

3. Two Forms of Epistemology

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The twofold division of epistemologies I propose will cut across some familiar categories and produce some unlikely bed fellows.

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On the one side stands what I shall call the *objectifying epistemologies*. These are epistemologies which take the form of a theory of cognition, the cognizing subject, and properly functioning cognitive activity. In this group I place contemporary naturalized epistemology (the naturalism so baptized by Quine), together with various metaphysical and theological epistemologies both past and present.



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Are there also non-objectifying epistemologies? We are asking here about two different takes on just what epistemology is, what our task is in that part of philosophy. Non-objectifying: that must mean doing something other than writing a theory which describes what cognition is like, how it works, what the beings engaged in it must be like, what capacities they have, and so forth. But are there any examples of any such alternative to the theory-writing approach? I'll suggest that we find examples in the American Pragmatist tradition. There we find of course some special features as well, and I will draw attention particularly to aspects of voluntarism found there. "Voluntarism," like all the "ism" words, tends to mislead because of the huge burden of accrued connotations and secondary meanings; I will try to spell out the few, perhaps relatively minor, aspects of voluntarism at issue here.



4. 'Objectifying' Epistemology

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The common impression of philosophy is that it is a theory-writing activity. If I just ask you to give us examples of epistemologies, you are most likely to think of such theories, to think of what I am calling 'objectifying' epistemologies. In recent jargon, there are externalism, internalism, reliabilism; in somewhat less recent terms, inductivism and foundationalism, and so forth. From the Middle Ages we remember the doctrine that knowledge is possible because of the *adequatio mentis ad rem*. Starting with Descartes' *deus ex machina*, modern philosophers constructed modern variants on this theme of what guarantees the accuracy of our mental representations with respect to their

extra-mental objects. Once some separation set in between philosophy and scientific psychology, Frege was right to decry the continuing psychologism in epistemology, and Husserl right to be converted by Frege's critique. But as Philip Kitcher has quite correctly brought to light, twentieth-century analytic philosophy largely turned against this Fregean insight in epistemology after having honored it so thoroughly in philosophy of logic, mathematics, and language. This psychologism tends now also to take a rather mechanistic form, in its alliances with cognitive science. Rudolf Carnap put his finger on the Zeitgeist when he declared the central problem of epistemology to be the design of a robot that can simulate our every intellectual capacity. For that, in his—and many of our contemporaries'—view, was how alone we can achieve self-understanding.

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This theory-writing project has an elementary problem to face. If we are to write a theory about our cognitive activities, and their adequacy, in this world, we'll have to draw on the very theory which encapsulates our present view of the world. How can the result be a view which allows, which does not simply rule out as impossible, any way of coming to know that we do not fit our present view of the world?



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Suppose for example that we construct our theory of knowledge based on a science which describes us as animals born with instincts and drives that shape response to experience, with all experiential access circumscribed by these animals' physiology. Then that theory of cognition cannot have as a theorem that under certain realizable conditions we will come to know that we are not thus. Indeed, it will have to imply that if we were to have a conceptual revolution taking us out of that current scientific view, that would be an example of cognitive dysfunction, of failure, of error, and fall under the heading of how error is to be explained.

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I chose as example one of which perhaps many would say: well, that is right, for this basic view of the world is true. Fine, but of course that is what every generation says of its most fundamental beliefs. The problem, that no such epistemology can classify conceptual revolutions at that level as anything but error and failure, is a general feature. It affects in just the same way an epistemology based on a medieval science, which can only classify as error any intellectual development that leads to a view of cognition as completely conditioned by our physiology. To put it quite generally: any epistemology of this form must imply that I cannot successfully come to have an accurate opinion to the effect that I am something not captured by this description of what I am.

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I ask you: could I rationally become someone who takes our current theories of how we function in the world to be radically mistaken? Answer this on the basis of what we are according to that current view, and the answer may indeed very well be Yes. But it will come with the corollary that this change would be just one of the many ways in which I can fall into error, to be explained on the basis of our limits, shortcomings, and imperfections. The sorts of change described as conceptual revolution will take their place in the category of serious error to be avoided, with prescriptions for how to avoid them. These are the errors of those who don't use Induction, won't accept falsification by the evidence, refuse to infer to the best explanation science affords, let their bodies deteriorate in way that obstructs intellectual proper functioning, and so forth. A few good lessons in the Scientific Method or the Rules of Right Thinking will be in order.

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Not everyone will see this as a shortcoming. Writers on naturalism are well aware of what I have

pointed out here, and willing to accept this feature as something to stand by: to rest one's epistemology on the currently accepted scientific world-picture they take to be what it is to be rational, let alone scientific or intellectually respectable. Well, that is really the only thing to do, if you think that epistemology must be cognitive science—if you take it that the project of epistemology is to write a theory of cognition.



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But this implies that at every historical change the current such epistemology will classify future conceptual revolutions under the heading of pathology—and also that no such epistemology will survive those revolutions if they occur. *In other words, this sort of epistemology gives us no view of knowledge which is invariant under such transformations.*

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I submit that then we will be able to see conceptual and scientific revolutions only as the "correct" ones that led us toward our current science and the "errors" that might lead us or might have led us away from that accepted truth. I submit that the epistemological problem of radical conversion, or if you like, conceptual revolution, is an unsolvable problem for the 'objectifying' epistemologies.

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Again, not everyone will see this as a shortcoming. I will not take this bull by the horns. In order to express my discontent with this sort of impasse, I can first of all refer to our *loci classici*, Feyerabend's *Against Method* and Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. But secondly, I'll do what I think is most effective in such a philosophical impasse: bring the real alternative into the light of day.




5. Non-objectifying Epistemology: A Reading of William James' "The Will to Believe"

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I am certainly not going to suggest that we can embrace the project of writing a theory of cognition while escaping from our general beliefs about what we and our world are like. We cannot construct a presupposition-less theory, a priori, independent of our current science, theology, or metaphysics, or whatever else we have accepted as knowledge. But neither can we construct a theory based in our current knowledge base, and still make sense of the very idea that we might be in the same position as the pre-Copernican, pre-Galilean, pre-Newtonian, pre-Einsteinian...., that is, capable of correctly attaining, through a conceptual revolution, a true insight radically at odds with that current knowledge base.

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How do we escape from this straightjacket? By rejecting the project of objectifying epistemology. We, imperfect, finite beings thrown into this imperfect, fallen world are engaged in an 'enterprise of knowledge'.  We are engaged in epistemic pursuit, so to speak, pursuit of epistemic goals, of cognitive gain (to coin another phrase), individually and as a community, a culture, a civilization.

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This characteristically voluntarist description of our human epistemic condition faces its own special question. To what extent this pursuit can be successful will certainly depend on what is true about us and about the world in which we live—hence on empirical fact—but what that dependence means



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depends on what counts as "successful." This in turn depends on what exactly that pursuit is, that is,

what is its defining aim, its *telos*. Only if we can answer *what we are after* in this enterprise, can we even begin to determine how much of it hinges on our doing something well or badly and how much on contingent fortune.

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Almost exactly one hundred years ago William James addressed the philosophy clubs of Yale and Brown on precisely this issue. The lecture he presented was his famous essay "The Will to Believe." James proposed that our epistemic enterprise is conducted with two ends in view. The two desires he identified in this role are the desire *to believe truth* and *to avoid error*. It would be easy to read this as itself a case of objectifying, that is, as a factual, descriptive theory of what goes on as we manage and change our opinions. But his discussion is so much in the form I outlined above, and the analogy to practical decision making so strong, that I propose to read it as an example of the non-objectifying approach. William James is not writing a theory of what we or our cognitive processes are like (well, he does quite a bit of that too—let's set that aside). To characterize what he does, think of a text on military strategy, as opposed to a treatise on what actually happens in wars.

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If we tend to the garden of our beliefs and opinions, we will see it flourish and grow, with many more beautiful plants, fewer and fewer weeds. ♦ But this gardening metaphor suggests something more. To increase our flowers, we fertilize and spray; but these treatments are good for the weeds as well. To decrease the weeds, we cut and burn; may even resort to some weed-killer—all of which degrade the environment and affect the flowers too.

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So it goes with our opinion. If all we wanted was to avoid error at all costs, we would cut our opinion down to the bare bone, perhaps end up believing tautologies only. That would drastically lower the information content, and we would not be believing much of the true story about anything. The other extreme is as bad. If believing truths was our only aim, we could just believe everything, and be sure to catch the truths in our net.

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We can't emphasize too much that these two desires introduce tension and conflict. We are not in the god-like position of simply and infallibly choosing for our beliefs all and only what is true. All we can do is pursue these goods, and in this pursuit we cannot jointly maximize informativeness an expected accuracy. The two values so introduced are not simply two desirables; they pull us in opposite directions. They cannot be jointly maximized, each is gotten to some extent at the expense of the other. So the two desires by themselves are an incomplete package, they do not yield a well defined *telos* for opinion. That *telos* should be the search for a properly or well balanced body of opinion, with some equilibrium of information and security. *Notice the third ingredient that has slipped in: the balance, the good*



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proportion, the golden ratio, the measure... *of truth believed as against error avoided*. Now, while truth and error are objective categories, handed to us by nature itself so to speak, this measure of balance is not! How are we to supply it ourselves?


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Isaac Levi speaks here of our individual *risk quotient*. Well, yes, that is an important personal factor, differing from the stout of heart to doubting Thomas and vacillating Hamlet. It is our own, we have a right to it. It is not something objective, in which we can simply follow nature's suit. Suddenly, if that is the clue, the responsibility for a crucial value judgement has landed on us ourselves.

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Once we have admitted this, it is easy to spot other value judgments at work. We certainly do not have a simple desire for information, period. Levi speaks here of desiring relief from agnosticism. Perhaps we sometimes desire such relief, and it may well be the very same desire James identified as the "desire to believe truth." But we do not desire such relief across the board! We are happy enough not to have any opinion on a multitude of topics. Instead we want information about *what concerns us*, what we count as relevant. *That is the fourth ingredient*, so to speak. As we are weighing the value of increasing our information content against the higher risk of falsehood in our beliefs, we'll certainly take into account what that information is about, and what sort of information it is. Otherwise we'd be obsessively reading encyclopedias and dictionaries, *People* magazine and *National Geographic*.

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So James was not exactly right in his identification of aims. We need to relativize, or to recognize sensitivity to context, in these two desires. Part of our judgment here, a very important part, derives from our opinion of what others will want from us. We are part of an information economy, 4 in which certain sorts of information are much more valuable than others. This is, as in Sellars' view, a matter of community. Enfin, the values involved here are quite different from *mere* desires for truthful information and freedom from error. Some are independent of the relative weight of information vs. security. To put it briefly, in terms of analytic philosophy: *neither* the logic of belief and knowledge *nor* the theory of subjective probability can address more than a severely abstracted aspect of our epistemic life.

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Conflict and tension are built into the very enterprise. If one of our main aims is to avoid error, we do have a general rationale for correcting our arithmetic wherever it is in play. But given that we have at the same time another aim, we realize that correcting our arithmetic does not get overriding importance—in fact, if we are pretty sure we stayed within certain error limits, we can often safely go on with our business despite a few such flaws. Fine; perhaps our eyebrows begin to rise a bit when the same reasoning suggests that we could actually under some conditions increase the proportion of truth to error by leaving a few inconsistencies untouched.... Thus,



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near the end of the continuum we see the importance of truth increasing sharply; but still, a continuum it is. However, any measure on this continuum, by which we may balance the two desires and find a point of equilibrium, we will have to supply ourselves. Neither logic nor empirical study will take this element of choice, this value-judgment call, in which we face a live, momentous choice, out of the process.

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The point is general. Once we think about our epistemic life as part of this more general information economy, in which our value judgements play a crucial role—with values in which there is considerable leeway for individual judgement—the very conception of a methodological cookbook, with precise recipes, or other sort of "inductive logic" loses all plausibility. This general point is especially evident on James' view, since the tension between our crucial epistemic goods make for an end in view beset with conflicts and tensions. The value judgement which supplies a measure of balance between our separate desires is up to us, the choice is momentous, and it is unavoidable.

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How does our major problem, the question concerning conversion and conceptual revolution look now, in the light of voluntarist epistemology? Certainly we have obtained some leeway, in that the element of personal decision, values, and volition has entered and received a legitimate place in our

epistemic life. But by itself, this element is no cure-all, and in fact it provides an immediate remedy only for the smaller ills. If I have a conflict between for example seeing a student and reading a colleague's paper, and can find no higher value to decide the matter, I may justly take the responsibility for deciding. The consequent inescapable problem of dirty hands is not so great. Similarly, the voluntarist says, for the decision about when to accept a hypothesis, when to make up one's mind that the evidence has become sufficient.

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Fine, this makes perfect sense in two cases. It makes easy sense when the stakes are low, and the choice not momentous. Secondly, it makes good sense for a hypothesis *which is already a live option for us*, one we understand and already count among the significant alternatives to be taken seriously. But is conversion a case in point? Does either case fit how it is with genuine revolutions in the arts, the sciences, ideology, or the conception of the state or of nationhood?

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Let us admit that we have gained a necessary condition for making sense of such revolutionary developments with the entry of volition and values. There are a number of reasons not to take it as sufficient. Yet we have gained something, for in contrast with the objectifying epistemologies, the introduction of volition and value judgement introduces a paradoxical virtue.

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The Jamesian epistemic agent can be driven into a corner by new experiences and new ideas. An agent pursuing the overriding value of explanatory harmony may find his or her epicycles multiplying inexorably, the weight of



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needed hidden variables increasing, the baroque adjustments in the light of new experience finally unbearable. Similarly, the person who has been proceeding with a definite risk quotient, and definite values for various sorts of information, may find that expectations are more and more frequently disappointed. Continually lowering the risk quotient is a temporary palliative, until thinking has become so hidebound as to suffocate itself with security.

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But the view of ourselves as engaged in such an epistemic pursuit with its governing desires and constraints can remain invariant throughout.