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2.1 Objectivism, Relativism, and the Cartesian Anxiety

Richard Bernstein's two books, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (1989) and *The Pragmatic Turn* (2010) develop a pragmatic pluralist account of objectivity. This chapter primarily discusses Bernstein's account and its differences both from Nagle's metaphysical realism and Rorty's postmodern pragmatism. Trying to diagnose assumptions that polarize thinkers to become objectivists and relativists, Bernstein articulates a *Cartesian Anxiety* he thinks they ironically both share. Descartes' anti-skeptical wave of rigor was presented as a rationalistic project of rebuilding an unstable and dilapidated 'house of knowledge' on secure philosophical and scientific foundations. His overtly foundationalist metaphor of rebuilding from timbers set "in rock or hard clay" shapes Descartes' attempt to refute the skeptic and to secure the objectivity of knowledge as pursued by a more rigorous and analytical method of knowing. But

the legacy of Descartes is not as he would prefer it, since many readers find more convincing his skeptical exercises exploring deeper and deeper levels of error-possibility than his way of bringing us back to rational self-confidence. His related claim that rationalist philosophy could buttress theology and rationally compel skeptics to accept the existence of a perfect being deity and the *real distinction* between human soul and body, has also been seen as failing at its task.

A broader question to consider, before granting Descartes his traditional mantle of ‘father of modern philosophy’ is whether he was actually even correct to hold responsible the Northern Humanists and their “new skepticism” for worsening the conflict between Catholics and Protestants. It was, famously, during some of the worst of these intra-Christian wars and also the era of ‘witch hunts’ that he wrote his *Discourse on Method* and *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Bernstein’s critique of Cartesian rationalism somewhat overlaps with that of Stephen Toulmin, who thought Descartes deeply mistaken to abandon the value that humanists like Erasmus and Montaigne attached to doubt, and by extension to virtues of intellectual humility. Historically the humanist perspective actually grounded the earliest attempts to support political pluralism and religious toleration over orthodoxy. A prime example is the *Edict of Toleration* issued by French King Henri IV but rescinded after his assassination just prior to the start of the Thirty-Years War (1618-1648). Descartes’ thought that uncovering rational grounds for certitude was the best and only way to cure the ills of his time. This is important because philosophers who neglect the religious context of early modern philosophy while reading Descartes can too easily accept a rationalistic conception of skepticism as an enemy or scandal (and philosophy’s task evermore to refute it). Those Christian humanists whose response to skepticism Descartes very much wanted to replace with an *a priori* proof of God’s existence and character, clearly thought of theological *anti-rationalism* (moderate skeptical fideism) as an antidote to the theological conflicts and witch hunts besetting Europe during this time.

But putting aside these considerations of the social causes served by Descartes’ attempt to give new foundations to the house of human knowledge, Bernstein presents the Cartesian Anxiety as a

complex of philosophical assumptions and attitudes that seduce us to choose between finding certain foundations and embracing radical skepticism:

Descartes leads us with an apparent and ineluctable necessity to a grand and seductive Either/Or. *Either* there is some support for our being, a fixed foundation for knowledge, *Or* we cannot escape the forces of darkness that enveloped us with madness, with intellectual and moral chaos.¹

Bernstein finds these two tendencies of thought—ironically—to stem from much the same footing. If one starts by assuming that a foundationalist response to skepticism is the only one that will satisfy, and subsequently finds that bar too high to meet, logic seems to drive us to the victory of skepticism. The same forces that motivate the Cartesian Anxiety sometimes prevent us from accepting that there can be any difference between pluralism and relativism. Either there is one right way of truth-seeking inquiry, or all ways are equally valid. But, “We are not confronted with the alternative of ultimate fixed foundations or a foundationless relativism. *Pragmatic pluralism is not relativism*; it is one of the strongest responses to picture of relativism suggested by the myth of the framework.”²

False dichotomies are always a worry, but all the more so where used in a highly rhetorical manner. Moral bifurcations are some the most persuasive. The thought that ‘If God is dead then everything is permitted,’ for example, can motivate amoralism and subjectivism, or it can motivate a fervent reaffirmation of absolute moral law founded in divine command. The

¹ Bernstein (2010), 53.

² Bernstein (2010), 55.

necessity of a foundation for morals in religious authority becomes for the absolutist the only alternative to social anarchy, while for the disappointed it becomes the source of moral egoism, subjectivism, or even nihilism. In epistemology as well as ethics the Cartesian Anxiety often results in one of two attitudes, attitudes that we can label *retrenchment objectivism* and *boomerang relativism*. People who give up one extreme are especially liable by personal temperament to be swayed not by intermediate stances but by the discourse of the other extreme. But despite the human misfortune that extreme voices are often the loudest in our ongoing culture wars, many contemporary philosophers believe it possible “to avoid both the grand pretensions of ‘first philosophy’ and the sort of disillusioned relativism voiced by thinkers who cannot conceive of human inquiry in other than social, rhetorical, and political terms.”³

Champions of objectivist or realist intuitions argue that reductions of truth and objectivity to social justificatory practices fail to adequately allow for ways in which our judgments are answerable to the world (as John McDowell puts it), and not just to our partners in the social conversation. But endorsing metaphysical realism looks like a case of philosophical overreach, and something that appeals more to philosophers than to many scientists themselves. On the other side of the coin, reducing truth to justification looks like a form of decisionism that cuts off rather than promotes criticism enabling better understanding of the natural and social world. Those who look for a path beyond objectivism and relativism might try to show that objectivity can be understood without commitment to more than a realistic minimum. They might also insist that being always situated in a cultural/historical community is a vital insight, transforming our

³ Bevir and Paul (2012), 301. See also Zammito (2012), 330.

very ideas of meaning and reference; but it “does not cage us into ‘incommensurable’ systems of relativism in which a decisionist ‘solidarity’ totally displaces ‘objectivity’.”⁴

Bernstein gives many indications that Richard Rorty’s sharp contrast between endorsing ‘solidarity’ and endorsing ‘objectivity’ is a reflection of the Cartesian Anxiety. At the least, he finds overdrawn Rorty’s forced choice between objectivity and solidarity, and the closely-related rejection of the value of the concept of objectivity. It is not just that Rorty, a strong anti—realist, frames the either/or choice between solidarity and objectivity as applicable to how we choose beliefs in natural science as well as in history, philosophy, and politics. Bernstein would repudiate the need for this contrast outside of science as well as within. Acknowledging problems with correspondence theories of truth, Bernstein points out, “feed[s] the opposing intuition that it is really our justificatory inferential social practices that are primary, and that any adequate conception of reality, objectivity, and truth must begin with this insight.”⁵ But there are dangers in this view as well, and Bernstein is sympathetic only to attempts to connect truth and justification that do not *reduce* the one to the other. We will consider more closely Rorty’s critique of objectivity at the end of this chapter, and his liberal ironism in Chapter 6. But I introduce it to now to point out that Bernstein develops pragmatic pluralism in more than one direction: in response to champions of objectivist or realist intuitions, but also in response to their postmodern and radically social constructivist counterparts. Its multi—edge character is one of the reasons Bernstein thinks of pragmatic pluralism as “one of the strongest responses to the picture of relativism suggested by the myth of the framework.”

⁴ Zammito (2012), 337.

⁵ Bernstein (2010), 114.

Recognizing the Cartesian Anxiety as a powerful motivator of the polarization of objectivist and relativist attitudes does not of course mean that we can dismiss these views by attributing reactionary motivations to their actual adherents. Diagnosis of tensions and their sources, together with genealogical reconstructions of the functions of key concepts in philosophy, can be powerful tools. With broad philosophical debates it is often valuable to offer a *diagnosis* for antagonisms and stalemates, a diagnosis that reflects upon values in motivations. But a diagnosis of general attitudes and tendencies should not lead us to psychologize individual authors.

Retrenchment objectivism and boomerang relativism we should see as over-easy solutions that reflect a false-dichotomy or excluded-middle fallacy. Diagnosing effects of the Cartesian Anxiety can help us to recognize not only the effects of temperament on the debate, but also rhetorical strategies of persuasion. Persuading someone of the need to reaffirm objective foundations can easily employ a rhetoric of *slippery slope* and *appeal to fear*. Supporters of a ‘boomerang’ attitude of deep suspicion of the value or realizability of objectivity will typically appeal to some new false dichotomies to replace the old. When we approach a debate aware of its rhetorical dimensions we are more likely to already be on guard. The always-available straw-man aids all sides in mischaracterizing their opponents.

Some find the terms “objectivist” and “relativist” descriptive enough, and invoke one or the other in an effort of *reducio ad absurdum*: if the shoe fits, wear it. Others think that invoking these terms amounts to little more than employing *red herring* or making a *circumstantial ad hominem* attack. Nothing, it seems, poisons the well of discourse in these debates more quickly than rhetorical tricks like these. Labeling someone a relativist or calling them an objectivist is

usually a way of saddling them with implausibly strong views: Relativist, objectivist, and scientific are usually not self-descriptions, but rather pejorative labels that opponents provide.

Wanting to open rather than block the road to inquiry, our approach like Bernstein's should be to find some value in the terms "objectivism" and "relativism," but largely as designations for general, abstract tendencies of thought, and for ideas and attitudes associated with the extreme poles in the debate over objectivity. We will not try to assign them exact definitions, since it is the attitude which is our focus. If Bernstein is correct, there is value in diagnosing the sources of both tendencies of philosophical thought, and especially in identifying and scrutinizing those *shared assumptions* that polemical debates of this kind so often turn upon. But in discussing particular authors we will continue to avoid such labeling by employing more self-attributed terms, such as realist, anti-realist, rationalist, empiricist, pragmatic pluralist (humanist), social constructivist, liberal ironist, etc.

2.2 Intuitions and the Temperament Thesis

One reason why pragmatic pluralist like Bernstein provide an interesting basis on which to reconstruct the concept of objectivity is that they argue that "the clash of intuitions and temperaments underlies and motivates many of the contemporary disputes about truth, justification, realism, and objectivity."⁶ Pragmatists offer temperament as a contributing factor behind philosophical diversity. Pragmatic pluralists don't deny that people have realist or idealist intuitions, but they find them associated with individual temperaments and acquired cultural paradigms rather than with rational insights over which we should expect consensus.

⁶ Bernstein (2010), 108.

On Bernstein's approach, "Appealing to competing intuitions and temperaments may be the beginning of philosophical dispute, but nothing is finally resolved by simply appealing to them." Bernstein holds that while intuitions have a role to play in philosophy, that role is primarily one of introducing judgments that are open to contestation and require independent argumentative justification. He treats intuitions basically as "hunches," helpful for some purposes but having content that may shift across time and culture due to an indefinite number of factors.

Over-dependence on intuitions in Western philosophy is partly a product of philosophy's attempt to establish its own autonomy as a field of study. Rationalism traditionally supports the strongest commitment to philosophy's autonomy. This point reflects upon a growing dissatisfaction with the continued dependence upon intuitionistic methods in certain areas of philosophy, something that is also being challenged from a more empirical direction by *experimental philosophy*. Appeal to intuitions works best if they are widely shared or grounded in *a priori* insights, but experimentalists argue that philosophers often ask philosophical intuitions to do far more theoretical work than they should. Joshua Alexander writes, "What has traditionally interested philosophers about people's philosophical intuitions has been that these intuitions are supposed to be able to tell us about the world and ourselves".⁷ Experimental philosophers cast a shadow over 'armchair' methods in philosophy by trying to show empirically

⁷ Alexander (2012), 1-2. "We advance philosophical theories on the basis of their ability to explain our philosophical intuitions, defend their truth on the basis of their overall agreement with our philosophical intuitions, and justify our philosophical beliefs on the basis of their accordance with our philosophical intuitions."

“that people’s intuitions are sensitive to a range of things (e.g., ethnicity, gender, affectivity, and presentation order) that we neither expected nor perhaps wanted them to be.”⁸ At the least, the introspective investigation traditionally shared by rationalists and epistemological internalists should be supplemented and corrected by studying people’s philosophical intuitions empirically. But if we can no longer treat philosophical intuitions as rational insights or *a priori* knowledge, then neither can we treat them as a means to bridge either the gap between subjectivity and objectivity or that between cognitive and ontological objectivity. In Chapter 6 we will return to the importance of psychologically informed approaches in ethics and epistemology by discussing social experiments involving ethical judgment-making.

2.3 Realism and Humanism

Thomas Nagel famously claims that realism makes skepticism intelligible and even that skepticism is simply “the other aspect of any realist view.” His skepticism, then, follows as a consequence of his approach of metaphysics as first philosophy. Realism, this is to say, implies the coherence of certain skeptical possibilities since it highlights the possibility that the world is quite unlike the way we take it to be. If one cannot close what the realists and skeptics agree is a deep logical gap between knowing subjects and the object of knowledge, then “a pervasive skepticism or at least provisionality of commitment is suitable in light of our evident limitations.”⁹

⁸ Alexander (2012), 3.

⁹ Nagel (1989), 69.

Nagel certainly does not contest James' claim that our human psychology shapes our percepts and concepts; indeed he insists on this point. However, identifying metaphysical realism with "anti-humanism," he draws very different conclusions. The skeptical side of Nagel's thinking pervades his belief that we have no satisfactory resources for combining the outlooks of the subjective and objective selves. As previously noted he thinks that, "The objective standpoint here 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

Nagel highlights two particular considerations that he thinks makes skepticism unavoidable: 1) our inability to eliminate skeptical hypotheses logically inconsistent with our knowing (for example, in 'you-could-be-a-brain-in-a-vat' scenarios); and 2) our consequent inability to have a "general" positive account of our ability to know. But perhaps this places too high a burden on anti-skeptical philosophy. The obligation owed to a skeptical-interlocutor may not be to supply the general theory of our place in the universe that rationalists from Descartes to Kant to contemporary thinkers like Bonjour and Nagel have yearned for. We may not have to diagnose the discourse between skeptic and anti-skeptic in this way, or to censure the human capacity for knowledge on the basis of our having relatively well-evolved self-reflective and hypothetical-reasoning abilities. George Berkeley pointed out that "The same faculty of reason and understanding, which placeth us above the brute part of creation, doth also subject our minds to greater and more manifold disquiets than creatures of an inferior rank are sensible of."¹¹ If Nagel's approach leads to denying humans knowledge or justified belief on the basis of their

¹⁰ Nagel, 88.

¹¹ George Berkeley, "Immortality" *The Guardian*.

very possession of reflexive, higher-order faculties not shared by brute animals, this arguably reflects problems with his approach rather than with our capacity for knowledge.

If displacing the subject – object polarity from its central role in metaphysical realist thought is philosophically legitimate, it arguably has the benefit that one will not be inclined as Nagel is to accept skepticism as realism’s necessary counterpart. There have been many attempts to ‘round off the edges,’ so to speak. If strong realism drives ‘pervasive skepticism’ as Nagel insists, then it stands to reason that limiting the commitment we need to make to an ontological grounding for cognitive objectivity changes the dialectic between philosophy and skepticism. But how could such alternatives be framed such that they do not collapse into some kind of relativism? Neo-Kantians like Sacks we have seen have their own answers to this and are by no means uniformly attracted to Nagel’s account. Pragmatists like Bernstein think of epistemology as a theory of inquiry, and that we must start from our present evaluative practices, together with the personal and group habits that shape and are shaped by these practices. But to start there does not mean to end there in some kind of conventionalism or decisionism.

According to Bernstein, “Objectivity is not to be confused with metaphysical realism. There are philosophers who think that unless one endorses metaphysical realism, then there is no possibility of giving a proper account of objectivity... [But] objectivity is not a metaphysical or epistemological given; it is an ongoing conflictual *achievement*-- one that must be constantly rethought.”¹² The conflict between Bernstein and Nagel is sharp because humanist theories, which Nagel charges are unacceptably “reductionist,” are among those that when properly qualified Bernstein sees as having the resources to lead us beyond objectivism and relativism.

¹² Bernstein (2010), 161 and 163.

The problem of hidden truths, truths that humans may never access, leads Nagel to emphasize “the great gap between the grounds of our beliefs about the world and the contents of those beliefs under a realist interpretation.”¹³ According to Nagel, the thing we can do which comes closest to getting outside of ourselves is to form a detached idea of the world that nevertheless includes us: “What we want is to reach a position as independent as possible of who we are and where we started, but a position they can also explain how we got there.” On this view, “the form of our understanding would be specific to ourselves, but its content would not be.”¹⁴

Bernstein thinks that in challenging the realist’s subject – object dichotomy one is also challenging the use that realists like Nagle try to put to the consciousness–content distinction. Pragmatists generally associate a sharp consciousness–content distinction with a “spectator theory” of knowledge; they think that the sharpness of that distinction dissolves when we take a more active conception of epistemic agency focused on habits and problem–solving strategies than on propositional attitudes. For pragmatists this approach is partly premised on their view of the interconnectedness of knowing and doing, or theoretical and practical reasoning generally. But we will later discuss how these ideas connect with a far broader movement of “de–centering” epistemic agency, and with philosophical naturalism’s support of it.

Nagel's initial separation of the subjective and objective self would for related reasons be contested by Bernstein, who discusses the implications of William James' explicit denial of any such "duplicity" of subject and object in experience. James writes, "Experience, I believe, has no

¹³ Nagel (1989), 69.

¹⁴ Nagel, (1989), 74.

inner duplicity: Any separation of it into consciousness and content comes, not by way of subtraction, but by way of addition."¹⁵ This denial is important to us because Nagel describes the difference between epistemological and ontological objectivity in terms of a separation of epistemic means and the *content* of propositions that have a truth value. Pragmatists argue that by denying this inner duplicity and affirming experience as the starting point of philosophical inquiry, ontological objectivity with its subject–object polarity is deprived of the privileged position it has for the metaphysical realist. But at the same, they argue, skeptical worries do not arise in the same way or to quite the same extent.

Bernstein tries to show that one can develop a conception of justification, truth, intersubjectivity, and objectivity “that avoids appealing to the final ends of inquiry, ideal conditions of justification, and does not lead to ‘bad relativism’ or conventionalism.” He does not believe that linking objectivity to our social justificatory practices — what he calls justificatory *praxis* — necessarily leads to these ills. Indeed he insists that for the American and European pragmatic tradition the conceptual connection “is not to be thought of as identification, or as dispensing with truth and objectivity in favor of justification.”¹⁶ Although truth is internally connected to justification, we can still in context distinguish between them. But a closer point of contention between metaphysical realists and pragmatic pluralists is the ideal communal convergence account that Peirce proposed. Nagle dismisses Peirce’s view as decisionist and reductionist, insisting that “this limit of convergence is not the definition of truth, as Peirce suggests.”¹⁷

¹⁵ James quoted from Bernstein (2010), 57.

¹⁶ Bernstein (2010), 110.

¹⁷ Nagle (1989), 83.

Bernstein is more sympathetic to it, but as we will see eventually moves towards an inferentialist account as better suited to pragmatic pluralism.

2.4 Peirce's Ideal Limit Theory

Kant gave objectivity its primary, cognitive sense, in so doing differentiating it from correspondence to the way things as they are in themselves. Peirce extends the scientific conception of science's objectivity as epistemic to community acceptance under ideal epistemic conditions. The Kantian picture assured our fallibility, but Peirce wanted to insist that it does not imply that we are 'cut off' from the real. Peirce's attempt to show this involves his notion that scientific truth is what the community of inquiry would agree upon at some indefinite or ideal terminus of inquiry. On the Peircean account, the real or true is couched in terms of acceptability under epistemically ideal conditions.¹⁸ The claim that deliberation under ideal conditions should eventuate in consensus best fits with answers to empirical questions, questions where there are definite facts available that are sufficient for their answer. We should not of course restrict cognitive objectivity to strictly empirical questions or subject matter, but even if we do, we may be overlooking the contextuality of descriptions and explanations. Is there, for example, a single correct third-personal description of an orchestral composition? James famously challenged this with the following example:

¹⁸ Later pragmatists including Dewey and Bernstein have treated warranted assertability and convergence more as analyses of knowledge or rationality, than of truth. This is perhaps a useful a qualification.

A Beethoven string-quartet is truly, as someone has said, a scraping of horses' tails on cats' bowels, and may be exhaustively described in such terms; but the application of this description in no way precludes the simultaneous applicability of an entirely different description.¹⁹

Pluralists also hold that causal explanations, such as what we accept as the cause of an automobile accident, may vary substantially in terms of the factors we select as important or unimportant *to us*, that is, for our *interests* in explanation. This does not impugn our ability to compare explanations, and the various natural and human sciences largely recognize how explanatory adequacy can differ substantially by field of study. Bernstein, in short, appears to agree with James' view that consensus is neither a realistic expectation nor something universally desirable, and rejects Peirce's ideal conditions account on this basis.

This is quite different than Nagle's reason for rejecting Peirce. Truth for Peirce is expressed as what *would* be accepted when beliefs converge under pressure of future experience and criticism, and the harnessing the unique characteristics of counterfactual conditions is clearly part of the attraction of the view for him. But when Nagle numbers Peirce among reductionists and decisionists (who Bernstein calls conventionalists), he does so without even noting the *ideal* stature of the consensus Peirce alludes to in his communitarian conception of scientific truth. This raises an interesting question for us: Is the Peircean account "decisionist"? Firstly, the idea of truth as ideal justification need not be a mere glorification of what we presently take to be the true or the good. "This final opinion" Peirce writes, "is independent, not indeed of thought in

¹⁹ James, "The Sentiment of Rationality."

general, but of all that is arbitrary and individual in thought”.²⁰ So Peirce decidedly is not claiming that any *actually achieved* consensus is the measure of the true or the real. Secondly, the status of the end of inquiry as a normative or *regulative ideal* should serve to separate it both from decisionism and from reductionism, even as Nagle defines them. Nagel discounts the philosophical importance of the *counterfactual* nature of the conditions that Peirce’s appeal to ideal epistemic conditions and to the ‘end of inquiry’ require.

What Bernstein finds most appealing in Peirce’s approach is the way that fallibilism and improvement through criticism are highlighted. He points out that the seeds of Peirce’s social account are found in his anti-Cartesian papers.⁶ Peirce stressed the individual’s vulnerability to ignorance or error and the importance of social mechanisms of correction and adjustment that a community of inquiry performs. Although he did not deny that the source of the new ideas may be individuals, he insisted that those ideas be tested and sifted in a community of inquiry. The epistemic norms we employ are not ahistorical or purely logical, but in science they can effectively correct for the many idiosyncrasies and biases of individuals. Furthermore,

Peirce carefully distinguishes between our knowing ‘things as they are’ (which he does not doubt) and being ‘absolutely certain of doing so in any special case’ (which is never completely justified)...Fallibilism means that every knowledge claim -- and, more generally, every validity claim -- is open to challenge, revision, correction, and even rejection.²¹

²⁰ Peirce (1992), 89.

²¹ Bernstein (2010), 36.

So Peirce's intended middle-path between objectivism and relativism does not dispense with the ontological grounding of cognitive objectivity, nor does it reduce the meaning of truth to any present test of truth. The pragmatist alternative argues that a commitment to fallibilism rightly understood ensures the importance of continual criticism and self-correction without the ontological baggage of strong realism.

2.5 Infallibilism and Fallibilism

Can fallibilism together with insistence that we are not cut off from experience of the real world satisfy the modest claims of realism without encouraging its skepticism-inviting aspects?

Bernstein tries to clarify why fallibilism should not be confused with skepticism. One might see fallibilism as a partial concession to skepticism, but we should not overlook that it leads to a very different understanding of the challenge of skepticism, one where reasonably side-stepping global skepticism rather than providing a definite refutation of it is all that is reasonably expected. Fallibilism requires less concession to skepticism than does Nagel's metaphysical realism with its basic distinction between things in themselves and mental representations. What Nagel calls the appropriate provisionality of commitment to truth-claims will be handled quite differently by metaphysical realists and non-realists.

Bernstein's pluralist agrees with Nagel that any simple equation of the predicates "is true," and "is justified" fails. Given fallibilism we cannot merely appeal to our current *de facto* opinions or any actual consensus. He allows that there is a legitimate sense in which we can speak of truths that may never be justified. So fallibilists can agree with Nagel's key claim that, "The idea of objectivity always points beyond mere intersubjective agreement, even though such

agreement, criticism, and justification are essential methods of reaching an objective view.”²²

Bernstein says that the ‘pointing beyond’ is insisted upon by Peirce and treated in terms of the Peircean category of Secondness, a “non-epistemic sense of resistance, brute force, and compulsion.”

An ontological way of speaking establishes a connection between truth and reference; an epistemic way of speaking establishes a connection between truth and justification. But might both of these conceptual connections both be accepted without fostering reductionism? Employing the distinction between the *order of being* with the *order of knowing* is one way to support this. With this distinction the ‘pointing beyond’ might more easily be understood in a way avoids the otherwise serious charge of ontological overreach. There is a general sense in which the object of knowledge has a logical or conceptual priority within the *order being*, this still being consistent the object-world having an essentially normative function within the *order of knowing*.

Nagel’s demand for a general theory that even the skeptic will have to respect is really a demand for a self-reflective ability to know that we know; it flows from Nagle’s overt rationalism and the “absolute conception” of knowledge he shares with others like Peter Unger and Lawrence Bonjour. A strong sense of the demand for infallibility as a condition of knowing requires that there be *no* possibility of error. Nagle’s version of the skeptic’s challenge to our

²² Bernstein (2010), 108. Mention of the distinction between the orders of knowing and being are my own; Bernstein does not mention the distinction.

ability for knowledge highlights even just *logically* possible error. The infallibilist insists and the fallibilist denies these sorts of demands.²³

Fallibilism concedes something to skepticism, but also denies something. In his reply to Descartes, Peirce puts this by saying that we can doubt any particular belief, but we cannot doubt everything at once. In his reply to Kant he puts it by saying that any particular empirical belief is correctable in light of future experience, but that we are in contact with the real things that we seek to know, and not 'cut off' from them. *For Peirce the infallibilist demands Nagle puts in the voice of the skeptic are not supported by recognition of our human limitations and 'incapacities.'*²⁴ The wrong thing to say is that there is no possible verification of correspondence with the world independent of mind, and that one must be a verificationist or reductionist for demanding of the intelligibility of knowledge that there must be. The hidden truths problem is a key realist intuition pump, but itself rubs up against unintelligibility when it blurs with the notion that we must posit as a metaphysical first principle a *noumenal* realm in principle beyond human access or representation. *That independence of the world that Peirce agrees is a condition of the*

²³ So the strong demand associated with an infallibilist argument for skepticism has the further unfortunate effect of discounting the importance of differences between *nearby* error possibilities (like missing a news story that would defeat my justification for believing that a certain food product is safe), and *remote* ones like brain-in-vat scenarios (scenarios whose force lies only in that *any* perceptual experiences one might be having can be said to be consistent with them).

²⁴ Nagle, by contrast with Peirce, appears strongly committed both to the "infallibility-based" and the "closure-based" arguments for skepticism, according to Duncan Pritchard in *Epistemic Luck* (2005). See Pritchard for a useful critique of both.

intelligibility of knowledge cannot without introducing a whole other sort of unintelligibility be seen as unrepresentable to mind.

Nagel insists that the external world “is not dependent on our view of it, or any other view: the direction of dependence is the reverse.”²⁵ There are several responses that antirealists might make. One is that if this claim is construed empirically, it appears to be empirically false or at least unjustified, given what we know about both relativity theory and quantum theory in physics. The current state of our physics both of the very large and the very small seem to show that observational results can depend upon the presence or location of an observer. If observation physically effects what is observed, then the dependence that Nagle claims is decidedly uni-directional is really in important respects bi-directional.

Bernstein does not develop such empirical responses, but he does provide further development of his pragmatic pluralism. He does not see much problem with talking about “correspondence” or “agreement” to facts as having many uncontroversial instances. “[B]ut things get much more confusing and messier when we are dealing with more complicated cases of philosophical, scientific, mathematical, or historical assertions....[In these] the very meaning and the criteria for determining what does and does not correspond to objective reality aren’t at all clear”.²⁶ Reflexive objectivity is located within the space of reasons. Where we can’t simply look and see, we are required to turn to reason – giving to support claims about what is true or real, and this is always an *epistemic* enterprise.

²⁵ Nagle (1989), 108-109.

²⁶ Bernstein (2010), 108.

Bernstein's account builds from Peirce's late break from James, his insistence that the meaning of a concept is bound up in what uses (what affirmations and denials) it obliges, permits, or invites one to make. This leads us to Bernstein's version of semantic inferentialism. In doing so he makes a partial break from representationalism by showing some affinity with the alternative approach called inferentialism or normative functionalism.²⁷ This approach, shared by Wilfrid Sellars, John McDowell, Robert Brandom and others, analyzes acts of asserting in terms of their function or role in norm-governed social practice.

Sellars' suggestion to turn from the starting point of the "given" toward a starting point within the space of reasons has been highly influential, leading to forms of both causal and normative functionalism. Normative functionalism as one proponent puts it, "*interprets the ability to form judgments, possess concepts, rationally defend or be critical of judgments, and consequently act as an agent, as largely guided by one's responsiveness to norms.*"²⁸ On the version of it that Bernstein calls attention to (Brandom's), objectivity of propositional content is made intelligible not by starting with semantics, as is usually the case, but with the norm-

²⁷ Causal and normative functionalism are competing accounts of concept meaning that inferential lists might appeal to. Beisecker (2012) argues that Peirce sets his "pragmaticism" apart from James' "pragmatism" in part by shifting his language from causal-talk to more normative-talk: "Whereas earlier he talked about the meaning of a concept or idea in terms of its 'effects' upon sensory experience and behavior, later on he speaks in terms of its 'consequences for deliberate self-controlled conduct.'"

²⁸ Reider (2012).

governed “structure of the commitments and entitlements that articulate the use of sentences.”²⁹

While differences between inferentialists and representationalists can sometimes be sharp, Brandom and other inferentialists argue that their approach satisfactorily supports the independence of the real and the objectivity of propositional content.

2.6 Fine’s Pluralism

One philosopher whose direct response to Nagle might further bolster the pluralist thesis is Arthur Fine. Science, Fine holds, isn't in need of essentialistic interpretation in the way that realists, instrumentalists, and social constructionists all suppose. He points out how realists who defend the primacy of an ontological or more specifically what Bernard Williams calls an "absolute conception" of objectivity typically find it distinctive of the procedures and results of the natural sciences. Fine, by contrast, resists singling out the domain of natural science as uniquely objective. It is misleading to use objectivity “as a criterion that marks a special way of knowing characteristic of the natural sciences.”³⁰ Fine also resists the ‘at least here’ appeal to ontological objectivity illustrated by Bernard Williams' claim that "the natural sciences, at least, are capable of objective truth."³¹ Williams' absolute conception, much like Nagle's view from nowhere, seeks "to represent the world in a way to the maximum degree independent of our perspective and its particularities."³² Fine responds to this in a manner similar to Bernstein.

²⁹ Brandom (2003), 203.

³⁰ Fine (1998),

³¹ Fine (1998),

³² Williams (1985), 139 and 189.

While there are different kinds of objectivity, "there is no special provenance for objectivity. It is not special to the natural sciences, nor excluded when we inquire into the mind, or human affairs."

Where Fine locates problems with the metaphysical realism shared by Williams, Nagle, and others, is in the assimilation of all objectivity to *impersonality*. In making impersonality the paradigm of objectivity he thinks they illicitly run together two different sets of associations of the concept of objectivity. The first association is to the impersonal, which goes together with the non-perspectival, the detached, and the disinterested. This is the kind of objectivity appealed to when we speak of scientific experiments as reproducible by anyone, which is to say by no one in particular. The view from nowhere exemplifies this first kind of objectivity. The second association is to the unbiased, impartial, or neutral. Blind Lady Justice with her balanced scale, and John Rawls' project of deriving principles of justice through a thought experiment designed to heighten impartiality by placing us behind a 'veil of ignorance,' both exemplify this kind of objectivity. The big problem comes when we attempt to instill an impersonal or non-perspectival stance where this would be inappropriate to its subject matter, or again when we try to infer ontological status from impersonality.

To the realist, scientific methods are objective because perspectives aren't important to them as they are to other practices. But "checking on the objectivity of the research" is ambiguous between checking on the *process* and checking on its *product*. So Fine sees Nagle's and Williams' claims about objective truth as similarly ambiguous. Realists begins by sharply distinguishing the means and content of scientific theory, but then make the contentious inference that this leaves the content of scientific knowledge non-perspectival. Fine argues that the metaphysical realists' use of the concept of objectivity is often guilty of a recognized fallacy

of ambiguity, the *process-product fallacy*. The metaphysical realist "takes processes that are impersonal and non-perspectival and runs them together with procedures that are impartial and unbiased." But there is not adequate justification for an assumption that the quality of a process attaches to its products. Fine sees no logical connection between being objective in these two senses, and thinks that fallibilism and particular examples from history of science should be enough to refute the view. While Fine agrees that objectivity attaches both to procedures and processes, the equivocation he charges Nagel and Williams with he finds evidenced in their thought by "crossover effects, the false assimilation to one another of independent aspects of objectivity."³³ Thus, he concludes, "the objectivity that Nagel and Williams try to mark out is a hodgepodge and not a natural kind... impersonal does not imply unbiased, nor conversely." We might say for Fine, by contrast, that what is real does not need to be non – perspectival, and what is non – perspectival is not necessarily the criterion of the real. Procedural objectivity is a matter of degree and works by striking balances and achieving a temporary equilibrium, "but it scarcely guarantees overall reliability, much less access to what is really real.... Procedural objectivity does not guarantee objectivity for the products of inquiry. It does not guarantee that the contents of those products are non-perspectival, nor that the products themselves are really real."³⁴

Non-realists arguably sometimes make an analogous, though inverse mistake. We may assimilate objectivity in science with "openness" of the process to multiple perspectives. John Stuart Mill's claims about good political practice involving multiple and competing voices cannot so easily be carried over to natural science. Given the pluralist view that science's

³³ Fine (1998), 18.

³⁴ Fine (1998), 16-17.

methods are many and varied, attributes like "unbiased," and "impersonal," may promote objectivity here and not there, and the same thing goes for attributes like "open" and "democratic."

To digress briefly, this also means that the pluralism that Fine and Bernstein share can be related to the *irreducible complexity* thesis of Heather Douglas (2004). The confusion we are speaking of could easily be accommodated in her pluralistic taxonomy of kinds of objectivity as a confusion between what she calls objectivity₃, which keys to the procedures or products of social processes, and one or the other of her other two kinds. Douglas thinks that an “operationally” focused taxonomy is needed to provide us a clearer sense of what to look for when describing a process or product of inquiry as objective. As a pluralist she argues that “the divergence of meanings and contexts of applicability make it implausible that the different senses [of objectivity] are reducible to each other.”³⁵ Her full taxonomy consists of eight distinct “modes” or senses of objectivity under three more general “kinds”:

For objectivity₁, one examines the particular laboratory or human-world interactive processes. For objectivity₂, one examines individual reasoning processes. For objectivity₃, one examines the structure of group dynamics and social processes.³⁶

The specific modes of these three basic kinds tell us where among the products and processes of inquiry to look for the markers of objectivity. Our exploration of the uses of the

³⁵ Douglas (2004), 466.

³⁶ Douglas (2004), 465.

concept of objectivity in the hard (empirical) and soft (theoretical or interpretive) sciences in later chapters will pick up further on Douglas' taxonomy and her related reconstructive work on objectivity. The point here is primarily that the pragmatic pluralist thesis offers an explanation for confusions among kinds of objectivity that polarize the debate between over objectivism and relativism. A standard that appealed only to openness and democracy among scientists, or their social-political solidarity, would surely underestimate the kind and degree of objectivity that science is capable of. A standard that appeals to the independence of the results of hard scientific experimentation (objectivity₁) would surely exaggerate our expectations for objectivity with respect to the processes and products of fields of study *other than* hard science.

It is important to enhance public trust in scientific results, along with efforts at scientific literacy. Fine argues that openness and responsiveness to public concerns are important, but also that their importance in trust-building should not be premised upon an over-generalization about the *epistemic* ends that such openness may promote. Trust and technical rigor sometimes come apart, and in some instances the public responsiveness of scientists and risk-assessors matters as much as the repeatability of their tests, or the invariance of their subject matter.

In an example of the close connection between trust and objectivity that Fine discusses, the FDA, from a purely data-driven perspective would prefer the testing of new pharmaceuticals to meet standards of placebo-controlled, double-blind experimentation carried through as long as necessary to ensure the clearest of outcomes. But all of the patients in the study are stakeholders, and very often have to give up taking other life – extending medications in order to be admitted into new trials. Humanitarians and patients themselves see it as an issue of justice if some who consent to such a risk will not even potentially stand to benefit from the new drug. Public distrust of a process that extends genuine care only to patients randomly assigned to the experiment

group, and which may actually shorten lives for others left taking placebos, has led to some compromises. In a trade-off between rigor and public trust the FDA has moved in the direction of modifying its testing procedures and expectations. In many cases a supervisory panel including a medical ethicist is charged with monitoring clinical trials to determine if and when the drug should be offered to all the participants.

From a public and perhaps from a social epistemic perspective, science is objective when its methods promote trust. While we surely might balk at our saying the same thing about truth or about the epistemic status of results, Fine's pluralism holds that "what counts as an objective procedure is something that needs to be tailored to the subject matter under consideration in a way that generates trust." Whether a process marked out as objective is actually reliable, and whether it earns public trust, are things that scientists and risk analysts learn in the course of inquiry. Fine's response to Nagle and Williams thus ties directly into his Deweyan "experimentalism," according to which much of what we learn in inquiry is how better to conduct it.

2.7 Objectivity versus Solidarity?

Reformers of the concept of objectivity, as we have seen, are typically critical of the concept's ontological sense, and so of metaphysical realist theories that accord this sense primacy over cognitive or epistemic objectivity. But the harshest critics of objectivity reject also attempts to rehabilitate the concept. They say that objectivity even in its etymology *necessarily* points to naïve realist truth. Appealing to objectivity in justifying or explaining one's beliefs on this view must always draw us into an unacceptable metaphysical realism or scientism. To eradicate foundationalist epistemology and metaphysics, we should divest ourselves of the language of

objectivity if not also its associated personal and group virtues. The viability and value of the concept of objectivity is challenged across the board, its cognitive or epistemic sense along with its ontological sense.

Rorty's famous paper "Objectivity or Solidarity" (1991) favored the replacement of representationalism with alternative incommensurable *vocabularies*, and the replacement of the concept of objectivity with that of solidarity. Rorty's presentation of the two concepts results in an Either/Or choice, well captured in his stated hope for a future in which we could "be moved solely by the desire for solidarity, setting aside the desire for objectivity altogether."³⁷

To reject representationalism wholesale as Rorty does is to reject the value of any spatial metaphor for human cognition, such as "mirroring," "corresponding to," or even "directed to." None of these is a useful description of our relation to the life – world.³⁸ On his postmodern version of a strong linguistic turn in philosophy, there is no intelligibility to the notion that human inquiry is answerable to the capital W World, or capital T Truth, where the capital implies existing outside of language and linguistic practices. Indeed Rorty endorses Nietzsche's claim that "the traditional notion of Truth, as correspondence to the intrinsic nature of Reality, was a remnant of the idea of submission to the Will of God."³⁹ Rorty's rejection of the value of objectivity leans upon his prior rejection of the value of the concept of truth. He basically

³⁷ Rorty (1991), 27.

³⁸ McDowell (2000), 128.

³⁹ Rorty quoted by Davidson (2000), 66. Davidson like McDowell clearly takes a rehabilitators perspective, in contrast to Rorty's use of Davidson as a sounding board for many of his own claims about truth, meaning, and objectivity.

reduces the function of both concepts to just their rhetorical function as expressions of commendation. In the post-philosophical culture towards which Rorty directs us, philosophy abandons conceptual *analysis* and is pursued if at all as *conversation*, and as *therapy* for the self – constructed problems of metaphysics, epistemology, political theory, and ethics. Rorty’s postmodernism is in these respects no less radical than the ‘elimination of metaphysics’ thesis of logical positivists like Rudolph Carnap, although also rejecting his former teacher’s position by thoroughly repudiating his scientism.

Whereas realists and empiricists, through their focus on hard science, see knowledge as converging and becoming more unified, postmodernists (like social epistemologists) provide the useful counterpoint of emphasize knowledge(s) proliferating, and the production of use-knowledges becoming more diffuse. More moderate critics of the language of objectivity would surely agree with this counterpoint emphasis. They might agree with Rorty’s efforts to “fuzzy-up” many of the sharp distinctions favored by objectivists: facts vs. values, analytic vs. synthetic, science vs. non-science, logic vs. psychology, cognitive vs. emotive uses of language, etc. The whole of the pragmatist tradition broadly agrees with this critique of foundationalism and scientism. It would also take issue with Nagel’s combination of metaphysical realism and skepticism, the combination he says is unavoidable when one takes as basic the subject – object and existence-being distinctions.

But Rorty goes much further than mainstream pragmatism goes by also challenging distinctions such as those between knowledge and opinion, and finding versus making true. His position becomes verificationist or reductionist in ways we have argued that classical pragmatism and Bernstein’s pragmatic pluralism does not. But our strongest critical concern should be that Rorty, at the same time that he ‘fuzzies up’ sharp distinctions that supported

objectivism and scientism, actually constructs a new dichotomy of his own that could just as easily become a roadblock to inquiry.

As a prime example of Rorty's own either/or logic, he sharply contrasts these two groups of thinkers: "those who wish to ground solidarity in objectivity," and "those who wish to reduce objectivity to solidarity." Those who agree with this way of framing the philosophical divide and also his postmodern critique of scientism he thinks will thoroughly repudiate the concept of objectivity and "reduce" appeals to objectivity to social-ethical-political appeals to solidarity. But in a crucial respect Rorty's approach shows itself to be a distorted mirror image of Nagel's. While Nagel contrasts realism and reductionism as *his* Either/Or choice, Rorty's contrast of Objectivity or Solidarity presents a formally similar choice, then bids us to take the opposite stance.

If this interpretation is correct, his philosophy is very much a reflection of what we earlier called the "boomerang" effect, where the basic choices Objectivists offer is accepted, but the answer has changed. Ironically, despite all of his overt skepticism, it is Nagle who insists that the "gap" between all of our epistemic means and the world in itself should not vitiate the pursuit of objectivity. Rorty thinks we are better off giving up that pursuit of objectivity as misguided and not only in hermeneutic studies but in the hard sciences as well. He paints the issue with a single brush, in contrast with the pluralist approach we have seen Bernstein argue is the best way to assuage the Cartesian Anxiety.

Recalling our earlier discussion of Nagle's realist objections to reductionist decisionism, a reduction claim is significantly more presumptuous than a claim about there being important conceptual connections between knowers and what they know. Rorty's Solidarity is far more open to the charge of being reductionist/decisionist than is Peirce's ideal consensus account of

truth, since for Rorty there appears to be no difference that makes a difference between “saying ‘there is only the dialogue’ and saying ‘there is also that to which the dialogue converges’”.⁴⁰ Again these large generalizations by Rorty are drawn without qualification by the type of subject matter under discussion, whether or the natural sciences, the social sciences, history, etc. While this may fit philosophical hermeneutics well, it seems that in making the choice that Rorty demands, all fields of inquiry are cast into the same model of philosophical hermeneutics—essentially his own style of philosophizing. In taking Objectivity as the contrast term to his favored Solidarity, Rorty characterizes it as an appeal to criteria that is supposed to be transhistorical. But most of the post-positivist reconstructions hold the value of objectivity to be quite consistent with moderate historicism about epistemic norms.

The foregoing critique of Rorty reflects some aspects of John McDowell’s rebuttal of Rorty’s call to abandon and vocabulary of objectivity. In “Towards Rehabilitating Objectivity” he suggests that rehabilitation, not abandonment, is the correct path. McDowell accepts part of Rorty’s critique of epistemology but defends the idea of inquiry as answerable to the facts about the natural and social world. Rorty tends to identify the vocabulary of objectivity with the denial of contingency or historicity, but McDowell denies that the vocabulary of cognitive objectivity commits us to any such wishful denial of contingency. Rorty, he argues,

is wrong in supposing that the way to cure people of the impulse towards that sort of philosophy is to proscribe, or at least try to persuade people to drop, the vocabulary of objectivity, and centrally the image of the world as authoritative over our

⁴⁰ Rorty (1991), 26.

investigations....The way to cure ourselves of unwarranted expectations for philosophy is not to drop the vocabulary of objectivity, but to work at understanding the sources of the de-formations to which the vocabulary of objectivity has historically been prone.⁴¹

McDowell here nicely pinpoints what we have tried to highlight as doubtful shared assumptions of strong realists and strong social constructionists. McDowell calls the shared assumption of a *mundus absconditus*, a threat of withdrawal into inaccessibility on the part of the world. Let us call the *mundus absconditus* assumption “the problem of the receding world”:

The culprit...is a frame of mind in which the world to which we want to conceive our thinking as answerable threatens to withdraw out of reach of anything we can think of as our means of access to it. A gap threatens to open between us and what we should like to conceive ourselves as knowing about, and it then seems to be a task for philosophy to show us ways to bridge the gulf.⁴²

There are at least two main ways to motivate the problem of the receding world: 1) by way of the gap between the “real” order of things external of mind and any and all ‘merely’ epistemic standards for truth and justification; and 2) by way of encapsulation of persons and communities within incommensurable linguistic schemes or language games. What Nagle calls subjective and objective selves is basically what are most traditionally divided as Existence and

⁴¹ McDowell (2000), p. 121.

⁴² McDowell (2000), 110.

Being, or Reason and Nature. When this has been the central problematic in philosophy, skepticism looms large and philosophical systems are erected to bridge the gulf between the two. Unfortunately, that gulf has already been posited as being potentially infinite. We are driven to think in terms of mediation, conceptual structuring and frameworks that stand between inquiring subjects and the object (objective) world. The shared insistence by objectivists and relativists on some version of a receding world thesis is motivated by or at least strengthened by the pull of the Cartesian Anxiety.⁴³

To conclude, Rorty and Nagle, despite their very sharp differences, share an either/or choice that Bernstein suggests a more consistently pluralistic understanding of cognitive objectivity is the best means of avoiding. By comparing Rorty with Nagel, we have suggested that McDowell's insightful comments on how Rorty's postmodernism leads to a severe version of the problem of the receding world" actually applies about equally well to those two arch enemies, the metaphysical realists and the radical social constructionists. If Nagel offers us only a paradoxical, almost desperate pursuit of an always receding world of things in themselves, Rorty, offers us an all-too-easy dismissal of the pursuit of objectivity due to our encapsulation in language games without a common world or trans-historical "criteria" to mediate between them. Rorty's own project would be better served, McDowell argues, if he would attack the conception of the world as withdrawn, than the vocabulary of objectivity as such. An exemplar of the attitude of rehabilitation, McDowell contends that, "Freeing the vocabulary of objectivity from

⁴³ Hence, Rorty's either/or choice would be recognizable as one instance of what we have called the "boomerang" reaction to it, although again, this does not dismiss the need for a more detailed critique of the arguments he offers.

contamination by the threat of withdrawal can be the project of epistemology in a different sense."⁴⁴

⁴⁴ McDowell (2000), 110-111.