validity of the ideas or beliefs in question. The fact that reason is not all of a piece, that styles of argument and standards of evidence change over time and with reference to the issues involved is not a general problem. To try to make it so is to enter into the same kind of relativistic limbo as the sociologists of deviance mentioned above. That is to say, the challenge to the styles and standards we

currently use that they are historically and socially specific is no challenge at all.

That styles of reasoning and standards of evidence change does not undo, of itself, the arguing and showing of either the past or the present. The determination of the validity of belief by methods that we no longer use was effective in its time for the purposes of its time. We think none the worse of past refutations of erroneous beliefs because they were accomplished with the aid of methods of reasoning we would not employ today. Equally, we are not threatened by the fact that past thinkers we deem valuable and intelligent contributors to our present state of knowledge were led by their general styles of argument to conclusions we know to be erroneous. Leading thinkers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries argued rigorously for the existence of witches or the legal validity of persecuting people accused of being such. We do not believe in witches and feel secure in our grounds for knowing belief in the reality and efficacy of witchcraft to be false. We can appreciate why thinkers argued as they did from their premisses and why they made the assumptions they did. We can see these premisses and assumptions to be wrong, but we can appreciate the rigour and efficacy of their arguments in the context of such premisses and assumptions. Some of our own ideas and arguments will doubtless fall into the same category. This fact does not, however, undermine any of our specific arguments or processes of evidentialization: only counter-arguments and counter-evidence effective in the present can do that.¹²

A degree of epistemological and ethical relativism is inescapable today. We live in a world with an increasing multiplicity of different disciplines and types of knowledge. We would be more than hard-pressed to find a single methodological doctrine that adequately covered and respected this diversity and yet which was not impossibly bland as a result of doing so. We live in a world of differing ethical standards and social objectives, in which a certain social pluralism is the only answer to either perpetual strife or the tyrannical imposition of one set of values. At both levels a degree of acceptance of diversity by a species of relativism is necessary. It is a condition for a degree of toleration. But a generalized relativism that dodges the issue of the validity of beliefs in a complete epistemological and social liberalism is a dangerous accentuation of the differences we encounter. We also face the necessity of imposing justified limits on belief in both the intellectual and the social spheres if the world of knowledge and society as a whole is not to be torn apart by the consequences of certain beliefs.

I have tried to avoid discussing the question of relativism at the level of abstract philosophical doctrines *pro* and *contra*. Approaching the question by looking at the social sources of difference which lead to their reflection in relativist views enables us to understand why relativism is endemic and ineradicable in modern intellectual debate. It also enables us to understand why a philosophically generalized and thoroughgoing relativism is incompatible with sustaining the conditions for a tolerant and pluralistic intellectual and political order. This is exactly the opposite conclusion to the one that leading philosophical relativists draw when they argue that freedoms to

develop knowledge and political freedom depend on accepting the slogan 'anything goes'. It is also a very different conclusion from those who get hottest under the collar about 'objectivity'. The more grandiloquent forms of objectivism and universalism seek to answer relativism by extirpating it. They perceive it to be a dangerous pest of a single species. In fact such arguments tend to feed the case made by the more generalizing relativists about the tyrannical nature of objectivist philosophical doctrines. It is, therefore, easier to argue for the more radical forms of relativism than it otherwise would be and easier to present the issue as if it were a general philosophical one. The objectivist argument simply fails to recognize species of relativism that are not pests, because in order to exist itself it cannot accept that there are such. It thus simply fails to apprehend the forms of relativism which are necessary and constructive in certain disciplines like social anthropology, or the forms of intellectual relativism necessary to the limited pluralism of a sustainable liberal order.

NOTES

- 1 Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987).
- 2 The contact of Christian Europe with hitherto unknown civilizations with radically different cultures is interestingly discussed in Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of the Americas* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984) and in Anthony Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982). On the Jesuits in China see J. D. Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (London: Faber, 1985).
- 3 See Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967). Casuistry is considered by Benjamin Nelson in a number of papers in his collection *On the Roads to Modernity*, ed. T. E. Huff (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 1981), and in E. Leites (ed.), *Conscience and Casuistry in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
- 4 The issue of the conflict between paganism and Christianity is considered by E. R. Dodds in *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (New York: Norton, 1970) and by Arnaldo Momigliano (ed.) in *The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), and St Augustine's early experiences of the conflict of cultures before his full Christian conversion - see his *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961) - are considered in Peter Brown's *Augustine of Hippo* (London: Faber, 1969).
- 5 Pascal's 'wager' is to be found in his *Pensees* (op. cit., passage 418). The wager as a decision procedure is discussed in a fascinating essay by Mary Douglas, 'The social preconditions of radical scepticism', in J. Law (ed.), *Power, Action and Belief* (London: Routledge, 1986), in the context of a general discussion of relativism. Ian Hacking in *The Emergence of Probability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975) considers Pascal's wager in the context of the development of probability theory (see especially chapter 8). Hacking also contends that the Jesuit doctrine of probabilism (central to their practice of casuistry) was an intellectual obstacle to the development of modern concepts of probability. The social background to Pascal's religious views is considered in Lucien Goldmann, *The Hidden God* (London: Routledge, 1964), part 3.
- 6 For a taste of Bayle's work consult the selected edition of the *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, ed. R. H. Popkin (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965). For a

NEW FORMATIONS

- valuable short introduction to Bayle's work see Elizabeth Labrousse, *Pierre Bayle*, Oxford Past Masters series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983). On the development of religious toleration see Henry Kamen, *The Rise of Toleration* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1967) and on scepticism in this period see R. H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes*, 2nd edn (New York: Harper & Row, 1968).
- 7 Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method* (London: New Left Books, 1975).
 - 8 Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd edn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).
 - 9 A good example of such sociological relativism is to be found in T. J. Scheff, *Being Mentally Ill* (Chicago: Aldine, 1966). I have discussed this type of sociological relativism further in Paul Hirst and Penny Woolley, *Social Relations and Human Attributes* (London: Tavistock, 1982).
 - 10 'Anything goes' is, of course, a well-known slogan from Paul Feyerabend, who with extreme honesty subtitled his *Against Method* 'Outline of an anarchistic theory of knowledge'. Feyerabend's stricture against the legislative excesses of prescriptive methodology is well taken but to my mind he simply ignores the political implications of 'anything goes' in the realm of knowledge and belief. He consistently seems to suppose that a democracy can avoid legislating in matters of belief.
 - 11 For the concept of 'styles of reasoning' and a discussion of the implications of the fact that they change, see Ian Hacking, 'Language, truth and reason', in M. Hollis and S. Lukes (eds), *Relativity and Relativism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982).
 - 12 I have discussed this issue of the use of rational arguments to sustain witchcraft belief and the problematicity of explanations of why persecutions of witches declined at the end of the seventeenth century in Paul Hirst, 'Is it rational to reject relativism', in J. Overing (ed.), *Reason and Morality* (London: Tavistock, 1985).