

A CRITICAL REVIEW OF  
*REASON AND COMMITMENT*

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In *Reason and Commitment* (Cambridge UP, 1973) Roger Trigg is concerned with defending the notion of objectivity--of things being the case whether people recognize them or not--against the various forms of relativism as found in ethics, religion, language and science. By considering the works of Wittgenstein, Kuhn, Hare and others in these fields Trigg finds relativism as fundamentally unsound and not worthy of support. We will first consider some of the general arguments used by Trigg against relativism and then examine his consideration of various thinkers.

Trigg readily admits that we cannot view the world without employing *some* conceptual system, but this, however, does not mean that we are locked "within" such a system or that such a system defies objective assessment. It is simply trivial to note that we must describe the world by some conceptual system and most assuredly mistaken to let this fact be the source of relativism. The demand for a "neutral way" of describing the world is wrong-headed; it forgets that cognition is a relation and that the knower must play an active role. This of course, is not to say that things as they are cannot be known but only that we should not assume that "knowing things as they are" must be accomplished without some conceptual system. Relativism requires more than just noting that man has a consciousness.

Moreover, Trigg considers relativism as internally incoherent. The claim that there is no independent reality but only "realities" relative to the person or society is itself a claim to

truth, an attempt to declare what is objectively the case. "Thus, the very denial of the possibility of something being independently or objectively real itself rests on the view that the various realities are objectively real." (p. 2) If the relativist claims that the truth of his position is only relative to himself or his society, there is no point to his utterance, for the whole purpose of his position is to describe other societies or persons as well. Thus, relativism in general seems to be self-refuting or, at least, a meaningless exercise.

Sometimes the defender of objectivity is accused of begging the question, for if the objectivist admits that it is impossible to argue outside of all conceptual frameworks, how can he justifiably criticize those who do not operate in his framework? How can, for example, the western medical researcher criticize the African witch-doctor? What the former means by "evidence" or "viruses" will not count as arguments against the witch-doctor, for there is a fundamental clash in world views here. The western scientist cannot prove the correctness of his account of certain diseases (or the witch-doctor of his) without begging the question in favor of his own conceptual framework. Thus, how can one's account of disease be called true while the other's is false?

Trigg correctly notes that this argument treads again on the assumption that knowing the truth must be accomplished without some conceptual system, which, of course, is absurd. Yet, the relativist tries to pull more out of this admission than it allows. From the fact that someone must be thinking in his own terms (after all the western scientist must think like a western scientist), nothing follows regarding the impossibility of being objective. "In other words, the accusation about begging the question itself presupposes that the objectivist is wrong, and that a belief that one's conceptual scheme reflects reality must be mistaken. The argument is only a good one if relativism is correct, and that is what is at issue." (p. 17) The admission, then, that we operate from a conceptual framework in no way rules out the possibility of our criticizing the adequateness of other conceptual systems and our being correct in doing so. Another thing that Trigg notes in reply is simply that the mere existence of an unresolved disagreement still leaves the relativist-objectivist controversy wide open. Just because the western scientist and witch-doctor do not accept each other's presuppositions, this does not mean *a priori* that one set of presuppositions cannot be true. Just as it

takes more than the fact of human consciousness to establish relativism, so the existence of unresolved disagreements will not suffice either.

Part of Trigg's defense of objectivity entails a consideration of a related issue--namely, "Why should one be rational?" Isn't this after all *the* basic commitment which cannot be justified without begging the question? What justification can be offered for being rational? Trigg carefully refrains from attempting to justify being rational; he, in fact, finds W. W. Bartley's justification inadequate. Trigg notes instead that there is "something wrong with the notion of *justification* of rationality, because clearly it is itself a concept from *within* rationality. Anyone who wants such a justification wants to stand outside of rationality while remaining inside, and this is obviously incoherent." (p. 149) Thus, one must refrain from attempting to justify that which is fundamental or basic to all justification. One must realize that where no justification is possible, none should be demanded. This, of course, does not make rationality a mere arbitrary commitment but rather something akin to a first principle in the Aristotelian sense, for one must use reason in trying to deny it.

So far we have seen that Trigg's defense of objectivity has been concerned to combat relativism as it pertains to truth claims. A large part of his book, however, is directed toward criticizing the notion that the very meaning of a concept is ultimately determined by one's commitments (usually the "forms of life" to which one belongs) and that it is impossible for persons with different commitments to disagree in terms both sides can understand. It is as if there were a "compartmentalization of language and understanding" causing people to live in "different worlds." The world views, for example, of the theist and atheist are so diverse that it is not so much that they disagree on the question of God's existence as it is that they really don't understand each other. This attitude, according to Trigg, is relativism in its most extreme form, and he calls it "conceptual relativism."

As to whether conceptual relativism as so described is the most correct understanding of Wittgenstein's view of meaning we shall see later; it is however a common contemporary attitude of some Wittgensteinian interpreters, and Trigg's argument against it is most fascinating. Trigg contends that there must be some objective feature to language because this allows people of fundamentally different views to understand

each other. If language were solely a conventionalized activity, whose very context of operation was itself a result of commitment, then there could be no disagreement between people of varying basic views. Communication would not be possible and language itself would be destroyed, for there would be nothing about which to disagree. Yet, people do disagree about fundamental issues. The theist and atheist (after much effort) do understand each other's system and still disagree; theirs is a real dispute. They are talking about the same thing (this world) but making different claims about it. Trigg argues, then, that if "we can understand those we disagree with, language must be understood to be about one world, where certain states of affairs hold." (p. 15) Anyone who wishes to deny or blur the distinction between the way the world is and what we say it is must also deny that disagreement is possible, and this is patently absurd. Thus, we cannot let the desire to be tolerant or the desire to understand someone's system of thought allow us to blur this distinction. It is only because this distinction is in principle possible that we can have belief and disagreement in the first place. Not only, then, does the concept of truth underpin the notions of belief and disagreement, it is also the main function of language to attempt to elicit it. "An essential function of language . . . is to communicate truth, or at least purported truth." (p. 153) Though not the only function of language, statement-making is its central purpose. Whether talking about the type of weather or the ultimate nature of existence, from the simple to the complex, language cannot be understood without this objective feature.

Trigg is on solid ground in demanding that language must have an objective feature to it. His continued reliance, however, on *reductio ad absurdum* does leave us less than completely satisfied. One wishes that Trigg would deal with the underlying presumption of conceptual relativism--namely, that language is more like a game than anything else. He should show more appreciation for this contention because the question as to whether language can best be understood by a game analogy is not an idle concern regarding the choice between mere metaphors. It is rather a question regarding the very nature of language itself, and since many philosophical problems require clarification and understanding as opposed to information for their solution, the method of analogy is

quite legitimate, for it consists in a search for significant similarities between the subject matter under question and something we already understand. Thus, the strength of the game analogy rests on the recognition that it is to provide a greater understanding of language in terms of something we already understand, i.e., games, and indeed there are many similarities between them. Both are rule-governed activities with certain "moves" required and prohibited. Both have an ability to modify non-essential rules but still maintain the basic ones. Merely resorting, then, to *reduction ad absurdum* leaves the impression that the comparison between language and games cannot be directly challenged. Trigg's defense of objectivity should challenge this analogy in terms of its own method, for if the game analogy is successful, then language must be understood as a self-connection with the world. It would be purely conventional and its rules would not be subject to any appraisal by reference to the facts of reality. Games are perfectly meaningful without such reference, thus, why not language?

The key objection to this argument is to admit that there is indeed an analogy between language and games, but there are other analogies that are even closer. "There are many rule determined activities whose rules, unlike those of games, are subject to appraisal as legitimate or illegitimate by appeal to facts external to the activity." (Panayot Butchvarov, *The Concept of Knowledge* [Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1970], p. 133.) It has been suggested, for example, that language is more analogous to fire-fighting than to any game on the grounds that language and fire-fighting both have contexts of operation that are not rule dependent while a game does. (Butchvarov, p. 134.) When one plays a game, the context is a function of the rules. You use rules to establish the context in which moves take place. The context is as arbitrary as the rules, e.g., the kinds of pieces, their arrangement and stage of the game, are all functions of arbitrary rules. In fire-fighting the context is not a result of rules; the context is a result of objective fact and the rules of fire-fighting deal with this context. The context for linguistic "moves," e.g., "There are two chairs," is also *not* determined by any rules. That there are chairs and there are two of them in no way depends on linguistic convention or commitment; and, of course, this is the very point of Trigg saying that language is about the world. Language, then, though rule governed and highly

conventional, is more like fire-fighting than a game. Thus, the method of analogy can be used to directly challenge the game analogy and provide a basis for establishing language's objective feature. This realization in conjunction with Trigg's use of *reductio ad absurdum* leaves little support for conceptual relativism.

One outstanding aspect of this work is Trigg's integration of the various positions in different fields into a cluster of related ideas--ideas which all tend to stress commitment to self-sufficient conceptual systems at the expense of objective assessment. By considering various viewpoints on science, ethics, and religion, Trigg finds the notion of objectivity under attack by conceptual relativism. Kuhn's view of the incommensurability of competing paradigms and the lack of justification for the choice between them; Hare's view that our "bilks" (fundamental attitudes and beliefs) are adopted in a vacuum where nothing can count for or against them; and D. Z. Phillips view that religion cannot be justified or rejected by any "all-embracing" view of truth are a few of the more prominent examinations made by Trigg. Trigg subjects these positions and others to the same deft criticism we have already seen. Relativism in any form is Trigg's target, and he considers many fashionable notions as his target.

Easily the most fashionable and certainly the most important notion examined by Trigg is Wittgenstein's concept of a "form of life." Trigg seems to be aware that this is a most problematic concept, but he takes "a 'form of life' to be a community of those sharing the same concepts." (p. 64.) According to the interpreters Trigg has chosen to concentrate upon, there is no doubt that a "form of life" constitutes an ultimate commitment to which all reason and facts must be subordinate. Whether viewed as a commitment to a social system, as Toulmin seems to suggest, or as a commitment to a way of life entailing a moral code, as Beardsmore implies, the "form of life" concept is viewed as incompatible with and opposed to the notions of objectivity and truth as such. This may be a correct result from certain views of the "form of life" notion, but there is another understanding of "form of life" that does not entail conceptual relativism and in fact supports objectivity--an understanding which in many respects seems what Wittgenstein actually proposed.

In order to understand this view of the "form of life" notion,

we should remember that Trigg admits that we must use *some* conceptual system to understand the world and that it is silly for anyone to demand that we view the world without some conceptual system. Thus, we can ask if there is a certain way of understanding the world that results from the fact that we are human beings? Or, to put the question in its classic form: What are the conditions for the possibility of knowledge? If we ask this question, we see that indeed human beings do have a peculiar way of knowing--usually it is called conceptualization--and this is one of the conditions for knowledge. Now, are there any conditions for conceptual knowledge? According to Wittgenstein there must be certain judgments which "stand fast for us" and constitute the "given." These judgments are the general view of the world we *as human beings* have formed or inherited. In *On Certainty* these judgments are the propositions which form what Moore called the "common sense" view of the world. These judgments are presupposed in any concept being meaningful, for they are a part of the very framework from which we learn the meaning of a concept. There is no way to learn the meaning of a term by ostensive definition alone. Some training is presupposed; some basic judgments are already made. This "given" is what Wittgenstein calls the "form of life," and it is a condition for conceptualization and thus knowledge. To the extent, then, that we realize that human beings must employ some conceptual framework, then the preconditions for a conceptual system making sense must be acknowledged which, for Wittgenstein, is the "form of life."

In many respects Wittgenstein's argument is Kantian in that "form of life" functions in a manner parallel to Kant's "form of sensibility," for both are conditions for their being knowledge. There is, however, a significant difference: our ability to conceive of human beings in a make-believe manner as having different conceptual structures or different "forms of life" from that which we actually have in no way entails a subjective view of the world. In fact, any serious or cognitive consideration of "possible" would not admit such an alternative, for there is no way that we could have any conception of what this alternative "form of life" might be. So, there are no alternatives to the "form of life" we find ourselves caught up in, and thus there is no such thing as being committed to a "form of life" as Trigg suggests.

An excellent statement of this interpretation of "form of life" is as follows:

We can raise the question of what is objective or otherwise only within the conceptual scheme that we have, given our form of life, since to ask whether something is objective is to ask whether it is objective as a such-and-such. To have classified something as a such-and-such is already to have invoked and applied a set of concepts; we cannot get outside these concepts altogether to raise questions about objectivity independent of them. This is what is wrong with forms of idealism that attempt to undermine the possibility of objectivity by emphasizing the fact that although the only conception of the world that we can contemplate is the one that we have come to have, we might always have come to a different one. The sense in which the last is true does not entail subjectivism or conventionalism such that there are no standards of objectivity but all is subjective or a matter of human convention. (D. W. Hamlyn, *The Theory of Knowledge* [Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1970], pp. 72-73.)

The key difference, then, between this view of "form of life" and the one that Trigg considers is that "form of life" is here considered as our conception of reality as a whole--our conception of reality as such. As Trigg is so concerned to show, it makes no sense to speak of "realities", and in the same way, it makes no sense to speak of rival "forms of life." Thus, upon this interpretation of the notion of "form of life," conceptual relativism does not follow.

Trigg has argued that the mere fact of human disagreement (and therefore of human communication) implies that there must be one world where certain states of affairs hold. This alternative interpretation of the concept of "form of life" also underscores this very point, for it tries to say what some of these states of affairs must be. Indeed, this is the very point of Wittgenstein's argument against universal scepticism in *On Certainty*. "The sceptic must understand his doubt. If it is an intelligible doubt, it must be expressible in language. In other words, he must at least be certain of the meaning of his words in which he expresses his universal doubt. If he is certain he knows what his language means, he must also be certain of the criteria which give language its meaning. These criteria are states of affairs or facts in the world, and hence to doubt every fact about the world would be to destroy the criterial links with his language, thus depriving it of meaning." (Patrick J. Bearsley, "Aquinas and Wittgenstein On the Grounds of Certainty," *The Modern Schoolman*, LI, May, 1974, pp. 331-332.)

These facts, as already stated, are expressed in what Moore called the "common sense" view of the world, namely, such judgments as: there existed a living human body which was his body, that he was a human being, that the earth had existed for many years before his body was born, that he had had many experiences, and that he had often observed facts about other bodies, etc. Further, Wittgenstein leaves no doubt that these are not the only facts that are presupposed, e.g., "My friend hasn't sawdust in his head," or even "The boiling point of water is 100°C. at sea level," are judgments which stand at the foundations of our language. Such judgments according to Wittgenstein note the states of affairs, the "given," the "form of life" which are a part of the very process by which human beings know and understand the world.

A full consideration of Moore-type propositions is most likely one of the key ways of appreciating what Wittgenstein meant by "form of life." There are many questions that should be raised regarding them. In particular, just what is the logical status of these basic judgments which "stand fast"? How are such judgments formed? These are questions that Trigg would ask and should be answered, but we cannot go into these here. It will just have to be sufficient to say that there is not necessarily any conflict between this alternative view of "form of life" and the notions of objectivity and truth as such. Further, we even think there are great advantages found in this alternative view of "form of life" for defending objectivity against the standard arguments advanced by conceptual relativism. It is only because we find Trigg's book, *Reason and Commitment*, such an important work for epistemology that we think such an alternative understanding of Wittgenstein's central concept worth considering. It may be that no interpretative enterprise of "form of life" can be fully satisfactory, for it is not clear that Wittgenstein ever fully explained the notion itself, but this still does not diminish the importance of the notion.

Trigg's book is a very significant contribution to philosophy because he challenges much of the irrationality that is hiding under the guise of commitment. Commitments, themselves, must be tested for their truth or falsity; one cannot step outside of the responsibility of judging whether in science, ethics, or religion. This is the breath of fresh air that Trigg brings.