

Kandidatnr. 26, Oppgave 1

“Worries about “objectivity” are a 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.

The quote above raises questions concerning one of the issues closest to the core of our culture, namely the secularization of society and its consequences for those who live in it. While many in western society today consider secularization to be the natural state in which to structure our society, it is crucial to remember that this is a recent trend, while most societies throughout history have been strongly influenced by and built around a consciousness of the divine. It can therefore be interesting to discuss said secularization and whether it in fact can be said to be an improvement on earlier cultures. The quote made by Richard Rorty sheds light on what can be said to be society’s replacement of the religious with the scientific. In order to fully understand this quote, it may be interesting to first establish whether or not one agrees with the claims being made, before exploring the consequences and practical meaning of its message.

In order to discuss the topic of objectivity in regard to secularization, it is crucial to establish an understanding of what is meant by the term itself, as well as in what area said objectivity is thought to exist. One way of understanding the term is to consider the objective as the lack of subjective interference into an understanding, an idea or a perspective. This definition implies the understanding of the concept of subjectivity but for the sake of simplicity and understanding, we will assume the standard and most widely accepted definition for both terms: The objective is that which is the closest one can get to the non-disputable or the fact, while the subjective is that which is ever-changing, whose definition and understanding will vary based on who or what is considered. As for the area to which the quote’s objectivity refers, this matter is without clear or concise answer. However, in order to discuss the validity of the claim, one has to narrow the focus of its examination. This is because the consequence of the potential objectivity depends and will vary based on what the objectivity refers to, whether that be the objectivity of truth, knowledge, reality, belief etc. For this essay, I will choose to consider the objectivity of truth and sense of reality in connection to the contrasts between science and religion.

To claim that secularized culture inspires worry about objectivity, can be said to imply that the opposite, namely a religious culture, values and worries about the subjective. This idea supports what could be considered a commonly accepted understanding of fact, namely that science and scientific evidence constitutes the true, valid and objective fact, while religion introduces ideas that are inferior in their objectivity and credibility. However, one could argue that instead of there being a clear divide between the era of the religious society and the era of the secular, it is one's perception of objectivity that has changed, rather than to which degree one values it. Perhaps it is not the case that the societies of history have lacked the value of objective truth (given the acceptance that such a thing exists) and have instead settled for the subjective, inferior truth. Is it not a more plausible explanation for the change in society's values, that the religious *was* what one then considered to be objective? Is it not therefore an arrogant approach to the subject to imply that our society is in some way superior due to our better understanding and intelligent appreciation of knowledge? One cannot be certain that science in fact is the ultimate objective truth and not merely one of many possible answers to the same question. It seems to me that to believe wholeheartedly in that our society has cracked the code to objective knowledge, while people before lived in illusion, is a position that overlooks the simple fact that in 400 years, philosophers may laugh at *our* society and its belief that it has solved the unsolvable mystery of objective knowledge.

Rorty's quote states that the scientist "keeps humanity in touch with something beyond itself". Based on the acceptance that that 'something' being referred to is knowledge, the quote can be said to claim that knowledge is a concept beyond humanity or beyond the material world. If this distance between the human and the concept of true knowledge can be proven true, one has drastically strengthened the validity of the quote. One way of doing so can be by referring to Plato's idea of Forms. Plato believes that the true form of something lies beyond human reach, while what one considers on earth in human existence is a mere shadow of the thing in its true form. As a consequence of this, true understanding or knowledge of any given thing is practically impossible, as the truth of it lies somewhere beyond the reach of human consciousness. This establishes a clear divide and considerable distance between knowledge and human, which if accepted to be valid supports the quote above.

One way of disproving the validity of the quote is to challenge the idea that the hunt for objectivity is something that follows secularization. The quote states that worries about objectivity "are a characteristic of a secularized culture", however might it not be the case that it in fact is the other way round? One could say, as Rorty does, that when a secular culture is

established, its inhabitants are pushed into the pursuit of the objective truth. One reason for this may be that in lack of a priest providing the word of God as the truth, one has to look elsewhere for an equally, if not more so, convincing view on reality. However, one could easily argue that it is the natural human thirst for knowledge and truth that makes him distance himself from the church, thereby bring about a secular society. One may ask the question as to what difference this distinction makes. In practice, the difference is not necessarily remarkable. However, when considering the validity of the quote, it may destabilize its entire understanding of human nature and the pursuit of objective truth. Perhaps it is not the case that for reasons out of a person's control, his society forces him to seek truth elsewhere than the church. One possible retort may be that it is man's natural wish for such objectivity that pushes him to gradually restructure society without the church as its main component. Perhaps it is in fact the case that the scientist replaces the priest. However, perhaps "objectivity" is the constant in human nature driving us forward through history, not history pointing us onto the road of objectivity. If one accepts this line of argumentative thought, one may say that it enfeebles the integrity of Rorty's quote.

Despite the arguments against the quote's validity, it is in my personal opinion fair to claim that secularized society values objectivity and that this can be connected to its lack of religious interference in daily life and social structures. Despite the arguments that can be made against the value of empirical scientific evidence, I do believe that at least in our society today, it is the closest thing to objective, provable truth that we have access to. That being said, this evidence only seems to cover the material world, while topics of abstract matter and ideas often are too complex to be converted into a mathematical formula. I therefore cannot agree fully with the quote's latter part, which implies that the scientist is the only bridge between the human and that which lies beyond. I believe this to be too simple an explanation, seeing as there are plenty of topics and questions which cannot be examined or proved in a laboratory by someone in a white coat. All in all, however, I see the validity of the idea that secularization, the reliance on science and the hunt for objectivity are concepts all but separate from each other.

On the basis of one's acceptance of and belief in the quote, it is possible to explore the various consequences of its validity, in other words asking the question: What does this say about society and its population? One may argue that turning from the divine to the scientific when structuring both our societies and our belief systems, signals a simplification in what people are capable of understanding. Since religion and the explanations it provides are by definition

beyond human comprehension and far removed from the physical world, one could say that relying on their guidance requires not only faith, but an understanding of the complexity of existence. Knowledge based on science, on the other hand, requires no such complexity of understanding, seeing as it often provides what is considered hard evidence. This could be said to provide simpler explanations and a simpler form of knowledge than that which is religious. If one accepts this argument, it would seem that humanity has simplified its outlook by rejecting the priest and that which he cannot automatically understand.

On the other hand, one could claim the stark opposite, namely that society's secularization has led us to be increasingly hungry for knowledge, which can strengthen our character as being capable of reflexion and complex thought. While religion often provides its followers with explanations for life's unanswered questions, scientific answers are often unable to answer these fully. This lack of simple solution could be seen as an inspiration to further examination of the inexplicable, which can contribute to strengthening one's knowledge and further fuelling the fire of objectivity's pursuit. In this regard one could say that the modern man in a secular society is both understanding and eager to learn, which presents the quote by Rorty as a positively laden description of modern human nature in search of the objective.

There can be no clear or concise answer to the questions regarding objectivity in secular society, and differing interpretations of the quote and its meaning will be able to provide different views on the matter. It is definitely possible to pick apart the integrity of the quote by disproving the pretences it provides. In this way, one may claim that Rorty presents a simplified and wrongly skewed picture of human nature in modern society. However, if one considers the ideas surrounding the concept of knowledge as something abstract and far removed from the human being, it may seem that the quote has definite integrity and credibility. I believe the quote makes sense in accordance with the society I know, seeing as I find it hard to completely invalidate the arguments concerning the connection between secularism and objectivity. However one interprets the quote, it becomes clear that Richard Rorty has asked a common question regarding modern society that puts into words one of philosophy's most debated topics.