

Pragmatic Objectivity

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Abstract

Nicholas Rescher writes that “objectivity is not something we infer from the data; it is something we must presuppose. It is something that we postulate or presume from the very outset of our dealings with people’s claims about the world’s facts”. Such definition is just the opposite of objectivity conceived of in classical terms, but it cannot be equated with an idealistic viewpoint according to which objectivity is something that our mind simply creates in the process of reflection. It is, rather, a sort of cross-product of the encounter between our mind-shaped capacities, and a surrounding reality made up of things that are real in the usual meaning of the term. Science itself gives us some crucial insights in this direction, since it shows that we see, say, tables and trees in a certain way which, however, does not match the image that scientific instruments are able to attain. Does this mean that our commonsense view of the world is totally wrong and that nature deceives us?

This is not the case. The difference between the commonsense and the scientific image of the world is explainable by the fact that we are evolutionary creatures. Nature has simply endowed human beings with tools and capacities that enable them to survive in an environment which - at least in remote eras - was largely hostile. Our way of seeing tables and trees is what is requested for carrying on a successful fight for the survival of the species: nothing more - and nothing less - is needed for achieving this fundamental goal. Turning once again to the problem of ontological objectivity, the picture has now gained both strength and clarity. If we recall that human endeavors, although occurring in a largely autonomous social and linguistic world, are nevertheless limited by the constraints that natural reality forces upon us, we begin to understand that the social-linguistic world itself is not a boat freely floating without directions. If the boat is there, it means that an explanation of its presence is likely to be obtained if only we are patient enough to look for it.

Some kind of hand must be on the wheel, giving the boat indications on Contrary to other pragmatist-flavored positions popular nowadays, this approach maintains that universality has a fundamental and unavoidable function in our rational endeavors. This is due to the fact that “presupposition” and “hypothetical reasoning” are key ingredients of our very capacity to rationalize the world in which we live. Indeed, there can be no rationality without universality.

Keywords: Objectivity; Pragmatism; Realism; Idealism; World; Rationality.

What kind of objectivity?

Let's start with a quotation from Nicholas Rescher. His definition of ontological objectivity is both clear and problematic. Rescher writes:

Objectivity is not something we infer from the data; it is something we do and must presuppose. It is something that we postulate or presume from the very outset of our dealings with people's claims about the world's facts - our own included. Its epistemic status is not that of an empirical discovery but that of a presupposition whose ultimate justification is a transcendental argument from the very possibility of the projects of communication and inquiry as we standardly conduct them.¹

The aforementioned definition is just the opposite of objectivity conceived of as something that we merely infer from empirical data (with the aid of an abstractive effort). But, on the other side, nor can it be equated with a classical idealistic viewpoint, according to which objectivity is something that our mind simply creates in the process of reflection. Objectivity is, in this case, a sort of cross-product of the encounter between our mind-shaped capacities, and a surrounding reality made up of things that are real in the classical meaning of the term: they are *there* and in no way can be said to be mind-created. However, a final - and rather important - qualification is in order: the very "mode" in which we see these real things, and conceive of (and speak about) them *is* indeed mind-dependent. Science itself gives us some crucial insights in this direction, since it shows that we see, say, tables and trees in a certain way which, however, does not match the image that scientific instruments are able to attain. Does this mean that our commonsense view of the world is totally wrong and that nature deceives us?

Those who adopt such a stance do not really understand what is at issue here. The difference between the commonsense and the scientific image of the world is explainable by the fact that we are evolutionary (and, thus, fully natural) creatures. Nature has simply endowed human beings with tools and capacities that enable them to survive in an environment which - at least in remote eras - was largely hostile. Our way of seeing tables and trees is what is requested for carrying on a successful fight for the survival of the species: nothing more - and nothing less - is needed for achieving this fundamental goal.² Subsequently our conceptual capacities have grown to such an extent that science was made possible, and with science our consciousness of the gap between what we see and what really *is*, acquired an ever increasing speed. But *how* should the presence of peculiar creatures like ourselves within the natural realm be explained? Rescher puts forward some interesting replies to this crucial question.³

¹ N. Rescher, *A System of Pragmatic Idealism* (Vol. I: *Human Knowledge in Idealistic Perspective*), Princeton University Press, Princeton 1992, p. 259.

² See for example Wilfrid Sellars' classical paper "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man", in W. Sellars, *Science, Perception, and Reality*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1963, pp. 1-40.

³ See, for instance, his essay "The Intelligibility of Nature," in - *The Riddle of Existence. An Essay in Idealistic Metaphysics*, University Press of America, Washington, D.C. 1984, pp. 83-99.

Turning once again to the problem of ontological objectivity, the picture has now gained both strength and clarity. If we recall that human endeavors, although occurring in a largely autonomous social and linguistic world, are nevertheless limited by the constraints that natural reality forces upon us, we begin to understand that the social-linguistic world itself is not a boat freely floating without directions. If the boat is *there*, it means that an explanation of its presence is likely to be obtained if only we are patient enough to look for it. Some kind of hand must be on the wheel, giving the boat indications on *where* to go and *how* the destination should be reached. The fact of the matter is that human beings are not only evolutionary creatures, but also *communicative* ones. In order to shape our image of the world into which we find ourselves thrown (and without having chosen to do so, as Martin Heidegger often remarked), we need to have communicative intercourse with other human beings. This image comes thus to be shaped in the social-linguistic environment.

The fact is that the construction itself of the image does not take place freely, but according to standards that must somehow be objective. Objective in *which* sense, though? Certainly we do not want to assume that such standards were there from eternity, so that all we have to do is to *discover* them, just like mathematical objects wait to be discovered by us according to Bertrand Russell's philosophy of mathematics. Objective standards are indeed a product of human mind, and their production responds to essentially *practical* needs. Whenever we want to create a communal life,⁴ we need to establish standards and rules that determine, for instance, what is right and what is wrong within our community in ways that go beyond our personal wishes of the moment. There has to be an impersonal determination of what qualifies being accepted as a member, what kind of commitments are required of its members for assuring the community's safety, and so on. Here we have, thus, a first kind of objectivity, because it is obvious that in the community those standards must be held as objective. If this is not the case, the emergence and survival of the group would be jeopardized.

Let us note, however, that this type of objectivity is strong from some points of view, but weak from others. History, sociology and anthropology teach us that the communities or social groups are many, and not just one. A standard which is undeniably objective for a group may turn out not to be so for a second or a third one, and in most cases we do not even need the help of the social sciences to ascertain this fact: our traveling and practical experiences are more than sufficient for this purpose. Naturally the degrees to which the "socially" objective standards vary are quite diverse in different contexts. If I am Italian and travel to the United States, I may find some slight differences between the standards that are held objective in the social groups that live in the two countries, but it is in any event obvious that those differences are just matters of

⁴ It is important to note that the term "communal," in this context, does not refer necessarily to large communities. For our present purposes, we may even take into account a community formed, say, by only three people.

detail, so that we are allowed to claim that Americans and Italians share a basic set of objective standards.

Needless to say, the situation gets much more complex if an Italian (or an American) decides to spend a period of time with a primitive tribe of Aborigines in Australia, because most of the objective standards, in this case, are likely to change a lot, and for sure the so-called “civilized Western person” will have to undergo a great effort if only to get along reasonably well with the members of the tribe. Notice that we said that *most* standards will change, but not *all* of them, and this will turn out to be important. However these considerations, even though highly plausible, leave us with a sense of dissatisfaction. What kind of objectivity is this, that changes not only with the passing of time, but also according to the transformation of the social and political institutions and, last but not least, with the modification of cultural values? Are we allowed to use the respectably old term “objectivity” even in *this* case? It is indeed legitimate to do so because, starting from this socially limited kind of objectivity, we can find our path towards a broader type (never forgetting, however, that the quest for *absolute* objectivity is deemed to failure, just like Dewey used to say about the quest for certainty).

To address the problem in the proper way, it should be understood that it manifests two main aspects. On the one side, when pronouncing claims purported to be objective we want to understand whether such claims deal with real things in the real world rather than with mind-constructed phenomena. On the other there is an *epistemic* meaning of objectivity, that addresses the question of whether the claims we pronounce hold for (a) single individuals, (b) particular groups of people, or (c) for every man *qua* man. Rescher defines (a) as “egocentric” objectivity, (b) as “parochial” objectivity, and (c) as “impersonal” or “interpersonal” objectivity. In the first two cases our personal or locally social preferences are at work, while in the third case a “generalized impersonal cogency” is present which assimilates cognitive objectivity to rational cogency at large. Of course we have no strictly *empirical* methods for determining that, say, in case A impersonal objectivity is at work, while in case B it is not. All we can do is to arrange our own commitments so that the largest possible number of people would just act the same way if they possessed the same relevant information and found themselves in the same situation. So we are compelled to assume that these people are “rational”, in the sense that they share with us some basic insights on how to pursue their action. But what does “rational” mean in this context?

We can assume that in our social world two distinct kinds of *values* are present: (A) Those at work in rational inquiry (of which science represents the main - but not unique - asset) like truth, accuracy, verifiability, rational economy, etc.; and (B) such self-promoting values as power, influence, reputation, personal enrichment, and so on. Obviously both types of values influence our lives: after all, this is a crucial characteristic

of our nature of human beings. The self-promoting values are person-centered, in the sense that they take our individual interest as the only objective worth pursuing. The values at work in rational inquiry, instead, have an interpersonal character. They take individuals to be components of a larger net. So it turns out that the A-type values are essentially *holistic*, while the B-type ones are essentially *atomistic*. Arguing that the first ones are superior, we do not mean to claim that the B-values should be eliminated. This task is an unachievable one and, moreover, B-values play their own role in the cognitive endeavor. Think of a society where individuals are both prevented from taking care of their personal interests and compelled to pay all their attention to collective goals; however fascinating such a perspective may be for collectivistic philosophers, no doubt it is frightening for those who deem personal values essential.

The values of the first type are superior from the *cognitive* point of view, because they are indeed necessary tools for our comprehension of the world, be it natural or social. Without those values, we have no hope of transcending our strictly personal, individualistic and atomistic sphere in order to ascertain that we are just part of a much larger environment. And the fact of the matter is that this environment could never be known by us by resorting to the B-values alone, simply because this is not their job. The real meaning of objectivity, thus, is that it calls for our commitment to A-values.

It is interesting to note, at this point, that Rescher's position is quite different from Rorty's, although both claim to be inspired by the American pragmatist tradition. At the heart itself of Rorty's post-analytic and post-modern stance lies a typically relativistic view of the world. Both Rescher and Rorty would agree that, ultimately, our belief system is nothing but a product of the natural and cultural environment in which men happen to live. But from this premise Rorty draws the conclusion that we, persons living in the liberal-democratic societies of the Western world, are only luckier, and not more intelligent, than the people holding different points of view. This in turn means that, when we want to defend a democratic vision of the political and social order from the attacks of any kind of fundamentalism, we can invoke neither ultimate values nor an objective order of things; those values and that order do not exist, but are just products of the particular "form of life" (taken in Wittgenstein's sense) in which we chose to organize our political institutions and our personal lives. Nevertheless, as anyone can verify reading his works, Rorty defines himself as a "liberal democrat." He is really convinced that Western liberal thought has produced the best form of political and social life which has ever appeared on our planet. The problems show up because he explicitly refuses to put forward any *rational* argument in favor of this kind of life. *Our* ethics - he states - really is better than any other, even though there are many people we will never be able to convince about this fact. It is thus mistaken, in his opinion, to say that there is nothing that makes our ethics better than the moral

conception endorsed by the Nazis; but we are right in claiming, instead, that there is no common and neutral ground of discussion between a liberal democrat and a Nazi philosopher in which the differences can be brought to the surface.⁵

Rescher strongly opposes Rorty's relativism, and their differences may be reduced to the fact that the former endorses the "pragmatism of the right" while the second is the best known representative of the "pragmatism of the left." The contrast here is not between a personal vision of things and an impersonal vision of them because. Personal views are always at stake, because our view of reality is bound to be personal: this is the very way in which the world is accessible to us. The contrast is, rather, between those personal views that should be compelling for rational people and those which are uniquely prone to personal preferences. But it is important to remember that being "rational" means here being *practically* so. We are not talking of an abstract kind of rationality that has nothing to do with the concrete world in which we live. The rationality here at issue is practical in the sense of obeying to rules and standards that - in the mainstream of the American pragmatist tradition - are likely to improve the quality of our life. Speaking of something stronger, i.e. of a rationality totally detached by human beings who give rise to it and endorse it, is simply wishful thinking. Rescher and Rorty would certainly agree on the latest statement (and this is due to their common pragmatist heritage), but they split precisely when one asks what kind of values can validate this pragmatic rationality. Rorty's answer is that we only have subjective values, whose importance can be traded having recourse to conversation with other human beings. Rescher's reply, instead, is that we have both subjective and cognitive values at our disposal, and that both are important indeed. But when we embark ourselves in some type of cognitive enterprise, the only useful values are the cognitive ones, because the others do not have the indispensable force needed to transcend our subjective dimension.

Another important point to be noticed is the following. Rescher would say that Rorty can deny the presence of the cognitive values only by using his fertile philosophical imagination, i.e. at the purely theoretical level. In his daily life, however, even Rorty is forced to use A-type values to conduct his cognitive enterprise, and this means that, in the practical dimension, his reasoning turns out to be untenable. So we are left with the fundamental conclusion that the A-values are *built in* the structure of our social world: we need them in order to give shape to our social existence, and only a dreamer may think that they can be got rid of. This takes us back to what was said at the beginning of this paper: "Objectivity is not something we infer from the data; it is something we do and must presuppose. It is something that we postulate or presume from the very outset of our dealings with people's claims about the world's facts - our own included." The concept of "presupposition," then, plays a key role in

⁵ See for instance R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1989.

this context, because now we are able to understand in a fuller sense what Rescher means by claiming that the epistemic status of objectivity is not that of an empirical finding, like Christopher Columbus' discovery of the American continent, but, rather, that of a *presupposition* whose justification may be inferred from "the very possibility of the projects of communication and inquiry as we standardly conduct them." To put it in more down-to-earth terms: human beings would not even be able to construct the social world as we know it, were they have not to follow since the beginning the path of objectivity and rationality. Objectivity and rationality are connected to social and linguistic practice, but they are essentially linked to some basic features that all men *qua* men share in view of their common evolutionary heritage.

We know, furthermore, that human beings differ a great deal insofar as their particular skills are at issue. The goals that a bright atomic physicist sets up for himself are not the same goals likely to be achieved by an employee of an insurance company or by a blue collar worker of a steel factory. These common facts of our experience may be seen as rationally inherent in the objective circumstances of our differential situations. In other words, the fact that society developed according to largely impersonal standards does not mean that all members of society share the same existential and social situation. They share only *some* common features, which are in the last analysis tied to the necessity of granting the survival of each social group present on our planet, and these common features, in turn, must be such as to permit the life of the *individuals* within the net of a communally structured group. Rescher explains his stance regarding the relationships between objectivity and rationality as follows:

To say that matters of rationality are objective is not to say that people *will* reach agreement about them - it is to say no more than they *would* reach agreement *if* they proceeded in a totally adequate way. Rationality is a matter of idealization. It gazes towards idealities and away from the actualities of an imperfect world. Different *cultures* will no more agree about the world's character than different *eras* will agree about the factual truths of science. And the reason for this in both cases is much the same - different groups have different bodies of experience. But, the evidential relativity of our contentions does not show that there are no facts of the matter on the topics to which they relate, and no objectively rational decision to be made. The different views of those who have different data at their disposal no more destroy factuality and objectivity than the fact that different associates have different opinions of him annihilates a person.⁶

So we come to the conclusion that the typically relativistic stance, which holds that "what is objective for someone may not be so for someone else," can indeed be accepted if it simply means to point out that the objective circumstances of our differential situations vary a great deal. It must instead be rejected if its purpose is to claim that no objective standards explain why we can find some basic constants in the

⁶ N. Rescher, *Rationality. A Philosophical Inquiry into the Nature and the Rationale of Reason*. Clarendon Press, Oxford 1988, p. 173.

evolution of all social groups. In order to show this, in fact, the relativist must give the picture of a world quite different from our actually existing and shared world.

Objectivity and rationality

How is rationality conceived given the aforementioned remarks? Rationality is essentially a matter of *idealization*. Although we must admit our natural origins and evolutionary heritage, we must give way as well to the recognition that there is indeed *something* that makes us unique. Only human beings are able to “gaze towards idealities” and to somehow detach themselves from the actualities on an imperfect world. Just like objectivity, rationality is the expression of mankind’s capacity to see not only how things actually *are*, but also how they *might have been* and how they *could turn out to be* if we were to take some course of action rather than another. The concept of possibility plays, thus, a key role here, and it should be noted that there are similarities - as well as differences - between Rescher’s stance and that endorsed by Ludwig Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.

As is well known, the Austrian-born philosopher claimed, in his first masterpiece, that we always think of an object in the framework of some *possible* state of affairs; furthermore, the thought of an object that exists independently of every possible state of affairs is something that goes beyond our very capacity of thinking. The objects in turn, just due to their nature, determine the way reality is, but it is in any event clear that they underwrite many different possibilities (or possible worlds). The difference is, of course, that while the early Wittgenstein envisions the so-called “logical form of the world” behind the contingent manifestation of it that lies before our eyes, in Rescher there is nothing of that sort and, in particular, no fixed and unchanging “logical form of the world.” But it is anyhow clear that the notion of “possibility” is very important indeed for both thinkers. Rescher’s opinion on the status of possibility is precisely stated in a work of his that belongs to the middle period of his speculation:

Giambattista Vico said somewhere that we men only understand what we have made ourselves, and in my view this dictum applies with full force to *possibilia*; possible worlds and possible individuals being most properly viewed as actual or potential conceptual artifacts [...] The domain of the possible plays a prominent part in our thought about the affairs of nature and of man, deliberation about alternatives, contingency planning, reasoning from hypotheses and assumptions, and thought-experiments are but a few instances of our far-flung concern with possibility. The rational guidance of human affairs involves a constant recourse to possibilities: we try to guard against them, to prevent them, to bring them to realization, etc. The theory of possibility thus represents a significant part of our understanding of man’s ways of thought and action.⁷

⁷ N. Rescher, *A Theory of Possibility*, Blackwell, Oxford 1975, pp. xi and 1.

The *agent* is thus an inevitable point of departure in the theory of rationality and in all other philosophical issues as well. To someone charging this kind of approach with being essentially anthropocentric, it must be answered that we are *compelled* to adopt such a stance, because this is the only way we have at our disposal for gaining accessibility to the world. No one denies that it would be good to transcend our conceptual machinery - if only for a moment - to glimpse at how the world really *is*, independently of any view we can hold about it. This, however, we cannot do because of the very way human beings happen to be made. Unlike many classical idealists, Rescher never claims that our conceptual world is the only one that exists, the natural one being merely appearance or illusion. He always recognizes the presence of things that are real in the sense of being mind-independent but, on the other hand, he constantly hastens to specify that human beings have access to them via their conceptual apparatus (which, in turn, has nothing mysterious about it, since it is a product of natural evolution).

Rescher's dictum that "What is rational for me must, in like circumstances, be rational for all of us" cannot be properly understood without having recourse to the notion of *idealization*. Certainly such a dictum cannot be referred to the actual, particular circumstances in which we conduct our daily affairs because, in that case, it would be patently false. On the other hand, recall what was said before. Should we characterize human beings at large as creatures that can only think of what they actually see and touch, it would become impossible to understand what makes the difference between men and all other beings who, after all, share the world with them.

The fact is that, following the recognition that rationality is always tied to *interests*, we must proceed to specify what *kind* of interests we are talking about in each particular context. Bearing this in mind, it is not difficult to recognize that interests are, so to speak, located in a sort of ladder where the most personal ones (which are the large majority) lie at the bottom, and the most universal ones (a tiny, but very important, minority) lie at the top. Rescher himself puts forward an example concerning what doctors usually recommend to their patients for maintaining a good health. Clearly there are recommendations like "Eat chocolate" whose specific value is tied to the kind of patient they are addressed to. Since many people are better not to take that advice, this is an example of a *very* personal type of interest. Then more general recommendations follow, like "Eat vegetables at least once a day," which seems reasonably good for most of us. Yet, contraindications are at work even in this situation, and specifically for persons afflicted with some kinds of disease. So this is a border-line case: the interest at stake is still individualistic, but to a much lesser extent than before. However, if a doctor says: "Eat the foods conducive to maintaining your health," we have the instantiation of an interest located at the top of our ladder, because its validity can be accepted by every man *qua* man.

What, then, if the objection is raised that not *all* human beings comply to this recommendation? There certainly are persons who love a dangerous food so much that they will take the risk of health damage in order to satisfy their greediness. Or we may find someone who is really tired of living and decides that eating unhealthy foods may abbreviate his existence. The answer to this objection is that we have *not* said that rationality is compelling in the sense of logical necessity: after all, a human being is free, in normal circumstances, to choose the course of action that he prefers. What we stressed, instead, is that humankind at large has sorted out, during its natural evolution, some rational standards that have proven to be effective for the survival of the species. No extramundane realm of Platonic values convinced men to do so, but just the discovery that some actions are useful and others are less or not useful at all in enabling us to satisfy the needs that nature has legislated for us.

This is most likely the origin of the typically human capacity to *idealize*: by observing the results that a certain action produces, we are able to predict that it will continue to do so in the same or very similar circumstances. Ideals, however, become with the passing of time more and more autonomous, to the extent that they exert a feed-back reaction. The same happens in the field of political and social institutions. They are certainly not self-originated: any reasonable evidence leads us to assume that they were created by men. But, after a little time, they both begin an autonomous life and start having influence on their creators (feed-back effect). Just like objectivity, thus, rationality is not something we find *out there* ready to be used. It is, rather, something that we postulate or presume from the very outset of our dealings with people's claims about the world's facts.

The rationality here at issue is essentially *practical*, and has nothing to do with values that conduct their eternal life in a perfect world of which our imperfect one is just a bad and shallow copy.

Naturally one is inclined to wonder how the absolutistic universality of what Rescher calls the "defining principles of rationality," and the pluralistic differentiation that stems from the many, appropriate answers to the question: "What is it rational to do?" can be combined. The answer is that the sphere of rationality is not a single, undifferentiated block; it is, rather, a flexible structure formed by many intermediated levels, with the basic principles on the top and the concrete decisions at the bottom. So we have a "hierarchy of levels." The upper levels give the most general account of what it is to conduct our affairs intelligently (i.e., rationally). Then we have a set of governing norms which, although they are still general, admit of some variation. Subsequently the "rules of the game" are found, which provide the procedures for implementing our objectives in any particular context. And, at the bottom, there are the specific resolutions which are used in concrete cases. Obviously the degree of variation increases as soon as we begin descending the ladder. Rescher defines this

structure as “cultivation levels of principles of rationality,”⁸ and articulates it in the following manner:

(A) *Defining principles of rationality*: The basic principles that determine the nature of the enterprise and specify what rationality is all about. These principles in turn provide the criteria for assessing the acceptability and adequacy of rational norms and standards of procedure.

(B) *Governing norms and standards of rationality*: They are the standards for appraising the “rules of the game” that govern the rational transaction of our affairs. They also provide the criteria necessary for assessing the acceptability and adequacy of our rules of rational procedure.

(C) *Rules of rational procedure*: Rules for the rational resolution of choices, which constitute our criteria for assessing the rational acceptability and adequacy of any particular resolution.

(D) *Rationally warranted rulings*: Resolutions with respect to particular issues arising in the concrete cases of daily life.

It should be understood that (A)-(D) form a *system*. It is true that we have a series of descending levels but, just as the D-rationally warranted rules could not exist without the presence of the A-defining principles of rationality, so the latter have no meaning if taken in isolation. In other words, the defining principles exist as long as they can be instantiated in the particular cases, because no abstract/Platonic realm of rational principles is devised in this context. Rationality rests, in any case, on *praxis*.

Contrary to other pragmatist-flavored positions popular nowadays, this approach maintains that *universality* has a fundamental and unavoidable function in our rational endeavors. This is due to the fact that “presupposition” and “hypothetical reasoning” are key ingredients of our very capacity to rationalize the world in which we live. Indeed, there can be no rationality without universality.

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⁸ N. Rescher, *Moral Absolutes*, Peter Lang, New York-Bern 1989, pp. 41-62.

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