

## READING FOR LECTURE 7

**Kwame Anthony Appiah, Chapter 2 of *Cosmopolitanism* (W. W. Norton & Co, 2007).**

Are there objective moral truths? According to a view which Appiah calls *Positivism*, the answer is “no”. In this chapter, Appiah sketches the view, argues that it’s wrong, and sketches his own view.

### THE ESCAPE FROM POSITIVISM

#### Professional Relativism

As anthropologists have emphasized, what people regard as right and wrong varies from place to place and from time to time. What should we conclude from that diversity of opinion? Appiah begins the chapter by giving examples of that diversity, and describing various conclusions—some cautious, some radical—which people have drawn from it.

Cultural anthropologists are great enthusiasts for other cultures. That is, after all, their business. Once, not so long ago, before everybody in the world was within hearing distance of a radio, before Michael Jackson was famous on the steppes of Inner Mongolia and Pele was known along the banks of the Congo River, an anthropologist could set out from Europe or North America for places that had never before seen the “white man.”

There, at the ground zero of ethnography, the moment of first contact, he or she could come face to face with people who were completely unknown. Their gods, their food, their language, their dance, their music, their carving, their medicines, their family lives, their rituals of peace and war, their jokes and the stories they told their children: all could be wonderfully, fascinatingly strange. Ethnographers spent long days and hard nights in the rain forest or the desert or the tundra, battling fever or frostbite, struggling against loneliness as they tried to make sense of people who were, naturally, equally puzzled by them. And then, after disappearing from “civilization” for a year or two, they would come back with an account of these strangers, bearing (along with a collection of pottery, carvings, or weapons for the museum) a story about how their culture fit together.

For all this to be worthwhile, that story had to be news. So, naturally, the ethnographer didn't usually come back with a report whose one-sentence summary was: they are pretty much like us. And yet, of course, they had to be. They did, after all, mostly have gods, food, language, dance, music, carving, medicines, family lives, rituals, jokes, and children's tales. They smiled, slept, had sex and children, wept, and, in the end, died. And it was possible for this total stranger, the anthropologist, who was, nevertheless, a fellow human being, to make progress with their language and religion, their habits—things that every adult member of the society had had a couple of decades to work on—in a year or two. Without those similarities, how could cultural anthropology be possible?

Now, you might think that anthropologists, whose lives begin with this intellectual curiosity about other peoples, are bound to be cosmopolitans. Not so. While they do share, by necessity, a cosmopolitan curiosity about strangers, many anthropologists mistrust talk about universal morality, and spend a great deal of time urging us not to intervene in the lives of other

societies; if they think we have a responsibility, it is to leave well enough alone.

One reason for this skepticism about intervention is simply historical. Much well-intentioned intervention in the past has undermined old ways of life without replacing them with better ones; and, of course, much intervention was not well intentioned. The history of empire—Persian, Macedonian, Roman, Mongol, Hun, Mughal, Ottoman, Dutch, French, British, American—has many unhappy moments. But there are even broader reasons for the anthropologists' skepticism. What we outsiders see as failings in other societies often make a good deal more sense to the ethnographer who has lived among them. The ethnographer has, after all, set out to make sense of "his" people. And even if there is as much mischief as insight in the old maxim "*Tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner*"—to understand all is to forgive all—it does reflect a genuine human tendency. We often *do* forgive, once we understand. Anthropologists are likely, as a result, to find many outside interventions ignorant and uninformed. We think female circumcision, or female genital cutting, as many anthropologists prefer to call it, a disgusting mutilation that deprives women of the full pleasures of sexual experience. They know young women who look forward to the rite, think that it allows them to display courage, declare it makes their sexual organs more beautiful, and insist that they enjoy sex enormously. They will point out that our society encourages all kinds of physical alterations of human bodies—from tattoos and ear (and now tongue, nose, and umbilicus) piercing to male circumcision to rhinoplasty to breast augmentation—and that each of these practices, like all bodily alterations, has some medical risks. They will show us that the medical risks allegedly associated with female genital cutting—scarring, infections leading to infertility, fatal septicemia—have been wildly exaggerated; that they are, perhaps, just rationalizations for what is simply revulsion against an unfamiliar practice. In contrast to us,

they feel, they have escaped the prejudices of their backgrounds, in part through the intellectual discipline of fieldwork, living intimately with strangers. And many of them are inclined to think that words like “right” and “wrong” make sense only relative to particular customs, conventions, cultures.

Certainly the basic suspicion that moral claims just reflect local preferences is age-old. In book three of Herodotus’s *Histories*, we read that when Darius

was king of Persia, he summoned the Greeks who happened to be present at his court, and asked them what they would take to eat the dead bodies of their fathers. They replied that they would not do it for any money in the world. Later, in the presence of the Greeks, and through an interpreter, so that they could understand what was said, he asked some Indians, of the tribe called Callatiae, who do in fact eat their parents’ dead bodies, what they would take to burn them. They uttered a cry of horror and forbade him to mention such a dreadful thing. One can see by this what custom can do, and Pindar, in my opinion, was right when he called it “king of all.”<sup>1</sup>

One of Tolstoy’s stories is about a Chechen warlord called Hadji Murat, who tells a Russian officer one of his people’s traditional sayings: “A dog asked a donkey to eat with him and gave him meat, the donkey asked the dog and gave him hay: they both went hungry.’ He smiled. ‘Every people finds its own ways good.’”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. Aubrey de Sélincourt, rev. John Marincola (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 169.

<sup>2</sup>“Hadji Murat,” in Leo Tolstoy, *Master and Man and Other Stories*, trans. Paul Foote (London: Penguin, 1977), p. 240

And doubtless there is something salutary about the ethnographic inclination to pause over our own abominations and taboos. In the 1906 classic *Folkways*, the anthropologist William G. Sumner tells of a chief of the Miranhas, in the Amazon, who is baffled that Europeans regard cannibalism as an abomination: “It is all a matter of habit. When I have killed an enemy, it is better to eat him than to let him go to waste. Big game is rare because it does not lay eggs like turtles. The bad thing is not being eaten, but death.”<sup>3</sup> Sumner, who coined the term “ethnocentrism,” was not himself recommending cannibalism. But he clearly had sympathy for the chief’s account: *chacun à son goût*.

Or, in the words of Burton’s fictive Sufi,

What works me weal that call I “good,”  
What harms and hurts I hold as “ill”:  
They change with place, they shift with race;  
And, in the veriest span of Time,  
Each Vice has won a Virtue’s crown;  
All good was banned as Sin or Crime.

Yet the modern doctrines of relativism—the approach that cultural anthropologists often subscribe to—go beyond the old skeptical traditions. A lingering suspicion that a lot of what we take to be right and wrong is simply a matter of local custom has hardened, in the modern age, into a scientific certainty that talk of objective moral “truths” is just a conceptual error.

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<sup>3</sup>William G. Sumner, *Folkways* (Boston: Atheneum Press, 1907), p. 331

## The Exile of Value

Appiah now starts his sketch of Positivism. A key theme of Positivism, says Appiah, is a distinction between *facts* and *values*. What is that distinction?

First, Appiah explains another distinction: between *beliefs* and *desires*. According to Positivism, beliefs are true or false, can be reasonable or unreasonable and can be criticized, if unreasonable. By contrast, desires are not true or false, cannot be reasonable or unreasonable, and so cannot be criticized for being unreasonable.

What grounds modern relativism is a scientific worldview that makes a sharp distinction between *facts* and *values*. John Maynard Keynes used to say that those who claimed that they were just talking common sense were often simply in the grip of an old theory. This distinction between facts and values is now commonsense, but behind it is a philosophical theory that goes back at least to the early Enlightenment. Its origins have sometimes been traced to the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher David Hume, whose cosmopolitan engagement with the variety of human societies I mentioned in the last chapter. As it happens, I doubt that Hume would have endorsed this theory (or, indeed, that he invented it), but something very like this view was certainly current in the twentieth-century heyday of a philosophical movement called logical positivism, so I'm going to call it Positivism. The picture took a while to develop, but here it is, in a simplified, final version.

It is never easy to sketch a philosophical position, least of all to the satisfaction of those who claim it as their own. So I should make it plain

that I am not trying to characterize the view of this or that philosopher, however influential, but rather a picture of the world, elaborated by many philosophers over the last few centuries in the West, that has now so penetrated the educated common sense of our civilization that it can be hard to persuade people that it *is* a picture and not just a bunch of self-evident truths. That would not matter, of course, if the picture never got in the way of our understanding the world. But, as we shall see, the Positivist picture *can* get in the way; in particular, it often gets in the way of the cosmopolitan project, when it leads people to overestimate some obstacles to cross-cultural understanding while underestimating others.

What people do, Positivism holds, is driven by two fundamentally different kinds of psychological states. Beliefs—the first kind—are supposed to reflect how the world is. Desires, by contrast, reflect how we'd like it to be. As the philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe once put it, beliefs and desires have different “directions of fit”: beliefs are meant to fit the world; the world is meant to fit desires. So beliefs can be true or false, reasonable or unreasonable. Desires, on the other hand, are satisfied or unsatisfied.

Beliefs are supposed to be formed on the basis of evidence, and there are principles of reasoning that determine what it is rational to believe on the basis of what evidence. Desires are just facts about us. In an earlier philosophical language, indeed, these desires would have been called “passions,” from a Latin root meaning something you suffer, or undergo (a meaning still left to us in talk of the Passion of Christ). Because passions are just things that happen to us, no evidence determines which ones are right. All desires, in fact, are just like matters of taste; and, as the saying goes, there's no accounting for those. When we act, we use our beliefs about the world to figure out how to get what we desire. Reason, as Hume famously said, is “the slave of the passions.” If our passion is for apples, we go to where our beliefs suggest the apples are. And, once

we go looking for the apples we're after, we'll find out whether our beliefs were right.

Because beliefs are about the world, and there's only one world, they can be either right or wrong, and we can criticize other people's beliefs for being unreasonable or simply false. But desires can't be right or wrong, in this sense. Desires are simply not responses to the world; they're aimed at changing it, not at reflecting how it is.

Actually, the distinction is slightly more complicated, since some desires are tangled up with beliefs. So the Positivist makes a further distinction between *conditional desires* and *basic desires*. The properties above really apply just to basic desires, not all desires, on Appiah's sketch of Positivism.

There's a complication to the story, because much of what we ordinarily desire has beliefs, so to speak, built into it. Like you, I want money; but only because of what it can get me. If I didn't believe that money could get me other stuff that I wanted, I wouldn't want it any more. So my desire for money (I'd rather not call it a passion, if you don't mind) is *conditional*; it would disappear, if I discovered—as I might in some apocalyptic scenario—not only that money can't buy me love (this I have known since my first Beatles concert), but that it couldn't buy me anything at all. Desires that are conditional in this way can be rationally criticized by criticizing the underlying beliefs. I want an apple. You tell me I'm allergic and it will make me sick. I say: I don't mind being sick, if I can just have that delicious taste. You tell me that this apple won't have that delicious taste. I say: Find me something that will. You say: The only things that have that taste will kill you. I say: So be it. It will be worth it. I die happy.

It looks as if nothing in the world can stop me from wanting that taste. On the Positivist picture, this is the only way desires can be criticized: by criticizing beliefs they presuppose. Once you remove the conditional element from the specification of a desire, you get to what we might call your *basic desires*. And since these depend on *no* assumptions about how the world is, you can't criticize them for getting the world wrong. So the fundamental point remains.

Hume himself drew the distinction, in a famous passage, between judgments about how things are and judgments about how things ought to be. Normative judgments naturally come with views about what one ought to think, do, or feel. And the Positivist picture is often thought to be Humean in part because Hume insisted that the distinction between “is” and “ought” was, as he said, “of the last consequence.” Like desires, *oughts* are intrinsically action guiding, in a way that *is* isn't. And so, in the familiar slogan, “you can't get an ought from an is.” Since we are often tempted to move from what is to what ought to be, this move, like many moves philosophers think illicit, has a disparaging name: we call it the *naturalistic fallacy*.

Having explained the Positivist's distinction between beliefs and desires, Appiah now explains the key distinction for the Positivist, which he mentioned at the start: the distinction between facts and values. Facts are “the truths that beliefs aim at” and talk of values is “really a way of talking about certain of our desires”.

Such a distinction between the way beliefs and desires work in action is the key to this picture of how human beings work. Desires—or, more precisely, basic desires—set the ends we aim for; beliefs specify the means

for getting to them. Since these desires can't be wrong or right, you can criticize only the means people adopt, not their ends. Finally, the Positivist identifies the truths that beliefs aim at with the facts. If you believe something and your belief is true, it gets one of the facts in the world right.

If that's what facts are on the Positivist view, what are values? You could say that, strictly speaking, the Positivist thinks there aren't any values. Not, at least in the world. "The world," the young Ludwig Wittgenstein said, "is the totality of facts." After all, have you ever seen a value out there in the world? As the philosopher John L. Mackie used to argue, values, if there were any, would be very strange entities. ("Queer" was the word he used: and his argument that there aren't really any values in the world he called "the argument from queerness.") The world can force us to believe in *things*, because if we don't they'll bump into us anyhow, get in our way. But reality can't force us to desire anything. Where, after all, would one look in the world for the wrongness of a basic desire? What science would demonstrate it? A science might be able to explain why you desire something. It couldn't explain that you should—or shouldn't—desire it.

Talk of values, then, is really a way of talking about certain of our desires. Which ones? Well, when we appeal to what we take to be universal values in our discussions with one another—the value of art or of democracy or of philosophy—we're talking about things we want everyone to want. If exposure to art is valuable, then, roughly, we'd like everyone to want to experience it. If we say democracy is valuable, then, roughly again, we want everyone to want to live in a democracy. We might say, as a *façon de parler*, that someone who wants everyone to want X "believes that X is valuable," but that is still just, in reality, a way of talking about a complex desire. Again, some values will subsist upon certain facts. I could value universal vaccination for smallpox, because I wanted to make everyone

safer—but give up this “value” once I learned that smallpox had been eradicated. If a value reflects unconditional desires, however, since these basic desires can’t be criticized, values can’t either. I value kindness. I want to be kind. I want me to want to be kind. I want all of you to want to be kind. As a matter of fact, I want *you* to want everyone to want to be kind. But I don’t want this because I believe that all these kindnesses will lead to something else. I value kindness intrinsically, unconditionally. Even if you showed me that some acts of kindness would have effects I didn’t want, that wouldn’t persuade me to give up kindness as a value. It would only show me that kindness can sometimes conflict with other things I care about.

It may be that there are basic desires like this that everyone has. So it may turn out that there are things that everyone values. Those values will be *empirically* universal. Still, on the Positivist view, there’s no rational basis on which to establish that they’re correct.

Having sketched Positivism, Appiah notes some consequences of it. In particular, he notes how Positivism leads to “relativism about fundamental values”, the idea that different people’s values are all on a par.

If you accept that all this is a fair, if sketchy, version of a philosophical account that has been extremely influential for at least the last two and a half centuries in the West, you’ll see that many of the consequences of thinking in this way are recognizable parts of our common sense. There are facts and there are values. *Check*. Unlike values, facts—the things that make beliefs true and false—are the natural inhabitants of the world, the things that scientists can study or that we can explore with our own senses.

*Check.* So, if people in other places have different basic desires from people around here—and so have different values—that’s not something that we can rationally criticize. No appeal to reasons can correct them. *Check.* And if no appeal to reasons can correct them, then trying to change their minds must involve appeal to something other than reason: which is to say, to something unreasonable. There seems no alternative to relativism about fundamental values. *Checkmate.*

I don’t know how sensible this picture of human reasoning seems to you, but it grabbed the imaginations of many students of other cultures. That’s why the great anthropologist Melville Herskovits once wrote, “There is no way to play this game of making judgments across cultures except with loaded dice.”<sup>4</sup> Yet it has implications that are inconsistent with what most of us believe. A Tormentor who wanted everyone to want to cause innocent people pain, we might say, takes the infliction of pointless suffering to be a value. We’d also want to say that he was wrong. Do we have to content ourselves with the Positivist view that our judgment *just* reflects our desires, as the Tormentor’s reflects his?

## Positivist Problems

In this section, Appiah describes some problems for Positivism.

First, he suggests that Positivism *over-generalizes*. The Positivist says that facts about objective values would be strange kinds of facts, quite unlike familiar facts (facts about shoes, ships, and sealing wax) and, furthermore, that it’s hard to see how we could learn anything about such facts.

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<sup>4</sup>Melville J. Herskovits, *Cultural Relativism* (New York: Random House, 1973), p. 56.

But Appiah suggests that that is misleading. We are, after all, perfectly comfortable with facts about what's possible and impossible, or mathematical facts, and so on. Wouldn't Positivism, if true, cast suspicion on *those* kinds of facts too, as well as facts about objective values? Once we appreciate this, says Appiah, we'll see that Positivism is not as obvious as it might have appeared.

There are various moves critics of Positivism have proposed in response to such challenges. One is, so to speak, to go on the offensive. There are lots of facts that one can't point to and lots of beliefs that we don't have evidence for (if that means evidence from experience, from seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, touching). If every true belief corresponds to a fact, then isn't it a fact that one and one make two? Where exactly is *that* fact? And what's the *evidence* that bachelors can't be married? However many unmarried bachelors you find, that won't show you that bachelors *can't* be married. So far as I know, no one has ever found a pine tree with exactly fifty-seven cones painted purple and gold. Still, nobody thinks there couldn't be one. For that matter, who could deny that, as Socrates insisted, all men are mortal? So where is *that* fact?

The Positivist picture, in short, seems to generalize too quickly from one kind of belief: beliefs about the properties of particular concrete things that you can see, hear, touch, smell, or feel. What are we to say about beliefs about universals (all human beings), about possibilities and impossibilities (married bachelors), and about abstract objects (the number two)? The Positivist seems to be suggesting that if we can't answer the question "Where is that fact?" or meet the command "Show me the evidence," then there can't be any true beliefs about that subject matter. Every true belief corresponds to a fact "out there" in the world, the Positivist claims. But then we'd have to abandon belief not only in values

but also in possibilities, numbers, universal truths, and, one suspects, a whole lot more. A theory that sounded plausible to begin with now looks as if it comes with a pretty high price tag. It's not that the Positivists don't have theories about numbers and universals and possibilities. It's that once you grasp that you have to tell a lot of different stories about different kinds of truths, the idea that observable facts are what truths correspond to looks a good deal less obvious.

Continuing his argument that Positivism over-generalizes, Appiah focuses on a particularly awkward case for the Positivist: facts about what's reasonable and unreasonable to believe. The Positivist is happy to make claims about what's reasonable and unreasonable to believe, but aren't such facts just as suspect from the Positivist's point of view as facts about objective values?

There is another fundamental puzzle for the Positivist. The Positivist thinks that you can criticize beliefs and actions as unreasonable. Okay. Is it a *fact* that they're unreasonable? If it is, then can't we ask about *that* fact what the Positivist asked when we claimed that causing innocent people pain was wrong? Where is it? Where, for example, is the *fact* that it's unreasonable to believe that something that looks green is actually red? And what evidence supports the claim that it's unreasonable to believe that something's green when it looks red? Someone who thinks this is reasonable is hardly going to be persuaded by our showing him red-looking things and insisting they are red. These questions look just as hard for the Positivist as the ones he posed to us.

If, on the other hand, it isn't a *fact* that certain beliefs are unreasonable, then, presumably, it's a *value*. (For the Positivist, those are the only options.)

So to say, “It’s unreasonable to believe that what looks green is red,” just means that you want everybody to want not to think that what looks green is red. And if it’s a basic value, then it can’t be critically evaluated. The Positivist has no rational objection to make to people who make this preposterous assertion. But surely people who think red-looking things are green aren’t just pursuing an “alternative lifestyle” with its own values. They’re irrational, and they ought not to think that way.

Now comes a new point. Some people are attracted to Positivism because they think it goes hand-in-hand with an admirably tolerant attitude to other people’s values. But does it? Appiah questions this supposed link between Positivism and tolerance.

There’s a disconnect, too, between the Positivist creed and the relativist counsel that we ought not to intercede in other societies on behalf of our own values. For on the Positivist account, to value something is, roughly, to want everyone to want it. And if that’s the case, then values are, in a certain way, naturally imperialist. So the whole strategy of arguing for toleration of other cultures on the basis of Positivism seems self-contradictory. How can you argue rationally that other people’s basic value choices should be tolerated on the basis of a view that says that there are no rational arguments for such basic choices? Positivism doesn’t motivate intervention; but it doesn’t motivate nonintervention, either. (One may be reminded of an old story from the days of colonial India. A British officer who was trying to stop a suttee was told by an Indian man, “It’s our custom to burn a widow on her husband’s funeral pyre.” To which the officer replied, “And it’s our custom to execute murderers.”)

Some relativists confuse two different senses in which judgments can be *subjective*. The view that moral judgments express desires means that they are, in one sense, subjective. Which judgments you will agree to depends on what desires you have, which is a feature of you. But, in this sense, factual judgments are subjective also. Which ones you will accept depends on what beliefs you have, which is similarly a feature of you. From the fact that beliefs are subjective in this way, therefore, it does not follow that they are subjective in the sense that you are *entitled* to make any judgments you like. Indeed, to go from the first claim to the second is to make one of those moves from “is” to “ought” that furrowed Hume’s brow. It’s to commit the naturalistic fallacy. So even on the Positivist view there is no route from the subjectivity of value judgments to a defense of toleration. Toleration is just another value.

### **Values Reclaimed**

Appiah has argued that Positivism is false. But if there *are* objective facts, what kinds of facts are they and how do we know about them? In the rest of the chapter, Appiah sketches his own view of the matter.

What’s an alternative to the Positivist picture of values? Values guide our acts, our thoughts, and our feelings. These are our *responses* to values. Because you recognize the value of great art, you go to museums and to concert halls and read books. Because you see the value of courtesy, you try to understand the conventions of each society that you live in so that you can avoid giving offense. You act as you do because you respond to the values that guide you. And values shape thought and feeling as well. Truth and reason, values you recognize, shape (but, alas, do not determine)

your beliefs. Because you respond, with the instinct of a cosmopolitan, to the value of elegance of verbal expression, you take pleasure in Akan proverbs, Oscar Wilde's plays, Basho's haiku verses, Nietzsche's philosophy. Your respect for wit doesn't just lead you to these works; it shapes how you respond to them. Just so, valuing kindness leads you to admire some gentle souls, and leaves you irritated by other thoughtless ones. It's true that when you think of, say, kindness, as a universal value, you want everybody to want to be kind. And, since you want them to agree with you, you also want *them* to want everybody to want everybody to be kind. But perhaps the Positivist has the story exactly the wrong way round. Perhaps you want people to want each other to be kind *because you recognize the value of kindness*. You want people to agree with you because people who agree with you will be kind and encourage kindness in others. The same thing is true about everything you hold to be a universal value, a basic human good: your valuing it is a judgment that we all have a good reason to do or to think or to feel certain things in certain contexts, and so, also, have reason to encourage these acts and thoughts and feelings in others.

How, in fact, do people learn that it is good to be kind? Is it by being treated kindly and noticing that they like it? Or by being cruelly treated and disliking it? That doesn't seem quite right: kindness isn't like chocolate, where you find whether you have a taste for it by giving it a try. Rather, the idea that it's a good seems to be part of the very concept. Learning what kindness is means learning, among other things, that it's good. We'd suspect that someone who denied that kindness was good—or that cruelty was bad—didn't really understand what it was. The concept itself is value-laden, and therefore action guiding.

But how should we adjudicate disagreements about values? Appiah has a straightforward answer. He also suggests that radical disagreements about values are rarer than some suggest.

The Positivist will no doubt ask us what we will do about the ones who think cruelty good. And I think the right answer is that we should do with them what we should do with people who think that red things are green. Faced with the Tormentor who genuinely thinks it good to be cruel, the Positivist has just the options we have. Change the Tormentor's mind. Keep out of his way. Keep him out of ours.

Disagreements of this fundamental sort are actually quite unusual. You have probably never met someone who sincerely admits to thinking that it's just fine to be cruel to ordinary innocent human beings. There are people who think that it is okay to be cruel to animals. There are people who favor cruelty to wicked people. There are people who don't recognize what they are doing is cruel. And there are people who think that cruelty can be justified by other considerations. Many people think torture can be a necessary evil to uncover terrorist plots. Still, it is, exactly, as a necessary *evil*, a bad thing done in the service of a greater good. Defending particular acts of cruelty in this way means that you recognize the value of avoiding cruelty if you can.

To motivate her view, the Positivist tends to start by thinking about an *individual*. From that starting point, it's natural to try to give an account of values by first saying what it is for an individual to regard something as valuable. That turns out to be very hard. Should we conclude, then, that no account of values can be given? No, says Appiah. The problem is that we started in the wrong place. To understand what values are, we

need to take a cosmopolitan point of view: that is, we need to think about values “not as guiding us as individuals on our own but as guiding people who are trying to share their lives.” To close the chapter, Appiah develops this idea.

The deepest problem with Positivism, however, is not in its conclusions. It is in its starting point. I began, as I think one must if one is to make the Positivist story believable, with a single person, acting on her own beliefs and desires. Starting from there, one has to give an account of values that begins with what it is for me—this single person—to regard something as valuable. But to understand how values work, you must see them not as guiding us as individuals on our own but as guiding people who are trying to share their lives.

The philosopher Hilary Putnam famously argued that, as he once put it, “Meanings ain’t in the head.” You can talk about elm trees, even if you personally couldn’t tell an elm from a beech; you can talk about electrons, even if you couldn’t give a very good account of what they are. And the reason you can use these words—and *mean* something by them—is that other people in your language community do have the relevant expertise. There are physicists who are experts on electronics, naturalists who know all about elms. Our use of factual terms like these depends upon these social circumstances. What I mean doesn’t depend only on what’s in my brain.

We go astray, similarly, when we think of a moral vocabulary as the possession of a solitary individual. If meanings ain’t in the head, neither are morals. The concept of kindness, or cruelty, enshrines a kind of social consensus. An individual who decides that kindness is bad and cruelty good is acting like Lewis Carroll’s Humpty-Dumpty, for whom a word

“means just what I choose it to mean—neither more, nor less.” The language of values is, after all, language. And the key insight of modern philosophical reflection on language is that language is, first and foremost, a public thing, something we share. Like all vocabulary, evaluative language is primarily a tool we use to talk to one another, not an instrument for talking to ourselves. You know what you call someone who uses language mostly to talk to himself? Crazy.

Our language of values is one of the central ways we coordinate our lives with one another. We appeal to values when we are trying to get things done *together*. Suppose we are discussing a movie. You say that it expresses a cynical view of human nature. This is not just an invitation to me to accept a fact about the film’s picture of the characters and their motivations; it is also an attempt to shape how I feel. Seeing it that way, I am more likely, for example, to resist my first emotional responses, my sympathy, say, with certain characters. If I hold on to those feelings, I might want to resist your characterization. Not cynical, I might say; pessimistic, for sure, but also deeply humane. *Cynical, humane, pessimistic*: these are part of the vocabulary of value. And, as I say, they are meant to shape our responses.

Why, you might ask, should we care how other people think and feel about stories? Why do we talk about them in this language of value? One answer is just that it is part of being human. People tell stories and discuss them in every culture, and we know they have done so back as far as the record goes. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the *Tale of Genji*, the Ananse stories I grew up with in Asante, weren’t just read or recited: they were discussed, evaluated, referred to in everyday life. We wouldn’t recognize a community as human if it had no stories, if its people had no narrative imagination. So one answer to the question why we do it is: it’s just one of the things that humans do.

But a deeper answer is that evaluating stories together is one of the central human ways of learning to align our responses to the world. And that alignment of responses is, in turn, one of the ways we maintain the social fabric, the texture of our relationships. The 2004 Afghan film *Osama*, which tells the story of the life of a girl under the Taliban, shows us women and girls driven out of public life to hide in the shadows, as murderous and moralizing mullahs seek to impose a vision of gender they claim to derive from Islam. It shows us the waste of human talent: Osama's mother is a doctor who cannot practice. It shows us, too, that there are women who find small ways of resisting, and men who are forced into acts of courage as well as moments of dishonesty to help them. And it reminds us, at the end, when Osama is handed over to be the latest of four unwilling wives of an elderly mullah, that what makes oppression possible is that there are people who profit as well as people who suffer. Robbing Peter to pay Paul, as George Bernard Shaw observed shrewdly, is a policy that will, at least, guarantee you the vigorous support of Paul.

Our response to this film, when we discuss it with one another, reinforces our common understanding, and the values we share. *Murderous, waste, courage, dishonesty, oppression*: these are value terms, meant to shape our responses to the movie. And if the story it tells is truly representative, our discussion of it will help us decide not only what we feel about the characters but how we should act in the world. Talk about *Osama* can help us think about whether it was right for so many of the nations of the world to unite to remove the Taliban regime. It helps us, too, to think about other kinds of oppression, other places for courage, other wasted opportunities. It keeps our vocabulary of evaluation honed, ready to do its work in our lives. And that work, as I say, is first to help us act together.

You could insist on a technical use of the word “reason” to mean something like “calculation,” which is what it seems to mean when modern Positivists use it. And then it would be fine to say that when people talk in these ways they are not, strictly speaking, reasoning together. But in the English we speak every day, it is natural to call what we do when we seek, through a conversation rich in the language of value, to shape each other’s thoughts and sentiments and deeds, “offering reasons.”

Folktales, drama, opera, novels, short stories; biographies, histories, ethnographies; fiction or nonfiction; painting, music, sculpture, and dance: every human civilization has ways to reveal to us values we had not previously recognized or undermine our commitment to values that we had settled into. Armed with these terms, fortified with a shared language of value, we can often guide one another, in the cosmopolitan spirit, to shared responses; and when we cannot agree, the understanding that our responses are shaped by some of the same vocabulary can make it easier to agree to disagree. All this is part of the truth about human life. And it is a part of the truth that Positivism makes it very hard to see.

For if relativism about ethics and morality were true, then, at the end of many discussions, we would each have to end up saying, “From where I stand, I am right. From where you stand, you are right.” And there would be nothing further to say. From our different perspectives, we would be living effectively in different worlds. And without a shared world, what is there to discuss? People often recommend relativism because they think it will lead to tolerance. But if we cannot learn from one another what it is right to think and feel and do, then conversation between us will be pointless. Relativism of that sort isn’t a way to encourage conversation; it’s just a reason to fall silent.