Towards a Subjective Adaptation of Objectivity

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Abstract
This paper is a critical inquiry into the postmodern nihilistic negation of objectivity departing from an ontological analysis in the field of Humanities through the works of Boris Cyrulnik in Psychiatry, Pierre Bourdieu in Sociology and Philippe Descola in Anthropology. How are subjectivity and objectivity perceived and applied in the works of these thinkers? If their studies are constantly confronted to changes and revisions, do their findings follow the postmodern nihilistic trend that categorically refutes Truth? This short overview of major studies by Cyrulnik (2011), Bourdieu (1984) and Descola (2005) will help us rethink the postmodern nihilistic view about objectivity, trying to follow the path of a subjective adaptation to objectivity and lead us to consider the possibility of a temporary unity of Reality.

Key words: animism, habitus, now truth, objectivity; resilience, subjectivity,

This paper is a critical inquiry into the postmodern nihilistic negation of objectivity departing from an ontological analysis in the field of Humanities through the works of Boris Cyrulnik (2011) in psychiatry, Pierre Bourdieu (1984) in sociology and Philippe Descola (2005) in anthropology. Humanities are related to the study of human beings and what they create with regard to themselves and/or their interaction with the world. Psychology, Philosophy, History, Literary Studies, Sociology, Anthropology, Linguistics, Cultural Studies etc. all these disciplines are also called “Human Sciences”. This denomination already bears in itself the dual relation between the subjective characteristics inherent to human beings and the objective attributes of rigid scientific research. The study of Humanities therefore aspires to be governed by objective scientific rules, but it is also open to the relative nature of truth when it comes to the study of human beings.

The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy (IEP) defines objectivity and subjectivity as follows:

The terms “objectivity” and “subjectivity”, in their modern usage, generally relate to a perceiving \((active)\) subject (normally a person) and a perceived or unperceived \((passive)\) object. The object is something that presumably exists independent of the subject’s perception of it. In other words, the object would be there, as it is, even if...
no subject perceived it. Hence, objectivity is typically associated with ideas such as reality, truth and reliability. The perceiving subject can either perceive accurately or seem to perceive features of the object that are not in the object. For example, a perceiving subject suffering from jaundice could seem to perceive an object as yellow when the object is not actually yellow. Hence, the term “subjective” typically indicates the possibility of error.

The ontological and epistemological opposition between subjective and objective knowledge has been a constant subject of debate since ancient Greece. Among the first major philosophers who advocated relativism was pre-Socratic Protagoras (490-420 BC). His book Truth contains his most famous statement “Humans are the measure of all things”. To measure something is to give it a value and Protagoras regarded all values – truth, good, beauty, even existence – as dependent upon the human observer. Protagoras believed that different things were true for different people at different times. That is, the value of everything depends on the relative perception of the observer and is therefore subjective. In The Republic, Plato (428 – 348 BC) opposed Protagoras’ radical relativism by developing a dual conception of reality which became known as the divided line. Plato gives many arguments in opposition to Protagoras’ radical relativism. Plato acknowledges that our perception of reality is subjective and that we, humans, are limited in time and space. Our perception and intellect are subject to error, our points of view limit what we can apprehend and understand. Still, even though it is out of our understanding, we can form concepts of the infinite, whole, eternal true universe. In The Republic, Plato introduces a powerful image known as the divided line to explain his idea of the dual level of reality:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>One</th>
<th>identity</th>
<th>permanent</th>
<th>divine</th>
<th>soul</th>
<th>reason</th>
<th>truth</th>
<th>knowledge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Many</td>
<td>difference</td>
<td>changing</td>
<td>human</td>
<td>body</td>
<td>senses</td>
<td>appearance</td>
<td>opinion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Above the line are the attributes of objective reality; below the line are the attributes of relative and subjective reality. The human condition is characterized by the lower level. But we have the capacity to aspire to and seek the upper attributes. Thus, according to Plato, philosophical relativism is nothing but a confusion of our own limitations for the eternal truths of the universe.

Bearing in mind this Platonic distinction between objective and subjective reality, these attribute will be analyzed as they are represented in the works of three French thinkers: in psychiatry with Boris Cyrulnik (2011), in sociology with Pierre Bourdieu, and in anthropology
with Philippe Descola (2005). How are subjectivity and objectivity perceived and interpreted in these disciplines? Are they also divided concepts that take their source of inspiration from the platonic view of the universe?

Boris Cyrulnik is a French psychiatrist who developed the concept of resilience while working on children in orphanages in Romania. The Romanian orphans who had lost their families under the harsh rule of the communist dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu, and who had been isolated from the world and deprived from basic communication needs, had developed symptoms of autism. This illness is characterized by problems of social interactions and relationships as well as problems of verbal and non verbal communication such as eye-to-eye gazing, facial expressions, and body posture. These children lacked interest in sharing enjoyment and achievements with other people and therefore failed to establish friendships with children of the same age. When Boris Cyrulnik went to Romania to cure these children, he asked for brain scanners and the images confirmed the symptoms of autism. Cyrulnick saw brain damages that concerned the zones related to emotions and communication. During the 1970’s, doctors considered that these brain damages were irreversible and could not be cured. They thought that a child who had been exposed to traumatic events and who had been deprived from the basic communicative interactions with other people during the very first years of his/her life could not recover. But Boris Cyrulnik had himself experienced the harsh events of world war II and had lost both his parents when he was only seven years old. His personal experience led him to think that there was a possibility of recovery for these children. Cyrulnik asked to put these children into families where they could benefit from communicative and affective interactions with caring persons. After one year, the children had acquired the communication skills and the affective interest in other people that they had lacked before. The results were visible in the scan imagery where the brain zones concerned with communication and affection had recovered.

Out of his work with Bulgarian orphans, Boris Cyrulnik developed the concept of resilience which means the aptitude of the brain to be flexible and to recover from traumatic experiences. In an interview to The Guardian, Cyrulnik explains that “even if a child has suffered a lot, the human brain is malleable and can recover. Brain scans show that traumatized children can heal. In the right conditions, the brain returns to normal within a year.”

Boris Cyrulnik’s work on Romanian orphans shows that subjects interact with their environment and that what can be considered as objectively static and definitive in one
situation, may be altered if the subject is placed within a new environment under a new set of experiences. An objective analysis like the one Cyrulnik and his team first observed on the brain scanner images showed that the children had severe irreversible brain damages. However, Cyrulnik’s subjective history as a Jewish child who had lost his parents at an early age, who had escaped from the Gestapo and who fought alone to rebuild himself, made him believe that if he altered the children’s spatial and affective environment, there could be a possibility of recovery from traumatic events. In the case of Boris Cyrulnik psychiatric studies, subjective experience and objective knowledge were combined to cure orphan Rumanian children who were thought to be autistic.

A second example of the way representations of objectivity and subjectivity evolve in Human Sciences is with French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. His book La Distinction: critique sociale du jugement (1979) is a sociological report about the state of French culture, based upon the author’s empirical research, from 1963 until 1968. In the United States, the book was published as Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste (1984). In 1998 the International Sociological Association voted La Distinction as one of the ten most important books of sociology of the 20th century.

According to Bourdieu, “Taste” is an important example of cultural hegemony, of how class fractions are determined, not only by the possession of social capital and of economic capital, but by the possession of cultural capital, which is an insidious social mechanism that ensures the social reproduction and the cultural reproduction of the ruling class. Moreover, because a person is taught his or her tastes at an early age, these are deeply internalized. Such social conditionings are very difficult to change, and tend to permanently identify a person as having originated in a certain social class, which then impedes upward social mobility. In that way, the cultural tastes of the dominant ruling class tend to dominate the tastes of the other social classes, thus forcing individual men and women of economically and culturally dominated classes to conform to certain aesthetic preferences, lest they risk societal disapproval by appearing to be crude, vulgar, and tasteless persons. Thus, when it comes to taste, the line separating objectivity from subjectivity is blurred.

In Distinction, Bourdieu rejected Claude Levi Strauss’ structuralism which he considered too static. For Bourdieu, objectivism is related to the structured context and subjectivism is the actor’s experience of those structures. Bourdieu rather thought in terms of constructivism, where actors are those who make sense of the structures they negotiate. Bourdieu thus criticized structuralism’s “strange philosophy of action” which “made the agent disappear by reducing it to the role of supporter or bearer of the structure” (Bourdieu, 1984).
Bourdieu’s sociological studies tries to combine subjectivism with objectivism by bringing together an agent’s experience of social structures with his/her ability to negotiate these structures that are outside himself, in the objective world through his use of Habitus. This concept first coined by Bourdieu seeks to describe the way objective or material conditions of existence are internalized into a subjective disposition, a practical set of expectations, attitudes to time which reflects the objective future as a field of possibilities. It is composed of the competencies, temperament, tastes, insecurities, cognitive structures, bias, predispositions and expectations that are present in the mind and body of a person.

(...) all knowledge, and in particular all knowledge of the social world, is an act of construction implementing schemes of thought and expression, and that between conditions of existence [objectivism] and practices or representations [subjectivism] there intervenes the structuring activity of the agents, who, far from reacting mechanically to mechanical stimulations, respond to the invitations or threats of a world whose meaning they have helped to produce.

Bourdieu, 467.

We have seen so far how Cyrulnik and Bourdieu combined subjectivity with objectivity in their studies and how these concepts are closely related when it comes to the study of human beings in relation to their interaction with the world. A third case will now be explored in the field of anthropology with Philippe Descola.

Philippe Descola is a renowned French anthropologist who studied the origins, physical and cultural development as well as the biological characteristics and social customs of the Achuar, a tribe in the Amazon region of Ecuador. He lived with the Achuar from 1976 to 1979 and his reputation largely arises from these studies. In Beyond Nature and Culture, Descola rethinks the epistemological basis of anthropology that had always relied on a unique and narrow representation of reality based on the universalistic dualistic world view that made a clear distinction between nature and culture.

When Descola lived among the Ashuar tribe in Equador for three years, he realized that the relation between this Amazonian tribe and nature was different from the Occident’s dualistic conception of nature and culture. In fact, for the Ashuar objects, plants and animals are considered as human beings. These people tend to treat elements in the natural environment as persons endowed with cognitive, moral and social qualities analogous to those of human, and thus they incorporate within the category of persons spirits, objects, plants and animals as part of a cosmology that “does not discriminate between human beings and non-human beings” (Descola, 31-6).
Through his analysis of the Ashuar modes of representation Descola urges attention to ‘schemas’ – or “deeply internalized…cognitive and corporeal templates that govern the expression of an ethos” (92). He attends to two particular elements of such schemas, which play a particular role in structuring human collective experience. These are ‘identification,’ by which differences and continuities are established between a self and some other existing being, through the inference of analogies and contrasts; and ‘relationship,’ or the detectable sets of norms governing the relationships between such sets of beings and things (112-113). The actual establishment of different modes of identification and relationship, in turn, come from varied distributions of ‘interiority’ (how is the other’s internal world of subjectivity and intention like or not like mine?), and ‘physicality’ (how is the substance that makes up the other’s physical constitution like or not like mine?) (116). With this framework in place, Descola puts the basis of four basic ontologies (122) that, for him, govern the fundamentals of variation in collective life. And it is on the basis of these ontologies, in turn, that he is going to set out on a grand comparative project, based on an originary matrix of collective life, subjectivity, and social relations. The four ontologies are:

- **Animism** is the assumption that non-human beings (animals, plants and objects) possess a spiritual essence. Animism is found in the Amazonian Ashuar tribe and in some other tribes in North America.

- **Naturalism** clearly divides the world into spiritual human beings (men/women) and non-spiritual beings (animals, plants, objects). Naturalism as classified by Descola makes a clear distinction between the objective state of nature and the subjective state of culture. This belief is prevalent in the majority of European Occidental parts of the world.

- **Totemism** is the belief in which each human is thought to have a spiritual connection or a kinship with another physical being, such as an animal or plant, often called a “spirit-being" or "totem." The totem is thought to interact with a given kin group or an individual and to serve as their emblem or symbol. Totemism is found in many parts of the world, mainly among Australian aboriginals and in some Asian tribes as well as North and South American ancient communities.

- **Analogism** a sort of radical system of difference, in which each being has a uniquely constituted interior and physical existence.
Descola’s ontological classification of humans modes of identification is therefore based on the way humans construct their world upon whether they consider the entities surrounding them to be similar or dissimilar to humans in terms of their interiority and their physicality. The modes of identification are schematized as follows:

Descola’s Modes of Identification

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>+ interiority</th>
<th>+ interiority</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ANIMISM</td>
<td>TOTEMISM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-- physicality</td>
<td>+ physicality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-- interiority</td>
<td>-- interiority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NATURALISM</td>
<td>ANALOGISM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ physicality</td>
<td>-- physicality</td>
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</tbody>
</table>


Descola’s anthropological study therefore shows how subjectivity and objectivity or interiority and physicality are ontological concepts that are perceived and manipulated differently and even in opposite ways among various populations around the world.

The concepts of subjectivity and objectivity have been presented so far in three humanistic disciplines: psychiatry, sociology and anthropology through the major studies of prominent French thinkers: Boris Cyrulnik, Pierre Bourdieu and Philippe Descola. Cyrulnik’s concept of resilience shows how the flexible nature of the human brain makes it possible to adapt itself to a changing environment. Bourdieu’s sociological study on the idea of habitus shows how the subject is not a mere passive agent who evolves within an established structured world, but rather that s/he actively combines and responds to objective conditions of existence. Descola’s anthropological study of the Ashuar Amazonian tribe reveals animism, the ontological category under which this tribe can be classified that shows how these people consider the objective material world that surrounds them as having a subjective spiritual life like humans.
Going back to Plato’s divided line on the light of Descola’s four ontological modes of identification, the platonic fallacy can easily be detected behind a unique universalized world view based on Naturalism that claims a clear division between Body and soul. This ontological division was in fact only present in some parts of the world whereas there existed three other modes of representation later classified by Descola as Animism, Totemism and Analogism. Cyrulnik’s and Bourdieu’s studies also reveal a perspective which is different from the Platonic conception of reality. In both psychiatry and sociology there is no aspiration to a definite and static Truth. Instead, agents constantly interact with their worlds and evolve within various environments to reach what I would call a temporary unity of their own Truth or the ‘now truth’\textsuperscript{1}. When Romanian orphans suffered from autism, they were living a period of unfortunate static condition or subjective reality or ‘now truth’ which could have lasted for their whole life if Boris Cyrulnik’s team did not intervene to cure them and consequently give them the possibility to live a new ‘now truth’.

This ontological analysis in the fields of psychiatry, sociology and anthropology shows how human subjectivity can adapt itself to the objective world. Cyrulnik’s (2011) field work showed how one agent’s subjective and objective reality may heavily rely on historical events as well as on environmental circumstances and that the human brain has a flexible capacity of resilience that makes it open to radical recovery from traumatic experiences. Bourdieu’s sociological study shed light on how agents develop a habitus by evolving and interacting within the internalized structures of a given society and how their subjective truth constantly adapts itself to their objective environment. With Descola (2005), subjective experience and the representation of objective reality may vary from one culture to another, and a given culture can develop Animism, a system of representations that is totally different from the Naturalism developed for centuries mainly by cultures in the Occident and some in the Orient too. To conclude, when it comes to the ontological study of objective and subjective reality in Human Sciences, these concepts may interact, be blurred or even disappear. However, the very presence of a constant process of adaptation taking place between subjectivity and objectivity does

\textsuperscript{1} I had initially used the expression ‘temporary truth’, but I then choose to adopt The expression ‘now truth’ which was coined by my colleague Bachar Aloui (University of Jendouba) during a discussion about the subject.
not mean complete dissolution of Truth. This is why I would be tempted to consider the platonic divided line as curved rather than linear.
Cited works


https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rd13inJYbQk [accessed 22/04/2015]


file:///C:/Users/user/Downloads/499-2951-1-PB.pdf [accessed, 08/04/2015]
