1 Objectivity and 'First Philosophies'

1.1 The Origins of Objectivity

Interest in the concept of objectivity is part of the legacy of Modern Philosophy, tracing back to a

new way of understanding the starting point of philosophical reflection. It traces back to an

"epistemological turn" that attended the development of New Science of the 16th and 17th

Century. These origins are an indication that what a thinker takes as the starting point of

philosophical reflection deeply affects how they approach key philosophical concepts, including

truth, knowledge, and objectivity. Even before Greco Roman thought gave way to the Christian

era, the Western tradition tended to favor what Charles Peirce called the *method of authority* as

the method by which to fix belief, and until the 17th century no genuine scientific approach or even law-like view of the physical world had yet been codified.

The method of authority is often justified by the assumption that "metaphysics is first philosophy." The idea that metaphysics comes first makes it easier to support the religious worldview based upon received tradition, or to support a search like that of the pre-Socratic an *arche*—a t*rue nature* first source or true nature of all that exists—in contrast with the world as shaped by human conventions and customs. The Aristotelian characterization of metaphysics as first philosophy still connects it with the pre-Socratic desire for a science or principal of the world beyond nature. But whether it can be approached through introspective means or readily comes "after the physics" is one of the key differences between Plato, with his rationalistic *Theory of Forms* and Aristotle's more empiricistic approach.

The Church being authoritative over matters of education, philosophy's role in 1600 was still, as in most of the Christian era, that of a handmaiden of theology, even though interest in Islamic and early Greek science or "natural philosophy" had brightly rekindled across much of Europe. Interest in astronomy was keen, including by the Vatican, but there was as yet no real distinction between what we call science and what at the time was simply called natural philosophy. Early Modern philosophers like Galileo and Descartes, straining under the bit of restrictions, proposed new ways to divide the roles of theology and natural philosophy, ways they hoped would be acceptable to the Church while also giving place to the aims, methods, and theories of the New Science.

Perhaps the most famous such compromise between the Church and the New Science was Galileo's. He readily advocated that the "book of the world" was written in mathematical

language, a view that he thought comported well with recognition of divine order. But in commenting on the charges brought against him in 1633 for his role in publishing in defense of the Copernican or heliocentric model (in contrast to the Church stance favoring the traditional geo or earth-centered universe), Galileo wrote "The Bible teaches us how to go to heaven, not how heaven goes." The Bible is not a book about nature or natural processes, and the Church, Galileo argued, should not take sides on cosmological theories developed by natural philosophers, which are subject to change in light of new findings. The rationalist philosopher Descartes proposed a somewhat different compromise with the Church based on his "real distinction" between physical or extended substance and immaterial soul, while similarly presenting himself as a good Catholic. But despite arguing in his book dedications that philosophy should be recognized as serving the Church by proving mind–soul dualism and by decisively refuting skepticism and atheism, some of Descartes's most important books were ill-received by authorities and placed alongside Kepler's *New Astronomy* and others on *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, the list of heretical books.

Anti-skeptical philosophy takes a skeptical challenges seriously, but attempts to sidestep or refute them and to affirm our capacity for knowledge and understanding. Ancient Greco-Roman skeptical treatises were known as and studied with some interest in Descartes's time. Indeed, the value of doubt and the limits of the metaphysical beliefs of theologians and philosophers were actually heralded by early modern thinkers like Erasmus, Montaigne, and Pascal. These thinkers believed that skepticism discouraged dogmatism and theological conflicts, and encouraged greater tolerance for cultural differences along with other humanist values. Descartes's lifetime was a time of strife, including the Witch Craze and the worst of the pan – European wars fought between Catholics and Protestants. But beginning with Descartes, who

believed that Europe's political and religious conflicts between would subside only when secure methods of knowledge were established, skeptical challenges have triggered corresponding waves of rigor among anti-skeptical philosophers. Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy* applied rigor to the problem of skepticism by introducing a new conception of method, one based upon careful observation, analysis, and logical inference.

The 18th century Enlightenment Period saw the further extension of the concept of objectivity into the philosophical lexicon, especially in the work of the rationalist German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Use [1] Kant's philosophy represents another wave of anti-skeptical rigor, developed partly in response to the 'scandal to philosophy and to human reason' that Kant took David Hume's skepticism to be.[2] The methods of natural science had been codified by the end of the 17th century under Isaac Newton's laws of motion and gravity. Philosophers by and large didn't need to worry as much about consistency of their work with Christian theology, although the *Index* was active until 1966 and did include Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason.* The

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[1] "Kant realized fully that grounding objectivity, the possibility of knowing the external world and objective laws pertaining to its workings, would require a reworking of certain presuppositions in particular of the model of the epistemic subject, towards a new model that would not commit rational inquiry to skeptical conclusions" (Sacks, 43).

[2] Zammito (2012) cites sharp rejection of the "psychologism" of the late nineteenth century by figures such as Frege and Husserl as another such wave. Positivism or logical empiricism followed as yet another.

complex relationship that book develops between epistemology and metaphysics was indeed revolutionary-- so much so that it is often referred to as having initiated a 'Copernican revolution' in philosophical thought. But like Galileo and Descartes, Kant was more conservatively proposing another new partition that he thought should allow science and religion each more harmoniously to pursue their work. His *Critique* in part tries to establish what belongs to faith, philosophy, and to science, and how to understand the boundaries between them. It develops an account which "makes room for faith" while also showing how we can have objective knowledge of the empirical world.

The epistemological and critical turns in philosophy both emphasize the need to study our own sensible and mental faculties, and to recognize on this basis the limits of what we can justifiably claim to know. So the epistemological turn was attended by appeals to dispassionate assessments of reason and evidence, and by heightened regard for intellectual honesty and integrity as signs of those who value truth for truth's sake. In trying to stem religious intolerance by contrasting religious "enthusiasm" with trust of reason, John Locke wrote that, **"**Whatsoever credit or authority we give to any proposition more than it receives from the principles and proofs it supports itself upon, is owing to our inclinations that way, and is so far a derogation from the love of truth as such."[3]

Objectivity as we have seen was not really a known or valued concept prior to the epistemological turn, and Stefan Gaukroger even argues that for the early modern philosophers objectivity *replaced* truth in the role of primary cognitive guidance. These philosophers held that,

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[3] Locke, *Essay Concerning Understanding*, CH XIX, 1.

[W]hat we need …is something that guides arguments by making sure they start and proceed in the right way, as opposed to finishing in the right way... If truth guided argument by showing where arguments should end, objectivity took the opposite route, constraining how arguments should begin and proceed… Objectivity was deemed to be able to play this role through the qualities of impartiality, freedom from prejudices, lack of bias, and lack of partisanship.[4]

So the primary sense of objectivity, the sense grounded in the epistemological turn, identifies it as an epistemic concept, and a concept more specifically that measures the fittingness of our actions and strategies of inquiry. Cognitive objectivity concerns the *means* by which we come to know something; it concerns our epistemic *praxis*—our norm-governed practices of evaluation and guidance-giving. Objectivity is associated with the fittingness of methods to objects of inquiry, but still more to practices of giving and asking for reasons. Like justification and rationality, which on this view are its closest cousins, objectivity is a prime contributor to the acquisition of acquisition of true beliefs, but not a guarantor of truth. Accepting the burdens of the epistemological turn leads not only to taking inventory of our own cognitive faculties, but also to recognizing that different subject matters or objects of knowledge require different methods of investigation.

Reality and mental mediation

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[4] Gaukroger, 59.

The rationalist and empiricist branches of philosophic modernism both largely embody the epistemological turn in philosophy, where the theory of knowledge (epistemology) rather than metaphysics becomes the starting place for warranted assertions about what is real or true. Yet these two main branches of modern philosophy are also, somewhat ironically, *sources* both of new skeptical problems and of sometimes quite opposed attempts to *answer* these problems. Empiricism grounds all knowledge in sense experience. Rationalism, which we focus on here, is exemplified in efforts to authorize logic and introspective, and *a priori* foundations, as defining concerns of philosophy. For rationalists, from Plato to Descartes to Kant, this is the essential basis of any adequate response to the skeptic's challenge to the human capacity for knowledge and justified belief. To Kant, the skeptic's doubt trades on an epistemic blindness to the presuppositions of our own agency and the structuring, unifying activity of the mind.

The phenomenal world, the world as experienced. It is the temporal, spatial, and causal world we experience. Kant defended our knowledge of the natural world, and of the objective laws pertaining to its workings. But while securing this sort of objectivity he also sought to make room for faith about things at the border or fringe of human awareness. This is one function of his fundamental distinction between *phenomena* (things as we experience them) and *noumena* (the same things as they are in themselves). But unlike those empiricists who viewed the mind as a *tabula rasa* or perception as a passive imprint of the natural world upon the senses, Kant thought that experience was only possible through the active, structuring categories that human thought imposes. Objectivity resides in the knowing subject and is the result, the product, of human structuring. The human mind partly constitutes the world of human experiences world though the *a priori* categories it imposes. We must identify those elements with which the faculties of sensibility and understanding are furnished *a priori*, and which serve as

preconditions of experience. Though we cannot know it directly, a noumenal world against which phenomenal experience is to be contrasted, is a presupposition of all theoretical reasoning.

Perhaps Kant's core example and that which has been most debated is his description of "space" as a *category of the understanding* and a subjective condition of all outer appearances, *rather than* a property of things in themselves. Kant interestingly denies to time and space "all claim to absolute reality." He claims that a study of the categories of the understanding "establishes the *reality,* the objective validity, of space in respect of whatever can be presented to us outwardly as object, but also at the same time the *ideality* of space in respect of things when they are considered in themselves…."[5] This combination of positions -- that human knowledge attaches to the objective validity of an empirical world, but that how we experience things in time and space is not ultimately independent of human structuration -- is what Kant calls *empirical realism* combined with *transcendental idealism.*

Since the categories of mind structuring the way that we perceive the world are universally shared among our species, the recognition that perception is mediated by mentally imposed categories and that we are not just passive recorders but active in the construction of experience is no great source of worry. Different creatures may well experience the world through different senses or be sensitive to different ranges of light, sound, etc. But no creature can think without a brain, or talk without a language. The "subjective constitution of our manner of sensibility" provides the only access that we have to it. As Stephen Gaukroger puts it,

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[5] Kant, 72.

"Unmediated perception (and thought) is not objective perception: it is not perception at all. As such, it cannot provide a model of objectivity to which we can aspire."[6]

So the reassuring, anti-skeptical parts of Kant's systematic philosophy result from the *universality* of the categories of the understanding. These are 'hard wired' categories shared by our species, and ones that allow us to make rational and explanatory sense of our experience. In contrast to Hume's skepticism about any real unity to human consciousness, Kant held that the knowing subject has a unified stream of consciousness. If a precondition of such a unified consciousness is an external-objective world, then we can be confident in positing noumena although we can never directly access things as they are in themselves but only things as we experience them.

But what critics have found as the worrisome parts of Kant's system move from the given facts of our experience always being structured by the categories of mind, to an inference that we can never know reality – in– itself. Kantians do not see this shortfall of our "epistemic reach," this "unavoidable ignorance of things in themselves," as a skeptical problem. Kant indeed thought it was liberating to acknowledge that "we can ... have no knowledge of any object as thing in itself, but only insofar as it is an object of sensible intuition, that is, of appearance…."[7] he thought that objects in themselves are quite unknown to us and that objects as they appear are mere representations of our human modes of sensibility, allow us to avoid the error of making the range of human sensory experiences coextensive with the real.

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6 Gaukroger, 2012, 43.

7 Kant, 27.

To summarize, the limit of our epistemic reach isn't skepticism-inviting for Kant because it doesn't diminish science but enables recognition of "the *reality,* the objective validity" of the objects of the science and of science's causal laws, which anyway apply only to objects represented in space and time. Objectivity therefore has an epistemic or cognitive meaning, *not* an ontological one indicating how things are independent of mind. But the noumenal would not be left by Kant as a wholly mysterious black box. Some tenets of faith, especially stemming from certain pragmatic needs we have—for example, the need for a foundation for ethics, and for accepting ourselves and others as having the freedom of will to be considered ethical agents with responsibility for our action— play a crucial role for Kant. filling in what is admitted as beyond the human capacity for knowing. But others see Kant as having left us with 'knowledge' only of what is a matter of appearance, not a matter of reality or truth, where these are endowed with the idea of independence of mind.

In order to look further at the legacy of Modern philosophy it will be helpful to compare two more contemporary thinkers who, although each deeply influenced by Kant's account of objectivity, take his critical turn in vastly different ways. One is Thomas Nagle, author of *The View from Nowhere* (1989)*,* and the other is Mark Sacks, author of *Objectivity and Insight* (2001). Both follow Kant in their concern with the problems of conceptual structuring, yet they develop sharply-opposed treatments of objectivity.

Nagle's View from Nowhere

The view from nowhere is Nagle's term for a perfect 'distancing' from our subjective selves to a recognition of our true place within the objective order. Nagel's general view is that "a view or

form of thought is more objective than another if it relies less on the specifics of the individual's make up and position in the world, or on the character of the particular type of creature he is."[8] The conception of objectivity is "a conception of reality which includes ourselves and our view of things among its objects." Ideally, this conception would arise from gradual, progressive "detachment …from the contingencies of the self."

Because Nagel is a self-described metaphysical realist, grounding objectivity in the independence of the real from how humans take it to be, it is often assumed that he thinks that the view from nowhere is actually achievable. Nagel *does* think that we can progressively achieve distance from the subjective self, and that cognitive objectivity is improved in this manner. Life constantly challenges us to do so. Through this effort we learn more about ourselves and our distinctly human ways of experiencing world, as we try "to transcend our particular viewpoint and develop an expanded consciousness the takes in the world more fully."[9] But what Nagel emphasizes time and again is the deeply paradoxical nature of the view from nowhere as a goal for beings like ourselves. Reality probably extends not only beyond what we humans now conceive of, but even that we *can conceive of.* Also, subjective and objective views of the self and of our place in the universe may never well cohere: "the claims of both the objective and the subjective self seem to be too strong to allow them to live together in harmony." If this is so it "produces a split in the self which will not go away, and we either alternate between views or develop a form of double vision".[10]

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[8] Nagle (1989), 50.

[9] Nagle (1989), 5.

[10] Nagle (1989), 88.

Nagel's approach that lead him to the paradoxical combination of metaphysical realism and epistemic skepticism he develops. He seems to demand that only knowledge of the noumenal has the independence necessary to satisfy the realist. Yet it is not quite the perspective posited of an omniscient observer, or of perfect scientific third-personal description either, since it is crucially supposed to contain the view of a first-personal subjective self as well. Aside from the demand that the view must still incorporate the subjective self, this is very much akin to realizing a demand for the knower to jump the "gap" between subjectivity and objectivity, ontologically conceived. This is why Nagle readily concedes that his account invites scepticism, and why he actually endorses a kind of radical scepticism *alongside* his realism. For Nagle, "The objective self is responsible for both the expansion of our understanding and for doubts about it that cannot be finally laid to rest."

Are Nagle's basic distinction between the subjective and objective self and Kant's distinction between *phenomena* and *noumena* significantly different than the appearance/reality distinction that plays such a large role in ancient sceptical tropes? The burden is on the defenders of these distinctions to explain those differences. While Kant tries to overcome the 'scandal' of skepticism, Nagle readily accepts that starting from any of these dichotomies has sceptical implications, but he finds this unavoidable. The inability to avoid it may be partly due to human limitations, but for Nagel it is largely driven by the *logical* impossibility of eliminating radical-deception scenarios.[11] Metaphysical realism and skepticism Nagle argues are "intimately bound

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[11] There is a blend of closure-based and infallibility-based skeptical arguments in Nagle's book, and he clearly denies the closure principle, unlike Moorean common-sense realists and those who say we need only to eliminate "relevant alternatives." Those who retain closure or who take

together" by assumptions they share, assumptions which Nagel finds unavoidable. Skeptics and realists are both concerned over Kant's claim that since all of our knowledge is structured by the *categories of the understanding* we never know things as they exist in themselves, independent of mind. But instead of taking it as a choice between realism and skepticism as most thinkers do, Nagel develops a philosophy with strong aspects of each. "The search for objective knowledge, because of its commitment to a realistic picture, is inescapably subject to skepticism and cannot refute it but must proceed under its shadow. Skepticism in turn, is a problem only because of the realist claims of objectivity". As a metaphysical realist, Nagle "resist[s] the natural tendency to identify the idea of the world as it really is with the idea of what can be revealed, at the limit, by an indefinite increase in objectivity of standpoint".[12] Skepticism needs to be taken seriously, Nagel thinks, because while we may certainly discover some aspects of our previous "objective blindness," and can never really know the limit of it. But whereas Kant had sought to unshackle speculative *reason* by distinguishing it from knowledge and the faculty of *cognition*, Nagel eagerly blurs Kant's distinction between reason's concerns with the unknowable and our cognitive faculties' empirical, experiential focus. Pursuing the Cartesian ideal of infallible cognition, Nagel's account thus a high degree of invites epistemic *angst:* anxiety over our epistemic position. The basis of knowledge for the infallibilist must *guarantee* the truth of what is known, but can never do so if whatever basis or grounds one might cite is 'equally compatible' with one's being radically deceived.

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one of these latter views will see Nagle's problem as due to his philosophical approach, which seems to demand infallibilism is a condition of knowing something.

[12] Nagle (1989), 71 and 91.

We can turn now to Sacks, whose very different understanding of the critical turn in philosophy provides an initial reply to Nagel. Approaching objectivity through critical theory, Sacks argues that the price Kant pays for relying upon the empirical–transcendental distinction to secure scientific knowledge is a price higher than Kant thinks. Sacks writes,

> Traditionally, securing a handle on objectivity or the possibility of an absolute conception of the world has been regarded as part and parcel of a strictly realist outlook… the basic idea is that we can secure an escape from relativism to full objectivity -- to an absolute conception of the world -- only if we can cover the distance between the way the world appears to us in the way it is in itself [or again], the grounds of our beliefs about the world and the contents of those beliefs.[13]

Kant shatters much of this traditional picture, but Sacks and other critical theorists think not as thoroughly as he should have. Noumena (things-in-themselves) play no role in Kant's approach to knowledge, arguably, in Nagle's. Since they fall outside the categories, which include causation, we cannot even say that they cause things to appear to us. A more consistent application of critical method rejects the structuring picture of robust metaphysical realism and the notion or notions of objectivity it entails. Like the justification we can muster for any belief, our objectivity comes in degrees. If the structuring picture is an ontological one that begins by separating humans from contact with the real world but demands bridging that gap as a requirement on knowledge, then we face the old problem of the impossibility of spanning an infinite gap, or reaching an *absolute* standard, by *degrees*. As long as our structuring picture

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[13] Sacks (2001), 313.

starts from the subject – object duality and identifies knowledge with "a secure crossing from a subjective to an objective order," philosophy will remain prone to both subject-driven and world-driven skeptical problems.[14] Anything short of mental or linguistic representation of "objective reality" in the metaphysical realist's sense will appear to be an untenable compromise and a victory for skepticism.

Sacks argues that there are multiple ways of rejecting this structuring picture that divides Existence from Being, together with the absolute conception of knowledge it entails. Kant's idea of the conceptual structuring of the world of human experience initiated an important *critical turn* in modern philosophy, but Sacks primarily holds that we need to carry it out in a more thorough sense than Kant's initial distinction allows. A more thoroughly critical approach would challenge commitment to an ontological base, displacing more satisfactorily than Kant could the subject-object polarity from its foundational status. This critical turn includes qualifying or "deflating" rationalism's claims of transcendental necessity, and of the authority of the *a priori*. Pure reason does not supply the certainty or foundation for knowledge Kant thinks.

Sacks also tries to argue that the empirical and the critical levels of thought are not well captured by the subjective – object distinction, which is essentially a polarity. The differences between the *order of being* and the *order of knowing* are confused by it. Alternative distinctions such as those between *intentional objectivity* -- our *being towards* a natural and social world -- and *reflexive objectivity* (reflexive as requiring a critical and for Sacks, non-ontological stance), have also been suggested as ways to *displace* the subjective – all objective polarity and replace it a conception of distinct levels of inquiry requiring different conceptions of objectivity.

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[14] Sacks (2001), 323.

Next we continue to broaden the discussion about objectivity by surveying the perennial debate between realists, idealists, and social constructivists, and the different theories of truth which each typically appeals to in developing their diverging philosophical systems.

Realism, Idealism, and Social Constructivism

The issue of what theory of truth to accept is not one that needs to be definitively settled in order to make progress on the problem of objectivity. But since how people understand objectivity is caught up in what they mean by truth, it behooves us to do a little canvassing. This we can do together with a discussion of Realism and Idealism.

 "Realist intuitions" is a commonly–heard term for what is purported to be immediate apprehension of a reality external to mind. "There are *real things*, whose characters are entirely *independent of our opinions* about them," Charles Peirce proclaims in his famous paper, "The Fixation of Belief." Such intuitions can lead philosophers to defend a correspondence theory of truth, a specific form of realism or representationalism, or a sharp distinction between objective facts and anything that is colored with perspective. People differ widely in the intuitions they appeal to and in the philosophical positions they take them to support. Idealist and constructivist intuitions, which clash with realist one's, also lead philosophers to defend a variety of positions, most often a coherence or pragmatic theory of truth. Let's look at realism, idealism, and constructivism briefly in turn.

For the metaphysical realist, the world, being independent, does not logically depend upon any of the epistemic means used to investigate and to understand it. The realist holds us committed to the possibility of a divergence between the way the world is and how we conceive it to be. Justification and truth are logically distinct, but the more robustly realist one's view the

more one takes objective reality as the direct arbiter of our changing and evolving

conceptualizations of it. The world provides us the truth – makers of all true propositions.

Crispin Wright, whose book *Truth and Objectivity* (1994) focuses upon metaphysical realism

(realism about the external world) describes this view in terms of two distinct claims, one

relatively modest, the other stronger or more presumptuous:

> The modest kind of thought concerns the *independence* of the external world -- for
> example, that the external world exists independently of us, that it is as it is
> independently of us, that it is as it is independently of the conceptual vocabulary in
> terms of which we think about it, and that it is as it is independently of the beliefs about
> it which we do, will, or ever would form…. The presumptuous thought, by contrast, is
> that, while such fit as there may be between our thought and the world is determined
> independently of human cognitive activity, we are nevertheless, in favorable
> circumstances, capable of conceiving the world aright, and, often, of knowing the truth
> about it.[15]

In analyzing these claims, Wright first points out that discussions of realism and anti-realism

rarely revolve explicitly around *metaphysical* realism. Philosophers tend to worry a lot about

global (radical) skepticism, but realism and anti-realism are usually debated not at this level of

generality but in relation to particular domains like scientific, political, or ethical or aesthetic

discourse. Someone can also be a realist in the strong sense about certain subject matters or

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[15] Wright (1994), 2.

sciences, yet not about the objects of mathematics (numbers) or of quantum physics or string theory, etc. It is philosophers alone who worry about "external world" realism and about radical skepticism *a la* Descartes's scenarios of radical deception by an evil genie. But what we find is that whether we are dealing with defense of metaphysical realism or a realism of a more restricted sort, there are two directions of attack: one from the direction of skepticism, and the other from the direction of idealism/constructivism.

> A skeptical attack challenges the presumptuous thought: Issue will be taken either with the truth of the claim that our cognitive powers are adequate in the way presumption takes them to be, or with our right to make that claim. An idealistic attack, by contrast, will challenge some aspect of the way in which independence features in modest thinking. Or, more radically, it challenge the whole idea that the area of discourse in question is properly seen as geared to the expression of thoughts whose aim is to reflect an independent reality. (2-3)

The presumptuous, 'bridging' claim of realists depends logically upon the more moderate claim directly associated with the metaphysical realist intuition of the independence of the external world. The presumptuous claim has seemed highly problematic and even self-contradictory to non-realists: it appears to insist on the independence of truth from even our best cognitive efforts (and so of questions ontology or metaphysics from those of epistemology), but then to prevaricate when it comes to our newest and presumably best theories, claiming something about them that we would never claim about older ones that have already been surpassed. The presumptuous thought in this way seems to undermine the moderate, resulting in

doubtful coherence.[16] But even the modest version of realism, the claim about the independence of the external world, has its critics: in this case, idealists and constructivists, who we can turn to next.

The idealist intuition associated with Bishop Berkeley is that "the absolute existence of unthinking things without any relation to their being perceived … seems perfectly unintelligible."[17] We cannot make real sense of the realist's independence claims, since every effort to conceive of things wholly independent of mind brings forth an effort of conceptualization that presupposes a perceiver. Anti-realism could express only a denial of realism, but following Berkeley's reasoning we are led to a much more robustly idealist metaphysic: Berkeley held that *esse est percipi*—to be is to be perceived. Idealism like realism becomes presumptuous and makes highly contentious claims: "Beyond the limits of human knowledge lies nothing at all—no understandable proposition whose truth may outrun our idealized epistemic capacities."[18] The presumptuous thought associated with this kind of strong anti-realism is that we can make our epistemic reach coextensive with the real by reducing the latter to the former. Whatever our epistemic reach is, that must be the measure of the limits of the real. But if we are looking for more moderate thoughts associated with idealism, they are not hard to find. The moderate thoughts might be that we have no intellectual right to *claim* something to be true aside

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[16] Nagel clearly makes not only the moderate but also the presumptuous claim, and we have already seen how closely tied metaphysical realism and skepticism are for him-- the admittedly paradoxical sense in which he embraces both.

[17] Berkeley, (), Section III.

[18] Salerno (2010), 1-2.

from how it accords with our epistemic norms of justification or evidence, and no *access* to the real independent of our own perceptions and practices of inquiry. Appeal to the mind – independence of the external world, or to this world as the truth maker of true propositions therefore does not do the work the realist expects of it.

Social constructivism should be distinguished from idealism, although it is also in the antirealist family of metaphysical theories. In *The Quest for Certainty,* John Dewey (1929) critiques what he calls the 'spectator theory' of knowledge, on which knowledge acquisition does not essentially involve habits of inquiry but only passive observation on the part of a subject of a fixed and wholly independent object. This spectator or 'photograph' account of knowledge he tries to show has been accompanied by a misguided quest for certainty in epistemology, whether in the form of fixed foundations for knowledge claims, or infallible means of distinguishing truth from falsehood.

In his collection of lectures entitled *Pragmatism*, William James (1907) articulated the stronger constructivist intuition that "The trail of the human serpent is thus over everything." The mind, James thought, "*engenders* truth *upon* reality" and everything from brute percepts to distinctly human concepts and norms is bound to be "full of human contributions." While others might find this troubling in light of how one theoretical perspective can contradict another, James himself thought that this active construction of truth shows the legitimacy of using "our theoretical as well as our practical faculties…to get the world into a better shape…." Neither Dewey nor James divorce knowledge from action in the way that realist theories do; both make the knower, as Dewey puts it, a "knowledge is not the act of an outside spectator but of a participator inside the

natural and social scene."[19] So their approaches to truth, often described as pragmatist, do not comport well with the correspondence theory as realists traditionally understood it. While correspondence theories take truth to be the match between a proposition and the world, the pragmatic account takes truth to be a triadic relationship that includes an interpreter.

In the first half of the 20th century, philosophers concerned with the conceptual structuring of experience focused more and more to the importance of language. How does language organize and structure our experienced world? This emphasis on language led to new forms of constructivism, and new understandings of ontology. Ludwig Wittgenstein famously claimed that "the limits of our language the limits of our world." Languages were sometimes associated with worldviews, or ways of life, or language games, and the questions of diversity of languages and of plural descriptions of any object or phenomena were raised in a way that challenged realist assumptions of a *common* experienced world.

"Linguistic relativism" became in the mid-twentieth century a more troubling worry than Kant's version of conceptual structuring. Kant's categories of the understanding are universal among humans at least, whereas languages and the conceptual schemes and vocabularies they supply are multiple. We might say that 20th-century constructivism takes away the restrictions that Kant thought that assured universality. Now the constructive elements might come from languages, cultures, theories, or worldviews. There are a plurality of phenomenal worlds, and this is the case whether or not we posit a common but impenetrable noumenal world lying behind them.

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[19] Dewey (1985[1927] *LW* 4, 193).

Do languages conceive reality differently, and can we be sure that we understand something expressed in other than our native language? The idea of self-contained meaning-frames raises a worry about whether there is any neutral observation language by which the natural world can be described. It also raises a worry about whether ideas or theories framed in one language can be translated without loss of meaning into another, or whether meaning is "incommensurable" (without a common measure) between speakers of different languages. Strong incommensurability about meanings is typically premised on linguistic relativism. Sometimes the whole notion of a common world is lost, and representationalism is repudiated altogether. For representationalism functions best on assumption of a world of "natural kinds" that languages, theories, and worldviews aim to mirror. If there are no such natural kinds, then meanings become more free-floating constructions. Constructivists deny that we can appeal to natural kinds and absolute essences to secure cognitive objectivity. Communication problems and possible incommensurability between *theories* have also been concerns in the sciences affecting the possibility of theory comparison, as we saw in Chapter 3.

Claims about strong incommensurability can undermine cognitive objectivity. Realist and empiricist defenders of objectivity, however, have seen this supposed implication of linguistic plurality as motivated by psychologism or by one or another version of a 'myth of the framework.' So we might articulate the presumptuous thought associated with social constructivism as the claim that what anything means is wholly internal to a linguistic or other sort of socially – constructed "scheme" or "framework." But the moderate thought asserts that experience is basic and that all experience of an outer world is *mediated* by the mental or linguistic, without the stronger assumptions of linguistic relativism or necessary incommensurability of meanings.

Constructivists emphasize that there is no neutral observation language and no "criteria," to adjudicate meanings, to use one of Richard Rorty's favorite stalking-horses. But the great fallacy of this debate over incommensurability, it seems to me, is that constructivists and realists both talk of "criteria" in the distinctly ontological sense of the word, serving to differentiate true and false hypotheses, beliefs, and theories in a direct way. Realists who find that only an ontological conception of objectivity and an empirical world comprised of natural kinds will do for genuine knowledge, and anti-realists who object that there is no neutral observation language and no neutral criteria on which to base the concept of objectivity, are wholly focused on *ontological* objectivity. Cognitive objectivity deals with what we understand as reasons and evidence, and is comprised of normative expectations of evidence, logicality, etc. It is not, like ontological objectivity is purported to be, a third – personal description of the world cast in a neutral observation language of natural kinds.

Drawing on a distinction between cognitive and ontological objectivity, some realists argue that without a presupposition in ontological objectivity, "the project of communication about a shared world would become inoperable"; this presupposition or grounding is required "in order to be in a position to learn by experience at all."[20] This claim is quite moderate if it is clearly articulated as a point about the order of being, rather than making and epistemic claim about ontological objectivity as criteria. It is quite different to claim a) that what exists in the natural order exists independently of our epistemic standards, and b) that we have an independent access to the true or real in a way that allows it to be a *direct arbiter* of conflicting theories or beliefs.

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[20] Rescher (1997), 97.

In terms of connections between these different metaphysical positions and theories of truth, realists tend to affirm a correspondence theory of truth and anti-realists to reject it in favor of a theory of truth with more epistemic aspects, such as a coherence or a pragmatic theory. The mind-independence aspect of metaphysical realism seems to demand a non-epistemic conception of truth, while the connections between truth-claims and justification argue for an epistemic conception. On the coherence version, the best test of truth is how some of our beliefs rationally cohere with the rest of our beliefs. For theories that James describes as humanist, experience is the basic term, rather than Nagle's neo-Kantian division between the subjective and object of self. For James, "Truth thus means, according to humanism, the relationship of less fixed parts of experience (predicates) to other relatively more fixed parts (subjects); and we are not required to seek it in a relation of experience as such to anything beyond itself." By contrast, Nagel describes his metaphysical realism and skepticism as "anti-verificationism" and "a strong form of antihumanism."[21] He decries these latter views as "reductionist" or "decisionist" by appeal to his Kantian structuring picture with its deep logical gap between the world as we conceive it and as it is in itself.

Decisionist accounts of truth might have epistemic elements, but are basically psychological or sociological, depending on whose decisions are being claimed to be constitutive of truth. Some sociological accounts are also strongly anti-normativist, arguing that what are called true

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[21] Nagle (1989), 108.

and false beliefs are not distinguished by anything distinctly normative or epistemic, but only by the same sociological factors.[22]

Ideal consensus and warranted assertability accounts are *not* sociological because they are overtly normative, entailing an account of what counts as warranted judgments or as ideal epistemic conditions. They may and often do refer to reason-giving responsiveness to others, or to a consensus among a community of competent or expert inquirers at some ideal end of inquiry. But these are counter–factual conditions, substantially different in kind than defining truth in terms of the actual decision or consensus of some actual group. While epistemic conceptions of truth involve inter-subjectivity and are called *social* conceptions in this sense, they are not "sociological" accounts because the approach they take is normative, and not descriptive.

These clarifications allow us to classify ideal consensus, warranted assertability, and pragmatic theories of truth as *epistemic* theories, but to oppose Nagel's over-easy and blanket

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[22] S. Turner (2010) describes anti-normativists as objecting to the normativist's every effort to distinguish the empirical normative fact (the sociological description of a normative practice) from "real" normativity, be it logical, epistemic, or ethical. We must start with sociological descriptions of the norms rather than treating "normativity" as a thing apart, deriving from reason as a separate source. There is only one basic direction of explanation of norms, not two. The matter seems somewhat confused because a sociology of knowledge may need to approach normative beliefs and standards descriptively as a matter of sociological method, and in this case remains neutral on metaphysical questions. That a sociologist of knowledge is decisionist in their philosophical thinking about truth thus isn't implied by their descriptive approach to their subject matter, although many do write on these philosophical issues as well.

characterization of Peircean ideal consensus theories and others like it as decisionist, and therefore "reductionist." Appealing to judgments made under ideal epistemic conditions seems better described as expansionist than as reductionist, since idealizations function as *standards* for a self-correction. For their point is to underline that present or actual judgments may be mistaken, and that being subject to change or revision in light of future experience our present judgments cannot be the measure of empirical truth.

Values as First Philosophy?

As much as any philosophical debate one might study, the debate over metaphysical realism and idealism seems to oscillate endlessly. It has ancient roots—"perennial" debates like this one usually do. Each side defends their own intuitions, develops a systematic philosophy in line with them, and argues that their opponents frame the problem in ways that lead to theoretical dead-ends and assumptions that render our capacity for knowledge unintelligible. Realism is said by its critics to be uninformative, offering no explanatory gain and perhaps little specific guidance for inquirers. Idealism and social constructivism are claimed by *their* opponents to appreciate neither the discoverability of truth nor our ability to correct errors in belief by consulting empirical facts and conducting experiments. Each metaphysical position, taken as a hypothesis, is impossible to test directly or empirically. Each such system of thought puts itself forward as exclusively able, as Nagle puts it, to "make sense of our thoughts".[23]

Noticing how the different contenders in our metaphysical debate each appeals to the intelligibility of knowledge may suggest that disagreement actually roots in divergent judgments

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[23] Nagle (1989), 146.

of value. This has in turn suggested to some that perhaps we need not take sides in the way that proponents of each of our three main systems of thought suppose. We earlier talked about the views of metaphysics, and of epistemology as "first philosophy," and how one's starting point deeply affects their conception of objectivity. But we can next turn to the third traditional subfield within philosophy, value theory, for there are also accounts that take values as first philosophy.

Drawing attention to the view that *values are first philosophy* will give us a triad. Perhaps the view that the perennial debate between realists and idealists really revolves around divergent *axiological orientations,* or more specifically around value-charged assumptions about the intelligibility of all knowledge. Let's call this third approach a value-centric or *axiological* approach, from *axios,* the Greek term for value or worth. According to those who describe themselves as axiological idealists like Hugh McDonald in *Radical Axiology* (2004), "Values regulate first philosophy." To support this view he argues,

> Positivists value knowledge and science, hence choose the metaphysics most compatible with science as they interpret it: a metaphysic of 'fact.' Other philosophers value some other principle or field, and choose a metaphysic that will ground it…All [philosophical] paradigms draw attention to, extol, or valorize a central idea, concept, thing, or relation in terms of which all other elements in the world should be seen.[24]

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[24] McDonald (2004), 205-206.

McDonald bids us to acknowledge that hidden value judgments are common in philosophical argumentation, especially in determining how a thinker integrates metaphysics, epistemology, or value-theory into a systematic philosophy. "A paradigm of first philosophy also creates a hierarchy of existence, ideas, or concepts in accordance with its first principle." Positivism, for example, inverts Plato's hierarchy topped by the form of the Good by erecting a fact/value dichotomy, associating science with reasoning by facts, and pulling Plato's Form of the "Good" down into matters of emotive meaning best understood psychologically. By contrast on the value-centric first philosophy we are considering, "the project of philosophy itself is a teleological–normative project that involves principles of value."

Whether wittingly or not, in the course of building a philosophical system we valorize one particular idea or concept, attributing primacy to it and creating hierarchies by so doing. The central idea of every broad philosophical 'ism' is a value, a value that generates a hierarchy in terms of itself. This key source of the strife of metaphysical systems does not mean for the axiologist that philosophical concern with key concepts is *merely* disguised value debate, nor does it mean that it is merely politics by other means. But it does mean that values of all kinds enter philosophical systematization, and it suggests that oscillations within debates like those between realists and anti-realists reflect changes in value as well as changes in belief.

The more specific explanation that axiologists offer for hardened opposition between realists and anti-realists is that both sides too often fail to recognize the extent to which their basic position is a value–charged set of assumptions connected with the intelligibility of *all* knowledge. Realism, idealism, constructivism and certain other 'isms' in philosophy arise from value-charged assumptions about conditions that make for the intelligibility of all knowledge. Each form of realism and anti-realism appeals to some ideal of intelligibility which can be

acknowledged but never proved in any fully logical manner. For their first principles are logically underivable in the sense that they are value-charged rather than logical or empirical claims. Thus they each hold that if their intuitions are denied, we cannot make sense of knowledge and its rational justification.

As a principle of intelligibility, the idealist demands that anything "true" must be knowable in principle. *Ratio est capabilis:* the rational faculty must be capable of cognizing all that is real! As Hegel alternatively put this highly optimistic doctrine, "The rational is the real, and the real is the rational." An unbridgeable gulf between phenomena and noumena, or appearance and reality is conceptually impossible or at least unintelligible.

Because of their close connection with value–charged assumptions about the intelligibility of all knowledge, we can even find realist and antirealist intuitions expressed by the very same thinker. Peirce, for instance claims both: a) "There are *real things*, whose characters are entirely *independent of our opinions* about them"; and b) "*cognizability* (in its widest sense) and *being* are not merely metaphysically the same, but are synonymous terms."[25] Combining a realist ontology with an epistemic theory of truth as Peirce seems to do in these passages can certainly sound self-contradictory. But that impression may be exaggerated by ignoring the value-charged character of both claims—the sense in which both are asserted as preconditions of the intelligibility of all knowledge. That reality must be independent of any particular mind reflects what Peirce takes as a condition for the intelligibility of empirical knowledge. But at the same

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[25] Peirce quotations from (2010) "The Fixation of Belief"; 5.257.

time insists that we cannot without leading to a different sorts of unintelligibility also make the real inaccessible or unrepresentable to mind.[26]

It is sometimes claimed that the *distinction* between value and reality—how the world might or ought to be and how it is—constitutes a condition indispensable for all willing and for all *practical reasoning*: reasoning about what strategies to employ in inquiry and what actions one ought or ought not to take. Only the *non-identity* of fact and value makes the faculty of will possible. But on the other hand, the *complete separation* of value and reality seems to make knowledge and its communication unintelligible.[27] A better way to put this claim may be that the separateness of being from knowing is the presupposition of ontology, while the primacy of values over being is a presupposition of epistemology. We seem to be caught in what one philosopher calls a *value-centric predicament:* Discursive thought seems unable to move beyond the duality-yet-inseparability of value and being, and is forced to *treat* them as axiological judgments.[28] Yes, thought is directed to an object beyond itself; but *for thought* this object, and

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[26] Peirce is in fact providing his response to Kant, one that concedes the external reality affects our senses according to regular laws, but the eschews the Kantian thing-in-itself as an unrepresentable reality or an unknowable cause of sensation.

[27] Urban (1929), 152 and 159.

[28] See the quintessential radical axiologist W.M. Urban's *Beyond Realism and Idealism* (1949), whose argument I loosely paraphrase here.

indeed this intentionality, or *directness* towards a natural and social life-world is *inseparable from value.*[29]

If, as value-centrists argue, metaphysical realism, idealism, and social constructivism find their basic philosophical motivations in demands for the intelligibility of all knowledge, then by charitably separating "moderate" and "presumptuous" versions of each, the debate might move beyond its present impasse. The axiologists us are optimistic in this regard. To the extent that the modest claims of realism and idealism can be consistently maintained, both principles could be mutually-acknowledged as minimal conditions on the intelligibility of knowledge.

The driving force of idealism is found in the assertion that everything known must be related to mind and meaning: *We must know! Reason must be capable!* The resistance of realism is found in insistence on the independence of natural or empirical fact from our epistemic means. If the objective of philosophy is an intelligible world, we must acknowledge the essential evaluations related to the intelligibility of knowledge that realists and anti-realists both make. Any attempt to reconcile the intellectual motivations for realism and idealism must begin by rejecting their more presumptuous claims, while acknowledging and showing the basic compatibility of their more modest claims. The presumptuous claims of realism and idealism are highly problematic, but the moderate claims establish important points about the intelligibility of human knowledge.

The axiological approach suggests finding ways to encompass an idealistic and a realistic 'minimum' into our theories of knowledge. Any realism, to be adequately critical, needs to

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[29] Realists argue out that the reduction of fact to value (of truth to an epistemic value or ideal) would rule out empirical science and fact – driven revisions of belief. Anti-realists counter that reduction of value to fact would impugn the normative control of values.

accept substantial constructive elements to our cognitive grasp the world. Any idealism or constructivism, in order to be adequate to the discoverability of truth, needs to accept how the lived world can surprise and correct our beliefs. If this is correct, then these realist and non— realist *intuitions* are over – emphasized, are anyway not strictly incompatible even if the philosophical systems built – out from them typically are.

An axiological approach was brought into philosophy of science by Arthur Fine (1986). His influential account of the "natural ontological attitude" is intended to synthesize aspects of rationalism and empiricism, and of realism and instrumentalism. Although we have been studying the debate over *metaphysical* realism and will delay turning to *scientific* realism directly until Chapter 3, it is worth noting what Fine says motivates his project: He says it is made plausible by taking positions in the debate over scientific realism "as expressing attitudes towards science, and in particular attitudes towards the significance of science—its proper interpretation and understanding".[30]

If axiological commitments motivate the realism/idealism debate, this implies a strong view that proponents of realism, idealism and social constructivism are largely "talking past" one another. By not acknowledging the value-charged nature of their first principles, the proponents of these positions largely ignore what really separates them. But turning to criticism of the axiological approach, even if their diagnosis of the debate is helpful the philosophical consequences of it may not be nearly as optimistic as the axiologists believe. For the axiologists still conceive of moving *beyond* realism and idealism as a movement in the direction of further, although more inclusive, metaphysical position. Radical axiology leads to an elaborate

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[30] Fine (1986), 150.

dialectical synthesis or reconciliation of metaphysical schools, and in some authors it is even claimed to uncover a final metaphysic, or "perennial philosophy." But while axiologists say "both/and" to certain claims of realism and idealism, philosophers more deflationary of metaphysics and problems, like Paul Moser in his book *Philosophy after Objectivity* (2010) redress the strife of metaphysical systems by holding themselves able to say "neither/nor." If there is a disunity or incommensurability that characterizes debate over realism/idealism, then *whatever* its cause a better solution is a principled suspension of ontological commitments—a post-ontological philosophical culture.

In both social constructionist and post-modern thought there is a recommendation for a philosophical culture in which metaphysics is substantially *deflated*. Description and explanation of the many things the sciences study can be carried out without the "ontological over–reach" that realists and idealists can both be charged with. Moser is especially critical of the notion of perennial philosophy, which if not just another grand metaphysical system looks to him insufficiently deconstructive of the absolute essences and natural kinds that traditional metaphysics deals in. In later chapters we will consider the critics of the value of objectivity more directly, but these objections to so-called perennial philosophy are noted here as one problem for radical axiology's conception of values as first philosophy.

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