To my son Thomas!

Objectivity

Recovering Determinate Reality in Philosophy, Science, and Everyday Life

TIBOR R. MACHAN

Chapman University and Hoover Institution

ASHGATE

To my son Thomas!

Objectivity

Recovering Determinate Reality in Philosophy, Science, and Everyday Life

TIBOR R. MACHAN

Chapman University and Hoover Institution

ASHGATE

Published by
Ashgate Publishing Limited
Gower House
Croft Road
Aldershot
Hants GU11 3HR
England

Ashgate Publishing Company
Suite 420
101 Cherry Street
Burlington, VT 05401-4405
USA

Ashgate website: http://www.ashgate.com

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Machan, Tibor R.
Objectivity : recovering determinate reality in philosophy, science, and everyday life
1.Objectivity
I.Title
121.4

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Machan, Tibor R.
Objectivity : recovering determinate reality in philosophy, science, and everyday life / Tibor R. Machan.
p. cm.
ISBN 0-7546-4042-6 (alk. paper)
1. Objectivity. 2. Science–Philosophy. I. Title.

BD220.M33 2003
121'.4–dc22

2003063709

ISBN 0 7546 4042 6

Typeset by IML Typographers, Birkenhead, Merseyside, and
printed in Great Britain by TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall.

Contents

Acknowledgments *vi*
Preface *vii*

Introduction: Why Will Nothing But Objective Truth Do? 1

PART I Philosophy

1 Reflections on Richard Rorty 15
2 C. S. Peirce and Absolute Truth 31

PART II Science

3 Thomas Kuhn and the Objectivity of Science 41
4 Kuhn and the Moral Dimension of Objectivity 57

PART III Everyday Life

5 The Nature of Objective Moral Claims 71
6 Journalistic Objectivity, True and False 85
7 Richard Posner's Pragmatic Jurisprudence 95
8 Terrorism and Objective Moral Principles 105

Epilogue 113

Bibliography *115*
Index *119*

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank the publisher of *Theory and Decision* (1974) for permission to use material from my paper 'Kuhn's Impossibility Proof and the Moral Element in Scientific Explanations'; Dordrecht Publishers for permission to use material from my essay 'On the Possibility of Objectivity and Moral Determinants in Scientific Change,' from Karen D. Knorr et al. (eds), *Determinants and Controls of Scientific Development* (1976); the publisher of *Transactions of the C. S. Peirce Society* (1980) for permission to use materials from my paper 'C. S. Peirce and Absolute Truth'; the publisher of *Metaphilosophy* (1993) for permission to use material from my paper 'Some Reflections on Richard Rorty's Philosophy'; the publisher of *Philosophia* (1997) for permission to use material from my paper 'Why it Appears that Objective Ethical Claims are Subjective'; the publisher of *The American Journal of Jurisprudence* (1995) for permission to use material from my paper 'Posner's Rortyite (Pragmatic) Jurisprudence,' and the publisher of *International Journal of World Peace* (1987) for permission to use material from my paper 'Terrorism and Objective Moral Principles.' All the materials taken from these works have been thoroughly reworked.

My thanks go out to Gregory R. Johnson and Jason Raibley, as well as an anonymous reader for considerable editorial help with this book. I also want to thank John Raisian of the Hoover Institution, Jim Doti of Chapman University and Dave Threshie of Freedom Communications, Inc., for their support during my work on this project.

Preface

The question of objectivity is whether human beings are capable of knowing reality just as it is. Or is there some necessary distortion in our grasp of the nature of things, a distortion imposed by the very nature of our cognitive mechanism, or by such factors as language, culture, personal ambitions, psychological disorders, and class interests? Could it be that we do not see the world at all, since we see from a particular point of view? A somewhat less drastic concern is whether we can ever satisfactorily establish that our understanding of reality is accurate, or must that always remain in doubt?

The purpose of this book is to defend objectivity in philosophy, science, and everyday life from some of its many critics. Why does objectivity stand in need of a defense? Because objectivity is a difficult ideal to serve, especially in an era of multiculturalism, deconstructionism, feminism, and diversity. People from different cultures report having radically different experiences, indeed radically different worlds. They usually claim that their experiences are as true as anyone else's. Deconstructionists tell us that we know nothing determinate beyond language, that is, that we don't know what we are talking about. Feminists often maintain that women see the world in significantly different ways from men. The idea of diversity gains much of its plausibility from the idea that people from diverse backgrounds all have their own valid ways of seeing the world. The most prominent movements in Anglo-American and Continental philosophy are against objectivity. Such figures as Richard Rorty and Jacques Derrida unambiguously deny that human beings are capable of knowing the world as it is.

Some people don't care about such philosophical questions, and that is surely their right. But they ought to care. Our nature as rational animals is perfected by caring about such things. This is why I care about them, and why I hope to convince at least a few others of the possibility of objectivity.

There is much at stake here. It matters for our confidence in how we think and live. I am not talking about reckless arrogance that is the mark of unthinking dogmatism, but of ordinary confidence that one's mind can know reality, that it is competent to face the challenges of life, that even if it makes mistakes, it is capable of accepting this and correcting them.

If we lack such confidence, then we can become vulnerable to charlatanism, quackery, and con games. Dishonest people take advantage of any lack of self-confidence, usually by claiming to possess untestable powers in various areas such as politics, psychology, religion, and even science. If we cannot know how things really are, we cannot confidently distinguish

between the quacks and *bona fide* authorities (who have actually learned a thing or two about the world as it really is).

Furthermore, the quality and length of our lives depend on knowing what there is. If we can't know the world, then how can we expect to live in it? If there is no objective reality to serve as a standard, how are we to adjudicate the clash of opinions without resorting to force and fraud? The melancholy march of human history teaches this lesson: those who know well, live well. Those who know badly, live badly. The key to knowing and living well is objectivity.

Introduction

Why Will Nothing But Objective Truth Do?

> Hardly anyone will deny that it requires disciplines of mind and character to 'see things as they are' as opposed to how they appear to be and, especially in the case of psychological phenomena, how for many and subtle reasons we fantasize them to be. Nor are many people likely to deny that we must often distance ourselves from our subject so that our fears, fantasies and affections do not interfere with our sense of what is objectively the case.
>
> Raimond Gaita, *A Common Humanity: Thinking about Love and Truth and Justice* (Routledge, 1998), p. 248

> Truth, says the cultural relativist, is culture-bound. But if it were, then he, within his own culture, ought to see his own culture-bound truth as absolute. He cannot proclaim cultural relativism without rising above it, and he cannot rise above it without giving it up.
>
> Willard Van Orman Quine, 'On empirically equivalent systems of the world,' *Erkenntnis*, 9 (1975): 327–8

The Imperative to be Objective

It is a vital task of philosophy to defend objectivity: to show that human beings are able to know the world as it is and that suggestions to the contrary are wrong. If philosophers succeed in defending objectivity, not only will they show that we can know the world, but also that we know this fact as well. We will know that we are able to know.

This is not meant to suggest that all philosophers set out to show these things. Indeed, Gaita seems a bit too optimistic in his assessment of what most folks will not deny. Clearly many have the opposite intention. But these skeptics do not prove that philosophy aims at anything other than truth, any more than the existence of quacks and charlatans proves that the aim of medicine is anything other than enhancing our health.

Not all individuals have the chance to reflect on whether their minds are suited to know reality. We all know this, of course, but when we are challenged to prove it, most of us are unprepared to answer. We have what Socrates called opinions on these matters but we lack knowledge, because we

are too busy living in the real world to worry about whether we know it or not. It is tacitly known or assumed, that's all.

Philosophy arises when at least some of us ask and try to answer such questions. Once philosophy emerges, all sorts of positions on objectivity are generated, aired, and considered. Most skeptical positions can, however, be easily eliminated because of self-referential problems. It is patently contradictory to claim that one knows that no knowledge is possible. If nothing can be known, then how does someone who advances that position know it to be so? Consider a prominent contemporary philosopher's opinion on these matters. Simon Blackburn, writing on Richard Rorty, speaks for many when he says,

> we have become uncomfortably aware of a large distance between truths at which we aim, whether in science or history or law or economics, or any field of interpretive endeavor, and the forces that shape our minds ... Hence there is no such thing as the given, or the unvarnished truth. There are only what the Harvard philosopher Nelson Goodman called 'versions,' and the versions current at any place or time are the results of these hidden forces.[1]

The self-assurance with which such utterances are offered, in the face of the plain fact that their own claims cannot have any force if they are actually justified, is scandalous. Why should anyone actually take Blackburn to heart, given the meaning of what he tells us, namely, that everything is just a version of the truth, making his no better, no more deserving of serious regard, than any other version, including versions he would find utterly unworthy of serious regard?

In any case, how do we proceed with the task of ascertaining that objectivity can be attained by us? The discipline of philosophy is not carried out by means of controlled experimentation. People's lives, including how they are able to deal with reality, cannot be held still, under control, for experimental purposes. Any such attempt would distort any possible findings, since human beings will change their behavior in reaction to the attempt to control them. So philosophy is pursued by means of conversations and thought experiments, what is sometimes called dialectic.

At times one hears complaints that philosophy makes no progress, but this is misconceived, for it models philosophy on the special sciences and technology. Yet philosophy isn't comparable. One does not need to reinvent the wheel to use it. But in a sense one does have to reinvent philosophy. If one simply accepts philosophical principles ready made, then one cannot really be said to know them. To know a philosophical principle, one has to know the reasons for it, and to know the reasons, one has to go through the arguments oneself. Thus, in effect, each person has to reinvent philosophy for himself. Members of every generation must revisit the perennial questions of philosophy, however successful or unsuccessful the previous visits may have been. When it comes to philosophy, we are all adolescents: we will not just accept what adults tell us on authority, however true it may be.

The only progress that exists in philosophy is marginal. Issues and concepts can be more sharply defined. Novel distinctions can be introduced. Spurious distinctions can be eliminated. But no topic can be just laid aside as completely settled and immune to criticism. Precursors exist to virtually every ongoing, contemporary debate. Take the question of Artificial Intelligence, whether machines might be able to think. This is not a new concern at all. In nearly every age some suggest as much, others holding forth against the idea.

In philosophy the questions are all very basic, so much so that it is unimaginable that other fields of knowledge can proceed without some answer to them. What is truth versus falsehood? Opinion versus knowledge? Subjectivity versus objectivity? Whatever the difficulties may be in answering these questions, philosophy cannot settle for anything less than the truth.

This brief introduction should set the stage for exploring all the different forms of failed objectivity and complacent non-objectivity I will be discussing in the chapters that follow. Let me simply mention some of the most important branches of philosophy and their leading questions. I will also lay my cards on the table, stating the views that I regard as true and indicating where defenses of these views can be found. I hope thus to enable the reader to get a fairly clear, if incomplete grasp of the more positive ideas that lie behind my thinking as I criticize views which attack objectivity.

1. Metaphysics

'Metaphysics' literally means 'above' or 'beyond' physics, and 'physics' refers here to the study of nature as a whole, not merely to physics in the modern sense. The metaphysical, then, can easily be defined as the 'supernatural,' which explains why metaphysics so often strays into mysticism. But there is nothing necessarily mystical about metaphysics. Metaphysics can go 'beyond' physics – beyond the natural sciences – simply in investigating aspects of reality which cut across all the different domains investigated by the natural sciences and which cannot, therefore, be adequately grasped by the methods of one science or another.

To take a page from Aristotle: biology studies being insofar as it is alive; mathematics studies being insofar as it is quantifiable; modern physics studies being insofar as it is matter in motion. But metaphysics studies being in an unqualified sense, not being-as-this or being-as-that, but being-as-being. Metaphysics deals with the question: What is it to be as such? The study of being-as-being is also called *ontology*. Ontology deals with such questions as the metaphysical foundations of logic, the nature of causality, and whether there is one basic type of being (monism) or two (dualism) or more (pluralism).

Metaphysics has been divided into 'general' and 'special' metaphysics. General metaphysics is ontology. It is general in dealing with being as such.

Special metaphysics deals with specific kinds of being which are not adequately understood by the methods of the natural sciences. There are three traditional branches of special metaphysics.

Rational theology deals with the question of the existence and nature of God. Are there rational grounds for belief in a god? If there is a god, then what kind of knowledge can we have of him?

Rational cosmology deals with the nature of the universe as a whole. Does the universe exist in time, with a beginning and an end? Or does the universe exist outside of time, eternally? If the universe does exist in time, was it created by a god? Is order a product of design, is it basic and inexplicable, or does it evolve without design out of chaos? Other cosmological questions include the nature of space and time.

Rational psychology deals with the nature of the soul. This includes three basic questions. First, what is the relationship of the soul and the body? Are they one substance or two? Second, can the soul exist independent of the body? Can it exist before or after it comes into relationship with the body? If souls can exist independent of bodies, do they actually? Do they reincarnate? Is the soul immortal? Third, is the will free? Are all human actions determined by external causes, such that in any given choice, we could not have done otherwise? Or do human beings determine their own actions, such that in any given choice, they could have done otherwise?

In my view, ontology consists of two principles: the principle of identity and the principle of causality.[2]

The principle of identity is simply this: whatever is, is what it is. Its corollary, the principle of non-contradiction, is that no thing can have contradictory properties at the same time and in the same respect. A rose is a rose, and a living rose cannot be a dead rose at the same time and in the same respect. A living rose can die, but lives at one time and dies at another. A rose can have both living and dead leaves, but it is living and dead in different respects. The principle of identity is true of all beings, past, present, and future, actual and possible. Whatever they are, we can know in advance that they are what they are and cannot display contradictory properties at the same time and in the same respect. The principle of identity is not, moreover, merely a fact of reality; it is the foundational principle of logic. To recognize the principle of identity – that all things are what they are – is essential to objectivity.

The principle of causality is simply this: the causal properties of all beings are part of their identities. What a thing does is part of what it is. What a thing can do is part of what it is. How a thing reacts to other things is part of what it is. Because there appears to be a plurality of different kinds of beings in the universe, there is a corresponding plurality of different kinds of causality.

As for questions about the 'stuff' of the universe, I see no way of answering such questions by philosophical methods. All that philosophy can say is this: whatever the universe is, it is what it is. However many kinds of being it contains, it contains no more and no less. This is not, however, very

informative. All specific information about how many kinds of beings there are and their particular natures must be determined by special investigation. The same is true for cosmological questions about space, time, and the cosmos. It is even true of questions about the separability of the soul and the existence of God. Although there are no sound arguments for these claims, we cannot rule out the possibility that experiential evidence might emerge.

The only other metaphysical question that interests me as a philosopher is free will.[3] To say that one's will is free does not deny the universality of causality. It denies only the universality of a mechanistic model of causality originating with some of the ancient Greek atomists (although some others, such as Epicurus – as reported in Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* – made room for a variety of free will). But since there are as many different types of causal powers as there are different kinds of beings, there is nothing contradictory about asserting that one of man's causal powers is his capacity to act freely, to determine his own actions in such a way that no matter what he may choose, he could always have chosen otherwise.

Freedom of the will is closely connected with objectivity. Objectivity is a cognitive achievement. It is something that we must choose to pursue. If man is not free to pursue objectivity, then he has no control over whether the contents of his mind correspond to reality or not. Whatever he thinks, he could not have thought otherwise, and he cannot do better. Without freedom, we cannot claim that any idea is objectively true, including determinism. If the determinist is right, then he cannot claim to know it, that is, he cannot claim to have arrived at his belief by choosing to adopt truth over falsehood. He can only claim that he 'cannot help' but be a determinist, and he is helpless in the face of someone who claims that he cannot help but believe in free will.

2. Epistemology

'Epistemology' means the theory (logos) of knowledge (episteme). Epistemology is the second major branch of philosophy. Some think it is the first branch, but that cannot be, for before there is knowledge, there must be something that is known.

Epistemology is a vast field, which can be divided up in different ways. There are, for instance, epistemological questions associated with different levels of consciousness: perception, conception, and inference.

There are three basic theories of perception. *Realism* holds that we perceive a reality that exists independent of, but knowable by, consciousness. *Representationalism* holds that we perceive inner images which may or may not accurately depict objective reality. *Idealism* holds that 'to be is to be perceived,' that reality consists of mental states, that there is no ultimate distinction between the perceived world 'in here' and the real world 'out there.'

The main issue regarding concepts is the 'problem of universals.' Proper names like 'Spot' refer to particular beings. But to what do general terms like 'dog' refer? They obviously refer to kinds of things. But the question is: What is the metaphysical status of these kinds? *Realism* is the view that these kinds exist in the world, whether we recognize them or not. *Nominalism* is the view that there are no objective kinds, but that kinds are created by free acts of classification.

The same debate exists in logic as well, between *realists*, who hold that there are objective foundations for the laws of logic, and *nominalists*, who hold that logic is a matter of social convention.

A similar distinction also holds in the theory of truth. The *correspondence* theory of truth holds that a statement is true if it corresponds to the facts of reality. The correspondence theory of truth is associated with realism. Two anti-realist theories of truth are *coherentism*, which holds that a statement is true if it 'coheres' with other statements held by oneself or others, and *pragmatism*, which holds that a statement is true if it aids in man's quest to predict and control phenomena.

In all these debates, I side with the realists – realism broadly construed, since there are many positions held by individual realists which I would not care to defend. Realism is the only position consistent with the robust sense of objectivity I defend. Representationalism, idealism, nominalism, and anti-realist theories of truth cannot provide an adequate account of objectivity. They either fall into subjectivism or preserve the appearance of objectivity by redefining objectivity as intersubjectivity, that is, as social convention or collective subjectivism.

Other epistemological distinctions and debates include rationalism versus empiricism, certitude versus fallibility, and knowledge versus opinion.

Rationalism and *empiricism* concern the origins of knowledge. Does our knowledge derive ultimately from sense experience, as the empiricists claim? Or do we have access to another kind of knowledge (innate ideas, intellectual intuition) which allows us to bypass experience, as the rationalists hold? I think the empiricists are right that all knowledge requires some input from experience. But consider the principle of identity. We could not grasp this principle without some experience, but as soon as we grasp it, we see that it does not apply merely to the experiences we have had or will have, but to everything, whether we have experienced it or not.

Certitude and *fallibility* are enormously important concepts. A piece of knowledge is certain if it is immune to revision by further experience and we know that fact. By this definition, the principle of identity is certain, for we know that we will never encounter a square circle or any other contradiction in reality. A piece of knowledge is fallible if it can be overturned by experience. Even a piece of knowledge that cannot be overturned by experience can be treated as fallible if we have no way of knowing this fact. One of the main causes of skepticism is an unrealistic desire for certitude and an excessive fear of fallibility. If one demands knowledge to be certain, then

we will have very little knowledge and fall into skepticism. Only if we are willing to endure fallibility can we come up with a theory that does justice to real, human knowledge.

Knowledge versus *opinion* is an essential distinction for understanding the importance of objectivity. There is no such thing as false knowledge. If something is known it is as true as it could be; that is, the judgment or statement in question corresponds with all the available facts and contradicts none. There are, however, false opinions. People believe all sorts of things that do not correspond with the available facts. Opinions are infected with subjectivity. They are as much expressions of our characters and tastes and wishes as they are of reality. Knowledge, however, is objective. It is based upon reality alone. Both knowledge and opinion vary from time to time and place to place. But knowledge varies according to the availability of objective evidence, whereas opinions vary according to a host of subjective factors, individual and collective. In any given time and place, there are many opinions about a matter but only one truth. Knowledge, therefore, is better than opinion, because it is more objective.

3. Ethics

Moral philosophy, or ethics, deals with the question of what makes life worth living. It does not deal with what we actually do, but what we *ought* to do. There are two basic approaches to this question. *Realists* hold that there are objective goods. Moral realism is often called 'natural law' or 'natural right' theory. *Nominalists* hold that the good depends upon human fiat. In ethics too I side with the realists. The nominalists are correct about the importance of human choice. But freedom of choice is not a good because we choose it to be, as the nominalists would have it. Freedom is good by its very nature, whether we choose to acknowledge it or not.

In particular, I side with the Aristotelians.[4] Ethics is an objective science, based on the facts of human nature. Each human being, like all other living beings, has a natural end which it strives to actualize in this life. Those actions and traits of character which promote man's self-actualization are good. Those which interfere with self-actualization are bad. Moral philosophy, therefore, is like medicine, which pursues the actualization and healthy functioning of the body. Moral philosophy promotes the actualization and healthy functioning of the 'soul' – one's mind, character, personality. Chapter 5 will not discuss particular actions and character traits, but merely explore whether an objective moral philosophy is possible.

There is a strong connection between moral philosophy and free will. To act morally, human beings must be able to make choices from among alternatives. As Kant noted, '"Ought" implies "can".' To say that one ought to do something presupposes that it is humanly possible. To say that man ought to choose good over evil presupposes that such choice is humanly possible.

If ethics is an objective science, are its principles universally valid? Yes and no. Insofar as ethics deals with how human beings should act, some moral principles will be universal, applicable to us all. But not all moral principles are universal, because not every moral question is about human beings as such. Most moral questions deal with how *this* individual should act in this unique set of circumstances. But there can be objectively correct answers even here. So one cannot equate objectivity and universality. The fact that some moral principles are not universal does not imply that they lack objectivity.

4. Political Philosophy

There are two senses of political philosophy: philosophizing about politics and being political about philosophy. I wish to deal with the former sense. (Leo Strauss and his students deal with the latter.) Much if not all of human life is lived in communities. These communities can be ordered in radically different ways. So the issue of what order they *ought* to possess, what makes a good or just community, is quite meaningful and vital. The debate about the best political order does not take place merely in philosophy books, but in voting booths and on battlefields. Political philosophy is, quite literally, a deadly serious occupation.

Political philosophy depends on moral philosophy. We cannot know which community is good until we know what is good for the individual as such. We can't know how we should act in concert before we know how we should act as individuals.

In political philosophy too the great divide is between objectivists and subjectivists, those who think that there truly is a best political order and those who think that there are only opinions on this matter. The most common form of subjectivism is cultural relativism, the claim that politics is necessarily parochial, the expression of a particular people at a particular time and place, with nothing amounting to principles or truths that are universally applicable to human community life as such. And there is something very tempting about this view, since it seems duly humble about our capacity to know the truth. It also seems to preserve freedom and diversity. But does it? Are freedom and diversity better served by sanctioning oppressive and chauvinistic cultures, or by arguing that they are universal and objective values, cultures to the contrary notwithstanding?

I have devoted a number of books and articles to political philosophy.[5] I argue for a libertarian or classical liberal political system on the grounds of Aristotelian metaphysical, epistemological, and moral realism, broadly construed.

5. Aesthetics

Aesthetics has come to mean the branch of philosophy that asks what art is and what good art is. More broadly, aesthetics can also deal with the beauty of nature. Why is aesthetics important? Because beauty is one of those things which makes life worth living, thus a discipline that makes us more finely attuned to and richly aware of the beauties around us contributes to the value of life. Aesthetics is perhaps the most problematic area in which to suggest that universal and objective answers can be given. And, frankly, it is the area of philosophy to which I have given the least thought. But there is nothing *ipso facto* implausible about an objective approach to aesthetics, and, indeed, no great aesthetic theorist from Plato to Kant on down has ever defended the idea that beauty is *merely* in the eye of the beholder.

6. Why Do We Need Philosophy?

Some of the greatest philosophers claim that philosophy itself is necessary for leading a good life and that the unexamined life is not worth living. There is a good bit of truth is this claim. Without an integrated worldview, it is hard to know good from evil, true paths to happiness from false ones, and to pursue the better. Not that having such knowledge guarantees success but it is hard to imagine any sustained, conscious approach to happiness, to living successfully as a human being, that can do without objective knowledge. A few may just be lucky, but reliance on such luck is itself an impediment to success.

One need not take this to mean that everyone, in order to have a chance of living a good human life, must become a professional, let alone an academic, philosopher. What is needed, however, is an individual commitment to seek the truth about the most important things and live in its light. We need to know what is good for man as such in order to know what is good for us. Knowledge alone is not sufficient, of course. We also need to act. But true knowledge is necessary to act rightly.

But what does this have to do with objectivity, objective reality, objective truth? Why can't we do without objective truth? Why can't we live with subjective opinions? Because life is too hard, too short, and too precious. Nearly all of us are pursuing happiness or well-being, however we may define it. Yet most people are not happy. Why? One reason is that they lack the objective truth about what makes life worth living. Because they have all sorts of false opinions, and every day they suffer the consequences of acting on these opinions. Objectivity is what is needed to avoid falsehood and error. Nothing less than an objective answer to the questions of philosophy will do, particularly if one thinks that philosophy is a matter of life and death – if one holds, as I do, that a sound philosophy must enter into all successful projects, including the project of living life as the individual that one is.

Conclusion

Sadly much work in philosophy has been motivated by the desire to get it right for all time and all places – and, most problematically, without any possibility for further improvement in light of experience, so that we can rest on our answers, no more work being necessary. But these are not what 'universal' and 'objective' must mean, only what certain philosophers take them to mean. This is a case of the perfect being the enemy of the good – the perfect being a kind of absolute knowledge often associated with Plato's vision of ideal forms (which Socrates apparently regarded beyond the grasp of reason), the good being something that is scrupulously based on the best available evidence, but open to constant revision and correction. Ironically, the best friends of subjectivism are those who insist upon standards of objectivity that bear no relation to man's quest for truth.

Objectivity is one of the highest and noblest aims of philosophy. Objectivity is better than subjectivity, because truth is better than opinion, light better than darkness, life better than death.

But objectivity has its enemies. Most of them, however, criticize objectivity because they do not see it, and prize it, the way I do. The aim of this book is to criticize the critics, to put objectivity in a more objective, and more positive, light.

This desire to get to what we wish to understand fully, completely, finally or so that no more work would be necessary has done philosophy much harm, mainly in leading to the widespread acceptance of skepticism. Since such a final truth is unavailable, even unthinkable – given how the world keeps going on and nothing guarantees changelessness – asking for it must lead to disappointment and dejection. And these have an impact on all aspects of life, all the lives lived under their influence.

But 'objective' need by no means have the meaning given to it by those who demand final answers. That is just what certain misguided philosophical aspirations have led many to take it to mean.

Objectivity must not be permitted to become undermined by the skepticism that arises from not being able to satisfy impossible standards, ideals of dependability. Can we depend on our minds to obtain the resources to know the way things are, or are we forever lost in a mire of self-delusion? Although I know the answer to this question to be in the positive, it takes a good deal of work to show why that answer is the right one. The main task of this book is to do that work.

On the practical front, in how these ideas are applied in everyday affairs, we can then conclude as follows. In ordinary terms, to achieve objectivity one needs to check one's own likes and dislikes and guard against their influence. One also needs to check for influences coming from outside, such as flattery on the psychological front, or obstruction of visibility on the perceptual.

To avoid bias one needs discipline and self-understanding. If I know that I am partial to those who are tall, blonde, or athletic, while working as a

teacher, juror, or judge, I need to make doubly sure that what I think of their performance, the merit of their work, or their legal status isn't based on my liking (or disliking) them for irrelevant reasons. One can generalize this and decide if prejudice is unavoidable or whether discipline can overcome it.

Some argue, as already noted, that there is no way to overcome prejudice, bias, or the determination of one's culture or community when one thinks about anything. Indeed, they claim, everything we think is unavoidably influenced by such factors. Some even go so far as to claim that the very fact of having a human mind guarantees that the world won't be understood as it really is but only as it appears to us.

This and related positions are, however, troublesome to uphold consistently because they also indict the person who advances them, making it appear that one need not take the positions seriously since they, too, are just prejudiced and thus quite unreliable. In my view, in contrast, we are well able, but rarely fully willing, to rid ourselves of prejudices. We can turn our minds to consider things as others would and even as just a human being would, free of prejudice or bias, never mind specific background. A human being's mind need not be prejudiced or biased at all since it is just the sort of organ that can gain understanding without shaping the world at the same time. It is akin to when one grabs a cup, hammer, or baseball – just doing that need not have any influence on what is being grabbed. (On the other hand, if what one uses to grab something has on it paint or glue or some other stuff that can easily be transferred, the situation is different. Similarly, if one has many prejudices, biases, preconceptions one hasn't purged, one's judgments will reflect this and will be unreliable. But that isn't necessary by any means.)

Scientists, engineers, jurors, judges at athletic events or beauty pageants as well as philosophers do manage to understand the world, or at least parts of it, all the time, more or less successfully. Yet even to say that assumes that now and then success can be had, otherwise how would we even know that sometimes we fail? What would our failed efforts compare to?

Notes

1 Simon Blackburn, 'Richard Rorty,' *Prospect Magazine*, April 2003; http://www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/Start.asp. Not to mislead, however, Blackburn ultimately rejects such skeptical musings on grounds very similar to those I shall display throughout this book. For another source of criticism of anti-rationalist views, see Robert Nola, *Rescuing Reason* (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2003).

2 Tibor R. Machan, 'Evidence of Necessary Existence,' *Objectivity*, 1 (Fall 1992): 31–62.

3 Tibor R. Machan, *Initiative–Human Agency and Society* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2000).

4 See, for a detailed treatment, Tibor R. Machan, *Classical Individualism* (London: Routledge, 1998) and *Generosity; Virtue in Civil Society* (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, 1998). See, also, Tibor R. Machan, *A Primer on Ethics* (Normal, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997).

5 For the position I have defended, see Tibor R. Machan, *Private Rights and Public Illusions* (Rutgers, NJ: Transaction Publishers, Inc., 1995); *Capitalism and Individualism* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1990); *Individuals and Their Rights* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1989), and *Human Rights and Human Liberties* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1975).

PART I
Philosophy

Chapter 1

Reflections on Richard Rorty

> Why does he not walk early some morning into a well or over a precipice, if one happens to be in his way? Why do we observe him guarding against this, evidently because he does not think that falling in is alike good and not good? Evidently, then, he judges one thing to be better and another worse.
>
> Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1006b (IV, iv, 40)

Not many academic philosophers manage to climb down their ivy walls and speak to the general public. One exception is Richard Rorty, Professor of Romance Languages at Stanford, formerly University Professor of Humanities at the University of Virginia and Professor of Philosophy at Princeton.

Rorty established his professional reputation by doing solid work in analytic metaphilosophy, the discipline in which the nature of philosophy itself is being investigated. Rorty became famous for his 1979 book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*,[1] in which he condemned philosophy's traditional 'foundationalist' aspirations to know the absolute, universal, and true.

Rorty also condemned the analytic philosophical establishment for its parochialism, intolerance, and irrelevance to practical life. He praised such movements as pragmatism, hermeneutics, and deconstruction, and such thinkers as Dewey and Derrida, who are widely suspected of putting political ideology ahead of the search for truth. Rorty defends this attitude in an essay entitled, 'The Priority of Democracy over Philosophy.'[2]

Now Rorty has virtually ceased publishing in philosophical journals and has turned his hand to punditry, appearing regularly in the opinion pages of major dailies in America and England, as well as prominent intellectual periodicals such as *The New York Review of Books*, *The London Review of Books*, *Dissent*, and *The New Republic*.

1. Solidarity or Objectivity?

Rorty's view of the basic philosophical option is stated plainly: 'Solidarity or Objectivity?' This is the title of the first essay in the first volume of his *Philosophical Papers*.[3]

Rorty prefers solidarity. In the Introduction to the same volume, he attacks the idea that true thoughts must correspond to objective reality. He calls this

idea 'representationalism.' Rorty's anti-representationalism seeks to 'represent objectivity as intersubjectivity, or as solidarity.'[4]

> On an antirepresentationalist view, it is one thing to say that a prehensile thumb, or an ability to use the word 'atom' as physicists do, is useful for coping with the environment. It is another thing to attempt to *explain* this utility by reference to representationalist notions, such as the notion that the reality referred to by 'quark' was 'determinate' before the word 'quark' came along (whereas that referred to by, for example, 'foundation grant' only jelled once the relevant social practice emerged).[5]

Rorty also attacks a related idea, which he calls 'foundationalism.' Foundationalism is the view that philosophy is the guardian of reason and objectivity.

My aim is to rescue objectivity and foundationalism from Rorty's critique. I will show that Rorty's efforts are not successful and are, moreover, self-defeating despite his denials that this is so.

A Brief on Foundations

I have elsewhere developed my own positive case for what I call a minimalist foundationalism.[6] Let me make a slight detour here to lay out its central element since it will help us to see how one can conceive of a metaphysics with minimal substantive commitments, one that should be the province of the special sciences.

In Ayn Rand's somewhat sketchy philosophy, which, nonetheless, I find convincing on the topic of foundations, a central place is occupied by axiomatic concepts: roughly, ideas that we cannot do without anywhere, any time (even if we don't identify them explicitly). They are basic because they point to a fact that is ubiquitous, omnipresent, even in attempts to challenge them.

Rand's concern with axioms has often been ridiculed. As one author, Leon Wieseltier, puts it, 'A = A. Big deal.' Yet her claims for the role and function of axioms are sweeping. If those claims are justified, her stress on the importance of axioms is not at all misplaced.

According to Rand, the formulation 'Existence exists' is a way of 'translating into the form of a proposition, and thus into the form of an axiom, the primary fact which is existence' (*Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*). 'But,' Rand goes on, 'explicit propositions as such are not primaries; they are made of concepts. The base of man's knowledge – of all other concepts, all axioms, propositions and thought – is axiomatic concepts.' It is axiomatic concepts that serve as the first principles of Rand's philosophy. She defines an axiomatic concept as:

> the identification of a primary fact of reality, which cannot be analyzed, i.e, reduced to other facts or broken into component parts. It is implicit in all facts and all knowledge. It is the fundamentally given and directly perceived or experienced, which requires no proof of explanation, but on which all proofs and explanations rest.

This squares with common sense: we learn first and foremost what there is – not statements or propositions about what there is. And while a good deal of later learning – as well as human communication – occurs via propositions, the experiences we have provide us with plenty of brute facts that we access directly by means of our perceptual organs and minds.

In the Aristotelian tradition, two kinds of first principles exist. The first consists of basic statements describing the contents of a particular realm of phenomena that is the subject of scientific investigation. An example from geometry would be a basic definition, such as that of a point or a line. These first principles are particular to specific sciences.

The second kind of first principle applies to all sciences across the board. These principles do not provide the content of the science, rather, they rule its form. These are the principles of reasoning, such as the Principle of Non-Contradiction and its corollaries, or the principle that equals added to equals yield equals. These principles are axioms. These axioms are not stated as the premises of scientific demonstration. Rather, they identify the unspoken assumptions or presuppositions that rule and guide scientific demonstration itself (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*).

Rand's axiomatic concepts are axiomatic in this second sense. They do not appear as the premises of scientific demonstrations. Instead they (1) delimit the realm in which demonstration takes place and (2) provide the foundation for the rules of logical inference. That is to say, they are akin to the standards of measurement – for example, the meter or the yard – which cannot be questioned. To ask, 'How long is a meter?' makes no sense (except insofar as it is to be answered by conversion into another unit; ultimately, one simply points to the specific length one is taking as a unit for purposes of measurement). 'Why should one accept reality?' also makes no sense.

Axiomatic concepts do not refer to the specific content of our knowledge, but to the form that our knowledge must take. The chief difference between Rand's axioms and Aristotle's axioms is that Aristotle appears to speak explicitly of axioms solely in the context of scientific demonstration, which proceeds by induction. Rand extends the context of axioms by pointing out that they are presupposed in and ground inductive reasoning as well. Yet if one understands Aristotle's principles of being as axioms, then this supposed difference disappears.

What motivates the identification and conceptualization of the primary facts of existence, identity, and consciousness? The motivation is foundational: to ground human knowledge, to serve as a guardian against error and a corrective for it. As Rand puts it, 'Axiomatic concepts are the products of an epistemological need – the need of a volitional, conceptual consciousness which is capable of error and doubt ... It is only man's

consciousness, a consciousness capable of conceptual errors, that needs special identification of the directly given ...' (*Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*).

Rand's axiomatic concepts – perhaps one of the most widely misrepresented elements of her thinking, competing only with her ethical egoism for this honor – delimit the form of knowledge in two general ways.

First, they lay down the boundaries of possible experience.

Whatever in fact we happen to experience, it will exist – that is, it will be something other than the conscious act that is our experience of it. Thus we can simply ignore the solipsists who claim that conscious acts create their objects *ex nihilo*. Furthermore, whatever we happen to experience, it will 'have' an identity – that is, it will be determinate. Thus we can ignore those who claim that they have experienced something that is both red and green (that is, not-red) at the same time and in the same respect. And finally, whatever we happen to experience, it will *be* an experience – that is, we will be conscious in experiencing it. Thus we can smile bemused at those psychologists and philosophers who claim that they are 'aware' of data which 'indicate' that consciousness, intentionality, and the given are myths.

Second, in addition to their role as boundaries, the axiomatic concepts serve as *guidelines*, as means by which we can conscientiously reach, delimit, and protect proper knowledge. We do this primarily by adhering to the principle of non-contradiction, the basic law of logic.

The identification of existence, identity, and consciousness is not 'informative,' if informative speech is arbitrarily restricted to the production of so-called 'synthetic' propositions. Nor is it informative in the sense of communicating something surprising and novel. Everyone knows these facts, or can know them upon a moment's reflection. As soon as they are stated, it seems less as if they have imparted new information than reminded us of something that we have known all along.

The purpose of identifying them explicitly is, again, not so much to inform as to underscore the basic framework of human cognition. This underscoring is reflected in the formal, intrinsically repetitive axioms drawn from these concepts.

To dismiss these axioms with the claim that they are repetitive, banal, or obvious is simply to miss the point. Of course they are obvious. If they weren't, they wouldn't be identifying basic facts.

Rand takes philosophy with the utmost seriousness. Its purpose is not to titillate with novelty but to contemplate and appreciate eternal verity, and the necessary implications of that verity. Given this conception of philosophy, repetition is not an impoverished mode of speech, but the highest and deepest.

Repetition, moreover, is especially necessary in the current intellectual climate. Rand, like Orwell, thinks that our culture has sunk to such a level of skeptical decadence that it is necessary to identify, repeat, and defend the obvious: A is A.

2. In Defense of Objectivity

First, Rorty's assertion that 'the word "quark" ... is useful for coping with the environment' has the same problem as the assertion that 'quark' *represents* reality. For it appears that Rorty has done nothing more than to switch vocabularies – unless, of course, he presupposes the position he disavows, namely, that his choice of words describes reality better than the language of representationalism. Rorty assumes that his words better ' "correspond to" or "represent" the environment' – for example, the relationship between words and things – than other people's words.

Second, Rorty's deprecation of the claim that 'the reality referred to by "quark" was "determinate" before the word "quark" came along' is self-defeating. For instance, whenever scholars discuss Rorty's views, I imagine that he feels gratified when those views are accurately represented and irritated when they are not. For example, he clearly resents being pigeonholed as a neo-Marxist or a relativist or a deconstructionist.

This can only make sense because Rorty's ideas exist in a determinate fashion prior to their interpretation by various scholars. Those scholars could, of course, simply concoct any ideas and ascribe them to Rorty, on the grounds that Rorty's views have no determinate identity prior to their interpretation.[7] But, in fact, this would be playing coy and not being charitable, as scholars are supposed to be. Nevertheless, the point is telling – on *his* terms Rorty has no basis for objecting to misrepresentation.

Third, Rorty is wrong to think that all defenders of objectivity believe that we can 'climb out of our minds' or find 'a skyhook – something which might lift us out of our beliefs'[8] so that we can determine whether or not they correctly match reality. That simply does not capture the position of many who do hold that when we think and talk carefully, we are thinking and talking about objective reality – a reality that is not being shaped or created or distorted or otherwise influenced by our minds. Thinking, of course, is not independent of our minds. We think *with* our minds, just as we perceive with our sense organs and communicate through speech and writing. But that should not undermine our conviction that we can know a determinate, objective reality.

Accordingly, when we think and talk about 'Rorty's position' on the minimum wage there is an objective reality, namely, Rorty's position, distinct from our thinking and talking. If, however, we were to talk about Hamlet's position on the minimum wage we run into immediate problems, because there is no such position.

In order to appreciate these points, it is entirely unnecessary to make use of notions such as 'getting out of our minds' to check if our minds represent reality. A less misleading metaphor is suggested by the German 'Begriff' and the English terms 'grasp' and 'grab.' When talking about cognition, 'begreifen' means to apprehend or take cognizance of, as do 'grasp' and 'grab.' Just as grasping an object in one's hand is different from

manufacturing an object with one's hand, so too with grasping an object with one's mind. Just as grasping an object in one's hand does not necessarily alter it, so too with grasping an object with one's mind.[9] Just as I may pick up a coffee cup without changing it into something else, I can know a coffee cup without changing it into something else.

This cognitive sense of 'grasp' also accommodates the pragmatist emphasis on the open-endedness of the pursuit of truth. When one grasps an object, one need not have full, complete, and timeless control of it; one only needs it well enough in hand to proceed with one's purposes. Thus a cognitive grasp need not satisfy a Cartesian model of certainty, where one does not know unless one knows 'beyond a shadow of doubt,' as opposed to 'beyond a reasonable doubt.'

Grasping with the hands and grasping with the mind are subject to various kinds of failure. Just as grasping with the hands may involve greater or lesser delicacy, so too with knowing. Just as some things may slip through our physical fingers, some might slip through our cognitive fingers. Just as grasping with the hands may crush or mangle or leave fingerprints on the object, so too with knowing. But to improve our physical grasp, we do not have to 'go outside of our hands'; we simply have to take a new, more subtle and appropriate hold on things. So too with knowing.

Sometimes these failures are complete and cannot be corrected. Some point to Heisenberg's 'uncertainty principle' as proof that objectivity is impossible. If our attempt to know something changes it into something else, then it cannot be known. But even this failure is an objective fact, and it is an informative one. It teaches us that some things are too delicate and susceptible to influence to be known as they are in themselves. The same is true of physical attempts to grasp things. Smoke rings and spiders' webs are too delicate to be grasped by the hand without changing them. But Heisenberg's observations do not constitute a blanket critique of objectivity. Even if we cannot know some extraordinary things as they are, this does not imply that we cannot know ordinary things as they are. Otherwise, one could just as well argue that we cannot pick up a coffee cup because we cannot pick up a smoke ring.

Fourth, Rorty's view seems to presuppose a questionable assumption about the causal interactions of mind and world. This questionable assumption has both naive and sophisticated forms.

An example of the naive form: when I was about 12 I was sitting in my seat on a train waiting to depart from the main railroad station in Budapest. As I was looking at the people milling around outside my window, it occurred to me that these people now had a new attribute or property, something that would have to be recorded in a very detailed biography about them: to wit, I, Tibor Machan, had seen them.

But then I thought, wait a minute. This may be something that my biography should record. But surely those people will be entirely unchanged by my having looked at them.

It may well be a kind of childish egocentricity that leads one to think that knowing something changes it, so that one does not know the thing in itself, but only the thing as one knows it.

This view leads to an infinite regress, because once one accepts this position it follows, by substitution, that not only is the thing changed by being known, it will keep changing every time some additional reflection is entertained concerning it. So that not only were the people I saw changed by my seeing them, they are also changed by my reflections on seeing them, *ad infinitum.*

The more sophisticated form of this assumption arose when Western philosophy took its turn from a metaphysical to an epistemological emphasis, roughly with Descartes. It became attractive to offer mechanistic explanations for everything. Once the functioning of the human mind was to be explained within this framework, it became tempting to ascribe certain powers of efficient causation to it. Even Kant, who allowed himself a measure of dualism via his postulation of the noumenal realm, treated the sensory organs as parts of the body and saw them as exerting a causal influence upon what they perceived, thereby affecting our knowledge of the world. Accordingly, Rorty understands mind as a force that transforms the world.

But now that the universality of the mechanistic worldview is being questioned, we can also question the idea that the mind causally influences its objects. Instead, we could reconsider the earlier approach, found in Aristotle and Aquinas, that the human mind is intentionally, not causally, related to its objects. It is the object that causally impresses itself upon one's senses and then becomes the object of human awareness by the mind, not vice versa, provided the agent focuses on it.[10]

Fifth, although Rorty tries to replace objectivity with solidarity, he still cannot escape the traditional philosophical concern with objectivity. After all, one can ask: Is 'solidarity' something objective and determinate in the world? Or does Rorty have *carte blanche* to dictate what 'solidarity' means?

3. Solidarity and Individuality

If we take Rorty at his word, his politics comes before his philosophy. His praise of epistemological solidarity seems designed to support his collectivist brand of liberalism. His denial of objectivity seems designed to render his politics immune from criticism. Rorty's philosophy is particularly well designed to undermine the individualistic, Lockean form of classical liberalism that appeals to objective natural rights.[11]

Individual rights are a feature of a just human community because, contra Rorty, individuals require independence and have the power to know on their own, if such be necessary (for example, when living under the rule of a totalitarian regime wherein the bulk of official 'truth' is likely to be false);

they do not always need to appeal to social consensus, because they can, when the chips are down, appeal to objective reality (even if normally this isn't something everyone needs to do). Then, also, human progress has to have come from the initiative of individuals – collections of persons do bring forth many worthwhile achievements but it is only individuals who possess the consciousness and imagination to conceive of ideas and plans that can be implemented. And often it was single individuals who were opposed at nearly every turn by the consensus of the great majority of others who broke through with advances and only later managed to change that consensus.[12]

Not only does Rorty fail to take individuality seriously enough, he does not take community seriously enough either. It is clear that each of us belongs to innumerable communities, more one day and fewer the next, moving between them frequently. This requires of each individual to judge which deserves his loyalty, which he should value more highly, which lower, and when one and when the other, although many may simply drift with their loyalties without much thought about the matter.

Some people begin to have to evaluate whether their communities are deserving of their allegiance at an early age – when, for example, they challenge their family's various opinions, or when they may decide to stand opposed to the demands placed upon them by the laws of their society, their schools, clubs, churches, and so on. This would make it very difficult to fully account for what people do when they think and judge as expressing the views they have received from 'their community' even if we confine such communities to important, functionally crucial ones to which we belong.

Indeed, at some point those of us who are more than passive human putty need to get into the driver's seat and judge some matters for ourselves. Just what degree of contribution any one individual makes probably differs between human beings, but there is little doubt that Rorty's project of trying to reduce all individuality to some community membership is misguided.

Rorty himself, for example, refuses to conform to his own community of epistemologists – he is constantly differentiating himself from deconstructionists and radical multiculturalists,[13] not to mention the common sense of the larger community that surrounds him whose membership is certainly convinced that what they know is objectively true – as when they take account of the weather, some ailment that afflicts them, or the flat tire on their car.[14] In short, Rorty's own radical challenge of ordinary beliefs in the community or communities to which he belongs belies his account of the relationship between the individual and community. His is a clear example, in short, of how individuality sometimes overrides the community.

In addition, the many diverse communities to which we belong often make entirely incompatible demands upon us. These demands may have to be assessed by at least quite a few of us, often individually, with at most a little help from our friends but by no means with the option of abdicating individual responsibility.[15]

The human individual's creative role in life, especially concerning some of his or her ideas, is so basic that the insistence on epistemological solidarity or communitarianism simply will not manage to erase it. Human beings, in short, must come to terms with some vital options as individuals, including the option of whether to join this or that community. Not just any community will do and even those we choose to belong to must be ranked in importance, a task that we cannot simply give to yet another community. There will always be questions pertaining to the suitability of the recommended community for individuals who face the option of participating in it as well as the suitability of the order of priorities in our loyalty to the several communities to which we belong. Solidarity will not help here since the question posed is about where solidarity ought to be deployed. For that purpose what is needed is some objective standard for choosing between different possible loyalties.

This is indeed the problem faced both by radical and by conservative collectivists. It is also the main reason for the development of the very sort of rights theory Rorty finds objectionable. Such a theory, when implemented in a legal system, offers some measure of objective – rather than arbitrary – protection against being bullied into accepting the judgments of others in vital matters of belief and conduct.

Because of this, Rorty's 'moral equivalency' thesis *vis-à-vis* anti-liberal regimes will fall on deaf if not outright resentful ears among the opponents of tyrannies and dictatorships. As he puts it, 'Non-metaphysicians [of whom Rorty and, by his account, all other wise persons are members] cannot say that democratic institutions reflect a moral reality and that tyrannical regimes do not reflect one, that tyrannies get something wrong that democratic societies get right.'[16]

It is the very possibility of objective political principles that Rorty rejects, of course, not just the principles of classical liberals. (It is also arguable that his rejection requires some objective basis – for example, the objective equivalence of competing political orders.) This approach, however, leaves his own left-wing politics no more than his own (and the members of his community's) prejudices rather than capturing what is right in human community life.

It is also important that there are many different strains of belief emanating from roughly the same approach to philosophy Rorty embraces. This new turn, despite its championing of consensus over metaphysics as the ground of harmony, promises very little agreement despite its constant rhetoric in favor of solidarity rather than independent objective thinking. On the Left, we have Rorty, Derrida, Lyotard, Foucault, and Paul Feyerabend. On the Right, we have a host of Humean and Burkean conservatives admonishing us to trust the group.[17]

When the wisdom of the group reaches such radically different conclusions, the individual finds himself or herself with the challenge of making up his or her mind. When one cannot reliably appeal to the opinions

of others, one is required to form one's own opinions, to open one's eyes and deal directly with reality. Solidarity then must give way to objectivity.

4. Some Initial Objections Considered and Answered

Before concluding these reflections on Rorty's views, I will address some points raised by Nicholas Capaldi, with whom I have discussed the topic for several decades and whose stance is quite friendly to this major opponent of the very possibility of objective knowledge.[18]

The first point Capaldi makes is to distinguish between the ontological realist – including Richard Rorty as Capaldi understands him – who admits that there is a world independent of the human community and an ontological skeptic. Capaldi claims that the epistemological realist (objectivist) asserts that knowledge is the grasping of a structure in objects independent of us. Capaldi sympathetically explains why Rorty and he are such skeptics. The reasons he gives are as follows:

(1a) the definition of 'knowledge' is a human convention;
(1b) no one ever specifies a criterion by which we can confirm that we have successfully grasped this alleged external structure; there is as well a Wittgensteinian argument to the effect that it is impossible even to state what the objectivist case is in a non-question-begging way. You cannot refute Rorty by saying that he cannot objectively prove his case; he has challenged the intelligibility of what it means to give an 'objective' account;
(1c) to talk about 'reasonable' doubt is to talk about the convention of what 'reasonable' means.

Capaldi then continues by claiming that

> how we understand ourselves is basic; how we understand the world outside of human activity is derivative. We can talk about the world (independent of human things) because there are human conventions by reference to which such talk can be judged. This will give no comfort to objectivists.

In response to the suggestion that what Capaldi – and Rorty – claim about how we relate to the world purports to be an objectivist or realist epistemological claim, Capaldi says:

(2a) it is not a statement about the world;
(2b) it is a statement about human conventions.

But then how do we determine the correctness ('truth', if you like) of statements about human conventions? Capaldi answers thus:

> What Rorty says is that such a statement is 'true' if we 'agree' with it, where agreement has to be understood in terms of actions we perform, including but not limited to linguistic actions. Action is primary; speech is derivative. Speech never fully captures an action. Know-how is more primitive than know-that.
>
> The thesis about justification that he espouses is 'ethnocentrism', the view that justification is relative to our practices. The defense of our beliefs against challenges by other communities (Nazis, religious fundamentalists, and so on) must always be question-begging, but this does not vitiate the defense, since no other kind of defense is available.
>
> One will be tempted to say that all this has to be judged in terms of whether it is objectively true. But Rorty is not claiming that any of it is objectively true; he has denied the intelligibility of saying that something is objectively true. All he can do is exhibit (Wittgenstein's 'show') the practice.
>
> Rorty's ethnocentrism appears to some to be circular and conservative, making existing practices and institutions self-justifying and impervious to 'rational' criticism, an objection also brought against other epistemological behaviorists such as Wittgenstein. This is both right and wrong. There can be criticism but it cannot be radical in nature:

(3a) 'rational' criticism is itself an inherent part of the practice (still inherently conservative);
(3b) Rorty tries to escape and provide a rationale for radicalism, but it will only work if radicalism is part of the traditional practice. Some of us would deny that it is. Marx tried to make radicalism inherent in the process, and later radicals have followed him in this respect. But this 'Marxian' move attributes a movement to the process that could only be viewed from the 'outside', but there is no 'outside'. Appealing to Kuhn and scientific revolutions will not help him because on Rorty's own terms science is derivative, not fundamental. If it is not fundamental, then it cannot be a basis for explaining any human social practice. This is an argument I make against all forms of radical post-modernism and deconstruction. Epistemological skepticism does not entail radicalism; it presupposes some version of conservatism.

Capaldi agrees with Rorty in everything except (3b) which he denies – that is, he is, as he puts it, 'a conservative in the Oakeshottean sense.' He adds 'Rorty's incoherence is in claming to make radicalism intelligible. It cannot be done. It fails on grounds of coherence and not on grounds of correspondence.'

Here is my reply to these considerations. For one, it is hardly possible for one to be an ontological realist – justifiably and thus confidently affirming a reality independent of the human mind's creations via, for example, imagination, dreams, fantasies, gossip, myths, and the like – unless epistemological objectivism is sound. In other words, that there is an independent reality is only possible for us to affirm if we can know such a