

The Figure of Aperspectivical Objectivity

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Abstract

This article presents the concept of aperspectivical objectivity that is familiar from Adam Smith and the Scottish Enlightenment. Some lines of its conceptual history are traced as well. Finally one of the anticipated products of aperspectivity, the affirmative idea of a sentient being or the constitutive idea of interactive sympathy is linked to the discussion on concept of society. What is objectivity? Can it have a history? This article follows the argument that objectivity is not a transcendent (self-generating, eternal, veritable) category. It is better understood as a creature of the sublunary flexible, subject to change, affected by historical styles of reasoning and socio-political theoretical diagnoses. It is not a figure cast in stone; it does not await contraction, conscious deliberation or reduction to an essential feature. Among the discussed aspects of objectivity are: the history of the word itself, the idea of presumptive universality, the Enlightenment principles, epistemological shifts in techniques and styles of understanding objectivity.

Introduction

The figure of aperspectivical or disinterested objectivity is perhaps most often linked to Scottish Enlightenment, and within this tradition especially to Adam Smith and his protracted endeavours at trying to understand and specify ideas of an impartial and internalised spectator and the ways in which they work together with *sentiments* and *sympathy* in social and political life. Both terms, the vistas of sentiment and sympathy, are difficult to approach, conceptualise and discuss (Daston 1992; Dear 1992). Following Nietzsche we tend to emphasise the *perspectivical* character of all thinking and action, as well as the merely provisional character of all knowing, rejecting the idea of the very possibility of 'absolute knowledge' transcending all perspectives or interests. On the other hand, 'objectivity' (*objectivité*, *Objektivität*) is commonly conceptualised in terms of its opposite, 'subjectivity', in other words in terms of variability and contingency, perspectives of the human subject, local conditions or circumstances, particular situations or contexts moulded by them into a distorted mirror.

Common sense often dominates in knowledge questions. Whatever is known seems systematic, proven, applicable and evident to the knower, and what is not known likewise seems contradictory, unproven, inapplicable or mystical. Current usage allows us to apply the word as a synonym for the empirical, the factual, the rational, the evidence-based or the contractarian. As Richard Lewontin (2004) tells us from recent American developments, even in funding from the Department of Defense and the Department of Energy, decisions about research grants are made by peer review systems in which the reviewers and agency administrators are drawn from the research community and share in its general culture. As a consequence, public research support has created a large and prospering community of 'independent investigators' with immense prestige and effective control over the distribution of funds for research. It is no surprise that 'attempts by various administrators to make science serve political and economic policy have been met by public opposition from prestigious scientists speaking in the name of *disinterested objectivity*' (Lewontin 2004).

The story of objectivity seems to be an invention of an objective, timeless, independent world based on external knowledge, 'sharing', 'management' etc. It immediately raises complex issues of confidentiality, credibility and trust. Nevertheless society as a knowledge creating company seems to flourish. Perhaps for the very reason that there is no 'real' or 'objective' or 'absolute' or 'foundational' or 'fact of the matter' or 'right answer' truth about anything, the landscape of society is brought to the fore. Critical diagnoses follow quite another route. Friedrich Nietzsche would say that *facts* are precisely what there is not, bare interpretations. For Niklas Luhmann *value* is just another name for unsolved problems. Max Weber regarded the confusing of these two terms as impermissible. Sociology made objectivity depend on our perspective of, interest in, commitment to and engagement with reality. Objectivity is then geared to knowledge interests. Jürgen Habermas made them a beacon of objectivity. They provide us with decisional orientation. We must decide (and through the decision bring legitimacy to our approach) which portion or realm of it is meaningful for us. Reality does not allow itself to be approached systematically, or, to put it more strongly, one can attempt a systematic approach, but the results will be far less objective than those of the partial perspective.

In his famous article about objectivity of knowledge Weber (1968, 170) stated that '*{e}s gibt keine schlechtthin objektive wissenschaftliche Analyse des Kulturlebens oder der sozialen Erscheinungen unabhängig von speziellen und einseitigen Gesichtspunkten, nach denen sie als Forschungsobjekt ausgewählt, analysiert und darstellend gegliedert wurden*'.

As has perhaps already become evident, the aim of this paper is not to bring order into a wide variety of things we may recognise within this kind of confusion. My focus is rather on the parallel socio-moral triptych, of which aperspectivical objectivity, objectivity and the escapes from perspective, is a pivot that is meant to join 'common worlds', the public sphere, the social condition and the spectacle of what is going on there. The speciality of the article is not to stop here, but to extend the discussion on to the possibility of social order and society.

The concept of society—in itself a neologism from the 1840s—is narrowed in the context of this presentation, however, to specific constitutional or nascent aspects of society. The focus is on what is, or should be, understood as acceptable or legitimate as an account of social conditions that we become to understand as society. For example Smith imagined society as an ensemble of people having sympathetic feelings and expectations towards each other and classical sociologists as a process of symbolisation. In the contemporary polycontextual and polycontextural situation differences and multiplicity of constellation appear simultaneously. An earlier kind of integrative or centre- or top-based 'society' is no more possible and is perhaps not even needed any more. Society has to be constructed from different orders, justifications, mediations, disputes, struggles, approvals. This is also why concepts aiming at realistic theories, such as 'compromise' (trust, confidence, tolerance etc.), 'communication' (dialogue, life world, life time etc.), and 'account' (description, expectations, observation, test, monitoring, governance) have come to the fore (see Bröckling et al. 2004).

Under the circumstances I will not promise to do more than to arrange a modest contribution aiming at specifying what is at stake in the figure of aperspectivical objectivity and to discuss some ways in which this figure is or can be seen as intelligibly fruitful or harmful. This will be the first half. The second half will be about the possibility of society. I will confront unsolved problems around the concept(s) of society in terms of justification

of compromises, accounts and communications of societal conditions. This will not be a genuine exercise in conceptual history (analysis of redescrptions or differences in the temporal index of objective), in systematic political and social philosophy or in sociology of knowledge, but I would like to see it as an exercise in *Gesellschaftstheorie*, that according to Stephen Turner (2004, 141) can and should be understood as a coherent and valuable form of intellectual activity and as a voice in the conversation of mankind, with its own internal conversation of considerable complexity and depth.

Ideas of objectivity

The concept of objectivity as well as concepts such as security, success, creativity etc. tend to be conceptualised in terms of their opposites. They invoke a kind of shadow-world that only exists by virtue of those things that they are *not*: 'the view from nowhere' (Thomas Nagel) or 'knowledge without a knower' (Karl Popper). A view from nowhere is a view from no particular time, no particular place, no particular circumstance, no particular perspective and no particular interest. If we move from a straightforwardly ontological to a primarily epistemological account, however, we reach a different realm, the objective/subjective condition that is not intended to mark a split in reality between some sort of autonomous and some sort of dependent entities, or distorted understanding of other epistemological contexts. It serves rather to distinguish two grades of knowledge achievements. In this sense concepts and justification can be said to be epistemologically objective or subjective.

Epistemological objectivity is, however, a delicate matter. At least some sort of 'minimal concept of objectivity' is required, a concept that will be neutral with respect to the competing and especially contentious theories that declare what objectivity is. For example Immanuel Kant (1953, §19) discussed epistemological objectivity as '*presumptive universality*', conditional or possible objectivity in terms of how the world can be known and what can be known about it: for a judgement to be objective it must at least possess a content that 'may be presupposed to be valid for all men'. Thus there are specific senses in which objective knowledge may appear

as disinterested knowledge or comes to be understood as knowledge in and of itself. Let us recall for example Walter Benjamin's well-known perspective according to which we should try to uncover the '*objective hieroglyph*' of things and should not keep back its substantial figures by general concepts or overviews. A similar equivalent of seeing reality as *rebus* that always needs to be interpreted is perhaps present in the contemporary discussion about robustness of knowledge emphasising that *robust* knowledge is *both* boisterous *and* has the durability of solidity to travel from one knowledge context to another.

'Objectivity' is a word at once indispensable and elusive. In one guise it is near truth, in another it approximates disinterestedness. This is however not enough to just uncover its elements. It is also necessary to investigate 'the principles that cause it to be useful—or problematic' (Hacking 2002, 69). Science can say important and trustworthy things about practices of constructed realities, but it cannot alone solve the question whether it presents the whole truth. Ian Hacking (1999, 22–24) regards words like *truth*, *fact*, *reality* and even *knowledge* as words that are made to work at a different level than words for ideas. He calls them elevator words. They 'are not objects in the world', he says, but these 'words are used to say something about the world, or about what we say or think about the world'.

On the whole objective knowledge is regarded as knowledge that is not contingent on the situation of the observer. In the seventeenth century and earlier the central word 'objective' referred—not surprisingly—to objects and to collective of intellect. 'Objectus' meant something thrown up for consideration by the mind and classically, the world could also refer to legal charges levelled against an accused. Thus objective (truth) stood at the heart of things. It meant some sort of cooperation or joint production of brains. The problem here is neither about sharing objects nor about constructing an impartial and disinterested observer. It concerned the correct way to express the relationship between the representation of something in the mind and the thing itself. It concerned objects of thought, a true representation or cognition, a conformity between the thing itself and the idea of the thing. Thus the solutions to problems of certainty or evidence were reached through defining degrees

of *certainty* and demonstrability. A further observation to make here is that attainable certainty or evidence is not contrasted with subjective standards but with *objective yardsticks*.

Certainty or evidence was explained in the context of justification of enthusiasm in mid-seventeenth century England where it was based on the lack of certainty surrounding scriptural texts and their provenance. Objective evidence paled before subjective certainty and was a possibility that had to be dismissed in this case, above all because subjective certainty reflected ideas in the divine mind, came from the Holy Ghost and 'did not rely on the truth shining by its own light through the provision of objective certainty' (Dear 1992, 624).

The gradual turn to socio-moral categories (and to forms of *understanding* objectivity) was effected by English natural philosophers in the second half of the seventeenth century. It was they who formulated a distinction between a 'matter of fact' and a hypothesis so as to evade the threat to knowledge represented by reliance on the testimony of individuals (Poovey 1998). 'Matters of fact' could not admit a mere probability. A probable matter of fact would be an oxymoron. Thus, in order to persuade people to accept one's knowledge claim as unproblematic or credible, one needed to expand (elevate) work in attaching to it the label 'matter of fact'. A 'matter of fact', like moral certainty, was all about invoking specific social categories—*social facts*.

Statistical social research and the early history of empirical sociology was monitoring the conditions of industrial capitalism in the nineteenth century in England, France and Germany to promote social reforms through demonstrating how things really are, as represented by 'objective indicators' of matters of fact. But relying on social categories was not only about constructing growing ground for knowledge possessions, it also meant that the high social status of the informant was felt to increase the credibility of his advisory position. It seemed to represent some sort of communal epistemology, a collectivist epistemology according to which knowledge and its cognates mark a social status and that primary possession of knowledge belongs to groups of people. The basis of this particular brand of certainty is a kind of objective evidence in which the thing itself, the *amberggris*, plays no causal role at all. Thus objectivity resides entirely in disinterestedness.

Max Weber's famous essay 'Die Objektivität sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis' (1904) has to be mentioned again because it openly attacked the disguised objectivist approach and underlined the perspective nature of our knowledge in recognising and defining the range of our possibilities. According to Weber, each attempt to grasp (*greifen*) reality, namely the possibility to read reality through concepts (*Be-griffen*), is limited by our perspective. This limitation is not necessarily a diminishing attitude, sceptical opinion or concession to fancifulness to which we must adhere in order to adjust to the times. It is simply a statement that to see things in perspective is to recognise the specific embeddedness of objectivity. Objectivity depends on our perspective and on our personal commitment to reality. Objectivity is therefore directed by our engagement with reality. Since reality is not a preconstituted entity that we must discover in its entirety, we simply must decide which portion of it is meaningful to us. This very decision legitimises our analysis, because it is far more primary or 'real' than any attempt at universal conceptualisation. Weber (1968, 170) thinks that there is no plainly objective scientific analysis of the cultural life of social phenomena. One can always attempt to construct a 'systematic' approach, the results, however, will be far less objective than those of the partial perspective.

The 'objective' as a dimension of knowledge, rooted in things and their knowability, was gradually replaced in the seventeenth century by a negative category characterised by the absence of features deemed to be inappropriate to valid knowledge. This is a remarkable change. The new standards and ideas of objectivity can only be understood in terms of what is accepted as a socially legitimate account of actual social conditions—i.e. in terms of social history, reciprocal understanding, intersubjectivity, the possibility of common (shared) worlds, the (distant) chance of society. The links between hierarchiality of society or social system and the principle of disinterestedness in the generation of knowledge in that society, scholastic guardians of objective concepts and paradoxes of aperspectivical objectivity, as well as between earlier institutionally based credibility and ideas of the so-called scientific revolution—these all are signals and symptoms of the coming of a new basis of common

agreement over what is recognised to count as valid knowledge. The figure of aperspectivical objectivity appeared first in the moral and aesthetic philosophy of the latter half of the eighteenth century.

The social triptych

The essential point about aperspectivical objectivity is the new sense of communicability, of providing embeddedness, of constructing a public sphere (*Öffentlichkeit*) or societal communication in which contradictions and confrontations, concords and compromises, reforms and spectacles, new social landscapes and new challenges, harmonies and conflicts among truths and realities have gained the opportunity to become active contexts for knowledge and also to become determined by difference and entanglement. It is revealing that this turn contains several parallel themes as well as paradoxes of interaction and obligations. Therefore it is profoundly difficult to set simple standards and norms that would give guidance. There is no plain normalcy or an adequately complex normality standard, but things have to be seen as changing in their processes and unstable in their effects, for example in the collection of statistical information and its analysis in terms of probabilities, averages and variation, or in the rise of clinical medicine with corresponding changes in the concept of life and the status of the distinction between the normal and the pathological.

This sort of interpretative opposition—between, on the one hand, social development seen in terms of a necessary and by and large *predictable* process of modernisation, and on the other hand, society that can be freely shaped by acting human beings and that is, therefore, open to a variety of different *possible* developments—has marked most of the debate on modernity in social theory and philosophy. As Hans Joas et al. (2002, 4) write, this interpretative opposition 'can only be overcome by focusing explicitly on the problem of contingency, i.e. on that which is neither necessary nor impossible, that which can be, but does not have to be'. Aspects of seeing things in perspective and the achievement of aperspectivical knowledge are thus possible ways in which clearer and closer perception of the contingency of societal development is sought or obtained.

The essence of aperspectivical knowledge works or becomes implemented according to Daston (1992, 600) in practice through 'narrowing the range of genuine knowledge to coincide with that of public knowledge' or through sacrificing 'deeper or more accurate knowledge to the demands of communicability'. Therefore aperspectivity understood as a specific form of knowledge or the knowledgeable, cannot be thought of without some sort of perceptual capacity. This precondition and presupposition, sensitivity towards a certain situation, not only towards relevant facts but also towards relevant normative grounds for a certain purpose, can be seen as a virtue understood by John McDovell as 'an ability to recognize requirements that situations impose on one's behaviour' (see Forst 2003, 661). This is typically applied on a case by case basis and not by applying universal principles or categories. This virtue, aperspectivity understood as a *virtue*, refers to a certain kind of person and to observing or seeing situations in a certain distinctive way.

Daston (1992) also argues that aperspectivical objectivity (or the internal context of scientific knowledge in terms of aperspectivical objectivity) is only a part of objectivity and does not have its home base in natural science but in aesthetic and moral philosophy. It was emigrated to science in the mid-nineteenth century because of radical changes in the organisation of science. In general aperspectivical objectivity is a 'high-minded ideal rather than a sociological reality'. She thinks that scientists may have given up writing in the first person singular, but not signing their articles: 'in so burying their individual identities in the impersonal collectivity, scientists actually aggrandize rather than surrender their social and intellectual authority'. Moreover Daston (1992, 614) thinks that the value standards of aperspectivical objectivity 'left visible traces in the conduct of scientists, in their ever stronger performance for mechanized observation and methods, in their ever more refined division of scientific labour, and in their ever more exclusive focus on the communicable'.

I will now turn to the social triptych and discuss its elements one by one in the political and moral philosophy of the 18th century. For Adam Smith the great cement of human society was *sympathy* understood as a social instinct, as an act of imagination facilitating fellow feelings, as an idea of being affected by the affection of others, as conformity of opinions,

as tastes and characters that draw together individual hearts, as an agreement of affections and inclinations which make two persons delighted and pleased with each other, as an invisible bond of socio-moral relation, as a means of sympathetic identification as opposed to egoistic identification, as an idea of sentient principle, as a mechanism of mutual sensation and of course also much more. Smith's attempt was to abolish the gulf of mutual incomprehension, and to reconstruct morality, together with the foundations of a morally acceptable account of social conditions, politics and socio-moral norms. But how to conceptualise what is the dynamically and socio-culturally relevant specificity in Smith's theory of sentiments and what is it based on?

Luc Boltanski (1999, 24) maintains that Smith's figure of objectivity is in this respect organised around a new politics of pity and government of poverty, which he sees as 'the double figure of an unfortunate and an impartial spectator who observes him from a distance'. To specify its value and relevance in terms of common worlds and the concept of society, several elements must be brought into focus: the public sphere, the spectator's character, the idea of impartiality, the idea of internalisation of impartiality, the 'spectacle' around commercial society, industrial disputes and socio-economic poverty. Smith imagined society as an ensemble of people having sympathetic feelings towards each other for which he seems to have seen a link or a continuum between the figure of the impartial spectator and the anthropology of the 'man-within-the-breast' who rises above particular viewpoints and refutes egoism. According to Smith we must view interests neither from our 'own place' nor yet from his, neither with 'our own eyes' nor yet with his, but from the place or position and with the eyes of a third person. The third person has no particular connection with either. He will judge with impartiality between us. But what is the effect on the politics of pity?

The question has to be about unsettled and unsettling moments in detachment, impartiality, disinterestedness and elimination of perspective views that are seen to contribute to the constitution of self-effacement and moral order. Smith's theory refers to the tension between, on the one hand, active demand and strong expectations of public speech, and on the other hand, the struggle over descriptions with and without perspective.

The figure is in a sense 'analytical' or at least strongly mediated by 'reason' when compared to figures more clearly based on symbolisation, like some other examples within the Scottish tradition, or when compared to the later shift of the discourse concerning human passions from the status of metaphysical and philosophical 'sentiments' and 'passions' being the origins of language (Rousseau) to the status of social bonds that are measurable and objectifiable 'energies', 'currents', 'forces' and 'affects'. They can be used as collective or affective frames of human existence (Durkheim), applied in different versions of *civil religions* from 'habits of the heart' (les habitudes de l'esprit, Alexis de Tocqueville) to the golden rules of communitarianism (Etzioni).

There is a raft of studies on Smith's debts to nature (physiology, vitalism etc.), on the origin or provenance of concepts of 'sympathy', 'harmony', 'consensus', 'concordance', on the figurative use of gravitational attraction, on the link between the concept of sympathy and the nervous system (or on the analogy between the body and society), on the link between human kind and the systematics of Linnaeus and Buffon, on the role Pufendorf's model of sociability and its concomitant anthropology played in Smith's idea of commercial society. I will not in go into these here even if they might offer some further clues for understanding the objectivity figure. There is also a modern example that in its effort to construct veritable commensuration goes much further than Smith. Nancy Love (2003) tells us that the architect of well-ordered society, John Rawls, compares society to an orchestra, and sees it as parallel both to Smith's *division of labour* and to von Humboldt's *social union of social unions*.

Several contemporaries, public persons and philosophers such as Lord Kames, Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, John Gregory and Thomas Reid made 'sympathy' a key figure in their characterisations of instincts, imagination, being, identification or mutual sensation. The Scottish moral philosophers imagined society as an ensemble or as a constellation of people having sympathetic feelings and expectations towards each other. It is also worth mentioning that the contemporary concept of 'empathy' was not introduced into the English language until 1909 as a translation of the German '*Einfihlung*'—whose elevators were not eternal moral laws but commonality.

Hume's aesthetic version of aperspectivical objectivity stresses that the peculiarities of the individual's natural position must be subdued by forgetting one's self in order to attain the true standard. But the true standard does not stem from fellow feeling. In his advice on judging works of art, Hume takes a short step from empathic virtuosity to detached objectivity while he recommends that the competent critic cultivates '*perspectivical suppleness*'—the ability to assume a myriad of other points of view (Daston 1992, 604). Also Smith (1982, 247) blames deviation from the true standard in an unsuitable perspective—self-interest was the most common and at the same time, the worst of these perspectivical distortions.

What Smith surely is capable of adding to the figure is the sympathy that makes the spectator feel the anxiety of the sufferer, and the expectation on the part of the sufferer to wait for or to approximate the cool indifference of the spectator. Smith imagines a clear continuum between the figure of the impartial spectator and his 'anthropology' of the 'man within' who raises above all particular viewpoints. He does approach impartiality neither the Cartesian nor the natural science way, but, I wanted to stress, through a specific notion of *contingency*—contingency as completely secular interpretative or socio-political action space, that gives orientation through contingency consciousness and that has to be most securely defined and guarded (Makropoulos 1999). According to Smith (1982, 135) habit and experience have taught us this figure:

In the same manner, to the selfish and original passions of human nature, the loss or gain of a very small interest of our own, appears to be of vastly more importance, excites a much more passionate joy or sorrow, a much more ardent desire or aversion, than the greatest concern of another with whom we have no particular connexion. His interests, as long as they are surveyed from this station, can never be put into the balance with our own, can never restrain us from doing whatever may tend to promote our own, how ruinous so ever to him. Before we can make any proper comparison of these opposite interests, we must change our position. We must view them, neither from our own place nor yet from his, neither with our own eyes nor yet with his, but from the place and with the eyes of a third person, who has no particular connexion with either, and who judges with impartiality between us (Smith 1982, 135).

The figure itself is not entirely new. Daniel Defoe wrote 'An Essay upon Projects', published in 1697, where he already made a distinction between 'improvements' and 'inventions', thus also, in some sense, between 'limiting' and 'utilization' of contingency, and between 'aperspectivical ethics' and 'ethical perspective' of the social question and social reform. This aspect may be widely discussed in historical studies but perhaps not in its cognitive perspective. The epistemological basis of the question is about *entangled* knowledge that seems to be both fascinated and disgusted by contingency or strangeness. Entangled knowledge or epistemological entanglements seem to have two different kinds of perspectives. The first of these is '*aperspectivical ethics*' and simply means empirical observation of suffering and constructing the ambiguous socio-political scheme—including its elements of 'beneficence' and 'prudence'—of the spectacle. The second could be called an '*ethical perspective*' and is manifested as a declaration of ethical standards and virtues in social life together with a break with the deterministic philosophy of history that both gives space and makes it necessary to observe and to obtain clearer perception of the contingency of societal development.

Perspective, conciliation and contraction

The idea of a world comprising a multiplicity of subject position and an ambiguity of view and orientation looks very much like a form of relativism. The ethnographer, for example, observes that the notion of multiple viewpoints on reality often implies that 'every perspective is equally valid and true' or that 'a correct and true representation of the world does not exist' (de Castro 2004, 471). The ethnographer—or, more generally, a thesis of epistemological obscurity (*Unübersichtlichkeit*)—is right, of course, but only in a sense. It belongs to the very nature of perspectives that they should be kept separate. The autonomy of perspective is not to be violated. Intercommunication becomes possible only at a second level or through a 'third'. Practically speaking only shamans and military commanders can make perspective communicate, and then only under special controlled conditions. But let's have a closer look at what a perspective theory posits

and ask the question: does it really produce a multiplicity of representations of the same world? Sheer empirical evidence seems enough to observe that the opposite is the case. 'All beings perceive ('represent') the world *in the same way*', de Castro (2004, 471–472) writes, 'what varies is the *world* that they see', in other words 'the things *that* they see are different'.

The point he is making is an exciting one. It is that 'perspectivism' seems to have a deep connection with exchange in two senses: first, it may be a type of exchange; second, exchange is by definition an exchange of perspectives. Exchange of perspectives, on the other hand, has to have a link to intellectual curiosity and rational reflection (that are important factors in guiding us to identify with emotional reactions and approval of the other). A universe that is 100 percent relational, is a universe in which there are no distinctions between primary and secondary qualities or between 'brute facts' and 'institutional facts'. This distinction presented by John Searle (1995) opposes brute facts (natural objects, natural kinds or *indifferent kinds*, Hacking 2002) to institutional facts (socio-cultural objects, or *human kinds*). The reality of the first category is independent of interests of classification, and the reality of the second category derives its existence from culturally specific meanings. Let me mention two comments. On the one hand, as all objects derive from the meanings and uses that subjects attribute to them, this picture would be nothing but relativism. On the other, constructionist relativism would define all facts as institutional and thus culturally variable.

In this discussion we are not far away from (cultural) universalism that can be complemented by natural universalism. What is normally meant by 'perspectivism' is this kind of inversion of conventional pairing of nature with the universally cultural. We need not go much further to learn that cultural (or multicultural) relativism supposes a diversity of subjective and partial representations, and that natural (multinatural) relativism means a pronominal and deictic approach indifferently applied to a radically objective diversity. The tentative conclusion seems to be that 'a perspective is not a representation because representations are a property of the mind or spirit, whereas the point of view is located in the body. The ability to adopt a point of view is undoubtedly a power of the soul, and nonhumans are subjects in so far as they have (or are) spirit; but the dif-

ference between viewpoints (and a viewpoint is nothing if not a difference) lies not in the soul' (de Castro 2004, 474). Where this interesting point ought to be linked is perhaps this: a shift from commensurability to the *problem of commensurability*.

Conciliation of worldviews can be seen as *negotiating* between worldviews, for example as a *cosmopolitan proposal* discussed recently especially by Ulrich Beck (2004), and as a critical *warning* against presuming we know what that conflict entails. Beck's proposal is a plain peace plan but with neither an escape to metaphysics nor to presuppositions of consensus or ideal speech situation (Habermas). Context has to be taken into account and nobody wants to become caught arguing for a 'view from nowhere'. In other words, both idealist universalism and absolute contextualism must be avoided. The enlightened authoritarianism of 'we liberals' (Perl 2004, 426), the hope that committed believers 'in this or that dogma can discuss their differences amicably' is more and more presented as something that does not actually intend communication. The question that de Castro seems to have opened up, as was discussed above, is to ask whether worldviews are *commensurable* and what may be the problem of *commensuration* we face now.

As Perl (2004, 428) puts it, 'the question is whether we should do what it takes—all that it takes—to communicate and reconcile with those we fear', adding that there perhaps are 'things worse than terrorism and war'. De Castro's observations presented above underscore that (ontological) differences of worldview can be radically fundamental and unobserved. Even if 'intercommunicability' between perspectives is not out of the question, the achievement may be unimportant and even dangerous. He also points out that experts and politicians talk metaphorically—and thus optimistically—about exchanging perspectives. Yet we know that (ontological) perspectives are communicated and exchanged in quite specific contexts (they are traded, transferred, transformed etc.). No ordinary person can handle that. It is a burden to everyday communication. It belongs to somewhere else. Once more: exchanging perspectives is a business for shamans. They may and can resist earlier fixations, previous tenacity, unspoken presuppositions, in other words ontological *predation*. This may be an important reminder because the reconciliatory talk with religions, otherness, good methods and expansive moralities have dominated the field.

Validity and actuality of affirmative sympathy

The core of the figure of aperspectivical objectivity is the juxtaposition of the internal and impartial spectator against the idea of the *volonté générale*, Adam Seligman (1997, 112) explains. Conscience (together with mutual sympathy) has to take the place of the collective will, the dogma about it (universal truth) or the place of contrasts between private and public virtues. The workings of 'propriety'—contributing to the possibility of society, for example—turn on the impartial spectator. This position—understood as impartial, informed and sharing in the common standards—becomes the invisible normalcy through which we judge both our own conduct and that of others. It does not only guide our passions in line with acceptable shared standards, but also creates an independent moral standpoint. The idea of propriety is rooted in 'the eyes of a third party'. Thus social life is the continual search for this 'neutral' position.

With this insight and with this figure Smith is seen to create a distance to the tradition of civil society with the traditional ideas of innate sympathy, collective norms, latent community of shared moral code and world of values, civic virtues. It is exciting to learn about the narratives of the coffee houses in London where 'men do talk of everything, / With large and liberal lungs, / Like women at a gossiping', likewise that new standards of discursive decorum advised the inhabitants of London with the general rule 'That men should not talk to please themselves, but those that hear them' (Cowan 2004, 356). But all this is far too descriptive material to reveal structural changes and unshackling trends in the development of civil society: no shared moral code, the common world of values has dissolved, division of labour and specialisation has increased, thus also little expectation for common goals and values—they must be replaced by norms that guide to coexistence (Kangas 2001, 221–222). Especially while revising the sixth (1790) edition of the 'Theory of Moral Sentiments', Smith is said to have abandoned the idea of harmony and concord in society (public opinion guiding moral action) and proposed instead a psychological mechanism as a new foundation for the development of internal conscience and the social good (Seligman 1997, 113). Through different editions of the book, the impartial spectator is internalised.

Compared to the older tradition of civic virtues, Smith cleared away obstacles from society based on the private realm of virtue and moral sentiments, the mechanism of the impartial spectator, the divided model and inward orientation of the self.

If we read Smith through an understanding that the 'man within' takes the place of the 'man without' (or public opinion) as the source of virtue as well as of familiarity, trust, confidence etc. qua mechanisms of generalised exchange (Seligman 1997, 126–127), a new, singular (private and individual) foundation is created for the construction of a 'feel of society' or 'public good', the individual citizen himself. But it is another thing to make something of it. For recognising this pure historical sources are not enough. This figure has also remained vague because his conception of an impartial spectator is too much of a 'mental vehicle' and the concept of sympathy too much of a 'technical term' (Kangas 2001, 223). Even if there are interesting new sources on Smith's treatment of moral sentiments, on ideas about public places and private/public distinction, on exciting conceptual comparisons (impartial spectator as George Herbert Mead's 'generalized other', Singer 2004, 37), on new interpretative opening ('self-love' as pre-social quality that cannot constitute a social bond, *ibid.*, 38 f.), and on supplementary elements (like impartiality as modal imagination of 'surface objects' and 'deep objects', Piper 1991, 732), new contributions are needed especially in terms of social theory and conceptual thinking.

Adam Smith is no theorist of any modern 'politics of pity', where compassion is evoked on the sole basis of another's humanity, independent of all questions of distance, as Luc Boltanski (1999, 35–54) argues. The figure of the impartial spectator may appear to imply 'aperspectivical compassion' (Smith is aware of this and speaks about 'universal benevolence'), but he only speaks of it in order to draw back from its implications. The power of social passions depends on the proximity of their objects. They also have a double role: on the one hand they make a pre-condition of society, but paradoxically, on the other hand they can be made into a reality only in society. The compass of these passions is extended only very slowly, inductively, in other words on the basis of the evidence of the senses. Moreover, the solicitude we feel for family members and neighbours is

based not just on their propinquity (or commensurability). It is rooted in prudential as well as compassionate concerns. 'Thus there is no real moral equivalence between what we feel for the proximate, particular other and for humanity in general' Brian Singer (2004, 40) concludes.

In his book on moral sentiments Smith mentions the word society many times. 'Are you in adversity', Smith (1982, 84) asked, and replied that 'do not mourn in the darkness of solitude', but 'return, as soon as possible, to the day-light of the world and of society'. In another place he made it a sort of principle of *normalcy* (seen to solve at once the problems of homogeneity, invisibility and factuality) through regarding society as 'the most powerful remedy for restoring the mind', as a means for obtaining 'prudence' and as 'propriety of conduct' (cf. the chapter on 'stoical philosophy' in the 'Theory of Moral Sentiments'). Smith does not merely say that 'man (...) can subsist only in society' but also says that society 'upholds the whole edifice' of human life, becomes 'the immense fabric' that raises this world, 'elevates' the individual, teaches him new 'passions' and makes him competent of considering both 'licentious practices to the welfare of society' and 'the fortune and happiness of society'. Smith (1982, 110) does not seem to have had any hesitation in declaring that 'Bring him into society, and he is immediately provided with the mirrors which he wanted before'.

What do we mean by 'society'?

Things that exist or happen in 'society' have never been limited to national boundaries. 'Society' cannot be defined through *pars pro toto* argumentation. It has always meant a heterogeneous association and never been limited to individuals, groups, segments or enclaves. 'Society' is a rare treat that can exist only at a conceptual level—speaking of such an entity is therefore only possible with quotation marks (Papilloud & Rol 2004, 207).

Different parts and pieces derived from institutional or political 'raw stuff' (prior to observation, perception or description) may well be able to provide no contribution towards the 'making of society' and thus do not make a reality. Neither can we think of any totality of reality that

could become a finite being. The means and styles of representation are also always partial. 'Societies' may be produced by the process of symbolisation, but the workings or effects of symbolisation are not easy to describe. The 'real' can be both a lack and an excess of the process of symbolisation. The symbolised forms may appear as results that deviate from what is expected. They can also change in observably different ways.

The fact (or the fear) that we lack the genuine capacity to recognise or to communicate 'the feel of society', is not at all exceptional. Problems in conciliating different scattered elements to reach common ground for society are ordinary, and the unsolved problems around the concept of society should not make us inferior. Everybody knows how easy it is to 'find' societies in everyday life of common activities, in different communities or in different fields of urban babble. There is no lack of societies on that level. The problem however is, how can we conceptualise it or them, and what do these facts (or self-descriptions) indicate?

One way to go beyond the trivial description and definition of society is to try to define it through nascent qualities or processes. 'Society' is then for example seen as 'one of the resources of a nascent social justice, capable of favouring its expression at the heart of socio-cultural relation' (Papilloud & Rol 2004, 217). 'Society' here is given the position of the 'making of society' or as the *Ding an sich*—as the obvious possibility or expectation that there must be an excess of this process and that it is exactly this nascency and this excess that ought to prove productive and meaningful when we try to grasp what 'society'—as a heterogeneous agency, as a mediation, as an endeavour or as a test (see Lemke 2004, 263–270; Latour 2004)—is or does. In an interesting sense there is no 'society', or 'society' becomes imaginable only through the mediation of a 'third', as has been stressed by Georg Simmel and also Adam Smith, as we saw earlier. Appearance and disappearance of 'society' seems to be a kind of perpetual motion, and in a sense, 'society is always just about to disappear' (Marilyn Strathern).

Imitation and imagination (or conversation and communication) are obvious mirrors of 'society' because there is no 'pre-existing model', no 'system of networks', no 'collective choices', no 'ratified treaty', no 'mutual agreement' and no 'normal condition' that would furnish us

with the prerequisites of 'society'. In this respect traditional and modern social imaginaries (Taylor 2004) seem to say the same thing. On the other hand, our interpretations or images of society are always of a world or a reality that is already occupied by 'societies'. This is important: 'society' is always already written, and is always already compiled through different acceptances and compromises. It is a completely de-naturalised entity and a conceptually impregnated reality. All its internal boundaries depend upon self-organisation and self-production of society.

'Society' as an entity as well as an object of social theory can also be regarded as an *imaginary* institution. Even if nobody has ever seen it, even if there perhaps never will be an adequate definition of it, and even if it seems to exist only on 'paper', 'society' is a theme and a discourse of and about which everybody is speaking. In fact, we ought to say that it exists because it is spoken of, in other words because there are self-observations and self-descriptions about it (Willke 1993, 82). Ideas and thoughts about society and the concept of society not only reflect reality but also take part in constructing it. In doing so the concept seems never to reach a balance or concordance. It seems to be either something that is too strongly (etastically) integrated or too limited (the nation-state) a notion, either too general for the body of institutions and relationships or too abstract for the conditions within which such institutions and relationships are formed, either too much tied to the brute facts of population within a country or having too much confidence on the normative power of the state. It is often difficult or even practically impossible to tolerate the principle that no agency may project its own perspective or competence onto the perspective or competence of the whole of 'society'.

There are many unsettled issues concerning 'the legitimacy of the contemporary' (Rabinow 2004). This readily applies to the concept of society. We can ask—following Marilyn Strathern's formulation that she presented in a speech—: 'What kind of information do we need to know about social conditions in order to produce an account of social conditions that will be acceptable as an account of social conditions'. To accept this challenge and to try to answer this kind of question neither conventional semantics nor simple conceptions (integration, inclusion etc.) of order are sufficient. Society is no longer (and perhaps never has been) a metaphor

of community or wholeness, but ought to be geared into a concept that tolerates and promotes differentiation, because—as Armin Nassehi (2004, 104) suggests—‘the problem of society evolves only when coordination of difference does not come out by itself’.

In our time new orders of justification, their rise to relative dominance (Boltanski & Chiapello 2003), formal loops by which the system observes itself (Wagner 1999), and the new vocabulary of presence—from ‘knowledge management’ to ‘diversity management’ and from ‘humanitarian intervention’ to ‘self-responsibility’ (Bröckling et al. 2004)—are applied for producing *self-observations* and *self-descriptions* of society. According to Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello in contemporary ‘cognitive capitalism’ new ‘proofs of efficiency’ are being applied with the help of which not only quite normal competence and qualifications, but also things and qualities like uprightness, commitments and obligations of actors—, i.e. qualities that are situated beyond traditional technologies of power and legitimation—are put up as normative standards.

The implementation of these new principles—not only the principles of flexibility and totality but also those of visibility and factuality—of normality (cf. Ewald 1993) means the introduction of new standards for observation and description of society, and especially a plurality of mutually incompatible models of justification. Boltanski and Thévenot have called them ‘orders of worth’ and mention six of them; the ‘world of inspiration’ is based on the recognition of others, the ‘domestic world’ depends on kinship, face-to-face relationships and tradition, the ‘world of renown’ depends on conventional signs of public esteem and recognition, the ‘civic world’ depends on the efficiency of authorities of common good, the ‘market world’ coordinates individuals through the mediation of goods, and the ‘industrial world’ can be measured only on a scale of professional capabilities (see Wagner 1999, 356–357). But what are the rationalities and technologies and to which sectors, segments or thematizations (like the ‘welfare state’) of society are they referring to?

One important interpretation is the demolition and dismissal of the idea of subject or a concrete individual and its dis/replacement with a group or cluster of many factors. The construction of these factors is far from any old rules of society (or physics of society) based on application of statistical

mechanisms. Neither is it in any direct way based on the consciousness approach of Enlightenment. It is based on the erosion of concrete subjectivity through introducing conceptualised threats and dangers (risks; cf. Castel 1991) as new guidelines in life, and, at the same time, inviting the subject to a process of self-activation through making him active, imaginative and empowered in studying himself (self-closure), in governing himself (self-management) and in becoming responsible of his own life (conduct of conduct). As a result the decreasing subjectivity appears as an *aleatory* subjectivity that is being met with new, latently normative (cool) semantics of circulation and flow of knowledges, activities, proposals, guidances, precepts etc. This is sheer working of ‘immunologic’ (Luhmann 1984, 507) that makes people stronger to flexibilities! Flexibility does not mean submission or resignation to uncertainty and ambivalence but—to use the concept of Gregory Bateson—it means ‘unbound potentiality of change’.

It is no easy task to make a conclusion on this discussion. It is, however, tempting to say that there is no society. There are just orders, justifications, disputes, mediations, proofs and approvals. If we wish to soften this somewhat, we may say that yes, there is a ‘society’, it evolves even, but it cannot control itself. For example: there are very few addresses in society where justified complaints can be sent and where an answer can be expected. Things are treated with creative neglect. Aims to integrate or guarantee reciprocal support of institutional rules, social contracts, managed diversities, definitions of exclusion, assessments of social bonds become confronted with complex and deeply interlinked dependencies and interdependencies. It is a polycentric ‘society of presences’ (Nassehi 2004, 104) in which *causal constructions* are no longer possible from a central—and therefore ‘objective’—point of view (Arnoldi 2003, 406).

The unshackling of life, efforts of recognising what legitimates our social arrangements and efforts of defining social imaginary or the amalgam of new practices, follows certain rules of movement because that is simply what one does in one’s ordinary life and what is usually also taken as an indication of a generalised body of others. This is simply the objectivity of contemporary everyday life. But it does not seem to matter a jot how one moves within the range of possibilities. All long term concepts

seem to suffer this fate. Examples of such concepts are the philosophical concept of 'Übersichtlichkeit' and the ethical concept of 'greatness'—*capacity for protracted action* must be regarded as a necessary condition for both of them. Perhaps there is some peculiar poignancy in asking today whether such conceptualisation is—in an aperspective point of view—possible today.

Jacques Derrida (1986, 17) once wrote that 'if things are deconstructible, they are deconstructible already—as things', in other words, they consist of deconstructing, dislocating, displacing, disarticulating and disjoining and they acquire their value from their inscription in a chain of possible substitutions. For excellent reasons we should assume that this is also applicable to the figure of aperspectivical objectivity, in other words that the term 'aperspectivical objectivity' lets itself be determined by such other words as presumption, entanglement and imaginary, which may even remind us of the presence of the 'unrepresented singularity' who is not 'everyone' or 'the universal'. A quarter of a century ago John Dunn (1980, 297, 299) complained about the 'objective viewpoint' that 'however far it may be (and is likely to be) from being motivationally compelling, could be epistemologically irrelevant for human beings'. He thought that a theory of it is beyond hope not because 'there is nothing for such a theory to be about', he remarks, 'but because there is so much that such a theory has to be about' and 'so much to which it has to do justice'.

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