

BOOK REVIEW: *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* by Richard J. Bernstein (1983) University of Pennsylvania

This very interesting book illuminates the progression of science away from its Positivist entrenchment and onto a post-Positivist, post-empirical mode of expression. To illustrate this progression, the author outlines the projects of four distinguished philosophers from the 20th century: Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jurgen Habermas, Richard Rorty, and Hannah Arendt – together, he says, representative of most of the major trends of 20th century philosophy. The thinking of each of these philosophers is shown to be influential in the general movement of philosophy beyond the narrow confines of the traditional “objectivism-relativism” debate – a movement spurred by what the author piercingly describes as the need to exorcise the “Cartesian Anxiety.”

Cartesian Anxiety arose with the desperate need to establish an “Archimedean point,” a firm grounding in an ultra-rational epistemology – based on reason alone – upon which the edifice of pure, objective knowledge could be built. There was “the basic conviction that there is or must be some permanent, ahistorical matrix or framework to which we can ultimately appeal in determining the nature of rationality, knowledge, truth, reality, [etc.]” (p. 8). This is Objectivism (along with its necessary counterpoint, Relativism); and yet, in the past few hundred years since the Project began, such a firm anchor has failed to decisively materialize. Bernstein describes “*beyond objectivism*” as “a recovery of the hermeneutical dimension of science.”

Scholars: take note of this word ‘hermeneutics’ because it will appear again in our studies. Hermeneutics is an interpretive or explanatory approach to inquiry with a thematic emphasis on *understanding* and *application*. It turns out that the social sciences have been distorted and encumbered by the attempt to fit them into the ‘Cartesian box.’ Hermeneutics recovers the “practical reasoning” dimension of inquiry, realized in applied and meaningful practice (or *praxis*). “In all of the debates of the last century, practice was understood as application of science to technical tasks...it degrades practical reasoning to technical control” (p. 39). But for the four philosophers highlighted in this book, action and *praxis* is “the highest form of human activity, manifested in speech and deed” (p. 44). One could say that there is no real understanding without practice; or, what good is knowledge if it can’t be meaningfully applied to the improvement of life? “[A]uthentic understanding...is not detached from the interpreter but becomes constitutive of his or her *praxis*” (p. 146).

Hermeneutics is further justified as the most suitable methodology for the social sciences. In this approach to inquiry, knowledge tends to be “suggestive and illuminative”

rather than “explicit and determinative;” the inquiry emphasizes the role of “exemplars and judgmental interpretation” using “case histories and precedents.” “The type of knowledge and truth that hermeneutics yields is practical knowledge and truth that shapes our *praxis*” (p. 150).

Bernstein describes the intellectual movement or conceptual rhythm of hermeneutics as taking the form of “a continuous dialectic tacking between the most local of local detail and the most global of global structure in such a way as to bring both into view simultaneously... Hopping back and forth between the whole conceived through the parts which actualize it and the parts conceived through the whole which motivates them, [seeking] to turn them, by a sort of intellectual perpetual motion, into explications of one another” (p. 95). This motion is approvingly termed the “hermeneutic circle” – an interpretive device for gaining practical, meaningful understanding, and, as Gadamer would say, “meaning is always *coming into being* through the “happening” of understanding” (p. 139).

After Bernstein effectively moves us “beyond objectivism and relativism,” he begins to make a further movement “beyond philosophic hermeneutics;” or rather, he outlines the implications of the intellectual achievements of our four distinguished philosophers. The gravity of his conclusion can be felt in the following statement: “We must appreciate the extent to which our sense of community is threatened not only by material conditions but *by the faulty epistemological doctrines that fill our heads*” (p. 204, emphasis added). Exorcise the Cartesian Anxiety indeed! This then becomes the practical task: the creation and implementation of what he calls “dialogical communities,” a vision of community life in which there is genuine participation, where *praxis* as communal action among equals becomes an expression of tangible public freedom. This conclusion is affirmed nicely in a closing quote by Alisdair MacIntyre: “[W]hat matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained” (p. 229, taken from *After Virtue*). So go out and do something for your community today!

This book is thick for its size and full of philosophical insight. It can be tedious at times as the writer is a professional philosopher seeming to reference and cross-reference everything he’s ever read, comparing the thinking of numerous other philosophers with each other and with himself. Still, I highly recommend this book as a useful contribution to forming an epistemology to effectively guide the work of the scholar-practitioner.