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Pragmatic Objectivity in History, Journalism and Philosophy (Presidential Address)

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I. Introduction

If you are like me, you are someone who cares both about your fellow human beings and the truth. (These cares may even be related!) If you are like me, you have found it exquisitely painful and depressing to follow political events and rhetoric over the past few years—if not longer. Mendacity is rampant, historical memory grows shorter by the minute, and logic—well, logic was thrown overboard by some dude in the Tea Party sporting a Tri-cornered hat. What’s more—*I’m on a roll, here*—the highly educated “professionals” charged with providing historical context, statistical perspective, or straightforward fact-checking are *missing-in-action*—or, just as often—blithely making things worse.

I’m ranting, of course. *But I’m mad as hell and I’m not going to take it anymore!* And if I have to use my Presidential Address to get a few things off my chest, well, you may not have to like it, but if you want to get to the banquet tonight, you’re going to have to listen. Now, before you think me a crank—too late?—let me ratchet things down a notch and briefly introduce this talk on “pragmatic objectivity.”¹

Pragmatic Objectivity: Philosophical Background

In a discussion associating his views with those of William James, Richard Rorty once wrote that the word “true” (like the words “good” and “rational”) was merely a normative notion, “a compliment paid to sentences that seem to be paying their way and that fit in with other sentences which are doing so” (Rorty, 1982, p. xxv). He also claimed that once it became clear that we cannot “stand outside” ourselves to compare our concepts with the world, philosophers would have to recognize that, beyond socio-linguistic consensus, there are precious few ways for us to “warrant” our judgments—and we really ought to stop trying. Our culture’s failures to achieve “Objectivity” tell us that we have been desiring the wrong ideal all along. Rorty writes, “The desire for objectivity—the desire to be in touch with a reality which is more than some community with which we identify ourselves” should be replaced “with the desire for solidarity with that community” (Rorty, 1991, p. 39).

So, perhaps “true” is just a compliment; and perhaps “objectivity” is

just an illusory desire; perhaps not. Regardless, *calling* objectivity “illusory” has done little to eradicate the constant and practical need of discussing and debating what objectivity should—and should not mean. The term is *too important*: practically, epistemically, and morally. Reaffirming Alasdair MacIntyre’s argument, Thomas Haskell argues that while “the obstinate persistence of the appeal to objective standards, as well as the skepticism aroused by such appeals” may seem paradoxical, nevertheless “it still needs to be taken with the utmost seriousness” (Haskell, 1987, p. 996). For even if objectivity is a masquerade—even if it is, as MacIntyre puts it, “nothing but a mask for personal feeling and preference”—the question remains “Why *this* masquerade? What is it about rational argument which is so important that it is the nearly universal appearance assumed by those who engage in moral conflict?” (MacIntyre in Haskell, 1987, p. 996).

Going Outside Philosophy

Now, you are all familiar with ways in which *philosophers* debate “objectivity”: realism versus antirealism, objectivism versus relativism, internalism versus externalism, and so forth. I am frustrated with those debates because I cannot see where they are getting us. For me, they have lost traction. But what has come to fascinate me is that *outside* of philosophy—in the space philosophers sometimes call “the world” or “that part of existence that charges me rent” —there is a plethora of claims to objectivity in many guises. There are claims of “the fact of the matter,” “the way things really are,” “fair and balanced” news, “the real story,” “the bottom line,” and sundry other phrases all supposedly embodying something objective—a fact, a truth, a value—and thus laying claim to a standpoint that is “above it all.”

So, tonight I would like to report on a little experiment. To better understand objectivity, I have been venturing outside philosophy to see how objectivity is faring among theorists in history and journalism (a.k.a. history’s “first draft”). Both fields are, I think, crucially important in influencing what the average person considers to be debate, argument, knowledge, truth—indeed, what they think is “objectivity.” I am curious about what “objectivity” means outside philosophy and what philosophy might learn from—or instruct—such efforts.

I proceed as follows. First, I present two sketches of the recent history of the concept of “objectivity”—first among historians and then among journalism/media theorists. Second, I examine several critiques each field has made against what *they* consider the traditional conception of objectivity. Third, I shift to these critics’ pragmatic proposals for reconstructing

objectivity. Finally, I make a very brief case regarding why these critics' proposals would benefit from greater connection with a philosophically pragmatist conception of democracy. In brief, my tentative conclusion is that these (historians' and journalists') proposals to renovate "objectivity" only become defensible once they more firmly connected to democracy by dialogical and epistemic habits of inquiry.

II. History of "Objectivity" in History and Journalism

Historians' Objectivity

From the late 19th century until today, the consensus among historians regarding the purposes and aims of historical interpretation has shifted back and forth from approaches typically classified as "objectivist" or "historicist" toward others called "postmodern" or "anti-historicist." *Historicists* view history as aspiring toward a scientific account that aims at a determinate picture of past events and their causal relations. For them, objectivity is an ideal. *Anti-historicists* view history as aspiring toward narratives about the meaning of historical events. For them, objectivity is, at best, a misleading illusion or myth.

In the 1880's, objectivity was "the charter under which professional history was inaugurated" (Haskell, 1997, p. 147) and a cluster of ideas comprised the concept. Historian Peter Novick summarizes this cluster of ideas as:

...a commitment to the reality of the past, and to truth as correspondence to that reality; a sharp separation between knower and known, between fact and value, and above all, between history and fiction. Historical facts are seen as prior to and independent of interpretation....Truth is one, not perspectival. Whatever patterns exist in history are "found," not "made."
(Novick, 1988, pp. 1-2)

During the interwar years, the historicist conception waned under the attacks of Charles Beard and Carl Becker (who were informed by a variety of intellectual currents, including pragmatism), but the historicist view waxed again during the height of the Cold War. But by the 1960's it was impossible for historicists to restrain the plurality of groups (women, blacks, gays) who wished to refashion historical theory to express their interests and perspectives. As Novick (1988, p. 415) notes, "The political culture lurched sharply left, then right; consensus was replaced first by polarization, then by fragmentation; affirmation, by negativity, confusion,

apathy, and uncertainty. The consequences of all this turmoil for the idea of historical objectivity were various, and often contradictory.”

Indeed, more than pluralism was responsible for undermining historicist views. Historians like John Higham were calling for historians to become more self-conscious of their commitments and to reject the application of static and simplistic political formulas to the study of the past (see Kloppenberg (1989, p. 1022)). “The obligation of the historian to become a moral critic,” Higham (1970, pp. 155-6) argued, “grows out of the breakdown of ethical absolutes. If no single ethical system... does justice to all situations, a complex awareness must take the place of systematic theory.”

Today, while there is no dominant consensus among historians on the nature of historical truth, Haskell and others agree that “the [historicist] ideal is currently viewed with considerable skepticism... [and] the overall trend has been one of declension. The ideal of objectivity just does not grip us as powerfully as it did the founding generation of the 1880s” (Haskell, 1997, p. 148).

Journalism’s Objectivity

Turning now to journalism, we also find shifting definitions for “objectivity.” As Robert McChesney notes, the commonly understood notion “that journalism should be politically neutral, nonpartisan, professional, even ‘objective,’ did not emerge until the twentieth century. During the first two or three generations of the Republic such notions for the press would have been nonsensical, even unthinkable. The point of journalism was to persuade as well as inform, and the press tended to be highly partisan” (McChesney, 2003, p. 300). In the late 19th century (around the time, recall, that historians enshrined objectivity as their profession’s central norm)² journalists were embracing something similar, which they called “realism.” According to the Committee of Concerned Journalists (CCJ, 2007), “realism emerged at a time when journalism was separating from political party affiliations and becoming more accurate” and it encapsulated “the idea that if reporters simply dug out the facts and ordered them together, truth would reveal itself rather naturally.”³

However, this simple and correspondentist notion of realism, like its sibling notion in history, was to undergo a similar critique, also in the interwar years. Particularly in the 1920s, amidst concerns about the rise of propaganda and burgeoning role of public relations professionals, there was a “growing recognition that journalists were full of bias” along with a concern that the realism doctrine was naïve. Walter Lippmann and others sought ways that the journalist could “remain clear and free of his irrational, his unexamined, his unacknowledged prejudgments in observ-

ing, understanding and presenting the news” (CCJ, 2007). Lippmann proposed that “realism” be replaced with a conception of “objectivity” but one which—unlike the early historian’s conception of objectivity—would emblemize “the unity of disciplined experiment.” The key for Lippmann “was in the discipline of the craft, not the aim” (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2007, p. 82).

However, despite this marked shift of objectivity’s intention (from aim to method), the codes that professionals *actually developed and adopted* tended to replicate the principles of the earlier (and supposedly naive) journalistic realism. As Stephen Ward writes,

Proponents of objectivity drew a hard, clear line between news and opinion in the newspaper.... For objectivists, news did not differ from opinion by having less interpretation or comment—it had *no* interpretation or opinion.... only statements of facts.... Interpretations contained value judgments—one person’s subjective “opinion.” (Ward, 2005, p. 217)

Here, I will pause to briefly rehearse what has happened to journalistic truth: journalism attempted to escape the partisanship of its earliest days first by turning to naive realism and later, reacting against this, by loosely aping the scientific method via the implementation of professional principles and codes. These codes, however, had the effect of reinstating the naiveté of the earlier realism. What was, and what remains, unrecognized by many journalists is a fact that, as McChesney (2003, p. 302) points out, “There was nothing naturally objective or professional about [the values in journalism’s professional codes]. In core respects they responded to the commercial and political needs of the owners, although they were never framed in such a manner.”

What is the situation in journalism today? Unlike historians, who are largely uneasy or skeptical of neutralist objectivity, journalism still officially maintains it. As Richard Salant, former president of CBS news, put it in the early 1970’s, “Our reporters do not cover stories from their point of view, they are presenting them from *nobody’s* point of view” (quoted in Mindich, 1998, p. 7). And while in 1996 the term “objectivity” was officially dropped from *Society of Professional Journalists’ Code of Ethics* (in favor of “seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues”) one still finds media scholars such as Julia Fox describing “journalistic objectivity” as a reporting norm demanding that reporters aim at “being neutral, unbiased, and balanced... void of personal ideology and values, opinions, and impressions.” This professional

norm, Fox (2006, p. 37) says, is “seen by journalists as both an individual responsibility of the reporter and a collective responsibility of the profession.”

Unfortunately, the actual implementation of journalism’s objectivity code is, as you would imagine, a mess. According to Kovach and Rosenstiel, reporters who have refined this idea of “objective method” have largely done so only privately and piecemeal, as reflective of “reporting routines rather than journalism’s larger purpose.” The problem is that reporters’ “informal strategies have not been pulled together into [a] widely understood discipline.... There is nothing approaching standard rules of evidence, as in the law, or an agreed-upon method of observation, as in the conduct of scientific experiments.” The upshot is a fragmented epistemic approach: “Although journalism may have developed various techniques and conventions for determining facts, it has done less to develop a system for testing the reliability of journalistic interpretation.” (Foregoing quotations from Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2007, p. 85.)

Unfortunately, this leaves journalism in an untenable position. As media scholar Jay Rosen (1993) puts it “it’s not an exaggeration to say that *journalism is the last refuge of objectivity as an epistemology*. Nobody else takes this notion seriously anymore.... Yet... in journalism... this concept remains. Even journalists are beginning to lose their faith in their own epistemology... [and they frequently exclaim] ‘Of course, no one can be really objective. But we try to be fair’” ([my emphasis]).

III. Critiques of Objectivity in History and Journalism

I focus now upon several scholars actively criticizing the reigning interpretations of objectivity in history and journalism. The goal is to elucidate some similarities among these criticisms before moving on to their (also similar) proposals. Their proposals amount to what can, I believe, be collectively called “pragmatic objectivity.”

History

In History, as I mentioned earlier, the pendulum has swung away from the notion that history can or should try to provide a picture of the Real Past. Still, in the view of scholars like Haskell, the primary tension is between those who retain faith in an ideal of pure interpretative neutrality and detachment and those who do not.

For Haskell, pure neutrality is implausible because, as he puts it, “*facts* only take shape under the aegis of paradigms, presuppositions, theories, and the like” (Haskell, 1997, p. 157). Similarly implausible is the antiquated notion of the *detached scholar* who “contributes his brick to a

steadily accumulating edifice of unchallengeable knowledge” (Haskell, 1997, p. 146-47). Haskell rejects as unlivable the notion that neutrality can be a selfless stance, where truth-seeking becomes “a matter of emptying oneself of passion and preconception, so as to become a perfectly passive and receptive mirror of external reality” (Haskell, 1997, p. 150). All such neutralist versions of objectivity have proved fruitless, even infantilizing. As Haskell puts it, “representing the past is a far more problematical enterprise than most historians realize” (Haskell, 1997, p. 146).⁴

At the same time, Haskell refuses to embrace the more radical historicist conclusions which trace back to Nietzsche and later blossom in contemporary works by Rorty, Derrida, and others. These anti-historicist reactions remove too many checks on interpretation and meaning in history. Haskell writes, “The boundlessness of interpretation—implying, as it does, the absence of any but self-imposed constraints upon thought, the fluidity of the boundary (if any) between reason and the imagination, and the impossibility, therefore, of objective judgment—is the quintessential premise of the more radical forms of historicism” (Haskell, 1987, p. 992).

There are real costs for the gambit of “boundless interpretation,” Haskell argues, even if they cannot be proved to be metaphysically real. For whether justification is cashed out as a play of signifiers, or perspectives, or contexts, or even just “turtles all the way down” (as the famous Geertz story has it) we must still, somehow, reconcile these images with lived “heaviness of heart we all feel upon reading, say, the reports prepared by Amnesty International. Do our objections to torture have no better foundation than this? Are the torturer’s practices just the product of a particular cultural and historical situation incommensurably different from our own?” (Haskell, 1987, p. 991).

To a pragmatic thinker like Haskell, what’s objectionable in both historicist and anti-historicist schemes is the way they tie objectivity to metaphysical stakes, “something timeless and universal,” which, he says, “transcends the mundane world of human experience” (Haskell, 1987, p. 994). Practically, making the stakes so abstract in effect relocates important conversations away from concrete, specific, and occasionally pressing problems to another place where they no longer make much practical difference. Thus, Haskell’s pragmatic and moderate historicism rejects the assumption that “objectivity” is a term whose meaning must ultimately depend upon a metaphysical commitment.⁵ His proposal—which I will come back shortly—rejects the need for metaphysical grounds without throwing out key concepts. He would throw out the bathwater, keep the baby, and reprimand those insistent on throwing out both.

[Moderate] Historicism can, and ought to, revise our traditional understanding of what it means to be “objective,” “rational,” and “scientific,” but [it] does not show any promise of leading us into a brave new world where those qualities can be meritorily dispensed with. Why would anyone but a narcissist want a world free of the constraints of epistemology? (Haskell, 1987, p. 1011)

Critiques of Journalist Objectivity

Unlike historians, who can tolerate (at least enough to debate them, professionally) a range of positions on objectivity, professional journalism (excluding journalism/media critics) has hewed to just one position: neutralist objectivity. This allegiance to neutrality has inspired voluminous and withering criticism. Here, I rehearse just those criticisms pertinent to the epistemic and moral dimensions of journalistic objectivity.

Impartial Voice

One aspect of journalistic objectivity which has been attacked is the “impartial voice.” This voice is supposed to help “news organizations... highlight that they are trying to produce something obtained by objective methods” (CCJ, 2007). However, the impartial voice can often obscure or cover over the intentions of the author(s). As CCJ (2007) puts it,

this neutral voice, without a discipline of verification, creates a veneer covering something hollow. Journalists who select sources to express what is really their own point of view... [and who] use the neutral voice to make it seem objective, are engaged in a form of deception. This damages the credibility of the whole profession by making it seem unprincipled, dishonest, and biased... [at a time] when the standards of the press are so in doubt.

No Frames?

Another demonstration of false journalistic claims to impartiality can be understood in terms of frames. While the impartial voice implies “no frame,” the fact is that, as Jay Rosen puts it, when journalists “talk about politics and public life, the frames... are very identifiable and narrow. There is, for example, the strategy lens: seeing everything through the eyes of the tactician. There is the emphasis on winning and the game aspects of politics” (Rosen, 2001, p. 216).

In addition, there are frames originating in economic interest, and these frames emphasize certain stories over others. As McChesney argues,

“Far from being politically neutral... [professional journalism] smuggles in values conducive to the commercial aims of the owners and advertisers as well as the political aims of the owning class.” Besides focusing on crime and celebrity stories (which are much less expensive to cover and do not antagonize the powerful) journalists tend to scrutinize government but not big business. One result of this is to augment “public cynicism about government’s ability—indeed its legitimacy—to regulate business in the public interest.” (Foregoing quotations from McChesney, 2003, p. 305.) Only a fraction of attention is paid to working class and labor issues.⁶

Epistemic Effects

Besides the flat-out contradictions between theory and practice, journalism’s stance of neutral objectivity has also been criticized for pernicious epistemic effects. For example, one effect of neutrality is the minimization of context in news stories and thus the reduction of public understanding. Journalism, McChesney argues, “tends to avoid contextualization like the plague.” One of the strengths of earlier, partisan journalism lay in its attempt to place every important issue “in a larger political ideology, to make sense of it. But under [contemporary] professional standards, [the provision of] meaningful context and background for stories, if done properly, will tend to commit the journalist to a definite position and enmesh [them]...in the controversy professionalism is determined to avoid.” As a result, coverage “tends to be a barrage of facts and official statements.” (Foregoing quotations from McChesney, 2003, p. 304.) Much reporting, in fact, is passive not investigative—it waits upon actions or events involving people in power; by relying on such “legitimate triggers,” journalists can claim to be above the fray.

The epistemic effect of this is to deprive readers not only of *context* (as just mentioned) but also of *analysis of how systems function* and those systems can potentially affect the public—or the natural world.⁷ “This inability to provide criticism of the system as a whole—even when it is well deserved—is an inherent flaw of professional journalism” (McChesney, 2003, p. 315).

I will mention just two other epistemic effects of journalistic objectivity. The first is the isolation of journalists from the public. As Rosen points out, “when journalists say, ‘All we do is present the facts,’” the effect is both to mislead the audience while severing any “conversation about journalism and its values from the rest of political culture.” “One of the most powerful things about the declaration ‘I’m objective,’ is the hidden corollary: ‘You’re not.’” (Foregoing quotations from Rosen, 2001, p. 216.)

The second and perhaps more devastating epistemic effect is the journalistic technique for manufacturing dialectical balance. It would be easy to multiply examples: discussion on economic policy pits free market conservatives *versus* social welfare advocates; science education panels pits Creationists *versus* trained, working scientists; discussions about climate changes pits global warming “skeptics” *versus* environmentalists, to name just a few. The technique is obvious—the journalist (or news producer) seeks out polarized extremes as a way, ostensibly, to “get at the truth.” These theatrics however, contrive to make the journalist appear *indispensable* to ensuring “balance,” the “authoritative middle ground between extremes.” The upshot, Rosen argues, is that “objectivity has this cunning ability to devalue and deflect all criticism.” Because journalists assume they occupy the “middle” position, they feel justified in discounting all claims (e.g. from conservatives or liberals) as biased. The result is an insidious form of journalistic self delusion for this supposedly “critical” approach to objectivity is actually immune from self-correction. Indeed, it is stupefying, for it “eliminates the possibility of learning from criticism.” (Foregoing quotations from Rosen, 1993.) It is fair to say that such criticisms (of journalistic pretensions to neutrality) are akin to the one levied by Haskell at historians: “narcissism.” It is narcissism because, “at the root of objectivity,” Rosen (2001, p. 218) writes, “is the wish to be free of the results of what you do.”

To briefly review the argument thus far: we have seen that a longstanding cleavage in philosophy about the nature of truth and reality—popularly known as a debate over “realism”—has also occupied both historians and journalists. In their lexicon, the debate is focused upon the meaning of “objectivity.” (1) *A cursory review of “objectivity” in history* reveals that the debate over “objectivity” (also referred to as a debate between “historicists” and “anti-historicists”) is, on the whole, inconclusive but leaning against the older historicism. It is unclear what will emerge as the fields’ dominant interpretative stance. *The situation is unsettled.* (2) *A cursory review of “objectivity” in journalism* reveals a fairly univocal embrace of “objectivity” by the profession of journalism, especially where “objectivity” means a method which strives for neutrality or impartiality. However, the professional stance on “objectivity” (or “neutrality”) is strongly contested by many critics and scholars in the fields of media and communication studies. Public confidence in journalism is middling at best. *Overall, the situation is unsettled.*

We have also looked at several main *criticisms* of objectivity in both areas. Very briefly, (1a) *the critiques in history* against objectivity in-veighed against, on the one side, correspondence views of truth coupled

with impossible demands for self-abnegation; and, on the other side, post-modern or relativist attacks on objectivity fueled by the desire to escape epistemic constraints but offering no positive clues about how historical interpretation should proceed. (2a) *The critiques in journalism* against objectivity attacked the profession's pretensions to "impartiality" and "neutrality," a stance that is not only performatively contradicted in practice, but also destructive of any epistemic contributions journalism could do make to public inquiry and whatever justice (economic, environmental, social, etc.) that inquiry might produce.

With this review in mind, we turn to look briefly at several *positive* proposals by historians and media/communication scholars.

IV. Positive Proposals

Positive Proposals, History: Modest Historicism

Let us return to Thomas Haskell's proposal for a via media between historicism and anti-historicism. (He is not the only historian moving in this direction—James Kloppenberg is a fellow traveler—but I focus on Haskell's ideas because they are, I believe, more powerful.)⁸ Haskell calls for a "modest historicism," but we could justifiably name it "pragmatic objectivity." (Indeed Haskell identifies his view as congruent with the classical pragmatists and their anti-foundational fallibilism.)⁹ For reasons mentioned by MacIntyre earlier, Haskell refuses to get rid of objectivity since this concept is embedded in the way we talk, act, and see the world. He writes,

Although the ideal of objectivity has been most fully and formally developed by scholars and serves importantly to legitimize their work, it was not invented by them and in fact pervades the world of everyday affairs. ...[T]he ideal is tacitly invoked... every time anyone opens a letter, picks up a newspaper, walks into a courtroom, or decides which of two squabbling children to believe. (Haskell, 1997, p. 12)

In more familiar pragmatist jargon, the idea is meaningful because it is already doing work in everyday life. And whether or not the idea can be proved with purely theoretical reason, we can accept our analyses as legitimate on the basis of deeply rooted epistemic and moral practices in which objectivity plays a central role. We need not choose between the alternatives described by Rorty: conversation *or* logical proof, solidarity *or* objectivity.¹⁰

If we press to know what objectivity *is*, after all, for Haskell, we learn

that it is an active *stance*. Not unlike Aristotle's *phronesis*, objectivity is conduct that emerges when a set of epistemic and characterological habits are engaged in the course of everyday life. He refers to these habits as "ascetic" ideals or practices, but unlike the asceticism derided by Nietzsche, these are both modest and indispensable for the pursuit of truth. In "Objectivity and Its Institutional Setting" he writes,

What I champion under the rubric "objectivity" is not neutrality or passionlessness but that "vital minimum of ascetic self-discipline that enables a person to do such things as abandon wishful thinking, assimilate bad news, and discard pleasing interpretations that cannot pass elementary tests of evidence and logic." Most important, objectivity requires the ability to "suspend or bracket one's own perceptions long enough to enter sympathetically into the alien and possibly repugnant perspectives of rival thinkers." These mental acts require a degree of detachment, an ability to achieve some distance from one's own spontaneous perceptions and convictions. But they do not require indifference. (Haskell, 1997, p. 60)

Notice that Haskell's reconstruction of "objectivity" vitally depends on distancing it from "neutrality" but *not* from detachment. *Detachment*, properly understood, is a crucially important ability, and it is simply the grossest of overreactions to insist that detachment always entails Cartesian acts of complete self-abnegation; it does not. Indeed, detachment is a capacity we use everyday—when we referee a journal article, grade a student's paper or coworker's report, or try to suspend judgment in a meeting. More important, detachment functions to promote not antiseptic neutrality but fecund intellectual conflict.

[B]y helping to channel our intellectual passions... [detachment helps]... insure collision with rival perspectives. In that collision, if anywhere, our thinking transcends both the idiosyncratic and the conventional. Detachment both socializes and deparochializes the work of intellect... and fits an individual to participate fruitfully in what is essentially a communal enterprise.... When the ascetic effort at detachment fails, as it often does, we talk past one another, producing nothing but discordant soliloquies, each fancying itself the voice of reason. (Haskell, 1997, p. 5)¹¹

In sum, then, for Haskell: objectivity is a stance which depends upon ascetic self-discipline of an especially epistemic sort; it relies on detachment

not as an end in itself but as a way of constructing the most powerful arguments—those arguments which raise then defeat the *best versions* of opponent’s arguments—and only after this is done, may it advance its own passionate convictions. Objectivity, then, is not neutrality, nor is it “something entirely distinct from detachment, fairness, and honesty... [Objectivity is]... the product of extending and elaborating these priceless and fundamentally ascetic virtues” (Haskell, 1997, p. 4).

Positive Proposals, Journalism: Pragmatic Objectivity

More than a few scholars in communication and media studies have been unequivocal: *journalistic objectivity is not working*. The professional posture of many in the press (“everybody but us is highly partisan”) is contradicted by the way the press is deeply embedded in political culture—with political professionals and insiders, with discussions of strategy, polling, technique, and thus tangled up with all the manipulation endemic with such enterprises. Such close entanglements “is framing the story of public life for us in a particular way... and it’s not working for citizens” (Rosen, 2001, p. 217).

What to do? Some calls to reform journalism’s philosophical bearings explicitly label themselves “pragmatic objectivity.” Others do not employ that label but nevertheless use core concepts illustrative of this same notion. All concur that a need for reform is compelled by both theoretical and practical exigencies. Stephen Ward, who does use the label “pragmatic objectivity,” assesses the situation this way:

The traditional notion of journalistic objectivity, articulated about a century ago, is indefensible philosophically. It has been weakened by criticism inside and outside of journalism. In practice, fewer and fewer journalists embrace the traditional objectivity, while more and more newsrooms adopt a reporting style that includes perspective and interpretation. Traditional objectivity is no longer a viable ethical guide. (Ward, 2005, p. 4)

Like Haskell, Ward believes that the best course is not to abandon objectivity, but to reconstruct it. “Journalists,” he writes “continue to need a clear, vigorous norm of objectivity to guide their practice.... Without a thoughtful reform of objectivity, we risk losing a much-needed ethical restraint on today’s news media” (Ward, 2005, pp. 4-5).

What seems valuable in objectivity to Ward is comparable to those mentioned in philosophy and history. The value lies in the direction ob-

jectivity provides for the process of inquiry, particularly insofar as it calls for the special kind of *detachment* which facilitates inquiry *without* trying to bracket out all perspectives and values. Ward writes,

Pragmatic objectivity does not require detachment from all values and perspectives—an impossible demand. ...[I]t does not insist on drawing a hard line between facts and values [nor] seek to eliminate all judgment and evaluation in reports.... [but] operates as an instrument of rational restraint within the pragmatic, purposive activity of journalism. (Ward, 2005, pp. 263-64)

Ward's call for pragmatic objectivity is complemented by those arguing for a more vital epistemic connection between journalists and the public. In part, journalists need to reconceive what a "public" is, for without this notion, journalism is lost. The public, as James Carey once put it, is the "god-term of journalism—the be-all and end-all, the term without which the enterprise fails to make sense.... Insofar as journalism is grounded, it is grounded in the public" (Carey, in Rosen, 2001, p. 68). Some, like Rosen, have adopted John Dewey's conception of a public as a social group which forms in response to problems for the purpose of inquiry."A public," Rosen writes, "is something more than a market for information, an audience for spectacle, or a pollster's random sample. *Publics are formed when we turn from our private and separate affairs to face common problems, and to face each other in dialogue and discussion*" (Rosen, 2001, p. 75 [my emphasis]).

But a pragmatically objective journalism must do more than theoretically re-conceptualize the public. What can it *do*? In Rosen's proposed model of "public journalism," the journalist must eschew professional neutrality in favor of a more engaged and *dialogical* relationship with their public. They must stop sighing about the public's disengagement from news and instead assume a more active stance toward improving this crucial aspect of democratic life. Rosen writes,

In a word, public journalists want public life to work. In order to make it work they [must be] willing to declare an end to their neutrality on certain questions—for example: whether people participate, whether a genuine debate takes place when needed, whether a community comes to grips with its problems, whether politics earns the attention it claims.... [A "public"] is best understood as an *achievement* of good journalism—its intended *outcome* rather than its assumed audience. Public journalism tries to place the journalist within the political community as a responsible member with a full stake in public life. (Rosen, 2001, p. 75 [my emphasis])

The justification for such proposals can be found, I think, in a view of democracy as sustained by—and creative of—certain epistemic habits, the likes of which we have already heard spelled out by Haskell. Indeed, it is clear that there *cannot be* a journalism without a social order that promotes and sustains such habits. Once people lose interest in the epistemic benefits good journalism can provide—which is caused in part by the deterioration of their own epistemic abilities—*that's it*: journalism—in some real, non-entertainment sense of that word—is dead-in-the-water. Rosen writes,

[W]ithout an engaged and concerned public even the most public-minded press cannot do its job. Thus, the involvement of people in the affairs of their community, their interest in political discussion, their willingness to abandon a spectator's role and behave as citizens—all form the civic capital on which the enterprise of the press is built. To live off that capital without trying to replenish it is a dangerous course for journalists to follow, but this is precisely the predicament of the American press today. It addresses a "public" it does little to help create. (Rosen & Merritt in Rosen, 2001, p. 75)¹²

V. Conclusion: The Connection to Philosophy

Near the beginning of my talk I quoted Richard Rorty, who told us that because philosophy has been unable to achieve perfect Objectivity, a "God's Eye View," it would be best resign ourselves to seeking solidarity through conversation. Now "conversation" is, of course, a broad term for Rorty, and he would have been the first to suggest that debate and argument deserve no privileged rank above persuasion and poetry. But we must let go of the hopeful notion that there is any additional "traction" inherent in the rational character of debate; there isn't, and there cannot be. The metaphilosophical point, according to Rorty, is that there is nothing "other than convenience to use as a criterion in science and philosophy" [where "convenience" means the]... ability to avoid fruitless, irresolvable, disagreements on dead end issues." Whatever "pries us out of present convenience," Rorty adds, "is just the *hope* of greater convenience in the future." (Foregoing quotations from Rorty, 1993, pp. 456-57 [my emphasis].)¹³

I have argued elsewhere that there are other choices available than the ones Rorty depicts, and one is *not* forced to choose between a Rortyan "conversational consensus" and some absolute conception of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful.¹⁴ Indeed, when one looks beyond philosophy—as I have done tonight by peeking, however briefly, at history and journal-

ism—one can see that there are large swaths of plausible middle ground on which a moderate pragmatic view could easily be homesteaded.

What Can Philosophy Add?

So let me close by briefly speculating about what history or journalism might take from philosophy. These accounts need a more coherent theory of democracy. Though I have not mentioned John Dewey tonight, his political writings show a truly nuanced appreciation of the critical and complex roles played by historians and the press in the formation of democracy. Dewey understood how the influence of money, power, and privilege could dispose, as he put it in 1924, “a considerable class of influential persons, enlightened and liberal in technical, scientific and religious matters” to be “only too ready to make use of appeal to authority, prejudice, emotion and ignorance to serve their purposes in political and economic affairs” and that such actions could, in effect, “debauch the habit of the public mind” (Dewey, 1924/1978, p. 50).

Today, we know all too well that Dewey’s observation still applies. In fact, there are now even more ways for society’s best minds to concoct *entire careers* whose end result (intentionally or not) is to fragment, distract, and titillate—in short, to debauch the very epistemic abilities people need to reason objectively, to form a *public*.

But while many of Dewey’s insights are still instructive, journalists and historians might be well served to read other, more contemporary pragmatist accounts of democracy. Such accounts could, I believe, help ground and consolidate their current efforts to formulate “pragmatic objectivity.” One such account comes from Robert Talisse (2009) and focuses upon what he calls “dialogical democracy.” Dialogical democracy connects the individual’s habits of everyday reasoning (“folk epistemology”) with the larger social forms of knowledge-seeking, and then shows how these epistemic activities require a democratic political and social order. Talisse writes, “The argument... is that the folk epistemology to which we are already committed entails a commitment to a certain social epistemology which in turn requires a democratic political and social order” (Talisse, 2009, p. 6).¹⁵

Talisse’s theory may or may not be right; for the moment, that is not important. My recommendation is based my survey of the roles played by objectivity as a pivotal concept in journalism and history. In those fields, journalists and historians wind up unearthing and assaying a host of concepts which comprise what Talisse calls “folk epistemology”¹⁶ but these people do not, so far as I can tell, drive those concepts home. In other words, they do not satisfactorily connect them to the goals they explicitly

posit—goals like fairness, justice, and democracy. They need Talisse’s theory, or one like it, to do this—to make plain how integral epistemic practices are to a genuinely democratic outcome. “Proper believing,” Talisse (2009, p. 123) writes, “requires a social context in which reasons can be freely exchanged, compared, criticized, and challenged; this in turn requires a political order in which individuals can be confident that they have access to reliable sources of information.”

There may not be far to go. Between the disciplines, there is already significant shared ground. Talisse’s idea that democracy requires we treat one another as “epistemic peers” is an integral component of many critiques against unassailable journalistic neutrality, or the cozy relationship between media and political actors. Talisse’s concern about “pseudo-deliberative fora” (where political debate is mimicked but not instantiated) or the “weak man argument fallacy” can be found in critiques of Presidential debates, pre-screened “town hall” meetings, TV shouting matches, and many others.¹⁷

Most important, perhaps, is the worry—shared by philosophers, historians, and journalists—that while public appetite for the appearance of epistemic contest points to something enduring about the uses of reason, it is clearly up to us to ensure that these appetites are not diverted or perverted by those who do not care for democratic life. As Talisse puts it, “The *epistemic capabilities* requisite to acknowledging reasonable disagreements and engaging in rational dialogue cannot be taken as given, but *must be socially cultivated and maintained*” (Talisse, 2009, p. 173 [my emphasis]).

The social cultivation of reason has many contributors; schools, churches, and the media are only the most prominent examples. Philosophers plays an important role in reason’s cultivation not only by writing and talking to each other, but by aggressively deploying their theories and arguments in spaces and places beyond the philosophical salon.

Notes

¹ Some of the ideas in this paper were developed in a paper I gave at the Second Nordic Pragmatism Conference (2009) entitled “Pragmatic Democracy: Inquiry, Objectivity, and Experience.” A revised version of that talk is forthcoming in *Metaphilosophy*.

² See Kloppenberg (1989, p. 1012).

³ Note: while this quotation comes from a website, identical portions can be found at Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007, p. 82). The Committee of Concerned journalists (CCJ) began as a task force of The Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism, but has been independent since July 2006. CCJ, based

in Washington, D.C., is affiliated with the University of Missouri School of Journalism and the Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute.

⁴ Cf. James Kloppenberg: “It is precisely because the indeterminacy of truth and the historicity of reason are now widely conceded that we can no longer claim to find objectivity—in science or in history. It is, furthermore, precisely for that reason that historians must insist on the indispensability of historical studies as one of the most fruitful forms of inquiry in a world of uncertainty. We cannot have, nor should we want, the self-righteous smugness of earlier generations that we have “got it right” once and for all” (Kloppenber, 1989, p. 1030).

⁵ In a discussion regarding the objective basis of rights, Haskell sets up an opposition between Leo Strauss and Friedrich Nietzsche in order to draw out the point that “both assume that the only acceptable basis for rights would be metaphysical. Nietzsche hitches rights talk to metaphysics for the purpose of discrediting it, Strauss because he thinks reason can vindicate the connection. Both hold that right must refer to something timeless and universal, something that transcends the mundane world of human experience, something, in Strauss’s words, that ‘is wholly independent of any human compactor convention.’ That is the assumption that moderate historicism fruitfully rejects” (Haskell, 1987, p. 994).

⁶ McChesney (2003, p. 312) adds, “Today much of journalism is increasingly directed at the middle class and the upper class while the working class and the poor have been written off altogether.”

⁷ Largely because of journalism’s professional codes, McChesney notes, journalists failed to expose or follow up consistently upon the deep and systemic connections between deregulatory government policy and the colossal cascade of collapses which began with Enron in 2001.

⁸ For an expression of Kloppenberg’s pragmatist hope, see Kloppenberg (1989, p. 1030): “But that [the inability to fulfill the old objectivist dream of a picture of reality] should not cause us to despair about our prospects for making progress. Beyond the noble dream of scientific objectivity and the nightmare of complete relativism lies the terrain of pragmatic truth, which provides us with hypotheses, provisional syntheses, imaginative but warranted interpretations, which then provide the basis for continuing inquiry and experimentation.”

⁹ Haskell writes, “My position... is more or less congruent with the teachings of pragmatism’s founders, Charles S. Peirce, William James, and John Dewey.... I endorse... one of the cardinal principles of the pragmatist tradition, which holds that what truth requires is not unassailable foundations but self-correcting processes” (Haskell, 1997, p. 10).

¹⁰ Following a discussion aimed at resisting Rorty’s typical dichotomous choice (i.e., language vs. substance), Haskell (1987, p. 1011) argues, along lines of Deweyan realism, that “The effort to justify our beliefs by reference to realities that extend beyond language and communal solidarity is a wholesome discipline and a deeply human practice, the value of which is quite independent of the likelihood that it will ever yield incontrovertible Truth.”

Pragmatic Objectivity in History, Journalism and Philosophy

¹¹ Drawing on C.S. Peirce's notion of the "community of inquiry," Haskell notes the special role detachment and trenchant argumentation play in advancing inquiry. While less often noted, Haskell argues, vigorous competition is as important as cooperative inquiry: "if we ask what exactly it is about life in the scientific community that produces the gradual convergence of opinion toward the real, what can the answer be if not criticism, competition, impassioned confrontations between error-ridden individuals, each seeking to advance his own flawed conception of the truth!" ("Professionalism versus Capitalism" in Haskell, 1997, p. 108).

¹² Cf. McChesney (2003, pp. 304-5): "Unless there is a citizenry that depends upon journalism, that takes it seriously, that is politically engaged, journalism can lose its bearings... [In that event] the political-system becomes less responsive and corruption grows." According to McChesney (2003, p. 305), the implication of this mutual dependence of journalism and democracy is that journalism can only remain meaningful if it becomes "aggressively and explicitly critical of the anti-democratic status quo.... In short, the logic suggests that to remain democratic, to continue to exist, journalism must become... unprofessional."

¹³ Pragmatists, and indeed all philosophers, Rorty says, should see themselves "as involved in a long-term attempt to change the rhetoric, the common sense, and the self-image of their community." ("Is Truth a Goal of Inquiry?" in Rorty, 1998, p. 41).

¹⁴ See, e.g., Hildebrand (2003).

¹⁵ By "social epistemology," Talisse (2009, p. 6, n. 5) simply means that "knowledge-seeking is in large part a social endeavor involving the coordination and collaboration of many individuals within various institutional contexts."

¹⁶ Roughly, "folk epistemology" includes those "concepts and principles that inform our everyday practices of believing, asserting, deliberating, reasoning" and so forth (Talisse, 2009, p. 85).

¹⁷ See Talisse (2009, chapter 5, especially 162ff).

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