

Beyond Objectivism and Relativism

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One very important line of division in today's philosophy is between those who want to go beyond the dualism between objectivism and relativism and those who still think this dualism is a live option. On this issue, I side with Richard Rorty's view in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford, 1979). Obviously, his version of pragmatism is not intended to solve, but to transcend, the old problem. The title I have chosen for my paper is also the title of a book by another American philosopher, Richard Bernstein's *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Oxford, 1983). And Bernstein, too, is looking for such a transcendence. But he does not advocate exactly the same position as Rorty; for instance, he puts heavy stress on Kant's analysis of the aesthetic judgement.

I am saying this in order to make it clear at once that there is already more than one camp in the newly discovered land beyond objectivism and relativism. That being said, I want to state my own position in the form of three theses:

- (1) Philosophers should move beyond objectivism and relativism.
- (2) We should retain a concept of truth, meaning correspondence to reality.
- (3) Philosophers should even continue to do systematic metaphysics.

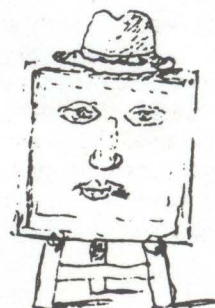
In what follows I shall, first, give my account of how the need to go beyond objectivism and relativism has arisen, then, second, introduce a special notion of truth and some of its consequences. I will end up, third, with some comments on metaphysics.

Epistemological Objectivism

For me epistemological objectivism is no longer a live option. Absolutism, whether in the form of rationalism, empiricism, transcendentalism, or scientism, is made theoretically untenable by, on the one hand, the modern philosophy of science, and on the other by historicism and the sociology of knowledge. The term 'historicism' I use in the sense which associates it with Vico and German 'Historismus'. The phrase 'modern philosophy of science' is intended to refer to the kind of philosophy associated with names like Thomas Kuhn, Paul Feyerabend, Norwood Russell Hanson, etc. And the central thesis which I am interested in is their thesis that all observations and all empirical data are theory laden, and that as a result of this there are no necessary and sufficient

conditions or rules of theory choice.

This view has obviously, whatever follows logically from it, furthered a relativistic point of view. And the way it functions is of course easy to understand. If all observations are necessarily impregnated with a certain theoretical point of view, it might seem as though scientists are in the grip of a theory in the same sense in which a man wearing coloured glasses is in the grip of the colour of these glasses. If the glasses are blue then everything will get a blue nuance. The world's perceived colour does not depend on the world but on his glasses. In the same way: What science says about the world seems to be determined by its theoretical presuppositions, not by the world itself.



Modern philosophy of science is hermeneutics extended to natural science. Many philosophers, Bernstein and Rorty among them, take the hermeneutic insight to be the most effective weapon against epistemological objectivism. Therefore, before proceeding, I want to fasten attention to the fact that a positivistically interpreted sociology of knowledge also makes objectivism problematic. Let me first of all, however, remind you of the structure of some of the arguments put forward by the ancient sceptics. They centred their scepticism around facts of perceptual relativity. I am thinking of such facts as that if you first have your left hand in a bucket of warm water and your right hand in a bucket of cold water, and then place both hands in a third bucket you will perceive different temperatures in the hands. The impact of modern science has, I think, made perceptual relativity look like a mere curiosity, and not a threat to the concept of knowledge. The sociology of knowledge, however, questions scientific knowledge in about the same way as the bucket experiment questions perceptual knowledge.

The structure of the old sceptical argument is that the history of the right hand and the left hand, respectively, partly determine what is now perceived in them when they are put in the same bucket. Today, sociologists of knowledge say that a scientist's history, his background, partly determines what he will come to regard as knowledge. The similarity in structure between this modern sceptical argument and the ancient one comes out very clearly if we look at a schematic Marxist example of sociology of knowledge. We can then just substitute a scientist with working class background for the left hand and a scientist with upper class background for the right hand. If these two scientists are doing research with regard to exactly the same problem, their pre-history will cause their opinions to differ as the different pre-histories of the hands will cause the perceptions to differ in the bucket experiment.

As such an argument stands, it may be taken as referring, without any hermeneutic sophistication, to brute facts. I want to stress this because I think that today the sociology of knowledge is becoming part of common sense. And this process explains to my mind the fact that today the philosophical discussion of objectivism and relativism has an impact on the cultural climate outside of philosophy.

Epistemological Relativism

If objectivism is gone, relativism remains. This is the old dualism. I will let objectivism go, but I cannot accept relativism. And mainly for two reasons. First, philosophers ought in my opinion to take self-referential inconsistencies seriously. It might be seen as a 'thin' defect of relativism that it cannot be applied to itself; I mean 'thin' compared with the wealth of data which support the view that knowledge is culturally bound. But most philosophical arguments are in this sense 'thin' since philosophy is abstract. So, either we stop arguing about abstract questions or we regard the self-referential inconsistency of relativism as a real argument against it. Second, I also find it a defect of a philosophy if its proponents have to leave it in their study, when they step out in life. David Hume is one sceptic who explicitly admitted this to be the case with his philosophy. Implicitly I think this holds true for all relativists, and I think it is the practical counterpart to the theoretical problem of relativism's self-referential consistency.

The modern problem of objectivism and relativism should, I think, be formulated in the following way: Is it possible to accept both the sociology of knowledge and the modern philosophy of science without becoming a relativist?

Proposals for a Solution

Bernstein, in the book I referred to¹, makes a very good point about philosophers like Kuhn, Gadamer, Habermas, and Rorty. It is very tempting to regard all of them as old-fashioned relativists. But this is not fair. They are not just dropping objectivism and the concept of rationality. At least some of them are rather, in different ways, trying to catch a new kind of rationality. And such an undertaking need not necessarily end up in relativism. This is the reason behind Bernstein's claim 'that we are witnessing and participating in a movement beyond objectivism and relativism' (op. cit., p. 49).

I do not intend to discuss Bernstein's or the aforementioned philosophers' ideas in detail. I merely want to make some broad comments. Originally, the concept of rationality was joined to that of truth as correspondence. Rorty tries to get rid of both rationality and truth. The move common to for instance Bernstein, Habermas and some others who also try to avoid the predicament of traditional relativism is: (a) to disjoin the concepts of rationality and truth, (b) to drop the concept of truth as meaning accurate representation, and (c) to modify the concept of rationality. Habermas

gives us 'undistorted communication' and Bernstein 'practical wisdom' as substitutes for the old universal rationality. Neither of them is an old-fashioned relativist or sceptic, but nevertheless all of them want to get rid of the old truth-concept. They want to skip 'mirror imagery', to use one of Rorty's phrases. In my opinion, they ought therefore to be called relativists. But I do not want to quarrel about words. I am opposed to their position, and I will now state my own very briefly.

I think that:

- (a) we should really disjoin the concepts of rationality and truth, but
- (b) we should drop the concept of rationality, not that of truth, and
- (c) we should make a small modification of our old concept of truth.

This is the way I think we can move beyond both objectivism and relativism, and I shall try to explain and explore this position a little bit.

The Old Dualism

In order to get a better perspective on the dualism of objectivism and relativism, we should place it within the following matrix:

		Theories are:	
		true or false	neither true nor false
Good theories are:	not socially caused		
	socially caused		

Epistemological objectivism of all kinds, rationalism, empiricism and so on, should be placed up to the left, whereas historicism is diagonally opposed down to the right. The right upper corner contains positivistic instrumentalism. Down to the left we have an interesting position, which I will comment upon; I want to call it 'the privileged position stance'.



Common to all epistemological positions which can be placed to the left is what might be called a *sociological rationalism*. Faced with the facts brought forward to historicists, they still maintain that there is a kind of Reason, i.e. some kind of cognitive faculty or cognitive enterprise, which (a) need not be influenced by anything else in society, and (b) when not influenced automatically yields truth. Reason in this sense (c) may be influenced by social factors, but only in the negative sense that what is socially caused is always regarded as a deviation from reason and truth.

You can here only have a sociology of error, a sociology of deviation from knowledge.

This is the positivist view of science, and it even was the common sense view of science for a long time. It can also be found within the Marxist tradition. The French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser once argued that there is something called Theoretical Practice which falls outside the scope of the general Marxist thesis that the economic base in the last instance determines the superstructure.

Now, the privileged position stance (bottom row first column) is like sociological rationalism (top row first column), a position which wants to save epistemological objectivism. This time, however, objectivism is saved not by saying that some kind of knowledge production is not determined at all by social factors, but by saying that although everything is socially determined there are cognitively privileged positions in society. Such positions are not bearers of an ahistorical Reason. It is not a question of Reason but of a good position. Truth-finding should be compared with situations where someone can see something that other people cannot see; not because they have a special kind of eyes but because they have a position in space which the others do not have. Such cognitively privileged positions *cause* those who are in them to find the truth.

The classic example of this point of view is, of course, to be found within Marxism, where the proletarian standpoint is appointed the cognitively privileged position. However, it should be noted that Marxism is not in this respect homogeneous. Althusser, as just mentioned, had another view, and those Marxists who sharply distinguish between proletarian and bourgeois science have still another. The latter should be placed in the lower right corner in our matrix. The most theoretically explicit account of the view that the working class has a cognitively privileged position is Georg Lukacs's *History and Class Consciousness* (1923).

Another theoretician who has embraced the privileged position stance is Karl Mannheim, the man who wrote the book *Ideology and Utopia* (1929). According to Mannheim, the free-floating intellectuals have this privileged position. Because they are living in a position where conflicting interests meet, they become socially motivated to find truth.

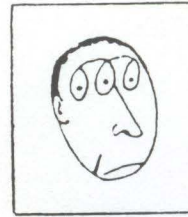
It is important to see the difference between the privileged position stance and rationalism in the sociological sense referred to. The latter relies on the old assumption that Reason is self-explaining. When reason is operating we need no explanation why truth is found. Social causes can only, as I said before, disturb the proper function of Reason. According to the privileged position view something in society has to cause the truth-finding. There is no self-explaining Reason, there are only socially determined cognitions.

Truthlikeness

In order to break out of the dualism between objectivism and relativism we need an epistemology which falls outside the matrix above. And some features of such an epistemology I shall now try to sketch.

First I shall introduce the small modification of the truth concept I hinted at earlier. This idea is not an idea of mine, and it cuts through very dissimilar philosophical traditions. Actually, I would like to call it 'the Lenin-Popper notion of truth'. The idea is that we should replace the concept of truth with a concept of truthlikeness. Lenin calls it relative truth, and Popper calls it verisimilitude (see *Materialism and Empirio-criticism* and *The Open Society and Its Enemies* addenda 1961, respectively).

Ordinarily we speak in a way which presupposes that what we say is either true or false. The common sense notion of true and



false is a polar conceptual construction. But I think it is philosophically important to begin to think in terms of degrees of truth. Of course, a lot of philosophers already speak in this way, since it is part and parcel of evolutionist thinking in general that our knowledge better and better approximates truth. My point, however, is that they nonetheless fail to appreciate the philosophical significance of this notion.

Let us see how we can block the following inference (the inference-example is taken from a lecture by Rorty); A means Aristotelian physics and G Galilean physics:

- (1) There is no way to translate A into G, though A could learn G.
- (2) There is therefore no way to argue against A in G, nor vice versa.
- (3) So both A and G must be true.
- (4) The world makes beliefs true.
- (5) So *different* worlds must make A and G true.

A conclusion may be blocked in several ways. In this case, one of them is simply to substitute 'truthlikeness' for 'truth'. You can then without any trouble maintain that it is the same world which makes both A and G truthlike. Obviously, this shows that the concepts of truth and truthlikeness are not equivalent; something which also can be shown in other ways.

If you only have recourse to the polar concept of truth and think that today's science is not the last word, you are in the curious position that you have to say that all theories, not only of yesterday, but also the theories of today, are false. And in such a case one could very well let the concepts of true and false go altogether. In my terminology, one would then become a relativist. With a concept of truthlikeness at hand relativism cannot enter that easily.

The polar concept may also easily make you believe that if you are right your opponent must be totally wrong. But if you look upon a paradigm conflict armed with the notion of truthlikeness, you may maintain (a) that both your and your opponent's paradigm have a non-zero degree of truthlikeness, (b) that one of them has a greater degree of truthlikeness than the other, (c) that the paradigm with the lesser degree of truthlikeness captures something in reality which the other paradigm does not, and (d) that therefore the truer paradigm has something to learn from the less true one, and, finally (e) that as a consequence of this it is well worth continuing the discussion.

Amazingly few philosophers, especially the post-positivist and post-structuralist ones, seem to me to have realized the simple fact that the concept of truthlikeness is quite compatible with pluralism and accompanying discussions within both science and philosophy. The concept of truthlikeness does not in any way imply a totalitarian scientism or transcendentalism.

The notion of truthlikeness has also, I think, very specific philosophical repercussions. I have not worked them out, but I would like to mention them anyhow. In the context I am speaking of, the notions of truth and truthlikeness are used in their non-epistemic sense, i.e. they do not mean something like 'warranted assertability'. Such notions are often accused of being vacuous. And in a sense I can agree. Truthlikeness is a rather empty notion. But it is not totally empty. It cannot settle discussions, but it can explain why even discussions across paradigms are meaningful;

there is something to discuss, truthlikeness. I think we need a rehabilitation of the Kantian notion of regulative ideas, i.e. empty but not quite empty concepts. And, in order to do this, I think we need a semantics which turns 'partial reference', or 'referencelike', into a primitive term.

Contingently Privileged Positions

Let me now use this concept of truthlikeness to amend our matrix. We then get the following:

Theories are:			
Good theories are:	true or false	neither true nor false	more or less truthlike
not socially caused	empiricism or rationalism	positivistic instrumentalism	popperianism
socially caused	privileged position stance	historicism	theoretical realism

To the new column corresponds two rows. In the first I have written 'popperianism'. Karl Popper is opposed to the sociology of knowledge. He is a sociological rationalist. It must be noted, however, that he is also a fallibilist. He believes in truthlikeness, but he regards it as a regulative idea, and he has criticized those who think that we need criteria for it in order to be able to speak of it. We will here get a fallibilist sociological rationalism.

The bottom row contains my own position. It is also a fallibilist position, but this time fallibilism is connected with the sociology of knowledge. So, here we do not need a concept of rationality at all. I have called the position 'theoretical realism'. 'Realism' because it contains belief in truthlikeness, and 'theoretical' because it contains the belief that empirical data are theory laden. Furthermore, the label is already attached to some English philosophers who have argued for views which are close to those I put forward. I am thinking in particular of Roy Bhaskar's *A Realist Theory of Science* (Leeds, 1975), *The Possibility of Naturalism* (Brighton, 1979), and Russell Keat's and John Urry's *Social Theory as Science* (London, 1975).

Philosophers who drop the notion of truth but retain that of rationality usually risk becoming relativists. I retain truth but drop rationality, i.e. I am doing the opposite. And I will also face the opposite risk, that of becoming an old-fashioned objectivist. Since I subscribe both to the sociology of knowledge and truthlikeness,



a problem arises: Does not the sociology of knowledge give me a criterion of truth? Those who are in the privileged position are made bearers of truth, and are therefore, also, the criteria of truth. Am I not then forced into objectivism, although I speak of truthlikeness? This problem brings us to the next idea I shall put forward: Substitute the idea of *contingently* privileged cognitive positions for that of *essentially* privileged positions.

What I mean is the following. Lukacs and Mannheim thought that they could discover a privileged position once and for all, and consequently also make a sure prediction about what position would yield knowledge in the future. By the term 'contingently

privileged position' I mean a social position which is privileged only with hindsight. There can be no completely sure prediction that some social position in the future will yield knowledge. Neither the working class nor the free-floating intellectuals can save us from a fallibilist conception of knowledge.

Like the substitution of truthlikeness for truth, this idea has important consequences. It affects for instance the view that science is for ever privileged, or has an essence which ensures that scientists always will obtain the most truthlike theories. Interpreted in this way the idea of cognitively privileged positions and the notion of truthlikeness as a regulative idea fit each other very well, and support a non-foundational view of knowledge.



The Concept of Anomaly

Although I am convinced that we can speak of truthlikeness without having any criteria for it, I do think we need to say something more in order to defend it. In the discussions connected with Kuhn's concept of paradigm, or similar conceptual constructions put forward by other philosophers of science, there has, in my opinion, not been a proper emphasis on the concept of anomalies. An anomaly is an observation or empirical data (i.e. a presumed fact), which, according to the paradigm itself, should not be possible, but which anyhow exists.

For traditional empiricists anomalies are reality's way of saying 'No' to a theory. But, as Kuhn and other historians of science have amply proved, things are not that simple. All fundamental theories seem to have anomalies all the time. They are born with anomalies, they live with anomalies, and die with anomalies. Furthermore, what is once an anomaly may later turn out not to be an anomaly at all. Historicists have taken such facts as proving their point of view. I think, however, that we should look more carefully at the available options. One may easily think that the only possible alternatives are the following:

- (1a) It is always the case that: Anomalies are reality's protest.
- (1b) It is always the case that: Anomalies are internal defects of a theory.

In the option between these positions (1a) represents the empiricist answer and (1b) the idealist answer. The funny thing now is that empirical data tell against empiricism. The history of science invalidates (1a), and idealism remains. But let us now compare the following options (1) and (2):

- (1) 1a or 1b, which means: *either* (It is always the case that: Anomalies are reality's protest) *or* (It is always the case that: Anomalies are internal defects of a theory).
- (2) It is always the case that: *Either* an anomaly is the protest of reality *or* it is an internal defect of the theory.

The important thing to note is that the disjunctions (1) and (2) are not equivalent. There is, then, a meta-option between (1) and (2), and if we opt for (2) we are not faced with the dilemma between empiricism and idealism. And I think we shall opt for (2) since nothing in the history of science blocks this alternative. Our low-level option then only goes on each individual case. We get:

- (2a) This anomaly is a protest of reality.
- (2b) This anomaly is an internal defect of the theory.

The answer to this option should, I think, not be given by philosophers at all, but by the scientists who are concerned with the case at hand. From the philosophical point of view then, an anomaly is something which *may* be a sign that the theory is not truthlike. One cannot be sure, but neither is it possible to be sure of the opposite. The option (2) above might be called a *realist-fallibilist conception of anomalies*. This in turn means that we can never know for sure when a theory is more truthlike than another, but, yet, it affords us a centre around which to discuss which theory is closest to truth. Such a conception does not give us any proofs, but this should really not be the case with a non-foundational epistemology. However, it saves us from total relativism since anomalies function as, so to say, poles which connect the argumentation or conversation with reality.

Ontology-centred Metaphysics

I have now put forward three ideas which I think cohere and point forward towards a possible non-foundational epistemology. They are to:

- (a) substitute truthlikeness for truth;
- (b) substitute contingently privileged cognitive positions for essentially privileged positions;
- (c) substitute a realist-fallibilist conception of anomalies for empiricist and idealist conceptions.

Now, I can very well imagine a general objection to the effect that the position I have intimated does not look like an epistemological position at all. Rather, someone might say, it is only a defence of metaphysical realism. In a sense I think this objection is perfectly right, but in another it is wrong. Let me explain.

Modern philosophy is, as stressed for instance by Rorty, in the main epistemology-centred. If we divide the great metaphysical systems into two parts, an ontology and an epistemology, respectively, in most systems epistemology is regarded as logically prior to ontology. Hegel's system is of course the great exception. And like Hegel I think we have to reverse the priority between epistemology and ontology. But we should do this in a way which does not seduce us, like Hegel, into another kind of absolutism.

However, I shall quote one of Hegel's most famous remarks against Kant: 'What is demanded is thus the following: we should know the cognitive faculty before we know. It is like wanting to swim before going in the water.' To this remark I would like to add: knowledge in this case implies existence. If we have got knowledge of a cognitive faculty, this has to be knowledge of an existing faculty. This means that '... in the last analysis the cognitive relationship is itself an ontological relationship' [2]. The lesson to draw is that, independently of the hermeneutic and sociological criticism, there is a logical flaw in epistemology-centred philosophies. This flaw, however, does not invalidate all kinds of systematic metaphysics. It disappears if the priority order between epistemology and ontology are reversed; and we regard ontology as the prior part in our metaphysical systems. Epistemology then becomes what might be called a *regional ontology*. We get *ontology-centred philosophy*. This is the reason why the position put forward does not look like traditional epistemology.

Fallibilistic Metaphysics

Let us now look at the amended matrix above. Instead of 'theories' we shall now write 'ontological systems'. Ontologies in general, as well as theories in general, may be looked upon as fallible and socially caused. In this case, in contradistinction to that of relativism, there will be no self-referential inconsistency. The theses which I have put forward can also be regarded as fallible and socially caused, but in spite of this having a certain truthlikeness.

We may speak of fallibilistic but truth-seeking metaphysical systems. We may for instance construct fallibilistic counterparts to Cartesian dualistic ontology, to Leibnizian monadology, to reductive physicalism, and so on. But with regard to the future we should try to work out new and better metaphysical systems.

According to this conception, philosophy differs from science only in being more abstract and more general. Both philosophy and science should be regarded as truth-seeking activities. A metaphysical system may then come in conflict with a scientific theory, and vice versa. But it may also conflict with common sense and other things as well. Since not only common sense, but also science and philosophy are human fallible constructs, this means that there can be an interaction between science, philosophy and common sense. The kind of conception of philosophy I have tried to sketch may therefore be labelled an interactional conception.

Rejecting foundationalist conceptions of philosophy, Rorty says that instead of epistemology and knowledge, philosophy should be hermeneutics and edification. Philosophy is merely an eternal conversation without truth-finding as its goal. He thinks that we should have less metaphysics rather than new and better metaphysics, which is my opinion. The difference is obvious. What needs stressing, therefore, are the similarities. The view I have sketched, too, includes the opinion that philosophy cannot lay foundations and create justifications for the rest of the culture. Neither does it imply that philosophers know something about knowing which nobody else may contest. Since ontology is fallible it may be contested by sociologists, psychologists, and whoever you like. But, on the other hand, the philosopher may contest common sense and the sciences. And the contest is about who has the most truthlike opinion. Philosophers should not be the guardians of rationality, but they should be truth-seekers and guard the truth-seeking activity.

Perhaps this conception of fallibilistic metaphysics turns me into more of a 'Rortyan' than Rorty himself. He wants everybody to participate in a never-ending 'conversation of mankind'. Excluded from the future conversation, however, are the metaphysicians; as well as all other meta-storytellers. According to the conception here put forward, even we who regard ourselves as metaphysicians should be welcome to let our voices be heard.

Notes

- 1 Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, Oxford, 1983.
- 2 The quotation is from Nicolai Hartmann's *New Ways of Ontology*, Westport, 1975, p. 137.

