

# Introduction: Antirepresentationalism, ethnocentrism, and liberalism

This is the first volume of a collection of papers written between 1980 and 1989. The papers in this volume take up, for the most part, issues and figures within analytic philosophy. Those in the second volume deal mostly with issues arising out of the work of Heidegger, Derrida, and Foucault.

The six papers that form Part I of this volume offer an antirepresentationalist account of the relation between natural science and the rest of culture. By an antirepresentationalist account I mean one which does not view knowledge as a matter of getting reality right, but rather as a matter of acquiring habits of action for coping with reality. These papers argue that such an account makes it unnecessary to draw Dilthey-like distinctions between explaining "hard" phenomena and interpreting "soft" ones. They offer an account of inquiry which recognizes sociological, but not epistemological, differences between such disciplinary matrices as theoretical physics and literary criticism.

The antirepresentationalism I advocate here harks back to my 1979 book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Although the figures looming in the background of that book were Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey, my most proximate intellectual debts at the time I was writing it were to Wilfrid Sellars and Willard van Orman Quine. In the subsequent ten years, I have come to think of Donald Davidson's work as deepening and extending the lines of thought traced by Sellars and Quine. So I have been writing more and more about Davidson – trying to clarify his views to myself, to defend them against actual and possible objections, and to extend them into areas which Davidson himself has not yet explored. The four chapters which make up Part II of this volume are a mixture of exposition of Davidson and commentary on him.

The remaining four chapters in the volume – those which make up Part III – are about political liberalism, rather than about antirepresentationalism. The connection between Part III and the first two parts is the one Dewey saw between the abandonment of what he called the "spectator theory of knowledge" and the needs of a democratic society. I read Dewey as saying that it suits such a society to have no views about truth save that it is more likely to be obtained in Milton's "free and open encounter" of opinions than in any other way. This thought, characteristic of Peirce and Habermas as well as Dewey, is the one which I try to develop in "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy" and in the three shorter pieces which follow it.



## OBJECTIVITY, RELATIVISM, AND TRUTH

The remainder of this introduction has two aims. In the first two-thirds of it, I try to clarify the relations between antirepresentationalism and antirealism. I claim that the representationalism-vs.-antirepresentationalism issue is distinct from the realism-vs.-antirealism one, because the latter issue arises only for representationalists. In the final third, I use the notion of ethnocentrism as a link between antirepresentationalism and political liberalism. I argue that an antirepresentationalist view of inquiry leaves one without a skyhook with which to escape from the ethnocentrism produced by acculturation, but that the liberal culture of recent times has found a strategy for avoiding the disadvantage of ethnocentrism. This is to be open to encounters with other actual and possible cultures, and to make this openness central to its self-image. This culture is an ethnos which prides itself on its suspicion of ethnocentrism — on its ability to increase the freedom and openness of encounters, rather than on its possession of truth.

Philosophers in the English-speaking world seem fated to end the century discussing the same topic – realism – which they were discussing in 1900. In that year, the opposite of realism was still idealism. But by now language has replaced mind as that which, supposedly, stands over and against "reality." So discussion has shifted from whether material reality is "mind-dependent" to questions about which sorts of true statements, if any, stand in representational relations to nonlinguistic items. Discussion of realism now revolves around whether only the statements of physics can correspond to "facts of the matter" or whether those of mathematics and ethics might also. Nowadays the opposite of realism is called, simply, "antirealism."

This term, however, is ambiguous. It is standardly used to mean the claim, about some particular true statements, that there is no "matter of fact" which they represent. But, more recently, it has been used to mean the claim that no linguistic items represent any nonlinguistic items. In the former sense it refers to an issue within the community of representationalists — those philosophers who find it fruitful to think of mind or language as containing representations of reality. In the latter sense, it refers to antirepresentationalism — to the attempt to eschew discussion of realism by denying that the notion of "representation," or that of "fact of the matter," has any useful role in philosophy. Representationalists typically think that controversies between idealists and realists were, and controversies between skeptics and antiskeptics are, fruitful and interesting. Antirepresentationalists typically think both sets of controversies pointless. They diagnose both as the results of being

On this point, see my exchange with Thomas McCarthy about the Habermasian claim that truth-claims are claims to universal, intercultural validity. McCarthy's criticism of me, "Private Irony and Public Decency," appeared in *Critical Inquiry* 16 (1990), as did my "Truth and Freedom: A Reply to Thomas McCarthy" and his "Ironist Theory as Vocation: A Response to Rorty's Reply."



### INTRODUCTION

held captive by a picture, a picture from which we should by now have wriggled free.<sup>2</sup>

The term "antirealism" was first put in circulation by Michael Dummett, who used it in the first sense. He formulated the opposition between realism and antirealism in the following terms:

Realism I characterise as the belief that statements of the disputed class possess an objective truth-value, independently of our means of knowing it: they are true or false in virtue of a reality existing independently of us. The anti-realist opposes to this the view that statements of the disputed class are to be understood only by reference to the sort of thing which we count as evidence for a statement of that class.<sup>3</sup>

Dummett believes that much of the history of philosophy, including the battles between realists and idealists, can be usefully reinterpreted by deploying this distinction. He also believes that "philosophy of language is first philosophy," for he views the difference between the realist and the antirealist as a difference about the *meaning* of the disputed class of statements. So he thinks the theory of meaning philosophically fundamental.

In taking this stance, Dummett turned away from the "therapeutic" conception of philosophy familiar from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, and from such earlier books as James's *Pragmatism* and Dewey's *Reconstruction in Philosophy*. In this respect, Dummett is typical of the majority of English-speaking philosophers of the last two decades. These decades have seen a gradual repudiation of the Wittgensteinian conception of philosophy as therapy, and a gradual return to systematic attempts to solve traditional problems. The trouble with the later Wittgenstein, Dummett says, is that he cannot "supply us with a *foundation* for future work in the philosophy of language or in philosophy in general." Wittgenstein gave us no "systematic theory of meaning," and hence nothing on which to build. Indeed, he thought such a theory impossible, since (in Dummett's words) he rejected his earlier view that "the meanings of our sentences are given by the conditions that render them determinately true or false" and substituted the view that "meaning is to be explained in terms of what is taken as *justifying* an utterance."

This latter view is typical of antirepresentationalist philosophers, for their concern is to eliminate what they regard as representationalism's pseudo-problems,

- 2 Colin McGinn provides a nice illustration of the way in which his own representationalism and Donald Davidson's antirepresentationalism are at cross-purposes. After noting that Davidson's "principle of charity" makes it possible to simply shrug off the skeptic rather than answering him, he adds "I had the idea of using the anti-sceptical consequences of the principle of charity as a reductio before I learned that Davidson regards this as a virtue of his account of interpretation." McGinn, "Radical Interpretation and Epistemology," in Ernest LePore, ed., Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), p. 359n.
- 3 Michael Dummett, Truth and Other Enigmas (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 146.
- 4 Ibid., p. 453.
- 5 Ibid., p. 452.



## OBJECTIVITY, RELATIVISM, AND TRUTH

rather than to build systems or to solve problems.<sup>6</sup> The later Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey, for example, would all be as dubious about the notion of "truth-makers" – nonlinguistic items which "render" statements determinately true or false – as they are about that of "representation." For representationalists, "making true" and "representing" are reciprocal relations: the nonlinguistic item which makes S true is the one represented by S. But antirepresentationalists see both notions as equally unfortunate and dispensable – not just in regard to statement of some disputed class, but in regard to all statements.

Representationalists often think of antirepresentationalism as simply transcendental idealism in linguistic disguise — as one more version of the Kantian attempt to derive the object's determinacy and structure from that of the subject. This suspicion is well stated in Bernard Williams's essay "Wittgenstein and Idealism." Williams says there that a Wittgensteinian view of language seems committed to the following chain of inference:

- (i) 'S' has the meaning we give it.
- (ii) A necessary condition of our giving 'S' a meaning is Q. Ergo
- (iii) Unless Q, 'S' would not have a meaning.
- (iv) If 'S' did not have a meaning, 'S' would not be true.

  Ergo
- (v) Unless Q, 'S' would not be true.

Since the values of Q will typically include human social practices, the conclusion of this set of inferences is, indeed, reminiscent of transcendental idealism. But the antirepresentationalist will reply that (v) merely says that unless certain social practices are engaged in, there will be no statements to call "true" or "false." Williams, however, rejoins that "it is not obvious that for the later Wittgensteinian view . . . we can so easily drive a line between the sentence 'S' expressing the truth, and what is the case if S." His point is that antirepresentationalists typically do not think that, behind the true sentence S, there is a sentence-shaped piece of nonlinguistic reality called "the fact that S" – a set of relations between objects which hold independently of language — which makes 'S' true. So, Williams concludes, antirepresentationalists, and in particular the later Wittgenstein, are committed to the idea that "the determinacy of reality comes from what we have decided or are prepared to count as determinate."

- 6 See Robert Brandom's contrast between representationalist theorists and social-practice theorists in his "Truth and Assertibility," *Journal of Philosophy* LXIII (1976), p. 137 – a contrast I discuss in more detail in "Representation, Social Practise, and Truth," in Part II.
- 7 These quotes from Williams are from his Moral Luck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 162-3. For an example of the sort of thing which makes Williams nervous, see Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, Macquarrie and Robinson, trans. (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 269: "Newton's laws, the principle of contradiction, any truth whatever these are true only as long as Dasein is."



### INTRODUCTION

The trouble with this conclusion is that "comes from" suggests causal dependence. The picture called up by Williams's terminology is of some mighty immaterial force called "mind" or "language" or "social practice" — a force which shapes facts out of indeterminate goo, constructs reality out of something not yet determinate enough to count as real. The problem for antirepresentationalists is to find a way of putting their point which carries no such suggestion. Antirepresentationalists need to insist that "determinacy" is not what is in question — that neither does thought determine reality nor, in the sense intended by the realist, does reality determine thought. More precisely, it is no truer that "atoms are what they are because we use 'atom' as we do" than that "we use 'atom' as we do because atoms are as they are." Both of these claims, the antirepresentationlist says, are entirely empty. Both are pseudo-explanations.

It is particularly important that the antirepresentationalist insist that the latter claim is a pseudo-explanation. For this is a claim which the typical realist can, sooner or later, be counted upon to make. He or she will say that we achieve accurate representation because, sometimes, nonlinguistic items cause linguistic items to be used as they are — not just in the case of particular statements within social practices (as when the movement of a tennis ball causes the referee to cry "Out!") but in the case of social practices as wholes. On this account, the reason why physicists have come to use "atom" as we do is that there really are atoms out there which have caused themselves to be represented more or less accurately — caused us to have words which refer to them and to engage in the social practice called microstructural physical explanation. The reason why such explanation meets with more success than, say, astrological explanation, is that there are no planetary influences out there, whereas there really are atoms out there.

The antirepresentationalist is quite willing to grant that our language, like our bodies, has been shaped by the environment we live in. Indeed, he or she insists on this point – the point that our minds or our language could not (as the representationalist skeptic fears) be "out of touch with the reality" any more than our bodies could. What he or she denies is that it is explanatorily useful to pick and choose among the contents of our minds or our language and say that this or that item "corresponds to" or "represents" the environment in a way that some other item does not. On an antirepresentationalist view, it is one thing to say that a prehensile thumb, or an ability to use the word "atom" as physicists do, is useful for coping with the environment. It is another thing to attempt to explain this utility by reference to representationalist notions, such as the notion that the reality referred to by "quark" was "determinate" before the word "quark" came along (whereas that referred to by, for example, "foundation grant" only jelled once the relevant social practices emerged).

Antirepresentationalists think that attempt hopeless. They see no way to explain what "determinate" means in such a context except by chanting one of a



## OBJECTIVITY, RELATIVISM, AND TRUTH

number of equally baffling words, and so they see the realist's use of "determinate" as merely incantatory. Just as Quine suggests that we throw out the whole cluster of concepts (e.g., "synonomous," "conceptual") which are invoked to make us think that we understand what "analytic" meant, so antirepresentationalists suggest that we throw out the whole cluster of concepts (e.g., "fact of the matter," "bivalence,") which are used to make us think we understand what "the determinacy of reality" means.

Antirepresentationalists think this latter cluster dispensable because they see no way of formulating an *independent* test of accuracy of representation – of reference or correspondence to an "antecedently determinate" reality – no test distinct from the success which is supposedly explained by this accuracy. Representationalists offer us no way of deciding whether a certain linguistic item is usefully deployed because it stands in these relations, or whether its utility is due to some factors which have nothing to do with them – as the utility of a fulcrum or a thumb has nothing to do with its "representing" or "corresponding" to the weights lifted, or the objects manipulated, with its aid. So antirepresentationalists think "we use 'atom' as we do, and atomic physics works, because atoms are as they are" is no more enlightening than "opium puts people to sleep because of its dormitive power."

This point that there is no independent test of the accuracy of correspondence is the heart of Putnam's argument that notions like "reference" – semantical notions which relate language to nonlanguage – are internal to our overall view of the world. The representationalists' attempt to explain the success of astrophysics and the failure of astrology is, Putnam thinks, bound to be merely an empty compliment unless we can attain what he calls a God's-eye standpoint – one which has somehow broken out of our language and our beliefs and tested them against something known without their aid. But we have no idea what it would be like to be at that standpoint. As Davidson puts it, "there is no chance that someone can take up a vantage point for comparing conceptual schemes [e.g., the astrologer's and the astrophysicist's] by temporarily shedding his own."

From the standpoint of the representationalist, the fact that notions like representation, reference, and truth are deployed in ways which are internal to a language or a theory is no reason to drop them. The fact that we can never know whether a "mature" physical theory, one which seems to leave nothing to be desired, may not be entirely off the mark is, representationalists say, no reason to deprive ourselves of the notion of "being off the mark." To think otherwise, they add, is to be "verificationist," undesirably anthropocentric in the same way in which nineteenth-century idealism was undesirably anthropocentric. It is to fall under the influence of what Thomas Nagel calls "a significant strain of idealism in

<sup>8</sup> Donald Davidson, Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 185.



### INTRODUCTION

contemporary philosophy, according to which what there is and how things are cannot go beyond what we could in principle think about." Nagel thinks that to deprive ourselves of such notions as "representation" and "correspondence" would be to stop "trying to climb outside of our own minds, an effort some would regard as insane and that I regard as philosophically fundamental."

Antirepresentationalists do not think such efforts insane, but they do think that the history of philosophy shows them to have been fruitless and undesirable. They think that these efforts generate the sort of pseudo-problems which Wittgenstein hoped to avoid by abandoning the picture which held him captive when he wrote the *Tractatus*. Wittgenstein was not insane when he wrote that book, but he was right when he later described himself as having been buzzing around inside a fly-bottle. His escape from the bottle was not, as Williams suggests, a matter of buzzing off in the direction of transcendental idealism, but rather of refusing any longer to be tempted to answer questions like "Is reality intrinsically determinate, or is its determinacy a result of our activity?" He was not suggesting that we determine the way reality is. He was suggesting that questions which we should have to climb out of our own minds to answer should not be asked. He was suggesting that both realism and idealism share representationalist presuppositions which we would be better off dropping.

Nagel thinks that if we follow Wittgenstein we must "acknowledge that all thought is an illusion," for "the Wittgensteinian atttack on transcendent thoughts depends on a position so radical that it also undermines the weaker transcendent pretensions of even the least philosophical of thoughts." Pretty much the same view is found in David Lewis's reply to Putman's suggestion that we be content to remain intratheoretical, content not to seek a God's-eye view. Lewis grants that if theories of reference are "made true by our referential intentions," then Putnam's internalism is inescapable. But, he says, "What we say and think not only doesn't settle what we refer to, it doesn't even settle the prior question of how it is to be settled what we refer to." So, he continues, we need a constraint on theories of reference which is something other than our referential intentions, and we can get it by "taking physics . . . at face value." "Physics," according to Lewis, "professes to discover the elite properties," where "elite" means the ones whose "boundaries are established by objective sameness and difference in nature."

- 9 Thomas Nagel, The View from Nowhere (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 9.
- 10 Ibid., p. 11.
- 11 Ibid., p. 107.
- 12 David Lewis, "Putnam's Paradox," Australasian Journal of Philosophy, 1983, p. 226.
- 13 "Among all the countless things and classes that there are, most are miscellaneous, gerrymandered, ill-demarcated. Only an elite minority are carved at the joints, so that their boundaries are established by objective sameness and difference in nature. . . . Physics discovers which things and classes are the most elite of all; but others are elite also, though to a lesser degree. . . ." (ibid., pp. 227-8).



# OBJECTIVITY, RELATIVISM, AND TRUTH

Lewis thus builds representationalism into the "face value" of physics. 14 This is characteristic of representationalists who are realists rather than skeptics. For they see physics as the area of culture where nonhuman reality, as opposed to human social practices, most obviously gets its innings. The representationalist believes, in Williams's words, that "we can select among our beliefs and features of our world picture some that we can reasonably claim to represent the world in a way to the maximum degree independent of our perspective and its peculiarities". 15 By contrast, antirepresentationalists see no sense in which physics is more independent of our human peculiarities than astrology or literary criticism. For them, various areas of culture answer different human needs, but there is no way to stand outside of all human needs and observe that some of them (e.g., our need for predictions of what will happen in various circumstances, our need for simple and elegant ways of saving the phenomena) are gratified by detecting "objective sameness and difference in nature" whereas others are gratified by whomping up what Lewis calls "miscellaneous, gerrymandered, ill-demarcated" objects. The human need which is gratified by the attempt thus to stand outside all human needs - the need for what Nagel calls "transcendence" - is one which antirepresentationalists think it culturally undesirable to exacerbate. They think this need eliminable by means of a suitable moral education - one which raises people up from the "humility" which Nagel recommends. Such an education tries to sublimate the desire to stand in suitably humble relations to nonhuman realities into a desire for free and open encounters between human beings, encounters culminating either in intersubjective agreement or in reciprocal tolerance.

When we turn away from the contrast Dummett draws between realist and antirealist views about various classes of statements, we find "antirealism" being used in the second of the two senses I distinguished earlier. In this sense, the sense in which it is a synonym for what I have been calling "antirepresentationalism," Donald Davidson has come to be thought of, in recent years, as the arch antirealist.

Dummett originally portrayed Davidson as an archetypal realist, but Davidson

- 14 Not all philosophers of physics share Lewis's view of what physics professes to do. Arthur Fine, for example, attributes to the physicist only what he calls "the natural ontological attitude," abbreviated as "NOA." Fine writes as follows: "Does science aim at truth, or does science merely aim at empirical adequacy? This is the springboard for the realism/instrumentalism controversy. NOA wants to pull back a bit from the question to ask, more fundamentally, whether science 'aims' at all." Fine sums up his own antirepresentationalism when he says "NOA does not think that truth is an explanatory concept, or that there is some general thing that makes truths true." (Fine, "Unnatural Attitudes: Realist and Instrumentalist Attachments to Science," Mind XCV [1986], pp. 173, 175.)
- 15 Bernard Williams, Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 138-9.
- 16 Lewis, "Putnam's Paradox," p. 227.



### INTRODUCTION

has subsequently said things which have made clear that this was a misleading description of his view. He says, for example:

Beliefs are true or false, but they represent nothing. It is good to be rid of representations, and with them the correspondence theory of truth, for it is thinking that there are representations that engenders thoughts of relativism. <sup>17</sup>

Davidson has argued, in papers stretching over the last twenty years, that if we once adopt the "scheme-content" distinction – the distinction between determinate realities and a set of words or concepts which may or may not be "adequate" to them – we shall, needlessly, find ourselves worried about relativism-vs.-absolutism – about whether our knowledge is merely "relative" to what Williams calls "our perspective and its peculiarities" or whether it is in touch with what Lewis calls "objective sameness and difference in nature." So he urges that we drop that distinction, and with it the notion that beliefs represent a content according to the conventions of a scheme. Davidson has no parti pris in favor of physics, and does not think that it, or any natural science, can provide a skyhook – something which might lift us out of our beliefs to a standpoint from which we glimpse the relations of those beliefs to reality. Rather, he takes us to be in touch with reality in all areas of culture – ethics as well as physics, literary criticism as well as biology – in a sense of "in touch with" which does not mean "representing reasonably accurately" but simply "caused by and causing."

In an attempt to circumvent this attempt to change the terms of controversy and rise above the old battles, David Papineau has invented some new definitions of the term "antirealist," definitions tailored to fit Davidson. At one point Papineau defines the term as follows: "Anti-realism is the thesis that the analysis of representation yields an a priori argument for holding that at some level judgement and reality must fit each other." At another point he writes: "Anti-realists are philosophers who deny that it makes sense to think of reality as it is in itself in abstraction from the way it is represented in human judgement."

Neither of Papineau's definitions avoids the misleading imputation of a belief in representations to philosophers who protest their lack of any such belief. Still, the latter definition, if not the former, catches something important in Davidson's view. For Davidson argues that "beliefs are by nature generally true," and claims that

- 17 Donald Davidson, "The Myth of the Subjective," in Relativism: Interpretation and Confrontation, Michael Krausz, ed. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), pp. 165-6.
- 18 David Papineau, Reality and Representation (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), p. xii.
- 19 Ibid., p. 2. Compare Nagel, The View from Nowhere, p. 93, where "idealism" is defined as "the position that what there is must be possibly conceivable by us, or possibly something for which we could have evidence." Nagel notes that "an argument for this general form of idealism must show that the notion of what cannot be thought about by us or those like us makes no sense," and then launches into an argument against Davidson, whom he presumably counts as an idealist in the specified sense.



# OBJECTIVITY, RELATIVISM, AND TRUTH

the agent has only to reflect on what a belief is to appreciate that most of his basic beliefs are true, and among his beliefs, those most securely held and that cohere with the main body of his beliefs are the most apt to be true.<sup>20</sup>

But for Davidson, of course, reflection on what a belief is is not "the analysis of representation." Rather, it is reflection on how a language-using organism interacts with what is going on its neighborhood. Like Dewey, Davidson takes off from Darwin rather than from Descartes: from beliefs as adaptations to the environment rather than as quasi-pictures. Like Bain and Peirce, he thinks of beliefs as habits of acting rather than as parts of a "model" of the world constructed by the organism to help it deal with the world.

This non-Cartesian, antirepresentationalist approach is, in both Dewey and Davidson, holist through and through. Both men see no need for, or possibility of, a theory which starts off by specifying which bits of language tie up with which bits of reality — what Davidson calls a "building-block" theory. For Dewey, the paradigm of such a theory was sense-datum empiricism. For Davidson, it is attempts such as Kripke's and Field's to make such concepts as reference susceptible to "an independent analysis or interpretation in terms of non-linguistic concepts." By contrast with such attempts, Davidson suggests "that words, meanings of words, reference and satisfaction are posits we need to implement a theory of truth," where a theory of truth is neither an attempt to explain the meaning of the word "true" nor an attempt to analyze such notions as "corresponds to" or "makes true."

Such a theory is, instead, an account of how the marks and noises made by certain organisms hang together in a coherent pattern, one which can be fitted into our overall account of the interaction between these organisms and their environment. Davidson's argument that we must interpret the beliefs of any such organism (including ourselves) as true, and most of any organism's concepts as concepts which we ourselves also possess, boils down to the claim that we shall not take ourselves to have found such a coherent pattern unless we can see these organisms as talking mostly about things to which they stand in real cause-and-effect relations. Since our theory of how to correlate another organism's marks and noises with our own has to take its place within a general theory of our and their similar relation to relevant environments, there is no room for the sort of whole-sale slippage between organism and environment which the Cartesian notion of "inner representation of the environment" is capable of producing. More generally, there is no room for the notion of "thought" or "language" as capable of being mostly out of phase with the environment — for there is no way to give sense to

<sup>20</sup> Donald Davidson, "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," in Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson, Ernest LePore, ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), p. 319.

<sup>21</sup> Davidson, Inquiries, p. 219.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 222.