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The "Absolutely" Indefensible Conception of Reality

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Introduction

The Natural Sciences are typically viewed as an area of study that provides objective answers to what the external world is like; answers that are independent of perspective, context, personal or community biases, value commitments and other apparently subjective phenomena. The objectivity in science applies to its methodology, claims and results, which are determined by observation and experimentation. Through observation and experimentation, science provides information about the external or physical world that is, to some degree, accepted as a truth about reality. Scientific statements are therefore considered to be statements of *fact*, where a fact is determined by the way the world is.¹ ‘The way the world is’ is independent of any and all perspective of the world.

Contrasted with scientific statements, are statements of value, which are typically viewed as falling under the separate field of ethics.² Claims that are evaluative in nature are ‘not determined by the way the world is, because value is not to be found in the world.’³ In this respect, value claims are ‘subjective’, where subjective is not what is objective, in the way I have described. *Prima facie*, there seems to be nothing wrong with the view of science outlined above. However, it is when such a view is taken to the extreme that we begin to see problems. By ‘extreme’ I mean adopting a view that science is the *only* standard of determining what is real. Non-cognitivism, and its variants logical positivism, and error theory, although different in some respects, are all examples of philosophical traditions that adopt this *strict* view of objectivity.

1 David McNaughton, *Moral vision: an introduction to ethics*, (Malden: Blackwell, 2008): 17-18. (Hereafter I will cite this book as *Moral Vision*.)

2 Evaluative statements are not restricted to the field of ethics. However, due to the scope and purposes of this project I will primarily use value judgements in the realm of ethics. I will still certainly use examples of ‘values’ that are not ethical, in order to develop my argument.

3 McNaughton, *Moral Vision*, 17.

Strongly adopting a variant of this view, philosopher Bernard Williams argues for a purely ‘scientific’ conception of reality qua objectivity. In doing so, he defends a hard and fast Science/Ethics dichotomy. This paper argues against Williams’s *strict* view of objectivity for the following two key reasons. First, on this view all evaluative (or value) claims, including moral claims, are simply not capable of objective warrant. And second, such characterizations of science problematically *encourages* a hard and fast Science/Ethics and Fact/Value dichotomy. The construction, or reconstruction, of strict dichotomies leaves ethical claims in a similar position to that left by the non-cognitivists: namely, as being unable to state anything ‘objective’. But this is founded on the mistake of attempting to confine ‘objectivity’ to a rather strict definition and a failure to recognize that observation is only one part of science. Interpretation and theory choice play a large part in scientific inquiry and typically require evaluative judgments of a certain kind. Following this line of thought, I conclude that Williams’s conception of reality is simply indefensible.

The ‘Absolute conception of Reality’

Let us begin with the following quote summarizing Williams’s position.

“...The basic idea behind the distinction between the scientific and the ethical, expressed in terms of convergence, is very simple. In a scientific enquiry, there should ideally be convergence on an answer where the best explanation of the convergence involves the idea that the answer represents how things are; in the area of the ethical, at least at a high level of generality, there is no such coherent hope.”⁴

He calls this convergence the *absolute conception of reality*. Williams’s Science/Ethics distinction is therefore developed on this central notion of *convergence*. He maintains that convergence in ‘science’ can and will solve any disagreement about the world, while ‘ethics’ does not have this ability. The idea is that ethical knowledge can and will be lost, outside of its cultural context. For the universalization of ethical concepts leads to the loss of such ethical knowledge due to cultural differences. Any convergence in moral (or ethical) opinion cannot be thought of as ‘primarily world-guided but as

⁴ Williams, “Knowledge, Science, and Convergence,” In *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985): 136; 139.

governed by such cultural and psychological factors as similarity of upbringing and education, and shared interests and concerns.⁵ One can speak the moral truth, but this truth is not objective because it is not absolute. Ethical judgements in this sense, are not objective: they are bound to the social world, and thus they are perspectival. What he means by perspectival is best understood as relative to a culture and their local language. Within a local perspective, there can be ‘true’ and knowable ethical facts. But they falter in telling you something about the world. They fail to ‘converge’. On the same token, values, or ethical values, says Williams, are similar to secondary qualities, on a Lockean view.⁶ Any sort of value is a mere projection onto the world, not a discovery in it. Therefore, Williams maintains that ethical claims are not objective qua absolute.

Essentially, what Williams is suggesting is that, through a determinate method and continued inquiry, science could potentially describe a reality that is entirely non-perspectival: one that explains not only why the absolute conception itself is possible, but also why other perspectives on reality can be explained. Such a conception should therefore, transcend any and all perspective, providing a ‘transparent mode of access to reality.’⁷

An initial response to Williams might be to say that there certainly is disagreement within the realm of science. But Williams does not deny this. His reply would be that, science has the ability to resolve such disagreement through convergence on an answer and this answer will be in ‘the vocabulary of physics, a physics that describes the world in terms of primary qualities alone.’⁸ The scientific method of ‘pure enquiry’ is the setting aside of all ‘externalities or contingent limitations [human fallibilities] on the pursuit of truth...it is not only a matter of overcoming limitations on enquiry...and occasional

5 McNaughton, *Moral Vision*, 86.

⁶ Locke describes secondary qualities as the ability to produce sensations in observers; they are the effect things have on people. Color is perhaps the most well-known example of a secondary quality amongst others, such as taste, smell and sound. Secondary qualities, therefore, are relative to our perceptual capacities and do not provide objective facts about the world.

⁷ McDowell, in his article “Aesthetic Value, Objectivity and the Fabric of the World,” uses the terms, ‘transparent mode of access to reality’, to describe what Williams claims scientific language has the possibility of providing.

⁸ Hilary Putnam, *The collapse of the fact/value dichotomy: and other essays*, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2004): 4.

error...but of overcoming any systematic bias or distortion or partiality in...our representation of the world'⁹

Here is another potential objection: *prima facie*, the absolute conception seems impossible. For example, if one were to describe the rules of the game of soccer in a scientific or atomic (by atomic I mean using the vocabulary of physics) way, how would that give one the concept of scoring a goal? It looks like conceptual understanding of any sort is deemed impossible on this view. Further, it seems as though any description of reality we could achieve, will use human concepts.¹⁰ Transcending any and all perspective seems incoherent, because the description of such 'transcendence' would involve concepts human beings have developed. Williams however, has an answer to these questions, which makes his support for the science/ethics dichotomy harder to refute.

Williams's answer to the first objection lays in the local perspective. So, for example, one could very well describe a soccer game using language that enables a conceptual understanding of what it is to score a goal. He would call this the 'local language'. The relevant sort of truth, Williams thinks, 'is something like right assert ability in the local language game.'¹¹ This enables people to make and assess unscientific claims, such as value claims. Within a local perspective, the shared values and practices of a culture define true value judgements, using thick ethical concepts. Take for instance the thick ethical concept 'cruel'. A culture could share the same evaluative understanding of such a word; therefore, so long as one belongs to 'this social world or other'¹², they can use the word correctly, with the right conceptual understanding of the word. But in doing this, they are not stating something *absolute*.

As for the second objection, that any description of reality will use language from some human conception or another is quite easily cleared by Williams. He can respond as follows:

9 Williams, *Descartes*, 66.

10 John McDowell, "Aesthetic Value, Objectivity, and the Fabric of the World," In *Mind, Value, and Reality*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998): 120. (Hereafter I will cite this work as "Aesthetic value")

11 Hilary Putnam and James Conant, "Ethics and Aesthetics," In *Realism with a Human Face*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992): 166.

12 Williams, "Knowledge, Science, and Convergence," 150.

“...there is no suggestion that we should try to describe a world without ourselves using any concepts, or without using concepts which...human beings can understand...the suggestion is that there are possible descriptions of the world using concepts that are...not peculiarly relative to our experience. [A description] that which would be arrived at, as C.S Pierce put it, if scientific enquiry continued long enough....a ‘final opinion’ not independent of thought in general, but of all that is arbitrary and individual in thought.”¹³

Indeed, not only is this response compelling but it also seems to make Williams’ position stronger. What, then, seems to be the problem with positing an absolute conception of reality when it accounts not only for itself, but also for other representations of reality? The issues that remain, with Williams’ absolute conception, concern more than the possibility of the ‘convergence’ of science. As I argue below, they concern the implication that scientific enquiry provides a ‘transparent mode of access to reality’, which is equally necessary for the plausibility of an absolute conception. Moreover, Williams ignores how the factual could overlap with the ‘ethical.’ He claims that in the realm of ethics, convergence on an answer to provide an absolute conception of reality is impossible. But that is not the point of ethics. Ethics is not claiming to be absolute, neither is it claiming to be a transparent mode of access to reality. Since Williams sees the absolute as objective, it seems as though there is no possibility of objectivity in ethics. However, the very notion of an absolute conception is incoherent. And to associate the absolute with ‘objective’, lands ethical, and other claims of the same nature, into relativism.

The Absolute Conception Fails to Transcend

Williams introduces the idea of a ‘transparent mode of access to reality’ in order to escape the following dilemma that appears in his work¹⁴: that ‘attaining [an absolute conception] is only attaining another point of view...another appearance [perspectival view], in terms of which all appearances [perspectival views] could be explained.’¹⁵ But it strikes me as incoherent – or at least question-begging – to account for particular perspectival ‘projections’ (appearances) as a mere projection, by an absolute conception. The absolute conception is supposed to serve as a framework, out of which all cognitive

13 Williams, *Descartes*, 244.

14 Ibid, 65-66.

15 McDowell, “Aesthetic Value,” 120.

relations with the world are explained. Thus implying a certain transcendence beyond particular points of view. However, Williams claims that the only way to do this is to occupy the very point of view in question, as a third-personal, or completely impersonal, point of view.¹⁶ This requires, as McDowell highlights, detaching ‘subjective properties from objects in the world, eschewing all need for the idea of an object’s really possessing such a property, while retaining the thought that such properties “figure in our experience”, so that we can regard them as projected on to the world from there.’¹⁷ But I think that this describes nothing more than our occupying a ‘third-personal’ stance. How the third-personal is objective *qua* absolute, therefore, is unclear. In an attempt to account for the factoring such ‘projections’ into the absolute conception, Williams makes a jump by equating the *third-personal* point of view, with objective, where objective is the absolute conception.¹⁸ There is no doubt that one can intelligibly associate with a third-personal point of view, but that is only to associate with it from another sentient standpoint ‘whose phenomenological character is sufficiently similar to that of the facts to be understood.’¹⁹

I do not deny that a third-personal point of view can be attained. But it does not follow from this that it is objective, or ‘graspable in a sense that affords any comfort to the absolute conception.’²⁰ Indeed, taking a third-personal point of view is still to occupy the point of view that was meant to be transcended in the first place. Now it looks like the absolute conception fails to explain how different perspectives on reality are possible but recognizable, at the same time, as mere projections. Williams, then, seems unable to resolve this dilemma.

A different account of why the absolute conception is not a transparent mode of access to reality is argued quite well by Putnam. The attack focuses on contradictions within the metaphysical realist position Williams adopts in defining the absolute conception. Most importantly, what Williams’ theory

¹⁶Williams, *Descartes*, 295-96.

¹⁷ McDowell, “Aesthetic Value,” 124.

¹⁸ Ibid, 125.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

requires [is] a correspondence between language and some ‘fixed set of [mind-independent] objects out there,’ and this is unintelligible.²¹ Indeed, Putnam makes a good point here. Williams constantly uses the phrase, ‘that is how things are’, which seems to imply that the world already is a certain way, and through physics we will be able to discover it. This means that, things, all objects in the world, are causally connected to us in some way. However, causal relationships cannot be explained in purely physical terms because they require *explanation*, which is an *intensional (or semantic)* notion.²²

Williams is essentially presupposing that we have a good idea of what an absolute conception would look like in present-day physics, and that present-day physics will (and does) not contain intentional notions. In fact, Putnam argues against intentionality. For a ‘science of the intentional is a ‘we-know-not-what.’²³ But Williams cannot defend this without failing to say that he has no idea what the absolute conception would be like. Nevertheless, he claims that physics gives us a good approximation of what the absolute conception will be. Williams intended for the absolute conception to be able to explain why talk of the intentional (perspectival) is useful. How can he do this, however, without assuming an intentional correspondence theory of truth, which requires a causal connection to beliefs? Indeed, ‘Williams tacitly assumes a correspondence theory of truth when defining the absolute conception, then forgets he did this when he suggests that...semantic notions [such as] the ‘content’ of a sentence [do not] turn out to figure in the absolute conception itself.’²⁴

The Absolutely Indefensible Conception of Reality

The entire notion of objectivity, postulated by Williams, founders on the impossibility of achieving an absolute conception of reality in the first place, let alone providing a transparent mode of access to reality. Let me now explore why these reflections might cast doubt on the idea that scientific

21 Putnam, “Ethics and Aesthetics,” 174.

22 Putnam, in his essay, “Why there isn’t a Ready-Made World,” tackles metaphysical realism, with a focus on how causal and referential relationships cannot be reduced to physical definitions. The notion of cause is undeniably intentional, where in which, salience and relevance play a part in explaining a cause. Therefore, cause is more like ‘explanation’, which is a semantic notion and hence, not physically definable.

23 Putnam, “Ethics and Aesthetics,” 173.

24 Ibid, 174.

inquiry is able to converge on a single answer. Science certainly does provide some answers about the world as it is, but science is ever improving and changing. So scientific claims are subject to modification depending on a number of variables, not least time. Science – and, more importantly scientific methodology – are evolving processes. Substantive views of scientific methodologies still depend on a view of what the world is like. This conception itself depends on the history of science.²⁵ Indeed, single scientific theories have a multitude of reconstructions. It is possible for science to converge on some answers. For example, ‘under certain conditions, the Poisson equation of Newtonian gravitational theory gives an approximately correct description of the gravitational field of body.’²⁶ However, the theoretical aspect of Newtonian mechanics has drastically changed by general relativity, and there is inadequate evidence for the claim that it will not be superseded some other scientific theory.²⁷ There is, then, inadequate evidence to support that science *will* converge on one answer. Given our inaccessibility to objectivity *qua* absoluteness, we cannot, and should not, evaluate the plausibility of claims using anything more than the evidence available to us. In light of these consideration, Williams’ claim about scientific convergence appears implausible.

In order for scientific methods to be abstract, or general enough, to avoid the inevitable modifications or alterations to scientific theories, the notions it appeals to must also be abstract. Epistemic values, such as simplicity and coherence, are the kind of abstract ‘notions’ that science would have to appeal to. And ‘such notions acquire determinate content...only in the context of some specific beliefs.’²⁸ How, then, science could reach an outlook on reality, that is completely independent of such interactions, is unclear. One’s ‘beliefs about which sorts of transactions with the world yield knowledge of it are not prior to, but part of, one’s beliefs about what the world is like. Necessarily so, since the transactions themselves take place in the world.’²⁹ That scientific enquiry can bridge the gap between reality and mere

25 McDowell, “Aesthetic Value,” 126.

26 Putnam, “Ethics and Aesthetics,” 171.

27 Ibid.

28 McDowell, “Aesthetic Value,” 126.

29 Ibid.

projections through scientific comparison, is indeed a farfetched notion: it ignores how our beliefs about the world are constituents of *our beliefs about the world*.

Here is a different way of making the point made by McDowell and Putnam. Supporting their objection, Williams account seems like it is open to the following charge of incoherence. On the one hand, he holds that absolute truth is independent of perspective, and on the other hand, he holds that moral truth depends only on relevance to cultural facts, that is, only on perspective. But it seems more natural to say that if the latter claim is true, it is only because cultural facts themselves belong to an absolute conception of the world. So his claim, that there can non-absolute moral truth, seems itself to depend on the moral truth latching onto something absolute. His denying this, therefore, seems incoherent and unmotivated.

I certainly share Putnam's and McDowell's reservations about the sheer weakness of Williams' argument for the absolute conception. This ultimate weakness entails that Williams provides unpersuasive support for the science/ethics dichotomy. Without Williams's absolute conception, the convergence of science – its 'tendency, [to arrogate to itself final authority over the use of the notion of the world – is] revealed as nothing but a familiar scientism'.³⁰ But even though Williams's moral relativism and scientific absolutism are compatible, renouncing his absolutism does not lead inescapably to relativism or subjectivity. The point is simply that, in attempting to find an answer, an assessment of truth that is independent of human conception, one inevitably involves human-dependent conceptions. This does not immediately render 'objectivity' impossible. We observed that Williams himself denies that 'truth' must be non-perspectival. Once we shake his strict notion of objectivity, variants of which seem to have survived the positivists, we can also accept that what is 'objective' need not be *only* 'factual', 'absolute', or any version of an idea that attempts to describe a reality completely independent of human thought.

³⁰ Ibid, 129.

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