REASON, TRUTH AND HISTORY

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Preface

In the present work, the aim which I have in mind is to break the strangle hold which a number of dichotomies appear to have on the thinking of both philosophers and laymen. Chief among these is the dichotomy between objective and subjective views of truth and reason. The phenomenon I am thinking of is this: once such a dichotomy as the dichotomy between 'objective' and 'subjective' has become accepted, accepted not as a mere pair of categories but as a characterization of types of views and styles of thought, thinkers begin to view the terms of the dichotomy almost as ideological labels. Many, perhaps most, philosophers hold some version of the 'copy' theory of truth today, the conception according to which a statement is true just in case it 'corresponds to the (mind independent) facts'; and the philosophers in this faction see the only alternative as the denial of the objectivity of truth and a capitulation to the idea that all schemes of thought and all points of view are hopelessly subjective. Inevitably a bold minority (Kuhn, in some of his moods at least; Feyerabend, and such distinguished continental philosophers as Foucault) range themselves under the opposite label. They *agree* that the alternative to a naive copy conception of truth is to see systems of thought, ideologies, even (in the case of Kuhn and Feyerabend) scientific theories, as subjective, and they proceed to *put forward* a relativist and subjective view with vigor.

That philosophical dispute assumes somewhat the character of ideological dispute is not, of itself, necessarily *bad:* new ideas, even in the most exact sciences, are frequently both espoused and attacked with partisan vigor. Even in politics, polarization

and ideological fervor are sometimes necessary to bring moral seriousness to an issue. But in time, both in philosophy and politics, new ideas become old ideas; what was once challenging, becomes predictable and boring; and what once served to focus attention where it should be focussed, later keeps discussion from considering new alternatives. This has now happened in the debate between the correspondence views of truth and subjectivist views. In the first three chapters of this book I shall try to explain a conception of truth which unites objective and subjective components. This view, in spirit at least, goes back to ideas of Immanuel Kant; and it holds that we can reject a naive 'copy' conception of truth without having to hold that it's all a matter of the Zeitgeist, or a matter of 'gestalt switches', or all a matter of ideology.

The view which I shall defend holds, to put it very roughly, that there is an extremely close connection between the notions of *truth* and *rationality;* that, to put it even more crudely, the only criterion for what is a fact is what it is *rational* to accept. (I mean this quite literally and across the board; thus if it can be rational to accept that a picture is beautiful, then it can be a *fact* that the picture is beautiful.) There can be *value facts* on this conception. But the relation between rational acceptability and truth is a relation between two distinct notions. A statement can be rationally acceptable *at a time* but not *true;* and this realist intuition will be preserved in my account.

I do not believe, however, that rationality is defined by a set of unchanging 'canons' or 'principles'; methodological principles are connected with our view of the world, including our view of ourselves as part of the world, and change with time. Thus I *agree* with the subjectivist philosophers that there is no fixed, ahistorical *organon* which defines what it is to be rational; but I don't conclude from the fact that our conceptions of reason evolve in history, that reason itself can be (or evolve into) *anything,* nor do I end up in some fancy mixture of cultural relativism and 'structuralism' like the French philosophers. The dichotomy: either ahistorical unchanging canons of rationality *or* cultural relativism is a dichotomy that I regard as outdated.

Another feature of the view is that rationality is not restricted to laboratory science, nor different in a fundamental way in laboratory science and outside of it. The conception that it is seems to me a hangover from positivism; from the idea that the scientific world is in some way constructed out of 'sense data' and the idea that terms in the laboratory sciences are 'operationally defined'. I shall not devote much space to criticizing operationalist and positivist views of science; these have been thoroughly criticized in the last twenty-odd years. But the empiricist idea that 'sense data' constitute some sort of objective 'ground floor' for at least a part of our knowledge will be reexamined in the light of what we have to say about truth and rationality (in Chapter 3).

In short, I shall advance a view in which the mind does not simply 'copy' a world which admits of description by One True Theory. But my view is not a view in which the mind *makes up* the world, either (or makes it up subject to constraints imposed by 'methodological canons' and mind-independent 'sense-data'). If one must use metaphorical language, then let the metaphor be this: the mind and the world jointly make up the mind and the world. (Or, to make the metaphor even more Hegelian, the Universe makes up the Universe – with minds – collectively – playing a special role in the making up.)

A final feature of my account of rationality is this: I shall try to show that our notion of rationality is, at bottom, just one part of our conception of human flourishing, our idea of the good. Truth is deeply dependent on what have been recently called 'values' (Chapter 6). And what we said above about rationality and history also applies to value and history; there is no given, ahistorical, set of 'moral principles' which define once and for all what human flourishing consists in; but that doesn't mean that it's all merely cultural and relative. Since the current state in the theory of truth – the current dichotomy between copy theories of truth and subjective accounts of truth – is at least partly responsible, in my view, for the notorious 'fact/value' dichotomy, it is only by going to a very deep level and correcting our accounts of truth and rationality themselves that we can get beyond the fact/value dichotomy. (A dichotomy which, as it is conventionally understood, virtually commits one to some sort of relativism.) The current views of truth are alienated views; they cause one to lose one part or another of one's self and the world, to see the world as simply consisting of elementary particles swerving in the void (the 'physicalist' view, which sees the *scientific* description as converging to the One True Theory), or to see the world as simply consisting of 'actual and possible

sense-data' (the older empiricist view), or to deny that there is a world at all, as opposed to a bunch of stories that we make up for various (mainly unconscious) reasons. And my purpose in this work is to sketch the leading ideas of a non-alienated view.

My Herbert Spencer Lecture, 'Philosophers and Human Understanding' (given at Oxford University, 1979) overlaps the present text, having stemmed from work in progress, as does the paper ' "Si Dieu est mort, alors tout est permis"... (reflexions sur la philosophie du langage)', *Critique,* 1980.

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