Perspective-dependence and Critical Thinking

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Abstract   Recent theories of critical thinking have stressed the importance of taking into consideration in critical enquiry the *perspectives*, or presuppositions, of both the speaker whose statements are under scrutiny and the critic himself. The purpose of the paper is to explore this idea from an epistemological (rather than a pedagogical or psychological) point of view. The problem is first placed within the general context of critical thinking theory. Three types of perspective-dependence are then described, and the consequences of each for the possibility of critical discussion discussed. It is concluded that although it is essential in critical discussion to take the other's perspective into consideration, perspective-dependence does not exclude the possibility of criticism.

Keywords   Critical thinking · Epistemology · Perspectives · Presuppositions · Objectivity · Max Kölbel

In an overview of critical thinking theory, Kerry S. Walters criticises a traditional "logicistic" approach to critical thinking for not taking into account the subject- and context-dependence of claims and arguments, thereby obscuring factors that are essential for critical self-reflection (Walters 1994a). Logicism defines critical thinking exclusively in terms of logical principles and methods, such as inductive and deductive reasoning, fallacy recognition, statistical calculation, evidence assessment, and argument analysis. Applying these, one is supposed to focus exclusively on the inferential and evidential strengths of arguments, irrespective of considerations of their origin, ideological inflection, and historical setting, and to think objectively by suspending as much as possible of one's personal convictions, presuppositions, and biases.

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According to Walters and other thinkers in the "second wave" of critical thinking theory, good thinking requires logical skills but is not exclusively defined by them; creative imagination, empathy, and self-reflective awareness of one's own presuppositions are equally important (cf., for example, Mezirow 1977; Brookfield 1987; King and Kitchener 1994; Thayer-Bacon 2000; the contributions in Walters 1994b; Brodin 2007, Chap. 3). The good thinker goes beyond received claims and problems to envision other possibilities; he sometimes empathises with perspectives contrary to his own in order to explore their possibilities; he does not seek to suspend his presuppositions and prejudices altogether, but instead tries to become aware of them in order to make them available for self-critical reflection; and, in assessing an argument, he sometimes puts great weight on the particular social, historical or personal circumstances in which it was put forward (Walters 1994a). Thus, critical thinking requires one to self-reflectively identify presuppositions of one's own ideas, beliefs, values, and actions, to assess their validity, and to examine alternative ways of thinking and acting (cf. also Brookfield 1987, pp. 7–8). Moreover, the critical task of assessing people's arguments, statements, and actions is inseparable from the hermeneutical task of understanding them in terms of their wider contexts.

The main target of Walter's criticism is the informal logic tradition, which he largely identifies with the "first wave" of critical thinking theory. In addition to being logicistic, the informal logical tradition is typically philosophical and *normative* in its approach; the attempt to establish criteria for good and bad thinking is essential to it. "Second wave" critical thinking theorists, in contrast, are more social-scientific, pedagogical, psychological and non-normative in their approach. Indeed, the strong focus in second wave critical thinking theory on context- and perspective-dependence may appear to exclude any normative attempt to state abstract and universal principles of "right" thinking.

I believe that this assumption, plausible as it may seem, is mistaken. Emphasising contextuality, perspective-dependence, self-reflection, empathy and creativity is, I think, incompatible with logicistic reductionism, but compatible with a normative logical, methodological, and epistemological approach to critical thinking.

The purpose of the present paper is to make a certain idea in second wave critical thinking theory clearer from an epistemological rather than a pedagogical or psychological point of view; namely, the idea of perspective-dependence. Thus, I am not interested in the psychology or sociology of perspectives, or in methods for making people change perspectives, but in the consequences for the validity of critical assessments of the fact or supposed fact that statements are dependent on the perspectives from which they are made. What role do perspectives play in justification and critical questioning of beliefs?

Suppose that someone, call him the *critic*, assesses the validity of another person's assertions, call him simply *the other*. (This term is here intended to allow the possibility of the critic and the "other" being, in self-criticism, one and the same.) The general epistemological–methodological problem of critical thinking, as I understand it, is what method or methods a critic can follow in his assessments; what *evidence* he can use and by what steps of *inference* he can validly justify critical assessments. (Needless to say, no solution to this problem can have the

precision of formal logic.) By perspectives, I here mean presuppositions or sets of presuppositions underlying an individual's thinking or a critical discussion (if shared by the participants), both meaning presuppositions and factual and evaluative premises or background assumptions. (These correspond to Ennis's terms "presuppositions" and "premise-type assumptions" respectively; Ennis 1961.) A perspective can be simply the place in which a statement of a speaker is uttered (this seems to be the literal or non-extended meaning of the term), or more properly speaking the assumption that the statement is uttered from that place. This would be an example of meaning presuppositions, since it contributes to determining the reference of terms. But a speaker's perspective, or parts of it, can also be a scientific paradigm which he accepts, or a cultural tradition to which he belongs. Here, "perspective" refers to sets of background assumptions, or implicitly assumed premises. (On the methodological difficulties in presupposition ascription, see Ennis 1961; Turner 1994. For an overview of different uses of "perspective", see Graumann 2002a.) The rationale for employing the term "perspective" for both these types of phenomena, thus making it somewhat amorphous, is that both contribute to making statements perspective-dependent in ways that are important for critical thinking. By saying that a statement is perspective-dependent, I mean that its truth-value or degree of justification varies, *ceteris paribus*, with the perspective of the speaker or thinker. A critic who tries to assess the validity of the speaker's or thinker's statements needs to take this into consideration.

The notion of perspective-dependence sometimes seems to be associated, explicitly or implicitly, with the skeptical or relativistic idea that statements made within one perspective cannot be criticised by someone who sees things from a different perspective. One of my purposes is to question this idea. What does it mean to say that a statement is perspective-dependent? To what degree, if any, is it the case that a critic cannot assess statements made from another perspective? Can perspectives themselves be critically assessed; can they be true and false, right and wrong? What *is* a perspective, anyway?

The general plan is to first distinguish different ways in which statements can be perspective-dependent, and then try to show how critical discussion is possible despite perspective-dependence of each type. In Sect. 1, examples are introduced to illustrate three types of perspective-dependence, and preliminary analyses are given. The notion of a perspective is examined in Sect. 2, and the main arguments for compatibility of perspective-dependence and critical thinking are stated in Sect. 3. Finally, the conclusions are summed up in Sect. 4.

1 Three Types of Perspective-dependence

Consider the following simple example. Peter and Paul are searching for a ball. Just when Peter spots the ball in front of a tree, he hears Paul crying out "I see it. It's behind the tree". Imagine first that Peter replies "No, it's in front of the tree". And imagine next that he instead reasons as follows: "Paul sees the ball behind the tree. From my position, however, it is in front of it. Thus Paul must be on the other side of the tree." (Perhaps Peter looks to check.)

A first point which this example may serve to illustrate is simply the importance of taking perspectives into consideration when critically questioning the views of others and oneself. The evidence available to Peter—Paul's utterance and the visual evidence of the ball's position—leaves open two possibilities, either that Paul (strange as it may be under the circumstances) is mistaken, or that Paul is right but sees the ball from another perspective. The difference is evidently important, and consequently critics sometimes need to take notice of the perspectives of others, to self-reflectively acknowledge their own perspectives, and to examine the other's statements either from the other's perspective or as re-stated within their own perspectives. (For instance, Peter re-states "behind", uttered by Paul, as "in front of".) If they do not, they will incorrectly reject valid statements made from other perspectives, or mistakenly accept invalid ones.

A second point is that, at least sometimes, the perspective from which a statement is made is neither *right* nor *wrong*, or true or false; however, the statement itself is, and consequently there can be critical discussion about it. (The places from which Peter and Paul see the ball are neither right nor wrong, but what they say about it is.) Hence, a perspective-dependent statement can be open to critical discussion—there can be reasons for and against it, and there can be mistakes about it—although the underlying perspective is not. Let us call such statements *perspective-dependent but objective*. (The sense in which "objective" is used here will be explained later.)

A third point is that it is often (although perhaps not always) precisely by disagreeing with others that we realise the existence of different perspectives. The difference in perspective is made evident by the fact of disagreement—it is *because* Paul says something which from Peter's perspective seems obviously *wrong* that Peter, even before he has checked Paul's position by looking, has reason to conclude that there must be different perspectives at work.

A final point which the example may serve to illustrate is that disagreement leaves open in principle the alternative possibility that there is in fact *no* perspective difference but that the other is simply wrong. (In the example, this would mean that Paul, seeing the ball from the same angle, mistook its position or mistook it for something else.) If my critical assessment of another person's statement on some issue gives overwhelming evidence against it, this can be *either* because there is something in *my* perspective which leads me to assess it incorrectly, *or* because the other has made a mistake and the statement at issue is wrong—from *his* perspective, not only from mine. (An interesting special case would be that someone makes a statement which is wrong from his own perspective and right from that of a critic.)

Let us now consider a different type of perspective-dependence, which seems more deeply problematic for critical thinking. Suppose that Peter comes from a part of northern Sweden where *surströmming*, fermented Baltic herring, is a traditional dish, and that he himself finds it extremely tasty. Paul is of a different opinion, however, and thinks that *surströmming* both smells and tastes like rotten fish. Unlike the previous example, this seems to be a typical case where no critical discussion is possible. It is at least conceivable that no argument which Peter can present will be sufficient to give Paul valid reasons to change his mind. Indeed, it seems that there *is* no right or wrong about the matter, so that neither Peter nor Paul can be correctly said to have made a mistake. The matter is one of taste, and therefore one on which

there can be no critical discussion—*de gustibus non disputandum est*. It is a *non-objective* matter, one in which there is no objective, perspective-independent truth. (See Kölbel 2002, pp. 98ff. The example is a variant of one of Kölbel's.)

One way to describe the situation here is to say that Peter and Paul are *neither right nor wrong*. Another way to describe it is to say that each of them (presumably) is right *from his own perspective*; the statement "*Surströmming* is tasty" is true from Peter's perspective, but false from that of Paul. I think the latter description has the advantage of allowing the possibility that one may be *mistaken* from one's own perspective (cf. Kölbel 2002, p. 100). For instance, it is conceivable that Paul finds, after tasting *surströmming* with milk, chopped onion, and thin flat unleavened bread, that he was wrong and that it *is* in fact tasty (according to *his* taste, that is). (See also below on the context-dependence of objectivity and non-objectivity.)

Comparing this to the first example, we may note that in both cases, a critic must take into consideration the difference in perspective between himself and the other, and in both cases, neither of the two perspectives can be said to be right or wrong. But in the second example, the same goes for the matter itself; there can be no reasons for or against any of the two opposing views, no right or wrong and therefore no critical discussion—or so it would seem.

Let us now consider a third type of perspective dependence. In the two examples above, what depended on the speaker's perspective was the *meaning* and *truth* of the statements at issue. However, there is a use of the notion of a perspective in which perspectives affect *justification* rather than truth. Two persons may have different evidence such that one of them has reasons to believe that p while the other has reason to believe that not-p. (For instance, an object may look round from Peter's perspective and square from that of Paul.)

Things become more complicated when the perspective which contributes to the justification of a statement is a system of background assumptions, such as a scientific or cultural tradition, rather than simple observational evidence. Suppose that someone says: "From a Newtonian perspective, planetary motion is a more complex physical phenomenon than from a Platonic-Ptolemaic perspective." (The Newtonian sees it as the result of two forces, inertia and gravitation, while the Ptolemaic astronomer sees it more simply as a case of the circular motion of celestial bodies.) To add a similar example from a different area of thought, suppose that someone says: "From a Muslim perspective, polygamy is acceptable under certain circumstances, but from a mainstream Christian perspective it is not."

Note to begin with how well this way of using the notion of a perspective conforms with ordinary usage. But note also how difficult it is to classify the matters under consideration—the degree of complexity of planetary motion and the moral merits and demerits of polygamy respectively—as either objective or non-objective. An epistemological and moral objectivist would argue that the perspectives involved can be right and wrong, that there can be reasons for and against them, and that the same holds for the matters themselves; for instance, astronomical observation has disproved the background assumption that celestial bodies move in perfect circles and thereby also the view that planetary motion is simple in the sense at issue. A non-objectivist may respond that the opposing views belong to different scientific paradigms and cultural traditions respectively, that there is no

"Archimedean point" from which entire paradigms and cultures can be impartially assessed, and that there is therefore no meaningful sense in which a common truth of the matter exists (see, for instance, Kuhn 1970).

According to the objectivist interpretation, there is a sharp distinction between *justification* and *truth* with regard to our two example statements. It is the former rather than the latter which depends on the underlying perspectives. The Newtonian laws of gravitation and inertia, the Platonic principle that celestial bodies move in perfect circles, and the Platonic assumption that planets are such bodies, are the background assumptions which provide *reasons* for holding the two opposing views on the nature of planetary motion, but they do not make either of them *true or false*. The non-objectivist, by contrast, will dispute any such sharp distinction between justification and truth in clashes between paradigms and cultures. Not only the justification but also the truth of the matter is paradigm- and tradition-dependent. Thus, for instance, Thomas Kuhn famously claims that after Copernicus, astronomers "lived in a different world" (Kuhn 1970, p. 117).

In sum, then, our examples in the present section illustrate three different ways in which statements (beliefs, etc.) can be perspective-dependent. The *meaning* of perspective-dependent objective statements depends, among other things, on the place in which they are uttered, but critical discussion of such statements is nevertheless possible, provided that the critic takes the perspective of the other into consideration. The *truth conditions* of non-objective statements are perspective-dependent, in a way which at least *prima facie* seems to exclude the possibility of critical discussion. A third type of statements depend for their *justification* on evidence and background assumptions, in such ways that, according to a non-objectivist interpretation, not only their justification but indirectly also their truth is in some cases perspective-dependent, in which case there can be no critical discussion about them, or at least none stated from within a different perspective. According to an objectivist interpretation, however, such matters are in principle open to critical discussion.

Below, I will present three arguments for compatibility of perspective-dependence and critical discussion, each of which concerns one of the three types of perspective-dependence just discerned. The first is that perspective-dependent objective statements can be re-stated within other perspectives. The second is that objectivity and non-objectivity are context-dependent in such a way that even matters which would normally be considered non-objective can become the object of critical reasoning. The third argument is that perspectives are sometimes capable of being true and false, or at least must be treated as such in critical discussion.

Before considering these arguments, however, we need to reflect for a moment on the question of what exactly a perspective-dependent statement depends *on*. What is a perspective?

2 The Nature of a Perspective

The notion of a perspective occurs in ordinary language, and has special uses in the theory and history of visual arts, in philosophy, linguistics, sociology, history, and

psychology (Graumann 2002a, p. 25). In sociology, for example, George Herbert Mead and Alfred Schütz emphasized the importance of perspective-taking for human communication and interaction, and in philosophy, Nietzsche and others have seen perspectivity as a fundamental trait of human cognition and knowledge-seeking (Graumann and Kallmeyer 2002, p. 2). Although, as one author points out, "'perspective' is not, and cannot easily be made into, a very precise notion", it has an important analytical function in that "it points to possible differences in talking or thinking about (what is somehow) the 'same' topic. It is on this point, mainly in the analysis of different ways of treating a given subject matter, that we need it" (Linell 2002, p. 53). The lesson to draw from the multiplicity of uses, therefore, is not that the concept should be abandoned, but that the specific usages should be explicitly marked in order to avoid misunderstanding (Graumann 2002a, p. 25).

In a truth-theoretical discussion of truth, relativity, and perspective-dependence, Max Kölbel provides a definition that seems particularly relevant to the understanding of critical thinking. Kölbel defines a perspective as a function from propositions (or contents) to truth-values (Kölbel 2002, p. 100). (On the notion of a perspective, cf. also Moore 1997 and Redding 2003.) For instance, Peter's perspective in the example would assign the value "true" to the proposition "The ball is in front of the tree", while Paul's perspective would assign it the value "false".

Kölbel's definition provides no more than a highly abstract explication of the notion of perspectives. Can it be made more specific and concrete? What types of factors constitute or determine a perspective, in the sense (or senses) of the word that is relevant to the understanding of critical inquiry? (For the reasons just stated, no attempt will be made to provide a general definition.)

It is difficult if not impossible to make anything like a complete enumeration here. In what follows I will just attempt to point out some aspects of perspectives that seem particularly important. Some of the concepts employed in the list are perhaps no more clear than that of a perspective, and I am not sure how to make them clearer. Still, I hope that listing them will give a more precise over-all picture.

Before going on to state the list, we should reflect on the conceptual role of the notion of a perspective in critical thinking theory. In philosophy of language, perspectives are important because *meaning* and *truth*, to some degree or other, are relative to position, among other things, as the case of the ball exemplifies. *Rationality*, or the having of good reasons for a belief, statement, or action, is also relative to perspectives. And speaking psychologically, we may say that beliefs, statements and actions depend causally on the thinker's, speaker's, or agent's perspective; depending on their circumstances, experiences, and background assumptions, people form different beliefs in similar situations, and speak and act differently. When defining perspectives as functions from propositions to truth-values, Kölbel has in mind what I here call truth perspectives. Drawing on Kölbel's definition, we can define rationality perspectives as logical functions from propositions to degrees of justification, and psychological perspectives as causal functions or mechanisms from propositions to states of belief (and disbelief). Depending on which kind of perspective is at the focus of our investigation, we will have to include different factors when explicating the concept. Evidence, for

instance, would be part of a person's *rationality perspective*, as we may call it, but not of his *truth* (or rightness) *perspective*, and the psychological fact of what one actually believes may depend on all sorts of irrational factors that form part of one's world-view or *psychological perspective*.

Since our topic is critical thinking and not psychological explanation, we can exclude psychological perspectives immediately. It seems to me that for a critic, the rationality of beliefs and statements has no more than an indirect interest, as far as it can contribute to determining their truth or rightness; it *does* have such an indirect interest, however, because critics often cannot decide the truth directly and with certainty, but need to reason indirectly and probabilistically by weighing the relevant evidence and trying to draw the most likely conclusion from it. Therefore, not only factors pertaining directly to meaning and truth will be included in our list of perspective factors, but also evidence and background assumptions.

In its most literal or direct sense, the term perspective refers to the place from which a subject visually perceives a given object. If Peter and Paul make prima facie contradictory statements about the ball's position, and see the ball from (closely enough) the same place, then one of them must be mistaken, but if they are standing at opposite sides of the tree, both may be right. More precisely, one of them must be mistaken if they are seeing the ball from the same place at the same *time*—a moving ball can of course be behind the tree at t_1 and in front of it at t_2 as seen from the same place. Hence *place* and *time* (or assumptions about the time and place of an utterance) are perspective factors.

Time and place could be termed *external*, or relatively subject-independent perspective factors, in contrast to inner or more *subject-related* factors, which are less bound up with the external, subject-independent situation and more with the situation-independent idiosyncrasies of an individual subject or a group of subjects. Among these are those which may be referred to as *objects of comparison*. When one says, for instance, that an object is small or large, or expected or unexpected, one is explicitly or implicitly assuming something *in relation to which* it is big, unexpected, and so forth.

Perspectives are also determined by *languages*, or conceptual systems, including entire languages and the language use of groups and individuals; the same word may mean different things in different languages, or dialects, or specialised vocabularies, and in different contexts within the same language, dialect, or specialised vocabulary.

Time, place, objects of comparison, and language contribute to determining the *meaning* of what I have called perspective-dependent objective statements. Strictly speaking, the properties of being perspective-dependent and objective are mutually exclusive (so that perhaps it would be better to talk of "potentially objective" or "de-relativisable" statements). The expression "perspective-dependent objective" is intended to bring out that such statements can be re-stated without essential loss of meaning in other perspectives in such ways that they can be validly criticised from within those perspectives—thus Peter's "in front of" becomes Paul's "behind"—and translated into objective (or more objective) statements in what could be called a more general, or less idiosyncratic and subjective-dependent perspective—thus "in front of" becomes "west of".

As we have seen, *taste* is a subject-related truth perspective factor for a different type of statements, namely, non-objective statements. For instance, what made "*Surströmming* is tasty" true in Peter's perspective and false in Paul's was simply their different tastes. According to Kölbel, *subjective probability*, or probability as understood in subjectivist interpretations of the concept, is a perspective factor for similar reasons (Kölbel 2002).

We have also noted that the *evidence* available to a person at a given time is part of his rationality perspective, as are *background assumptions*, both factual and evaluative

This brings into focus a difference between the perspective factors appearing on our list, namely, that some of them are capable at least in principle of being *right* or *wrong*, or *true* or *false*, while others are not. It seems difficult to make sense of the question whether a time or a place was right or wrong (although of course beliefs about time and place can be either). However, if a critic assesses a statement made by an other by tracking the background assumptions or presuppositions on which it is based, he can sometimes ask whether these assumptions are right—indeed, it seems difficult to avoid that question if from the critic's perspective, given *his* background beliefs, they seem wrong, perhaps even radically unreasonable. We can therefore distinguish what could be called *correctness-capable* perspective factors—evidence and background assumptions—from perspective factors that are correctness-*in*capable, or beyond the possibility of being correct or mistaken.

3 The Compatibility of Perspective-dependence and Criticism

On the background of what has already been said, the first argument for compatibility of perspective-dependence and critical discussion can be stated briefly. We may talk of *re-statements* or *interpretations* of perspective-dependent objective statements (propositions, beliefs, etc.). Since these depend for their meaning on the place and time in which the statements are made, on the speaker's presupposed objects of comparison, and on his language and language use, the critic must re-state them within either a perspective in which a different place, time, etc, is presupposed, or a more general perspective which does not in the same way presuppose any particular time, etc. One particular way of interpretation from a more general perspective may be called *de-relativisation*, by which I mean the explicit formulation, as part of the translated statements, of the otherwise presupposed relational terms—yielding, for instance, the re-stated expressions "behind the tree *as seen from Paul's position*", or "behind the tree as seen from the eastern side of the tree". Interpretation is of course associated with all sorts of methodological and other problems, but re-statements of the kind at issue here at least do not seem more problematic than other kinds of interpretation. If correctly made, they allow the critic to put forward valid reasons for or against the other's statements.

My second main argument for the compatibility of perspective-dependence and criticism has to do with the nature of objectivity and non-objectivity; what I want to

propose is that non-objectivity in many contexts is *not* a hindrance for critical discussion. Again, my analysis is based on Kölbel's.

Kölbel formulates the following criterion for objectivity and non-objectivity: A proposition *p* is non-objective if there can be *faultless disagreement* about it, that is, if it can be the case that one speaker holds that *p* and the other that not-*p* and none of them has made a *cognitive mistake*, which means that none of them has reasoned from incomplete or misleading evidence or drawn conclusions which do not follow from the evidence (Kölbel 2002, p. 100 and Chap. 2). In other words, if two speakers assign opposite truth-values to a proposition or statement—"*Surströmming* is tasty", for instance—and, like Peter and Paul, none of them is wrong, then the matter under discussion is non-objective. Conversely, the matter is objective if it can only be the case that two speakers disagree on it if one of them has made a cognitive mistake.

A consequence of this analysis is that the objectivity and non-objectivity of a statement is, in a certain sense, relative to the context, or more precisely, to the perspectives of the participants in a given discussion or communication (see Kölbel 2002, p. 108). Suppose that someone utters something which a critic considers false. There are then two possibilities, either (i) that the other's statement would be false and due to a cognitive mistake if it were uttered from the critic's perspective, but is not when uttered from that of the other, or (ii) that it is false and due to a cognitive mistake from the perspectives of both the critic *and* the other. In the latter case, although not in the former, the critic *can* present reasons against (and for) the statement which are valid in the other's perspective. Suppose, for instance, that Peter and Paul both love *surströmming* and both like it firm in consistence but not too salty. "Borkbo *surströmming* is tastier than Höga kusten (High Coast) *surströmming*", says Peter. "You are wrong", Paul replies, "Borkbo is too salty this year. Höga kusten tastes better". To resolve the dispute, they agree to make an empirical test by tasting both brands. The result is that Peter admits that he was wrong and that Höga kusten *surströmming* is tastier, for the reason stated by Paul. Moreover, he explains that he based his opinion on incomplete evidence—he had tasted last year's brands, but not this year's—and had drawn hasty conclusions from it. Hence, the initial disagreement was due to the fact that Peter had made a cognitive mistake and was wrong, within his own *and* Paul's perspective.

What this implies is that a given matter of discussion is neither objective nor non-objective in itself, independent of the context of discussion. Its objectivity or otherwise depends on the perspectives of the participants in the discussion. If the participants share a perspective, in all aspects relevant to the matter, then the matter is objective, relative to their common perspective. The term "objective" here obviously does not carry the metaphysical sense of something that exists independently of all human observers. It means no more than what is captured by Kölbel's criterion. But as far as I can see, objectivity in this sense—"non-absolute objectivity", one might call it—is all that is required for critical discussion, for it to be possible to exchange valid reasons between two or more speakers for and against their respective statements and beliefs.

In sum, then, the relativity or context-dependence of objectivity and non-objectivity, in the senses just explained, implies that there *can* be critical discussion

even about non-objective matters, or matters that would normally be considered typical cases of non-objectivity, such as matters of taste, the condition being that the critic and the other have sufficiently and relevantly similar perspectives.

The third argument for the compatibility of perspective-dependence and criticism is partly a corollary of the second. We have seen that statements of the third type of perspective-dependent statements discerned earlier depend for their justification on evidence and background assumptions, and that some such statements—those disputed between scientific paradigms and cultural traditions—can be interpreted either as objective or as non-objective. If objectivity and non-objectivity is context-dependent in the way suggested above, then matters under dispute are non-objective if—and *only* if—the parties to the dispute have sufficiently and relevantly different perspectives; otherwise they are objective (at least in the sense of "non-absolute" objectivity). A question here is in what way it can be decided whether there exist such perspective differences between participants in a discussion. The mere fact of disagreement is not sufficient, since it can in principle be due to a cognitive mistake on either side.

Consider the following suggestion for a criterion: a matter of dispute should be deemed non-objective if the antagonists cannot reach agreement *despite their best efforts*—if each of them has presented all the arguments he can think of without managing to convince the other, both have reasoned to the best of their rational capacity, and both have good knowledge of the matter and well developed reasoning skills. It seems difficult to come up with a better practically applicable criterion than this. Nevertheless, I think it is clearly insufficient. Perhaps some matters are just very much harder than others to reason about, so that even the very best thinkers proceed from incomplete evidence or get entangled in reasoning from it which the evidence does not really support. What looks like evidence of different perspectives may be no more than unskillful or less than optimal reasoning.

A parallel question in science would be whether there exist parts of nature that do not obey natural laws and consequently cannot be rationally explained. Suppose that scientists fail to come up with a theory about a certain natural phenomenon, despite the very best efforts of a large number of experts working over a long period of time. Should they conclude that the phenomenon at issue is unexplainable, or that it is explainable in principle but that they have so far failed to come up with the right theory? The evidence is logically compatible with both possibilities. I think it speaks strongly in favour of the second conclusion, however, that there appears to exist no other way in which one could possibly decide the matter than by actually discovering the laws of the phenomenon. If they are discovered, one knows (fallibly, of course) that they exist; if they are not, one does not know whether there are no laws or whether one has just failed to find them. Lawfulness can be proven (confirmed, corroborated), but unlawfulness cannot. Hence there is no other way to answer the question *whether* the laws exist than by searching for them, assuming, as a methodological device, *that* they exist (which is of course not to *prove* that they do).

It seems to me that something very similar is true of radical differences in perspective. Since background assumptions are often implicit, it is difficult to imagine any other way for the participants in a discussion to determine whether they

share an underlying perspective or not, than to simply discuss the matter and, to the best of their ability, try to reach agreement on rational grounds. If they eventually do, they have reason to conclude that, despite initial appearances, they did share a common perspective. If they do not and the discussion concerns some very simple matter, such as the taste of *surströmming*, then it may perhaps be possible to exclude any conceivable cognitive mistake (incomplete evidence, and so on) and so to infer that the participants in the discussion do have different perspectives. But if the discussion concerns a matter of greater complexity, then it is much more difficult, if not impossible, to exclude the possibility that the disagreement is due to some cognitive mistake by one or more of the participants; even if they fail to reach agreement despite their best efforts, they do not know whether they have fundamentally different perspectives, or have not thought of all the relevant reasons pertaining to the matter, have not been sufficiently open-minded, or have otherwise made a cognitive mistake. If so, the only possible way to search for an answer to the question whether a fundamental perspective difference exists is to carry on critical discussion, proceeding from the methodological assumption that the participants have the same fundamental perspectives. (This is similar to Davidson's argument that two persons would have different "conceptual schemes" if some sentences could not be translated from the language of one to that of the other, but that "nothing could count as evidence that some form of activity could not be interpreted in our language that was not at the same time evidence that that form of activity was not speech behaviour", and to his argument that translation must proceed on the methodological assumption that there is general agreement with the other, so that apparent massive disagreement with the other must be treated as indication of mistranslation; Davidson 1974/1984, quotation from p. 185.)

So far, I have spoken of objectivity and non-objectivity in relation to two people disputing some matter, but essentially the same argument applies to a single person reflecting on assumptions which are particularly fundamental to his system of beliefs. If he finds that these assumptions cannot be defended by argument against conflicting assumptions in other traditions of thought, then it may appear that he has reason to conclude that they are non-objective and beyond the range of rational critical inquiry; but again, the possibility remains that there exist reasons, criteria, or methods which he has overlooked.

It is difficult to find a reasonably clear example to illustrate this point, and probably impossible to find one that is not highly disputable. Let me nevertheless propose the example of Muslim and feminist perspectives on polygamy. In an influential essay, Susan Moller Okin criticises the Muslim practice of polygamy and other Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions for the oppression of women which, she argues, is a consequence of them (Moller Okin 1999). This seems prima facie like a case where certain fundamental principles of thought stand against each other and no room for critical discussion is left; a principle based on the authority of the Quran and hadiths is challenged by modern feminism, and vice versa. But in response to Moller Okin, critics have argued, among other things, that her interpretation of Islam is simplistic and based on incomplete knowledge (al-Hibri 1999), and that she underestimates the potential for change in Muslim and other non-Western cultures, implicitly assuming "that while 'we' can survive change and

innovation and endure the tensions created by modernity, 'they' cannot; that 'we' can repeatedly reinvent ourselves, our culture, our tradition, while 'they' must adhere to known cultural patterns" (Tamir 1999, p. 51)—or, in sum, that she sees a fundamental gap between perspectives where there is really none, but only differences of opinion open in principle—although obviously not always in practice—to critical discussion.

4 Conclusion: Confronting Different Perspectives

Suppose that we are trying to understand and morally assess the customs of a people with a very different culture. In the case of some of their practices and beliefs, we find that the others react just the way we ourselves would find it reasonable to react in the same circumstances; they are hungry, and they eat; they are insulted, and they get angry, etc. Thus, we can make perfect sense of what they do and say from within our own perspective, or so it seems. (Such impressions can of course be deceptive if the others do what we would, but for quite incompatible reasons.) In other cases, however, we find that the others do and say things that seem clearly unjustified according to our norms of speech and behaviour. For example, we find that they have the custom of instructing their children to play war games where stones are thrown at the opponents, that children are occasionally killed in these games, and that the adults, although they mourn those killed in this way, continue to encourage the games. Here, it seems impossible to understand and agree with the others while remaining within the perspective of our own culture; given *our* moral standards and what we know of the circumstances, it seems that nothing can justify such a practice. To assess it, it seems, a critic must shift perspective, or at least somehow take the difference in perspectives into account. What can this mean?

First, it is conceivable that by learning more about the people we are trying to understand, we find that the particular circumstances under which they live in fact makes the practice justifiable, even according to *our* moral standards—say, because they inhabit an overpopulated area with constant wars over territory going on between rival tribes, where it is of crucial importance for the survival of each tribe that their young ones develop fearlessness and insensitivity to pain from an early age, and where the practice of encouraging realistic war games among children is, to everyone's regret, the only means to achieve this. Seeing things from the other's perspective in this case means taking time, place, and other relevant facts of the matter into account. This could be called *conservative perspective shift*, since it does not require us, as critics, to change or in any way abandon our own moral principles or standards of extra-moral rationality.

Suppose now instead that taking all relevant facts into account is *not* sufficient to make the custom we are trying to understand justifiable according to the moral standards of our own culture, but that the attempt to interpret the other culture and the careful weighing of arguments for and against it has the effect of making us question and revise some of our own general moral standards and factual beliefs that made the custom unacceptable to us. We thus recognise a genuine conflict between our own culture and that of the others, and admit that the others are right. Hence, we

may say that we *learn* from the others. Let us call this *dialogical change of perspective*, since what happens resembles a conversation or dialogue where one of the parties, or both, revise their beliefs as a result of the dialogue. A genuine conflict is found to exist between the cultures of the interpreter and the other, and as a consequence, the critic changes his own perspective (in this case, his moral background assumptions). (It may be difficult to distinguish dialogical and conservative perspective shifts since the demarcation line between beliefs on particular facts on the one hand and more general and fundamental moral principles and factual beliefs on the other is not sharp.)

A third possible way of relating to a different and conflicting culture or tradition in critical assessment is to *not* shift perspective; instead of trying to make sense of the practice from within either our own culture or that of the other, we simply condemn it as unjustified, and try to find an explanation for it that does not presuppose its rationality from any perspective. Note that this does *not* mean saying that their truth or rationality perspective is fundamentally different from ours, but rather that they have made a cognitive mistake—perhaps because they have been less rational about the matter at issue, which in turn can be due to social, historical or other factors.

If I am right, all these possibilities are in principle open when we are confronted with a perspective radically different from our own. As critics, we need to observe perspective differences and compensate for them. Doing this, we may sometimes find that the others' beliefs, statements and actions are right "from their own perspective" but not from ours, or rather, from *both* perspectives once the relevant circumstances, objects of comparison or other aspects of their frames of reference are taken into account. In other cases, however, we find that the disagreement goes deeper and affects even our most fundamental factual and moral convictions. In such cases, we cannot avoid the—notoriously difficult—question whether they or we are right; whether we should learn from them or they from us.

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