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# OBJECTIVITY IN HISTORY

MARK BEVIR

## ABSTRACT

Many philosophers have rejected the possibility of objective historical knowledge on the grounds that there is no given past against which to judge rival interpretations. Their reasons for doing so are valid. But this does not demonstrate that we must give up the concept of historical objectivity as such. The purpose of this paper is to define a concept of objectivity based on criteria of comparison, not on a given past. Objective interpretations are those which best meet rational criteria of accuracy, comprehensiveness, consistency, progressiveness, fruitfulness, and openness. Finally, the nature of our being in the world is shown to give us a good reason to regard such objective interpretations as moving towards truth understood as a regulative ideal.

## I. INTRODUCTION

There are all sorts of reasons for rejecting the possibility of objective knowledge of the past. But one reason has become particularly prominent in the latter half of the twentieth century. In general terms, the argument is that we cannot have objective historical knowledge because we do not have access to a given past against which to judge rival interpretations. Hermeneutic theorists sometimes make this point by stressing the historicity of our understanding. We cannot have access to a given past because any understanding we develop of the past necessarily will be infused by prejudices arising from our particular historical situation. For example, Hans-Georg Gadamer has argued that "there is no understanding or interpretation in which the totality of this existential structure [the historicity of being] does not function, even if the intention of the knower is simply to read 'what is there' and to discover from his sources 'how it was'."<sup>1</sup> Genealogists make a similar point by pointing to the role of discourses and regimes of power in producing all knowledge. We cannot have access to a given past because the past is constructed by discourses which are themselves the effects of power. For example, Michel Foucault has argued that the ideal of history offering a true reconstruction of the past must give way to a history of the present offering a perspective on the past designed to challenge contemporary systems of power/knowledge.<sup>2</sup> Finally, deconstructionists make

1. H-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, transl. W. Glen-Doepel (London, 1979), 232.

2. See, in particular, M. Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, transl. D. Bouchard and S. Sherry, ed. with intro. D. Bouchard (Oxford, 1977).

much the same point by arguing that nothing can be straightforwardly present as a given truth. We cannot have access to a given past because the objects of the past, like all other objects, do not have stable meanings or identities. For example, Jacques Derrida has suggested that all discourse includes a "trace (of that) which can never be presented," so any attempt to pin down the nature of an object will exhibit a logic of supplementarity with the language of the account of the object referring to something ostensibly excluded from the account of the object.<sup>3</sup> All these are instances of rejecting historical objectivity on the grounds that we do not have access to a given past against which to judge rival interpretations. They reject the possibility of access to a given past for rather different reasons—the historicity of our being, the influence of power on discourse, the absence of any stable meanings—but they all agree that we cannot grasp the past as a presence, and that this threatens the very possibility of objective historical knowledge.

In what follows, I will offer an account of historical objectivity which relies on criteria of comparison, not on our having access to a given past. I will do so because if historical objectivity does not depend on our having access to a given past, then to deny that we have access to a given past is not to show the impossibility of historical objectivity. In short, I want to argue that even though we cannot grasp historical facts as immediately present truths, we can have objective knowledge of the past that is neither relativistic nor irrational. In doing so, I will not offer a direct critique of Gadamer, Foucault, and Derrida; after all, they all could accept the possibility of historical objectivity as I define it, limiting their critique to concepts of objectivity which rely on access to a given past. Nonetheless, I will offer an indirect critique of their positions; there are times when they seem to oppose historical objectivity as such, and the general orientation of their ideas often suggests they would not want to accept any concept of objectivity (this is particularly true of the antirationalism of Foucault and Derrida).

I will begin by considering why we cannot have access to a given past. Here I will show that even though we cannot have access to any given truths, historical knowledge is not especially underprivileged at least in this respect. Next, in the bulk of the essay, I will construct a general account of objective knowledge in terms of criteria of comparison, and show how this account applies to history as exemplified by discussions of Locke's views on property. Finally, I will defend this account against the charge of out-and-out relativism.

## II. A CRITIQUE OF EMPIRICISM<sup>4</sup>

Empiricists argue that historians can justify their interpretations using a logic of either vindication or refutation. Logics of vindication tell us how to determine

3. J. Derrida, "Différance," in *Margins of Philosophy*, transl. A. Bass (Chicago, 1982), 23.

4. Empiricism is a disputed term. In what follows, I use the concept in a narrow sense, the content of which is indicated by the ensuing account of verificationism and falsificationism. There are broader senses of empiricism, some of which might entail the annexation of my account of objectivity as itself empiricist. The difference seems to me to depend largely on whether one adopts

whether a given historical analysis is or is not true, while logics of refutation tell us how to determine whether a given historical analysis is or is not false. Verificationists defend the ideal of vindication, arguing that we can decode all reasonable interpretations into a series of observational statements, and we can see whether or not these observational statements are true because they refer to pure perceptions.<sup>5</sup> An interpretation is true if it consists of observational statements which are true, or, as probabilists argue, it is more or less probably true according to the nature and number of observational statements in accord with it. In contrast, falsificationists deny that any number of positive observations can prove an interpretation to be true.<sup>6</sup> Thus, they defend the ideal of refutation, arguing that the objective status of interpretations derives from our failure to make observations showing them to be false.

We need not worry ourselves too much with the differences between verificationists and falsificationists which derive from their respective stance towards the Humean problem of induction. What interests us is common to them both. They both ground objectivity in straightforward confrontations with a given past. All logics of vindication and refutation believe that ultimately we can confront interpretations with the facts in a test proving them to be either true or false (in the case of verificationism), or not-true or false (in the case of falsificationism).

So verificationism and falsificationism rely on the idea of a given past. If we are to determine conclusively the truth or falsity of interpretations, we must be able to compare them with a given past, so we must have access to the facts of the matter. Here empiricists guarantee our knowledge of basic facts by arguing that we have pure experiences of the external world; our perceptions are of the world as it is; the process of experience does not affect the way we perceive the world. Certainly, empiricists disagree about whether the pure experiences which decide issues of truth are the particular experiences of individuals or the intersubjective experiences of a community, but whatever view they take, they defend some sort of pure experience as the grounds of their logics of vindication or refutation.

I think that Gadamer, Foucault, and Derrida are right to reject the idea of a given past. They are right for the very general reason that we do not have pure experiences. The nature of a perception depends on the perceiver. A sensation can become the object of a perception or an experience only when our intelligence identifies it as a particular sensation both distinct from, and in a relation to, other sensations. We become aware of a sensation only when we attend to it, and when we attend to a sensation we necessarily identify it, using abstract categories, as a particular sort of sensation. Thus, perceptions always

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a narrow account of empiricism defined against both realism and idealism or a broad account defined against idealism alone.

5. For a subtle version of the probabilist variety of verificationism see R. Carnap, *The Logical Syntax of Language* (London, 1937).

6. For a subtle version of falsificationism see K. Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (New York, 1959).

incorporate theoretical understanding. Our everyday accounts of our experiences reflect numerous realist assumptions, including that objects exist independently of our perceiving them; objects persist through time; other people can perceive the same objects we perceive; and objects sometimes act causally upon one another. This does not mean that our categories determine what experiences we have — objects do force sensations on us — but it does mean that our categories influence the way we experience the sensations we have. We make sense of the sensations objects force on us using our categories. Because our experiences embody theoretical assumptions, our experiences cannot be pure, and this means that our experiences cannot provide unvarnished data for determining the truth or falsity of our theories.

Empiricists might respond to this criticism by giving a phenomenological account of pure experience. Here the ideal of pure experience would refer to the content of our sensations without invoking realist assumptions about the relationship of these sensations to an external reality. This response will not do for two reasons. First, a purely phenomenological account of experience cannot capture the actuality of experience: when we see an object falling, we see an object falling; we cannot have a more fundamental experience, and we cannot give a simpler description of the experience. If we could deprive people of the theoretical assumptions entwined within their experience, we would be left with people so disoriented, they would not be able to make coherent sense of the world in the way they would have to if they were to describe their sensations. Second, the very idea of phenomenological experience already presupposes a background which includes realist theories. We cannot make sense of the idea that we have sensations which do not embody realist assumptions except in contrast to the idea that we have experiences embodying realist assumptions. More generally, to identify experiences with pure sensations bereft of intelligent resolution would be to identify experiences with things we cannot conceive of precisely because they cannot be objects of experience. Thus, even a purely phenomenological account of our experiences presupposes a prior realist account of the world.

Empiricism is false because experiencing is something done by individuals, and all experiences embody the theoretical categories of the individuals having the experiences. People make observations, and they do so in the light of their current opinions. Moreover, any attempt to abstract the notion of sensation from the experiences of individuals ends in the dismissal of the idea of sensation because sensation always occurs within the context of the experiences of individuals. The idea of experiences or sensations without prior theories is incomprehensible.

Because experience or observation entails theory, objectivity cannot rely on a logic of vindication or refutation. If an observation disproved a favorite theory, we could rescue the theory by insisting that the observation itself rested on a false theory; and, if an observation proved a detested theory, we could jettison the theory by insisting that the observation itself rested on a false theory.

Thus, we cannot determine conclusively whether an individual theory is true or false precisely because any such judgment must depend on various theoretical assumptions embodied in our observations.

But the limits of testing need not especially worry historians. The argument against empiricism is entirely general, applying to science as much as to history, and historians certainly need not aim at more secure knowledge than do scientists. What claim to objectivity do scientists make? Few scientists say they can give us conclusive answers; their theories are always vulnerable to improvement, revision, and rejection. What scientists do say is that their theories are the best currently available. This suggests that objectivity rests not on conclusive tests against a given past, but on a process of comparison between rival theories.<sup>7</sup>

### III. OBJECTIVITY THROUGH COMPARISON

Because our critique of empiricism implies that historical interpretations always might be mistaken, we must define an objective interpretation as one we accept as correct on the basis of rationally justifiable criteria, not as one we are certain is true. But this does not mean that we must reject the idea of objectivity. Rather, an objective interpretation is one we select in a process of comparison with other interpretations using rational criteria. Sometimes there might be no way of deciding between two or more interpretations, but this will not always be the case, and even when it is the case, we still will be able to decide between these two or more interpretations and innumerable inferior interpretations.

A logic of comparison must refer to human practices. Empiricists defend a foundationalism that tries to ground human knowledge in pure experience. They argue that experience provides us with certainties: perhaps certainties about what is so, perhaps certainties about what is not so, but definitely certainties. Yet they are wrong. The infusion of theories in experiences means judgments of truth always require something more than experience alone. What is this something? Once we reject the possibility of pure experience, we must allow for an irreducible subjectivity in the concept of judgment; we must allow that our knowledge depends, in part, upon us since our observations do not neutrally record reality, but rather make sense of reality through our understanding. In short, because experience contains human elements, knowledge contains human elements, and because we cannot eradicate these human elements, objectivity must be in part a quality of human behavior, not just a product of experience. Here objectivity represents a particular orientation towards experience, a product of certain types of human activity. Objectivity

7. Something akin to my account of objectivity through comparison is adopted by every contributor to *Scientific Revolutions*, ed. I. Hacking (Oxford, 1981). While there are clear differences in their positions, I have been influenced particularly by T. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, 1970); I. Lakatos, "Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes," in *Philosophical Writings*, Vol. 1: *The Methodology of Scientific-Research Programmes* (Cambridge, Eng., 1978); and L. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, transl. D. Paul and G. Anscombe (Oxford, 1974).

depends on our making reasonable comparisons between rival theories where comparison is a human activity. Thus, our account of justified knowledge must end not with a growing history of information, or theories, or putative certainties, but with a description of a particular attitude or stance towards such information, or theories, or certainties. Our epistemology must be anthropocentric.

The apparent danger is that reducing objectivity to a function of human practices leaves us with no control over the sorts of beliefs these practices can define as objective. Once we introduce subjective elements into our epistemology, we seem to threaten the very idea of rational or objective knowledge, raising the specter of an out-and-out relativism in which anything goes. Thus, our task is to define an anthropocentric epistemology incorporating rational criteria for accepting or rejecting specific interpretations. I will start by defining the human practice which provides the grounds of objectivity, and only afterwards turn to the question of what grounds we can give the out-and-out relativist for accepting the results of this practice.

Objectivity arises from criticizing and comparing rival webs of interpretations in terms of agreed facts. What is the nature of an agreed fact? A fact is a piece of evidence which nearly everyone in a given community would accept as true. Let us consider both the reasons why we must so divorce facts from truth, and the threat of idealism that arises from doing so. My definition of a fact follows from a recognition of the role of theory in observation. Because theory enters into observation, we cannot describe a fact as a statement of how things really are. Observation and description entail categorization (so, for example, when we see or describe a stone falling, we categorize the object doing the falling as a stone). In addition, categorization entails decisions about what other instances the thing being categorized resembles (so, for example, when we categorize a falling object as a stone, we decide the object falling resembles other stones, not, say, slates). Facts entail categorization. But because our categorizations can be wrong, facts can differ from how things are, from truth.

However, the role of theories in observation does not mean that facts depend solely on theories, as idealist epistemologies claim. We cannot describe a fact as a theoretical deduction because observations enter into theories. Any theoretical argument must rest on premises whose content comes from outside the theory because such arguments employ terms which refer to states and events in the world. Facts entail observations, and because observations stick to the world, facts too must attach themselves to the world. In this way, we can fend off idealism simply by insisting on an impersonal reality correspondence which constitutes the truth.

A fact is a proposition members of a community accept as true. Facts typically are observations embodying categories based on the recognition of similarities and differences between particular cases. But not all observations embodying categories will count as facts. For instance, if two backpackers catch a glimpse of an animal they believe to be a wolf, they might say that they saw a wolf,

but not go so far as to say that it is a fact they saw a wolf: their uncertainty about their classification could hold them back. Observations embodying categories count as facts only if they are exemplary, that is, if we cannot reasonably expect to have a better opportunity to judge the correctness of our classification. For instance, if a couple of naturalists watch a wolf through binoculars for an hour or so, they can say it is a fact they saw a wolf even though they thereby make certain theoretical assumptions such as those concerning the working of binoculars. A fact is an exemplary case of a classification. Thus, when we say that such and such is a historical fact, we are not simply asserting such and such, we also are asserting that such and such is either an exemplary case, or a case that has been tested against exemplary cases.

Historical interpretations explain facts by postulating significant relationships, connections, and similarities between them. They try to account for the facts being as they are by bringing out relevant parallels, overlaps, and distinctions. The important point is: a fact acquires a particular character as a result of its relationship to other facts which provide it with a definite context. Here interpretations reveal the particular character of facts by uncovering their relationship to other facts, by presenting a fact in terms of other facts that locate it in time and space, and suitably define the preconditions of its unfolding. Of course, as interpretations reveal the particular character of a fact, they often partially define the way we regard the fact. Interpretations do not just reveal the character of facts, they also create the character of facts, and, what is more, they guide our decisions as to what constitutes a fact. Because there are no pure observations, facts do not hold out their particular characters to such observations. Rather, we partly construct the particular characters of facts through the interpretations which we incorporate in our observations. Thus, we cannot say simply that such and such an interpretation either does or does not fit the facts. Instead, we must compare bundles of interpretations in terms of their success in relating innumerable facts to one another through highlighting pertinent similarities and differences, continuities and disjunctions, and the like.

Objectivity arises from comparing and criticizing rival webs of interpretations in terms of facts. The basis for such a comparison of rival views exists because historians agree on a wide number of facts which collectively provide sufficient overlap for them to debate the merits of their respective views. For instance, even if Peter's view entails theoretical presuppositions with which Mary disagrees, and even if Mary's view entails theoretical presuppositions with which Peter disagrees, Peter and Mary still might agree on enough facts to make debate worthwhile, and perhaps to enable them to reach a decision as to the merits of their respective views. Because they agree on numerous facts, the facts constitute an authority they can refer to in their attempts to justify their views and compare their alternative interpretations.

But, someone might ask, if facts embody interpretations, do not interpretations end up determining the nature of the facts they explain, and if interpretations determine the nature of what they explain, how can we judge interpre-



tations by their success in explaining these things? The whole process seems perilously circular. It is here that criticism plays a vital role. The existence of criticism means no interpretation can determine which facts it will encounter. The critics of a theory can point to facts the proponents of the theory have not considered, and demand that the theory explain these facts. Critics can highlight what they take to be counter-instances to an interpretation, and the interpretation must meet these tests set by its critics. In this way, criticism gives facts a relative autonomy which prevents the process of comparing interpretations in terms of facts from being purely circular.

Nonetheless, there remains the problem that appeals to the facts never can be decisive. For instance, if Peter refers to a fact apparently supporting his view and contradicting Mary's, Mary need not admit that Peter is right. Instead, Mary could question the fact or introduce a speculative theory to reconcile the fact with her original interpretation. It is at this point that we must take an anthropological turn so as to ground objectivity in human practices and the values they embody. When historians debate the merits of rival interpretations they engage in a human practice which has a number of rules defining a standard of intellectual honesty. These rules of debate are neither decisive nor independent of us; they neither compel us to give up our interpretations in specifiable situations, nor force us to comply with their vaguer strictures. Rather, they represent a normative standard which exercises a control on our behavior because we recognize their reasonableness. Thus, objectivity is principally a product of our intellectual honesty in dealing with criticism; when we contrast objective belief with biased belief, we recognize that objectivity is a normative standard arising out of a human practice.

Let us consider more closely the rules of thumb which demarcate the normative standard of intellectual honesty. The first rule is: objective behavior requires a willingness to take criticism seriously. If Mary does not take Peter's criticism of her views seriously, we will consider Mary to be biased. Nonetheless, as we have seen, Mary could respond to a fact or argument against her view either by denying the fact or argument, or by deploying a speculative theory to reconcile the fact or argument with her interpretation. The second rule is: objective behavior implies a preference for established standards of evidence and reason backed by a preference for challenges to these standards which themselves rest on impersonal and consistent criteria of evidence and reason. This rule limits those occasions when we can reject a fact or argument which contradicts our views. In particular, this rule sets up a presumption against exceptions: we should try to avoid responding to uncomfortable facts or arguments by declaring them to be exceptions proving our interpretation; instead, we should try to modify our webs of interpretations to accommodate troublesome cases. The third rule is: objective behavior implies a preference for positive speculative theories, that is, speculative theories postulating exciting new predictions, not speculative theories merely blocking off criticisms of our existing interpretations. This rule limits the occasions when we can have recourse to speculative

theories to reconcile an original interpretation with apparently contrary evidence. In particular, the third rule expresses a presumption against purely face-saving responses to criticism: we should try to avoid meeting criticism by personalizing the issue, fancy word-play, vacuous waffle, special pleading, or makeshift apologetic; instead, we should try to modify our webs of interpretations in ways that extend the range and vigor of their core ideas.

The rules that define intellectual honesty describe preferred behavior, not required behavior. This is because we can compare only webs of interpretations, not individual interpretations. Because experiences and facts embody understandings and interpretations, we cannot evaluate a particular understanding or interpretation except as part of a wider web of understandings or interpretations. Thus, if historians reject a fact, or introduce a speculative theory, in a way precluded by our rules, the interpretation they thereby invoke still might be part of a web of interpretations which our rules show to be highly desirable. We must respect our rules as we develop a web of interpretations, but we need not follow our rules on each and every occasion. Our rules are rules of thumb, not prescriptive laws.

Definite criteria for the comparison of webs of interpretations arise out of this account of intellectual honesty. These criteria fall into two groups. First, because we should respect established standards of evidence and reason, we will prefer webs of interpretations that are accurate, comprehensive, and consistent. Our standards of evidence require us to try to support our interpretations by reference to as many clearly identified facts as we can. An accurate web of interpretations is one with a close fit to the facts supporting it. A comprehensive web of interpretations is one that fits a wide range of facts with few outstanding exceptions, and especially one that fits facts from different areas, or from areas that previously seemed unrelated. Our standards of reasoning require us to try to make our interpretations intelligible and coherent. A consistent web of interpretations is one that holds together without contravening the principles of logic. Second, because we should favor positive speculative theories to those merely blocking criticism, we will prefer webs of interpretations that are progressive, fruitful, and open. Our speculative theories are positive insofar as they inspire new avenues of research, or suggest new predictions. A progressive web of interpretations is one characterized by positive speculative theories postulating new predictions not previously connected with that web of interpretations. A fruitful web of interpretations is one in which the new predictions made by associated speculative theories characteristically receive support from the facts. Here, fruitful progress comes largely from historians postulating speculative responses to criticism, so the more a web of interpretations cuts itself off from all possible criticism, the more it becomes a dead end, unable to sustain further progress. An open web of interpretations is one that consists of clearly defined propositions thereby facilitating criticism.

We cannot evaluate interpretations either definitively or instantly. In the first place, because objectivity rests on criteria of comparison, not a logic of

vindication or refutation, the web of interpretations we select as a result of comparison will be a web which best meets our criteria, not a web which reveals itself indubitably to be a given truth. Historians make sense of the past as best they can; they do not discover certainties. Thus, no matter how badly a web of interpretations does by our criteria, we will not reject it unless there is a better alternative in the offing. Effective criticism must be positive. There is no point in our attacking a web of interpretations unless we also champion a suitable alternative. When critics challenge our interpretation of such and such, we rightly ask how the critics would account for such and such. In the second place, because objectivity rests on criteria of comparison, not a logic of vindication or refutation, our selection of interpretations by a process of comparison will be gradual. How well a web of interpretations does in comparison with other webs might vary with time as protagonists and critics turn up new facts and propose new speculative theories. A single criticism can never demolish a reigning web because we must give the protagonists of a reigning web time to develop a speculative theory countering the criticism in a fruitful way. Thus, dogmatism can have a positive role. People can stick by challenged interpretations while they develop suitable responses to the challenge. Here a web of theories triumphs over time by winning an increasing number of adherents, but as it triumphs, fresh alternatives emerge, and old alternatives return with new additions. In this way, historians make better and better sense of the past through a continuous process of dialectical competition between rival webs of interpretations which themselves constantly progress in response to criticism.

#### IV. THE EXAMPLE OF LOCKE'S *TWO TREATISES*

My account of historical objectivity suggests that historians generally agree on certain facts, and they should conduct disputes between their rival interpretations in terms relying, at least implicitly, on criteria of accuracy, comprehensiveness, consistency, progressiveness, fruitfulness, and openness. This is true even of the history of ideas, the area of study of most concern to Gadamer, Foucault, and probably Derrida too. A brief consideration of a well known debate about the meaning of Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* will fill out my concept of objectivity through comparison by showing how something like this view of objectivity might be at work in this debate.

Just as historians generally agree on various facts understood as observations saturated with interpretation, so historians of ideas agree on several facts about Locke and his *Two Treatises*. They agree that Locke wrote the *Two Treatises*; that Locke used the idea of a state of nature to present his political views; that Locke argued that men have rights, including those to life and property; and that the *Two Treatises* justifies revolution in some circumstances, albeit exceptional ones. They agree on these facts, and others like them, irrespective of things such as their ideological affinities, their theories of meaning, and their professional standing. Moreover, because any number of intellectual historians accept such

facts, they can use them as a starting point for comparing their rival interpretations of Locke's work. Most theories in the history of ideas are either interpretations of texts, that is, attempts to show how various facts come together to give one or more texts a certain significance, or they are philosophical views of the general nature and place of texts and ideas in history and society. For instance, C. B. Macpherson marshalled various facts to argue that Locke defended the rationality of unlimited desire, and so capital accumulation, in a way that provided a moral basis for capitalism. What is more, Macpherson did so in the context of a broadly Marxist historiography, according to which British theorists of the seventeenth and eighteenth century adopted ideas which reflected the emergence of a capitalist economy.<sup>8</sup>

When historians criticize and compare theories in terms of accepted facts, they use criteria of accuracy, comprehensiveness, consistency, fruitfulness, openness, and progressiveness. Thus, Alan Ryan has criticized Macpherson for inaccuracy.<sup>9</sup> He argued that Macpherson was wrong to say Locke thought rationality was restricted to one class who went in for the acquisition of capital goods. Rather, Locke explicitly said that all adults apart from lunatics were rational enough to understand what the law of nature required of them. Ryan also criticized Macpherson, at least implicitly, for failing to be comprehensive: Macpherson's theory could not account for the many passages in the *Two Treatises* that appear to say things clearly contrary to Macpherson's interpretation. More generally, Ryan suggested that Macpherson's errors stem from an unfruitful method. Macpherson's historiography led to an emphasis on factors other than Locke's text as a basis for a reading of it, but when Ryan evaluated this reading against the text he found passages in it showing the reading to be wrong. Macpherson's historiography was unfruitful because it inspired a prediction that received no real support from the facts. In contrast, Ryan recommended a method based on reading the text alone so as to uncover what Locke said, if not what Locke intended to say.

John Dunn too has criticized Macpherson for not being comprehensive: Macpherson's theory took no account of Locke's religious faith, a faith which provided the unifying theme of his thought.<sup>10</sup> In particular, Dunn argued that Locke could not have intended to demonstrate the overriding rationality of capital accumulation precisely because his view of rationality depended on his religious beliefs, and so for him the rationality of any action in this world necessarily would depend on the effect of the action on one's afterlife. More recently, James Tully has developed Dunn's broad critique of Macpherson by interpreting the *Two Treatises*, within the context of Locke's religious beliefs, as an attempt to defend a self-governing community of small proprietors enjoying the security to harvest the fruits of their labors, an ideal which Tully sees as contrary to capitalism.<sup>11</sup> More generally, Dunn, too, related Macpherson's

8. C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (Oxford, 1962), chap. 5.

9. A. Ryan, "Locke and the Dictatorship of the Bourgeoisie," *Political Studies* 13 (1965), 219-230.

10. J. Dunn, *The Political Thought of John Locke* (Cambridge, Eng., 1969).

11. J. Tully, *A Discourse on Property: John Locke and His Adversaries* (Cambridge, Eng., 1980).

erroneous view of Locke to a faulty method.<sup>12</sup> Macpherson paid too much heed to the socioeconomic context of the texts he studied at the expense of their linguistic contexts; thus, to interpret Locke as an ideologue of capitalism is to ignore the importance of religious beliefs at the time Locke wrote, thereby reading into Locke a modern preoccupation with economic concerns. Instead, Dunn advocated, against Ryan as well as Macpherson, a method which would focus on the intentions we can sensibly ascribe to authors in the light of what we know of the characteristic beliefs of their time.

Because people can respond to criticism in a way that strengthens their theory, comparison must be a more or less continuous activity. Here, however, our criteria of comparison suggest we should scrutinize the way in which people deflect criticisms to see if they do so in a progressive manner maintaining the openness of their theory. Thus, if Macpherson responded to the criticisms of Ryan or Dunn, or if Ryan responded to the criticisms of Dunn, we would want to know whether their revised views represented either a progressive development of their theories or a purely defensive hypothesis. For example, Neal Wood has defended an interpretation of Locke that we might regard as a revised version of Macpherson's view insofar as it apparently rests on a fairly similar, broadly Marxist, historiography.<sup>13</sup> Wood criticizes Tully's interpretation of Locke for being incomplete, and possibly inconsistent: we cannot reconcile Tully's view with many established facts about Locke and his views, such as that Locke charged interest on loans to good friends, served the Whig aristocracy faithfully, supported slavery, and did not condemn wide income differentials. However, these criticisms of Tully do not suggest new insights, but merely counter a particular alternative to Macpherson; by themselves, therefore, they would represent a purely defensive attempt to block criticism of the Marxist outlook. However, Wood also extends the Marxist outlook by presenting a revised theory which he claims accounts for the limitations of Macpherson's original view of Locke. His Locke is a theorist of agrarian capitalism, not an apologist for a mercantile and manufacturing bourgeoisie. How progressive this view of Locke really is, and whether or not the Marxist outlook as a whole is characterized by progressive responses, need not concern us. What matters for our discussion is the way that historians might use my criteria of comparison to judge objectively rival interpretations and revisions to interpretations.

#### V. DEALING WITH RELATIVISM

Numerous historical debates could have illustrated the way historians might deploy my criteria of comparison to defend their interpretations. But any example I chose probably would meet the objections that an account of historical objectivity based on generally accepted facts and criteria of comparison fails

12. For Dunn's methodological beliefs see J. Dunn, "The Identity of the History of Ideas," *Philosophy* 43 (1968), 85-104.

13. N. Wood, *John Locke and Agrarian Capitalism* (Berkeley, 1984).

because we have no reason to assume the interpretations we so select will give us more or less accurate knowledge of the past. In particular, any explicitly subjective concept of historical objectivity such as mine will arouse the two dreaded phantoms of relativism, namely, irrationality and incommensurability. Critics will complain, first, that even if historians generally agree on the facts, and even if they have criteria for comparing webs of interpretations, they still cannot make rational decisions on the basis of these facts and these criteria. Just because certain facts are generally accepted does not make them true. On the contrary, if historical facts depend on human practices, they might differ from the truth, and this suggests our webs of interpretations are conventional, so our historical knowledge is irrational.<sup>14</sup> Critics will complain, second, that even if some historians can agree on facts, and even if they have criteria for comparing webs of interpretations, other historians still might reject both these facts and these criteria. After all, if our webs of interpretations rest on conventional facts, our interpretations are acceptable only to historians who accept our conventions, and this suggests our historical knowledge is incommensurable with the knowledge of historians from other cultural backgrounds.<sup>15</sup> How can we meet these criticisms?

Let us begin with the problem of irrationality. Any attempt to defend historical objectivity by invoking generally accepted facts must steer a course between the Scylla of arbitrariness and the Charybdis of circularity. If we do not attempt to justify our facts as true, if we rely solely on historians generally accepting them, they will appear arbitrary, and so incapable of justifying our interpretations. But if we justify our facts as true by reference to our interpretations, we create a circular argument whereby we justify the facts in terms of the interpretations and the interpretations in terms of the facts. There is a way out. We can relate generally accepted facts to truth by pointing out that our perceptions must be more or less reliable because human practices occur within given natural and social environments. Crucially, our knowledge provides us with an understanding of the world, our understanding of the world guides our actions in the world, and our actions in the world generally work out more or less as we expect. In contrast, a radically false understanding of the world would prove unsustainable because it would lead us to act in ways which would prove unsustainable. Again, our natural environment limits the actions we can perform successfully, and so the ways we can understand the world. Because we must act within the world, the actions we can perform successfully are limited by the nature of the world, and because our interpretations and perceptions inform our actions, our interpretations and perceptions too are constrained

14. This seems to me to be the criticism suggested by the anti-rationalism of Foucault, and to some extent Derrida, who argues that it is precisely because knowledge rests exclusively on human practices, epistemes, discourses, or regimes of power that there is no rational basis for such knowledge.

15. This seems to me to be a criticism suggested by—or perhaps I should say a criticism that could be levelled at—Gadamer's defining truth solely within the context of a tradition: if questions of truth are settled within a tradition, we cannot expect historians from outside our tradition to share our answers to these questions.

by the nature of the world. For example, suppose that John operates a dogsled in the Arctic Circle but he does not perceive any difference between dogs and wolves. Before too long, John will run into serious trouble. Suppose now that all humans had perceptions as unreliable as John's. In this case, humanity as a whole would have run into serious problems long ago. Thus, the very fact that we are here, let alone the successes we have had in manipulating the world according to our wills, is strong evidence that our perceptions generally are reliable. Further, because we can rely on the broad content of our perceptions, we have a good reason to assume the facts we agree upon usually will be true; after all, facts are simply exemplary perceptions. Finally, because we can assume accepted facts usually will be true, interpretations based on these facts will be relatively secure. In short, we can ground interpretations in facts, facts in perceptions, and perceptions in our ability to interact successfully with our environment.

We can relate historical objectivity to truth because our ability to find our way around in the world vouches for the basic accuracy of our perceptions. Here my anthropological epistemology takes on a naturalistic tint. It is our place in the natural order of things which enables us to treat our knowledge as an approximation to truth. Nonetheless, my anthropological epistemology differs significantly from naturalized epistemologies. Most naturalized epistemologies equate an account of objectivity with a peculiarly abstract psychological or sociological study of the way people actually reach what we take to be justified knowledge. In contrast, my anthropological epistemology presents a normative account of objectivity according to which historians should justify their interpretations in terms of my criteria of comparison. It is just that when historians do justify their interpretations in this way, they can fend off the charge of irrationalism by reference to the nature of our being in the world.

Our interaction with our environment secures the broad content of our perception, not particular instances of our perception. This is why we can accept criteria for comparing rival webs of interpretations, but not a logic of either vindication or refutation for evaluating individual interpretations. Our ability to interact with our environment implies that our perceptions of our environment must fall within the limits demarcating the point beyond which such interaction would not be possible. Thus, most of the facts historians agree upon must be more or less true. However, while our perceptions as a whole must fall within these limits, no particular perception is foolproof. Thus, the facts historians agree upon are not secure enough to enable us conclusively to determine the truth or falsity of any particular theory. I can make the same point in a different way. Our knowledge ultimately derives from an empirical base, but our knowledge of this empirical base embodies the theories we use to categorize things in terms of similarities and differences, and to ascribe certain qualities to things so categorized. Here the empirical basis of our knowledge secures the general accuracy of agreed facts, thereby making sense of our efforts to compare webs of interpretations. But the theoretical component of our knowledge pre-

vents our being certain about any particular fact, and so about the truth or falsity of any particular interpretation. We can secure the general sweep of historical knowledge, but not a particular aspect of historical knowledge.

Let us turn now to the problem of incommensurability. The practice of objectivity depends on our comparing rival webs of interpretations. If historians disagree about the relative merits of different webs, they should draw back from the point of disagreement until they find an acceptable platform—consisting of agreed facts, standards of evidence, and ways of reasoning—from which to compare these webs. Proponents of incommensurability suggest historians from different cultural backgrounds might not share any such platform so they cannot compare their respective webs of interpretations. For the sake of argument, imagine a group of anthropologists who discover a lost tribe opposed to many of our beliefs, our standards of evidence, and our ways of reasoning. Nonetheless, universal disagreement does not preclude meaningful comparison, so the mere existence of the tribe does not establish a thesis of incommensurability. Rather, our critics must argue that the anthropologists and the members of the tribe cannot compare their respective worldviews. Here we will find that worldviews cannot be incommensurable because the anthropologists and the tribe can come to understand each other's worldview, and because they then can compare their worldviews by trying to account for the practices inspired by each worldview in terms of the other worldview.

Once again, the crucial point is: our beliefs guide our actions within given natural and social environments. Because our worldviews inform our practices, members of any given culture must recognize some similarities and differences in the things they encounter: all practices consist of repeatable patterns of behavior, and these can exist only if the practitioners recognize at least some situations as similar to, and others as different from, at least some previous situations. Further, because the perception of similarities or differences ultimately must rest on exemplary perceptions, exemplary perceptions will count as facts in all cultures: people in all cultures will be as confident about the things they take to be exemplary perceptions as they could be about any evidence or reason to accept those exemplary perceptions. Thus, even if the anthropologists and the tribe disagree with each and every fact the other group believes in, the structures of their worldviews must be more or less similar. All worldviews must rest on facts understood as exemplary perceptions which lead to a categorization of things in terms of similarities and differences. Thus, the anthropologists and the tribe can come to understand each others' beliefs provided they can perceive the similarities and differences in terms of which each other categorizes things.

Because the success of both the tribe and the anthropologists in interacting with their environments guarantees the broad content of both of their perceptions, they both could come to perceive the similarities and differences in terms of which the other group categorizes things. For a start, a broad guarantee of the perceptions of the tribe implies that many of the similarities and differences



embodied in their worldview must be true of reality. Further, a broad guarantee of the perceptions of the anthropologists implies that they can recognize similarities and differences that are true of reality, including the true similarities and differences contained within the worldview of the tribe. Thus, the anthropologists can come to understand the beliefs of the tribe; and, by parallel reasoning, the tribe can come to understand the beliefs of the anthropologists. Even if their categorizations are not remotely similar, it remains true that they both perceive things more or less as they are, their categorizations must be more or less true to reality, and they can come to grasp each others' categorizations precisely because these categorizations are more or less true of reality.

Once the anthropologists and the tribe understand each other's worldview, they can compare the merits of their respective worldviews by trying to account for the practices inspired by each worldview in terms of the other worldview. As the anthropologists come to perceive the similarities and differences informing the worldview of the tribe, they typically will come to offer explanations of these similarities and differences. Either they will incorporate a belief of the tribe into their worldview, or they will dismiss the belief as an illusion, in which case they will try to explain the persistence of this illusion in the worldview of the tribe. Similarly, as the tribe comes to understand the worldview of the anthropologists, either they will incorporate new beliefs into their worldview, or they will dismiss these beliefs as illusions, in which case they will try to explain these illusions. In this way, the anthropologists and the tribe acquire a stock of shared facts, or, at the very least, they develop explanations of each other's worldviews. Thus, they now can compare their worldviews in terms of their respective ability to account for shared facts, or, at the very least, to account for each other's worldviews. Their encounter with one another has resulted in their understandings becoming commensurable.

## VI. CONCLUSION

We can accept with Gadamer, Foucault, and Derrida that we do not have access to a given past, and still insist on the viability of a concept of historical objectivity couched in terms of criteria of comparison. Gadamer, Foucault, Derrida, and other critics of historical objectivity in terms of a given past might be happy to allow for my concept of objectivity. But I think not. Crucially, they are generally too ready to adopt some sort of irrationalist (in the case of Foucault and to some extent of Derrida) or conventionalist (in the case of Gadamer) concept of truth as defined in relation to a particular discourse or tradition. In contrast, I have shown that we can relate an account of objectivity to an objectivist account of truth by way of the nature of our being in the world. In this sense, my account of objectivity remains an account of objective knowledge, not just an account of objective knowledge within a subjective or intersubjective language, tradition, or practice.

There is a special reason why my account of objectivity should appeal to historians in particular. I have presented objectivity as a product of a human

or historical practice; historians, and others, arrive at objective knowledge by engaging in a particular type of comparative activity. In this sense, an assessment of the objective status of a particular instance of knowledge is something to be judged not by some atemporal comparison with given facts, but by a historical investigation into the place of that instance of knowledge at the particular time being considered. Again, the problem of commensurability is overcome not by adopting a scientific or philosophical overview of the different cultures under consideration, but by the actual encounter of these cultures within history. Thus, we can say that the working out of objectivity is itself a profoundly historical process.

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