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**Intentional and Reflexive Objectivity: Some Reflections**

In Section 5 of ‘In Defence of Objectivity’ (pages 166-9), Andrew Collier sketches out a distinction between two types of objectivity which leads to the centre both of his own thinking and to the issues at stake between realist and related positions on the one hand and relativistic, deconstructionist or antifoundationalist positions on the other. As Kate Soper and other contributors to this volume have noted, one of the key elements of Collier’s thinking is his stress on a self-distancing relation to objects. This emphasis, paralleled by, for example, Adorno’s frequent reference to ‘what the object has by itself’, as distinct from our subjectivistic or, worse, narcissistic relation to it, or the quotations from Macmurray in section 4, gives Collier an interesting and sensitive angle of approach to existentialist thought, sharing elements of its critique of excessive reflection and what Kierkegaard called calculation, while wishing to curb its excessively voluntaristic approach to knowledge and practice.

Collier attempts to capture this tension in terms of a distinction between intentional objectivity, which is object-related in the sense of Brentano and Husserl, and a more distanced reflexive objectivity which is driven by questions, often sceptical ones, about the nature of our relationship to the alleged object, its status and the very possibility of an epistemic or practical relation to it. Objectivity in this second sense needs to be kept in its place;

It is useful in showing us how intentional objectivity goes wrong – that is, how is it that our thoughts and feelings are sometimes merely subjective in the sens that they don’t correspond to their objects and are to be explained by the nature of the subject rather than that of the object?....[But] What reflexive objectivity can never be is the criterion of intentional objectivity. (p.168)
Collier illustrates this distinction via the difference between science and the sociology of science, or between theology and religious studies. Whether the science is good science or not is a scientific question, though the sociologist may be able to explain after the event why it was good or bad, and even to suggest in advance some reasons why we might reasonably expect it to be good or bad. Similarly, the existence of gods and so forth is a question for theology, while the discipline of Religious Studies is concerned with religious beliefs, practices and experiences in isolation from their alleged objects.

A sociologist of science may be a good scientist, but only by switching off the sociology; an adept at Religious Studies may be a good theologian, but only by switching off the Religious Studies (p.169).

More generally, Collier suggests that

It is a specific feature of human practice that we can always monitor what we are doing. It is another feature of human practice that we always do things worse when we do them reflexively. A monitored activity is a badly done activity (p.169).

In this brief contribution I want to suggest that, while Andrew is on to something of unquestionable importance in making this distinction, the ways in which he does so are unduly sharp and that the relation is not so much between two mutually exclusive types of objectivity between which we can only ‘switch’, as a continuum between the wholly unreflective practice which I might have called animal if I had not been taught not to by Andrew, Ted
Benton, and others, and a reflexivity so intense that it entirely inhibits the making of claims about the world or any intervention in it. And contrary to the view that shifts from one kind of objectivity to another are discontinuous, I want to suggest the alternative image of a permanent oscillation between different forms of reflexive monitoring relation. If I were speaking these words to you rather than writing them, for example, I would have to pay some more or less conscious attention to my level of audibility, and I would be looking for reinforcing feedback that I had your attention. Three decades of lecturing to more or less impassive audiences does not diminish this desire for feedback, and experimental analysis of telephone conversations shows how quickly we become nervous if there is no response at all to our monologue. More complicated issues of whether I am writing this text as clearly as possible or whether I am deliberately indulging in obscurity in order to impress you are not so much an interruption to the writing process as its more or less permanent accompaniment. Higher-order reflections on the nature of academic debate in the early twentieth century, the status of realism as a philosophical position and the degree to which it is known in different parts of the contemporary world, and so on, are also ‘always on’ in the background, as I think about the audience for what I am writing. In what follows I shall illustrate this line of argument a bit more fully in relation to three major contemporary social theorists, Jurgen Habermas, Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens, whose work is paradigmatic of the very widespread use of the term reflexivity in contemporary thought, and I shall close with what I consider a more problematic and challenging case, that of Karl Mannheim.

As I have argued elsewhere, the theme of reflection is central to Habermas’s thought, and in particular to what he has come to call a model of

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1 See, for example, Delanty 1997, May 1999.
rational reconstruction. His early critiques of technocratic and decisionistic politics are based on their neglect of reflection, as is his closely related critique of positivism. ‘That we deny reflection is positivism.’ The more precise language of rational reconstruction which he develops from the mid-seventies expresses the epistemic dimension of this approach, while his model of communicative action developed at the same time is intended to capture its practical dimension. Habermas understands his theory of communicative action not as an abstract normative theory of how we ought to behave, such as theories based on an initial decision to 'take the moral point of view', but rather as a reconstruction of our existing practices. As he put it in an interview in 1991,

"... I am not saying that people should act communicatively, but that they must. When parents bring up their children, when living generations appropriate the knowledge handed down by their predecessors, when individuals and groups cooperate ... they must act communicatively. There are elementary social functions which can only be fulfilled via communicative action. In our intersubjectively shared lifeworlds which overlap with one another there lies a broad background consensus without which everyday action simply could not work."

Formal processes of argumentation, whether in everyday life or in specialised domains of morality and politics, are the exception, "islands in the sea of praxis".¹

Habermas is therefore rejecting an approach which sees communicative action, which he distinguishes from merely self-interested or 'strategic' action, as a special activity belonging to a different realm from that of everyday practice. In stressing the pervasiveness of processes of reflection and justification in everyday life he is also rejecting the conclusions of Niklas Luhmann's system theory, that modern differentiated societies consist of subsystems which have no common
language in which to communicate. At the same time, however, we cannot simply affirm the model of individual or collective subjectivity which based on the 'philosophy of consciousness' derived from Descartes and Kant, in which a subject reflects on its relation to its own representations of objects. Neomarxist philosophies of praxis, Habermas believes, remain limited by this perspective, while on the other hand many modern theories give up on subjectivity and rationality altogether. What is required is what he calls in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* "another way out of the philosophy of the subject", one which reconstructs in a more complex intersubjective model the reflective operations previously imputed to an isolated subject or logos: "concrete forms of life replace transcendental consciousness in its function of creating unity". This model is both more abstract and more concrete than more traditional conceptions. More abstract, because the processes of reflection embodied in the public sphere cannot be simply localised in an agora or an idealised assembly or set of other institutions, but have to be identified throughout the society, like power in Michel Foucault's conception. And although, as we have seen, Habermas rejects a simple conception of societies as subjects, his conception of "undamaged intersubjectivity" in which he now attempts to render the idea of emancipation is grounded in the life-histories, retrospective and prospective, of individuals and collectivities. "Forms of life, like life-histories, crystallise around particular identities".

The universalism which Habermas upholds does not mean the authoritarian imposition of a particular conception with universalistic pretensions. As he put it in an interview in 1988 with Jean-Marc Ferry,

"What does universalism mean? It means that one relativises one's own form of existence in relation to the legitimate claims of other forms of life, that one attributes equal rights to the alien and the other, with all their idiosyncrasies and incomprehensible aspects, that one does not stick rigidly to the universalisation of ones own identity and precisely does not separate out what
deviates from it, that the spheres of tolerance must become infinitely wider than they are today - all this is what is meant by moral universalism."\(^5\)

This also means also that our attitude to established structures and traditions can only be a cautious and reflective one. Habermas stressed this earlier in the same interview with Ferry:

"The horror [of the Holocaust] took place without interrupting the peaceful breath of everyday life. Ever since then, a conscious life is no longer possible without a mistrust directed at continuities which unquestioningly assert themselves and purport to derive their validity from their unquestioned character."\(^6\)

What Habermas is offering then, is in a sense a philosophy of reflection which develops outside the limits of what has traditionally been understood by the philosophy of reflection, consciousness and the subject. It is a philosophy or a sociology for a world of the kind described, for example, by Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens with the notion that modernity has become reflexive.\(^7\) This is a world in which individuals are increasingly thrown onto their own resources to define their own social relations - what Habermas calls "risky self-steering by means of a highly abstract ego-identity".\(^8\) The process itself was built into modernity from the beginning and described as such by Max Weber and others at the turn of the century, notably in the concept of rationalisation. There has been a tendency to stress the promethean and world-making aspect of this process, but the 'moderns' captured in Max Weber's concept of ascetic protestantism and in Lucien Goldmann's analysis of Jansenism were also racked with anxieties and self-doubt which for theological reasons they could not acknowledge. This negative or tragic consciousness of modernity eventually developed, in Romanticism, into aesthetic and often ironical forms. The tension between these two aspects of modernity continues, and many of the earlier descriptions, with their contradictory emphases,
But if Habermas’s models of communicative action and reconstruction, and their application in his theories of discourse ethics, discursive democracy and constitutional patriotism, involve reflection and reflexivity at all levels, his thinking is perhaps uncomfortably dualistic in one aspect of the way in which he theorises reflection. Habermas regularly invokes a distinction, derived no doubt from social phenomenology, between a second- and a third-person orientation. Example In the former, we interact with the other as an interlocutor; in the latter, we move towards a more distanced interpretation or explanation of his or her behaviour. Once again, however, it seems to me that the complexities of taking the role of the other involve a complex interplay between these perspectives, to such an extent that their analytical distinctiveness is rapidly obscured, rather as the distinctness of the left- and right eye view is effaced in stereoscopic vision.

My second theorist of reflexivity is the late Pierre Bourdieu, who explicitly described his sociology as reflexive (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Bourdieu has increasingly come to define his sociology as reflexive (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Bourdieu, 1997), and the motif is present even in early works such as Le métier de sociologue (1968; 1991). Bourdieu shows how a vigorously, even brutally, Durkheimian and Bachelardian conception of the separation of social science from everyday thought can be combined with a sensitivity to issues of reflexivity and a non-defeatist strategy for handling them. Bourdieu’s rejection of structuralist objectivism had been partly driven by an awareness of the gap between formal rules, whether located in the heads of actors or those of social scientist, and the reality of practice(s). He was, therefore, suspicious both of sociological
commonsense and of actors' concepts, and also of the formal models designed to replace them.

...the sociologist who refuses the controlled, conscious construction of his distance from the real and his action on reality may not only impose questions on his subjects that their experience does not pose them and omit the questions that it does pose them, but he may also naively pose them the questions he poses himself about them, through a positivist confusion between the questions that objectively arise for them and the questions they consciously pose themselves... (Bourdieu et al, 1968: 65; 1991: 38).

The objectivity of science cannot be built on such shaky foundations as the objectivity of scientists. The gains from epistemological reflection cannot be really embodied in practice until the social conditions are established for epistemological control, i.e. for a generalized exchange of critiques armed with, among other things, the sociology of sociological practices (Bourdieu et al, 1968: 109; 1991: 74).

For Bourdieu, the sociology of knowledge is no a mere specialist field of the subject but rather an essential preliminary and accompaniment to sociological investigation. Like budding psychoanalysts who have to undertake a 'training analysis' with an established practitioner, all sociologists, he argued, should undertake a more or less formal autosocioanalysis. It is of course no accident that Burdieu cut his teeth in ethnographic fieldwork, where the interplay and tension between the horizons of expectations of the anthropologist and the culture under investigation is explicitly thematised as an epistemic resource.

Bourdieu's response to postmodern sociology and anthropology is thus that he has been long aware of these issues and drawn more appropriate conclusions. He insists that his is an 'anti-narcissitic' reflexivity that 'has little in common with a complacent and intimist return upon the private person of the sociologist or with a
search for the intellectual Zeitgeist that animates his or her work' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 72). Such indulgences, like a concentration on the 'poetics' of ethnographic writing, 'open[s] the door to a form of thinly disguised nihilistic relativism...that stands as the polar opposite to a truly reflexive social science' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 72).

This can be seen, for example, in his increasingly prominent statements in the 1980s and onwards about the roles and responsibilities of intellectuals, beginning with an interview with Didier Eribon in Le Monde in May 1980. In response to Eribon’s suggestion that his polemics in Le Sens pratique & elsewhere come close to anti-intellectualism, Bourdieu replies with a denunciation of the closed circuits of mutual admiration and support which 'make a Golden Delicious pass for an apple’ and by a summary of his more formal analysis of the class position of intellectuals as a dominated fraction of the dominant class – this ambiguous situation explaining many of the political positions they take up. But he goes on to say that their understanding of this situation gives intellectuals a certain possibility of freeing themselves from it – ‘the privilege to be placed in conditions which enable them to work at understanding their specific and generic determinations. And thereby to liberate themselves from them (at least partially) and to offer means of liberation to others. The critique of intellectuals, if it is a critique, is the other side of a demand (exigence), an expectation.’

Bourdieu’s own critical interventions in the public sphere should be understood in this spirit. And in another interview (Le Monde, March 14, 1992) he suggests: ‘There is no effective democracy without a true critical countervailing power. The intellectual is one, and of the first importance…. I wish that writers, artists, philosophers and scientists could get a hearing in all the areas of public life in which they are competent. I believe that everyone could benefit a lot from the extension into political life of the logic of intellectual life, of argumentation and refutation. Today, it is the logic of politics, that of denunciation and defamation, which often
spreads into intellectual life. It would be good for the ‘creators’ to fulfil their function of a public service and sometimes of public safety’.

Bourdieu’s model of reflexive sociology has been enormously fruitful in his own and others’ research. Like Habermas, however, he displays a certain inflexibility in one aspect which must surely be central to any reflexive sociology; the lay sociology practised by social actors themselves. Again the psychoanalytic comparison is relevant: lay sociology, like lay (self-) analysis is seen as an object of suspicion and a likely source of distortion.

On this issue Giddens is a good deal more flexible.


Tr. as The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity. Cambridge: MIT, 1987, ch XI.


6 Ibid, p. 150

Die nachholende Revolution, p. 88.

8 Die nachholende Revolution, p. 88.