

DEFINING OBJECTIVITY IN REALIST TERMS

Objectivity as a Second-Order ‘Bridging’ Concept

Part I: Valuing Objectivity¹

BY

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Amid the myths and hysterias of opposing hatreds it is difficult to cause truth to reach the bulk of the people, or to spread the habit of forming opinions on evidence rather than on passion. Yet it is ultimately upon these things, not upon any political panacea, that the hopes of the world must rest.
(Bertrand Russell)

No dogma suits every dog. (Jack Vance)

Abstract. Our aim is to explore and develop notions of objectivity that are useful and appropriate for critical realist empirical research. Part I explores the values associated with objectivity, Part II the linkages between objectivity and situated action. (Part II will appear in the next issue of this journal.) The introductory section of Part I explains why it is worthwhile in realist terms to develop the notion of objectivity; that is, develop it as opposed to remaining content with murky hidden notions or connotations that the term ‘objectivity’ brings to mind and that tend to cause confusion in how it is accepted and rejected. This is important as a clarification exercise for social research. In Part II, we argue that the growth of knowledge requires engagement and critical analysis. We develop the idea that if subjects are engaging objectively with reality and its multiple standpoints, then the results will tend to be transformative. Again, our aim is to be of use to practical researchers by providing underlying arguments. Specifically, we argue that objectivity is a bridge between the subjectivities of subjects and the rest of the real world.

Key words: objectivity, situated objectivity, standpoint feminism, values, MacIntyre

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Introduction: Towards Non-Objectionable Objectivity

As Andrew Collier and Andrew Sayer have both argued, the concept of objectivity is an integral part of realism.² Objectivity has been a troubling concept not least because it is weighed down with the philosophical residue of various forms of positivism.³ To invoke the concept of objectivity is to invite condescension from those who refuse to be seduced by what is, from their perspective, after all just another form of talk. Consider the statement: 'Objectivity is a word about which it is difficult to be objective'. It can be read in ironic as well as tautological terms and the combination of the two appears to indicate something unsettling, rather like Foucault's (we paraphrase) if history has a history how can there be 'history'? What this phrasing seems to suggest is that objectivity is tacitly subjective and thus a definition of objectivity (the very basis of an applicable concept of objectivity) is a non-starter, a positivist or materialist-empiricist illusion of value-free sense data. The term appears as rhetorical camouflage for one position among many. It appears particularly pernicious because (to mix metaphors) it has the quality of the cuckoo: pushing alternatives from the nest. This seems to be so in two distinguishable ways: denying that objectivity is actually subjective (an interpretive process that not all may share) and denying that the subjectivity of objectivity includes different sets of goals, motives and values (that, again, not all may share). But should we be troubled by these traits, rather than the rhetorical camouflage? Should we be troubled by the question: if objectivity has an objective (an interpretation, and a set of goals, values, motives ...), how can there be 'objectivity'?

Some philosophers and social theorists, such as Malcolm Williams, Donna Haraway, and Sandra Harding, have argued that we should not be.⁴ Their strategy has been to recover objectivity by confronting and embracing its subjectivity, indicating that the problem of objectivity has been the pernicious conceptual elements that suppress its tacit subjectivity. They contend that objectivity should be understood as embracing 'situatedness' and that the very essence of objectivity is the clear expression of our standpoints and values. We want to argue that there is merit in this insight but that it is possible to

² A. Collier, *In Defence of Objectivity* (London: Routledge, 2003); A. Sayer, *Realism in Social Science* (London: Sage, 2000), 58-64.

³ See, E. A. Lloyd, 'Objectivity and the double standard for feminist epistemologies', *Synthese* 104(3) (1995), 351-81, doi:10.1007/BF01064505.

⁴ For example, M. Williams, 'Situated objectivity', *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 35(1) (2005), 99-120, doi:10.1111/j.0021-8308.2005.00265.x; D. Haraway, 'Situated knowledges: the science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective', *Feminist Studies* 14(3) (1988), 575-99, doi:10.2307/3178066; S. Harding, 'Rethinking standpoint epistemology: what is "strong objectivity"?', in *Feminist Epistemologies*, eds L. Alcoff and E. Potter (London: Routledge, 1993).

go further and develop a working realist definition of objectivity that can be illustrated and pursued using critical realism. As such we want to argue that it is clearly differentiated from the philosophical residue of positivism but in a way that also addresses and elaborates on the notion that objectivity is 'situated'. We intend to argue that doing so requires three elements: (i) an exploration of the relation between epistemology and ontology; (ii) an exploration of the nuance of ontology for the subject; and (iii) an exploration of the role of the subject in constructing, arguing, developing and moving between different positions or claims about aspects of reality.

This is because two questions arise from the argument that objectivity is a value. First, why would one choose objectivity as a value? And, secondly, what is it that one is actually rejecting if one rejects objectivity and what is it that one is choosing when one chooses objectivity? These are centrally issues of aspects of (i)-(iii) above, since making sense of objectivity means making sense of its role in the formation of knowledge, its relation to ontology, and the link between the two as a way of investigating the world for the subject. Indeed, the problem only arises because of the subject. Even if one accepts an objective reality of some kind (traditional externalism or more specific mind-independent yet mind-practice-affected reality), objectivity is more than that there is something to be objective about: it also refers to the significance of an 'objective' decision-making process for the subject and for societies of subjects.⁵

We are, therefore, thinking about the term in a compatible but slightly different way from Margaret Archer in her most recent work on the internal conversation. Archer's concern is to establish that if agency and structure are genuinely distinct rather than dualistic then the causal powers of each must be considered and the mediation between the two must be explored.⁶ Her solution focuses on the distinction between objective structures and subjective agency. For Archer subjective agency involves the personal powers of agents to act based on cognition as reflexive acuity, creativity and capacity for commitment in which personal projects are constructed and through which objective structures are confronted in ways that constitute them as particular enablements and constraints for that subjective self and the realisation of those projects. In a sense they only become constraints and enablements because of the personal project and because of the way that deliberation leads the agent to act (or not) in terms of objective structure. Her focus is

⁵ See S. Hunt, 'A realist theory of empirical testing', *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 24(2) (1994), 133-58.

⁶ M. Archer, *Structure, Agency and the Internal Conversation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

thus primarily on (ii) above, especially for the lay actor. Our interest is less directly in these ontic characteristics (objective structure, subjective agency) and the personal narrative as significant in making sense of agency-structure and more in how subjectivity impacts on the significance of objectivity as a way that a subject might approach her reflexivity, thereby helping to define what objectivity can be thought of as. As such it is compatible with Archer's argument that agency-structure in general can be understood in terms of the interplay between objectivity and subjectivity.

The point we want to establish is that a fuller sense of the role of the subject in knowledge-formation indicates the 'necessity' of objectivity in a variety of ways. It is necessary to the process of justification of any particular knowledge claim in achieving the status of knowledge. Equally it is necessary to the removal of the status of knowledge from any particular knowledge claim. And it is necessary to a subject's transition from one knowledge claim to another. Centrally 'necessary' is thus entwined with choice: objectivity must be chosen and applied. That it *should* be chosen and that it *should* be applied - that it *ought* to be considered necessary - arises from arguments about the situation of the subject within reality that make sense in terms of (i)-(iii) above. It is in making the argument that a working realist definition of objectivity arises. The key characteristics of that definition include:

- We value objectivity because we are subjects not subjectifications, and objectivity is a lever of agency: it is an attitude to choice.
- This attitude is a value and objectivity is about values in relation to the time-dynamic of 'aboutness': describing and desiring; the made and the making.
- Objectivity as a value encapsulates the activation of a capacity for reasoned consideration. Consideration is of positions including one's own that can likewise be chosen because they can be subjected to appraisal. These are choices because subjects choose.
- Objectivity bridges the characteristics of the fallible subject within the world with the rest of that world by situating both her own potentials and sociality and other ontic features of that world. Objectivity is thus also a lever between the subject and the rest of existent reality (past and present) and its potentials (future).
- Objectivity is an acknowledgement of the possibility of the realisation of judgemental rationality. It is a commitment to grounded critique, including critique of the grounds of critique.
- Objectivity is thus a form of the exercise of freedom. It is the possibility of the active human in transition, one aspect of which is the transition between knowledges as part of a becoming within reality.

For these characteristics to make sense they presuppose epistemological potentials and ontological characteristics:

- That subjects can confront a reality of objects and subjects in a way that allows corrigible investigation.
- That knowledge is possible: there is a difference between knowledge and belief only.
- That knowledge is active and that research and thought make a difference to how we conceive and act precisely by the corrigibility of investigation: subjects can gain more adequate accounts of subjects and objects that challenge received belief and received knowledge.
- That the subject is therefore potentially active and able to transit between knowledges: that this is part of the 'growth' of the subject.
- That intersubjectivity is potentially active and the subject can therefore be genuinely engaged with other subjects about knowledge, otherwise there is a disjuncture between the learning subject as agent of choice and other subjects as agents of choice. In a sense knowledge ceases to be social. It becomes a personal attribute and a collective aggregate but without an interface.
- That the corrigibility of investigation entails that these are not just characteristics of knowledge and the subject but ontic features *because* they are characteristics of knowledge and the subject that are themselves elements of reality – the possibility of knowledge, and the potentials of the knowing-acting subject.
- That reality is therefore active: not just temporally dynamic but genuinely transformative, implying both depth and incompleteness.
- That the capacity to choose objectivity as a value and the capacity to hold and realise different standpoints entails this (unless choice is itself an illusion in which case so is the very concept of meaningful valuing and standpoints).
- That knowledge as correspondence-directed also entails a focus on claims about the real as the realisable and as potential.

Developing this definition establishes objectivity as a second-order construct, a bridging concept between, on the one hand, the possibility of knowledge, the possibilities of the subject in pursuing knowledge and transiting between knowledges, and, on the other, the realisation or active pursuit of those possibilities: the commitment to corrigible investigation, to genuine efforts to understand and reconcile alternative accounts of what is and what may, should, and could be. As such it must simultaneously be conceived as aspirational but only in virtue of the substantive elements of those epistemic and ontic char-

acteristics that it presupposes. It is in a sense mutually implicated with them because without objectivity they cannot be realised and without them objectivity is meaningless because objectivity is no more or less than the commitment to them as characteristics and as realisable goals. Objectivity is thus the value of valuing a concept of knowledge and corrigibility precisely because we do not have to. It is the necessary that need not be.

Of course, one might argue that the attribution and withdrawal of the status of knowledge and the movement between different claims could in some sense be arbitrary in a way that corrodes such a definition of objectivity. The missing term in '*It is necessary ...*', which appears in the characteristics of 'objectivity as reasoned', is perhaps one or more of these: a reasoned attribution of status, a reasoned removal, a reasoned transition and a reasoned choice. There is a close link between reason and the necessity of objectivity. In terms of noting a possible counter-critique, it would seem that an opponent could establish relatively simply that 'reasoned' functions as a silent legitimisation of choices, as though reason can stand outside the process - as an asocial manifestation or God's-eye view - a sort of positivist fire-fighter, dousing scepticism but never revealing its own illegitimacy. The problematic nature of this refusal to acknowledge the need for objectivity is one of the things we shall be addressing as the argument develops. For the moment it is sufficient to state that the objection reads the social construction of knowledge in a variety of incompatible ways: as unreason, as wholly incommensurable reasoning, and as a polar opposite to Reason-as-exclusively-Right (the Totalising God's-Eye View). There is no need for this polarisation. Moreover, the opponent's refusal seems to rely on a concept of the subject as no more or less than a homeostatic manifestation of one or all of these in her approach to claims. However, if one considers the subject as *reasoning* and as addressing *reasons*, where such attributes are constituted through an incomplete and active process of the non-reified, non-subjectified, subject within the world, then the objection, although not the complexity of the enacting of objectivity, begins to fade.

We make the argument in six sections that explore objectivity with reference to and illustration from critical realist thinking. In §1 we explore some aspects of ontology and epistemology and some initial implications for objectivity in terms of the relation to reference. In §2 we set out some of the issues of what it means to talk of objectivity of the subject and choice that arise from §1. In §3 we address the question 'Why choose objectivity as a value?' and develop the idea that objectivity is a lever of agency. In §4 we address some aspects of situated objectivity as articulated in feminist debate. In §5 we explore some of the issues of objectivity and values that arise from §4, and in §6 we conclude by addressing what it is one is choosing when one chooses objectivity, turning the argument back onto critical realism to highlight both in what sense objectivity

may be a lever of freedom and what it means to be objective about objectivity. The first two sections are set out here and the following four in Part II.

As a final preliminary comment and by way of caveat we would note the problem of points of departure. In developing a working definition one must start somewhere. The process is not simply arbitrary but potential points of entry are multiple, especially when considering a second-order concept. Each point of entry provides the possibility of presupposing some other aspect of the whole problem that has not yet been acknowledged, confronted or formally defended or articulated. This can often result in confusion and misinterpretation concerning reductionism, contradiction or omission.⁷ It should be noted therefore that the following argument is intended to be incremental and cumulative and in some ways elliptical.

1. *Objectivity as 'Necessary': from the Mutual Significance of Ontology and Epistemology to the Significance of 'Because' for 'Aboutness'*

The justification of the 'necessity' of objectivity for realism begins from the deep-lying discursive legacy of the term 'knowledge'. Arising in the Greek classical tradition, it is most clearly articulated in *Theaetetus*, where Plato defines knowledge as true justified belief.⁸ Although this formulation has been subject to various assaults in analytical philosophy, its discursive legacy remains the understanding that there is a difference in status between knowledge and belief, based only on their derivation.⁹ For a claim to have the status of knowledge it must have recognised justifications that constitute reasons for elevating what one 'believes to be so' into 'what one knows'.

This of course is not all there is to the problem of knowledge. I may recognise that there are justifications for certain statements, theories and so on, and yet acknowledge that I do not have the capacity, time, inclination, training or background fully to comprehend them. That certain others do so may be a reason why they are elevated on a social rather than a personal level to the status of knowledge (that I then believe to be so but do not in a strict sense

⁷ If translated into counter-critique the unavoidable problem of complexity is effectively converted into an entirely avoidable and falsely premised form of refutation whose tacit assumption is that there *can be* a single starting-point that does not require some aspects of the problem to be assumed or put on hold for the moment. This begs the practical question of what that might be in any particular instance and begs the further conceptual question of whether the claim is a form of tacit foundationalism.

⁸ Plato, 'Theaetetus', in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. J. Cooper (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1997).

⁹ See R. Chisholm, *The Foundations of Knowing* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

'know'). A great deal of science is of this kind today and perhaps a great deal of religion has been of this kind in the past (different though their articles of faith may be for the layperson). As many have noted, power, authority and sociality can also be part of the ascription of the status of knowledge.

However, it is on the basis of the continued sense of a difference between knowledge and belief that the 'necessity' of objectivity arises in realism. The status of knowledge has significance because it is always in principle, from a realist perspective, given on the basis of the claim that knowing is an active process of investigation committed to greater understanding and explanation where either or both makes sense because it is possible that we do not currently understand or have not fully explained. What we believe to be so may not be so or may be only partially so or may be so for reasons other than we believe to be so. The very problem of knowledge would not arise if this were not so. And it is from this very source that both the importance of the definition of knowledge for realist proponents and the rejection of it for some critics arise.

This raises interesting issues concerning the relation of ontology and epistemology and the basis of 'aboutness' that we can start to address in terms of the problem of 'truth'. William Alston, in his realist exploration of truth-propositions (a statement is true if and only if - iff - what the statement is about is as the statement says it is), is clear that any argument for epistemology must presuppose a commitment to truth but that no statement is a guarantor of its veracity because there is a difference between a claim to knowledge, the construction of its justifications and the commitment that its veracity rests on its truth.¹⁰ This difference hinges on the facticity of the world that is in some sense indifferent to our accounts, which in turn creates the basis of fallibilism in knowledge because of the gap between knowledge and the rest of reality. This fallibilism was so also for Plato, despite the idealist nature of works such as *Phaedo*. It was why he took such care in exploring the nuances of what knowledge may be: knowledge has a tenuous status because justification is contingent and the truth of the argument is conditional on a tenuous and contingent process. That knowledge is fallible tells us something about its status and a proper attitude towards it. For Plato: 'Companions will find you gentler and less tiresome; you will be modest and not think to know what you don't know. This is all my art can achieve, nothing more.'¹¹ Critical realists tend to make the argument on the basis that a knowledge claim and the rest of reality are not the same even where that which is under investigation is itself concept-based, that is, ontology cannot be reduced to epistemology, nor can theories of either be conflated with reality.

¹⁰ W Alston, *A Realist Conception of Truth*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

¹¹ Plato, 'Theaetetus', 234.

However, the issue arising from modern philosophy in terms of truth is narrower and yet broadly suggestive in terms of how we think about the relation of epistemology and ontology and thus what objectivity might mean in terms of investigative (here, truth-directed) potential. The key debate is in terms of correspondence and deflationary theories of truth. For correspondence theorists such as Alston, knowledge is based on true justified belief, where true is understood as a normative commitment that genuine knowledge is so on the basis of facts about the world, that is, *P* is true iff it corresponds to how the world is. Since how the world is can only be approached through knowledge claims that cannot be conflated with the world, a disjuncture arises that entails that knowledge claims be truth-directed in order to be meaningful but at the same time are to be understood to be only conditionally assertible as true; that is, truth itself as actualised correspondence remains perpetually deferred (thus truth in general as a concept operates as a norm only). Deflationary theory, in its various guises, as articulated by such major figures as W. V. Quine and A. J. Ayer, takes issue with a range of aspects of correspondence.¹² Ayer states:

It is commonly supposed that the business of the philosopher who concerns himself with 'truth' is to answer the question 'What is truth?' and that it is only an answer to this question that can fairly be said to constitute a 'theory of truth'. But when we come to consider what this famous question actually entails, we find that it is not a question which gives rise to any genuine problem; and consequently that no theory can be required to deal with it.¹³

The core argument begins by refuting the notion that truth is a property in quite a specific sense. Consider the following statement: 'It is true that Jamie is angry'. For the deflationist this statement is equivalent to 'Jamie is angry'.

¹² See W. V. O. Quine, *Philosophy of Logic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); A. J. Ayer *Language, Truth and Logic* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, [1946] 1983). Relatedly, the dominant force in ordinary-language philosophy, J. L. Austin, maintained that the problem of reference was in a certain sense a problem created by philosophical method because there was a tendency to think of language in terms of the single meaning of words as though words were completed existential things rather than complex uses. In philosophy he associates this with the 'fallacy of asking about "Nothing-in-particular"', by which he means the special language usage by philosophers in asking particular questions such as 'What is reality?', 'What is a word?' or 'What is a concept?' That language use was predicated on the decontextualisation of the terms as though a definitive single meaning of them was possible *without* reference. It was in this sense that he was sceptical about philosophical uses of terms such as *a priori* and *universal*, not because he necessarily denied the existence of things that were so, but rather because he doubted the validity of ways in which philosophy argued about them (in a sense he splits the concerns of Ayer and Quine on truth and shares an existential agnosticism with Quine, albeit one whose work on speech acts went on to extend the range of philosophical enquiry as Quine did in logic). J. L. Austin, *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 56–62.

¹³ Ayer, *Language, Truth*, 117.

For the deflationist 'it is true that' has added no additional sense or content to the statement as long as one takes the position that Jamie *is* angry, that is, that the statement is descriptively accurate (and semantically coherent). Note that what the deflationist initially objects to is not the iff aspect of correspondence but rather the generalisable claim that truth is a property that philosophy can say something about in addition to the specific instance of any given statement that happens to be descriptively accurate and/or semantically coherent. The consequence, however, is to assert that talk of truth can simply be eliminated from each statement and can be set aside as a further subject of philosophical enquiry. Deflationists still hold that we have a concept of truth but that it is neither active within each specific statement (and thus not relevant to making or analysing the statement) nor a common *substantive* property of all instances of which we take there to be descriptive accuracy captured in the statement. For example, 'It is true that Jamie is angry' and, say, 'It is true that grass is green' do not share a common basis for their iff. It is in this quite plausible sense that for the deflationist true is not a property; rather, it is a convenient label that can just as conveniently be set aside once acknowledged. The deflationist intends to make a specific point about the nature of philosophical enquiry and the basis of philosophical method rather than simply to refute in some primitive sense that there is a basic reality to which enquiry and knowledge are directed. To all intents and purposes deflationary accounts seem to allow for truth as a (silent) normative commitment.

However, the nature of the silence has consequences *because* it formulates a vision of philosophical enquiry and a basis for method that affects how epistemology and ontology are then pursued. The key problem with a deflationary position is that it reduces analysis to statements that presume the descriptive accuracy of the statements but elides the basis of what it is that makes them accurate. In a deflationary account 'It is true that Jamie is angry' is equivalent to 'Jamie is angry', and the latter statement is sufficient and self-contained.¹⁴ However, the basis of a correspondence account is more than iff it is the case that the statement corresponds to the facts and that an active feature of veracity is therefore not self-contained or reducible to the statement. It is at this point that the gap between deflation and correspondence opens up and the strict deflationary position begins to unravel because it cannot incorporate explanation and remain self-contained within its own definition of a statement form. From a deflationary position one finds oneself with statements that are either simply false or merely trivial. For example, 'It is true that Jamie is angry' is, given the self-contained nature of the statement (necessary for true to be

¹⁴ See M. Dummet *Truth and Other Enigmas* (London: Duckworth, 1998).

eliminated from it), the same as 'Jamie is angry because Jamie is angry (it is true that Jamie is angry because it is true that Jamie is angry)'.

Metaphysical scepticism thus becomes a methodological impediment to providing a philosophical basis for adequate empirical enquiry because it puts aside ontological considerations and tends to create problems for epistemology in terms of its consistency with ontology precisely because it ceases to be interested in the ontological ramifications of method. This is deeply ironic when one considers that the intent of philosophers such as Ayer and Quine was precisely to reduce the philosophical obstructions to science.

The debate, therefore, and the positions within it are instructive. The significant point that a critical realist would take from the deflationary position is that it fails to locate the epistemological argument in terms of its ontological implications. The very nature of fallibility in the production of knowledge claims entails the ontic characteristic of externalism, which then raises the issue of how one consistently addresses a reality that allows for fallible knowledge. This then points us in the direction of objectivity because one nuance of the link between epistemology and ontology is that of reference. Objectivity is an issue because knowledge is about something other than itself; aboutness entails reference and reference demands consistency between how we understand epistemology, ontology and the basis of enquiry into an explicable world where 'because' (rather than simply self-contained descriptive coherence) is a key component in knowledge.

This is a highly generalised first statement of the basis of reference. But it is an extremely important one in addressing how we understand objectivity. One of the great failings of philosophy has been that compartmentalisation of its subject-matters in the name of specialisation designed to hone, narrow and advance its elements has created lacunae and contradiction precisely because few philosophers are now professionally disposed to explore a totalised reality. This is important because the corollary of a totalised reality must be a systematic response in philosophy, at least in the sense that the philosopher must be aware of the possibility of contradictions between methods, ideas of knowledge and arguments for ontology. Philosophy may have taken a progressive step in reducing the stridency of its claims and acknowledging the need to be intersubjective, engaged and (critically) reliant on conformity with empirical research and the findings of science and social science. But this is not the same as a simple rejection of system-building because this can be done in accordance with these things. To fail to think systematically, in a broad sense, is to allow for the dissolution of a broader understanding that is itself corrosive of knowledge because it removes the possibility of a significant test of that knowledge: its critical coherence in terms of a range of questions. This is critical realism's great strength and one that contextualises objectivity as, initially, a response to the problem of reference.

If we consider the problem of reference as one embedded within problems of ontology and epistemology, the problem itself becomes one of the complexity of reference. This complexity arises because reality creates conditions for knowledge formation where knowledge is not simply the definitive truth of a definite identity. To state that there is an 'aboutness' to reality and that there is something to refer to is not thereby to state that reference is to some fixed and unchanging universal but rather that there are ways in which things change and operate. That is surely one reason why there is a complexity to reference: reality has the ontic characteristic of complexity; 'reference to' is about the mutable, multiply realisable and open.¹⁵ The other reason is that 'reference to' is an act that presupposes subjects (conscious, self-aware, thinking, reflexive beings).¹⁶ Those subjects are themselves complex, differing, because of the characteristics of their being, in how reality is to be engaged with, classified, explicated and/or understood. There is thus an interface (Figure 1) of two kinds of complexity - the human and the rest of reality (the human arising out of that reality) - that stands in the shadow of the problem of epistemology and ontology. It is important to note that the great debates that have engaged social theorists and philosophers are precisely about this interface. It is a simple and unproductive reduction to classify thinkers as denying a real world. The debate between idealism and materialism and between radical social constructivism and forms of structure-agency are about what it means to talk about the real and what that talk suggests concerning human potential to know and make and do. All are thinking about reference and the real in some way, and when such terms are denied it is as part of the rhetoric of denying the other side the semantic high ground in a way that creates linguistic confusion. At its best, critical realism avoids this reduction and focuses on the implicit ontological ramifications of systematic incoherence in the very forms of argument (an immanent critique).¹⁷

It is because complexity at this interface is a key problem-field that objectivity becomes a relevant concept. It is not because of any specific agenda to

¹⁵ This gives the general realist notion that reality is in a certain sense 'indifferent to' us a dual inflection: (i) that of time - the past is past and retrospective causation through knowledge claims seems untenable; (ii) that of 'truth' - a knowledge claim can be causal through its operations, applications and our changed understandings but still not identical to that concerning which claims are made. The degree to which it is 'true of' hinges on that to which knowledge claims are directed. The effects of the knowledge claim thereafter are an analytically distinct matter.

¹⁶ For the distinctions see P. Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

¹⁷ See J. Morgan, 'The nature of a transcendental argument', *Journal of Critical Realism* 3(2) (2004), 305-340.

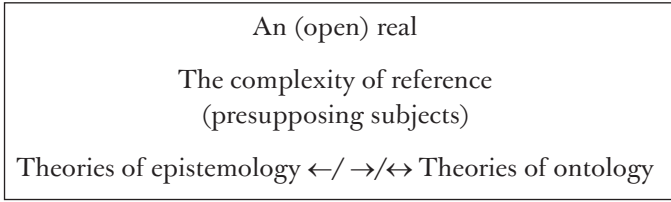


Figure 1. Interface between two kinds of complexity

treat subjects as objects: what objects are and how they are to be treated is itself a further element at issue precisely in terms of the interface (are they relatively enduring non-thinking entities, forces, varieties of structure and so on?). Objectivity arises as a relevant concept to be defined and explored because there is an interface: there is something to refer to. However, the nature of how objectivity is defined and understood thereafter takes shape in terms of how we understand whether reference *to* is possible and what this means. Quine, for example, argued that the traditional synthetic-analytic dichotomy of forms of propositions or statements could be blurred. A proponent of pragmatic empiricism, he is often read in the social sciences as an authority on incommensurability and the dissolution of the possibility of knowledge as classically defined (what has become known as the Quine-Duhem thesis). But he was not making the radical ontological point that there is nothing to refer to:

It is obvious that truth in general depends on both language and extra-linguistic fact. The statement 'Brutus killed Caesar' would be false if the world had been different in certain ways, but it would also be false if the word 'killed' happened rather to have the sense 'begat'.¹⁸

Rather, he was arguing that identity object-languages of the kind developed in logical empiricism did not capture the complexity of the problem of referring and thus added nothing to the problem of knowledge. This is thereafter a problem of how reference is possible that can be formulated in terms of various aspects of philosophy, including the philosophy of language.¹⁹

The point, however, is that the problem of objectivity arises precisely as a subset of what it means to talk about the real (however termed by proponents of different positions) and what that talk suggests concerning human potential to know and make and do. Accepting or refusing objectivity is to accept or

¹⁸ W. V. O. Quine, 'Two dogmas of empiricism', in *From a Logical Point of View* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953), 36.

¹⁹ For an excellent account of the issues see W. Alston, *Philosophy of Language* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1964). Note that in philosophy of language reference tends to be used in a more precise way differentiated from meaning via referent, expression and so on; thus one can refer to Venus as the morning or evening star and in terms of quite different forms of meaning through statement and context.

refuse (explicitly or implicitly) a panoply of claims about the interface between ontology and epistemology. It is these that form the framework within which we move from what it means to say that there is something to refer to, to the subsequent matter of in what sense reference is possible, and it is how we understand the nature of this possibility that gives rise to how we return to think about the engagement of knowledge – its development, the ascription of and withdrawal of its status – and what objectivity can mean.

2. *Objectivity as a Subject-Chosen Value*

Having established an initial context for thinking about the issue of objectivity, the next issue we want to develop here is that of the subject. If the subject is conscious, self-aware, thinking and reflexive then she is capable of choice, although the conditions of that choice may not be free. As John Searle notes, in the context of the problem of mind, if these are not characteristics of the subject then the problem of engagement (of consciousness itself) would not arise.²⁰

Objectivity must first be a value before it is anything else. To some degree it must be chosen because subjects choose. This phrasing, of course, produces a philosophical quandary because it may be that I have no choice in whether to be aware of some of the consequences of some kinds of non-objectivity in the sense of the existence and ramifications of some ‘objects’ (here, generics of an external environment). A typical (if often misguided) counter to solipsism is that self-aware implies a kind of common-sense externalistic objectivity of consequences. I am *really* aware of the consequences of stepping in front of a moving car. I do not choose this awareness: in a certain sense the very structure of awareness makes me aware of a world of mind-independent objects in a certain way. I have to refer *to* them, at the very least in a subconscious way, before choice is possible. ‘A car is coming, what shall I do?’ Plausible though this point is, it is not the interesting aspect of arguments about objectivity. The realist claim begins from *I can know (I may not know)* and argues that *I can know* is based on the possibility of reference *to*. In terms of how the realist argument is structured, it is the broader aspects of *know* and reference *to* that are important in the way that realism works back to the significance of the awareness of issues raised by statements such as ‘A car is coming, what shall I do?’ This is because the critical pressure-points on realism flow from arguments about what we can know, what knowing implies and what being a subject entails (such as further relations to and claims that there is a mind-independent reality with certain retroducible characteristics).

²⁰ J. Searle, *Mind, Language and Society* (London: Phoenix, 2000).

Realism may be an argument constructed in ontology but realists get there from arguments about the significance of knowledge (including its limitations and potentials) and the subject. Ontology is still an argument, it is not reality. Similarly, critics reject ontology in the same way. The irony, of course, is that arguments about realism are conducted and considered in (as a realist would see it) the most constructed and ephemeral of domains of reality, that of competing ideas. It is ironic because it is stylised characteristics of this particular domain that then are projected across all aspects of reality in discursive conflicts about what reality is by those who reject realism.

So, in a broader sense, the awareness issue, while not irrelevant, is not the key issue because, even if I cannot choose to be unaware, I can choose how to interpret and, although this is a slightly different process, choose what to decide as an action and choose what to hold as a general position. It might seem silly to choose to ignore the car and that is precisely why some realist interlocutors choose that example. But it is not silly in quite the same way for a theorist-researcher to make meta-choices: to choose to reject either realism or objectivity and style their position in some other way, subjectivity perhaps. This of course raises the issue of what that person thinks they are rejecting and why this forms an argument for the alternative.

However, before we can make sense of this latter point we need to address what objectivity so far implies. What we have said is that *objectivity begins with subjects* and that this implies that it is a value-commitment. It begins here because objectivity is an attitude of mind of self-conscious subjects who in a broad sense choose. Realists choose, on the basis of available argument, to be committed to the possibility of knowledge where there is something to refer to, devolving to claims about subjects and objects.

To a large degree the notion that objectivity is a value-commitment is simply truistic, like saying that language conveys meanings through structured patterns of words. It may be a convenient point of departure, but it does not tell one a great deal more about objectivity or its necessity because it is rather a hollow phrase. It is, of course, an important move in terms of addressing falsely posed ideas of objectivity based particularly in positivism. For this reason Williams spends some considerable effort setting out that objectivity is a value in various ways:

If value freedom is impossible and a value continuum exists then objectivity must be reconsidered. It cannot remain as a means to be free of, or neutral about values. If it is possible then it too must be a value, but what kind of value is it? Values are nested and relate to each other horizontally and vertically. The horizontal is that of the logical relationship of one value to another within a discipline or practice ... The vertical is the relationship of values in one social practice, say science, to 'higher' level values, such as policy or

moral, philosophical values ... Objectivity is likewise 'nested'[, it is not] an homogeneous value and its context will determine its relationship to other values (and therefore what it is in context).²¹

The background to Williams's position is that correct and incorrect must still make some kind of sense and that an investigative science (rather than oppressive scientism) of societies is possible and desirable.²² But in what sense possible and in what sense desirable relate to in what sense reality is investigable, that is, what is the significance of objectivity in terms of knowledge formation and critique (as a means in Williams's terms to a genuine science)? Without such a development two questions remain unanswered: what is one choosing and why choose objectivity as a value?

As a final point in Part I, if one chooses objectivity as a value one is, as Williams's position indicates, committing to a sense of discrimination among arguments based on investigative potential. As a value-entailing commitment, objectivity is therefore revealed as a second-order construct: a bridge within the interface we have articulated. By this we mean that its plausibility and substance ought to flow from the persuasiveness of first-order claims about seeking to *know* and referring *to*. It is how these are constructed that lends credibility to why objectivity might be a value-commitment we choose and of course why it is 'necessary' that we do so. This in turn ought to imply something about the nature of objectivity as a lever of agency because it is a potential characteristic/practice and commitment of subjects. It is issues arising from this in how we understand objectivity that we shall move on to in Part II.

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²¹ Williams, 'Situated', 108.

²² *Ibid.*, 99, 115-17.

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