

Task 1- At the limits of truth

Worries about ... “objectivity” are characteristic of a secularized culture in which the scientist replaces the priest. The scientist is now seen as the person who keeps humanity in touch with something beyond itself.

Richard Rorty: “Objectivity, Relativism and Truth”, Cambridge University Press, 1991: 35

In this quotation, American philosopher Richard Rorty expresses his concern over the philosophical concept of objectivity – or, as one can argue, the secularized and cultural fetishization of it. Objectivity, quite simply, is habitually considered that which we can be absolutely certain about. Furthermore, “objectivity” is characterized by the fact that it with all certainty is true – regardless of whether we are certain of it or not. In recent modernity, science is now viewed as the personification of objectivity – gravity is real, black holes exists, the earth is round. As Rorty points out, this is analogous with a religious society, where priests and mystics were the mediums through which humanity could keep in touch with the Truth (the God, Goddess or gods that the religion worshipped). Any sort of critical questioning was immediately surmised to be the stupidity and foolishness of an idiot, unlearned in religious affairs. As of today, science surely enjoys a quite similar privilege of perceived objectivity.

I have no intentions of criticizing science myself – I find myself far to unexperienced in its complicated reasonings to deduce forth any sort of meaningful criticism of its methods to arrive at the truth. Rather, what I intend to do in this essay is two things: a critique of the *duality* of science – how interconnected is its results with inherent human subjectivity? Furthermore, what really is objective truth? On which fundamental presuppositions does it have its base?

As I pointed out earlier – objectivity is considered as what is true, whether we want it to be or not. The particular objective truth is conceptualized as a sort of “object” completely detached and independent of human perception and reason. A tree makes sound if it falls, regardless of whether I happen to be there or not – be it on my kitchen stove or billions of lightyears beyond the galaxy, the laws of gravity and thermodynamics are still in full effect. Humanity is viewed as a sort of torch in a very large and dark room, and in the light we emit we discover all sorts of facts and truths – and through human reasoning we deduce that what is factual in the light, must be factual in the dark surrounding us as well. Things fall to the ground; things remain in place when there is no force influencing it. It does not matter whether we see it happen or not.

One can however problematize such a claim. I will employ an example, in the form a casual conversation, which hopefully will point out some particular problems considering the fine line between subjectivity and “objectivity”. Let us presume that I am arguing with my friend on which *film* is the better one: Citizen Kane or Tokyo Story. We are both painfully aware that we each have our own separate, incomputable opinions. We argue nonetheless, claiming that despite that despite whatever “your opinion” may be, “my opinion” is right - perhaps out of human pride, perhaps out of human folly. It is a thoroughly *subjective* discussion. But say we were to transform the debate into a thoroughly objective one – or at least attempt to do so. Is it even possible? On which criteria should we base the concept of quality? If I were to say that more people have seen “Citizen Kane”, my friend could simply reverse the argument, and claim that that fact quite simply proves Citizen Kane is pandering to the general audience. Like this we could go on forever. What we observe here is a debate, *reaching for an objective answer, built upon subjective ground*. Let me elaborate.

The first problem is the idea of the “better” film. Better, quite simply, is a matter of opinion. One can find a definition of the word in the thesaurus, yet still, the word functions rather

as a chest in which a person or a culture can place and store their internal sentiments and estimations considering what constitutes good quality. It is a word of complete association – there is no objective “better” in itself. “This I like more than that, and that I like less”, and after thinking this again and again, enough times, one manages to abstract out of experience subjective preferences and ideal conditions. Me and my friend, naturally, have different outlooks on what the word “better” means. There is surely some irony to be found in that if I somehow managed to convince my friend that “Citizen Kane” was the better film, I would have reached no sort of objective conclusion. The only thing that would have occurred, is that my friend would have changed his opinion (His personal understanding of what makes a film “better” or he would have managed to appropriate “Citizen Kane” to his subjective criteria of quality). We would have been no closer to any objective conclusion. Furthermore, there is yet another subjective fundament regarding the debate. We mentioned earlier a metaphor for human reason as a torch in which the surrounding world is enlightened for us to observe, analyse and examine. It is through this examination of our surroundings that we can reason that this is the case also in everywhere that is *not* our surroundings. However, a film is somewhat different than a Newtonian law of physics. For what is it, objectively? If one imagines a film playing in a room no one is in, can one still conceive it as a film? Surely one can claim that pictures in motion have flashed across the television, the pixels within the digital screen has emitted their threefold colour. Yet there has been no human perception present to bear witness to it; no phenomenological, perceiving presence to have *viewed* the film. Immediately it becomes difficult to separate the distinction between a *film* and a completely inhuman release of light and sound from a technical apparatus. This is the sudden eeriness one experiences walking into an empty room with the television turning on, radiating its light and sound to no one, nobody, nothing...

The first argument of the inherently subjective meaning and necessary contextualization attendant with a word such as “better” is quite easy to fathom. The last one, regarding the “film” that no one has seen, is more difficult to comprehend. It shall however turn out to be quite a relevant accompanying argument to Rorty’s critique of the “objective”. Anyways, regarding the film, we understand that what we generally think of when we mean a film is more the human *viewing* of one film, than the “thing-in-itself” concept of a film. For naturally, just imagining a film playing in an empty room won’t actually grasp the lack of perception, for then you envision it in your mind, granting it context and human perception. What the “film” is when no one is watching it is quite simply unfathomable – naturally. If it was fathomable, we again would have involved *ourselves* in the affair. What we know, on the other hand, is that when we sit down and watch a film, there occurs some connection between the pictures on the screen and your personal perception and impression of them. The artistic message, the cinematic context and the director’s choices become apparent, as the connections are made within your mind. After a while, solely internalized within yourself, you arrive at a personal conclusion of its subjective “quality”. This is why it is even more difficult to reach an objective conclusion regarding such a debate. A film is inherently interconnected with the subjective and human act of “viewing” – a personal temporary synthesis of your own mind and what can be seen and heard from the film. Yet, perhaps to defeat the unpleasant, phenomenological solitude of being trapped within the perceptions of your mind, you project your idea of quality onto the film itself and say to yourself that as a matter of fact, the film is so good that it would be the best film in the world regardless of the results of anyone else’s opinion. And *then* you start to argue with your friend.

Yes, it is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine music, films, books and art as something that can retain its artistic merit without being realized through a human perception. But is such a reasoning applicable to everything? And more importantly for our essay, is it applicable to science? Can we imagine Newtonian physics without a human Newton and all his human disciples in science? Is Rorty right in comparing scientists to priests – mediums showing the way to the mystical-like beyond of humanity?

To understand this, we must delve further into the concept of truth. But I will say that truth, quite simply, is *something human*. Let me quickly go through some of the main theories of truth. The consensus theory claims that human reason works towards a common goal of truth, and that which can be proved and argued for can be assumed true. Pragmatic truth is that what is gaining for humanity, in a good, solidary aspect, can be viewed as truth. A truth theory of coherence claims that our truths can be proved if they correspond to larger and other earlier truths, and if enough truths are falsified, a paradigm shift occurs. And correspondence theory claims that if human claims are equivalent parallels with the reality they attempt to describe (such as saying "There are three swans" when there are three swans on the lake) is the same as truths. Brutish simplifications of complicated systems to be sure, but I assure they are not here to display some false pretence of erudition. No, they are here to prove yet again what I have already stated: *truth is something human*. In every one of the theories, despite their specifications and designs, it is humanity that serves as the link between truth and the referent of truth found in factual reality. Truth is, technically speaking, the fact that *we know* something that is true, real, factual etc. As with the film and the empty room, one cannot discuss a "truth" which isn't known. One can only assume such things. As Hume beautifully puts it, humans spend so much time looking for the clear overlaying connection we find among things, phenomena, events ... only to eventually discover that the connection was to be found within ourselves all along. It is our own reason that fills in the gaps left by the limitations of our perception, and leads us to reduce events to causality, cause and effect, association, similarity, simplification, Hume claims. Or, as Rorty seems to imply in the quote, there is no "something" beyond humanity. If it "is" it is unreachable, unfathomable, irreducible and absolutely irrelevant to us. If there "is" something beyond humanity, it is also beyond truth.

But again, we return to the question of science. I agree with Rorty in his claim that there is no beyond humanity, but is he wrong to reduce science to what seems to be some sort of secularized superstition? To understand this, we will employ what we have found out about truth, but also our earlier claim about science as something dual. There are, in a way, two sciences. The first one is natural science in itself, as a practice, methodology, field etc. This is a field with great self-respect, but also much humility. With the help of Karl Popper's theory, modern natural science bases itself upon verification through falsification. If we can disprove every alternative hypothesis to a claim (again, as we have already mentioned, *our* hypothesis reasoned out human cognitive abilities) and remain with one hypothesis that cannot be disproved, no matter how hard we attempt, science can humbly present it as the closest thing to truth. One could perhaps call it an objective truth, but again, it is "truth" only as long as there are humans to correlate their knowledge accurately with the world. And as Thomas Kuhn shown, when he in his "Structure of scientific revolutions", radicalized further this viewpoint by showing how science is fluctuating, with its main theoretical, "objective" paradigms shifting into new general shapes and ideas of truth throughout the past and also into the future. This is only to be expected, as science, just like any other truth, is human – it is constituted in our cognitive and mental abilities, limited by our miniscule lifespans and the tiny sizes of our body. Science does not even attempt to explain, but to *describe*. The law of gravity, despite being the fundament for much of science, does not really explain *why* matter is attracted to matter, and in chemistry there are no certain answers to *why* negatives and positives attract to attempt neutral charge. To the theories attempting to answer this, one can just ask, "why is it like that then?" again and again. Science is neither occupied nor concerned with why. It is concerned with how (or, science is not concerned with asking "why" again and again, until one reaches paradoxes or the supernatural, but rather to focus on what we as humans actually can know and figure out) It focuses on the effects of the presumed law, not some original cause known "beyond humanity". This science openly admits to its shortcomings, its shifting truths and its narrow potential for knowledge. Science quite simply admits to being something human.

What Rorty has in mind is the modern and general *idea* of science. It becomes secularized superstition when people assume it to be exactly just what the quote is criticizing: “objective”. It is difficult to understand exactly why science enjoys this privilege of objectivity in the general public – perhaps it is because verification through falsification and the scientific method might just be the most effective way of knowing humanity has managed to come up with until now. It might also be because although science itself has its shortcomings, there are few viable alternatives to it. But this idea is a pretension. I was once told that science is superior because it is true “regardless of humanity” – that its truths were found “outside” of us. But as we already have shown, how should we know of anything outside of us? This is why the metaphor of the torch does not accurately represent the position of human knowledge – to discover if we are right about extending our reasoning to the dark, we would simply have to move the torch. But to know of anything outside of human perception, reasoning, logic? It would require us to move to some non-human place, a vantage point from where we would observe all of reality’s contents and discern subjective truths from objective ones. Such a task cannot even be called impossible: climbing Mt. Everest with a stack of elephants on your head is impossible but being able to know anything about our connections and tethers to what is beyond humanity is a task which is impossible to even *imagine*, because if you are capable of imagining it, you do not find yourself in the non-human place required to do so.

We see therefore that contrary to science’s healthy and humble self-acknowledgment of something dealing in solely theoretical truths whose lifespan ends when it is falsified and replaced with an improved one, the general idea of science is often something absolute and objective. Or, as one can joke, a truth-machine, pumping out facts and theories that cannot be proven, the same way a bakery pumps out loaves of bread. Science is, as we have mentioned earlier in the text, *probably* the most accurate truths we have. It is certainly the field that produces the most valuable results, the most productive and the most all-compassing. However, painting it with false pretences of objectivity is harmful. It might slow down the scientific process of continually attempting to disprove earlier scientific theories. Furthermore an “objectified” science might overshadow the wisdom, and the facts, presented by other fields of study. Philosophy makes no claims to the generally presumed “objectivity” of science – yet it often deals with why’s, and gives valuable, extremely valuable, insights. Why should we love, laugh, hate, live? No matter how much science discovers about the world we live in, the scientists, like all other human beings, are frightened to die, they wonder why they’re here, how to swallow the humiliations and sufferings thrown at them from life. This is when the consolations of philosophy and art becomes necessary, and many other fields. I’d like to remind you again of the example of the film that nobody saw. Philosophy, like many other fields, can hardly make a claim to objectivity or “the non-human place” because, just like the film, one requires a human mind to connect to it. The human being as a limitation of the world becomes much more apparent, when your own involvement is absolutely required for any effect to take place. But knowledge and facts we are so used to, that we believe they can exist without us, on some purely objective plane. And science, dealing only in knowledge and facts, is often confused with exactly this objective plane. It seemingly becomes a gateway to the supernatural. And this is what I understand Rorty to mean, when he talks about such a secularized superstition.

As we have seen: the goal of truth is not to know “everything”, it is to know everything that *can* be known. And that in itself is *our* everything. There, at the limits of human truth, we can rest. Does one not eventually look forward to the end of the hour, the end of the day, the end of the week ... the calm and tranquil end of one’s life? Does one not, at the back of one’s mind, wish to lay down in bed, content with one’s hard labour and commitment? Humanity is all the same. This is why we search for comprehension, for certainty and assurance. For then, possessing the finite knowledge of the universe, we can proudly, with serene smiles, watch the stars die out, one by one, as the redness of the sun or the heat death of the universe swallows

us all, and all our thoughts and knowledge and perceptions as well. Most of us will resign ourselves to our fate and our ephemeral, fleeting existence. Yet some of us will still reach for that which is beyond humanity. They will want more. They will shout upwards, towards the stars: "Why, why can we never know the infinite?"

No voice will answer.