

incredulously, withdrawing a bowie blade from the back of his boot. “Now *this*,” he says with a sly grin, “is a knife.”

RELATIVITY IS (RELATIVELY) easy to understand. But there’s one aspect of relativity that consistently trips us up. It’s this: we not only tend to compare things with one another but also tend to focus on comparing things that are easily comparable—and avoid comparing things that cannot be compared easily.

That may be a confusing thought, so let me give you an example. Suppose you’re shopping for a house in a new town. Your real estate agent guides you to three houses, all of which interest you. One of them is a contemporary, and two are colonials. All three cost about the same; they are all equally desirable; and the only difference is that one of the colonials (the “decoy”) needs a new roof and the owner has knocked a few thousand dollars off the price to cover the additional expense.

So which one will you choose?

The chances are good that you will *not* choose the contemporary and you will *not* choose the colonial that needs the new roof, but you will choose the other colonial. Why? Here’s the rationale (which is actually quite irrational). We like to make decisions based on comparisons. In the case of the three houses, we don’t know much about the contemporary (we don’t have another house to compare it with), so that house goes on the sidelines. But we do know that one of the colonials is better than the other one. That is, the colonial with the good roof is better than the one with the bad roof. Therefore, we will reason that it is better overall and go for the colonial with the good roof, spurning the contemporary and the colonial that needs a new roof.