

Three Notions of Communicative Objectivity

Henrik Rydenfelt

1. Introduction

Objectivity is a central concept in philosophy and communication studies, and the notions of objectivity proposed in these fields seem to tend to intersect in various ways. The reason for this, as far as I can see, is that in recent decades, it has become increasingly popular to think that *philosophical* views can be defended based on, or drawn from, some central features of communicative practices. Such a heavy concentration on *practice* has led to the development of a whole strand of pragmatist thought - or, differently perceived, a new application of the concept of pragmatism.

What I am suggesting here today should not be taken as a criticism of such a “pragmatist” approach. Indeed, I think it is a helpful point of view, bridging together ideas and concepts of analytic philosophy, transcendental philosophy and philosophical pragmatism as well as themes from many of the social sciences such as communication studies and sociology. However, I think the philosophical implications of communicative practices are easily exaggerated. Especially worrisome in my view are most of the attempts to show that such practices imply ontological commitments. While I am particularly keen to defend a particular ontological commitment, *realism* (of a particularly keen sort), the grounds on which we do so must be much more solid than those that the presuppositions of our communicative practices may immediately provide. To clear the ground, criticize overly eager philosopher and discover the correct epistemological and ontological implications of communicative practice, in what follows I will distinguish three senses of objectivity in communication that (at least) should concern us as pragmatists.

The first such notion I will call *factual objectivity*. This sort of objectivity is founded on the idea that, in communication, we assume that we are talking about the “same things” despite our possible disagreement. This commitment to joint “objects” of discourse has been taken to imply an ontological commitment to *realism* about facts or objects independent of us (Rescher 1997). I will however argue that such objectivity can be interpreted in a very different fashion which avoids these implications.

The second, *consensus objectivity* labels a pervasive feature of many of our communicative contexts and discourses: the attempt to derive an intersubjective agreement among participants. This notion I think underlies many more particular developments of the notion of objectivity in different communicative contexts, for example accounts of the right kind of democratic processes, policies concerning “neutrality” in journalistic practice, legal procedures and the like. Not coincidentally, consensus objectivity has been variously used by philosophers to argue that communication presupposes a set of argumentative principles (Habermas 1990) or that the mere fact of assertion implies a commitment to a shared notion of evidence or justification (Misak 2000). I will however point out that the second notion of objectivity is, as such, rather thin and too variously interpretable to have such wide-reaching implications.

For contrast, I will briefly develop a third notion, *convergence objectivity*, which is limited to a specific context of inquiry in which we attempt to derive an uncoerced convergence

of opinion among inquirers. As we will see, this (and only this) notion will ultimately have ontological implications.

2. Factual objectivity

The first notion of objectivity has been advanced by Nicholas Rescher (1997). Communication itself, Rescher has argued, already presupposes a certain conception of objectivity: that we talk about a common world, intersubjectively available to all of us. Lacking a better word, I'm going to call this *factual objectivity*. It is based on the simple observation that there appear to be common *objects* of talk and communication. Initially, such a view seems quite plausible. Especially if we *disagree*, it appears that we must have a way of saying what it is we disagree *about* - a world that is "out there". Rescher takes this to imply that *realism* - at least in one or another form - is assumed at the outset by us simply as engaged in communication.

Rescher's point of view is, however, questionable from both contemporary and the classical pragmatist perspectives, which allow us to construe our communicative practices or discourses rather differently while retaining the core idea of factual objectivity. One particularly interesting example of such a view is the global expressivist position advanced by the contemporary pragmatist Huw Price (2010). As a philosophical position, expressivism has its origin in meta-ethics, where it resisted the standard cognitivist picture of normative claims as *descriptions*, or as being "about" some facts. Instead, it views normative claims as *expressions* of the functional states or commitments of the speakers. In this manner, it avoids the difficulty of finding the "facts" that normative claim are supposed to be about.

The expressivist approach has subsequently been extended to cover also other domains with similar problems concerning the "facts" in question, such as the domain of modal claims. A recent outgrowth of this point of view is Price's global expressivism. Price, to an extent following Richard Rorty's lead, contests the traditional philosophical notion of representation - the idea that *any* of our thoughts, claims, statements and the like are *about* or describe some "facts" in a straightforward fashion. In his view - which he has likened to Robert Brandom's (1994; 2007) inferentialism - statements or claims express our functional, behavioural and inferential commitments. When making such commitments explicit in a discourse with others, our claims attain their typical assertoric shape and propositional form; Brandom's view of assertion as making inferential commitments explicit is one possible account of how this takes place.

In this global form, expressivism maintains that claims made in any discourse or domain do not represent or "describe" in a straightforward fashion. It loosens the grip of the representationalist picture by which our thoughts and claims are automatically "about" something, "represent" or aim to "fit" truthmakers that are there in the world. Of course, it easily may *appear* to us that they do; this much is admitted by the expressivist himself. Price has pushed a distinction between two notions (or nodes) of representation, which are intended to replace the standard picture. Price's *i-representation* (where "i" stands for "internal" or "inferential") covers the sort or answerability that comes with the expression of a commitment or stance inside a discourse. For those involved in that discourse, it appears as if they were talking about the way things *are* (at least loosely speaking). But as in the moral case, this is in a sense an illusion: the claims made are about something "external" only when viewed inside the framework of the discourse itself.

It is now easy to see how this alternative approach to communicative discourse renders the sort of ontological commitments that Rescher promotes highly dubious. Price's expressivist approach explains factual objectivity involved in different discourses *without* implying a commitment to realism. It makes intelligible how it may seem like we are talking about a world in a sense "out there", while it maintains that the claims made are not *about* some independent "objects" or facts, in a robust sense. In this way, it leaves the factual objectivity required for communication intact, but reinterprets the nature of the commitments that ensue in

a fully non-realist and anti-representationalist fashion.

I cannot here stop to argue for Price's view at length. Instead I want to note that - perhaps to the surprise to many - the classical pragmatists themselves could very well be viewed as allies to their contemporary expressivist offspring. To see why, recall the starting point of the tradition, the pragmatist maxim itself. As is familiar, by that maxim - first formulated by Charles S. Peirce (1878) and later advanced in somewhat different versions by William James (1907, ch. 2) - attaining a higher grade of clarity about our ideas involves imagining the results of the acceptance of an idea in the (conceivable) conduct of an agent. This aspect of the meaning of, say, "hard" is to be traced from its practical consequences in the *conduct* of someone who *believes* that something is hard. The pragmatist maxim is thus based on the contention that the nature of intentional states such as beliefs is primarily *practical*: beliefs are, as Peirce often put it, habits of action. The full meaning or purport of statements is in this manner dependent on - or derivable from - the practical stances that those statements are used to express.

Importantly, nowhere in this picture does the notion of "objects" - nor that of "representation" - appear as if by default. At least to this extent, I think the classical pragmatists would agree with their contemporary anti- or non-representationalist offspring. Take an example. Think of George, who believes that there are lions in China. When George contemplates lions in China, these thoughts will likely involve some mental imagery about both lions and China. But George plausibly believes that there are lions in China without entertaining a "representation" of this sort in mind. Days and weeks pass without such imagery occupying his mind. Things are even more complicated when several individuals are thought to share a belief. Sally, too, believes that there are lions in China. But Sally's lions, in her mental imagery, are of different shape, size and colour, as is China, than George's. If this sort of imagery is what is meant by a "representation", it appears to be far reach to insist that that beliefs are distinguished by such content. Intentional stances are not filled with, and distinguished by, such representational contents, nor is truth some straightforward match of representations with "reality". Instead, a belief is what it is as a practical stance. At least to this extent, then, the pragmatists would have any qualms about being anti-representationalist, or perhaps better put, *non-representationalist*.

Factual objectivity (at least in a minimal sense) indeed appears to underlie communication: there is always an "object" or "objects" to our discourse. But such objectivity underlying communicative ventures can be interpreted in a manner that does not entail a commitment to the *existence* of a mind-independent reality. Centrally to my argument here, this commitment to factual objectivity is not to be taken to imply any robust form or *realism*.

3. Objectivity as consensus

The second notion of objectivity in communication is that of the formation of a *consensus*. In many of our communicative practices, we not merely attempt to talk about the same thing, but attempt to reach an intersubjective agreement, an opinion shared across participants. The demand for objectivity of this second sort is sometimes so prevalent as to be elusive. Its centrality can be nicely illustrated by Huw Price's argument for an enlarged version of the deflationary account of truth. Deflationists or minimalists have argued that the whole of our concept of truth is exhausted by the use of the truth predicate in our assertoric practices. Typically, they have held that the predicate is employed as a device for disquotations or reassertion merely. For example, to say "that's true" is in effect to say what the previous speaker just asserted.

The aspect of our concept of truth as used in our assertoric practices that Price (1998; 2007) has drawn attention to is its function as pointing towards a disagreement to be resolved (or as a "convenient friction", as Price aptly puts it). The response "that's not true", invites

disagreement at least in many of our discourses. Such disagreement is something we desire to resolve, usually by further discussion. For contrast, Price envisions a group of “merely-opinionated asserters”, whose assertoric practices do not involve this phenomenon. For these speakers, the concept of truth is merely used to register one’s agreeing or conflicting opinion, but disagreement will not matter. The fault of the usual deflationist view, Price argues, is that it does not take into account this aspect of the concept of truth present in our assertoric practices.

I am not sure if the traditional deflationist should be very concerned. At least according to deflationary views which maintain that the concept of truth is a device of disquotation or reassertion, the “friction” phenomenon might be only expected, but not due to some special power invested in our concept of truth itself. But be that as it may, Price points towards a central phenomenon in our assertoric practices. And again, I think this insight has a parallel in the earlier pragmatist tradition, namely in Peirce’s classic piece, “The Fixation of Belief” of 1877. As is familiar, “Fixation” discusses four different ways of settling opinion, in effect four different notions of truth from the classical pragmatist perspective. The first of the methods is tenacity, the steadfast clinging to one’s opinion. Analogously to Price’s merely-opinionated asserters, the tenacious do not aim to coordinate their opinion, to reach objectivity understood as consensus. However, under the influence of what Peirce calls the “social impulse,” this method is bound to fail. The disagreement of others begins to matter, and the question becomes how to fix beliefs for *everyone* instead of merely for oneself.

The demand for the second kind of objectivity has resulted in various attempts of articulating the basic structures, procedures, policies or rules of communication and argumentative discourse. A case in point is Jürgen Habermas’s attempt to argue that everyone engaged in a communicative interaction with others is bound by certain principles. By such an argument Habermas has attempted to show that everyone is actually concerned with the opinions of others, with bringing about a consensus in a community, even despite appearance or pretense to the contrary.

This line of argumentation is, however, clearly problematic. If communicative interaction is *defined* as the attempt to derive a shared opinion among a group of individuals, it immediately follows that anyone engaged in such interaction *is* concerned with finding such a common view, however the discourse is otherwise expected to proceed. But this would result in a very limited conception of such interaction or communication itself. Peirce’s and Price’s examples already show that counterexamples are easily devised. Moreover, such cases are not limited to philosophical fantasy merely. Imagine that George hates ice cream and happens to meet Sally who asserts, “ice cream is great”. Perhaps George thinks highly of his preferences and protests with outrage, but we might more reasonably expect him to merely note his contrary opinion, or simply pass Sally’s comment by. Disagreement over some matters of taste just lacks any particular bite. But if we were to limit communicative interaction to those scenarios in which the participants attempt to form a consensus, George’s and Sally’s interchange here would not count as communication. This seems a rather poor result indeed.

Of course, one possibility for those who wish to argue for a set of principles of communication is to narrow their scope. Instead of attempting to discuss the whole of communicative interaction, such considerations may be limited to the sort of scientific and social practices of discourse where we *do* attempt to reach a consensus. But even here, it is easy to be too specific about the content of the notion of objectivity in question. Habermas, for one, has attempted to argue that argumentative speech as a process of communication presupposes universal and equal rights of participation in the absence of “all external or internal coercion other than the force of the better argument” (1990, 66).

However, it is far from evident that our communicative practices or discourses involve such idealized presuppositions - at least on pain of again limiting the scope of communication itself. Recall, for example, Peirce’s second method of fixing belief. By this method of authority, agreement across individuals is brought about by external compulsion: the state itself imposes

the correct opinion on its subjects, and puts down heresy by all means necessary. The followers of this method, then, achieve agreement by relying on the testimony of an infallible authority in settling their opinion. What is there to show that consensus should not be derived in this way?

Another case in point is Cheryl Misak's attempt to argue for the Peircean scientific method on *conceptual* grounds. Believing and asserting, Misak maintains, themselves already commit us to a certain notion of evidence or justification.

"If we want to arrive at true beliefs, we ought to expose our beliefs to the tests of experience. There is a whiff of circularity here: we test beliefs because we want beliefs which are true – beliefs which will stand up to testing. The circularity, however, evaporates once the pragmatist is explicit that we in fact value the truth. We can see that this is the case when we see that the assertion that p is the assertion that p is true. Belief and assertion aim at truth. And it is very difficult for a sceptical opponent to suggest that he does not have beliefs or make assertions." (Misak 2000, 83, paragraph break omitted.)

But this inference from the commitment to the truth of what one asserts to having to expose beliefs to the "test of experience" is simply too quick. Even if belief "aimed" at truth and were always "sensitive in something" in the sense of being open to revision in some manner, the difference between the methods is exactly about what may prompt such revision, or count as evidence.

In my view, such conceptual considerations and arguments were never a part of Peirce's attempt to formulate the second notion of objectivity. Consider, for contrast, Robert Brandom's account of conceptual content. Brandom has noted that the classical pragmatists' notion of meaning emphasizes practical consequences in conduct. This is in distinction to his own account which makes the meaning of an assertion (or conceptual content) dependent on both consequences in action (or the "exit rules" of a claim) *and* the circumstances where one becomes entitled or committed to endorse a claim (or its "entry rules"). Brandom turns this fact into a criticism of the classical pragmatist view, as leading to a semantic theory which is "literally one-sided" (2000, 64) in "identifying propositional contents exclusively with the consequences of endorsing a claim, looking downstream to the claim's role as a premise in practical reasoning and ignoring its proper antecedents upstream" (2000, 66).

I'm mostly in agreement with Brandom's analysis: there is a difference of this sort between his view and that of the early pragmatists. But I do disagree with Brandom about whether this should be considered a fault of the original pragmatist stance. Again, take an example. Assume that George and Sally both sincerely claim that there is a benevolent God, who will bring relief in time of anguish if one turns to him in prayer. Assume further that in a time of great turmoil, both George and Sally pray to God, but to no avail. Sally then becomes disillusioned, stops praying, and loses faith, while George sticks to his belief, perhaps explaining God's silence by some other consideration. George and Sally, then, have different notions of what counts as evidence for the existence of such a benevolent God (or in Brandom's terms, differing entry rules of that commitment). It is a consequence of Brandom's account that "God" and "God exists" then mean different things for George and Sally.

The distinct advantage of pragmatism (in its classical version) is that it makes things far easier for us. As George and Sally's conduct is similarly guided by their belief in God (or lack thereof), we may say that they talk about the *same* thing despite having different conceptions of what makes for good evidence (or in Brandom's lingo, entry rules) for God's existence. What matters is the functional and behavioural results of the belief (or exit rules) in the conduct of the agent. As these are joint to both George and Sally, their belief and their notion of God are the same. This pragmatist account leaves open the choice of the way of settling conflicts of opinion instead of imputing it as a part of the very meaning of the claims made by the participants of a

discourse.

The second notion of objectivity, then - at least in its abstract form - is central to many of our argumentative discourses. However, its scope is easily exaggerated, and its content made too specific by philosophers eager to argue for some distinct set of principles concerning validity, truth, or communication itself. Actual, concrete cases of communication show that firstly, not everything that plausibly counts as a communicative process aims at agreement of consensus, and, secondly, even when the second notion of objectivity is present in a communicative interaction, the way to derive a consensus is open to different interpretations. Not even this notion, when present in our practices, commits us to any substantial views about truth, evidence, inquiry or reality.

4. Objectivity as convergence

Finally, let's briefly consider the third notion of objectivity - the one I think will ultimately imply such a commitment. This notion is not intended to cover all of communication; instead, it appears in the framework of a specific kind of communicative and argumentative setting that attempts to derive a consensus. The gist of this notion is encapsulated by T. L. Short's proposal for a definition for the *objectivity of inquiry*:

[I]n calling an inquiry "objective", we shall mean that it is of such a nature [...] that, were it continued indefinitely and by an indeterminate number of inquirers, uncoerced opinion would eventually converge, irreversibly, on a single answer to a single question; that answer may then be called "true", and the changes made in opinion en route to it may then be called "corrections of error" (Short 2007, 324.)

Two features of this notion of objectivity are salient. Firstly, instead of a consensus formed by any means available - such as that of mere coercion - the sort of agreement in opinion that such a process aims at is of a specific sort, here referred to as *convergence*. Secondly, it entails that we proceed in our mutual communicative enterprise (or *inquiry*) in a manner that *would* bring about such convergence of opinion.

To elucidate this notion, recall again Peirce's discussion. By the third, *a priori* method of fixing belief, opinion is to be settled in light of what is agreeable to reason under conditions of liberty: "Let the action of natural preferences be unimpeded, then, and under their influence let men, conversing together and regarding matters in different lights, gradually develop beliefs in harmony with natural causes" (Peirce 1877, 118). Aiming at an unforced convergence, this method then involves the first feature of the third notion. But it still lacks the second. The *a priori* method, Peirce maintains, "makes of inquiry something similar to the development of taste; but taste, unfortunately, is always more or less a matter of fashion" (1877, 119), a result that we will ultimately find unsatisfactory. The actual development of human opinion will show that this method does not lead to any permanent, irreversible results.

This problem of making the possibility of irreversible convergence *intelligible* is Peirce's motive for turning to the fourth and final method of fixing belief he discusses, the scientific method. By this method, our opinions are to be "determined by nothing human, but some external permanency" which "affects, or might affect, every man" (1877, 120). The hypothesis that underlies the scientific method is the assumption that there are things independent of whatever any number of us may think - the view we could call *hypothetical realism*. With this hypothesis at hand, this method renders intelligible how the acceptance of a particular opinion may be inevitable as the opinion that reality itself (at least ultimately) would force upon us. It is only here in the development of the notion of objectivity that the realistic of an independent reality comes into the pragmatist purview. And even here, the realism is of a mild hypothetical nature. Peirce's scientific method cannot guarantee, in a transcendental fashion, that such

convergence would eventually take place - or that there indeed *is* a reality such that the method postulates. It merely makes the possibility, or hope, of convergence intelligible for us as inquirers.

5. Conclusion

The results of this sketch can be put very briefly. The first, factual notion of objectivity, appears to be present in any communicative enterprise: there is, in a sense, always an object of discourse. But as we have seen, this notion may be interpreted in a fashion which involves no *robust* ontological commitments. Perhaps surprisingly, in this line of thought, the classical pragmatists could easily agree with their contemporary expressivist and anti-representationalist followers. In turn, the second notion of objectivity as consensus - the demand for intersubjective agreement - is certainly present in many of our assertoric practices. But as concrete examples such as those of the tenacious and the merely-opinionated asserter show, the demand for consensus is not a presupposition of communication at large - at least unless our notion of communication is to be quite artificially limited. Moreover, the appearance of the demand for consensus has no implications on how such consensus is to be derived in a discourse. Accordingly, the third notion of objectivity is limited to the sort of communicative setting where a certain type of consensus, a freely formed convergence, is being pursued. It is only this notion that gives rise to realism even in its mild, hypothetical form.