

Chapter 2

Subjective and Objective Aspects of Points of View

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Abstract One of the most puzzling features of points of view is their bipolarity between the subjective and the objective. First, we will distinguish in a precise way subjective points of view from objective ones. Both of them have a subject as their bearer, so the distinction between subjective and objective points of view will have to be made over the peculiar explicit contents of the points of view involved. After doing that distinction, we will define other connected notions as those of inter-subjective points of view and private points of view. Finally, we will consider in detail the positions of relativism and perspectivism. This will offer, so to speak, a panoramic view from the subjective side of points of view. From the objective side, we will analyse the notions of independence from a perspective, absolute points of view, and transcendental points of view. Also, we will distinguish between independence from all perspectives and independence from any particular perspective. The second notion will be crucial for a certain way of understanding objectivity.

1 Subjective and Objective Points of View

Points of view have both subjective and objective aspects. The subjective aspects derive from the relationships between the bearer of the point of view and its explicit contents. Some of the strongest forms of relativism are rooted in those subjective

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aspects. But the objective aspects are no less important. It is by adopting some peculiar points of view that we are able to construe an objective scientific image of the world and of ourselves. We will begin by asking what the difference is between subjective and objective points of view.

We have to distinguish between the notion of a point of view with a subject as its bearer and the notion of a subjective point of view. Both subjective and objective points of view can have a subject as their bearer, and a set of attitudes connecting these subjects with the explicit contents of the points of view. Hence, the distinction subjective/objective points of view cannot depend on that. It has to be made in relation to how this can affect the peculiar explicit contents of the points of view involved.

The contrast subjective/objective points of view does not depend directly on the subjects which are the bearers of the points of view. It depends on the effects of the relationships that those bearers do in fact maintain with the explicit contents that the points of view have. More precisely, the explicit contents of a point of view can be said to be subjective in two main senses:

1. Subjective impregnation from attitudes: Non-conceptual and conceptual explicit contents can be subjective in the sense of being “subjectively impregnated” with the experiential, or qualitative, or phenomenal, non-conceptual contents linked to the psychological attitudes maintained by the subject, in such a way that these implicit non-conceptual contents determine the explicit contents. We will not define with more precision the notion of “subjective impregnation”. However, the idea is clear: some implicit non-conceptual contents determine the explicit, either non-conceptual or conceptual, contents. Some experiential, or qualitative, or phenomenal, features are projected onto the explicit contents of our points of view. Colours, sounds, smells, textures, etc., all the so called “secondary qualities”, many times are said to be subjective in that sense. Also, when a “non-cognitivist” stance about an area of discourse is maintained, what is generally claimed is that the intended conceptual contents belonging to that area are subjective in the sense that they only “express” our attitudes: desires, emotions, feelings, etc. If there is subjective impregnation, then our attitudes determine the contents. And that determination will produce cases of subjective points of view.
2. Subjective relativisation to a certain position: There is another way in which a point of view can be said to be subjective. This time, it is a way involving only conceptual contents. A point of view can be subjective when the conceptual contents explicitly contained in the point of view cannot be semantically evaluated solely in confrontation with the world, and some knowledge is required about how the bearer of the point of view is “placed” in the world. We can say that the conceptual contents are “subjectively relativized to a certain position or emplacement defined by some subject”. All indexical thoughts (demonstrative, temporal, self-referential, etc.) are subjective points of view in that sense. Also, when I claim “such-and-such, in my view”, and “in my view” is not redundant, i.e., when it does not mean simply that it is me who is claiming that, the conceptual content expressed by that such-and-such becomes subjectively

relativized in that sense. The truth or falsity of the proposition that such-and-such is relativized to the perspective, or point of view, from which I am having (maintaining, stating, considering, etc.) that content.

There is an important remark to make in relation to the second sense of “subjective points of view”. Only points of view with a subjective bearer, paradigmatically personal points of view, can be subjective in the first sense. In that case, the explicit contents, either non-conceptual or conceptual, of the point of view can be determined by a “subjective impregnation” coming from the implicit non-conceptual contents linked to attitudes. In contrast, any point of view could be subjective in the second sense. The conceptual contents of any point of view can be relativized to how the bearer of the point of view is placed in the world, having in perspective the contents in question. A special case of this, involving points of view not having a subject as their bearer, would happen when we attribute a certain propositional content to a particular state of an instrument; for instance when we are measuring something, and we make corrections according to how the instrument is placed in the circumstances.

However, the subjective relativisation in those cases is strongly dependent on “our” attributions of points of view with some explicit conceptual contents. Moreover, it is arguable that the relevant subject of relativisation is not the entity to which the point of view is attributed but the subject that is making those attributions. We will not discuss that issue here.

In general, we can make a distinction between subjective and objective points of view as follows:

A subjective point of view is a point of view having explicit contents which are subjective in at least one of the above two senses: either through a subjective impregnation coming from attitudes or through a relativisation to a certain subjective position.

An objective point of view is a point of view having explicit contents which are not subjective in either of those senses.

Now, it is clear that not all points of view with a subject as their bearer have to be subjective points of view. They can be completely objective. If objective points of view are called “impersonal”, we can also say that points of view with a subject as their bearer can be completely impersonal.

Traditionally, it has been assumed that most of the explicit non-conceptual contents of our personal points of view are always impregnated with subjectivity (i.e., with the subjectivity coming from the bearer’s attitudes). Concerning them, our points of view could not but be subjective. The classical distinction between “secondary” and “primary” qualities is based on that assumption. In contrast, it has been also generally assumed that our conceptual contents can be completely objective (i.e., that it would be possible to eliminate from them any subjective relativisation), at least in principle. Both assumptions can be questioned.

Subjectivism and objectivism are two philosophical positions in conflict. They can be defined as follows:

Subjectivism claims that all points of view are necessarily subjective.

Objectivism claims that objective points of view are possible.

The possibility of objectivity is enough in order to be objectivist. In other words, the philosophical position of subjectivism seems to be much more demanding than the philosophical position of objectivism. Because of that, it looks also much less plausible.

Here, we can introduce the notion of “epistemic independence”. It can be defined through the notions of subjective impregnation from the attitudes and subjective relativisation to a position.

The content of a point of view is epistemically independent if that content has no subjective impregnation from the attitudes of the subject which is the bearer of the point of view and it is not subjectively relativised to the position of that bearer either.

For subjectivism, the explicit contents of all points of view are necessarily epistemically dependent. For objectivism, some points of view can have explicit contents epistemically independent.

Epistemic dependence/independence can be applied both to non-conceptual and conceptual contents. And we can say that whereas the contents of objective points of view are epistemically independent, the contents of subjective points of view are epistemically dependent.

It makes sense to say that some contents have more subjective impregnation coming from the attitudes of the subject which is the bearer of the point of view than other ones. Also, it makes sense to say that some contents have more subjective relativisation to the position of the bearer of the point of view than other ones. The subjective or objective character of a point of view is a matter of degree. And epistemic dependence/independence is also a matter of degree.

Both objectivity and truth are connected with knowledge and science. They are, however, very different aims. Furthermore, It is generally supposed that only scientific knowledge is capable of achieving points of view at the same time increasingly objective and increasingly true. This is another assumption that must be questioned. Objectivity and truth can follow distinct ways. Falsity can be as objective as truth. And it makes perfect sense to speak of true contents which cannot be evaluated except in a subjective way.

2 Intersubjective Points of View

The notion of an “intersubjective” point of view is closely connected with the notion of an objective point of view. It is arguable that objectivity and intersubjectivity go in parallel, and that we can find both intersubjectivity in our search for

objectivity and objectivity in our search for intersubjectivity.¹ Moreover, even if the contrary of being “intersubjective” is to be “private”, and not to be “subjective”, it is arguable that it is much easier for an objective point of view to be intersubjective than it is for a subjective point of view to be so.

Intersubjective points of view cannot be simply contrasted with subjective points of view. This is not a good contrast. By themselves, intersubjective points of view can be very subjective. There is no reason why some strongly subjective points of view, in the senses above introduced, cannot be “shared” by a number of different subjects.

We cannot confuse intersubjective points of view with collective ones, either. In principle, there could be collective points of view which are not intersubjective ones. A collective point of view requires a collective subject, not a number of different subjects.

The notion of intersubjective points of view can be defined as follows:

An intersubjective point of view is a point of view that is taken by more than one subject, individual or collective.

Intersubjective points of view are points of view “shared” by a variety of subjects, individual or collective. So, a point of view can be collective without being intersubjective, and it can be intersubjective without being collective.

The opposites of intersubjective points of view are “private points of view”. And not only individual points of view can be private. A point of view can be at the same time collective and private, in the sense that it can be a very “idiosyncratic” point of view of a certain collective subject.

In any case, points of view can be more or less intersubjective. Alternatively, they can be more or less idiosyncratic ones. Private points of view would be the limiting case of idiosyncratic points of view. Private points of view can be defined in the following way:

Private points of view are points of view maximally idiosyncratic.

Private points of view could not be intersubjective because of their idiosyncratic character. The more idiosyncratic a point of view is, the less intersubjective it can be.

Both intersubjective and private points of view have been philosophically relevant for many reasons. On the one hand, intersubjectivity has been repeatedly considered a necessary condition for things like meaning, communication, language, collective agency, society, normativity, rationality, etc. On the other hand, privacy also has been considered a necessary condition for things like mentality, personhood, freedom, morality, etc. From a Cartesian perspective, the existence of private points of view is one of the “marks” of the mental. For Kant, morality is crucially a private business. In contrast, from the perspectives of authors like the

¹About that, see Davidson [33].

pragmatists, or Habermas, there could not be normativity without intersubjectivity.²

There is another important role for intersubjectivity. Even assuming all the nuances previously noted, intersubjective points of view also could have a crucial role in the “interplay” between the subjective and the objective. This is a very classical idea. And it has been recently emphasised by Donald Davidson.³ According to him, intersubjective points of view would help to “triangulate” our subjective points of view in the search for objectivity. We can go from the subjective to the objective only through the mediation of the intersubjective.

3 Relativism

Any analysis of the notion of points of view has to deal with relativism. However, the relationships between points of view and relativism are complex. On the one hand, the distance from perspectivism to relativism is very short. On the other hand, not every kind of relativism depends on the notion of points of view, and it is possible to make a deep philosophical use of the notion of points of view without embracing any relativistic conclusion.

In order to identify with precision how the notion of points of view is connected with relativism, we will begin by introducing some important distinctions. Then, we will analyse the conditions in which the notion of point of view can lead to relativism. We will continue by exploring some of the most relevant fields where relativism has been proposed. Finally, we will consider the widespread relativist attitude that can be found in recent philosophy under the banner of “postmodernism”.

3.1 *Absolutism, Relativism, and Perspectivism as Philosophical Programs*

The notion of points of view is relevant in many contexts. Absolutism, relativism, and perspectivism offer different philosophical accounts of that fact. These positions permeate all the history of philosophy. A precise characterisation would be the following one:

²In that line, see more recently Putnam [111, 113, 114, 115], Rorty [130, 131] and Brandom [12, 13]. One crucial difference between the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* [171] and the Wittgenstein post-*Tractatus* lies precisely in the contrast between private and intersubjective points of view. The solipsist option of the *Tractatus*, a private point of view which cannot but be the only correct one, is completely discarded as a serious option by the Wittgenstein of the *Investigations* [173], especially in relation to the problematic of “following a rule”. And it is discarded too, although for different reasons, by the Wittgenstein of *On certainty* [172].

³Davidson [33].

Absolutism claims that there is a stable way in which things are in themselves, with independence from any point of view, so that any other way in which things can be in relation to a point of view is reducible, at least in principle, to that epistemically independent stable way of being.

Relativism rejects the claim of absolutism, maintaining that there is no stable way in which things are in themselves with independence from any point of view.

Perspectivism claims that there are some stable ways in which things are in themselves, with independence from any point of view, and that there are also non-reducible ways in which things are the way they are only in relation to some points of view.

Absolutism includes a positive thesis about reality in itself and, as a consequence, a reductivist thesis about reality in relation to perspectives. The positive thesis is that reality in itself has an epistemically independent stability. The reductivist thesis is that reality in relation to perspectives, i.e., reality from a certain point of view, is reducible to that epistemically independent stable way of being.

It is very important to distinguish the notion of objective points of view, and objectivism as the philosophical position claiming that objective points of view are possible, from the notion of absolute points of view and absolutism as a philosophical position. In other sections, we will define with precision absolute points of view. Now, we will focus on the philosophical positions of absolutism, relativism and perspectivism.

Absolutism only makes sense if it is possible to adopt objective points of view. However, to be capable of adopting objective points of view, i.e., points of view which are not subjective in any of the two senses above defined, subjective impregnation and subjective relativisation, does not entail to embrace absolutism. The existence of an epistemically independent reality is not enough for the truth of absolutism. That epistemically independent reality has to have a minimally stable way of being. And everything else has to be reducible to it.

Absolutism, relativism, and perspectivism can be interpreted as giving place to three very different kinds of “philosophical programs”. Absolutism is adopted by reductive physicalism and by eliminativist physicalism. Points of view would have to be reduced to other more basic realities, or they would have to be ontologically eliminated. In any case, the world in itself would not contain points of view. That program has close links with the notion of an “absolute conception of the world”.⁴ The notion of an absolute conception of the world is the notion of a true and objective conception of reality independent of our points of view. A complete absolute conception of reality would show that points of view are either reducible or eliminable.

Now, let us consider relativism. It is the philosophical program adopted by many forms of idealism. The world without points of view is rejected as the basic reality. The basic reality is constituted by a number of points of view, or by a privileged point of view. And the world without points of view, a world independent of points

⁴See Williams [166], Moore [97] and Putnam [112].

of view, is understood as a construction, or projection, or postulation, made from those points of view.

We can find that program in Nietzsche also, and we can find it in many varieties of radical constructivism in the contexts of both continental and analytical philosophy. In this second context, it is a program explicitly adopted by Nelson Goodman, and by many other antirealists.⁵

The program of perspectivism is not as easy to introduce as the other two. It is suggested by claims like that of Putnam that, “the mind and the world jointly make up the mind and the world”.⁶ The crucial idea is that we cannot either reduce all points of view to a supposedly more basic reality, or eliminate them completely from our ontology. One of the main reasons for that impossibility, either of reduction or of elimination, is that any supposedly more basic reality could only be identified from some point of view. Moreover, the very distinction between “to see something, or to think of something, as being in a certain way” and “to be really in that way” also seems to depend on the adoption of a certain point of view.

Perspectivism entails a great amount of indeterminacy. From some points of view, we assume a reality independent of our points of view. From other points of view, we assume that at least some points of view are not reducible or eliminable. However, if the programs of absolutism and relativism are rejected, then our only option is to make that lack of determinacy acceptable.

3.2 *Relativism, Skepticism, and Subjectivism*

Relativism has to be distinguished from skepticism and from subjectivism. On the one hand, whereas relativism contains a positive claim about reality, namely, that there is no stable way in which things are in themselves with independence from points of view, skepticism does not contain any positive claim. Skepticism about a certain area is the rejection that we have, or that we can have, any knowledge about that area.

On the other hand, subjectivism can be a variety of relativism. A subjectivist relativism about a certain area would be that kind of relativism according to which all things inside that area are relativized to a certain subject (in any of the senses above introduced). However, there are other non-subjectivist varieties of relativism. In principle, relativism can be of a subjectivist kind and of a non-subjectivist kind.

We can distinguish two main ways of being relativist. One of them is the Protagorean way. According to Protagoras, the human being is the measure of all things. There is no place for a reality independent of human points of view. Usually, this is not meant to be equivalent to solipsism. It is supposed that there are a variety of subjects constituting reality. From Plato on, the consistency of that position has been an open problem. In any case, another way of being relativist is the

⁵See Goodman [51, 50].

⁶Putnam [110:xi]. Also, it comes close to other projects like Dennett [37]’s “heterophenomenology”.

Heraclitean way. According to Heraclitus, there is no stable reality. Everything is in flux, like a “river”. Everything is relative to the particular position in which it is placed in a fluent reality. This would be an important sort of relativism of a non-subjectivist kind.

Heraclitean relativism rejects absolutism. However, it assumes the existence of objective points of view. There are points of view having explicit contents which are not subjective in either of the two senses above introduced: subjective impregnation from attitudes and subjective relativisation to a certain position. Moreover, it is by adopting an objective point of view that Heraclitean relativism rejects the absolutist requirement of stability.

The two ways of being relativist, the Protagorean and the Heraclitean, can be found in many guises, both inside and outside philosophy. And both of them can be found in the works of Nietzsche. However, they are different. The sort of Heraclitean relativism we have described does not make any relevant use of the notion of point of view. Only the first one, the relativism rooted in Protagoras, depends clearly on that notion.⁷

3.3 *Relativism Requires Constitution and Plurality*

We have to note two very important features of relativism. The first one comes from the need to distinguish between a relational thesis and a relativist thesis. Being relational is not enough for being relative, or it is so only in a very weak sense. It cannot be accepted that every relation entails a relativisation. For something to be relative in a stronger sense, that relational character has to be “constitutive”.

Many properties manifest a relational character. However, only if that relational character is constitutive of the properties in question, in the sense that changes in the relations entail changes in the properties themselves, can it be properly said that the properties are relative. Only in that case would the properties be relative in a strong sense. In other cases, we could vary all the relevant relational parameters without any variation in the properties. There is a well known relation, for instance, between some gas having a certain temperature and the gas having a certain volume and exerting a certain pressure over its container. However, the property of having that temperature is not constituted by the gas having that volume and exerting that pressure. It is constituted by the kinetic energy of the molecules of the gas. Relativism requires constitution. And the property of having a certain temperature, even though it is lawfully related to the properties of having a certain volume and exerting a certain pressure, is not relative to them.

What relativism has traditionally maintained is that some relevant properties are relative to certain factors in the strong, constitutive sense. This is what we find both

⁷A detailed analysis of Nietzsche’s positions can be found in Conant [31, 32]. See also Hales and Welshon [59].

in Protagorean relativism and in Heraclitean relativism, with the difference that only in the first sort of relativism is there a relativisation to the points of view of a number of subjects. In Protagorean relativism the factor of relativisation is “inside” the points of view of some subjects, whereas in Heraclitean relativism the factor of relativisation is in the reality “outside” their points of view. The classical refutations of relativism also focus on that constitutive sense. Plato’s claimed that the very existence of thought and language requires some stable reality, a certain way things are in themselves. This was a claim against both Protagorean relativism and Heraclitean relativism in the strong sense, not in the weak one.⁸

Another important feature of relativism, such as it has been traditionally maintained, is that it needs to claim 1) that there are many ways in which things can be strongly relative, or in any case more than one way; and 2) that those ways exclude each other. If there could be but “only one way” in which things are strongly relative, then relativism would not make sense. If there could be more than one way but “without exclusion”, then relativism would not make sense either. Relativism requires a non-reducible plurality of mutually exclusive alternatives.

That feature of relativism is also present both in Protagorean forms of relativism and in Heraclitean forms. A Protagorean sort of relativism, involving crucially the notion of points of view, needs to claim that there are many possible points of view, or in any case more than one, and that those points of view exclude each other. A Heraclitean form of relativism would not appeal to the notion of points of view. However, it needs to admit that reality can flow in more than one possible way, and that those possible ways exclude each other.

This second feature is no less important than the first one. Even if subjectivism can be a variety of relativism, there are also subjectivist positions which are not relativist. And solipsism is one of them. According to solipsism, the whole of reality is necessarily determined by an individual subject. Solipsism is a form of subjectivism, but not a relevant form of relativism.

In exactly the same sense, it would not be enough for Protagorean relativism to say that from a certain point of view it is “as if there were” other points of view. In that case, those other points of view would exist only, so to speak, “inside” the first point of view. Relativism in its full sense needs a “real plurality”, or at least a “really possible plurality”, of points of view in conflict.

3.4 *From Points of View to Relativism*

The distinctions and commentaries we have made have a crucial importance regarding how the notion of points of view can lead to relativism. We can summarize them as follows.

⁸In particular, see *Cratilo*, *Teethetus*, and *Republic*.

1. The sort of relativism connected with the notion of points of view is not Heraclitean relativism, but Protagorean relativism.
2. Protagorean relativism, as any other relativism, requires that the relations between points of view and reality have a “constitutive” power. The mere existence of relations between points of view and reality would not be enough. If they were enough, because points of view have a relational nature, the need to adopt a point of view in any effort to know reality, and to know ourselves, would directly entail the truth of relativism.
3. Protagorean relativism would be a sort of subjectivism. However, as relativism, it cannot collapse into a subjectivism of a solipsistic variety. It has to assume the “real existence”, or at least the “really possible existence”, of a number of points of view in conflict.

In order to articulate a relativist position about a certain area from the notion of points of view, we would have to argue 1) that there are a number of different points of view about that area, 2) that they have a constitutive power over the properties that give structure to the phenomena in that area, 3) that those different points of view are in conflict, and 4) that there is no stable reality in that area that can remain out of that conflict.⁹

3.5 *Two Dimensions in Relativism*

Relativism can be projected into two dimensions: “scope” and “modal force”. Relativism can have more or less scope. It can be only local, affecting particular areas or fields of phenomena. Or it can have a maximal generality. In the last case, its scope is global.

Relativism also can have a more or less strong modal force. Even though the relativist relations need to be constitutive, it can be maintained that their modal force has limits. This would mean that at some modal level those relations could be not so constitutive. Alternatively, it can be maintained that the modal force of the relevant constitutive relations is maximal, and that they are completely unavoidable. In other words, the constitutive relations can be understood as contingent at some modal level, or as something completely necessary at every modal level.

The degree of generality defines the scope of the constitutive relations. Their degree of contingency or necessity defines its modal force. This allows us to distinguish the following four kinds of relativism:

⁹A recent rejection of relativism based on what would be entailed by the identification and interpretation of “other” conceptual schemes, is Davidson [35]. In close connection with some ideas of the Wittgenstein of the *Investigations*, Putnam [118] is also very interesting. Other analyses and refutations of relativism can be found in Siegel [143]. About relativism in general, see again Clark [29], Haack [56], Hales [57] and Hales (ed.) [58].

- Relativism-1 Relativism with both the maximum of generality and the maximum of necessity
- Relativism-2 Relativism with the maximum of generality but with a contingent modal force
- Relativism-3 Relativism with only a local scope but with the maximum of necessity
- Relativism-4 Relativism with only a local scope and with a contingent modal force

It is arguable that Relativism-1 is inconsistent. Relativism-1 would be necessarily false because it would have to be false even if it is true. If the relativist position is claimed as something necessary, then it cannot be maximally generalised. And if it is maximally generalised, then it cannot be understood as something necessary. Traditional

self-refutations of relativism always have made use of these ideas.¹⁰ However, many times it has also been maintained that, even if it is self-refuting “to claim” that kind of relativism, or “to believe” it, nevertheless it can reflect, or represent, our true situation. That move would go in parallel to similar moves that can be made, and that traditionally have been made, for protecting radical scepticism from a direct self-refutation.¹¹

There would be only three consistent possibilities for relativism: Relativism-2, Relativism-3, and Relativism-4. How plausible are they? In Relativism-2, the relativist constitutive relations are not seen as something necessary at every modal level. There is at least one modal level in which they do not apply. Hence, at that modal level, the content of that relativism, what it says, could be consistently claimed, or believed, as being true.

The problem with Relativism-2 is twofold. On the one hand, it does not seem to be true. Reality shows many aspects that do not seem to be so strongly relative to our points of view. At least, they seem to be independent of any particular point of view. In principle, any point of view could be enriched with those aspects of reality by “simple addition”.¹² On the other hand, it is difficult to see how its contingent character can be combined with its maximal generality. If it is assumed that “in fact”, or “at some modal level”, there are relativist constitutive relations over absolutely every field of reality, why not claim also that those relativist constitutive relations are necessary?

The second consistent possibility is Relativism-3, a local relativism with a modal force of necessity. The third possibility is Relativism-4, a local relativism without the modal force of necessity. We can consistently maintain both positions. Here, we would have relativist constitutive relations only with a local scope, and with a more or less strong modal force.

¹⁰See, for instance, Putnam [118].

¹¹See Stroud [156].

¹²About that idea, see Moore [97].

3.6 *Fields for Protagorean Relativism*

Some kinds of contents are prone to be considered a relativist matter in a Protagorean sense. They can be called “fields for Protagorean relativism”. The following list establishes a ranking of them:

1. Sensorial taste
2. Aesthetic taste
3. Social institutions
4. Moral norms and values
5. Meaning
6. Knowledge
7. Rationality

The list goes from fields, in the top, with a great propensity of being considered relative to a subject, individual or collective, in a strong sense, to fields that tend to be outside of relativist considerations.

Nevertheless, there are very important relativist positions about meaning, knowledge and rationality. As we have noted, we can find in Nietzsche a radical relativist approach about those matters. Sociology of knowledge,¹³ and the more recent so called “Strong Program”,¹⁴ offer no less radical relativist conclusions. In combination with philosophies inspired by marxism and psychoanalysis, the influence of Foucault has been crucial also, mainly in Continental Philosophy.¹⁵ Furthermore, current Postmodernism maintains very strong relativist positions.¹⁶

As we have said, it can be argued that such extreme relativist positions cannot be properly understood as “making a claim”. Radical relativist claims of a Protagorean sort are self-refuting. In order to restore consistency, they have to be understood in other ways. In fact, this is accepted by many radical relativists. And very often radical relativism is interpreted more as an attitude than as a claim.

In any case, there is a general tendency to consider that even if it may be adequate to see meaning, knowledge, and rationality as contextual phenomena, and even if a certain perspectivism about them can be reasonably maintained, they cannot be simply relativised to things like psychology, social relations, culture, etc., without losing their “normative” functions. Here, relativism would be in the same boat with psychologism and naturalisation. The old reasons of Husserl, Frege, and Russell against psychologism and naturalisation would be also reasons against relativism. Meaning, knowledge and rationality have an anti-relativist “conceptual behaviour”. In other words, to say that they are radically relative appears to be the same as to say that there is no meaning, no knowledge, and no rationality at all.

¹³See Berger and Luckmann [7].

¹⁴See Bloor [8].

¹⁵See Foucault [42, 41].

¹⁶See, for instance, Lyotard [85]. For a critical view of relativism, see Boghossian [10].

On the other pole of our ranking, things like sensorial taste, aesthetic taste, and social institutions (including here all of our “natural languages”) appear to be highly relative. Even if we suppose objective properties in reality capable of being relevantly connected with them, the contribution of the points of view of the subjects, individual or collective, always seems to be determinant.

In the case of sensorial taste, the subjective equipment of the bearer of the point of view is the decisive factor. As we have noted, the classical distinction between “secondary” sensible qualities and “primary” ones puts the emphasis in that point.¹⁷ In the case of aesthetic taste, the standards of taste, for a certain social group, in a certain context, would play a role similar to that of sensorial equipment. In the case of our social institution (for instance, “natural languages”), that role is played by our intentions, decisions and conventions.¹⁸

The field of moral norms and values occupies a very unstable position in between these poles. Sometimes, they have been considered at the same level as secondary qualities.¹⁹ At other times, they have been considered to be social institutions. And there are also many approaches claiming a more objective status for moral norms and values.²⁰

3.7 *Relativism and Postmodernism*

Nowadays, relativism is a very influential cultural perspective. Curiously, many times, natural science is appealed to “in support” of such relativism. This has been so especially in the case of relativity theory and quantum mechanics. Also, evolutionism and genetics are repeatedly mentioned as giving support to the idea that all our mental life is biologically determined. However, in spite of these appeals to natural science, the main sources of recent relativism are the social sciences and the humanities.

The movement known as Postmodernism maintains explicitly relativist theses. Postmodernism is an epigone of French Philosophy. It rejects all the rationalist and empiricist philosophical projects rooted in the Enlightenment, maintaining also an attitude of suspicion towards marxism, psychoanalysis and structuralism understood as “big theories”.

Very often, as in the case of Nietzsche and others, that relativism is preserved from inconsistency by being presented not as a set of claims, i.e., as something we would have to evaluate as true or false, but as something expressing an attitude, or having a rhetorical status.

¹⁷See McGinn [93].

¹⁸About that, see Searle [139] and Tuomela [159, 160].

¹⁹See for instance, McDowell [92].

²⁰With respect to relativist approaches to norms and values, see Harman [64], Honderich (ed.) [65], Krausz and Meiland (eds.) [70] and Mackie [90].

Postmodernism has received a harsh answer from more classical intellectual attitudes. The result is what has been called “The science wars”.²¹ The traditional conflict between the perspective of the natural sciences and the perspective of the social sciences and humanities reaches its highest intensity here. It is not only a methodological conflict,²² or a conflict between two cultures,²³ or a conflict between two images of the world and of the human being in the world,²⁴ but also, or even mainly, a conflict of “interests” and “cultural power”.

An important battle in the context of that war is “The Sokal’s case”. We can interpret it as a confrontation between those who believe in the possibility of absolutism and those who reject it, claiming some local kinds of relativist theses and adopting a generalised relativist attitude.²⁵

The point of view of gender also has led to relativist approaches, sometimes of quite a radical sort. And very often, this has been in connection with Postmodernism.²⁶

4 Perspectivism

The notion of point of view is deeply involved in our conceptions of the world and of ourselves. And the three philosophical reactions to that fact are absolutism, relativism, and perspectivism. We have defined them. Absolutism claims that there is a stable way in which reality is in itself, with independence from our points of view, and that everything else is either reducible, at least in principle, to that way of being or eliminable. Relativism claims that there is no such stable reality independent of our points of view. Perspectivism tries to place itself “between” absolutism and relativism.

Like absolutism, perspectivism assumes that there are some stable ways in which reality is in itself. However, like relativism, it also assumes that there are other non-reducible ways in which reality is dependent on our points of view. Perspectivism draws something from absolutism and something from relativism.

Another equivalent way to define perspectivism would be by maintaining the thesis that absolutism and relativism, even if they are stated with a maximum of

²¹See Ashman and Barringer (eds.) [4, 14], Callon [18], Gross and Levitt [54], Labinger and Collins (eds.) [75], Parsons (ed.) [106], Sokal [147] and Sokal and Bricmont [148].

²²See Davidson [34] and von Wright [174].

²³See Show [146].

²⁴See Sellars [141].

²⁵See Sokal and Bricmont [148] and Sokal [147]. Other authors with relevant contributions to all of these debates are Boghossian [10], Frankfurt [43, 44], Nagel [99], Searle [139] and Williams [168]. From different perspectives, all of them argue against relativism and defend the value of things like truth, reality, objectivity and rationality.

²⁶As an example of that kind of gender relativism, see Hardin [61, 62, 63].

modal force, can only have a “local” sense. Perspectivism looks like a reasonable position. However, it is very difficult to articulate it in a fully elaborated way.

We said that the program of perspectivism entails a great amount of “indeterminacy”. From some points of view, we assume a stable reality independent of our points of view. From other points of view, we assume that at least some points of view are not reducible or eliminable. In any case, perspectivism only is coherent if the following two conditions are fulfilled:

1. the scientific descriptions we have of physical, chemical and biological phenomena are not complete in the sense of exhausting every aspect of reality, and
2. the points of view we have about reality do not entail by themselves any relativist position.

The two conditions involve realist compromises. If condition 1 is not satisfied, then the claim that the world “really” contains points of view could not make sense. If condition 2 is not satisfied, then the claim that we can really “know” from some points of view that the world really contains points of view could not make sense either.

The most important problem for perspectivism is to distinguish those aspects of reality that are stable and independent of points of view from those aspects of reality that are not.

4.1 Contemporary Perspectivism in Philosophy

Many philosophical positions have adopted perspectivist positions concerning a certain area of phenomena. We will dedicate this section to offering a little guide about contemporary perspectivism in various philosophical disciplines.

4.1.1 Epistemology

There are very strong tendencies toward perspectivism and relativism in epistemology. Moreover, many times it is very difficult here to identify clearly the differences between each position.

The fact that things can be seen with different colours and shades, with different shapes, etc., from different perspectives, or by different subjects, or by the same subject in different conditions, etc., always has constituted one of the main motivations for perspectivism and relativism. The same point would hold regarding any other sensorial modality. Perception has a very “circumstantial”, or “situated”, character.

There is a very common argument that goes from that circumstantial character to the conclusion that none of the things we perceive can be objective. The argument is that there are so many different perceptual aspects in any object that none of them can be assumed to be its “objective” or “real” aspect, an aspect the object has

independently from points of view. Any object can be seen, for instance, with so many different colours, even with so many different shades of a certain colour, that none of them can be said to be its “objective”, or “real”, colour. Perceptual contents would be merely subjective.²⁷

The distinction between “primary” and “secondary” qualities puts a boundary on the above move. In contrast with secondary qualities (properties like colour, sound, smell, texture, etc.), primary qualities (properties like form, quantity, etc.) can be considered “objective”, or “real”, properties of the objects. That distinction has been a disputed topic throughout all the history of philosophy, and it continues to be so.²⁸

Going from perception to belief, there are also very strong tendencies toward perspectivism and relativism. Coherentism, for example, conceives justification and knowledge in ways that make it very difficult to avoid the possibility of alternative systems of beliefs that are maximally coherent and comprehensive.²⁹

Pragmatism is another example of an epistemological approach that makes justification and knowledge at least partially dependent on other things apart from the way things can be in themselves. Practical value is dependent on the subjects and their points of view.³⁰

Things are more implicit with the epistemological position known as *confiabilism*. *Confiabilism* seems to be a position that tries to do justice to the notion of objective truth. It defines justification and knowledge in close connection to it. However, in order to deal with real situations of knowledge, *confiabilism* always needs to include contextual references to concrete subjects and circumstances, and this entails a certain amount of *perspectivism*.³¹

Another approach that has had a crucial role in recent epistemological debates is the one called “*virtue epistemology*”. In *virtue epistemology*, the contextual aspects of justification and knowledge are very important. What can be an epistemic virtue for a subject does not have to be an epistemic virtue for other subjects, and what is an epistemic virtue in one context does not have to be an epistemic virtue in other contexts.³²

Reflective points of view about our own points of view also are very important in *virtue epistemology*. In some cases, coherence would not be enough to get justification and knowledge, nor would it be enough to fulfil all sorts of practical requirements. And we can say the same of the reliability of our representational states. Sometimes, justification and knowledge require an epistemic ascent: to take

²⁷ A paradigmatic presentation of that argument can be found in Russell [133].

²⁸ See Hamlyn [60], McGinn [93] and Stroud [157].

²⁹ See Bender [6], Bonjour [11], Davidson [35], Lehrer [80, 81], Rescher [124, 125] and Sosa [149].

³⁰ Two recent and very important approaches in that sense are Rorty [129] and Stich [153]. Among classical pragmatists, James [68] constitutes the most explicit assumption of *perspectivism*.

³¹ See Armstrong [3], Goldman [47] and Nozick [102].

³² See Sosa [150, 151, 152]. See also Greco (ed.) [52] and Greco [53].

an adequate epistemic perspective over our own epistemic states, and their sources.³³

The perspective offered by reflection has been very important in contemporary epistemology in another sense also. Nelson Goodman proposed a way to understand the relationships between inductive practices and inductive rules that has been called “reflective equilibrium”.³⁴ Inductive practices are corrected when they do not follow sound inductive rules, and inductive rules are changed when they are not in accordance with persistent inductive practices. Induction has a dynamics grounded in that reflective equilibrium. The same strategy has been applied to other areas such as the theory of justice and conceptual analysis.³⁵ Reflective equilibrium seems to be at the very core of rationality.

All the epistemological approaches we have examined are anti-foundationalist. Some of them are closer to relativism than others. Coherentism and pragmatism are very close to relativism, whereas confiabilism is not. In any case, all of them suggest some kind of perspectivism.

There is also an important kind of perspectivism in many foundationalist epistemologies. Descartes’s epistemology is a classical example of foundationalism. But, it is also a classical example of the first-person point of view. In Descartes, there is a peculiar blend of foundationalism and perspectivism. Descartes’s foundationalism is grounded in the first-person point of view.³⁶ It has been defended that it is possible to separate the two ingredients, foundationalism and the first-person point of view, in Descartes. According to some authors, whereas foundationalism would not be an adequate epistemology, the first-person point of view, such as it is elaborated by Descartes, defines the very nature of the mind.³⁷

Chisholm is another example of foundationalist epistemology. This time, the first-person point of view is taken to be essential to any process of assessment and justification of our beliefs in order to achieve knowledge. All our knowledge would be justified by certain “evidences”, and to be or not to be evident is a subjective matter. It depends on a certain perspective that only can be achieved from a first-person viewpoint.³⁸

We have said that coherentism and pragmatism are quite close to relativism. Other epistemological positions assume an explicit relativism. The possibility of alternative conceptual frames, or alternative conceptual schemes, or situations of theoretic incommensurability, has been maintained, or suggested, by many authors in contemporary philosophy.³⁹

³³About that requirement, see specially Sosa [150, 152].

³⁴See Goodman [49].

³⁵With respect to justice, see Rawls [122]; with respect to conceptual analysis, see Sosa [150].

³⁶About that, see Farkas [39], Quinton [121], Williams [166] and Williamson [169].

³⁷This is argued in Farkas [39].

³⁸See Chisholm [26].

³⁹We can mention Feyerabend [40], Foucault [42], Goodman [50], Kuhn [71], Quine [119, 120], Putnam [110, 111, 113, 114, 115]; and in a very radical way Rorty [128, 129, 130, 131].

In one way or another, the possibility of alternative conceptual frameworks has a very strong Kantian inspiration. That possibility was also considered by Carnap, in connection with his crucial distinction between “internal” and “external questions”. Internal questions make sense only inside a certain conceptual framework. External questions are questions about the frameworks themselves. The last questions do not have answers that can be true or false. Conceptual frameworks are simply chosen.⁴⁰

4.1.2 Philosophy of Language

If the circumstantial, or situated, character of perception has been the main motivation for perspectivism and relativism about non-conceptual contents, the circumstantial and situated character of language has been the main motivation for perspectivism and relativism in relation to conceptual content.

The circumstantial and situated character of language has many faces. All of them suggest a certain perspectivism, and sometimes also relativist positions. One such face, with a long history, has to do with the quite simple and obvious fact that there are “many” natural languages.

That linguistic pluralism has sometimes been transformed into a linguistic perspectivism, or even into a linguistic relativism. This is the case with the so called Sapir-Whorf’s relativist hypothesis. According to that hypothesis, natural languages shape different ways of conceptualising the world, even different ways of perceiving it. Moreover, those configurations are alternative in quite a radical sense.⁴¹ This position has been highly influential. Interestingly enough, that linguistic relativism is usually grounded in empirical studies comparing very different languages, as for instance Hopi language and English with respect to temporal concepts.⁴²

The close relations between languages and conceptual frameworks, or conceptual schemes, means that many of the authors who maintain an epistemological relativism also can be considered as maintaining a linguistic relativism, and vice versa.⁴³

A second sort of perspectivist approach connected with the circumstantial and situated character of language involves Quine’s theses about the “inscrutability of reference”, the “indeterminacy of translation” and “ontological relativity”.⁴⁴ Those expressions suggest an explicit alignment with relativism. However, it is not easy to interpret Quine’s claims. Certainly, they can be interpreted as being very close to relativism. Reality would be dependent on language and conceptual framework.

⁴⁰Carnap [20].

⁴¹See Whorf [165] and Gumperz and Levinson (eds.) [55].

⁴²For a reconstruction and criticisms of these relativist ideas, see Malotki [91].

⁴³In particular, this is so with Feyerabend [40], Davidson [35], Goodman [49], Kuhn [71], Quine [119, 120], Putnam [110, 111, 113, 114, 115] and Rorty [128, 129, 130, 131].

⁴⁴See Quine [119, 120].

However, Quine can be also interpreted as undermining, or undercutting, the very possibility of philosophical relativism. This would be so when the conclusion of Quine's theses, closely tied to his rejection of the analytical/synthetical distinction, is intended to be that neither absolutism nor relativism make sense.

Quine's approach has been very influential. Davidson's ideas about language, closely connected to notions such as "translation", "radical interpretation", "charity principle", "rationality", etc., have their roots in Quine. Davidson always emphasises the need to rationalise, and this entails adopting a very peculiar point of view, different from the points of view of the natural sciences. Also important is Davidson's anti-relativist thesis about the incoherence of the idea of a conceptual scheme completely different from our own conceptual scheme.⁴⁵

A third very important perspectivist face of language, derived from its circumstantial and situated character, is "context dependence". There are many kinds and subkinds of contextual dependence. And they can affect syntax, semantics, and pragmatics.⁴⁶

We will mention two other perspectivist issues connected with the circumstantial and situated character of language. One of them has to do with the peculiarities of indexicality in the first-person case. The indexicality of "I" is very special. Many other indexicals could be defined from it. Furthermore, it is not at all clear the sort of meaning, and the sort of knowledge, that are involved in the use of the indexical "I".⁴⁷

The other one has to do with the recent discussion of "faultless disagreements". There are cases of disagreements (for instance, I say "No doubt, avocados are tasty"; you say "Absolutely false, they are not tasty") where the truth of what is said seems to be ultimately dependent on some social standards, or simply dependent on the peculiar taste of the subjects involved. There seems to be a genuine disagreement concerning some truth, but the conflict cannot be solved with more information. The final result is a kind of "perspectival truth". In the extreme case, it can be a kind of non-reducible "relative truth".⁴⁸

Sometimes, the phenomenon of faultless disagreements is rejected because its incompatibility with an absolutist position. At other times, it is interpreted as a confirmation of relativism. Indeed, if faultless disagreements were the rule, then

⁴⁵See Davidson [35].

⁴⁶Recanati [123] offers a very clear and useful classification of the main forms of "context dependence". He distinguishes between pre-semantic context dependences and semantic context dependences. Among the first ones, the most relevant cases are language-relativity, syntactic ambiguity and lexical ambiguity. Among the second ones, the most relevant cases are circumstance-relativity, indexical token-reflexivity, indexical semantic under-specification and modulation. About contextualism in general, see Preyer and Peter [108]. About the relationships between contextualism and relativism, see Richard [127].

⁴⁷About that, see Perry [107].

⁴⁸Among the vast literature concerning this topic, see García-Carpintero and Kölbel (eds.) [45], Kölbel [72, 73, 74]; Lasersohn [77, 78], MacFarlane [87, 88, 89]; Preyer and Peter [108], Recanati [123], Richard [127], Williamson [169], Cappelen and Hawthorne [19], Stojanovic [154] and López de Sa [86].

large parts of our use of language, and large parts of our thought, would lead to “relative truths”. However, between the extremes of absolutism and relativism, faultless disagreements also could receive a perspectival interpretation.

How to obtain such a perspectival interpretation? It can be argued that faultless disagreements constitute very unstable situations. Sometimes, we are inclined to say that there is some fault in the disagreement, other times we are inclined to say that there is no disagreement at all. It would depend on the “perspective” adopted. Under that diagnosis, faultless disagreements would always have to be understood in a dynamic context.

4.1.3 Philosophy of Mind

The contrast between the first-person point of view and the third-person point of view is crucial in current philosophy of mind. At a personal level, a subject having a mental state always has a first-person perspective about it. The subject has a direct, empathic access to his, or her, own personal mental states. And all other subjects only have an indirect access to them. This “asymmetry” between the point of view of the first-person and the point of view of the third-person is a constant source of problems.⁴⁹

On the one hand, the relevance of the third-person point of view has been maintained, not only for a scientific study of the mind but in any context. In recent years, Daniel Dennett has been one of the leading authors in that sense. For him, the mind is no more than the result of an attribution made from an intentional stance. Alan Turing maintained that the capacity to manipulate symbols from a third-person point of view, in particular the capacity to simulate a conversation, is the only adequate perspective for attributing mentality. This idea was very influential at the beginning of artificial intelligence. Behaviourism in psychology and philosophy, the rejection of “the ghost in the machine”, the critique of the existence of “private languages”, etc., also entail a passionate defence of the third-person point of view. All sorts of reductionist and eliminativist approaches coming from neurology also maintain the prevalence of a third-person point of view in order to know adequately the nature of the mind.⁵⁰

The thesis that mentalistic concepts are theoretical concepts, introduced for predicting and giving an explanatory account of the behaviour of some complex entities, assumes quite directly a third-person perspective. That thesis comes from Wilfrid Sellars, and has had a tremendous impact on many recent developments.⁵¹

⁴⁹See Tye [162, 163, 164]. See also Levine [82], who coined the expression “explanatory gap” to emphasise the differences between the first-person point of view and scientific third-person points of view.

⁵⁰See Dennett [36, 37], Ryle [135], Turing [161], Patricia Churchland [27] and Wittgenstein [173].

⁵¹See Sellars [140] and Paul Churchland [28].

On the other hand, it has been also maintained that the first-person point of view has some privileges that cannot be obviated. And that this fact puts serious limits to the possibility of “construing machines” able to have properly a mental life. Sometimes, the first-person point of view is connected with a certain way of sensing the world and ourselves, a “what-is-it-like” producing a peculiar qualitative, phenomenal content. Other times, it is connected with a certain “know-how”, some abilities or competences not reducible to propositions or rules.⁵²

The classic defender of the privileges of the first-person view is Descartes. His “cogito” can be seen in clear contrast with the materialist third-person point of view of authors like Hobbes. The contents of the “cogito” only can be accessed from a first-person perspective.

The debate between “externalism” and “internalism” about mental content and mental states is one of the areas in philosophy of mind where the contrast between the first-person and the third-person points of view is more explicit. According to internalism, to have a thought with a certain content has to entail knowing that we have that thought with that content. According to externalism, the mental contents of our thoughts, and those very thoughts, are determined by environmental or social factors that can be completely outside our epistemic horizon. Even thoughts about ourselves, i.e., self-knowledge, would be so determined.⁵³

We have indicated some approaches giving relevance, in an exclusive way, either to the third-person point of view or to the first-person point of view. There are two other approaches that suggest some ways to overcome that tension. One of them consists in looking for a different perspective. And the “second-person” point of view is a perfect candidate. In situations of personal interaction, the mental attribution is reciprocal. And there is a dynamics of mutual attribution that determines the final result.⁵⁴

The other approach breaking the dichotomy between the first-person and the third-person is the analysis of “multi-agents” contexts in artificial intelligence. The design of adequate models of interaction in those contexts requires taking into account at the same time both the first-person points of view and the third-person points of view, and their various sorts of interactions.

⁵²See Cassam [21], Chalmers [23], Chisholm [25], Dreyfus [38], Farkas [39], Jackson [67], McGinn [93], Mellor [95], Nagel [100, 98], Searle [136, 137, 138], Lewis [83] and Shoemaker [142].

⁵³See Putnam [117] and Burge [15, 16, 17]. See also Boghossian [9] and Liz [84]. The need for a perspectival self-consciousness is particularly demanding in the case of thoughts about oneself. The phenomenology of the “I” has been analysed by Chisholm [25] and Castañeda [22]. Its radical indexicality has been emphasised by Perry [107]. And the connections among perception, action, and self-consciousness have been stressed by Hurley [66]. Extending Hurley’s ideas, Noë [104, 105] has defended the non-conceptuality of perspectival self-consciousness. Some of our analyses of points of view would have relevant implications here. Perhaps the proper space for “self-consciousness” and “self-knowledge” is that space which is internal to points of view without being internal to the subjects having those points of view.

⁵⁴See Gomila [48].

4.1.4 Philosophy of Science

Philosophy of science has always lived between the poles of a dogmatic absolutism and of an extreme relativism.

On the one side, the analyses of the methodology of science, assuming a distinction between the “context of justification” and the “context of discovery”, have favoured absolutist positions. This was the approach generally adopted by Logical Positivism and also by Popper. That approach gave place progressively to the idea that a better perspective is to treat scientific theories as interpretative frames or as conceptual systems.⁵⁵

On the other side, researchers both in the history of science and in the social, economic and political aspects of science have favoured relativist positions.⁵⁶

Against linearly progressive versions of the history of science, there is now a strong tendency to see the history of science as a dramatic “fight” between different paradigms: geocentrism versus heliocentrism, the old teleological concepts of premodern science versus modern biology, alchemy versus chemistry, etc. And recent science is also seen in that way, as a “fight” between different conceptions and interests where moments of peace are not the consequence of a rational victory but the result of the (academic) elimination of the enemy.

Inside basic science, things also have changed a lot in the past century. Many times, it has been said that two of the most important theories of that period, namely the Special Relativity Theory and Quantum Mechanics, involve a revision of the traditional notion of scientific objectivity and a vindication of the crucial role of the points of view of the observers.

Special Relativity rejects the existence of an absolute space-time. In particular, temporal relations between events depend on the inertial reference frame of the observer, other inertial frames being equally acceptable. According to Quantum Mechanics, the variables defining the state of a particle do not have specific values before the measurement process. The particle does not have a determinate state, but a superposition of different states, and it is only the operation of measurement that “fixes” some particular values. In Quantum Mechanics, at least under the standard interpretation, the state of a particle does not exist independently of the observer.

A very important consequence of those changes in basic science is that many of the fundamental concepts used in the description of reality, as for instance the concept of causality, are now seen as perspectival concepts.⁵⁷

⁵⁵For that change of perspective, see Lakatos and Musgrave (eds.) [76] and Toulmin [158].

⁵⁶In the first field, Kuhn’s notions of “paradigm” and “incommensurability” have had an enormous influence. See Kuhn (1996, 3 ed.). With respect to the second field, see Bloor [8], Barnes and Bloor [5] and Collins [30]. Holding a harder constructivism, see Latour and Wolgar [79] and Knorr-Cetina [69].

⁵⁷About the perspectival character of causality, see Menzies and Price [96], Price [109] and Álvarez [1].

The relations between science and other cultural instances are also under the pressure of different points of view. The tension between the perspectives of the, so called, “manifest image” and of the “scientific image” is a perfect example.⁵⁸

Some authors have proposed positions that try to maintain an equilibrium between “absolutism” and “relativism”. A recent case is the “perspectival realism” maintained by R. Giere. He uses as an analogy the partial representations offered by maps. It is a very good analogy. Maps cannot be said to be true or false with independence from a perspective. But, unlike Kuhn paradigms, the different perspectives that can be adopted are not necessarily incommensurable.⁵⁹

4.1.5 Perspectivism and Conceptions of Rationality

Many times, points of view are evaluated as being more or less rational. However, rationality can be understood in many senses. We can distinguish a theoretical rationality, in a more generic sense an epistemic rationality, from a practical one. Also, we can distinguish between merely formal conceptions of rationality and more substantive ones. We can distinguish between an instrumental rationality and a rationality including ends and values. We can also distinguish between “Humean” conceptions of rationality, in which beliefs are in the service of desires, and “Platonic” conceptions, in which desires have to be submitted to some rational control. Even if we do not want to adopt relativism, there is a wide room for perspectivism with respect to rationality.⁶⁰

There is another contrast worthy of attention. It is the one between “ideal conceptions of rationality” and “conceptions of a bounded rationality”. Two sorts of paradigmatic examples of ideal conceptions of rationality are the ones based on logic and the ones based on decision theory. Conceptions of a bounded rationality assume very directly a perspectivist approach. The origin of the notion of a “bounded rationality” is Herbert Simon’s idea that many times it is more rational not to be as rational as an ideal conception of rationality would require.⁶¹

Bounded rationality defines very circumstantial and situated ways of selecting and organising our beliefs and actions. Rationality is not defined by conditions independent of how we are placed in the real world. Rationality is always relative to some particular subjects and some particular circumstances.⁶²

There is a huge amount of evidence showing that ideal conceptions of rationality do not have a clear “descriptive” value. The open question is whether they can be said to have a certain “normative” value, and how they can have it.

⁵⁸See Sellars [141] and Rosenberg [132].

⁵⁹See Giere [46].

⁶⁰About all those distinctions, and many others, see Wilson [170] and Rescher [126].

⁶¹See Simon [144, 145].

⁶²About “bounded rationality”, and its contrast with “ideal conceptions of rationality”, see Cherniak [24].

In any case, one thing is to adopt, or to take, a point of view which can be more or less rational, and another different thing to evaluate a point of view as being more or less rational. The second situation, but not necessarily the first one, entails taking a normative point of view. And this seems to require having a certain conception of rationality, and applying it. The fact that our conceptions of rationality change, and have changed, offers another very sound argument for perspectivism in this field.

4.2 *Perspectivism Without Relativism*

Now, let us compare more closely the positions of relativism and perspectivism. As we have said, perspectivism would claim that there are some stable ways in which things are in themselves, with independence from points of view, and that there are also other ways in which things are the way they are only in relation to some points of view. Perspectivism assumes both absolutism and relativism in a local sense.

We distinguished between a relativism of a Heraclitean sort and a relativism of a Protagorean sort. Only the second one involves in a crucial way the notion of points of view. What was the diagnostic for Protagorean relativism? On the one hand, Protagorean relativism with a general scope and a maximal modal force is inconsistent. Its non-relative truth cannot be stated. This is the classical refutation of that sort of relativism. On the other hand, Protagorean relativism with a general scope but with a contingent modal force is not a stable position. In principle, there would not be any sound reason to consider it in that general but only contingent way.

Protagorean relativism is an option only in a local sense. In that local sense, even with a maximal modal force, Protagorean relativism is an innocuous position. In any case, the truth of such relativism would depend on its peculiar scope. So understood, relativism becomes an “objective” claim that can be tested and controlled. Here, the positions of relativism and perspectivism come very close. Perspectivism can be locally relativist in this sense.⁶³

Also, we distinguished between Protagorean relativism and subjectivism. Solipsism would be a subjectivist position, but not a relativist one. Even a Protagorean relativism with a general scope and a maximal modal force would have to assume the real existence of “other points of view”. There have to be other alternative points of view which are assumed as real. There cannot be only other points of view “from my own perspective”. Also in that sense, a consistent relativism assuming the real existence of “other points of view” offers a suggestive way towards perspectivism. Such relativism makes it possible to analyse what is entailed by such “objective” acknowledgement of other points of view. Again, the positions of relativism and perspectivism are very close here.

⁶³About that, see Anderson [2].

Perspectivism can accept local Protagorean relativism. Also, it can accept any relativism assuming seriously the reality of other points of view. The open problem for perspectivism would be to determine in detail the “objective” contents of those relativist positions. Perhaps that cannot be done for Heraclitean reasons. Here, the other way of being relativist, the Heraclitean way, might have a relevant role to play. In any case, now, it would be a role played “inside a perspectivist frame”.

5 The Objective Side of Points of View

Let us summarise briefly some of our results. Objective points of view are points of view which are not subjective. And subjective points of view are points of view with explicit contents having a subjective impregnation from the attitudes or having a subjective relativisation to a certain position. Both objective and subjective points of view can have a psychological subject as their bearer. The difference between them is a difference of content.

We have distinguished between objective points of view, objectivism, and absolutism. The contents of objective points of view are epistemically independent. Objectivism claims that such points of view may exist. And absolutism claims that some parts of reality have an epistemically independent stability.

Objectivism is a philosophical position in contrast with subjectivism, and absolutism is a philosophical position in contrast with relativism. The opposition between objectivism and subjectivism is exclusive. Each one has been defined as the negation of the other one. However, the opposition between absolutism and relativism is not exclusive. It is possible to be absolutist with respect to certain parts of reality and relativist with respect to other ones. This combination of absolutism and relativism defines perspectivism.

Objectivism and subjectivism are philosophical positions about points of view, more concretely about the nature of the explicit contents of points of view. Absolutism and relativism are philosophical positions about reality. It is very important to introduce exclusivism with respect to the first contrast and not to introduce it with respect to the second contrast. That way, we can obtain the following relevant conclusion:

Objectivism is entailed by absolutism, by perspectivism, and also by all the non subjectivist varieties of relativism. Only subjectivist relativism entails subjectivism.

Our intuitive, ordinary conceptual framework tends to objectivism. Many perspectivist positions, even many relativist positions, require a certain amount of objectivity. Our philosophical analyses have to reflect that feature.

According to absolutism, there is objectively a stable reality. According to Heraclitean relativism, there is objectively no stable reality. Also, it is important to make room for the possibility of rejecting absolutism from an objectivist stance. Heraclitean relativism is the prototype of a very relevant variety of relativism

different from Protagorean relativism. It is characterised by the aim of claiming objectively that beyond our epistemic contributions there is no stable reality.

In previous sections, we have focused on the subjective side of points of view. The analysis of subjective points of view, of relativism, and of perspectivism has offered, so to speak, a panoramic view of points of view from their subjective side. From their objective side, we have paid attention to the notions of objective points of view and to the philosophical positions of objectivism and absolutism. Now, let us consider more closely other aspects of that objective side.

In general, the objective side of points of view is manifest in six sorts of features:

1. The possibility of having objective points of view, with an objective content, and not only subjective ones.
2. The existence in points of view of ingredients which are internal to the points of view but external to the subjects having those points of view.
3. The non-eliminable and non-reducible character of points of view, particularly their non-reducibility to psychology.
4. The possibility of reflective moves producing objectivity.
5. The search for contents that are independent from perspective.
6. The aspiration to absolute and transcendental points of view.

In other places, we have discussed 1, 2, and 3.⁶⁴ Now, let us focus on 4, 5, and 6.

5.1 *Reflection and Objectivity*

Reflection can be understood in various ways. One way is to understand it as the achievement of some sort of “objective” point of view about our own points of view. In that case, the contents of reflection would have to be objective, and they could be also “intersubjective”. Moreover, perhaps those contents could not be objective unless they can be also intersubjective.

Many ideas of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, would be relevant here. His arguments against “private languages” and the nonsense of “following rules in a private way” are closely connected with that point. We can say that reflection about the rules we are following only makes sense if it is possible to get some “objectivity” about them. Moreover, according to Wittgenstein, the existence of such objectivity is possible only if the existence of an “intersubjectivity” with respect to those rules is also possible.

We have defined objective points of view in a very general way. Obviously, science tries to obtain points of view which are objective. However, we can ask, is science the “only place” from which such objectivity can be obtained? There are strong reasons for claiming it is not. The crucial point is that it is very difficult to

⁶⁴With respect to 1, see the preceding sections. With respect to 2 and 3, see the previous chapter of this book.

reject that there may be “also” objectivity in ordinary knowledge (about chairs, tables, mountains, etc.), in practical knowledge (for instance, about the best and worst ways to open a can), in personal knowledge (for instance, in self-knowledge), in inter-personal knowledge (for instance, in knowledge by testimony), etc.

Furthermore, is the objectivity obtained in reflection a “scientific” objectivity? Do the objective points of view achieved in reflection have to be always a “scientific” subject matter? Can they be so at all?

There are many important problems involved in these questions. One of them, really crucial, has to do with the requirement that in reflection there has to be a true and objective conceptual content about the identity, in our case a “personal identity”, between the subject who is making the reflective movement and the subject the reflection is about.

Even though it is a conceptual content, that content is a, let us say, highly “personal” content. And it has also a very strong “indexical” character. If scientific descriptions alone cannot contain that kind of personal content, and if they cannot show that kind of indexical character, then the objective points of view achieved in reflection could not be, in the last term, a scientific subject matter.

This would be a very important conclusion. Any scientific result has to be assumed reflectively. And through that reflective move, we aim to obtain also certain objectivity. However, the objectivity we can obtain in reflection is of a kind very different from the kind of objectivity we can obtain by means of scientific knowledge.

5.2 Independence from Points of View

According to absolutism, reality has a stable way of being which is independent from points of view. According to Heraclitean relativism, there is no such stable reality. According to Protagorean relativism, there is no reality independent from points of view. Both absolutism and Heraclitean relativism are objectivist. And their definitions make use of the notion of “independence from points of view”. What does that notion mean?

The notion of “independent from points of view” is equivalent to the notion of “epistemic independence” defined in other sections. In both cases, the crucial features are subjective impregnation from the attitudes of the subjects which the bearer of the point of view and subjective relativisation to a certain position of that bearer. A content is independent from points of view to the extent it has no subjective impregnation and it is not subjectively relativised.

In both cases, there is also a serious ambiguity. We will present it using the first notion, but the other case would be equivalent. Something like “independent from points of view” can be interpreted in two main senses:

1. It can mean “independent of, or apart from, all points of view”.
2. Alternatively, it can mean “independent of, or apart from, any particular point of view”.

The quantification is very different in 1 and 2. The second sense is entailed by the first one, but it is weaker than it. Absolutism seems to require the first sense, the stronger one. Absolutism claims that there is a stable reality independent from all points of view. The sense of independence that is rejected by Protagorean relativism seems to be also the first one. The claim that something, or even everything, is dependent on points of view is not merely a rejection of independence from points of view in the second sense.

However, the second sense of independence, the weaker one present in 2, has a great importance. Perhaps, this second sense is all we can have when we are looking for things like objectivity, intersubjectivity, and perspectival invariance. Moreover, beyond first appearances, perhaps the second sense also is enough when our aim is to obtain an absolute perspective about reality, or a transcendental perspective about our place in it.

Most of the difficulties in making full sense of absolutism and transcendentalism derive from the implausibility of adopting a perspective which can be independent from “all points of view”. To adopt one such perspective amounts to something like intending to think without thinking, or like intending to say something without speaking, or like intending to do something without acting. Sometimes this is just what is suggested by some transcendentalists. And “mystic transcendentalism” would feel comfortable with such formulations. However, it is not easy to make sense of statements like these.⁶⁵

The second sense of independence is weaker than the first one. But, as we have indicated, perhaps it is the only one that can be available for us. It is possible to consider that second sense of independence as the limiting case of the notion of “perspectival invariance”. The notion of “perspectival invariance” is crucial in many contexts. We can define it as follows:

Something has perspectival invariance if it has a way of being that is invariant under changes of points of view or perspective.

Perspectival invariance comes in degrees. Some things have more perspectival invariance than others. In any case, objectivity entails perspectival invariance. And perspectival invariance “suggests” objectivity. Points of view with explicit contents having a relevant high degree of perspectival invariance can be taken (more precisely, they can be taken in some contexts) as objective points of view.⁶⁶

Perspectival invariance has effects over our points of view about other points of view. We claimed that relativism needs the “reality” of a plurality of points of view, and not only other points of view that “seem” to exist from a particular point of

⁶⁵For a discussion of this subject, see Nagel [98, 99]. See, also, the discussions of Moore [97] of the “ineffable” character of some theses of absolutism, relativism, and transcendentalism.

⁶⁶About the relations between “invariance” and “objectivity”, see Nozick [103].

view. The notion of perspectival invariance offers a sense in which it is plausible to suppose that this need is satisfied. We can say that the other points of view can be assumed as real when they are capable of displaying a relevant high degree of perspectival invariance with respect to our points of view.

In other words, perspectival invariance could make us capable of “transcending” our points of view without adopting any either absolute or transcendental position. This is a very important idea that can be used in relation to many problems.

5.3 *Absolute Points of View*

We have said that the notion of perspectival invariance makes room for transcendence without absolutism, in the last term it makes room for transcendence without transcendentalism. We need to define with more accuracy what is it to adopt an absolute point of view, and what is it to adopt a transcendental point of view.

The number of authors defending relativist positions in contemporary philosophy is really impressive. However, there are also many authors defending positions completely contrary to relativism. These positions can be characterised as absolutist. Absolutism entails that there is a non-perspectival stable way in which reality is in itself, and that everything else has to be eliminated or reduced, at least in principle, to that way of being.

Nowadays, it is very common to identify absolutism with “scientific realism”. Science would have access to how reality is “in itself”, with stability and independence from all perspectives. Moreover, any perspective or point of view would have to be eliminated or reduced to some combination of features of such reality “in itself”. Curiously, the modern notion of an “absolute conception” of the world, and of ourselves, began closely linked to the Cartesian search for certainty from a reflective point of view centred in the “subject”. And from such a subjectively centred reflective point of view, the crucial questions were transcendental ones: Who am I? How am I epistemically related with reality? How can I know something about the world and about myself? What do I know of the world and of myself?⁶⁷

In order to illuminate the issue, we will introduce the following distinctions:

Absolutism/Absolute points of view

Absolute points of view/Transcendental points of view

Transcendental points of view/Transcendental, but non-conceptual, points of view

Transcendental points of view/Transcendentalism

To begin with, we can define the notion of an absolute point of view as follows:

⁶⁷About “absolute” points of view, see Williams [166] and Moore [97]. About “transcendental” points of view, see Moore [97].

An absolute point of view is an objective point of view with the conceptual content that, independently from all points of view, reality is in a certain way.

According to our definition, absolute points of view would be objective points of view of a “conceptual” kind. Their aim is to contain a certain amount of true conceptual content. We can also say that absolute points of view would constitute the extreme case of conceptual objectivity.⁶⁸

The sense of “independence from points of view” involved in absolute points of view has to be the strongest one. Perhaps this is not possible, but the aim of absolute points of view is to obtain epistemic independence in the strongest sense.

Absolute points of view can have a “local” scope. Hence, there may be a number of different absolute points of view, all of them having a local character. It is arguable that, in relation to them, truth can increase by “simple addition”, or “direct integration”.⁶⁹

We need to distinguish between “absolutism” and “absolute points of view”. Absolute points of view are a kind of objective point of view, perhaps an empty one. Absolutism is an ontological thesis about reality, perhaps a false one.

As we have said, absolutism would maintain that there is a stable way in which reality is with independence from all points of view. According to Protagorean relativism, there is no reality independent from points of view. Protagorean relativism rejects both absolutism and the existence of absolute points of view. However, Heraclitean relativism assumes the existence of absolute points of view.

Heraclitean relativism rejects the existence of a stable reality. However, this is a fact that is intended to be stated from an “absolute point of view”. It is a fact that is intended to be independent from all points of view. Reality in itself is that way. Heraclitean relativism intends to be an objective claim, independent from all points of view, about how reality is. It is important to appreciate this. Even if Heraclitean relativism rejects absolutism, it does so for different reasons than Protagorean relativism. Because of that, it can be committed to the existence of a certain absolute point of view.

If we do not recognize any difference between defending absolutism and defending the existence of absolute points of view, we could not appreciate what is peculiar in a position like that of Heraclitus. Absolutism needs an absolute point of view. But, it is possible to maintain the existence of absolute points of view and, at the same time, to reject absolutism.

⁶⁸As we said, the notion of an “absolute conception” of the world, and of ourselves as part of it, comes from Williams [166, 167], and has one of its main sources in Descartes. It has been recently analysed and vindicated by Moore (1987, [97]), and criticised by Nielsen [101] and Putnam [110, 111, 113, 114, 115, 116].

⁶⁹See again Moore [97]. We can also say that, in those cases, truth works as an “extensive” measure. In non-absolute (relative) points of view, truth would work as an “intensive” measure.

5.4 *Transcendental Points of View*

Are absolute points of view possible? Are some of them true? Even if it is not possible to obtain true conceptual contents such as those required for absolute points of view, the structure of absolute points of view is important. In many cases, they involve a peculiar transcendental move. They include, or at least they are associated with, a certain point of view about how we are, in the last instance, i.e., with independence from all points of view, epistemically connected to reality.

That combination can be called the “transcendental mood”.

The transcendental mood is a combination of 1) the aim to obtain an absolute point of view involving true conceptual contents with 2) a transcendental point of view about how we are epistemically connected to reality with independence from all points of view.

It is possible to adopt the transcendental mood not only with respect to our epistemic connections to reality, but in many other fields. For instance, we can adopt the transcendental mood with respect to how we are, with independence from all points of view, practically connected to reality, or morally connected to reality, or aesthetically connected to reality, or religiously connected to reality, etc.

According to our characterisation, absolute points of view have a conceptual character. Many times, the transcendental move involved in them also is conceptual. However, whereas the target of absolute points of view is the whole of reality, the target of transcendental points of view is only certain parts of reality. More precisely, we can define transcendental points of view in the following way:

A transcendental point of view is an absolute point of view about that part of reality constituted by how we are epistemically (or practically, or morally, or aesthetically, or religiously, etc.) connected to reality.

Also, we can characterise transcendentalism as follows:

Transcendentalism maintains absolutism with respect to how we are epistemically (or practically, or morally, or aesthetically, or religiously, etc.) connected to reality.

Transcendentalism is an ontological thesis about some peculiar parts of reality. Again, as in absolutism, the sense of the perspectival independence involved is in principle the strongest one. It does not seem to be enough to interpret that independence as “independence from any particular point of view”.

The distinction between transcendentalism and transcendental points of view runs in parallel with the distinction between absolutism and absolute points of view. Transcendentalism is an ontological thesis about our epistemic position (or practical position, or moral position, etc.), perhaps a false thesis. Transcendental points of view are a kind of absolute, and so objective, points of view, perhaps an empty one. To adopt absolutism entails the adoption of an absolute point of view, and to adopt transcendentalism entails the adoption of a transcendental point of view. Moreover, in the same Heraclitean sense in which one can reject absolutism while adopting an

absolute point of view, one could reject transcendentalism while adopting a transcendental point of view.⁷⁰

There is a modification we need to introduce. Even if it does not make clear sense to claim that there may be absolute points of view of a non-conceptual character (perhaps it can have only a “mystical” sense), it makes sense to claim that there may be transcendental “but non-conceptual” points of view about certain peculiar parts of reality. Reality as a whole is not a possible non-conceptual content. However, our epistemic relations with reality (also our practical relations, our moral relations, etc.), or a part of them, can be non-conceptual contents of some points of view. Simply, we can experience them.

Let us introduce the following notion:

A transcendental, but non-conceptual, point of view is an objective point of view having as non-conceptual content the way we are epistemically (or practically, or morally, etc.) related with reality independently from all points of view.

Some transcendental points of view can be understood as non-conceptual ones, and they have been so understood many times. According to that, we can consider that transcendentalism entails the adoption of some transcendental points of view, either conceptual or non-conceptual. And we have to admit also the possibility of a rejection of transcendentalism from a transcendental but non-conceptual point of view.

The blend of absolute and transcendental points of view that we have called the “transcendental mood” also can involve transcendental but non-conceptual points of view. This is not so when the transcendental mood comes from “scientific knowledge and naturalization”.⁷¹ But it is typically so in many cases in which the transcendental mood is purely philosophical.

In absolute points of view, there is always a strong emphasis on conceptual truth. Certain semantically evaluable conceptual contents are intended to be true. Moreover, it is a widespread idea that among absolute points of view, truth would increase by “simple addition”, or by “direct integration”. This feature suggests a strong “conceptual” character for those points of view. This is especially clear when science is taken as the paradigmatic example of an absolute conception.⁷² In contrast, many transcendental points of view do not look for the truth in that conceptual sense. They try to “grasp” our epistemic relations with reality in other ways. Sometimes, they look for something like a very special “intuition”, or

⁷⁰The classical locus for what we are calling the “transcendental mood” in epistemology is Plato’s criticism of the Sophists rejection that things have a way of being in themselves. Such transcendentalism offers an absolute, non-perspectival ontological position about our epistemic relation with reality.

⁷¹Our definitions of absolute points of view, transcendental points of view (of a conceptual kind), absolutism and transcendentalism fit very well with an exclusivist scientific realism involving projects for naturalizing epistemology, ethics, etc. The peculiar transcendental mood that we find here can be called “scientificism”.

⁷²About that, see again Williams [166], Moore [97] and Nozick [103].

“vision”, or “grasping”. Other times, they look for something that only can be “shown”, but not “said”, or for something only manifest “in our practices”. In any case, many times they look for something non-conceptual.⁷³

5.5 To Transcend Our Points of View Without Adopting Any Transcendental Mood

Let us discuss briefly a last, but very important, question. It has been mentioned in several places of other sections. Relativism needs a real plurality of points of view in conflict. Perspectivism also needs to affirm the real existence of different points of view. Both positions entail that there is more than just our own perspective. To claim the real existence of different perspectives entails to “transcend” our points of view. But, how to transcend our “own” points of view without being involved in the transcendental mood?

We will answer by emphasising a very important claim: we can do so in one of the two senses distinguished above for the expression “with independence from points of view”. The second and weaker sense, i.e., independence from any particular point of view, offers a way in which we can transcend our own points of view without assuming a transcendental point of view.

How to obtain such independence from any particular point of view? The notion of “perspectival invariance” is here crucial. We have said that the notion of perspectival invariance makes room for transcendence without absolutism. In the last term, that notion makes room for transcendence without transcendentalism. Perspectival invariance could make us capable of transcending our particular points of view without embracing any transcendental mood.

It is plausible to argue that, in a strict sense, we cannot take a transcendental point of view of any sort. It is difficult to see how the contents of transcendental points of view could be independent from all points of view. Also, it is doubtful that transcendentalism can make sense. In general, it is much more easy to understand reality apart from us than our relations with reality.⁷⁴ However, to transcend our particular points of view by trying to obtain “perspectival invariance” has a very clear and useful sense.

⁷³Plato, for instance in his *Cratylus*, develops the first option. The second one is one of the main topics of Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus*, one of the more important works in the transcendentalist tradition.

⁷⁴About that, see Stroud [155]. According to him, the main claim of radical scepticism is that a full understanding of the whole of reality is simply non possible.

6 Subjective and Objective Aspects of Time

We can apply our analyses to the problem of understanding time. The place of time in reality has been shown to be highly unstable. It does not seem to be completely adequate to place time in reality “in itself”, nor does it seem to be completely adequate to place time in our “pure subjectivity”.

Let us begin by distinguishing between “time” and “temporal points of view”. Time is intended to be something of reality, perhaps a feature, more or less constitutive, or a dimension, or a frame, etc. Temporal points of view are a kind of points of view. The real existence of time has been repeatedly questioned, in particular the real existence of a “fluent time” involving a past, a present, and a future.⁷⁵ However, it is not so easy to question the existence of temporal points of view. We adopt them “time after time”. This suggests that, perhaps, the real existence of a fluent time is closely linked to the real existence of temporal points of view (in the last term, to the real existence of points of view).

Let us say understand temporal points of view as follows:

A temporal point of view is a point of view identifying some differences in non-conceptual contents (qualitative, phenomenal, experiential contents) as “changes” of content.

The identification can be either conceptual or not conceptual. This is a very important point. Subjects without conceptual capacities could be capable of adopting temporal points of view. In any case, in a temporal point of view certain differences in non-conceptual content count as a “change”: something future becoming present, or something present becoming past.

The idea behind that characterisation of temporal points of view is very simple. Temporal points of view take some differences in the non-conceptual contents of experience as being temporal differences entailing a “change”. This is the crucial point.

Of course, temporal points of view also can take a content as having a “permanence” in time, i.e., as something continuing from the past to the present, or from the present to the future. However, we can consider that the identification of permanences in time is dependent on the possibility of identifying changes. In other words, to identify a permanence is to identify possible but not actual changes.

Now, let us explore briefly how temporal points of view so understood can be projected onto the analyses and distinctions we have been making in previous sections.

We began by distinguishing between “subjective” and “objective” points of view. Our distinction was relative to the explicit contents of the points of view. The

⁷⁵Apart from McTaggart, we have in Mellor [94], one of the most elaborated rejections of the real existence of a “fluent time”. In other chapters of this book, these issues will be discussed in depth.

explicit contents of subjective points of view are such that either 1) there is a determinant subjective impregnation coming from the non-conceptual, qualitative, phenomenal, experiential features of the attitudes of the subject of the point of view, or 2) the conceptual contents are constitutively relative to the position or emplacement of the bearer of the point of view. Are temporal points of view, such as we are understanding them, subjective in either of these two senses?

The subjective relativisation in the conceptualisation of something either as being in the future, or as being in the present, or as being in the past, seems to be unavoidable. Some reference, either direct or indirect, to the bearer of the temporal point of view is always necessary. What about subjective impregnation? Even though it can be claimed that there is not always a determinant subjective impregnation of the temporal contents involved, so that the different temporal positions are independent from the qualitative features of our attitudes, in many cases there is in fact such a subjective impregnation.

We can leave open the question whether there may be temporal points of view without a subjective relativisation and without a subjective impregnation. Perhaps this can be possible in some temporal points of view. In any case, let us suppose that temporal points of view are subjective points of view. Even in that case, this would not entail that the “fluent time” we can find in temporal points of view is merely internal to the subjects having those temporal points of view. Even if fluent time is “internal to temporal points of view”, it can be “external to the subjects” that are the bearers of these temporal points of view.⁷⁶

This is a very important result. The contents of subjective points of view are subjective in the sense of having a certain amount of subjective impregnation or being to a certain extent subjectively relative. However, nothing of that entails that those contents are internal to the subjects which are the bearers of those points of view. Those contents are internal to the points of view, but are not internal to the subjects adopting those points of view. Subjective points of view are not internal to the subjects having them. They are no more internal to the subjects than objective points of view are. With respect to this issue, it does not matter whether temporal points of view are objective or subjective. In any case, the “fluent time” we can find in them is not reducible to properties and conditions merely internal to the subject individually considered.

In our analyses, we also distinguished between “private” and “intersubjective” points of view. As we have said, the contents of temporal points of view are not internal to the subjects having those temporal points of view. But, would the subjective character of temporal points of view mean that they are private points of view, i.e., completely “idiosyncratic” ones? It does not either. If they were private,

⁷⁶In Russell [134], we can find a clear case of a relational time which is internal to a construed “space of perspectives” without being merely internal to the subjects from which that space of perspectives is construed. The construction of a Russellian space of perspectives is explained in other chapters of this book.

then no “rational control” over their contents would be possible. However, as a matter of fact, we are capable of having rational control over the contents of our temporal points of view. We use all sorts of clocks to “coordinate” our behaviours.⁷⁷

A simple explanation of that fact would be that temporal points of view can be “intersubjective”. Even though temporal points of view are subjective, they are not merely internal to the subjects. Moreover, they can be intersubjective ones. This entails that a number of “different subjects” can make the same temporal identifications, or at least that they can make similar temporal identifications.

This would be also a very important result. It entails the existence of some “shared temporal contents”. It is not only that the experienced fluent time is not something merely internal to the subjects that are adopting a certain temporal point of view. That fluent time can be a “shared fluent time”. The fluent time I am experiencing may be subjective. However, it is not simply “inside me”. And it can be “the same” fluent time than the fluent time you are experiencing, or very similar to it.

We established a sharp distinction among three ontological positions: “absolutism”, “relativism”, and “perspectivism”. Which ontological position would be the adequate one with respect to the fluent time we can find in our temporal points of view? The existence of a fluent time seems to be something relative to the existence of temporal points of view. Fluent time is internal to some peculiar kinds of points of view, namely temporal points of view. That way, relativism appears to be the adequate position with respect to a fluent time. However, things are more complicated when we look to temporal points of view.

The existence of temporal points of view appears not to be relative to any point of view. Can it be argued that temporal points of view exist in reality in an absolute sense? At least, they do not exist only “inside other points of view”. This would lead to a regression. It would be a particular case of the general kind of regression that we would have to face if we claim that points of view only exist from some point of view. From this perspective, absolutism would seem to be the adequate position to adopt. We can conclude saying that Temporal points of view seem to be subjective points of view existing in an absolute way.

According to their contents, temporal points of view seem to be subjective points of view. Even though there were no determination coming from a subjective impregnation of the qualitative features of attitudes, their contents would always be strongly relative to the positions or emplacements of the bearers of the temporal points of view in non-reducible ways. However, the existence of temporal points of view does not seem to be relative to further points of view. Temporal points of view seem to exist in a completely absolute sense.

Moreover, when temporal points of view become contents of other points of view, for instance when we think reflectively about them, these second points of view seem to be capable of being fully objective exactly in the same sense in which

⁷⁷And this is so with independence of all the problems about the possibility of “simultaneity” in relation to physical time.,

we can adopt a fully objective point of view about, let us suppose, our subjective points of view in matters of taste. We can convert, for instance, the subjective point of view of subject S with the content

1. Avocados are delicious

into an objective point of view with the content

2. For S, avocados are delicious.

So, there are reasons for relativism with respect to fluent time. And there are some reasons for absolutism with respect to temporal points of view. However, there are also reasons for relativism concerning temporal points of view themselves. Let us see with more detail this important issue.

A reflective point of view about temporal points of view would have to include, or to make reference to, the temporal contents of those temporal points of view. And it is doubtful that this can be done without inheriting the subjective relativisation of those temporal contents. The difference from the case of the avocados, and from other similar cases, is clear. Whereas it seems plausible to claim that we can make reference to the fact that S considers that avocados are delicious without any relativisation, even to describe that fact in fully objective terms, it is not easy to claim that we can do the same thing with respect to temporal contents such as, for instance, “It is raining now”.

There is a deep tension here. To say 2, above, is very different from saying something like

3. For S, it is raining now

In 2, we can leave behind all the subjective relativity present in 1. We can think of many kinds of “objective relations” between S and the avocados capable of doing the work. But it is not clear that we can get the same in 3.

The crucial problem is that the content expressed in 3 cannot be completely identified without knowing “when” it is raining. And “when” it is raining cannot be known except by “sharing” the temporal point of view of S.

There are many ways of sharing a point of view: we can directly ask, or we can observe a certain behaviour, or we can have testimony from others, etc. In any case, it is one thing to “share” a point of view, and another very different thing to have an “objective” perspective over that point of view. And the problem with the contents of temporal points of view is that we can only “share” them.

How could we maintain the absolutist demands regarding the existence of temporal points of view? Would we have to maintain a transcendental point of view about the existence of temporal points of view? Would we have to maintain, at least, a transcendental but not conceptual, point of view? The answer is negative.

According to our definitions, absolute points of view would have to be objective points of view. This entails an obstacle in relation to temporal points of view. As we have said, perhaps we cannot maintain reflectively any objective conceptual point of view about our temporal points of view. However, something “close to absolutism” can be maintained from the inside of some reflective perspectives.

The notion of a reality being in a certain stable way, independently from “any particular point of view”, has a very important role in many of our points of view. This is also applicable to the existence of temporal points of view. From the inside of some reflective perspectives, the existence of temporal points of view can be seen “very close to having an absolute sense”.

The possibility that temporal points of view can be “intersubjective”, so that we can have some “sharable temporal contents” in perspective, offers a clue.

It is plausible to think that if temporal points of view can be intersubjective, their contents can have a relevant perspectival invariance. At least, those temporal contents have to be invariant in relation to some idiosyncratic features of each particular temporal point of view. And perspectival invariance offers important reasons for absolutism. Even though the sense of independence from points of view involved in perspectival invariance is only the weak one (i.e., independence from any particular point of view), not the strong one (i.e., independence from all points of view), achieving that weak sense offers very sound reasons for thinking that temporal points of view are a feature of reality over which we can maintain an absolutist position.

Let us summarise our main results. With respect to temporal contents, a fluent course of things and events in time, we have claimed that even though they are internal to some temporal points of view, a peculiar kind of point of view, they are not merely internal to the subjects adopting those temporal points of view. Moreover, we have argued that temporal points of view can be intersubjective, and so temporal contents can be “sharable”.

With respect to temporal points of view, our position has been placed very close to absolutism. Temporal points of view cannot be a merely subjective epiphenomenon. They have to be included in a complete ontological picture of reality such as it is with independence from any particular point of view. At least in that sense of “independence from points of view”, temporal points of view are not ontologically dispensable.

All of that would be to “transcend” our particular temporal contents and our own temporal points of view. But it would be to transcend our temporal condition without adopting any “transcendental point of view”.

Perhaps we are capable of having transcendental points of view of a “non-conceptual kind” about the existence of a fluent time, independent of all our points of view, and about the existence of temporal points of view. Perhaps this is possible through a very special sort of “intuition” (“vision”, “grasping”, etc.) of our temporal relations with reality, or through something that only can be “shown” but not “said”, or through something having to do with “agency” and action”. However, we can leave this question open. We can get a great amount of intersubjectivity for temporal contents and a great amount of objectivity for the existence of temporal points of view even though we reject that possibility.

Our strategy would make it possible to transcend both our particular temporal contents and our own temporal points of view without adopting any “transcendental mood”. Intersubjective temporal points of view, displaying certain sorts of relevant perspectival invariances, make possible to share a fluent time (more precisely, a fluent world of things and events in the past, the present, and the future). Also, they

point at absolutism about the existence of temporal points of view. But they do all of that without embracing any “claim”, or any “intuition”, about the non-perspectival existence of fluent time, or about the non-perspectival place of temporal points of view in reality.

In conclusion, we could defend both relativism about the existence of fluent time and something “very close to absolutism” about the existence of temporal points of view. Fluent time would be internal to some temporal points of view, without being internal to the subjects having those temporal points of view, and these temporal points of view could exist in reality in quite an absolute sense, or at least in a very objective sense.

This means that, in general, we could be “perspectivists” with respect to time: we can be relativists in relation to some temporal phenomena (the existence of a “fluent time”) and we can be absolutists, or something close enough, in relation to other temporal phenomena (the existence of “temporal points of view”).

That temporal perspectivism would not be but a particular case of the general kind of perspectivism we can hold in many other fields. Furthermore, many of the perspectivist ideas we have maintained can be found in Russell’s notion of a “space of perspectives”.⁷⁸ According to Russell, the contents of our experience (he calls them “sensibilia”) have a place in a space construed through their relations: similarities, differences, groupings in classes, existence of series with a limit, etc. These relations make possible to define ordinary things, physical objects, matter, time, etc. In that space, our perspectives occupy also a position. They are like “points” in that space. And each perspective defines a different “space of experience”. From these spaces of experience, we construe a space of perspectives. In a certain sense, that space of perspectives is only a “virtual” space. However, it can also have a very important sort of “intersubjectivity” and “objectivity”. For Russell, there is integration, not opposition, between the spaces of our experiences and the space of perspectives. The physical world is construed out of that space.⁷⁹

Any scientific result has to be assumed reflectively. The same is true of any intuitive or ordinary statement. Through all these reflective moves, we aim to obtain some intersubjectivity and objectivity. However, the intersubjectivity and objectivity we obtain reflectively is always very different from the kind of intersubjectivity

⁷⁸See Russell [134]. A very important reference for Russell’s approach was Leibniz’s *Monadology*. Leibniz was also an important reference for the perspectivist position of the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset.

⁷⁹The details of Russell’s construction of a “space of perspectives” are explained in other chapters of this book. Russell claims that the spaces of experience are “private”. This is consistent with his insistence in that the constructions offered (of a space of perspectives, of a physical space and a physical time, of ordinary things and physical objects, of matter, etc.) could be made from a solipsist basis. According to our definitions, however, a “private point of view” could not be intersubjective. So, to the extent that spaces of experience can be intersubjective, and this can put us on the track of objectivity, they could not be “purely private”.

and objectivity we obtain by means of scientific knowledge. The intersubjectivity we have claimed for temporal contents and the objectivity we have claimed for the existence of temporal points of view have its sources in reflection.

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Temporal Points of View

Subjective and Objective Aspects

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