

Socrates on Moral Relativism

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(Revised and edited by Jeffrey D. Breshears)

The following is one in a series of dialogues between **Socrates (S)**, who has mysteriously reappeared on a modern American university campus, and **Paula Postman (PP)**, a young philosophy major at Desperate State University. As a product of post-modernism, Paula is the proverbial rudderless ship on the ocean of life, tossed about by every new idea and trend that comes her way. To her credit, however, she is a sincere seeker of truth. In past encounters the two have discussed a variety of topics – everything from modern education to sex and drugs and rock ‘n’ roll. This dialogue, excerpted and edited from Peter Kreeft’s book, *The Best Things In Life*, focuses on moral relativism.

ARE VALUES SUBJECTIVE?

Socrates: Well, Paula, here we are again in our outdoor classroom in the grove of academe. Are you ready for your Philosophy 101 final exam?

Paula: I think so. You know, I’m still not sure who you are or how you got here, but I’m certainly grateful for your free tutoring. It’s been like totally awesome!

S: How could I put a price on something priceless?

PP: Well, Desperate State University certainly does. The tuition around here goes up every year.

S: Indeed. How could my pupil Plato ever have foreseen that his great invention of the university would one day be in such a desperate state? But here – are you ready to read to me your paper, as we planned, defending the subjectivity of values?

PP: Yes, Socrates... You know, maybe we can save ourselves a lot of time. Maybe *neither* of us is in error. Maybe values are whatever we *think* they are, so that if I think they’re *subjective*, then they’re subjective to *me*. If you think they’re *objective*, well, then, they’re objective – at least to you.

S: That may be a statement of *your* position, but it certainly is not of *mine*. I do not believe values are *objective to me* – I believe they are *objective*, period. “*Objective to me*” – what possible sense could *that* make? Is that not the same sort of nonsense and contradiction as “*subjective in themselves*”?

PP: You mean “objective to me” equals “*objective subjectivity*” and “subjective in themselves” equals “*subjective objectivity*”?

S: Uh... yes, *something* like that. But I think we had better define our terms before we begin. For if we cannot agree about the meaning of the terms *values*, *subjective* and *objective*, then we cannot meaningfully disagree about whether values are objective or subjective.

PP: Yeah, like that was going to be the first point in my paper: defining my terms.

S: Very good. Now, what are your definitions?

PP: They’re very simple. I mean by *values* simply “rightness and wrongness.” *Objective* simply means “independent of the human mind,” while *subjective* means “dependent on the human mind.” How’s that?

S: I think those are fine definitions. They are simple and clear, and they are what people usually mean by those words. Now let us get on to your arguments against the objectivity of values.

PP: I found seven arguments. Here they are:

The **first** argument is unanswerable because it is based on undeniable *facts* – facts discovered by sociologists and anthropologists. The fact is simply that individuals and cultures have very *different* values, different *moralities*. As Descartes says, you can’t imagine any idea so strange that it hasn’t been taught by some philosopher. And you can’t imagine any morality so weird that it hasn’t been taught by

some society. Anyone who thinks values aren't relative to culture simply doesn't know much about other cultures.

Here's a **second** argument, also based *on fact*. The fact is that we are *conditioned* by our society, and *different* societies condition us *differently*. If I had been born in a Hindu society, I would have Hindu values today. We don't discover values as we discover cures for diseases; we get them the same way we get diseases – we catch them from our society.

My **third** argument is *practical*, based on the *consequences* of believing subjectivism or objectivism. The consequence of subjectivism is *tolerance*; the consequence of objectivism is *intolerance* and *dogmatism* and trying to impose your values on others because you think everyone ought to believe your way. If you believe values are only yours, you don't try to force people to believe in them.

My **fourth** argument is the primacy of *motive*. To do the right thing for the wrong reason is wrong, but you can't blame someone for doing the wrong thing for the right reason, the right motive. Morality is a matter of the *heart* – *motive* – and that obviously is subjective.

My **fifth** argument is *circumstances*, or the *situation*. Moral choices are conditioned by the situation, and that's relative to thousands of things. There can't be the same rules for all situations. You can imagine an exception to every rule in some situations. For instance, it can be good to kill if you kill a homicidal aggressor, good to steal if you steal a weapon from a madman, good to lie if you're lying to the Nazis about where the Jews are hiding. There *is no absolute* morality – it's always relative to the situation.

Now, my **sixth** argument is that it makes no sense to call an objective act good or evil. When you see an evil deed, like a murder, you feel terrible, but the morality is in our *feelings*, in how we *feel* about the act – not in the act *itself*. Where is the evil? Is it in the gun, the trigger finger, the wound? No – those are simply *facts*. We interpret the facts in terms of our feelings. We add value colors to the black-and-white world of physical facts.

And finally, my **seventh** argument is that objective values would mean we are *not free*. Either we are free to create our *own* values, or values are *imposed* on us as a hammer imposes its will upon a nail. To preserve human *dignity* we must preserve

human *freedom*, and to preserve human freedom we must preserve our *creativity* – our ability to create our *own* values freely.

Well, there you have it, Socrates. Nice and short and sweet.

S: There is no question about its being short, but I have a few questions about its sweetness. My first question is about that term of yours – “*values*.”

PP: I thought you *agreed* with my definition of it.

S: I do. But I wonder whether you mean by it the *law* of right and wrong, or just the *feeling* of right and wrong.

PP: Ummm... the *feeling* of right and wrong.

S: So you would rather talk about moral *values* or *feelings* than about moral *law*.

PP: Yes. Definitely.

S: That's what I was afraid of. You see, you beg the question in your terminology. As *you* use it, the word “*values*” connotes something subjective rather than something objective – *feelings* rather than *laws*. I think your reluctance to talk about moral laws means you believe there *are* no moral laws.

PP: Of course there are moral laws. The Ten Commandments, for instance....

S: You see, Paula, the point with regard to knowledge is that there are only two kinds of people in the world: the *foolish*, who think they are *wise*, and the *wise*, who know they are *foolish*. The same point with regard to morality is that there are only two kinds of people: *sinner*s, who think they are *saint*s, and *saint*s, who know they are *sinner*s. I will never cease to teach this embarrassing truth because without it, I am convinced, there simply *is* no knowledge and no morality – only the deceptive *appearances* of them.

PP: Yes, I remember reading about your encounter with the oracle at Delphi. She pronounced you the wisest of all the philosophers in Greece because only you recognized your own ignorance.

S: Yes. Self-awareness and humility are among the highest virtues.

PP: All right, let's begin. But remember, if you can't refute *every one* of my objections to objective values, I will have proved my thesis.

ARE VALUES CULTURALLY RELATIVE?

S: Agreed. Now then, your first argument was that scientists have discovered that different cultures have different moralities, isn't that correct?

PP: Yes.

S: And you claimed this argument was unanswerable because it was based on *fact*, isn't that right?

PP: That's right.

S: But surely that is a mistake in logic?

PP: What do you mean?

S: Can't you make a logically unwarranted inference from a fact?

PP: Of course. But how do you think I did that?

S: By using that ambiguous term of yours, "values." *Opinions* or *feelings* about values are one thing; but *true, real, objective* values would be another thing, wouldn't they?

PP: Well, sure, if they existed. But what's your point?

S: Though *value-opinions* may be relative to different cultures and subjective to individuals, that does not necessarily mean that *real* values are. For even if people's *opinions* about something vary with time or place or the prejudices of teachers, that does not prove that the thing *itself* varies in these ways, does it?

PP: But right and wrong are matters of *opinion*, or *conviction*. So when opinions or convictions vary, right and wrong vary.

S: Ah, but that is precisely the question at issue: are right and wrong just matters of opinion? You are begging the question, assuming exactly the conclusion you must prove: that right and wrong are matters of *subjective opinion*.

Now, not only that, but there is a second and even simpler mistake in your argument: it is *not* based on a fact.

PP: Of course it is. Don't you know about different cultures? Surely you know about science – about anthropology and sociology?

S: Of course I know about anthropology and sociology. But anthropology and sociology are not, strictly-speaking, sciences. And by the way,

scientists have not *proved* that values are relative or subjective for the simple reason that values cannot be measured by scientific instruments.

PP: Well, *value-opinions*, then. Anthropologists and sociologists have gone to many different places all over the world and taken surveys, you know.

S: I know. And even *there* you are simply mistaken about the facts. Even *value-opinions* are not wholly *relative* to cultures or individuals. Now, let's look closely at some of the facts you came up with to prove your point. Could you give a few examples?

PP: Certainly. Suicide was honorable for an ancient Roman, but not for a Jew or a Christian. Usury* was wrong in the Middle Ages but okay today. It's wrong for women to bare their breasts in America or Britain, but not in the South Seas. Value-opinions vary *tremendously*. And that's a *fact*.

S: But not *totally* – and that's *another* fact. Doesn't every society have some code of honor, and justice, and modesty (just to address your three examples)?

PP: I think so....

S: So *those* three value-opinions, at any rate, are *universal*. No society prizes dishonor above honor, or injustice above justice, or immodesty above modesty. And there are many more things like this. Perhaps we should call these things "*principles*" – I mean things like the law of fair play and courage and generosity and honesty and unselfishness. I know that the rules of behavior differ greatly, but different rules of behavior seem designed to differently apply or obey the same principles.

PP: So you're distinguishing the *principles* from the *rules*, and saying the values are in the principles, which are the same for everyone?

S: Yes – I'm even saying that *opinions* about principles are the same for everyone. Did you ever hear of a society that valued dishonesty above honesty, or rewarded homicidal maniacs and punished life-saving surgeons?

PP: Hmmm... no. So what *is* the relation between principles and rules?

* Usury is the practice of charging excessive interest on loans. Usury was condemned under the Mosaic Law and considered exploitative and sinful by the Roman Catholic Church in medieval times.

S: I think it is like the relation between *meaning* and *expression*. The same meaning can be expressed in various ways and in different languages. So the same value can be expressed in different codes of rules. If there were no common principles, we could not even argue about which set of rules was *better*, because we would have no common *meaning* for “better.”

PP: You mean we couldn’t even be doing what we’re doing now – arguing about morality?

S: Right. Now here is a fact: people *do* argue about morality. They nearly always assume the same principles, and each tries to prove that he or she is right according to those principles. No one argues about whether it’s better to be fair or unfair, loyal or disloyal, full of hate or full of love. They argue not about principles but applications.

PP: I see. That sounds like a very simple point – the distinction between principles and applications ... But don’t you think societies in the past often *absolutized* their relativities and confused applications and principles?

S: Yes, and your society does just the opposite: it *relativizes absolutes*, and reduces principles to the level of applications. Two wrongs don’t make a right, and two mistakes don’t make a truth. They are simply opposite errors.

PP: But Socrates, just because most societies have generally agreed about values, that doesn’t mean there can’t be a society that comes up with new values tomorrow.

S: No society has ever invented a *new value*. That would be like inventing a new sound or a new color. All we can do is put the primary sounds and colors together in new ways.

PP: Then what happened in Nazi Germany? Didn’t they create new values?

S: Certainly not. They just denied and rejected old ones. The only radical novelty in values that any society has ever come up with has been *negations*. Just as an occasional person shows up who is color blind, or tone deaf. But no one ever shows up who sees a color no one ever saw before, or hears a note

no one ever heard before.

PP: But isn’t an individual free to choose the rules by which he lives his life?

S: I think not, and I think I can show you that.

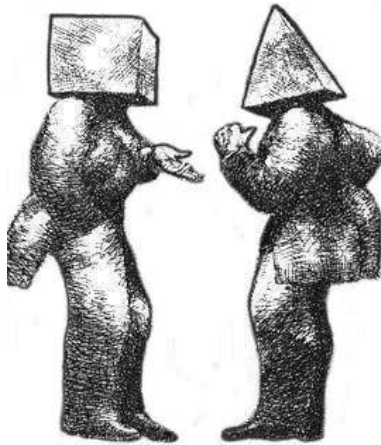
PP: Go ahead.

S: Do you think I also am free to create wholly new values and live by them?

PP: Well, if I am then you are, too.

S: Okay, then let us experiment and test your theory. I am much older than you are. Therefore, I declare that I am *wiser* than you and that my values are *superior* to yours.

PP: That’s silly, Socrates. That’s an illogical argument.



S: But why? What if those *really are* my values? What if I were teaching a class and you were in it, and you could only pass my course or make a good grade if you were one of the older students?

PP: Well, of course that wouldn’t be fair.

S: But what is “*fair*”? Remember: according to you, fairness or justice is merely *subjective* and *relative*. Therefore, it is whatever I *choose* to make it. How dare you now assume some *objective* and *universal standard* of justice to which you expect me to conform! Why should I conform to *your* subjective standard of justice? What right do you have to impose your personal, subjective values on me? *My* subjective standard is just as valid as yours if there is no ultimate objective standard!

PP: Oh... but... hmmm... I’m stumped.

S: Let me put it to you another way: Do you think there is anyone in the world right now who is doing anything that is wrong?

PP: Well, of course – obviously. Child molesters, for instance.

S: Good. Then you see, Paula, you *are* a moral absolutist after all! Your theoretical moral relativism was only a facade.

ARE VALUES SOCIALLY-CONDITIONED?

PP: All right, Socrates, I suppose you win round one. But let's go to round two. How do you refute my second objection – that *society conditions* values in us? If I had been born into a Hindu society I would have Hindu values, and so on.

S: Once again you resort to that slippery word “*values*”. We must bear in mind the distinction we agreed to. What *society conditions* in us, what we have, is *opinions* about values. But to associate these *opinions* with *true* values themselves is to confuse the issue, is it not?

PP: But at least we can agree that *society* determines those value opinions.

S: *Determines* or *conditions*?

PP: Uh... what's the difference?

S: An artist's palette and brushes *condition* his painting, but they still leave him free to choose within the bounds set by his conditioning. Parents *condition* their children not to lie and cheat and steal, but the children are free to disobey. *Conditioning* leaves you free. *Determining* does not.

PP: That sounds reasonable... My psychology and sociology textbooks don't make that distinction.

S: That's because their authors are not philosophers.

PP: Well, I still think if I were born a Hindu I'd have Hindu values.

S: Not necessarily. Has *everyone* who was born into a Hindu society grown up to accept Hindu values? Or are there rebels, or nonconformists, or independent thinkers? Do some Hindus become Buddhists, or atheists, or even Christians?

PP: Well, yeah, I'm sure some do.

S: Then obviously they have only been *conditioned* by their environment and culture – not *determined*.

PP: All right, but these factors do *condition* us, at least. We *do* learn different values from different societies.

S: But not *wholly* different values, as we have already seen. No society sanctions murder, or values cowardice, or teaches that it's best to be totally selfish.

And one other thing, Paula: Your *other* premise is *also* false: Ethical teachers *do* in fact agree about many things, including basic values.

TOLERANCE AND MORAL RELATIVISM

PP: Okay, so much for my second argument. But what about my third one? Aren't you in favor of tolerance?

S: I am, but I do not see what that has to do with your argument that values are subjective.

PP: Well, it's simple: if you think your values are objective and absolute, you'll probably try to impose them on others.

S: But if they are not “*my*” values, but actually *real* values, then I can no more impose them on someone else than I can impose the laws of gravity on other people. They *simple are*. In which case, teaching values is like teaching the laws of physics.

PP: But won't you be much more tolerant if you think values are subjective – a matter of individual preference – and less tolerant if you think they are objective and absolute?

S: I think not, and I think I can show you why. Tell me, what modern enterprise do you think has benefitted and progressed the most because of toleration and open-mindedness?

PP: Uhhh... science, I suppose.

S: I agree. Now then, does science believe its discoveries are only subjective?

PP: No. But it's silly to try to impose them on others by force.

S: Yes it is, and it's just as silly (not to mention, counterproductive) to try to impose *ethical values* by force. The parallel holds.

PP: But people have tried to do that throughout history – for instance, the Inquisition burned thousands of heretics.

S: Yes, and other foolish people tried to impose scientific theories by force or threat: the Galileo case, for instance. The parallel still holds. Both fields certainly have their fools.

PP: I suppose. But it seems strange to say that ethics deals with truth in the same ways as science.

S: But if we believed it did not, if we thought no ethical teaching could be true, why would we pay any attention to it? Values are important to us only if they are *true* values – isn't that true?

PP: I thought values were important to us because of our *emotional* investment in them. They are our cherished opinions.

S: Opinions about *what*?

PP: What?

S: Yes, that is my question: Opinions about *what*?

PP: I mean, like what do you mean?

S: I mean, is there a *reality* behind our opinions? If not, how can we have an opinion? An opinion is an opinion about something, and that *something* is the standard to judge one opinion as closer to it than another. Isn't that how we judge opinions?

PP: Well, but that would imply an objective truth over and above the opinions.

S: Precisely.

PP: But we only have opinions – we don't really know the truth.

S: But we *want* to. Our opinions reflect upon the truth – they aim at the truth. If there were no truth there, how could we aim at it?

PP: Oh... Well, then, I guess I don't mean to say that values are opinions. They are more like *feelings*.

S: Well, then, consider this: what are these value-feelings you speak of? Do you not feel *called*, or *challenged*, or even *compelled*, so to speak, by moral values?

PP: Well... I guess you could put it that way.

S: Well, if these values were only *subjective*, how could they make such demands on you?

PP: That's simple: they come from within me. I am *committed* to them. I am bound to them.

S: But if you bind *yourself*, how are you really bound? You can just as easily *loose* yourself. Do you really think that you can? For instance, can you be selfish and dishonest with a good conscience?

PP: I don't think so.

S: If you disobey real values, don't they continuously haunt you, condemn you, and make

you feel guilty? – unless, of course, you're a person who has a seared conscience.

PP: Yes.

S: Now that doesn't feel like the rules of a purely subjective and manmade game, does it?

PP: Hmm... I'll have to give that some more thought.... I guess tolerance doesn't prove subjectivity after all, does it?

S: Oh, it's much more than that. It proves just the opposite. It actually proves *objectivity*.

PP: Oh really, now? How's that?

S: Very simply. The real value of tolerance presupposes *real* values. Do you say that tolerance is really valuable?

PP: Suppose I don't. Suppose I just say it is my subjective preference to be tolerant?

S: Then suppose I say it is *my* preference to be *intolerant*?

PP: Well, then, I suppose I would say that we just disagree, that's all.

S: Exactly – that's all. Then we can no longer argue or debate. And if you feel passionately that tolerance is preferable, then all we can do is *fight*. It then becomes a matter of power and a contest of our wills – in which case we really do try to “impose our values” on each other. Do you choose to do that?

PP: Of course not. I choose to be tolerant.

S: And do you believe this choice of yours to be tolerant is really better than its opposite?

PP: Well... if I say ‘yes’...

S: Then you are admitting there is a real “better.”

PP: And there can be no “*better*” without a real “*good*.” So then, there *is* a real good – an objective moral value.

S: Correct. And here is another point: If you think that tolerance of all values and value systems is good, are you not then “imposing your values” – your value system, which includes the value of tolerance – on other people or other cultures, not all of whom *agree* that tolerance is a value? Many traditional cultures, in fact, see tolerance as a *weakness* – as a vice, not a virtue. So for you to say that everyone ought to be tolerant is for you to say

that your value system, with tolerance, is really better than others without tolerance. Isn't that tantamount to "imposing your values" on others?

PP: Well, I never thought of that.

S: Do so now, please.

PP: Do what?

S: Think about it.

PP: Well, I don't consider that to be imposing my values on them.

S: Neither do I.

PP: You don't?... Then what is it?

S: I think it is an insight into a real, objective, universal value: the value of tolerance. In reality, we cannot impose our values on others. When we try to do so, it is counterproductive. Some cultures and some individuals simply fail to realize it. We make mistakes in values, you know, just as we make mistakes in anything else.

PP: Yes, I realize that.

S: Well, if you admit *that*, you admit objectivity.

PP: How?

S: Because a mistake means a failure to know the truth. Where there is no truth, there can be no error.

PP: But we should be tolerant toward errors, not try to impose the truth.

S: Indeed. But notice what it is we tolerate: *error* – not truth. *Evil*, not good. So you see, the very word "tolerance" presupposes real good and evil.

PP: Socrates, you have tangled me up in my words again. How typically... umm... *Socratic* of you!

S: Paula, you know better than that by now. You know the point of my method is *not* to win the argument, but to win the *truth*; *not* to defeat the *opponent* but to defeat the *error*.

PP: Yes, I understand that. I just don't like to be made a fool of.

S: The only fool is the one who refuses to acknowledge his or her foolishness!

MORALITY & SUBJECTIVE MOTIVES

PP: You know, Socrates, I always thought morality couldn't be logical because it was a matter of subjective motive – which is my fourth argument. Do you really think that *motive* isn't the most important thing in morality?

S: Morality certainly *is* motive, but not *only* motive. Even if motive is *primary*, that does not exclude other, secondary aspects of morality.

PP: Why do you say we need anything other than right motives? After all, weren't The Beatles right: "All you need is love"? *Love alone* is enough, isn't it? And love is a motive.

S: First of all, I don't know why you bring up insects – did you say "beetles"? – when we are discussing moral philosophy. But back to the point: Is love *only* a motive? Is it not also a *deed*, or *action*? And can you really separate its *motives* from its *deeds*? Can you hate, or rape, or murder, or steal, or lie out of love?

PP: No, not really.... And by the way, The Beatles were a... well, never mind. I guess you missed the Sixties, didn't you? But no – hating and abusing people and breaking trust is incompatible with love.

S: So do you see? The commandments which specify good and evil *acts* are ways of specifying loving and unloving *motives*, too. Love does not steal, love does not kill, and so on.

PP: Well, love can certainly lead to adultery!

S: Not *real* love; not *faithful* love; not *unadulterated* love. I'm afraid you're confusing love and lust.

PP: Well, but the *motive* is the *primary* thing. Right?

S: Yes, but the primacy of one thing doesn't discount *secondary* things. The *soul* is more important than the *body*, but that doesn't mean the body isn't also important.

But now, let's look at your fifth argument. Could you summarize it briefly?



IS MORALITY SITUATIONAL?

PP: Sure. I said that situations are *relative*, and morality is determined by *situations*, so therefore morality is relative.

S: But that doesn't prove your point.

PP: Sure it does.

S: I thought you were supposed to be trying to prove that morality is *subjective* and *relative*?

PP: I *am* – at least I *think* I am.

S: But situations are *objectively real*, aren't they? So even if morality *is* determined by situations, it is still *objective*, is it not?

PP: But it's still relative – right?

S: Only if it is *wholly determined* by situations. Once again, I think we need to distinguish *conditioning* from *determining*. Do you think morality is *wholly* determined by situations, or only that situations *help* determine morality?

PP: I don't know. I never thought of it.

S: Well, have you ever studied Thomas Aquinas' moral philosophy?

PP: No, we read mostly *modern* philosophers here.... Well, actually, to be honest with you, we read *only* modern philosophers.

S: I'm not surprised. That's part of your problem.

PP: Well, what *did* Aquinas say about situations?

S: Something very reasonable, I think: that there are three things that make a human act good or evil, not just one: (1) the *nature* of the act itself; (2) the *motive* behind the act; and (3) the *situation* or *circumstances* involved.

PP: So, according to Aquinas, all three factors have to line up for an act to be right?

S: Correct. For instance, if I give money to the poor just to impress others, the act itself is good but my motive is not, so it becomes a morally deficient act.

PP: But wait – I just don't understand. How can a *thing* be *evil*? You apparently believe in God. Didn't God make *all things good*? Is the maker of *all things* the maker of *evil things*?

S: Oh, all *things* are good, all right. But *acts* are *not things*. *God* makes *things*, but *we* make acts.

PP: But how can an *act* be *evil*? It's just a physical event.

S: Is it? Don't you think the act of *murder* is a *moral* event?

PP: No. The moral event is *inside me*. What's out there is just the *physical event*. As a famous philosopher once said, "There is nothing good or bad, but thinking makes it so."

S: I don't believe you *really* believe that. Do you think that if I murdered you and I didn't *think* that it was an evil deed, then it would not *be* an evil deed?

PP: Not in *your* mind.

S: Would I be *right* or *wrong* in thinking that?

PP: I think you would be wrong, but *you'd* think you were right.

S: That is not what I asked. I asked which of these two opinions, yours or mine, would be *true*.

PP: Both.

S: But these are *contradictions*. Contradictions cannot both be true.

PP: Well, then neither.

S: But of two contradictories, one must be *true* and the other *false*.

PP: Not necessarily. What about paradoxes?

S: Paradoxes are only *apparent* contradictions. Clarify the issues and the contradiction is resolved.

PP: Well, what about mysteries, then?

S: "Mysteries?" Do you mean the unknown?

PP: Yeah.

S: How can something *unknown* be *known* to be contradictory?

Paula, there *is* a mystical realm that transcends human rationality, but it's *supra-rational*, *not irrational*. It merely belongs to another dimension that is above and beyond normal human reasoning.

PP: All right, Socrates, I give up. I'm getting a headache. I can't refute your logic, but I'm still not sure about the *reality*....