

# Foreword

The existence of significant differences between human cultures has been known since antiquity and has long been the occasion for philosophical reflection. Sceptics, for instance, have almost traditionally pointed to cultural divergence in matters of morality in order to challenge the assumption that such matters can be discussed objectively. On similar grounds they have cast doubt on the pretensions of any particular religion to be the ‘true’ one. It is a commonplace that much we find natural and necessary to our way of thinking proves on examination to be no more than a local custom. But if cross-cultural comparisons could lead to scepticism they seemed also to lead back from scepticism to be a true science of human nature. For the more striking the points of divergence within a range of cultures the more striking is any feature which is universally to be found among them.

Reflections such as these still find some place in recent philosophical discussions, including those which comprise the present volume. But recent discussions have taken new turnings. In the first place, they have tended to reflect the considerable growth of a variety of culture studies as well as the greater sophistication which results from pursuing them in a professional way. Classics of social anthropology well illustrate, for example, how easy it is for a researcher to project the values and assumptions of his own society on to that which he claims to be observing. The problem of ‘subjectivity’ is now acknowledged as a professional hazard for anyone whose business it is to try to understand cultures other than his own. At a philosophical level it can be asked what kind of understanding that would be and whether the kind of understanding sought can be achieved.

These are among the matters discussed in the first group of papers included in this volume. Placed between this group and a third group on ethics is a group of papers concerned with an alleged way of imparting objectivity from one of the natural sciences into culture studies and into ethics. But, if that is how advocates of sociobiology see their enterprise, their critics have not been slow to question its objectivity.

Several contributors to this volume have sought to characterize the natural sciences as possessing a kind of objectivity not attainable in ethics or in cultural and social studies. This is a view partly defended by Bernard Williams. Renford Bambrough, by contrast, seeks to defend a strong form of moral objectivism.

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The final two papers are both, as their titles indicate, partly sociological in approach. They are both, moreover, concerned with the objectivity of natural science. David Bloor suggests that this objectivity consists in effect in the prevalence of certain social institutions. These encouraged the view that nature was remote and could only be understood by painstaking experiment, the view later advanced in positivism. Dr Bloor's analysis might appear to be implicitly critical of a positivist theory of objectivity. But the terms of his analysis do not seem to leave him room to talk of a correct theory as opposed to one which seems right to us because it is part of our cultural heritage. If relativism seems endemic to Dr Bloor's approach, however, it presents itself to Ernest Gellner as a problem to be overcome. Professor Gellner concedes that there really is a difficulty in comparing radically diverse visions of reality such as the 'positivistic' or the 'Hegelian' so as to assess 'their relative cognitive purchasing power'. None the less Gellner seeks to provide a defence of positivism, albeit an unorthodox one.

I have presented some of these contributions as if they might have been replies to one another. But they were not so. Some of the later lectures were able to take account of what had been said earlier. But this has only marginally affected what is written here. Moreover the lectures were not presented in the order in which they are printed. They were written as self-standing pieces and can be read as such. None the less there are many connections—more perhaps than can be represented by any single ordering of them.

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