



Beyond Objectivism and Relativism by Richard J. Bernstein, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983.

Reviewed by

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In his latest book Mr. Richard Bernstein has chosen to tangle with, and attempted to distangle us from the grip of, the dichotomy of objectivism versus relativism. At the very outset he quite correctly notes the general uneasiness that has arisen across a broad intellectual and cultural horizon in regard to this issue. The problems involved here are important not only to philosophy, but to numerous other intellectual endeavors. Without exaggeration, this issue could be the dominant intellectual, and as Bernstein eventually frames the issue, practical one of our day.

Bernstein's purpose can be stated straightforwardly. His intent is "to clarify what is happening, to indicate what is wrong with the intellectual and cultural matrix that has shaped so much of modern life, to show why traditional oppositions are breaking down, what new directions are emerging, and what is the evidence for and the meaning of the move beyond objectivism and relativism" (p. 2). That he achieved a marked success, particularly in clarifying the problem, makes the book well worth reading. Even though the arguments he developed, based primarily on his ability to find a common ground in the seemingly disparate strands of thought from philosophers such as Rorty, Arendt, Habermas, and Gadamer, may not move us "beyond" objectivism and relativism, they definitely inspire us to set aside this dichotomy.

The book is divided into four major sections—with the first establishing an overview of the basic issues to be discussed. These issues are then given substance in the following three sections which deal, respectively, with various aspects of post-empiricist philosophy of science such as the thorny topic of incommensurability, with philosophical hermeneutics and the possible fusion of this approach with the idea of praxis, and with the relationship of these issues to the need for a sense of community based on a willingness to meet others in dialogue and judgment.

In the overview Bernstein establishes the nature of the problem of objectivism versus relativism. The issue at hand is that the former holds that there must be "some permanent, ahistorical matrix" (p. 8) to appeal to in resolving our differences, whereas the latter denies the possibility of any such overarching matrix and holds that we

must accept the condition of *their* standards versus *our* standards. Objectivism is about foundations or the grounding of knowledge; relativism denies the possibility of such grounding because there can be no appeal beyond a given conceptual framework or set of social practices. And, in the absence of a permanent neutral matrix, it must be granted that there may well be a “nonreducible plurality” (p. 11) of such frameworks or practices.

Put in different terms, the task is to face up to what Bernstein calls the Cartesian Anxiety. Even though this anxiety began long before Descartes, it is in his work that the grand Either/Or is most clearly set forth: “*Either* there is some support for our being, a fixed foundation for our knowledge, *or* we cannot escape the forces of darkness that envelop us with madness, with intellectual and moral chaos” (p. 18). The balance of the overview outlines, and the balance of the book substantiates how we must exorcise this Cartesian Anxiety. In other words, for Bernstein, to face up to this dichotomy is to expose it and strip away its plausibility or appeal as a focus of our lives. This movement beyond, or this exorcism, must follow the path of post-empiricist philosophy of science, of philosophical hermeneutics, of praxis, and end with the injunction that we must seize the “dialogical character of our human existence” (p. xv). To expose and exorcise the anxiety is a practical task of conversation and communication or of the need to “cultivate dialogical communities” (p. xv). This is a task to which Bernstein has made a major contribution.

The exposure and exorcism of the objectivism-relativism dichotomy begins in earnest with a discussion of Kuhn and the attempt to give up on commensurability in the natural sciences. Bernstein produces a very measured, insightful examination of some of Kuhn’s major points—a discussion which clarifies many of the misinterpretations, exaggerations, and so on that have been visited upon Kuhn’s work. This is followed by a discussion of Geertz and Winch, which allows Bernstein to bring the issues he is addressing directly into the social disciplines. His major intent throughout this chapter is to demonstrate that a “common ground” exists not only between Kuhn and those who have critiqued the positivist-empiricist conception of the social sciences, but also between Kuhn and many of his critics.

What is this common ground? In Bernstein’s words, it is “the beginnings of the recovery of the hermeneutical dimension of experience” (p. 107). He argues that various features of hermeneutics such as an awareness of the relationship of understanding and interpretation, the role of tradition in understanding, and so on have been reawakened by the post-empiricist philosophy of science. These hermeneutical tendencies are implicit in Kuhn and many of his critics and dominant in the work of Geertz and Winch. More importantly, the essence of the incommensurability thesis that is central to these writers is not one of closure and restriction (that crawl-

ing into one's own self-referential cave), but rather is one of an "openness of experience, language, and understanding" (p. 108). And, to be open to others or to engage in open dialogue with that which is strange or unclear to us is to engage (at least as a permanent possibility) a more profound understanding of our own lives.

Bernstein's movement of hermeneutics to center stage is completed in the third section. This chapter is devoted to elucidating Gadamer's philosophical version of hermeneutics (in contrast to other versions in which hermeneutics is seen as a theory of Biblical exegesis or as the method of the human studies) and to extracting the implications of this perspective for the Cartesian Anxiety. For those of us who have struggled with Gadamer in the past, Bernstein's clear and precise discussion is very helpful. Bernstein focuses on how, for Gadamer, hermeneutics is given an ontological and universal turn and is thus the basis for all human understanding. To cast hermeneutics in this fashion is, in effect, to realize that we are dealing with our own "primordial mode of being" in the world. Hermeneutics is at the very center of philosophy in the sense that it is at the very center of, or constitutes, the essence of our human finitude.

For Bernstein's purposes one of the most important things to take from Gadamer is his critique of the Cartesian tradition and of the objectivism-relativism dichotomy. Gadamer argues that the Cartesian tradition incorrectly "transformed" hermeneutics into a method of objective knowledge. This was the position Dilthey accepted, though not without ambiguity. Gadamer, in contrast, finds in philosophical hermeneutics a way to move beyond the Cartesian Anxiety and a way out of our seduction by the dichotomy. Gadamer is calling us to undertake, some problems notwithstanding, nothing less than an alternative way of thinking.

One of the major legacies Gadamer leaves in the wake of his analysis is the destruction of the pretenses of objectivism. If nothing else, the idea of the hermeneutic circle and, in particular, the idea that the interpreter is inevitably a part of the circle, does great damage to the objectivist position. We must participate in or share in that which we attempt to understand in the sense that we can accomplish understanding only through invoking "the forestructures and prejudices that are constitutive of our being" (p. 137). This kind of approach, and of course the extended critique of the Cartesian tradition throughout Gadamer's writings, has left little for objectivism to "hang on to."

Can Gadamer then be accused of being a relativist? Bernstein presents various reasons to indicate he is not. Since relativism is parasitic upon and gains its currency as an antithesis to objectivism, to expose the wrongs of objectivism is to "question the very intelligibil-

ity of relativism” (p. 167). Also, Gadamer is as critical as any objectivist of the Myth of the Framework—the idea that we are forever trapped within our own “horizon.” To argue for incommensurability is not to argue that we are closed off from one another, but rather it is to awaken in us the idea that we must be open to ourselves as we attempt to participate in the frameworks and horizons of others. However, these points notwithstanding, Bernstein does think that some problems have been left unresolved and that Gadamer has not completely succeeded in “charting the course beyond objectivism and relativism” (p. 168). In the last section, with the use of the idea of praxis, he attempts to more clearly chart this course.

Based on an analysis of the common ground among Gadamer, Habermas, Arendt, and Rorty, Bernstein demonstrates how the movement beyond objectivism and relativism is not simply a theoretical problem, but is very much a practical task. The *telos* that he finds in common to these authors is that we must “try again and again to foster and nurture those forms of communal life in which dialogue, conversation, *phronesis*, practical discourse, and judgment are concretely embedded in our everyday practices” (p. 229). For Gadamer the issue was human finitude, for Habermas the rationalization of action, for Arendt the meaning of action, and for Rorty the need for a renewed sense of community.

At the core of all this—the attempt to exorcise the Cartesian Anxiety and set aside the dichotomy of objectivism versus relativism—is a practical-moral concern. Bernstein argues that the kind of dialogical community necessary for human flourishing has been distorted and disrupted by the dichotomy. This dichotomy is a product of and sustains the dangerous illusion that technique and technical reason will allow us to “engineer” such communities. However, a community of shared hopes, of shared understandings, on solidarity, and so on, cannot be “engineered by some form of *techne* or by the administration of society” (p. 226). In the end we are very much faced with a practical task—a way of choosing to lead our lives. Bernstein finds deep truth in a remark by Wittgenstein: “The way to solve the problem you see in life is to live in a way that will make what is problematic disappear” (p. xv).

In closing, this book is an insightful discussion of the dominant issue of our time and, in being so, is an invitation to us to join in the conversation. Possibly a brief personal note, based on my interest in educational research, will suffice. One can quite easily find support in Bernstein’s comments for the claim that social and educational researches, to the extent influenced by positivism and scientism, have actually distorted and disrupted the practical task of the community. A research enterprise based on technique is not productive of the need to foster and nurture dialogical communities. Research

that attempts to distance itself from everyday practical-moral concerns and researchers who attempt to hold themselves apart from those they “research” engage in little more than an institutionalized self-denial of our hermeneutical nature or our primordial mode of being in the world.

Bernstein puts the situation as follows: “A false picture is suggested when we think that our task is to leap out of our own linguistic horizon, bracket all our preunderstandings, and enter into a radically different world. Rather the task is always to find the resources within our own horizon, linguistic practices, and experience that can enable us to understand what confronts us as alien. And such understanding requires a dialectical play between our own preunderstandings and the forms of life that we are seeking to understand. It is in this way that we can risk and test our own prejudices, and we can not only come to understand what is ‘other’ than us but also better understand ourselves” (p. 173). Certainly, social and educational researchers, if no one else, should pay attention to Bernstein, Gadamer, Rorty, and others who are trying to release us from the grip of the Cartesian Anxiety and the dichotomy of objectivism-relativism.