

Rand and Objectivity

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Ayn Rand was an unusually creative philosopher. In every major branch of philosophy, from metaphysics to aesthetics, she had original insights and integrations that contributed to the field. But I would say that her most important contribution was the one that gave her philosophy its name: her analysis of objectivity. Its importance lies in the fundamentality of the issue. If we cannot establish the basic objectivity of our knowledge, then all other conclusions in philosophy are in trouble.

In the history of philosophical thought about knowledge, one encounters over and over again a single problem: how can the products of the mind—percepts, concepts, statements, theories, etc.—be objective, i.e., true to reality, given that they are products of the mind, i.e., results of definite processes shaped by the nature of the mind and the activity of the knower? For example:

A long line of thinkers, going back to the Sophists, have argued that our perceptual experience of the world cannot be trusted or regarded as veridical because the way things appear to us depends on the nature of our sensory faculties and the way they interact with the physical environment. There is the stick that looks bent in water, the penny that looks elliptical from an angle, the railroad tracks that seem to converge, and so on.¹ Most philosophers have concluded that it is not the objects themselves—the stick, the penny, the tracks—that we perceive, but an inner representation of them.

A long line of thinkers, going back to Plato, have wondered how a concept like MAN could have an objective referent. After all, the concept does not stand for any particular existing man but is universal; and its content does not include the determinate features of any existing human, such as hair color or height, but is abstract. There does not appear to be anything in reality that is universal or abstract in itself, i.e., apart from human cognitive operations. Some philosophers, like Plato, argued that

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there must be an objective referent—a "man as such"—somewhere in existence, even if it does not exist in the perceptible, spatio-temporal world. Others have argued that since there is no such referent in reality, our concepts are merely human constructs that are not constrained by the world.

Again, many thinkers, especially in this century, have wrestled with the problem of truth. How are we to understand the truth of a statement as correspondence to a fact when the world does not appear to come already broken up into facts, any more than it comes already grouped into categories that correspond with our concepts? Snow exists, and so does its color, but there is nothing over and above these existents that could be called the fact that snow is white. In parallel with the problem of concepts and universals, this dilemma has driven some philosophers to invent a recondite ontology of facts, while other philosophers have abandoned the notion of truth as correspondence and held that the truth of a statement is determined solely by its relationship with other statements.²

There is a common pattern in these issues, a pattern found in numerous other specific issues. We start with the assumption that objectivity requires some sort of direct correspondence between the mind and reality, a correspondence in which the mind passively mirrors the object it purports to grasp. I have called this assumption the diaphanous model of cognition, because it likens conscious awareness to a diaphanous medium in which objects are revealed without any "distorting" coloration from the medium itself. But when we examine the case, we find that the mind is not passive after all; it actively combines, divides, abstracts from, or selects among the data at its disposal. In response, some thinkers posit a higher-order form of correspondence in order to preserve objectivity. Others, claiming that no such correspondence can plausibly be maintained, conclude that objectivity is not possible (or else redefine objectivity as intersubjectivity).

Ayn Rand cut through all these problems by challenging the basic assumption that objectivity requires diaphanous correspondence between mind and reality. Our cognitive faculties operate, she argued, in the same way as our faculties for digestion, respiration, and the like: they interact with the environment in various ways that are determined by their own nature. The fact that the stomach mixes its own acids with the food we ingest from outside does not invalidate nutrition. Nor is our knowledge invalidated by the fact that cognitive products such as concepts and statements reflect the cognitive processes from which they emerge.⁴

This insight applies quite generally to all forms of cognition. It is an implication of the even more general law of causality. The nature of an entity's action is determined by the nature of the entity itself as well as by the conditions in which it acts, so the nature of cognition must be determined by our own nature as knowers as well as by the objects we come to know in the external environment. In perceptual awareness, for example, we may distinguish the perceived object and its attributes from the variable forms in which we perceive them. The penny is actually round, and we are perceptually aware of its actual shape, but because of the way our visual system responds to light, we are aware of the penny's⁵ shape in a specific form that depends on the angle from which we view it.

In perception, despite the variable form in which we perceive an object, there is still a one-to-one correspondence between the perceptual awareness and the object of which we are aware; the object of perception is always a concrete, particular thing or action. At the conceptual level, however, there is no such correspondence. Rand describes the referents of a concept as "units"--a technical term she uses for things regarded as members of a class of similar objects. We are able to form and employ concepts designating open-ended categories of units only because we have the capacity to disregard the specific measurements that differ from one unit to another, and to retain the common dimension of measurement. As a result, the concept MAN designates "a man"--not any particular man in the full specificity of his nature, but every man regarded as differing from other men in a merely quantitative as opposed to a qualitative way.⁶

There is no passive mirroring of nature here. The ability to form such a conception involves a specific process of integration and differentiation, a process that, as far as we know, only a human brain can perform. Does this mean that concepts are human constructs, that we can validly group things together in any way we wish, that we can define terms according to our subjective wishes? No, says Rand. For one thing, concepts are based on our awareness of relationships of similarity and difference in the things themselves; those relationships exist apart from us and constrain us in forming concepts. We are also constrained by the nature of our own conceptual capacities, which work in certain definite ways and not in others. In accordance with her basic insight that the mind functions in a definite way as the result of its own nature, she holds that the constraints imposed by our faculties are an aspect of objectivity, not a refutation of it.

Rand's insight allows us to develop a rational conception of objectivity as a standard for cognition, a standard that takes account of the process of thought and the constraints set by our faculties rather than

wishing them away. There is a great deal of work still to be done in extending the Objectivist theory to other issues in epistemology, such as the nature of propositions and their truth-conditions, the standards for rational certainty, and the problem of induction. But Rand's insight gives us a basic principle to follow, and her theory of concepts gives us an example of how the principle applies to a specific form of cognition.

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1. See my *Evidence of the Senses* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), Chapters 3-4 for many examples of this argument.
 2. See Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 4-5, 20.
 3. For a fuller description of the pattern, see *Evidence of the Senses*, pp. 36-43.
 4. Ayn Rand, *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, 2nd expanded edition (New York, NAL Books, 1990), chapter 8.
 5. I have developed this approach to perceptual epistemology in some detail in *Evidence of the Senses*. For a discussion of form and object, see chapters 3 and 5.
 6. Rand's theory is presented in her *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*. See also my analysis of her theory: "A Theory of Abstraction" (Poughkeepsie, NY: Institute for Objectivist Studies, 1995).