

Imagine that you are a former defender of egocentric subjectivism who has been persuaded to reject that theory. Apart from being convinced that the theory that you once believed in is false, what is it that you now believe?

Recently I have come to regard egocentric subjectivism as somehow wrong, though I must confess that my motives for rejecting it are not completely rational. My moves towards objectivity have strength because I wish to claim that it is possible for me to have ideas which have some kind of certainty and status outside of my mind. Is this desire part of the human delusion whereby we claim some special position for ourselves and our knowledge?

If I abandon egocentric subjectivism does this mean that I am a metaphysical realist? To be so, I would need to convince myself that there is a unique set of objects which are mind independent. Moreover, there is some kind of correspondence between these objects and what I perceive about them, and that I can refer to them unambiguously.

There is a very large gap between metaphysical realism and egocentric subjectivism.

Egocentric egoism seems to paralyse the intellect. It is

'a growth in the already extreme intellectual laziness of contemporary culture and the collapse of serious argument throughout the lower reaches of the humanities and social sciences, together with a refusal to take seriously, as anything other than 1st-person avowals, the objective arguments of others' (Nagel).

I want to be able to put forward arguments and have them considered as objective.

It needs to be said however, that many fair-minded people associate objectivism with dogmatism and because of this, feel a need to argue for subjectivism.

Egocentric subjectivism also seems to be incoherent. If we make a statement such as "everything is subjective", then that statement itself must be either subjective or objective. It seems to be stated in an objective way, which is clearly self defeating, and if it is meant to be subjective, then it stands open to refutation by others. This argument, somewhat paraphrased, is made by Nagel in "The Last Word".

However, like the arguments against solipsism, this refutation seems to be too weak to convince us of the utter bankruptcy of egocentric subjectivism. It does not seem to be final enough to remove all doubt.

It may help if we may make a distinction in the use of "objective" as an epistemological predicate or as a metaphysical predicate. In the former use of objective, my statements are universally valid, if it they obtain irrespectively of the point of view from which they are stated. In other words, my statements hold good in virtue of their content and relation to the world, and not in the sense that they are in virtue of a particular mental framework of a given subject. As an epistemological objectivist I would be expressing my optimism in respect to my knowledge; I am in possession of an enlarging body of beliefs or propositions that are objective in the above sense.

As a metaphysical objectivist, I would be asserting that the objects of my knowledge are also "out there", independent of my mind, existing in just the way I see them.

It is useful to keep in mind these two uses of objective, since it seems perfectly possible to assert some form of epistemological objectivity whilst being sceptical about metaphysical objectivity and vice versa. For example, might it not be possible

to hold that there are real mind independent objects, but that it is not always possible to have knowledge of them? One reading of Kant hints at such a possibility with the existence of “noumena”. Also, it might be possible to hold that the objects of our discourse do not exist in quite the mind-independent objectivity we think, but that it is still possible to hold objective views about them (in the sense that others, participating in our discourse also have these views). However, what seems clear, is that expressions like “objective” and “subjective” become less absolute in their meanings.

In moving away from an extreme subjectivism, I have been influenced by the development of the views of Hilary Putnam. This may seem paradoxical, since Putnam began as a metaphysical realist believing in the clear objectivity of existents, and later abandoned this view, moving towards a degree of subjectivity. (Putnam referred to his current position as “internal realism”). However, although my own move is in the opposite direction (egocentric subjectivism to objectivism), I may still be occupying a position on the scale not too far distant from that of Putnam.

Putnam’s position is stated quite well in the opening three chapters of “Reason Truth and History”. According to this view metaphysical reality is badly flawed, for two main reasons. Firstly, it is not possible to refer to objects in a single unambiguous way. Putnam uses the “model theoretic” argument to show this. Secondly, the correspondence theory of truth is invalid. How do we form a picture of reality in our minds? By what means do we do this? To Putnam, this process seems “magical”; as though we possessed some special scanning equipment, “noetic rays” say, which help us form accurate pictures of reality. We divide reality into pieces, as though using a cookie cutter, and these pieces have reality within our discourse, and our conceptual framework. The objects of reality are constructs. In one reading of Putnam, his viewpoint seems Kantian; there is a noumenal reality out there but we cannot unambiguously refer to it. For Kant, reality is seen through our organising factors of time and space, for Putnam it is seen through our conceptual framework.

All of the above may seem to point away from the possibility of forming an objective point of view. However, although Putnam’s internal realism does not sit well with the possibility of forming final objective views, it is not a form of irrationalism. Thomas Nagel

puts forward a very convincing defence of objectivism in “The View From Nowhere” and “The Last Word”, which might not be out of kilter with Putnam. We can all use reason to ponder our position and its perspective on the world. Even cultural relativists must use reason to think through their position, despite viewing reason as a culturally relative tool. Because I am able to consider my own self and my conceptual framework as part of the space I inhabit, I am able to contemplate their possible effect on my decisions. Further, I can check my views against those of my fellows and make adjustments to them if necessary. I do not have to accept that every opinion is true, neither do I have to assume that what I believe will never be shown to be false. This process of continual exploration and dialogue is harder work than maintaining a pure objectivist or subjectivist position, but it is possible to regard my shared frame of reference as “objective”.