

Introduction

These essays all circle around the problem of relativism, which is both simple and crucial. *We know better* – but how do we *know* that we know better? Others think the same with even greater confidence. There is a profound irony about the fact that this self-doubt has become most acute and anguished in the one civilisation which really does know better – namely, our own. Or rather, should this affirmation seem complacent and self-congratulatory and vainglorious, doubt seems most acute in the one civilisation which has persuaded, by the demonstration effect of superior economic and military technology, the rest of the world to emulate it. So, if its occasionally vacillating conviction of its own cognitive superiority is erroneous, it is an error which it has nevertheless, by fair means or foul, managed to foist upon others.

The claim to cognitive superiority is, however, accepted in only a limited sphere – that of natural science and related technology. This immediately raises the issue, pursued systematically by two of the essays (the second and the third), of the difference(s) between those areas and the regions in which rankings of cognitive excellence are far from consensual. Science and technology contain a fair degree of consensus internally, and receive fairly unanimous acclaim, within their sphere, from outside. But when it comes to explaining and appraising their performance, or accounting for their social roots, we find ourselves in disciplines (philosophy, sociology) where such convergence is largely absent.

It is no doubt significant that the culture heroes of the civilisation which has engendered cognitive breakthrough at least in some spheres should be Robinson Crusoe, Hamlet, and Don Quixote. They illustrate, firstly, the capacity to go it alone and reconstruct one's world from one's own personal resources, symbolised by Crusoe and exemplified in philosophy by Descartes; secondly, the tendency to fail to live up to standards of moral excellence owing to indulgence in sceptical trains of thought, and the capacity to view such weakness with sympathy, on the tacit assumption that well-founded doubt is to be preferred to brute confidence and firmness; and, finally, the pathetic capacity to leave the

2 Introduction

earthy certainties of one's own culture for a past or imaginary one. Each of these men highlights the failure of the cultural cocoon to encompass and smother the individual – or some individuals – within itself. It is of course tempting to speculate whether it is just because it is capable of engendering, tolerating, perhaps encouraging such doubts within itself, that it has become the most powerful and expansive tradition on earth.

Having thus both power and doubt thrust upon it, it has for some three centuries struggled with this question: in a world of competing dogmatisms and thought-styles, how on earth do you pick the right one? The story of this debate is largely the story of modern philosophy, in a broad sense. The answers offered have oscillated between two poles. At one extreme, there is the claim that the structure of our minds is merely the structure of *all* human minds, or even of all rational minds (Kant), and that, give or take a few built-in tendencies to error (the dialectic in Kant's, pejorative sense), valid cognition, and even a luminously self-sustaining morality, are our birthright. If this is so, why did the kind of science and morality which Kant admired, and legitimated as the inherent potential of human mind *an sich*, take quite a long time, historically speaking, to make its appearance? This question did not escape the generation of thinkers who followed Kant, and they answered it in ways which were no longer his.

At the other end of our polarity there are the romantics, who repudiate the seemingly vainglorious assumption that our reason is the norm of all humanity. They reject any claim of pre-eminence which has been made for *our* form of life, or the High Culture within it, partly perhaps from a kind of inter-cultural egalitarianism, and partly from a quite special masochistic distaste for their own culture. All cultures are equal, but one of them (their own) is a damn sight less equal than the rest. So they advise us to return to the cocoon-*Gemeinschaften* of the past, on the somewhat incoherent grounds that (a) they were much better, and (b) we never did or could leave them anyway. If this were true, it really would be rather difficult to make any sense of the transformation of the world in the past three centuries. One of the essays (the seventh) discusses in some detail an interesting recent exegesis of the philosopher who seems to be the most influential of the twentieth-century romantics.

Between these two extremes, other positions are available. There is the view that a wide diversity of cognitive styles and convictions does indeed exist, but that they can all be ranked as runners in a single race (cosmic, biological, or historical). Their difference of position is due in the end only to the fact that differential speeds have deposited them at diverse points along what, in the end, is but a single race-course. This

solution, associated with the key word 'Progress', was probably the most pervasive idea in the nineteenth century, and in ours is still championed by thinkers as distinguished as Quine or (in one theme manifest in his thought) Popper. It certainly has the merit of not insisting on an unpalatable universality of our own way of thinking, or of pretending, contrary to the manifest conviction of the participants in this alleged race, that each participant has his own finishing line and that *all* of them are winners. However, it still does claim that there is but one race, and that all participants are running in it. I am rather sceptical about either of these contentions.

The truth of the matter seems to me to be that diversity and radical change are indisputable realities, but that the solutions we have inherited from the nineteenth century to the problems called forth are no longer workable or even plausible. The romantic solutions are frauds. Nor is there a single-criterion perpetual endeavour, nor indeed is there perpetual change. Sustained and cumulative cognitive growth is neither a birthright nor the fulfilment of some age-old pervasive trend: it is an altogether singular predicament. So if the inherited solutions won't do, one must seek another. These essays explore the way towards it.

The comprehension of our singular situation, and of the chasm which separates it from other social orders, may well require an approach which is not the same as that formed within the successful, consensual, cumulative sciences. This brings us back to the problem of the difference between the natural and the social/human sciences, which is the theme underlying most of the book. One essay in particular (the fifth) is concerned with the discussion of one recent prominent style in the social sciences and humanities which has in fact had only partial success; and another (the sixth) with the type of half-historical, half-anthropological approach to the preconditions of our situation, which I believe to be fruitful. The work discussed in that essay is concerned with the emergence of the kind of High Culture which eventually becomes universalised in our type of society, and it is all the more illuminating by doing it through the seemingly trivial, but in fact very revealing, subject of gastronomy.

It is not the function of an introduction to summarise the arguments of a book. I only wish to say that, though the essays contained in the volume were written in diverse contexts, they possess a common core of problems and ideas. They play their part in a single, coherent, though as yet incomplete endeavour.

1 | Positivism against Hegelianism¹

It is a curious but indisputable fact that every philosophical baby that is born alive is either a little positivist or a little Hegelian. It is also interesting that philosophically, Europe has remained in the eighteenth century, as it was prior to the diplomatic revolution: there is an Anglo-Austrian alliance, facing a Franco-Prussian one. Muscovy and the states and principalities of the Mediterranean area tend to be aligned with the Paris–Berlin axis, whilst the Scandinavians side with the opposing camp. Poles of distinction have fought on both sides.

A pattern which seems so deep, pervasive and persistent does require explanation and comment. It is possible, but improbable, that when so many men continue to be attracted by a given style of thought, there should be nothing whatever in it. Each side does of course have a very definite image of the other. If either of these images-of-the-enemy constituted the whole truth there would remain little to be said, other than dismissing one side or the other as unworthy of serious attention. There is even the possibility that both sides might deserve such dismissal. Professor J. O. Wisdom of York University, Toronto, once observed that he knew people who thought there was no philosophy after Hegel, and others who thought there was none before Wittgenstein, and that he was prepared to contemplate the possibility that both were right.

The image each side has of the other is simple and damning. In Hegelian eyes, positivists, by equating phenomena with their observable and isolated manifestations, are doomed to superficiality, a naive by-passing of the real problem of knowledge, and the endorsement of the political status quo: *chiens de garde*, jackals of the established order. They are doomed to such conceptual and political one-dimensionality by the fact that they cannot ask deep questions or consider radical alternatives, and they have willingly, nay eagerly, imposed such shackles or blinkers

¹ I am indebted to many people for helpful criticism of this paper, but especially to John Watkins, who read it in typescript, and to Hans Albert, who commented on it at a conference devoted to the thought of Karl Popper, in July 1980. Needless to say they cannot be held responsible for my views.

upon themselves. They revere observable facts, and these are but the surfaces of things. Truth is deeper.

By contrast, look at the members of the other movement, as seen by the most distinguished living representative of the Anglo-Austrian alliance, Sir Karl Popper:²

Many years ago I used to warn my students against the widespread idea that one goes to university in order to learn how to talk, and to write, impressively and incomprehensibly. At the time many students came to university with this ridiculous aim in mind, especially in Germany . . . most of those . . . who . . . enter into an intellectual climate which accepts this kind of valuation . . . are lost.

Thus arose the cult of un-understandability, the cult of impressive and high-sounding language . . . I suggest that in some of the more ambitious social sciences and philosophies, especially in Germany, the traditional game, which has largely become the unconscious and unquestioned standard, is to state the utmost trivialities in high-sounding languages.

Some of the famous leaders of German sociology . . . are . . . simply talking trivialities in high-sounding language . . . They teach this to their students . . . who do the same . . . the genuine and general feeling of dissatisfaction which is manifest in their hostility to the society in which they live is, I think, a reflection of their unconscious dissatisfaction with the sterility of their own activities.

There you have it. Victims of their own humbug: their self-deception leads them into social dissent. Presumably they would learn to accept their environment more graciously if only they knew how to think, talk and write clearly.

The counter-image is as brutal. The late T. W. Adorno writes:

Society is one . . . Sociology, which disregards this and remains content with such weak and inadequate concepts as induction and deduction, *supports what exists* in the over-zealous attempt to *say* what exists. Such sociology becomes ideology in the strict sense – a necessary illusion. It is illusion since the diversity of method does not encompass the unity of the object and conceals it behind so-called factors into which the object is broken up . . . it is necessary since the object, society, fears nothing more than to be called by name, and therefore it automatically encourages and tolerates only such knowledge of itself that slides off its back without any impact.

This quotation comes from the same volume as the one from Popper, namely *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology* (p. 76; italics mine). Other observations by Adorno also deserve citation:

Positivism internalizes the constraint exercised upon thought in a totally socialised society in order that thought shall function in society. It internalizes

² *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, by T. W. Adorno, Hans Albert, Ralf Dahrendorf, Jürgen Habermas, Harald Pilot and Karl Popper, London, 1976, pp. 294 and 296. This volume constitutes the starting-point of the present discussion.

6 *Relativism and the Social Sciences*

these constraints so that they become an intellectual outlook. Positivism is the puritanism of knowledge. What puritanism achieves in the moral sphere is, under positivism, sublimated to the norms of knowledge . . . knowledge denies what it seeks; what it ardently desires, since this is denied by the desideratum of socially useful labour. Knowledge then projects the taboo which it has imposed on itself onto its goal, and proscribes what it cannot attain. . . The felicity of knowledge is not to be . . . positivism grants a logical form to the sexual taboos which were converted into prohibitions on thought some time ago . . . Knowledge resigns itself to being a mere repetitive reconstruction. It becomes impoverished just as life is impoverished under work discipline.

(pp. 55–6)

Or again:

As a social phenomenon, positivism is geared to the human type that is devoid of experience and continuity, and it encourages the latter – like Babbitt – to see himself as the crown of creation. The appeal of positivism must surely be sought in its a priori adaptation to this type . . . Positivism is the spirit of the age, analogous to the mentality of jazz-fans. Similar too, is the attraction it holds for young people . . . Perhaps objective emptiness holds a special attraction for the emergent anthropological type of the empty being lacking experience. The affective realization of an instrumental thought alienated from its object is mediated through its technification. The latter presents such thought as if it were *avant-garde*.

(pp. 58–9)

These are fighting words. A pseudo-radicalism which in fact serves the established order, emasculates those who use it (literally or figuratively), fit for Babbitts, jazz-fans, and empty minds. (The cultural downgrading of jazz has a certain period flavour, dating from Adorno's youth rather than the 1980s.) So we have an army of verbiage-intoxicated, pseudo-rebellious windbags, meeting a horde of inwardly vacuous, conformist, impotent Babbitts, presumably led into battle by its own jazz-band. One assumes that the other side fights to the strains of Wagner. This should be quite some encounter.

The volume under discussion presents such a confrontation. It must be said right at the start, firmly if with regret, that it is a damp squib. It is a little like that last battle at which Muscovy secured its freedom from the Tartar yoke – when the Russian and Mongol armies took a good look at each other and both wisely decided to retreat, though no doubt abusing each other in the process. A contributor to the volume, Ralf Dahrendorf, records the disappointment:

the discussion generally lacked the intensity that would have been appropriate to the actual differences in view . . . the underlying moral and political positions

Positivism against Hegelianism 7

were not expressed very clearly . . . At times, it could indeed have appeared, astonishingly enough, as if Popper and Adorno were in agreement . . . For many participants, the Tübingen discussion left a keen feeling of disappointment.

(pp. 123–30)

Moreover, Dahrendorf noted that the battle was not only disappointing, but also strangely triangular:

the discussion was dominated neither by Popper nor Adorno, but instead by a 'third man', conjured up by almost all participants . . . against whom the two symposiasts unreservedly adopted a common stance. This 'third man' was given several names by his friends and enemies alike – 'positive method', 'unmetaphysical positivism', 'empiricism', 'empirical research', and so on.

(p. 125)

The plot thickens.

Perhaps it is necessary to bring out the underlying issues between Hegelian windbags and positivist Babbitts, whilst at least temporarily suspending the contempt they feel for each other, and at the same time bringing back that Third Man, the *jointly* disavowed character, on to the scene. Paraphrasing Oscar Wilde, when Popper and Adorno damn a position in unison, there really must be a great deal in it. The mediaeval Frederick II was said to have a Christian view of Islam and a Muslim view of Christianity. Perhaps we can achieve a similar kind of objectivity.

Battle lines

What are the features of the intellectual life of mankind, if one takes modern scientific knowledge as its paradigm? This sketch is meant to be provisional, and as expository and as unprejudicial as it is possible to make it. If, inevitably, it will be prejudicial, I hope it wears its prejudices on its sleeve, so that issues prejudged can be examined afresh. The picture presented manifestly owes a good deal to Popper, though obviously he cannot be blamed for any particular defects in this particular presentation.

Knowledge is cumulative and progressive. The cognitive capital of mankind *grows*. There are occasional cases of the reopening of issues which had been supposedly closed, of a reversal of a past consensus; but nevertheless, by and large, *later* means *better*. This is so notwithstanding the fact that it is difficult to express formally the criteria in terms of which such progress is achieved.

Knowledge is also technical and often genuinely difficult. It is articulated in a specialised idiom which is not continuous with ordinary speech and which can be acquired only by sustained effort and training

8 *Relativism and the Social Sciences*

(in most cases, fairly early in life); and the idiom is of the essence of the knowledge formulated in it. This is true notwithstanding the fact that *some* technicality may be redundant, spurious, or possess no real function other than the protection of the monopoly of the guild of its users. In most cases, however, the technicality is genuine: the ideas formulated in it cannot genuinely be translated into non-technical terms. When they are so translated, they lose the precision, or whatever quality it is, which makes them so genuinely operational and cumulative.

The joint consequence of the first two traits is that there is genuine innovation in these fields. Hence it is possible to write intellectual history in terms of the first occurrence of a given idea. It is possible to locate the point in time when it was first put on the ledger. Once it is firmly formulated and publicly available, there is a strong and natural presumption that other formulations of it are cases of repetition, of diffusion. Conversely, it follows that it is not very likely that earlier formulations will be found: had they occurred, they would have been diffused and been known from the start.

Connected with these traits is the fact that there is an infinite reservoir of possible ideas and theories.

From this in turn there follows the well-known consequence that the finding of a true theory, or even one true-so-far, is something of a miracle, the location of a needle in an infinitely large haystack. But as there is also an infinity of ever-accumulating data, no theory can be known to be definitely established, even if it should be wholly compatible with all currently available data.

Both theories and data are *relatively* isolable, both generically from each other, and, so to speak, laterally, from fellow-theories and fellow-data. *Problems*, above all, are relatively separable from each other. One issue can be dealt with at a time. Orderly procedure, step by step, is feasible, and does not appear to vitiate the activity as a whole. Bulk purchase, total package-deals, are not generally mandatory. It is possible to implement Descartes's Second Rule of Method:

Divide each . . . difficulty . . . into as many parts as possible, and as might be necessary to resolve them.

Apart from being separable from each other, problems, data, and ideas are also separable from their human carriers or agents. Scientific truth falls upon the just and the unjust alike. It is uninterested in their private lives.

In rough and provisional outline, the world of intellectual endeavour and cognitive advance, in the natural sciences, seems to have these

traits. Contrast this with the realm of social and moral ideas, which after all also constitute part of our intellectual life.

The number of available ideas seems limited rather than infinite. If there is one well-established law in the field known as the History of Ideas, it is that whatever has been said has also been said by someone else on an earlier occasion. Although a certain relative originality is possible, it is largely a matter of the combination of primary ideas and of context. The ledger *already* seems to contain very nearly all possible ideas, and the unsatisfactoriness of that tacit sociology which is half incapsulated in the history of social ideas lies in the fact that it seems to explain what people do in terms of what some thinker said or wrote. But, as all the ideas are in effect ever-present, the problem is rather why some of them acquire a powerful appeal at a given time. The History of Ideas becomes a pseudo-sociology when it pretends to explain historical events in terms of the thinkers of the age. The pool of ideas being ever-present, conduct cannot be explained in terms of the sheer presence of an idea. One has to explain why *it*, rather than its rivals, came to be effective on that occasion.

The pool of basic ideas seems limited. Moreover, they are not technical. Admittedly, some of those who articulate social ideas occasionally do so in difficult language, which strikes terror and awe in the hearts of the non-initiate, and is presumably meant to do so. But the genuineness of this technicality is generally open to doubt. It cannot be a pre-condition of cumulativeness (because there *is no* cumulativeness), and it is by no means obvious that the ideas in question cannot be successfully and without essential loss translated into an ordinary idiom, continuous with common speech.

The insulation of ideas from each other and from the data also seems far more difficult to implement. Problems seem curiously interdependent, not to say intertwined. Answers to one question seem inescapably cross-linked to answers to other questions. Even if we do not know what the answers are, we seem to know that they stand and fall together. . .

More particularly, the insulation of theories or ideas from data and facts seems much harder to ensure. This holistic quality of both social ideas and facts used to be called the Principle of Internal Relations: everything is what it is in virtue of its relations to everything else, and thus in the end there is but One Big Thing. In contemporary idiom, this reappears as the contention that the data are concept-saturated, and the concepts in turn theory-saturated. This may in some measure be true generally, but it is doubly and especially so in the human and social sphere, for the following reason: the conceptual saturation occurs not

10 *Relativism and the Social Sciences*

merely in the mind of the observer, but equally in that of the person *observed*. He too has ideas which guide, pervade, and constitute his actions. Ideas pervade the action itself and not merely its interpretation. This leads to the well-known variant of the idealistic solution to the problem of knowledge: the knower and the known are the same, and it is for this reason that the former can know the latter. For such idealism, knowledge is self-knowledge; thereby it overcomes that otherwise terrifying barrier between Subject and Object. (Not only is knowledge self-knowledge, but morality becomes self-recovery, and the problem of why one should be moral at all finds its solution in the identity of true self and of moral command.) Giambattista Vico is celebrated as the man who most clearly articulated the view that we can understand the human and social world best, because *we made it*. (The successful history of modern science suggests that it is nature which we understand better, because we did *not* make it.)

Moreover, whereas scientific theories are relatively insulated from the identities of their propounders, or critics, social theories tend to be identity-involving. The social identity of the person holding a crucial view concerning the legitimacy of this or that type of social order changes in accordance with the belief. The ability to use the very concepts required to characterise, and indeed to act out, a given social role or a given social relationship may depend on the prior comprehension and endorsement of a given social vision. In other words, social ideas frequently produce what may be called the Pirandello effect. That is, they resemble the theatrical devices characteristic of the playwright Luigi Pirandello, who causes his characters to converse with the author, the actors with the audience, and so forth, in a deliberate attempt to break down the barriers between author, character, actor, audience – between subject and object, in effect. In the theatre, this only happens as the result of a deliberate ploy on the part of the author and/or producer; in modern philosophy, it happens persistently.

Moreover, these ideas are not just intimately involved with their carriers and their social identities; they are intimately involved with *each other* too. The affirmation of one idea tends surreptitiously to refer back to the alternative view which it replaces, in a way which suggests the modern associations of the word ‘dialectic’.

Finite in number, ever-present and doomed or destined to an eternal return, wedded to each other in intertwined holistic tribal groups, incapable of observing the decencies of separation of subject and object – such are, by and large, our social ideas.

But there’s worse to come, if we look at the decision procedures, the manner of settling disputes amongst them. The strangeness of these