

## COMMENT

Riccardo Bellofiore

Sic veritas norma sui et falsi  
(Spinoza)

## 1. Prologue

The chapter by Warren J. Samuels is composed of two connected, but still different, arguments. The first argument (mainly represented by section 2 of the chapter) is a sophisticated critique of positivist methodological positions – or, as Samuels puts it, of ‘prescriptivist methodological monism’. Positivism is not rejected because it is ‘false’, but because of its internal limitations, and because of its lacking in persuasive power. Practising economists are not following its principles. The second argument (mainly represented by section 4 of the chapter) is a plea for ‘methodological pluralism’. Knowledge is here depicted as a social and linguistic construction which has no outside. It is, then, impossible to find an ultimate ground, a final epistemological principle. We have to choose ‘which set of [alternative methodological] credentials to accept and within what limits’ (p. 68); and we need thereafter to deploy rhetorical modes of argument. Conclusive demonstrations are substituted by persuasion.

In the following, I will accept most of Samuels’s critique of traditional absolutist methodology. I shall also find something worthwhile in his effort to embrace a credentialist (and conventionalist) approach without falling into the *non-sequitur* of methodological anarchy. Nevertheless, I think Samuels has been – so to speak – trapped by his anti-absolutist argument. It drives him to delineate methodological pluralism at a too abstract level. Samuels’s positive stance looks, in fact, like a photographic negative of methodological monism. On the contrary, I am persuaded that what is needed is a more radical break with the problematic of ‘epistemology’ in both its (seemingly opposed, but internally related) variants – ‘positivism’ and ‘post-positivism’; ‘absolutism’ and ‘relativism’; ‘prescriptivism’ and ‘rhetoric’. Method is *so* linked to substantive inquiry, that we can speak of the former only *after* and *within* the perspective of the latter – which means that we must abandon altogether the terrain of *any* kind of general philosophy of science, and gain access to concrete, specific knowledge enterprises with their concrete, spe-

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In the short space of a comment I can only give some hints of the reasons justifying this proposed 'dissolution' of epistemology. In the following section, I shall briefly show how a rhetorical approach replicates the traditional questions of positivist methodologies, and then sketch a different route going beyond epistemology. In the last part of this comment, I will recall some very plural voices (Bakhtin, Bachelard, Hacking) to show in what sense a dialogical, anti-foundationalist, local stance may not entail any relativist rejection of the objectivity of knowledge.

## 2 Epistemology as a Trap

The unifying feature of logical empiricism and of falsificationism is the quest for *guarantees* of knowledge – see the criteria grounding the logical empiricists's demarcation between science and metaphysics, or Popper's demarcation between science and non-science. All Popperian qualifications notwithstanding, the search for a universal, prescriptive method is still there – the correct methodological principle guaranteeing the scientific nature of the theory, as it confronts the given, independent reality.

Samuels rightly recalls the host of difficulties this train of thought has found on its way: deduction does not itself yield truth; rigorous testing cannot yield conclusive results; falsification never applies to single hypotheses, because they are combined with auxiliary ones; complete specification is impossible; all observation, data and facts are theory-laden; and so on. Following this critique, one has to recognize that truth (whatever it may mean) can be ascertained only within a textual representation of some constructed object of knowledge. Therefore, looking at the 'justification' of knowledge, the coherence account of truth is the correct one, as far as it underlines that logical accuracy and correspondence with 'facts' are wholly internal features of a peculiar system of thought.

This does not mean, however, either that the knowledge situation exhausts itself in a discursive matter or, as Samuels affirms, that 'there is a fundamental tautological relationship between the assumed principles of knowledge acquisition and the knowledge that is produced' (p. 68). If science is mere discourse, there is no 'outside' to the conversation – *about* what, then, are the conversants talking? And from this viewpoint can the conversation really be seen as a *dialogue*? Method – Samuels says – amounts to the 'stipulated recognized necessity' to argue and persuade in one's own peers' community. In the subjectivist reduction of knowledge to story-telling I am not able to see how the conventional nature of scientific inquiry can avoid slipping into

arbitrariness. Along this path, one is forced to follow McCloskey, and before him his philosophical mentor Richard Rorty, to the extreme conclusion that researchers, while they do not offer 'legitimations', still give each other the legitimacy in doing their own job. As Zygmunt Bauman (1987, p. 198) noted some years ago, this move seems to fit very well with intellectuals' (and academicians') concern with their own self-reproduction. But I suggest it is ill suited to account for what is the concrete practice of knowledge-gathering.

Before going on, let me set down a curious feature of Samuels' critique of positivism. Samuels is right when he observes that in the knowledge situation there is no direct access to the 'real' object; accordingly, the object of knowledge should not be identified with the world 'out there'. But then it is rather odd to adduce as a damaging statement against traditional epistemology that 'prediction ... within the context of a particular model ... is not the same thing as predicting the actual future of the world' (p. 71). To say that 'prediction within a model is determinate ... but lacks any necessary relevance to actual events' (ibid.) means precisely to forget that 'actual' world and 'actual' events *never* enter science as discourse. Here we find conspicuous evidence of the trap in which one finds oneself if one remains within the boundaries defined by the epistemological alternative – the question whether science is a sort of 'seeing', where truth must ultimately be seen as a correspondence with a given outside reality, or if it is a story-telling, where only coherence and persuasion matter.

Sure, there is no privileged outside viewpoint giving us a principle to discriminate the correct theory and the correct methodology. At the same time, knowledge should not be reduced to rhetoric. What is lost by both sides of the current *Methodenstreit* is that though the justification of knowledge is entirely discursive, the production of knowledge entails by its essence a practical *intervention* on some 'outside' realm. Let me put it this way: knowledge, rather than a 'picture' or a 'discourse' is rather a (specific) kind of 'action'. From this point of view, paraphrasing what the same Samuels has written elsewhere, the pursuit of knowledge amounts to a 'discipline'. This discipline has nothing to do with 'choice'. Once in place, and put to work, a putative 'science' has to accept the feedbacks on it as a system of representation coming from the power it shows or the failures it meets when it is applied in its outside realm – and from the ability or the lack of it in answering the problems generated in the process – in accordance with its own aims and following its own standards.

Economics is a good place to test this way out of the epistemological question. In economics, the outside realm is mainly made by social relations and human motives. In this domain it is crystal clear that the adequacy of theories cannot be divorced from their policy side, that knowledge cannot be divorced from action. Here we have a mutual dependence of knowledge seen

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as discourse (and hence persuasion) from knowledge seen as intervention (and hence change). *Objective* knowledge no longer means the static 'reflection' of an external object, but the dynamic process of 'construction' both of theory and of reality - theory *making* itself objective; reality *constraining* how this same process is going on.<sup>1</sup>

Looked at from this angle, the case for pluralism acquires a different content. Within a particular theoretical approach there is no place for methodological pluralism; there is rather a necessary relationship between that approach and its method. Among different approaches, pluralism may simply mean the irreducible split of human conversation in different traditions, because there is no final, 'external', methodological point of view, and therefore the only meaningful task is the hermeneutical one. But I suggest there is a more interesting kind of pluralism to endorse: pluralism as *dialogue* among competing theories. This variety of pluralism *presupposes* that there is *no absolute incommensurability* among theories. More than that, people engaged in conversation must take for granted that, at least in a minimal sense, they are talking about the *same* world. To have disagreement, you must have some point of contact. What is distinctive of this activity is that no side - the subject and the object of knowledge; the competing theories - will remain unaffected by the relation with 'the other'. *Change* is a constitutive feature of the knowledge situation.

To summarize the argument so far. The 'objectivity' of knowledge I advocate in this 'dissolution' of both methodology and anti-methodology is not meant to revive the traditional idea of a given reality which the epistemological subject must passively describe and explain. On the contrary, knowledge is objective in these two very different senses: (1) that it entails an activity, a practical intervention, an interaction with some outside realm, though the outcomes of this interaction are always assessed (justified) within the boundaries of language; (2) that the conversation among plural theories cannot be reduced either to solipsism, which leaves theories unaffected by the interaction, or to identification, which means an impossible immediate capability to understand the other (again leaving the conversants as they were at the beginning), but must reach the stage of a true dialogue. In both senses, which are in fact complementary, the knowledge situation compels to an 'exit from the self' foreign both to the dogmatism of positivist methodologies and to the scepticism of most post-positivist methodologies.

### 3. Dialogue, Objective Knowledge, and Styles of Scientific Reasoning

The preceding discussion leads us to a negative conclusion - i.e., to understand the practical undertaking of objective knowledge we must leave alto-



gether the epistemological debate. The other side of the coin is a positive suggestion: the only legitimate way to continue the 'discourse on method' is to address the concrete, specific, research programmes. From this perspective, the dilemma 'absolutism vs. relativism' is shown to be an empty one, because each side of the coin is right in what it denies and wrong in what it affirms. The posing and solving of specific problems is the site where appropriate methods are detected and refined.

In this last section of the comment I will not try any 'demonstration' of this point of view. I shall rather limit myself to quoting some authors I find useful in 'displacing' our questions, throwing in doubt any kind of passive epistemology and replacing it with the view of 'science' as active, objective knowledge. The pluralism appropriate to this form of life will prove to be incompatible with any strong version of either absolutism or relativism.

Let me start with the Russian thinker Mikhail Bakhtin, and his 'dialogical principle'.<sup>2</sup> According to Bakhtin, in the human sciences 'we are interested towards the thoughts, the meanings, the significations that come from the other and become accessible to the scholar only *sub specie* of the text'. Where there are not voiceless things but persons that contemplate and speak, think and act, 'there is no knowledge of the subject but dialogical' (quoted in Todorov, 1984, p. 17). Dialogue 'is the encounter of two texts: the already given text and the reading text being created' (in *ibid.* p. 18). Bakhtin rejects both absolute objectivism and individualistic subjectivism. Translating his train of thought from linguistics to the philosophy of science, his critique may be restated in this way: positivism and rhetoric see the epistemological subject as the individual, either confronting an external 'independent' world or constituting 'freely' that same world. Bakhtin tries instead a third way, seeing the individual himself as the product of social interrelations.

The dialogical situation shows this very well: the two texts are to be put in a *common context*, where alone they can be understood, and they produce an *intertext*, where each text is described by the other and replies to it. The speaker and the listener, in their changing roles, do not exist as such before the dialogue – just as in the knowledge situation the knowing subject and the object to be known are neither pre-constituted poles nor independent from each other, but are jointly defined only in that same practical relation. To understand *the* dialogue, and to understand *in* the dialogue, the primacy of the social background and horizon, the plurality of the voices, the reality of the other, ought to be recognized, both by the conversants and by whoever is studying the dynamics of the conversation. Discourse cannot be seen as self-enclosed: it has an 'outside' in which it is framed and with which it interacts. Not in the form of passive reflection or of mere persuasion: rather, in the form of an active encounter with the other:

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*Creative understanding* – writes Bakhtin – does not renounce itself, its place in time, its culture; it does not forget anything. The chief matter of understanding is the *exotopy* of the one who does the understanding – in time, space, and culture – in relation to that which he wants to understand creatively. Even his own external aspect is not really accessible to man, and he cannot interpret it as a whole; mirrors and photographs prove of no help; a man's real external aspect can be seen and understood only by other persons, thanks to their spatial exotopy, and thanks to the fact that they are *other*. (Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 109)

Bakhtin forces us to recognize the crucial role of exotopy and context to conversation seen as true dialogue, and not as a plurality of monologues. We are invited to read the encounter with the other – in a sense, we are invited to look *beyond* the individual text – *through* the textual dimension itself. It is possible to refer discourse to the material conditions and social relations in which it is inscribed, exploiting the tensions revealed by the polyphonic nature of the concrete use of language.

The French Gaston Bachelard emphasizes a similar dialectic within scientific knowledge, this time between theory and experiment.<sup>3</sup> Bachelard is quite clear in stating that there is no neutral standpoint from which to evaluate and make theories commensurable. Nevertheless, he does not see in the discursive nature of theory, in the absence of a permanent foundation, and in the discontinuities marking the history of sciences, a threat to rationality and objectivity. As an interpreter of Bachelard, Mary Tiles has aptly written, for him scientific thought is 'a structured constructive *activity*, manifest in the *discourse of scientists* ... the phenomena of contemporary science are products of experimental techniques and methods of preparation' (Tiles, 1984, p. 205; emphasis added). In the interference between theory and experiment, the one is constrained by the other as (partly) 'external' to it. Knowledge, then, is *rational* insofar as it is a planned, justifiable practice; and it is *objective* knowledge, because 'it has to recognize the nature of the constraints on and obstacles to successful action' (*ibid.*).

If we follow the reading of the late Wittgenstein put forward by Doyal and Harris (1986, pp. 147–8), we may further say that the theoretical representations 'materialized' in instrumentation come from an understanding of (external and human) nature which has a non-discursive grounding in constitutive activities appraised *prior* to the development of linguistic competence. Thus knowledge is not only applied rationalism; it is also rational *materialism*. Materialism intended as the centrality of material practice *before* and *outside* the discursive domain, however, can never be 'justified' at the epistemic level; it is rather 'a *Weltanschauung* – a "view" or "outlook" on the whole world', a 'line' or 'policy' leading the inquiry (Suchting, 1986, p. 60 and p. 66).

From this standpoint, 'truth' has no guarantee other than itself – i.e. that of being the temporary, open-ended result of critically reflective knowledge:

The scientific spirit is essentially a rectification of knowledge ... . Scientifically, one thinks of the truth as historical rectification of an initial common illusion. The whole of the intellectual life of science plays dialectically on this differential of knowledge, at the frontier of the unknown. The very essence of reflection is to understand what one has not understood. (Quoted in Tiles, 1984, p. 208)

According to Bachelard's 'new scientific mind', knowledge is again dialogue, this time in the form of contradiction and critique relative both to common-sense thought and to 'mainstream' anterior theories. Often old ways of scientific thinking are (translated and) incorporated in a more general one. The price to be paid to this kind of practice is that the 'new' approach will become itself subject to future revision and criticism. Epistemology can here consist only in the portrait of the concrete, plural, ways in which actual, plural, sciences have historically evolved and produced their results. The philosophy of science derives from science itself. The former is inevitably spelled out with 'local' pretences, as 'local' is the domain of inquiry of the latter. And it is set forth systematically only *a posteriori*; it can never be identified with the *a priori*, general, positivist or Popperian method.

Ian Hacking has recently proposed the concept of 'style of scientific reasoning', which is very close to the position I am here trying to sketch:<sup>4</sup>

A style of scientific reasoning is put in place in a network of people, answering to the needs, interests, ideology or curiosity of its members, defended by bluster or insidious patience. But when it becomes fixed as a new way to truth, it needs no support or rhetoric, for as it assumes self-confidence it generates its own standard of objectivity and its own ideology. It starts by being pushed and shaped by social vectors of every sort; we end with a self-sustaining mode of knowledge. It becomes less something moulded by interest, and more an unquestioned resource upon which any interest must draw, if it ever hopes for the accolade of objectivity. And it further determines how people conceive of themselves and their world, opening new horizons, but also constraining the possible forms of knowledge. (Hacking, 1990, pp. 3-4)

In this outlook, while *what* is true does not depend on how we think, the truth *conditions* depend on the style of reasoning. 'There is no truth-or-falsehood in the matter, independent of the style of reasoning', says Hacking. However, this does not lead to a relativist position because, recalling Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*, 'a style of reasoning, once in place, is not relative to anything. It does not determine the standard of objective truth. It *is* the standard' (pp. 7-8).

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On this account, pluralism is mainly to be intended as dialogue, and struggle, among competing 'styles'. Dialogue and struggle need, if they ever can be conceived as possible, some implicit reference – call it, if you wish, a meta-physics, or a philosophical *pris de position* – to a common natural and social world of material, and to some common understanding (though the more precise nature of this reference and of this understanding is, of course, controversial). 'Absolute', sceptical relativism is a sort of monologue, just as is dogmatic absolutism.

Samuels's case for methodological pluralism seems to me to be too much concerned with the problematic and the language of traditional epistemology. Maybe this is the reason for its 'relativist' flavour. As an instance, I may quote this phrase from page 69: 'Truth is principally the name given to *what we accept and privilege* as confident knowledge, and it bears *no necessary relation* to the subject about which statements deemed to be true are made.' However, a few lines later I find a position I am quite comfortable with: 'What is necessary, indeed *absolutely* necessary, is a recognition of both the particularity of the credentials of that which is taken to be true and the limitations that *inexorably* define the meaningfulness of each set of credentials.' Is the difference between Samuels's excessive concern with the subjectivity of 'scientific' theories against my stress on making knowledge objective only a difference in rhetorical attitude? No small difference, after all.

#### Acknowledgement

Financial aid from MURST 40% and 60% grants are gratefully acknowledged.

#### Notes

1. For a more extended critique of positivism and rhetoric *à la* McCloskey see my 'The Poverty of Rhetoric: Keynes vs. McCloskey', in Marzola and Silva (1994). I have found useful in developing my own position Lecourt (1981) and Suchting (1986), but see also the references in 'The Poverty of Rhetoric' and section 3 of this comment.
2. The writings of Bakhtin I am referring to are not, to my knowledge, easily accessible in English. In the following I shall use the very valuable study of Tzvetan Todorov, and the translations there included. On Bakhtin, see also Eagleton (1983).
3. The reference here is mainly to *Le nouvel esprit scientifique*, *Le materialisme rationnel*, *Le rationalisme appliqué*, *La philosophie du non*. As for Bakhtin, also in this case, for convenience, I shall refer to an interpreter: this time the first-class study by Mary Tiles. See also, on Bachelard, Lecourt (1975).
4. I borrow some arguments from Bellofiore (1994). Following this train of thought one would rescue some valuable insights by Neurath and Fleck, on one side, and Lakatos, on the other.

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