

Objective Knowledge

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THE heed philosophers have paid to language, philosophers who otherwise are Humean in their attachments, is justified with the claim that they avoid the quagmire of Hume's psychology, the subjectivity of his "impressions" and "ideas." In this paper I will challenge the claim and argue that the linguistic studies, for all their objectivity, have created a quagmire no less objectionable and that unlike the former, it is merely a verbal affectation. It is the notion that knowledge is or can be, in some sense, objective.

Throughout the destructive part of this paper I shall try to attract the interest of linguistic philosophers by arguing after their manner; constructively, this will not be possible for the argument will of necessity broaden.

I

Here we will discuss the phrase "objective knowledge" and then take up certain phrases merely suggesting that knowledge is ontologically independent.

(A) The first point does not need the minute and subtle distinctions being employed today and I fear this weakens rather than strengthens it. But it is simply this: the phrase "objective knowledge" is self-contradictory in the sense that "This knowledge is objective" is a self-contradiction. Unless "belief" and "opinion," when compared to "knowledge," mark differences of kind rather than degree, it is no less so that "objective belief" and "objective opinion." To be sure, an expression of your belief is objective for me and vice versa, but knowledge always implies a subject, a knower, whereas it need never be known that we know.

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Objective knowledge, as such, would be something no one believed.

In partial recognition of this dilemma, but more as an uneasy accommodation than an explicit rejection, "intersubjective knowledge" is sometimes substituted. If by this is meant a statement expressing the beliefs of two or more persons, and if this is all, then it is not only preferable but a true description of a possible state of affairs, whereas the claim that knowledge could be objective is always false. But, of course, it must be interpreted as a statement held to be true by two or more persons for when minds are related internally it is a medical anomaly. Furthermore, if the minds in question did not have distinctive histories the peculiar appeal a statement has when agreed to by more than one person would be forfeited. Yet, when so interpreted, I am not sure that the substitution is acceptable, i. e., in contexts where "objective knowledge" or even "intersubjective knowledge" appear, the author seems to be saying more. It is, after all, knowledge and not merely a statement. To secure the point that even those who use the phrase "intersubjective knowledge" do mean more, it will be necessary to mention other phrases they employ, phrases which taken together make up a rather curious mode of speech. With the aid of mutually reinforcing metaphors of varying strength, it strongly suggests that knowledge is ontologically independent.

(B) Here I will discuss the practise of using such terms as "verified," "falsified," "empirical," "factual," and "scientific," as modifiers for "statements," "sentences," "propositions," etc. I will argue that these terms could not possibly modify "statement," etc., but that if they distinguish anything at all, then

it is something else altogether. For example, it might be said of a statement, "This statement has been verified"; but I shall argue that verified statements are indistinguishable from statements that have not been verified. Now, the "impressions" and "ideas" of Hume are objectionable to the linguistic philosopher because they are not subject to empirical tests, i. e., such tests seem to impress him. Hence it will be appropriate to use such a test here, a test similar to Hume's analysis of the idea of substance. Sometimes statements are said to be verifiable but may be, as of a given time, as yet unverified. To perform Hume's test the reader need only formulate such a statement and then go about the business of verifying it and noting the difference. Hume disposes of the notion of substance to his own satisfaction by asking if it is perceptible as a color, sound, taste, etc. and I propose the same test for distinguishing a statement after it is verified from the same statement before this operation was performed upon it. Perhaps the reader has seen philosophers scrutinize a statement and then say of the statement, "This statement has been verified" and now all we ask is, how, by merely looking at the statement, does he know this?

If, on the other hand, to verify a statement is not to do anything at all to the statement, then we have here a metaphor, a poetic indulgence for which the meter has not prepared us. What is the event that occurs and where does it occur such that we can speak of a "before" and an "after"? Obviously it is one of those philosophical questions only a layman could answer, but before taking it up we will turn to other metaphors.

"This statement," it may be said, "is an empirical statement." Or, "That statement is not an empirical statement." Now, every statement can be written, spoken, seen, heard, lengthened, shortened, and translated, so obviously the speaker does not mean that

the statement can be experienced. And certainly no one believes that statements have experiences. What then could be meant by the claim that a statement is empirical? A statement is empirical, it may be replied, if it is meaningful and non-analytic. But again, if we look to the statement alone we find no distinguishing marks and if it is then stated that an empirical statement is a statement which can be known to be true or false we are back with the problem of verification.

"Scientific" and "factual" are subject to the same critique as "empirical," i. e., they do not modify the statements as such; thus if they refer to anything at all it is to something else. But there is another term which has added greatly to the substantiation of knowledge; i. e., "correspondence" in the correspondence theory of truth. Objects correspond when they are similar in some respect so when it is said that a true statement corresponds to a state of affairs this can only have a consequence for our belief about the character of knowledge itself. That the phrase is a metaphor is clearly evident since no advocate of the theory has maintained that the statement written in a natural language, corresponds literally to the state of affairs in question. What is being said is that knowledge is such that it could correspond to a state of affairs for the correspondence theory of truth is not merely a theory of truth, but an oblique reference to the character of knowledge. For truth is no problem when knowledge has been fixed and until then it is irrelevant. According to this interpretation such metaphorical claims as "the statement is verified inasmuch as it corresponds to a state of affairs," is an implicit appeal to the notion of objectivity. It is as if "verified" and "corresponds" were geometrical points such that when lines are drawn through them, the lines do not cross at "statement" as they would in a straight-forward claim, but at some other point beyond the

noun-subject; i. e., "statement" is not the subject of the sentence at all and is only the grammatical antecedent of "it."

When it was decided to forsake Hume's introspective explanations of knowledge, and translate his terms into statements about language "correspondence" was substituted for such terms as "copy" and "represent" in Hume's analysis. But whereas the terminology of Hume was straightforward and referred to actual events, i. e., the experiencing of remembered "faint images," no one has ever observed a correspondence between a statement and a state of affairs.

II

The desire to lay hold of objective knowledge in the form of statements is not new in western thought. If it were possible the beneficial consequences would be incalculable; even the consequences in which we had no personal stake would be unlimited. Thus at least some of our desire consists of disinterested motives. One of the most irksome features of our world is that this desire to substantiate knowledge has met with repeated frustration. However in some areas it is so evident that we have accommodated ourselves to it in another mood it is not difficult to interpret the strained metaphors discussed above in terms of personal beliefs. But before doing so it will be useful to note the peculiar rhetorical possibilities of argument by metaphor.

Before he even had a name for it man has known that a metaphor artfully contrived presented an almost impregnable defense, since it begins by absorbing any forthright attacks that may be made against it while at the same time presenting a kind of gossamer plausibility. This is particularly true if when stated literally, what the metaphor suggests, sounds silly and makes the opponent seem woefully naive. To avoid Hume's psychologism it was necessary to psychologize our

natural vocabularies and syntax (e. g., Do propositions exist?) But this could not be accomplished literally for it became absurd; at the same time when placed in the form of metaphors the absurdity of the literal statement worked in favor of the advocate. "Of course," it could be claimed, "we do not mean that the statement is verified; we perform no operation on the statement." Or, "No one believes that knowledge is actually objective; it is not an object such as a chair or table and does not exist in the vicinity of statements or the objects they are about," etc. Yet all the while, the affected and ritualistic manner of speech is persistently cultivated.

What we are talking about here is not new and our vocabulary possesses ample means for its expression; the decision to speak in such awkward metaphors is not motivated by a vocabulary deficiency. If I say that a given statement is true whereas before I had not known if it were true, then I am referring to something that has occurred within my mind, the creation of a belief which, now that I have the belief, is expressed by the statement. That, until expressed, this event is private, is something no one can alter. If I say that the statement is false then I am simply saying that I believe the contradictory. If I say that I do not know if it is true, then I am saying that I have no belief expressed by the statement or its contradictory. Although I can give a partial causal explanation of many of my beliefs, I am unable to give an exhaustive causal explanation of any. Therefore I do not know if they meet the conditions of Hume's causal explanation; but whether they do or not, they exist in my mind, and if not, then so much the worse for the explanation. They were, I believe, caused, but since I do not know the details of their composition, I cannot label them empirical. Thus beliefs either exist or they do not, and statements are either the expression of a belief, the con-

tradictory of an expression, or unknown. I can think of no other significant label by which we may designate them.

Above, we suggested that not all of our motives in creating the illusion of objective knowledge are disinterested. And indeed they are not. We are secure in a homogeneous society where the acts of others are predictable and if the expression of all beliefs were identical, prediction would be much easier. Fur-

thermore, if we can cause beliefs in the minds of others we can go a long way toward securing not only a uniformity of action but desirable action. And an effective technique for causing such beliefs in the minds of others is that of first causing them to believe that not only trees and grass can be experienced but the pure distillate, knowledge itself. Thus, "objective," "Scientific," "factual," "empirical," etc., have only persuasive significance modifying neither statements nor beliefs.

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