

Why we should not be postmodernists*

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1 Introduction

I wish to defend two claims in this paper. My first claim has two parts. First, I argue that there is a physical and social world out there which exists in a way that is independent of how we, *as observers*, represent it. In this sense, there is an objective reality. Following John Searle, I call this the claim of external realism. Note that this is an ontological claim. It says nothing about whether we know anything about this objective reality, or how we might get to know it, or whether there can be multiple accounts of this reality. It just states that there is a way that the world is, which is independent of our representations of it.

The second part of my first claim is a version of the correspondence theory of truth: a belief is true if and only if it accurately describes the external world. To use a form of words of Susan Haack, if you claim that the world is thus and so. Your claim is true if the world is indeed thus and so. Furthermore, what makes this claim true is not that we, or someone with power, agree that it is true. The claim is true just because the world is thus and so. And it would still be true even if nobody believes it.

My second claim concerns the general methods we use to gain understanding of the external reality. I argue that in order to advance our knowledge of the external reality, and indeed to have any intelligible thoughts at all, we must adhere to some objective principles of reasoning. The content of rational inquiry is not the same across all domains of thoughts. For example, in logic and mathematics, the method for rational inquiry is relatively austere, defined by the basic rules of

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consistency, modus ponens, modus tollens, and so forth. In science, ethics, practical reasoning and other domains, the toolkit for rational inquiry is much richer, involving many inductive and deductive procedures. However, the defining feature of rational inquiry in all domains is its universality. To have a reason to make any claim or to hold any belief is to have a justification which is valid, not just for me, but for all those who are prepared to consider the evidence. This justification cannot be local, or relative to a specific culture or linguistic community.

Postmodernists (who sometimes called themselves neo-pragmatists), deconstructionists and those who claim that everything is socially constructed, reject these two claims. Here are some typical postmodernist statements.

Insofar as Truth does not reside in correspondence to reality but in certain local practices of writing, it is sometimes argued that the “word is the world” or that texts, broadly understood, are all there really is. This is because the “real” is brought into being only through inscriptions, that is, through images, language, and writing. In DECONSTRUCTION, the TEXT can no longer be compared with an external physical or social reality, because “beyond the text there are only more texts and traces of texts”. Signs point at other signs that no longer seem to point at an independent reality (Fuchs and Ward 1994: 483).

Realistic representations become true descriptions not by correspondence to noumenal objects, but by conformity to orthodox practices of writing and reading (Brown 1994: 229).

Our knowledge of truth is not based on some extralinguistic rationality, because rationality itself is demystified and reconstituted as a historical construction and deployment by human rhetors. Logic and reason are brought down from their absolute, preexistent heights into the creative, contextual web of history and action (Brown 1994: 231).

Such claims have received some philosophical support. Richard Rorty, for example, maintains that, ‘I do not have much use for notions like . . . “objective truth” . . . [The] pragmatist view [is] of rationality as civility, . . . [as] respect for the opinions of those around one, . . . of “true” as a word which applies to those beliefs upon which we can agree’ (quoted in Haack 1998: 32). He also maintains that,

It is . . . more difficult than it used to be to locate a real life metaphysical prigs. [But] you can still find [philosophers] who will solemnly tell you that they are seeking *the truth*, not just a story or a consensus

but an honest-to-God, down-home, accurate representation of the way the world is (Rorty 1991: 86, quoted in Haack 1998: 18).

[T]here are ... two senses apiece of “true” and “real” and “correct representation of reality” ... the homely use of “true” to mean roughly “what you can defend against all comers” ... [and] the specifically philosophical sense of “good” and “true” which, like the Ideas of Pure Reason, are designed precisely to stand for the Unconditioned (Rorty 1980: 308–309).

I shall argue that there are, well, compelling reasons not to accept the postmodernist positions.¹ But first let me deal with two preliminaries.

First, the issue of postmodernism cuts across other debates in Sociology, such as that between quantitative and qualitative methods. Irrespective of whether you are a quantitative researcher, an ethnographer, a historical sociologist, or even a ‘theorist’,² I would argue that you should not be a postmodernist.³

Secondly, the issue of postmodernism also goes beyond what has been called the science war—the debate on the status of science and scientific knowledge. It carries implication for ethics, legal philosophy and other evaluative domains too. For instance, is it true that all our deepest convictions about what is right, what is just, what is evil or beautiful ... just something we happen to believe in, which can be justified only within our own community or culture, and which carry no wider validity? On such issues, I believe that wholesale subjectivism is untenable. But these issues are more complex, and I will only point to the excellent discussion by Dworkin (1996) without actually discussing them in this paper (see also Singer 1993, chap.1).

The main part of this paper is structured as follows. In section 2, I present a defense of external realism. The main challenge to external realism is the argument of conceptual relativity. I shall outline this argument in general, and describe an empirical variant of this view—the linguistic determinism of Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf. I shall argue that the Sapir-Whorf thesis has been discredited

¹The arguments I present below are not my own. Sections 2 and 3 are essentially simplistic summaries of Searle (1995) and Nagel (1997) respectively. I also draw on the works of Haack (1998) and Pinker (1994).

²Theorist, that is, of the curious type who, as Goldthorpe (2000: 2–11) observes, take it as their primary task the mere elaboration of concepts rather than the explanation of established social regularities.

³See Gellner (1992) for a criticism of postmodernism by an anthropologist, and Hammersley (1999) for one by an ethnographer.

empirically, and that the more general philosophical argument of conceptual relativity, as articulated by Hilary Putnam, can be met within external realism. I will not say much about the correspondence theory of truth. I believe once external realism is accepted, the notion of ‘truth as consensus’ or ‘truth as agreement’ becomes quite clearly untenable. Most of my discussions in section 2 are summaries of John Searle’s work. In constructing my defense of the objective authority of rationality, I turn to Thomas Nagel’s argument within section 3.

2 External Realism

As John Searle (1999) points out, the belief in the existence of an external world is a common sense, default position for most people. Common sense positions often turn out to be incoherent and indefensible upon reflection, but they are not always so. Is there any good reason to doubt the existence of an external reality? Perhaps the most powerful argument against external realism is the idea of conceptual relativity.

Roughly the argument runs as follows: Any view of the world is inevitably a view from a particular vantage point. Nothing drops out of the sky with a label ‘this is a piece of rock’ or ‘this is a cat’ or whatever attached to it. When we observe the world, it is inevitable that we do so from within a conceptual scheme, which classifies the world for us. We may not be consciously aware of the conceptual scheme that we use, but it is there in the background, structuring the very act of observation, and giving shape to the ‘kaleidoscopic flux of impression’ (to use an expression of Benjamin Whorf) that the world presents to us. Reality is therefore relative to conceptual schemes. Furthermore, since conceptual schemes are human creations, they are arbitrary and historically contingent: What counts as real in one culture may not be so in another.

An important empirical variant of the conceptual relativity argument is the thesis of linguistic determinism of Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf. They argue that the categories of our native language determine how we think and what we see. Consider the example of colours. There is no dispute that ‘languages differ in their inventory of color words. Latin lacks generic “gray” and “brown”; Navajo collapses blue and green into one word; Russian has distinct words for dark blue and sky blue ...’ (Pinker 1994: 62). If language does determine how we think, people who speak different languages would actually see different colours, at least in the sense that members of some linguistic communities would be able to make finer distinctions among hues in certain region of the colour spectrum.

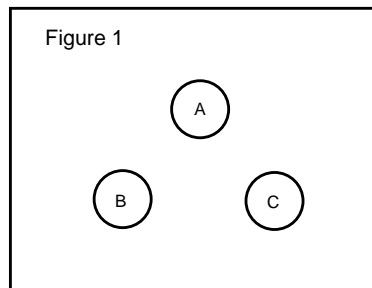
Whorf has also done research into native American languages. In his study of the Hopi, he writes that the Hopi language contains ‘no words, grammatical forms, constructions or expressions that refer directly to what we call “time”, or to past, present, or future, or to enduring or lasting ...’ (Whorf 1956: 57). Corresponding to this linguistic difference is a difference in metaphysics. He argues that it is ‘gratuitous to assume that a Hopi who knows only the Hopi language and the cultural ideas of his own society has the same notions ... of time and space that we have, and that are generally assumed to be universal. In particular, he has no general notion or intuition of TIME as a smooth flowing continuum in which everything in the universe proceeds at an equal rate, out of a future, through a present, into a past’ (Whorf 1956: 57).

What are we to make of linguistic determinism? The very limited work I have read in this area suggests that the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis has been empirically refuted. Summarising more than three decades of research into language and colour, Steven Pinker (1994: 62) writes that,

[H]umans the world over (and babies and monkeys, for that matter) color their perceptual worlds using the same palette ... fire-engine reds, grass greens, lemon yellows. Speakers of different languages unanimously pick these shades as the best examples of their color words, as long as the language has a color word in that general part of the spectrum. And where languages do differ in their color words, they differ predictably ... If a language has only two color words, they are for black and white ... If it has three, they are for black, white and red; if four, black, white, red, and either yellow or green. Five[,] adds in both yellow and green; six, blue; seven, brown; more than seven, purple, pink, orange, or gray.

Such cross-cultural commonality, Pinker points out, is due to the physiology of the human eye. We have in our eyes three types of light receptor cells called cones, each of which contains a specific pigment, which in turns makes the neurons respond best to one of three types of colour contrast: red against green, blue against yellow, and black against white. Pinker then goes on to report what he calls ‘the clinching experiment’ in colour perception research.

[It] was carried out in the New Guinea highlands with the Grand Valley Dani, a people speaking one of the black-and-white languages ... the Dani were quicker at learning a new color category that was based on fire-engine red than a category based on an off-red. The way we see colors determines how we learn words for them, not vice versa. (Pinker 1994: 62–63)



As for Whorf's claim on the Hopi language and metaphysics, subsequent research by Malotki, according to Pinker, has shown that Whorf has simply got it wrong. The Hopi language does contain 'tense, metaphors for time, units of time . . . ways to quantify units of time, and words like "ancient", "quick", "long time", and "finished". Their culture keeps records of sophisticated methods of dating, including a horizon-based sun calendar, exact ceremonial day sequences, knotted calendar strings, . . . No one is really sure how Whorf came up with his outlandish claims, but his limited, badly analyzed sample of Hopi speech and his long-time leanings toward mysticism must have contributed' (Pinker 1994: 63).

I am neither a cognitive scientist nor a linguist. So I have bowed to the authorities in the field. But of course Pinker, like any authority, may well be wrong. And future research may lead to a revision of our assessment of the Sapir-Whorf's thesis. I am open to correction (more on revisable results of rational enquiry in section 3). But let us, for the time being, assume that linguistic determinism has been empirically discredited. Even if this is true, we still need a general reply to conceptual relativity. The failure of a variant of this claim does not knock down the entire theoretical structure. Now I turn to the argument of John Searle.

Searle invites us to consider the following: a very large part of the universe already existed before there were any human beings (or other sentient beings). It will exist in the same way after the last human dies. In fact, much of the world would exist in exactly the same way even if there had never been any human beings. So why should we believe that reality depends on how we represent it? Critics of external realism, such as Hilary Putnam, has pointed to problems like the following. Suppose a small corner of the universe looks like Figure 1. How many objects are there? If you subscribe to Carnap's system of arithmetic, then there are three physical objects: A, B and C. However, if you adopt the conceptual scheme of Lesniewski, then there are seven mereological objects, namely: A, B, C, A + B, A + C, B + C, and A + B + C. So, really, how many objects are there? The answer is 'three', or 'seven', or something else, depending on the conceptual

scheme that you arbitrarily choose. Putnam's point is that there are many true descriptions of the world. And what is true is only true in relation to a conceptual scheme.

Is this a real problem for external realism? No, as Searle points out, if you bear in mind what external realism entails. External realism says that there is a world out there which is independent of our representation. It does not rule out the possibility that the world can be described in different ways, as long as the account under one scheme does not contradict the account under another scheme. Susan Haack (1998: 159) put it this way: 'Though there are different true descriptions of Putnam's imagined situation ("there are three regular physical objects," "there are seven mereological objects"), it doesn't follow, and neither is it true, that there is no one true description ("there are three regular physical objects, but seven mereological objects"; or better "there are seven mereological objects, *of which* three are regular physical objects")'.

To reinforce this point, suppose you walk into my front room and see two armchairs and a sofa. 'Two armchairs and a sofa' is a correct description of the content of my front room. But you can also describe what you see as a suite of furniture. So we have two descriptions of the same room. But is there a real contradiction here? It is difficult to see one.

Consider also the following argument from Searle: Suppose there was a tribe of people who lived near what we call the Himalayas. This group of people have their own language, and within that language, they have a peculiar definition of mountain. They have their own way of describing mountains, counting mountains, relating mountains to other things, and so on. This tribe came and went, and in their place, came a second tribe which spoke a different language, and they have a different conceptual scheme relating to mountains. So the Himalayas has been observed and described in quite different ways. Throughout these two periods of human habitation, what happened to the existence of the Himalayas and all the facts about it? Nothing.

Searle is quite explicit that his defense of external realism, summarised above, applies only to the physical world. That is, it applies to claims such as that 'each water molecule is made up of two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom'. Can his defense be modified to apply to the social world (to claims such as that 'income inequality in Britain has increased throughout the 1980s') or to mental states (e.g. 'on average, Britons are more sceptical about the European Union than are Germans')? I believe they do.

Human beings intervene in the world. As a result, parts of the world, such as the British Monarchy, the European Union, marriage or money, would not have existed if there had never been any human being. It is also obvious that if there were no human being (or other sentient being), there would be no mental state. So clearly the social world depends on our *existence*. However, I still maintain that the social world is independent of how we, *as observers*, represent it. The same is true of mental states.

Consider the following hypothetical example. An anthropologist paid a visit to a society, where she carefully observed and recorded the local institutions, customs, beliefs and values. Then she went away and wrote a book on the basis of her observations and analyses. Shortly afterwards another anthropologist came along who, let us assume, remarkably did not know about the first anthropologist and her book. He observed the same people and subsequently wrote another book. Suppose further that the two anthropologists have come to very different conclusions about the people they studied. Say, one thought that the society was very patriarchal in some specific and pertinent way, while the other thought that it was not patriarchal at all.

How is this possible? Perhaps the institutions and beliefs in question have changed between the two visits, though this would be rather unlikely. A more plausible explanation is that one anthropologist has got it right while the other was mistaken, or perhaps both were mistaken about some aspects of the phenomena they studied. What is impossible is that the two anthropologists were both right, if their claims were mutually contradictory. The key point here is that underlying all such scenarios is an unavoidable assumption: that the institutions of this society and the belief prevalent in that place were in a particular state, which did not depend on how any anthropologist thought about it. Without this assumption, we might end up in the impossible situation where mutually contradictory claims are both true.

Of course, the social world also reacts to observations made about it. A crude example would be that a rumour (founded or not) about the liquidity of a bank may lead to a run on it and, as a result, brings about a liquidity problem to the bank. But such a chain of events, if it did happen, is itself part of the social world, and the derived fact 'rumour led to a bank-run' would then be independent of how we, *as observers*, represent it. The same can be said if there was no run on the bank despite the rumour, or if there was no rumour at all.

To avoid misunderstanding, I would stress again that the claim of the existence of an external social reality does not imply that we know anything about it. It

does not even imply that this reality contains specific substantive content to be understood. But having no specific substantive content, if that is indeed the case, would also be a state of the social reality which is independent of the observer's representation. This last remark is less fanciful than it might seem at first sight. In fact, it has been demonstrated already. Consider the problem of non-attitude. Academics, government agencies, marketing companies have long been studying social attitudes, political preferences, and public opinions of all sorts. Typically, questions are put to a sample of respondents, who will then choose an answer from, say, a list of categories on a Likert scale. The naive assumption of many of such studies is that the frequency distribution of the responses thus solicited represents how opinions on that issue are distributed in that society. Converse (1964, 1970) has shown that often a large proportion of the respondents in such studies, despite being perfectly cooperative, may have no real opinion over the issue in question. This occurs when the respondents have not thought about the issue, or if they have, not in terms of the categories in which the questions were put.⁴

3 Objective Rationality

My argument in this section is a summary of Nagel (1997). Nagel points out that we need to distinguish criticisms of specific examples of reasoning from general challenges to the objectivity of rationality itself.

When we engage in reasoning of any type—in science, in ethics, or at the everyday practical level—it is easy to make mistakes. There may be a gap in our logical deduction. Our attention may lapse for a split second whilst we are carrying out a moderately complex arithmetic calculation. We may draw a false analogy between cases which really are different, or fail to consider a possibility that is not ruled out by the evidence. It is very common to subject our own or other people's reasoning to criticism of this sort. In fact, this process of criticism or self-criticism is indispensable to science and to all scholarly studies. But criticism of this type does not question the objectivity of reason. Quite the contrary, it relies upon an objective, unconditioned rationality, because any mistakes identified through such a process are mistakes, not just for me, but are universal, in the sense that anyone looking over my shoulder should be able to arrive at the same conclusion. Such criticisms are internal to rational inquiry, so to speak.

⁴Methodological and theoretical advances have been made in relation to the study of attitudes and non-attitudes, see Duncan, Stenbeck and Brody 1988, Brooks 1994.

We can also criticise particular examples of reasoning externally. Consider, for example, the recent legal case involving David Irving. In this case, the presiding judge Mr Justice Gray rules that ‘Irving had falsified history in order to exonerate Hitler, [because he was] driven by his anti-semitism and pro-Nazi views’ (The Guardian, 6 May 2000). This is a psychological explanation. In offering his judgement, Gray presents an external view of Irving and his argument. He traces the source of Irving’s mistakes not to the structure of his argument, but to his political views which there is no reason to accept. I am not sure about the exact nature of the accusation made against Irving. Perhaps it is one of intellectual dishonesty, but there is also a hint of self-delusion or perhaps rationalisation. In any case, criticism of this type still does not challenge the objectivity of reason. In fact, Gray’s point is that any reasonable person who looks at the historical evidences available to Irving would come to a conclusion very different from his.

Criticism against particular examples of reasoning are commonplace and indispensable in science and in everyday lives. But if we try to consider the possibility that *nothing* carries objective authority, then the argument will necessarily break down. This is because wholesale relativism is self-refuting. As Nagel (1997: 15) remarks:

[T]he claim “everything is subjective” must be nonsense, for it would itself have to be either subjective or objective. But it can’t be objective, since in that case it would be false if true. And it can’t be subjective, because then it would not rule out any objective claim, including the claim that it is objectively false.

To put this point differently, postmodernists claim that reason itself is historically contingent, that it has no universal, objective authority. This is a very strong claim, and strong claims require powerful arguments to back them up. But how do we develop any argument except by reasoning? If postmodernists are right, we will have no capacity to do so. Any challenge to reason must employ reason; it presupposes the authority of reason. In other words, the general challenge to the objective authority of reason is simply unintelligible.

The upshot, as Nagel put it, is that there are some thoughts which we simply cannot get outside of. To claim that something is local, relative, perspectival, we need to locate it in a non-relative, objective framework. Furthermore, to accept the objective authority of reason is *not* being uncritical, because all critical faculty presupposes such an authority. In fact, even the solipsist, who doubts the existence of everything except his own mind, accepts the authority of reason. To see this, consider the solipsist’s worry: what evidence about the external world do I have except my sensory experience about them? Since I have no direct, unmediated

evidence of the external world, all my experience is consistent with the possibility that there is nothing but my own mind, that all my experience is just a very complex dream.

It should be clear that even such an extremely sceptical position relies on the authority of reason. Reason is the regulative mechanism of all intelligible thoughts. We ask ourselves: of all the impressions that we have, what are mere appearances and what are real. To answer this question, we first identify rationally all the logical possibilities. Then we criticise these possibilities, with the aim of ruling out as many competing accounts as possible. This is a progressively destructive process, until we get to the point where reason cannot help us further to tell between the alternatives (perhaps because of the limited information currently available to us, or perhaps because something is simply indeterminate). In terms of the structure of thought, this is no different from the solipsist's.

This is Nagel's general reply to the postmodernist claim that reason is historically contingent and has no universal objective authority. But Nagel also points out that when the rational basis of any specific belief is challenged, repeating the general reply will not do. The response must be piecemeal and specific. This is because, as we have seen, we could have made mistakes during any reasoning process. Arguments which are thought to be robust may be shown to be perspectival in the future. In other words, while the objective, universal authority of reason cannot be challenged, the results of any particular instance of reasoning are clearly revisable. However, the process of revision has to be disciplined by the authority of reason.

4 Closing remarks

In this paper, I have tried to defend two claims rejected by postmodernists—external realism and the objective authority of reason. If my defense stands up to challenge, as I believe it does, then we should not be postmodernists. In this closing section, let me speculate a little on why postmodernism seems to have such an appeal to sociologists. I think this is because of certain misunderstandings of what postmodernism entails, or equivalently what follows from the rationalist, external realist position. I will comment on two of the misunderstandings here.

As their protagonists are keen to point out, the postmodernist position has political implications. From the postmodernist point of view, not only do reason and science have no special epistemological status, they are just politics. Thus, Seidman (1994: 124–127) argues that,

Once the veil of epistemic privilege is torn away by postmodernists, science appears as a social force enmeshed in particular cultural and power struggles. The claim to truth, as Foucault has proposed, is inextricably an act of power . . . Instead of asking what is the nature of reality or knowledge in the face of conflicting conceptual strategies . . . I suggest we evaluate conflicting perspectives by asking what are their intellectual, social, moral, and political consequences . . . Postmodern justifications shift the debate from that of Truth and abstract rationality to that of social and intellectual consequences.

I believe part of postmodernism's appeal is that it seems to offer a critical, politically engaged position to many issues. My reply to Seidman is as follows. If there is indeed an external reality and that rationality does have an objective authority, then of course we cannot turn away from seeking the truth. Furthermore, while it is true that there are often legitimate concerns about the relationship between truth claims and power, such concerns need not be raised within the postmodernist framework. We simply do not have to be postmodernists in order to ask questions such as 'who funds this research?'. At the same time, it must be recognised that pointing to the financial links, or connections of any type, between a piece of research and, say, a political party or an industry, is not the same thing as refuting it. The truth or falsity of any claim has to be established independently and solely on the bases of the merits of the argument and the quality of the evidence. Furthermore, as I have argued above, scepticism has to be based on the objective authority of reason. Without such a basis, there cannot be any intelligible critical enquiries.

I think a second source of the postmodernist appeal is that it seems to be so moderate and accommodating—different views are equally valid and there is no objective standard one can appeal to, as if by reflex, to weigh and judge the divergent views. By contrast, it seems so arrogant and simplistic to claim that there is external world which exists independently of how we might represent it. In relation to this concern, I can only repeat that the claim of an external reality does not imply that we know anything about it. I may be labouring an obvious point, but perhaps it is also worth pointing out that this claim does not imply the reality is simple, or black-and-white. If the reality is complex, and different parties to the same social situations have different accounts of what is going on, then this is the external reality.

It is very common to read about the need to allow for diverse epistemological positions and philosophical foundations in Sociology. This is no doubt essential. But it is also important to subject all such positions to critical scrutiny. I believe

the postmodernist position is one without a coherent and defensible foundation. Sociologists of all types should not be postmodernists.

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