

## 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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cific methods. According to this outlook, once a peculiar object of knowledge has been framed, it leaves no 'choice' to researchers investigating it; it rather 'compels' them on the way to local, but all the same necessary, truths.

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

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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-

