

Thank you, President Mills. I am honored to be speaking before my colleagues on the faculty and staff, before parents and guests, and especially before the Class of 2009.

By this point in orientation, you in the first year class have been talked at so much that you can easily be forgiven if you forget everything I say today. And you probably will: Last spring, I asked a group of seniors what they remembered from convocation, and none of them could come up with anything.

So I figure I can say whatever I want. The only catch is that if I manage to say anything that offends some of my faculty colleagues, *that* will be remembered for many years. There are always risks.

We human beings are a curious species. We want to know the truth about all manner of things: history, our culture, other cultures, human nature, the structure of the universe, the existence of God, the weather, etc. The ability to distinguish true from false has never been more important. In the digital age, we are constantly bombarded with information, claims, and hype. We can google any query and instantly have gigabytes of information. However, even on the advanced search page, Google does not have a little box to check that will sort the true from the false. Such a box would be quite useful, for there are irrational forces in our culture making extremely dubious claims: claims about astrology, homeopathy, and creationism, just to name a few.

We on the faculty attempt to enhance your ability to distinguish true from false. We teach you certain critical skills, and we teach you something about how good inquiry works in various disciplines. We also teach how to fend off forces of irrationality, but

our teaching here is mostly indirect. We teach the chemistry and physiology from which it follows that homeopathy is wildly implausible; we teach the physics from which it follows that astrology is bunk. We teach the evolutionary biology from which it follows that creationism is hopeless.

However, within certain circles of academia, we undermine the quest for truth by promulgating relativism. That’s my topic. I will try to explain what relativism is, suggest how it undermines our intellectual culture, and argue briefly that relativism is wrong. All that in my remaining 12 minutes.

According to relativism, claims about the world are not simply true or false. Rather, each claim is made from a particular perspective, and the claim is true or false only relative to that perspective. For example, consider the following moral proposition: “homosexual behavior is wrong.” I think that proposition is simply false, but the moral relativist says that its truth or falsity depends on the perspective from which it is made. Relativists suggest that within certain cultural frameworks, the claim is true, but that within others it is false, and that is all that can be said.

Relativism about moral claims is fairly common, but some, especially in academia, take relativism much further. For example, consider the Christian claim that Jesus Christ had no human biological father. Most Christians believe this to be true; most non-Christians presumably believe it to be false. The non-relativist says that there is a fact of the matter, and one side is right and the other wrong, even if none of us is absolutely sure which. But a relativist will say something different: the claim that Christ had no human father is *true for the Christian* and *false for the non-Christian*. Which perspective is right? The relativist says that this is not an intelligible question.

Some relativists go all the way, and say that *every* claim is true only relative to a perspective. On this view, even basic claims about physics or biology are true or false only within their perspective or framework. The sciences themselves are just particular perspectives on the world; within alternative frameworks that do not accept basic scientific principles, the laws of physics might be false, and there is no intelligible question as to which perspective is correct.

Such relativist views of truth are accepted and taught in some academic settings. Moreover, many academics adopt what they call “postmodernism” and the view that all reality is “socially constructed.” I’m not sure whether these academics are relativists or not, for I am not at all sure what the term “postmodernism” really means, nor am I entirely sure what academics mean when they speak of the social construction of reality. In any event, these fashionable doctrines are either relativist or might easily be seen as relativist by unwary students.

Relativism can have extremely negative consequences within our intellectual culture. As I mentioned at the outset, purveyors of nonsense abound. We must be able to critically examine the claims of astrologers, homeopaths, creationists, and the like. But a complacent relativist might say, for example, that the creationist simply has a *different* perspective. Since there is no real right or wrong, our schools should teach both evolution and creationism. This is indeed how the new breed of creationists argue, and academic relativists have paved the way.

Complacent relativism can also make you intellectually lazy when judging competing moral views. If you are a relativist, and *your* religion says that homosexuality

is evil, then you may not bother to think any further about it. You can then oppose civil rights for homosexuals. When others try to argue that homosexuality is morally acceptable, the relativist turns a deaf ear, saying, “that argument might work in *their* culture, but in mine homosexuality is sinful.” End of story; end of thinking.

I believe that we should reject relativism, though I only have time to scratch the surface of the relevant arguments here. I’ll start by discussing some misconceptions that people often have concerning the alternative to relativism, which we can call *objectivism*, just to have a label for it. Objectivism is the simple view that some claims are true or false, and they remain true or false when translated into other languages or frameworks.

First misconception: some people regard objectivism as an arrogant view, a view that unfairly privileges western culture above others. However, as far as I can tell, this charge rests on a simple confusion. It is one thing to say that there are truths; it is another to say that you or your culture knows all of those truths. Moreover, even when an objectivist does believe a claim to be true, she need not arrogantly think that the claim is obviously certain, or that the alternative is irrational. For example, I believe that homeopathic remedies are medically worthless; that’s the conclusion I’ve reached after considerable reading and thought on the matter. However, I am not *positive* that I am right about that; new information or arguments might well change my mind.

Second misconception: some justify relativism by appeal to the value of tolerance, and they think that tolerance is somehow inconsistent with objectivism. Of course we should be tolerant of other cultures, other religious beliefs, and other political beliefs. We should rarely, if ever, attempt to force our beliefs on others by legal or other coercive

measures. But objectivism is perfectly consistent with this notion of tolerance. Even if an objectivist was absolutely sure of her beliefs, it wouldn't follow that she should be intolerant. And since objectivists should not claim absolute certainty, they have even less reason to force their beliefs on others.

Beyond being merely tolerant and respectful, we should, of course, actively listen to those who differ from us. We should learn about them and learn from them. This is the motivation for Bowdoin's non-eurocentric requirement and the soon to be implemented international perspectives requirement. But this attitude justified more easily by objectivism than by cultural relativism. The objectivist should certainly acknowledge that each of us has our own prejudices and blinders, some of which are culturally induced. The antidote is to learn about other cultures, their social and political practices, and their belief systems. But the point is not that everything is just a perspective and that any perspective is as good any other. Rather, we listen to other cultures, to other points of view, in part because they *might be right* and we might be wrong, and we care about improving our worldview; we care about the truth.

In fact, it is the relativist who ultimately has no real *reason* to listen to other cultures. If all perspectives are equal, then our own point of view is not mistaken, and so we can't *improve* upon it by looking at other cultures. According to relativism, if we do revise our beliefs after looking at another culture, we have simply changed our perspective; there is no right or wrong, no truth or falsity, so we cannot make *progress* by learning from other cultures. Of course, the relativist is free to explore foreign cultures if she wants, but she has no reason with which to convince others that they should do so too. Only the objectivist can say that.

So, if relativists claim that objectivism is arrogant and intolerant, then these suggestions are simply based on confusions. Beyond that, there are powerful objections to relativism. I’ll briefly mention three.

The first objection is essentially a challenge to the relativist. According to relativism, within a culture or perspective one can have genuine disagreement; but across different perspectives, there is no question of truth, and thus no possibility of genuine disagreement. But what counts as a culture to which claims can be relative? Where are the boundaries? Do I have a separate culture from you because I’m from Kansas? Because I am a philosopher? Or do most of us have a common culture because we are from what is broadly known as the ‘western world’? Relativists need to spell this out before their view is even coherent, but they have not done so in any clear and defensible way.

Second objection. Taken in its full glory, relativism about truth is self-refuting. The full relativist view is that all propositions are true or false only relative to some perspective. But what about that very proposition—that all propositions only have relative truth? The relativist presumably intends to put forward this view as something that everyone should believe—in other words, as a claim that is simply true. But that is exactly what the view does not allow her to do.

Third, the more you push on relativist claims, the more bizarre they become. For example, consider the claim that men who die in Jihad are given 72 virgins in paradise. This is taught in certain Islamic religious texts (though not the Koran) and is, apparently, believed by many Muslims. So, according to the relativist, that claim is presumably true within those cultures, but false in others. But what can this mean? It seems that there

must be a fact of the matter here. Either the men actually find themselves in paradise surrounded by 72 virgins, or they do not. According to one scholar, the original Islamic writings have been mistranslated for centuries, and the texts actually promise grapes instead of virgins; so maybe the men will be surprised after they die and find a platter of grapes. Or perhaps there is no paradise at all, and when people die they simply cease to exist. Just before 9/11, Mohamed Atta told his fellow hijackers that “The virgins are calling you”. What did the hijackers actually find after they died? Virgins? Grapes? Fires of Hell? Or did they simply cease to exist? The relativist denies that there is any real fact of the matter here at all. But that seems absurd; something had to happen.

Similarly with moral issues. We believe that slavery is wrong, and that those who defended it in the ante-bellum south were gravely mistaken. But the moral relativist can't say that. According to relativism, the sentence, “slavery is morally acceptable” was broadly accepted and thus presumably true in the culture of the ante-bellum south. Think about what this means. There were abolitionists in the south who claimed that slavery was immoral. But, according to the relativists, the abolitionists were actually mistaken, for their moral claims are to be judged relative to their culture, and their culture thought slavery was fine. Furthermore, when, at some point, it became accepted throughout the south that slavery was morally appalling, the relativist cannot count this as *progress*. According to relativism, the culture simply changed its view of slavery, just as cultures change their views about what clothes count as fashionable. That seems absurd.

I could go on, at length, with my rant against relativism, and the relativists in the audience would undoubtedly have some things to say in response. But my 15 minutes of Bowdoin fame are just about over, so I'll end on a more aphoristic note.

According to the Gospels, Christ told his disciples that “the truth will set you free.” Incidentally, he did not qualify this by saying “the truth—relative to one’s own particular language, culture, or religion—will set you free.” I can’t promise that the truth will set you free, but you too are now disciples in a quest for truth—truths about history, culture, philosophy, religion, the arts, mathematics, the structure of the physical universe, and human nature itself. Both here, and especially after you leave these walls, various irrational forces will beguile you. Some want your money; some want your vote; some are self-conscious frauds; some are well-intentioned but wrong. For the sake of the businesses you will run, the communities you will lead, and the families you will raise, I fervently hope that you make the most of your Bowdoin education, and that it protects and serves you well.