Subjective and Objective

There is a problem that emerges in several areas of philosophy whose connexion with one another is not obvious. I believe that it can be given a general form, and that some treatment of it is possible in abstraction from its particular instances - with results that can be applied to the instances eventually. This discussion is a preliminary sketch for what I hope will be a more thorough treatment.

The problem is one of opposition between subjective and objective points of view. There is a tendency to seek an objective account of everything before admitting its reality. But often what appears to be a more subjective point of view cannot be accounted for in this way. So either the objective conception of the world is incomplete, or the subjective involves illusions that should be rejected.

Instead of trying to define these terms at the outset, I shall begin with some examples, drawn from ethics and metaphysics. The parallels between them should emerge as I proceed.

Consider first a problem about the meaning of life. There is a way of considering human pursuits from within life, which allows justification of some activities in terms of others, but does not permit us to question the significance of the whole thing, unless we are asking, from within life, whether the allocation of energy or attention to different segments of it makes sense in virtue of their relative importance. This view comes under challenge from a position that regards life in detachment from specific or general human purposes. People, and oneself in particular, are perceived as having no significance, and absurd because they seem to accord their lives great importance in action, even though they can also appreciate a broader point of view from which they have no importance.

Each of the two points of view claims priority. The internal view asks, what is the importance for individual life of insignificance from an external point of view? Life is lived from inside, and issues of significance are significant only if they can be raised from inside. It therefore does not matter that from a point of view outside my life, my life does not matter.

The external view, on the other hand, comprehends within its scope of observation all the aims and commitments by reference to which internal significance is measured. It presents itself as the right way for the individual to look at the world and his place in it: the big picture. He develops this kind of detachment naturally, to counter the egocentric distortion of a purely internal view, and to correct the parochialism engendered by the contingencies of his overspecific nature and circumstances. But it is not merely corrective. It claims a position of dominance, as the only complete conception of how things really are. This dominance is not imposed from outside, but derives from the intrinsic appeal of impersonality to individual reflection. Life seems absurd because it seems absurd to oneself, taking up a point of view that is both natural and appealing.

The second example to consider is the problem of free will. This problem arises initially in the form of a threat to free agency from the hypothesis that actions are determined by antecedent circumstances. There have been many attempts to analyze agency in terms compatible with determinism - by reference to intentions, motives, second-order volitions, capacities, absence of obstacles or coercion. Real advances have been made in specifying necessary conditions of agency, but the possibility that these conditions are themselves determined seems still to present a threat to some element of the ordinary concept of action. They may be necessary, but they do not seem sufficient.

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1 See chapter 2 above.

The next step, however, is the discovery that free agency is not implied by the absence of determinism, even though it appears to be threatened by the presence of determinism. Uncaused acts are no more attributable to the agent than those caused by antecedent circumstances. One is therefore led to wonder what further factor, in addition to the absence of determinism, is required for free agency, and whether this further factor might not be sufficient for freedom by itself. The most difficult problem of free will is saying what the problem is, which seems to survive every attempt to specify sufficient conditions for free action.

The recent attempts to analyze action in terms of agent causation rather than event causation is instructive because it reveals the true source of discomfort with determinism. The problem is that when one views an action as an event causally connected with other events, there is no room in the picture for someone’s doing it. But it turns out that there is no room for someone’s doing it if it is an event causally unconnected with other events, either. Hence some philosophers have tried to capture this aspect by making an agent, rather than an event, the cause. I do not find the concept of agent causation intelligible, but I think I understand its motivation. While its positive content is obscure, its negative implications are clear. It removes action from the causal sequence of events by denying that it is caused by antecedent circumstances; and by substituting an agent as the cause, it avoids the alternative that action is something that just happens. It is a doomed attempt to capture the doing of the action in a new kind of causation.

But the problem is not that the idea of agency clashes with this or that particular conception of what happens in action, viewed externally as a type of event. It is not predictability that creates the problem, for I make many choices and do many things that are completely predictable. It is just that when I pick the shiny apple instead of the rotten one, it is my doing – and there is no room for this in an external account of the event, deterministic or not. The real problem stems from a clash between the view of action from inside and any view of it from outside. Any external view of an act as something that happens, with or without causal antecedents, seems to omit the doing of it.

Even if an action is described in terms of motives, reasons, abilities, absence of impediments or coercion, this does not capture the agent’s own idea of himself as its source. His actions appear to him different from other things that happen in the world, but not merely a different kind of happening, with different causes or none at all. They seem in some indescribable way not to happen at all (unless they are quite out of his control), though things happen when he does them. And if he sees others as agents too, their actions will seem to have the same quality. The tendency to express this conception of agency in terms of freedom from antecedent causes is a mistake, but an understandable one. When the act is viewed under the aspect of determination by antecedents, its status as an event becomes prominent. But as appears upon further investigation, no account of it as an event is satisfactory from the internal viewpoint of the agent doing it.

The connexion of this problem with moral responsibility is that when we view actions, our own or others', merely as part of the general course of events, it seems impossible to attribute them to individuals in a way that makes sense of the attitudes we take toward someone we regard as the source of an action. Certain attitudes toward the agent, rather than just about him, lose their footing. If an individual is destructive enough we may think it would be better if he did not exist; but if he is just a disastrous part of the world, blame directed at him or guilt he directs at himself make no sense, however causally or indeterministically complex his behavior and motives are.

The true nature of the third problem I want to mention – that of personal identity – is also hidden in many discussions. The problem is usually presented as a search for the conditions that must obtain if two experiential episodes separated in time are to belong to a single person. Various types of continuity and similarity – physical, mental, causal, emotional – have been considered and they all seem to leave an aspect of personal identity unaccounted for. Given that any proposed set of condi-

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4 These points are discussed more fully in chapter 3 above.
tions is met, there still seems to be a further question as to whether the same subject or self is preserved under these conditions. This further question can be raised by imagining that you have the first of two experiences and asking about the other (which bears the candidate relation to it), ‘Yes, but will it be mine?’ As with free will, the real problem seems to be to identify the problem that always remains no matter how ingenious a solution has been proposed.

It may seem that this further question involves the assumption of a metaphysical ego which preserves personal identity. But this would be a mistake, for the ego, if it is a continuing individual with its own identity over time, would be just one more thing about which the same problem could be raised (will that ego still be me?). If on the other hand its only identity over time is that of still being me, then it cannot be the individual whose persistence preserves personal identity. For its identity would then simply consist in the fact that experiences had by it were all mine; and that cannot explain what makes them all mine.

The problem seems unreal when persons are viewed as beings in the world, whether physical or mental. They persist and change through time, and those are the terms in which they must be described. But as with the problem of free will, the persistent dissatisfaction with candidate analyses of this form derives from a submerged internal aspect of the problem which is left untouched by all external treatments. From the point of view of the person himself, the question of his identity or nonidentity with someone undergoing some experience in the future appears to have a content that cannot be exhausted by any account in terms of memory, similarity of character, or physical continuity. Such analyses are never sufficient, and from this point of view they may appear not even to supply necessary conditions for identity.

When someone poses inwardly the question whether a past or future experience was or will be his, he has the sensation of picking out something whose identity over time is well defined, just by concentrating on his present experience and specifying the temporal extension of its subject. The concept of the self is a psychological one, and it is characteristic of such concepts to give rise to the philosophical idea that their subjective essence, expressed most clearly in first-person applications, is detachable from more objective accompaniments and even to a considerable extent from necessary connexion with other psychological phenomena. (Another example: the conviction that it is a perfectly well-defined but in principle unanswerable question whether sugar tastes like this to other people.) This may be an illusion. It may have no sense to speak of ‘the same self as this one’ in complete detachment from all external conditions. But it is still the internal idea of the self that gives rise to the problem of personal identity. Any attempt to conceive persons completely as a kind of thing in the world persisting through time will come up against this obstacle. The self that appears to the subject seems to disappear under external analysis.

My fourth example is the mind–body problem. A particularly difficult aspect of that problem comes from the subjective character of experience. So long as mental states are looked at objectively, in their causal relations to stimuli and behavior, no special issues arise which do not arise about the physical analysis of other natural phenomena. Even problems of intentionality may seem to be soluble if one puts aside their subjective aspect, for then one may be able to describe certain kinds of computers as intentional systems. What seems impossible is to include in a physical conception of the world the facts about what mental states are like for the creature having them. The creature and his states seem to belong to a world that can be viewed impersonally and externally. Yet subjective aspects of the mental can be apprehended only from the point of view of the creature itself (perhaps taken up by someone else), whereas what is physical is simply there, and can be externally apprehended from more than one point of view. Is there any way of including mental phenomena in the world as well, as part of what is simply there?

Here too the idea of impersonally comprehensible reality asserts its claim to dominance. We are not faced only with the problem of the relation between mind and body, or the inclusion of the mental in the physical world. The broader issue between personal and impersonal, or subjective and objective, arises also for a dualist theory of mind. The question of how one can include in the objective world a mental substance having subjective properties is as acute as the question how a physical substance can have subjective properties.

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6 See chapter 12 above.
The physical is an ideal representative for the objective in general; therefore much obscurity has been shed on the problem by faulty analogies between the mental-physical relation and relations between the physical and other objective aspects of reality. As determinism is a substitute for externality or objectivity in posing the problem of free will, so the physical is a substitute for objectivity in posing the mind-body problem. All the disputes over causal role, theoretical identification, and functional realization, while of interest in themselves, fail to give expression to the central issue that makes the mind-body problem so hard. And as with free will and personal identity, the internal element remains, even if ignored, as the true source of persistent dissatisfaction with all physical or other external theories of the mind. At the same time, the idea that persons (along with everything about them) must be parts of objective reality continues to exert its powerful appeal. Objectivity is naturally linked with reality; it is easy to feel that anything has to be located in the objective world in order to qualify as real, and that it must have as its real nature some characteristic which, whether physical or not, can be regarded impersonally and externally.

The final example I want to discuss comes from ethics, and concerns the difference between consequentialist and more agent-centered views of right and wrong. A familiar type of objection to utilitarianism and other consequentialist views charges them with unjustifiably making questions about what to do subordinate to questions about what would be best overall. Such criticisms assert that an ethical theory should leave some room for each individual to pursue his own life without having to consider at every point how he is serving more comprehensive goals; or else they urge the need for certain restrictions or requirements on action that are not justified by their contribution to the general good. In other words, both what is permitted and what is required of a person can sometimes deviate from what would be best. I group these two rather different exceptions to consequentialism together because, while they can also be opposed to each other, they deviate from the consequentialist viewpoint in the same direction. This is clear in the case of permission to pursue one’s own life, less clear in the case of general requirements or restrictions on action, whatever the goal.

Utilitarianism, or any other purely consequentialist view, is very demanding. It requires you to justify the pursuit of your own personal life and interests only as components of the general good, and does not permit reasons for action to end with a reference to what you want or are devoted to. Those considerations are completely encompassed by an impersonal point of view which accords you no special position, unless it can be impersonally justified. Resistance comes, naturally enough, from the point of view of the individual, who may be willing to accord impersonal considerations some weight, but who is also powerfully motivated by the independent claims of his own life—of the view from where he is in the world. But this does not remain a conflict between impersonal values and mere individual interest, because the resistance can be generalized. Someone who regards consequentialist requirements as unacceptable because of their claim to dominance over his own point of view will naturally extend this objection to others. He will gravitate toward a general exception to consequentialism in favor of the personal viewpoint, and this will constitute an alternative ethic, rather than merely a resistance to ethics. Such an ethic need be no less universal than utilitarianism, but it will be subjective in a way that consequentialist positions are not. Each person will be permitted, within limits, to concentrate on the pursuit of his life, and there will not be a single, objectively describable end by reference to which everyone’s actions must be justified.

In this sense the deontological requirements that resist a consequentialist account are also subjective. Constraints against murder, lying, betrayal, assault, or coercion, though intended to apply universally, oppose the agent’s specific relations to other people to the conception of a single end that everyone should exclusively promote. They are agent-centered, but in a different way. The real source of these restrictions, unlike that of the agent-centered permissions, is not the agent but the potential victim whose rights are protected. But the wrongness of violating those rights implies a constraint on each person against violating them, rather than a requirement that he try to minimize their overall violation (even if this means committing a few himself).7 Deontological requirements are agent-centered because they instruct each person to determine the rightness or

7 See chapter 5 above.
wrongness of his acts solely from the point of view of his position in the world and his direct relation to others. The very idea that the basic moral concepts are right and wrong rather than good and bad entails that the character of one's actions rather than the world as a whole must be one's primary concern.  

If there is a difference in point of view between the two types of exception to consequentialism, it is that the first derives simply from the standpoint of the individual agent, whereas the second emerges when he considers in a certain way his own point of view together with those of the persons to whom he is directly related in action. Deontological constraints are intermediate between purely individual motives and completely impersonal values.

There are familiar disputes about whether utilitarianism really does have the consequences attributed to it by anti-consequentialist critics - aspects of the wider dispute between radical and moderate interpretations of utilitarianism. Likewise, there are disputes about the formulation of alternative views: how absolutist they are, whether they should be stated in terms of individual rights, or liberty, or self-realization, or interpersonal commitment. But the essence of the conflict is clearer than the exact nature of the alternatives. The issue is how the individual position of the agent should enter into a decision about what he should or may do.

Obviously it cannot fail to enter in certain ways. Even on a consequentialist view, what one should do will depend on what one is in a position to do, and on the relative desirability of the possible outcomes. Nevertheless, the consequentialist judgment that one should do something is essentially the judgment that it would be best if one did it - that it ought to happen. The right thing to do is to turn oneself as far as possible into an instrument for the realization of what is best sub specie aeternitatis.

Agent-centered views, on the other hand, determine what is right, wrong, and permissible partly at least on the basis of the individual's life, his role in the world, and his relation with others. Agent-centered morality gives primacy to the question of what to do, a question asked by the individual agent, and does not assume that the only way to answer it is to say what it would be best if he did, sub specie aeternitatis. It may also hold that the place for considerations of what would be best, in a decision about what to do, is not obvious and must be established by analysis of agent-centered choice and its grounds.

The real issue, therefore, is the relative priority, in regard to action, of two ways of looking at the world. On the one hand there is the position that one's decisions should be tested ultimately from an external point of view, to which one appears as just one person among others. The question then becomes, 'What would be best? Which of the acts within my power would do the most good, considering matters from out here, impersonally?' This point of view claims priority by virtue of greater comprehensiveness. The agent's situation is supposedly given its due in a larger perspective.

On the other hand there is the position that since an agent lives his life from where he is, even if he manages to achieve an impersonal view of his situation, whatever insights result from this detachment need to be made part of a personal view before they can influence decision and action. The pursuit of what seems impersonally best may be an important aspect of individual life, but its place in that life must be determined from a personal standpoint, because life is always the life of a particular person, and cannot be lived sub specie aeternitatis.

The opposition looks like a stalemate because each of the points of view claims dominance over the other, by virtue of inclusion. The impersonal standpoint takes in a world that includes the individual and his personal views. The personal

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8 A moral theory of this type is developed by Charles Fried in Right and Wrong (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978). An intermediate view has been put forward by Samuel Scheffler, in 'Agents and Outcomes' (Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 1977): he defends agent-centered permissions but rejects agent-centered requirements as having no intelligible basis.

9 In The Possibility of Altruism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970) I defended a version of this position.

10 This position is persuasively presented by Bernard Williams in 'A Critique of Utilitarianism', in J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams, Utilitarianism For and Against (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973). See also 'Persons, Character, and Morality', in The Identities of Persons ed. Amelie Rorty, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), where he presses the claims not only of the view from within one's own life but of the view from the present time. This tendency of a subjective viewpoint to shrink into the present moment has been noted by Derek Parfit in his skeptical work on prudence (not yet published).
standpoint, on the other hand, regards the deliverances of impersonal reflection as only a part of any individual's total view of the world.

This list of problems could be extended. Obviously the difficulty of reconciling subjective and objective points of view arises with regard to space and time, death, and throughout the theory of knowledge. Perhaps the problem takes its purest form in a sense of incredulity that one should be anyone in particular, a specific individual of a particular species existing at a particular time and place in the universe. There is a pattern in these questions which justifies us in locating a common philosophical difficulty behind all of them, concealed by their diversity, and sometimes ignored in their treatment with unfortunate results. In what follows I shall discuss some strategies for dealing with the problem. But first let me discuss the parallels among its different forms.

Although I shall speak of the subjective viewpoint and the objective viewpoint, this is just shorthand, for there are not two such viewpoints, nor even two such categories into which more particular viewpoints can be placed. Instead, there is a polarity. At one end is the point of view of a particular individual, having a specific constitution, situation, and relation to the rest of the world. From here the direction of movement toward greater objectivity involves, first, abstraction from the individual's specific spatial, temporal, and personal position in the world, then from the features that distinguish him from other humans, then gradually from the forms of perception and action characteristic of humans, and away from the narrow range of a human scale in space, time, and quantity, toward a conception of the world which as far as possible is not the view from anywhere within it. There is probably no end-point to this process, but its aim is to regard the world as centerless, with the viewer as just one of its contents.

The distinction between subjective and objective is relative. A general human point of view is more objective than the view from where you happen to be, but less objective than the viewpoint of physical science. The opposition between subjective and objective can arise at any place on the spectrum where one point of view claims dominance over another, more subjective one, and that claim is resisted. In the dispute over consequentialism in ethics, it appears in the clash between internal and external views of human life, both fully admitting the importance of human concerns and ends. In the mind–body problem, it appears in the clash between an internal human view of human beings and the external view of physical theory. In the problem of personal identity, it appears in the clash between the point of view of a particular individual toward his own past and future and the view that others may take of him as a continuing conscious being, characterized by bodily and psychological continuities.

Another point I wish to emphasize is this. What is more subjective is not necessarily more private. In general it is intersubjectively available. I assume that the subjective ideas of experience, of action, and of the self are in some sense public or common property. That is why the problems of mind and body, free will, and personal identity are not just problems about one's own case.

I cannot here take up Wittgenstein's arguments about the publicity of rules and therefore of concepts.\textsuperscript{11} I believe he is right, and that even our most subjective phenomenological concepts are public in a sense. But they are public in a very different way from that in which concepts used to describe the physical world are public. The coordination of the points of view of different individuals toward their own experiences is totally different from the coordination of their points of view toward the external world. Nothing in the former case corresponds to different individuals sharing a point of view toward the same object. Wittgenstein's position on sensations is that they just are appearances, so their properties are not the properties of objects which appear to whoever has them, and similarity in their properties is not similarity in the properties of such objects. Rather it is similarity in appearances. That is a similarity between irreducibly subjective phenomena. Only if we acknowledge their subjectivity – the fact that each is essentially an appearance to someone – can we understand the special way in which sensations are publicly comparable and not private. The private object or sense datum view is an instance of the false objectification of what is essentially subjective.

Since a kind of intersubjective agreement characterizes even what is most subjective, the transition to a more objective viewpoint is not accomplished merely through intersubjective agreement. Nor does it proceed by an increase of imaginative scope that provides access to many subjective points of view other than one's own. Its essential character, in all the examples cited, is externality or detachment. The attempt is made to view the world not from a place within it, or from the vantage point of a special type of life and awareness, but from nowhere in particular and no form of life in particular at all. The object is to discount for the features of our pre-reflective outlook that make things appear to us as they do, and thereby to reach an understanding of things as they really are. We flee the subjective under the pressure of an assumption that everything must be something not to any point of view, but in itself. To grasp this by detaching more and more from our own point of view is the unreachable ideal at which the pursuit of objectivity aims.

Some version of this polarity can be found in relation to most subject matter - ethical, epistemological, metaphysical. The relative subjectivity or objectivity of different appearances is a matter of degree, but the same pressures toward a more external viewpoint are to be found everywhere. It is recognized that one's own point of view can be distorted as a result of contingencies of one's makeup or situation. To compensate for these distortions it is necessary either to reduce dependence on those forms of perception or judgment in which they are most marked, or to analyze the mechanisms of distortion and discount for them explicitly. The subjective comes to be defined by contrast with this development of objectivity.

Problems arise because the same individual is the occupant of both viewpoints. In trying to understand and discount for the distorting influences of his specific nature he must rely on certain aspects of his nature which he deems less prone to such influence. He examines himself and his interactions with the world, using a specially selected part of himself for the purpose. That part may subsequently be scrutinized in turn, and there may be no end to the process. But obviously the selection of trustworthy subparts presents a problem.

The selection of what to rely on is based partly on the idea that the less an appearance depends on contingencies of this particular self, the more it is capable of being arrived at from a variety of points of view. If there is a way things really are, which explains their diverse appearances to differently constituted and situated observers, then it is most accurately apprehended by methods not specific to particular types of observers. That is why scientific measurement interposes between us and the world instruments whose interactions with the world are of a kind that could be detected by a creature not sharing the human senses. Objectivity requires not only a departure from one's individual viewpoint, but also, so far as possible, departure from a specifically human or even mammalian viewpoint. The idea is that if one can still maintain some view when one relies less and less on what is specific to one's position or form, it will be truer to reality. The respects in which the results of various viewpoints are incompatible with each other represent distortions of the way matters really are. And if there is such a thing as the correct view, it is certainly not going to be the unedited view from wherever one happens to be in the world. It must be a view that includes oneself, with all one's contingencies of constitution and circumstance, among the things viewed, without according it any special centrality. And it must accord the same detached treatment to the type of which one is an instance. The true view of things can no more be the way they naturally appear to human beings than the way they look from here.

The pursuit of objectivity therefore involves a transcendence of the self, in two ways: a transcendence of particularity and a transcendence of one's type. It must be distinguished from a different kind of transcendence by which one enters imaginatively into other subjective points of view, and tries to see how things appear from other specific standpoints. Objective transcendence aims at a representation of what is external to each specific point of view: what is there or what is of value in itself, rather than for anyone. Though it employs whatever point of view is available as the representational vehicle - humans typically use visual diagrams and notation in thinking about physics - the aim is to represent how things are, not for anyone or any type of being. And the enterprise assumes that what is represented is detachable from the mode of representation, so that the same laws of physics could be represented by creatures sharing none of our sensory modalities.
While there are problems about how to achieve this kind of transcendence, it is certainly one of the important ways of advancing our understanding. We cannot help wanting to extend it farther and farther, and to bring more and more of life and the world within its range. But the consistent pursuit of greater objectivity runs into trouble, and gives rise to the philosophical problems I have described, when it is turned back on the self, as it must be to pursue its comprehensive ambitions.

The trouble occurs when the objective view encounters something, revealed subjectively, that it cannot accommodate. Its claims to comprehensiveness will then be threatened. The indigestible lump may be either a fact or a value. The problems of personal identity and mind–body arise because certain subjectively apparent facts about the self seem to vanish as one ascends to a more objective standpoint. The problems about consequentialism and the meaning of life arise from a corresponding disappearance of certain personal values with the ascent to a more and more detached and impersonal point of view. The problem of free will combines both effects.

In either case it appears that something must give way, for two natural and necessary ways of thinking lead to a collision and cannot without adjustment be accommodated in a single view of how things are. But even allowing for adjustments, the options seem to be limited and unpalatable. If one wishes to insist that everything real must be brought under an objective description, there seem to be three courses available with respect to any recalcitrant subjective aspect: reduction, elimination, and annexation.

First, reduction: one may try to save the appearances as much as possible, by accommodating them under an objective interpretation. Thus one might offer a consequentialist account of rights or special obligations or the allowable forms of self-interest. Or one might analyze experience in terms of behavioral criteria, or agency in terms of certain kinds of causes, or personal identity in terms of physical or mental continuity.

Secondly, elimination: if no reduction seems plausible one may dismiss the deliverance of a subjective viewpoint as an illusion, perhaps offering an explanation of how it arises. For example, one might say there is no such thing as the subjective character of experience, that experiences can be adequately characterized by their causal roles and do not possess phenomenological properties in addition. And one might dismiss deontological requirements and other nonconsequentialist ethical intuitions as superstitious, selfish, or rule-bound.

Thirdly, annexation: if one fails to reduce the subjective to familiar objective terms, and is unwilling to deny its reality outright, one may invent a new element of objective reality especially for the purpose of including this recalcitrant element: the will, the ego, the soul, or perhaps the command of God. Such metaphysical inventions, however, can seem to serve the purpose for which they were designed only because their obscurity prevents it from being obvious that the same problems of subjectivity will arise with regard to them, if they really belong to objective reality. It is no good trying to amplify our conception of the objective world to include whatever is revealed subjectively, for the problem is not that something has been left out. An objective conception of space and time cannot be faulted for leaving out the identification of the here and now. Any conception that included it would not be objective, and any objective realization would fail to capture it. This applies also to the prediction that mental phenomena will eventually come to be counted as physical, once we understand them systematically – even if they are not reduced to terms already admitted as physical. We cannot solve these problems by simply annexing to the objective (or even physical) world everything that is not already in it.

The only alternative to these unsatisfactory moves is to resist the voracity of the objective appetite, and stop assuming that understanding of the world and our position in it can always be advanced by detaching from that position and subsuming whatever appears from there under a single more comprehensive conception. Perhaps the best and truest view is not obtained by transcending oneself as far as possible. Perhaps reality should not be identified with objective reality. The problem is to explain why objectivity is inadequate as a comprehensive ideal of understanding, without faulting it for not including subjective

elements it could not possibly include. There is always room for improvement in our objective understanding of things, naturally, but the proposal I am considering is not that the objective picture is incomplete, but rather that it is in essence only partial.

This proposal is harder to accept than it may seem, for it implies that there is no single way things are in themselves. Even if one admits to the world facts or values involving a particular point of view, it is tempting to assume that something’s being so from a particular point of view must consist in something else’s being the case from no point of view. (The something else may of course involve some objective relations.) Those who believe there are no objective values may try to analyze the existence of subjective values in terms of objective facts about the individuals for whom they are values. Others have analyzed apparently subjective values in terms of objective ones.13 And the philosophy of mind is full of refusals to admit that there may be no objective fact that is what really obtains when something looks red to someone.

The idealist tradition, including contemporary phenomenology, has of course admitted subjective points of view as basic, and has gone to the opposite length of denying an irreducible objective reality. I have concentrated on the tendency to resolve the conflict by objectifying everything because it has dominated recent analytic philosophy in spite of Wittgenstein. But I find the idealist solution unacceptable for the same reason: objective reality cannot be analyzed or shut out of existence any more than subjective reality can. Even if not everything is something from no point of view, some things are.

The deep source of both idealism and its objectifying opposite is the same: a conviction that a single world cannot contain both irreducible points of view and irreducible objective reality—that one of them must be what there really is and the other somehow reducible to or dependent on it. This is a very powerful idea. To deny it is in a sense to deny that there is a single world.

We must admit that the move toward objectivity reveals what things are like in themselves as opposed to how they appear; not just how they appear to one, relatively austere point of view as opposed to others. Therefore when the objective gaze is turned on human beings and other experiencing creatures, who are undeniably parts of the world, it can reveal only what they are like in themselves. And if the way things are for these subjects is not part of the way things are in themselves, an objective account, whatever it shows, will omit something. So reality is not just objective reality, and the pursuit of objectivity is not an equally effective method of reaching the truth about everything.

It is conceivable that everything has some objective properties. I do not know whether it makes sense to attribute physical and phenomenological properties to the same thing, but perhaps even experiences are events that can be in part described objectively, perhaps physically. But the properties that make them experiences exist only from the point of view of the types of beings who have them.

Since we are not the only creatures in the universe, a general conception of reality would require a general conception of experience which admitted our own subjective viewpoint as a special case. This is completely beyond us and will probably remain so for as long as human beings continue to exist.

It makes objectivity attractive by comparison. We can pursue a unified if very etiolated conception of reality by detaching progressively from our own point of view. We just have to keep in mind what we are leaving behind, and not be fooled into thinking we have made it disappear. This is particularly important in connexion with philosophical problems about free will, personal identity, agent-centered morality, or mind and body, which cannot be dealt with in detachment from the subjective point of view on which they depend for their existence.

The power of the impulse to transcend oneself and one’s species is so great, and its rewards so substantial, that it is not likely to be seriously baffled by the admission that objectivity has its limits. While I am arguing for a form of romanticism, I am not an extremist. The task of accepting the polarity without allowing either of its terms to swallow the other should be a creative one. It is the aim of eventual unification that I think is misplaced, both in our thoughts about how to live and in our conception of what there is. The coexistence of conflicting points of view, varying in detachment from the contingent self, is not just a practically necessary illusion but an irreducible fact of life.

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