

FOUNDATIONS OF OBJECTIVE KNOWLEDGE

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FOUNDATIONS
OF OBJECTIVE
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*The Relations of Popper's Theory of
Knowledge to that of Kant*



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To my grand father,
Professor Luiz C. de Castilho,
in memoriam

Wittgenstein once wrote: 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent'. It was, if I remember rightly, [Franz Urbach] who replied: 'But it is only here that speaking becomes worth while.'

K. R. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations*, 70/1.

It is decisive to realize that knowing what truth means, or under what conditions a statement is called true, is not the same as, and must be clearly distinguished from, possessing a means of deciding – a *criterion* for deciding – whether a given statement is true or false.

K. R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, 2, 371.

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EDITORIAL PREFACE

Kant and Popper. The affinity between the philosophy of Kant and the philosophy of Karl Popper has often been noted, and most decisively in Popper's own reflections on his thought. But in this work before us, Sergio Fernandes has given a cogent, comprehensive, and challenging investigation of Kant which differs from what we may call Popper's Kant while nevertheless showing Kant as very much a precursor of Popper. The investigation is directly conceptual, although Fernandes has also contributed to a novel historical understanding of Kant in his reinterpretation; the novelty is the genuine result of meticulous study of texts and commentators, characterized by the author's thorough command of the epistemological issues in the philosophy of science in the 20th century as much as by his mastery of the Kantian themes of the 18th.

Naturally, we may wish to understand whether Kant is relevant to Popper's philosophy of knowledge, how Popper has understood Kant, and to what extent the Popperian Kant has systematically or historically been of influence on later philosophy of science, as seen by Popper or not. To Fernandes, the way to answering these questions is through critical reconstruction of the Kantian and Popperian theories from three vantage points: (1) discovery, in contrast to any conventionalist underpinning, and in relation to possible guidance by metaphysical principle; (2) testing, so as to "formulate the problem of the objectivity of ordinary experience, which constitutes the empirical basis of science"; and (3) realism, "the status of the object of knowledge". In the end, Fernandes leads us to acknowledge the fallibilist, indeed Popperian, component in Kant but, in his impressive style of scholarship and enthusiasm, he also persuades us that "fallibilism and conjecturalism are not enough" (6). Each reader will have to decide whether Fernandes has also established his striking result that "the foundations of objective knowledge must lie in Kant's transcendental philosophy". But we must be careful; for Fernandes it is plausible, indeed clear, that such foundations are not in any sense to be construed as dogmatic, and he tells us at once that "transcendental conditions of the possibility of objectivity are neither first principles nor basic statements" (xiv). So, we are in the thick of current debates over relativism, naturalistic epistemology, objectivism, realism. We

are also in the presence of a fine example of the relevance of philosophical analysis to understanding in the study of the history of philosophy. And, finally we are faced with a remarkable challenge: forward from Kant!

August 1984

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PREFACE

This book is about objectivity, non-epistemic truth, the real world, and other related, traditional themes that some contemporary philosophers would prefer to commit to a museum. I defend the legitimacy of theory of knowledge as a *philosophical* discipline, that is, as a critical reflection about such themes as human knowledge, its possible conceptions, its expression by means of language, its sources, objects, scope, methods, limits and appraisal, and I oppose all forms of naturalism and relativism in epistemology. Besides being a historical *fact*, analysable by natural and cultural sciences, knowledge has in my view a normative dimension, irreducible to its factual one.

If objective knowledge is possible at all, then it must have *foundations*, which cannot lie in matters of fact, be they biological, psychological, or whatever. “What is characteristic of foundations”, writes J. Rosenberg, “is that, come what may, they stay put” (1980, 10). Well, let us not quarrel about words. It seems to me that, in a post-Kantian perspective, whatever stays put is that which must be presupposed by “any conceptual scheme which can be ours” (199n1). However difficult to identify such a *transcendental* core — which cannot be, itself, one more conceptual scheme — I think the search for it really makes sense, and is an indispensable philosophical task, if we are to understand what objectivity is.

“To have some ‘foundation’ or ‘justification’”, writes Popper, “may be important for a belief; but it is not the kind of thing we should require for a conjecture or a hypothesis” (RS, 22). Again, let us not quarrel about words. Conjectural knowledge, in my view, is not enough. We also need to understand how conjectural knowledge can be objective, not exactly objectively true, but objectively corrigible, under the guidance of the regulative idea of truth, for it is only then that we will be able to understand how it is possible for us to be critical. Objective knowledge is indeed grounded, grounded on reason, a transcendent and critical reason, that reason which, in Kant’s words, “must in all its undertakings subject itself to criticism” (KRV, A 739/B 707). Just as a book such as that of Popper, on the *logic* of scientific discovery, was written, among other things, to show that there is no such thing as an *infallibilist* logic of discovery — in the sense, say, of a privileged rational heuristics —, so the present book, on the *foundations*

of objective knowledge, was written, among other things, to show that there is no such thing as a *dogmatic* foundation of objective knowledge — be it in the sense of uncriticizable first principles or in the sense of uncriticizable rock-bottom, basic statements. But transcendental conditions of possibility of objectivity are neither first principles nor basic statements. And just as for Popper there is a sense in which science and methodology presuppose logic, so there is, in my view, a sense in which objectivity presupposes transcendental conditions of possibility, which can be neither one more conceptual scheme (for they cannot constitute *a* conceptual scheme), nor one more theory, for conditions of possibility of criticizability cannot themselves be criticizable, at least in the same sense that our theories can. All types of dogmatic foundationalist programmes must indeed be rejected, but this means that theory of knowledge really began with Kant's critical philosophy and that its method must be the transcendental one. There is no verificationism in transcendental arguments. On the contrary, it is the verificationism of those philosophers who have confounded the regulative idea of truth with its criterion that drives them into the despair of reason. They incur, as a consequence, in a now pervasive analogon to the naturalist fallacy, namely, the epistemic fallacy of deriving inexistence from incognoscibility.

Among contemporary epistemologists, the champion of objectivism is, in my judgement, Popper. And it is not a mere coincidence that Popper regards his theory of knowledge as a finishing touch to that of Kant (CR, 27). Now, Popper's theory creates problems of its own, both at the level of discovery, where his blend of deductivism and evolutionism apparently rules out transcendental guidance, and at the level of testing, where the same blend rules out the possibility that experience be a *reason* for our acceptance or rejection of test-statements. (He recently admitted that experience could be an inconclusive reason for decisions concerning test-statements (*Replies*, 1114), but he leaves unexplained how this is possible, since he rejects transcendental analysis of experience.) Other problems Popper's theory creates have their origin in the two just mentioned (e.g. the problem of the relations between verisimilitude and corroboration, the problem of the rationality of our pragmatical belief in the best corroborated theories etc.). And there is, of course, the recently discovered problem of the impossibility of providing a formal definition of 'verisimilitude'.

When I searched for the deep sources of the problems Popper's objectivist theory creates, I found that they were, ultimately, a consequence of Popper's not having been Kantian enough, in spite of all his insistent acknowledgements of a profound debt to the spirit of Kantian philosophy. I then decided to

investigate the relations of Popper's theory of knowledge to that of Kant, hoping to find alternative directions towards the solution of those problems, and as a means of achieving a better understanding of the case for objectivism in epistemology. This book is the result of such an investigation.

I need hardly say that not all of Popper's philosophy, nor all of Kant's, will be examined here. To begin with, my emphasis will lie on the theoretical, as opposed to the practical aspects of their philosophies. I will leave almost entirely aside Kant's practical, rationalism and Popper's contribution to social philosophy and to the philosophy of social science. In fact, I have examined only those aspects of their theories of knowledge I believe to be significantly correlated and important for the achievement of my main purpose: to make a case for objectivism in theory of knowledge. Yet, those omissions will be less important than might have been expected. For one remarkable result of the comparison between Popper's and Kant's theoretical philosophies is the finding that when one leaves aside what is mutually irrelevant, one is left with what is best and most important in each of their respective contributions to the case for objectivism. This book was thus written for those who are interested either in Popper or in Kant, or in theory of knowledge, but it was specially written for those who would like to know what are the philosophical presuppositions of any possible conception of objective knowledge.

Of course I do not claim to have made a historiographical exercise, and not even to have compared Popper's theory just as it is with that of Kant, just as it was. What I have done was critically to reconstruct their theories and investigate the objective relations between them, from three, major points of view: that of discovery, that is, that point of view from which we could formulate the problem whether our "gropings into the unknown" (SB, 133), to borrow Popper's expression, are random, or blind, or, on the contrary, guided by transcendental, metaphysical principles; second, the point of view of testing, that is, that point of view from which we could formulate the problem of the objectivity of ordinary experience, which constitutes the empirical basis of science; and third, the point of view of realism, that is, that point of view from which we could formulate the problem of the status of the object of knowledge and ask whether it must be reality in itself or empirical reality, in Kant's sense.

After a critical examination of Popper's own views of Kant's problems, I attempt to reconstruct Popper's problem as Popper regards it, that is, as a revision of that of Kant, soon becoming evident, however, that Popper's alleged revisions revise much less than Popper thinks they do. Indeed, Popper's views, both of Kant's problems and solutions, and of the relations

of Kant's theory to his own, do not coincide with mine. The first two Chapters will constitute, then, an interesting, if complicated, case of situation-analysis, though the extent of Popper's misunderstandings of Kant will only become clear when my own reconstruction of their philosophies is completed, in the course of the following chapters. Popper's misunderstanding of Kant, however, by no means makes Popper less of a Kantian: on the contrary, I hope to have shown that, once we set aside Popper's misinterpretations, we put ourselves in a position to discover even deeper, objective relations between their two theories, independently of what Popper thinks of them. After establishing those objective relations, from the three points of view mentioned above, I conclude by pointing out the relevance of such comparisons for the present controversy naturalism/relativism versus transcendentalism/objectivism in theory of knowledge.

It was John Watkins who first gave me the idea of undertaking the comparisons which are now presented in this book. Most of the material contained in it is a rewritten version of my doctoral dissertation (University of London, 1981) which he kindly and patiently supervised and to which he contributed with valuable criticism.

Gerd Buchdahl was also of inestimable help in encouraging my study of Kant and criticising the original 1981 draft. Moreover, had I not been guided by his work on Kant's philosophy, I would not have been able to reconstruct Kant's problems and solutions in a way appropriate to their being fruitfully compared with those of Popper.

None of this means, of course, that either Watkins, or Buchdahl, agree with all I have written.

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I am particularly indebted to Professor N. Sucupira for having helped me to overcome my ignorance of the German language and to Mr. Walzi C. S. da Silva, for having helped me in proof-correcting.

Finally, I am deeply grateful to my wife, our children, and my parents, for everything.

Rio de Janeiro
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S. L. de C. F.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL CONVENTIONS

ABBREVIATIONS USED FOR SOME OF POPPER'S WORK

- Autob.*: 'Intellectual Autobiography', Popper 1974a.
CR: *Conjectures and Refutations*, Popper 1976b.
GE: *Die beiden Grundprobleme der Erkenntnistheorie*, Popper 1979a.
LSD: *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, Popper 1977.
OK: *Objective Knowledge*, Popper 1979b.
OS: *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Popper 1974c.
OU: *The Open Universe*, Popper 1982a.
PH: *The Poverty of Historicism*, Popper 1976a.
QT: *Quantum Theory*, Popper 1982b.
Replies: 'Replies to My Critics', Popper 1974b.
RS: *Realism and The Aims of Science*, Popper 1983.
SB: *The Self and Its Brain*, Popper & Eccles 1977.

ABBREVIATIONS USED FOR SOME OF KANT'S WORK

- First. Intr.*: *First Introduction to The Critique of Judgement*, Kant 1965.
KPV: *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant 1976.
KRV: *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant 1978a.
KU: *Critique of Judgement*, Kant 1951.
L: *Logic*, Kant 1974.
MAN: *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*, Kant 1883.
Prol.: *Prolegomena*, Kant 1978b.

INTRODUCTION

Through the nineteenth century to the present, generations of philosophers have from time to time publicly commended successive returns to Kant: some, exegetically, to his texts, e.g. in some variants of neo-Kantianism; others, to the spirit of his philosophy. These returns took various forms, were undertaken through different philosophical paths, and staged by thinkers as different as Husserl and Peirce, as a means of achieving different and, sometimes, incompatible aims. But we just cannot philosophise as if Kant had never existed, and even at present the famous aphorism attributed to Liebmann is not entirely unjustified: “You can philosophise with Kant, or you can philosophise against Kant, but you cannot philosophise without Kant”.

Of course if one devotes oneself today, with analytical zeal, to the exegetical collection of mistakes in Kantian texts, one will be able to find quite a few of them. But in relation to Kant this will never be the whole story. Bennett remarked that although the first *Critique* still had much to teach us, it was wrong on nearly every page (1977a, viii). That this judgement was hasty was implicitly acknowledged by Bennett himself, eight years later, when he conceded: “there are doubtless fewer mistakes than I allege: my charge list has gradually shortened as I have gained in understanding of the work, and presumably it could be reduced further” (1977b, viii). No doubt it could. In interpreting Kant we should follow the tendency Scott-Taggart was able to spot in 1969, when reviewing recent work in Kantian philosophy: “one could say that, in the English-speaking world . . . there is an increasing ruthless philosophical examination which separates results in the Kantian spirit from mistakes in the Kantian text” (1969, 12).

Now, the best post-Kantian, *objectivist* theory of knowledge is, in my view, that of Popper. And, significantly, among contemporary epistemologists, Popper is perhaps the one who has most explicitly acknowledged his profound debt to the spirit of Kantian philosophy. The first book he wrote (GE), concluded in 1932, is for the most part an exposition and a critical commentary of Kant’s theory of knowledge. In fact, Popper says that the two *fundamental* problems of the theory of knowledge are essentially the same he identifies as Kant’s problems, in the first *Critique* (GE,

17), namely, the problem of induction and the problem of demarcation. Popper tells us that he arrived at his own philosophy by combining his ideas with those of Kant (*Autob.*, 46). He places his re-interpretation of Kant (43) at the very origin of his most important ideas, to whose formulation, he says, he was “led in the light of Kant’s analyses” (OK, 86). He attributes to Kant his idea of a critical rationalism (CR, 200). He looked upon himself, not only as an unorthodox Kantian in philosophy of science, but also as a Kantian in ethics (*Autob.*, 65). He came to think that his criticism of the Vienna Circle “was simply the result of having read Kant and of having understood some of his main points” (*id.*). He took Kant as his ally against positivism (LSD, 105n3) and pure empiricism (OS, 2, 213; OK, 342; *Replies*, 1183n31). He sees Kant’s theory of knowledge as “a strange mixture of absurdity and truth” (CR, 95), but adds that we should seriously consider the suggestion that Kant’s answer to his problem, “in spite of its partial absurdity, contained the nucleus of a true philosophy of science” (96). He thinks that “Kant’s problem can and must be revised”, in the direction of Kant’s “critical, or self-critical rationalism” (200), and that the critical rationalism, and the critical empiricism which he, Popper, advocates, “merely [put] the finishing touch to Kant’s critical philosophy” (26/7).

Yet Popper, who, incidentally, has never claimed to be a Kantian scholar, has misinterpreted Kant in more ways than one. Popper regarded his own problems as structurally similar to Kant’s. Indeed, they are similar, but not exactly in the senses Popper thinks they are. Much of what Popper rejected in Kant’s theory of knowledge, he rejected because he misunderstood. That he nevertheless understood enough of Kant’s philosophy to have adopted it as his point of reference in developing his own philosophy, despite all the misunderstandings, and to the point of having developed a theory of knowledge that is much closer to Kant’s than he himself realised, is an indication that Kant’s original insights must have influenced him deeply under the surface of whatever he has ever publicly said, be it in the form of acknowledgements of indebtedness, or in the form of protested disavowals. What Popper rejected in Kant’s philosophy includes that which Popper interpreted correctly and that which he interpreted incorrectly. But, then, the same holds for what Popper *accepted* in that philosophy. For he not only accepted those Kantian insights that he interpreted correctly, but he also accepted, and adopted Kantian doctrines which he did not regard as Kantian, that is, which he mistook for his own, or for the result of his own revisions, or his reinterpretation of Kant. These are the doctrines which, had Popper understood Kant better than he did, he would have accepted

as *Kantian doctrines*. That Popper fails to acknowledge Kant's precedence in many cases is not of much importance, however. What is really important is that Popper came to adopt those doctrines — or at least very similar ones. And the reason why I will pause, in the first two chapters *below*, to disentangle the *quid pro quo* that lies at the origin of Popper's theory of knowledge, is that Popper's misinterpretations of Kant are very important for our understanding of Popper's own philosophy, which does have many affinities with that of Kant, independently of what Popper himself thinks about them.

The relations between Popper and Kant constitute, thus, an interesting, if complicated, case to be sorted out by situation analysis. 'Situation analysis' is Popper's name for "a certain kind of tentative or conjectural explanation of some human action which appeals to the situation in which the agent finds himself" (OK, 179). It should be a task of situation analysis, in Popper's view, "to distinguish between the situation as the agent saw it, and the situation as it was (both, of course, conjectured)" (*id.*). And: "there are many cases in which we can reconstruct, *objectively* (even though conjecturally), (a) the situation as it was and (b) a very different *situation as it appeared to the agent*, or as it was *understood*, or *interpreted* by the agent" (*id.* & n). Well, this is what I will do in the case of Popper's relations to Kant. We shall see there are objective relations between their theories of knowledge *and* that Popper misunderstood and misinterpreted those relations. I will also try to make Popper's misunderstandings and misinterpretations themselves rationally understandable, that is, "adequate to [the agent's] situation as he saw it" (179), by means of idealised reconstructions, either of Popper's, or of Kant's philosophies. Two levels will have to be distinguished in this situation analysis. On the one hand, there will be the level of Popper's views of Kant's theory of knowledge and of Popper's views of the relations between that theory and his own. On the other hand, there will be the level of my reconstruction of Kant's theory and of those relations I believe to exist between that theory and that of Popper. That my own views of Kant's theory of knowledge and of its relations to Popper's theory do not coincide with Popper's does not, therefore, mean that Popper's theory is less related to that of Kant. Quite on the contrary, we shall see that one of the conditions for the establishment of a fruitful common ground of comparison between the two theories to be examined is precisely that we abandon Popper's interpretation of Kant. Popper's Kantianism does not depend, objectively, either on his having always correctly interpreted Kant, or on his having always subscribed to Kant's views. Nor would Popper's

Kantianism be less authentic if it could be established that other contemporary philosophers of science, not at all sharing Popper's basic views — Schlick and Carnap, for example — have also been influenced by Kant. Popper's Kantianism can be revealed by a reconstruction of the objective relations between Popper's and Kant's theories of knowledge. And the relevance of such a reconstruction can be appreciated solely on the grounds of its fruitfulness, either from the point of view of a better understanding of their respective ideas, or from the point of view of a better understanding of epistemological objectivism.

I believe, with Popper, that all possible readings of a philosophical text are interpretations (OS, I, 246n45). It is not only when one is being critical that one is interpreting, that is, putting forward interpretative hypotheses. Rather, even when one is merely trying to describe what one thinks is being conveyed by a text, one is bound to be making interpretative conjectures. In this sense all reading is conjectural and may of course be criticised. What is here of crucial importance is that the interpreter be aware that he is an interpreter and also that he be as explicit as possible about his interpretative hypotheses. Indeed, the least one must do before undertaking rational reconstructions is to explicate one's methodological presuppositions and concerns. A reconstruction would be *ad hoc*, for example, if all the arguments in its favour were based on the allegation that it rationalises the views it purports to reconstruct, instead of being also based on independent historical evidence. Since *all* readings are interpretations, hence at least primitive reconstructions, we cannot rely on any *absolute* independence of historical evidence, but must adopt, as a regulative idea, that it is possible rationally to appraise irrefutable interpretations. And the best way of doing this is to look upon our interpretations as a proposed solution to a set of problems. As Popper would put it: if we look upon a theory as a proposed solution to a set of problems, the theory immediately "lends itself to a critical discussion — even if it is non-empirical and irrefutable. For we can now ask questions such as, Does it solve the problem? Does it solve it better than other theories? Is the solution simple? Is it fruitful? Does it perhaps contradict other philosophical theories needed for solving other problems?" (CR, 199).

Among my methodological presuppositions there is, then, Popper's own objectivist theory of problems. Popper thinks that objective problems can be discovered and that a real problem transcends the verbal means of communicating it. The solution of a philosophical problem can, according to Popper, always be criticised and changed. By contrast, the discovery of

the problem itself “can be something final, . . . made once, and for all time” (CR, 200). This is not to say, however, that the discoverer may not misunderstand his own discovery (OK, 242). Examples are drawn by Popper from the history of science (179n, 246): Kepler misunderstood his problem as one of finding the Pythagorean harmony of the world; Schrödinger misinterpreted his, in wave mechanics, as a statistical one; Einstein mistakenly believed that one of the problems his general theory of relativity had to solve was the problem of meeting a demand for covariance. According to Popper, however far backwards we go in our investigations of the series, ‘problem, solution, problem, . . .’, such problems will always be capable of being treated as objective, in the sense that they can be conjecturally reconstructed, by hindsight, against their situational backgrounds (OK, 165 & 169). And a problem-situation is a problem together with its background. Moreover, problems need not have, according to Popper, conscious counterparts, that is, they may remain undiscovered. “Where they have their conscious counterparts”, Popper remarks, “the conscious problem need not coincide with the objective problem” (242). Some problems, though meaningful, are unsolvable in principle (for Popper’s own examples, see CR, 210; OK, 161n11 etc.). The relations between the solutions devised for a problem and the problem itself are logical relations (165). And a solution intended for one problem may, of course, solve another problem. In fact, not only may one and the same solution solve different problems, but also one and the same problem may be solved by different solutions. As Lakatos once put it, “one frequently solves very different problems from those which one has set out to solve”; and “in extreme cases, one may end up with solving (or trying to solve) no other problem but those which one has oneself created while trying to solve the original problem” (1978b, 128). Since every solution to a problem generates new problems, an infinity of problems will always remain undiscovered (OK, 161; CR, 28/9).

Another of my presuppositions is that Kant and Popper are *consistent, coherent* philosophers. Kant once remarked, referring to his first *Critique*, that “if we take single passages, torn from their contexts, and compare them with one another, apparent contradictions are not to be lacking . . .” (KRV, B xliv). This remark could be applied not only to the first *Critique*, but also to a large number of philosophical works. There is indeed a risk to be run by all interpreters who choose to base their arguments, as I intend to, on generous amounts of quotations from the works being interpreted. Though by doing so one may be fairer to an author than by replacing quotations by paraphrases, one must keep in mind that every author sooner or