How can we really understand our world? We must take for granted that it exists, in some way, that extra-human reality exists. Even though it is possible from a relativistic perspective – in the Cartesian intellectual tradition – to question our capacity to know if it really exists apart from our own mental conception, it still seems sensible from a pragmatic point of view to assume that it does – in one way or another. Obviously the world – globe, moon, oceans, mountains, forests – existed long before there were people who could observe, experience and think this. If mankind were to die out, according to all we know, the universe would continue to exist. We can see this as a metaphysical standpoint that everyone shares. On the other hand, one wonders what is particularly ‘metaphysical’ about it: the opposite point of view, if maintained consistently, seems to demand considerably greater imaginative powers and considerably more complex metaphysical speculation. It seems at any rate pointless from a practical point of view to discuss to what extent extra-human reality exists. Human reality, including human conceptions about the extra-human, poses, however, a considerably more complex and uncertain problem.

Human culture comprises as its predominant element a capacity – slowly developed – to think about the world. Without necessarily arguing for a conception of a purely one-way scientific and intellectual development, most of us can probably agree on this point, that human thinking about ‘reality’, especially about ‘nature’, has developed, been refined and therefore ‘improved’ during the last few millennia. In particular, this intellectual sophistication seems to have been under way during the last few centuries.

If this is the case, we can see human thought as a cultural phenomenon, as a cultural artefact. Thinking and logic are not ‘natural
phenomena’; they form a complex system of abstract conceptions that constitute, create, all the different versions of Homo sapiens that happen to exist. We are, each of us, born into a given culture and shaped by its representations.

We are perhaps willing to admit that thought, thinking and reasoning are not identical to existence, because after all reality seems to have existed independently of thought. However, thought has largely succeeded in ‘depicting’ nature in a way that on the whole seems plausible. In this context concepts of ‘scientific’ truth and of truth as a whole are obviously partly questions about ‘correct’ or credible depictions of reality. To the extent that our thoughts – possibly in the form of scientific tests of hypotheses – do not concur with our observations, we consider them incorrect, erroneous. One of the fundamental features of human thinking is the belief about reality, about ‘nature’ and about scientific truth. Nature exists and truth is a question of how our arguments seem to concur with what exists.

Another way of regarding truth is to see the whole thing as a question of the internal structure of arguments. The philosopher Richard Rorty emphatically endorses this standpoint.

To say that the world is out there, that it is not our creation, is to say, with common sense, that most things in space and time are the effects of causes which do not include human mental states. To say that truth is not out there is simply to say that where there are no sentences there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human languages, and that languages are human creations. (Rorty, 1989, p. 5)

Questions relating to truth are therefore bound up with argument, with human thought. Truth, Rorty declares:

cannot be out there – cannot exist independently of the human mind – because sentences cannot so exist, be out there. The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not. Only descriptions of the world can be true or false. The world on its own – unaided by the describing activities of human beings – cannot. (Rorty, 1989, p. 5)

In other words, ‘truth’ is linked to argument, and arguments can be perceived as ‘true’ or ‘false’. In addition to the relationship of arguments to observed reality, their truth value is formed by their internal linguistic structure, the logic through which the argumentation is