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OBJECTIVE KNOWLEDGE
AS INTERSUBJECTIVE AGREEMENT

Abstract

In this paper, I will show how Richard Rorty's critiques of objectivity fail to explain some degrees of objectivity that are achieved through scientific knowledge. On the one hand, I will analyze Rorty's objections to the classical view on epistemic values (such as truth, justification or objectivity). On the other hand, I will try a critical approach on Rorty's solution to the problem of objectivity. I will argue that Rorty is right in emphasizing that knowledge has an important social component but his dismissal of the classical desiderata, out of which the most important one is the possibility of a direct confrontation with the reality, is rather hard to accept.

Keywords: Rorty, objectivity, scientific knowledge, representation, truth, vocabulary, holism

The accessibility of the classical desideratum of objectivity has become problematic mostly because of the attack of the twentieth century philosophers on the presuppositions held by ancient and modern thinkers. Consequently, the different answers to the question concerning the possibility of objective knowledge have developed into distinct concepts: supplementing the classical presuppositions, defining objectivity from the perspective of scientific knowledge or weakening the concept of objectivity. In this paper, I will present the way in which Richard Rorty approaches objectivity as a classical desideratum of epistemologists and I will critically analyze his solution that proposes that we give up the objectivist aspirations and rely on intersubjective agreement.

1. The classical concept of objectivity and its critique

According to a conception that goes back to ancient philosophy, objective knowledge has some characteristics that express both an optimistic view on the human faculties of knowledge and a privileged relationship of the knowing subject with the world. These characteristics can be summarized as following:

(1) Objective knowledge is a consequence of the relationship of the knowing subject with the nature of things.

(2) All instantiations of this kind of knowledge are based on a correspondence between our statements and reality.

(3) "God's eye view", which tells us how things really are, is achievable.

(4) Objective knowledge, accessible to human beings, is the goal towards which all our philosophical or scientific preoccupations must converge.

According to (1), objectivity is possible through man's access to the nature of things, which is rendered possible by the correspondence asserted at (2). After assuming (2), we naturally require a point of view to sustain the existence and possibility of the correspondence, which proves to be "God's eye view", present at (3). These assumptions entail that objective knowledge, as made possible, is the goal of any research, as expressed at (4). Synthesizing, we could say that, from a traditional perspective, there are two essential constituents of objective knowledge. The former is the acceptance of the correspondence theory of truth, by (1) and (2), and the latter, illustrated best by Thomas Nagel's expression "the view from nowhere", is present through (3) and (4). As we shall see, in the classical approach these two elements are interdependent. A correspondence theory of truth accepted uncritically usually requires a "view from nowhere", while this kind of view should able to point out the necessary connections between words and things. This view has many drawbacks, emphasized by certain contemporary philosophers. I will follow the criticism employed by Richard Rorty and his solution to the problem of objectivity.

In "Solidarity or Objectivity?"[1], Rorty considers that reflexive beings have two ways of giving meaning to their lives: by objectivity or by solidarity. Objectivity is the classical way, proposed by Plato and Aristotle, while solidarity is preferred by pragmatists. Rorty's attack goes against the requirement of objectivity which leads to a constant detachment of one's community and to the idea of truth as a central theme in philosophy and as a goal for its own sake. By leaving their communities behind and contemplating the nature of things, philosophers can find out what transcends humanity. Solidarity is possible only in the framework offered by this objectivity. Rorty considers that this point of view is sustained by realist philosophers. In order to defend this view, realists need the adequate metaphysical grounds to sustain the correspondence theory of truth and an epistemology that permits natural justification. These points, essential for realism are vulnerable to many objections and, Rorty considers, can no longer be sustained, their replacement by an ethic basis being imperative. First of all, I will follow the threats raised against the classical view on objectivity and I will see how serious they are.

As we saw earlier, Rorty's objections against objectivity concern the metaphysics employed by the correspondence theory of truth and the epistemology that

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[1] Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, Cambridge University Press, 1991.

considers truth a goal in itself, found out there in the world, waiting to be discovered. In "Texts and lumps"[2], Rorty says that the correspondence theory of truth must be eliminated for various reasons. First, this theory is based on the presupposition that language cuts through reality, that the way in which we say something is determined by the reality. Second, should we accept correspondence-truth; we must accept that reality has a nature to which we must correspond. Lastly, Rorty mentions the fact that one of the vocabularies is preferred by the Universe, or, how he puts it in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, "It becomes hard to think that that vocabulary is somehow already out there in the world, waiting for us to discover it"[3]. To what extent do these objections affect the classical view on truth?

To the first one it could be answered from the larger framework which Rorty presents in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, specifically, the contingency of language. If the words we use are contingent and there is no privileged vocabulary, this does not mean that there isn't a nature of things. Alternative vocabularies can lead us to the same end, especially when we refer to scientific activity. Thus we see that, if we accept more alternative vocabularies, contingent, not imposed by reality, we do not refute the idea of an ultimate truth and, consequently, this does not undermine the realist theses. Ian Hacking brings this into attention in *The Social Construction of What?*. His considerations concerning the physical theories work as well for the other sciences: "Formally speaking, the contingency thesis is entirely consistent with the ultimate one-and-only picture upon which inquiry in the physical sciences will converge. For there could be many roads to the one true ultimate theory, or none at all"[4]. Concerning the second objection, the problem is whether we have any choice in corresponding to reality or not. As Rorty himself puts it, "Human finitude is not an objection to a philosophical view"[5]. The third objection, as we saw earlier, can no longer be sustained because truth can be expressed in more than one vocabulary. However, the issue concerning the nature of the correspondence between language and reality still stands. Furthermore, an objection that raises many difficulties for those who sustain the correspondence theory of truth is that we cannot go beyond simple coherence. To put it another way, there is no Archimedic point from where to view the relationship between our sentences and the world; we only have access to our beliefs as a system and their coherence. Here, Rorty's critique expands from the correspondence theory of truth to God's eye view, which sustains it.

Concerning the objections that refer to the quest for truth as a goal for its own sake, Rorty sustains, following Thomas Kuhn, that we can rewrite the history of science of philosophy anytime as converging to a certain point, but that does not

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[2] Ibidem.
[3] Idem, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, Cambridge University Press, 1989, pp. 5-6.
[4] Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?*, Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 78.
[5] Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p. 102.

mean that we are really pursuing a goal already set out there in the world. This is a hard blow against the objectivity thesis: if we cannot leave our cultural or historic framework how do we know whether our activities converge to a truth already set out there? In the same way, Rorty states that we can obtain the agreement of certain groups or communities, but we cannot rise above all. In these conditions, objectivity is seriously threatened.

We saw that Rorty's objections do not affect the main realist presuppositions, but bring some serious doubts concerning the objectivity of the choice between different vocabularies. The problem is not about the value of an ideal we seek, but rather how we come to achieve it. We saw that the existence of an objective truth, independent of us is not threatened by Rorty's arguments. However, the accessibility of this truth or objectivity becomes problematic.

Finally, there are Rorty's considerations on the larger context of representationalism which he attack beginning with his fundamental work, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Objective knowledge, along with other problems of traditional philosophy, bears the sign of "mirroring": "The picture which holds traditional philosophy captive is that of the mind as a great mirror, containing various representations - some adequate, some not – and capable of being studied by pure, nonempirical methods"[6]. Objectivity is, therefore, rendered possible by the means of what Rorty calls, following Peirce, "glassy essence", man's essence of mirroring nature, of representing it correctly. Thus the idea of a direct perception, of a direct contact with reality: "The damage done by the idea 'idea' in modern philosophy was done by the pseudo-explanation of epistemic authority through the notion of 'direct acquaintance' by the 'Eye of the Mind' with mental entities such as sense-data and meanings"[7]. Here, it becomes clear that objectivity is only a result of an old and wrong view upon knowledge, based on the visual metaphor. According to representationalism, the truths are available to us as well as various things from the sensible world. This perspective is parasitic upon the credit given to our senses, thought as being able to mirror the nature of things. As Rorty argues, modern philosophers such as John Locke did not consider knowledge justified true belief (knowledge *that* p) but rather, descriptive knowledge. This flaw is, once again, due to the essentialist perspective. Once this metaphor has been exposed and its uselessness has been proven, philosophy must "banish" epistemology from its role of "first philosophy" conferred by modern thinkers.

We see how Rorty's objections concern the metaphysical issue, as objections to the correspondence theory of truth, the epistemological one, against objectivity as a goal and the metaphilosophical one, by explaining and criticizing the traditional view upon knowledge. We saw that not all his attacks on realism can be

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[6] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the mirror of nature*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1979, p. 12.
[7] Ibidem, p. 209

sustained, but also that the classical view has to answer to some major objections. Following the problems raised by Rorty, we must answer the question "how is objectivity possible?" In order to observe the characteristics of Rorty's solution I will follow the views in epistemology and philosophy of science that have preceded him, especially that of W.V. Quine.

2. Science and objectivity

Quine proposes a naturalized perspective upon epistemology, where science cannot be studied from the outside, but only from within a scientific theory. This shouldn't worry those who sustain objectivity, because we start exclusively from the results of science: "Unlike the old epistemologists, we seek no firmer basis for science than science itself; so we are free to use the very fruits of science in investigating its roots"[8]. The validity of a scientific theory can be decided by means of observing certain facts in nature. Thus, observation sentences are, in Quine's view, closest to reality. By observation sentence, Quine understands "an occasion sentence on which speakers of the language can agree outright on witnessing the occasion"[9], the main characteristics of observation sentences being that they "are the link between the language, scientific or not, and the real world that language is all about"[10]. However, observation sentences are not the only constituents of science; more general sentences can be inferred from them, until we come to theoretical sentences that have only an indirect connection with experience. This way, the structure of knowledge as a web of belief becomes clear: the observation sentences are at its margins, while the theoretical sentences from logic or mathematics are at its core. It is important to specify that the observation sentences can be true or false, depending on the context in which they are uttered. The sentences found in the center of the "web", also called "eternal sentences", are true independent of any context.

Quine's epistemological holism sustains that a theory must confront evidence as a whole. However, experience alone cannot confirm a whole theory, thus the problem of underdetermination. Also, the refutation of a theory becomes problematic: it is hard to decide which sentences must be considered false after a "recalcitrant observation", furthermore, abandoning one sentence leads to the falsity of other interconnected sentences. Even more difficulties spring when it comes to choosing between rival theories. Two theories can be logically incompatible: let's say that the theory T1 contains the sentence p and the theory T2 contains $\neg p$, but the two theories are supported by the same empirical evidence. We can only make a choice from within one of the theories and not in the virtue of an external crite-

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[8] W.V. Quine, *From Stimulus to Science*, Harvard University Press, 1995, p. 12.
[9] Idem, *The pursuit of Truth*, Harvard University Press 1990, p. 3.
[10] Ibidem, p. 5.

rion. Therefore, in Quine's view, there is no theory-free perspective. Objectivity is only possible as long as at least some theories can be improved through observation. We see how Quine explains objectivity rejecting the presupposition of a theory independent view.

Quine also rejects the second characteristic of objectivity in the traditional view, the correspondence theory of truth, choosing a deflationary theory of truth. He defines truth as disquotation of a sentence. For example, if "Grass is green" is true, then grass is green. This is the lowest level of using the predicate "true", or truth 0, as Quine puts it. In order to avoid paradoxes, more levels of applying the predicate "true" are required. Truth 1 works for sentences that contain "true" or "false". For example, "The proposition from page 5 is false" is true it the proposition from page 5 is false. For Quine, wondering which level of the hierarchy is the most important one is counterproductive because in most situations truth 0 is enough.

At this point it becomes clear that another perspective upon the problem of objectivity is possible. Although he does not accept the classical characteristics, Quine does not deny the possibility of objective knowledge, preferring a weaker sense. The philosophers who follow Quinean holism and use it as a mean of undermining the aspirations to objectivity seem to ignore the status of science and the sentences placed in the center of the "web of belief".

When Davidson says that "nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief"[11], he denies any criterion outside our own set of beliefs. According to Davidson, truth is, strictly speaking, a propriety belonging to sentences, which can be verified only by confronting them with other sentences, not with the "facts". Consequently, truth is dependent upon language. The difference from Quine's holism is considerable: we no longer have access to nature, not even in a limited area of our "web of belief".

Other attacks of objectivity can be found among the philosophy of science which takes into consideration the history of science. Thomas Kuhn leaves little space for objectivity when he states that the paradigms used by different scientific communities are incommensurable because they refer to different entities and, therefore, the members of those communities live in "different worlds". Objectivity is possible only inside a certain paradigm and it regards only the progress through "normal science". As Kuhn mentions at the end of his fundamental work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, in order to express his views on science, he does not even employ the term "truth". The scientists' problem is not to achieve truth, but to go further with their paradigm, either by normal science, or by trying to solve anomalies. Science proves to be an activity held by a community whose members learn after handbooks compatible with the current paradigm. The shift

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[11] Donald Davidson, 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge', in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 141

from a paradigm to another takes place rather by persuasion than by objective, already established criteria: "Can we not account for both science's existence and its success in terms of evolution from the community's state of knowledge at any given time? Does it really help to imagine that there is some one full, objective true account of nature and that the proper measure of scientific achievement is the extent to which it brings us closer to the ultimate goal?"[12].

The denial of objective criteria and methods in science is sustained also by Paul Feyerabend, who argues that there is no method in science and comes to a relativistic conclusion, very hard to accept for the philosophers of science from the first half of the twentieth century: "Anything goes".

Rorty goes beyond the holism proposed by Quine and Davidson and also beyond the discontinuity sustained by Kuhn and Feyerabend, offering a perspective upon philosophy and epistemology totally different from their traditional problems. In Herbert Schnädelbach's interpretation, Rorty proposes a "cultural holism" where philosophy, science and the other cultural areas have the same status. If our knowledge is structured as a "web of belief" that can be modified only through a confrontation with the beliefs already held and by interacting with our peers, what remains of objectivity? Can objectivity remain a characteristic of science, or the scientific sentences are alike the philosophical or literary ones? Is there any difference between literature and philosophy of science? According to Rorty, objectivity is only a name for a social activity governed by strict rules. On the one hand, there are the arguments that sustain one thesis or another; on the other hand, there are evidences visible for all the members of a scientific community. The same considerations go for truth because, as we shall see, the justification is not empirical, but social. Under these conditions, science remains as accurate as before, but relies on debates concerning different arguments and evidences, rather than on a direct contact with reality. In the following section I will show how Rorty comes to the conclusion that "the application of such honorifics as 'objective' and 'cognitive' is never anything more than an expression of the presence of, or the hope for agreement among inquirers"[13].

3. The talking world and our ability to mirror it

Rorty's position is justified by the continuity of the objections raised against traditional concepts of epistemology by philosophers such as W.V. Quine (the analytic – synthetic distinction), W. Sellars (the Myth of the Given) or D. Davidson (the scheme – content dualism) and also by a radical breakout from philosophy understood in a traditional sense. As we have already seen, Rorty's

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[12] Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, second edition, The University of Chicago Press, 1970, p. 171.
[13] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 335.

attacks go against the idea of the representation of the world by the mind or language. As Simon Blackburn points out, Rorty separates his philosophy from what we know from the history of philosophy as "relativism". Rorty does not reject representation alone, but also any philosophy that finds its basis on it. Thus, it can be asserted that Rorty is a relativist only if we assimilate relativism to what he calls ethnocentrism. The latter concept proposes the replacement of truth by a more tangible desideratum: justification. Justification is not achieved by the virtue of a correspondence with reality, or by some objective criteria, but by social agreement: "we understand knowledge best when we understand the social justification of belief, and thus have no need to view it as accuracy of representations. Instead of seeking 'vertical' relationships between language, or ourselves as language users, and the world, we must concentrate upon 'horizontal' or inferential processes, whereby we advance and accept reasons from each other. Justification becomes a 'social phenomenon' rather than a transaction between a 'knowing subject' and 'reality'"[14].

If justification is a social phenomenon, and takes the place of truth, then there is no place for a "confrontation" with nature. This kind of confrontation is impossible, since we cannot escape from the vocabulary we use: "Since there is nothing beyond vocabularies which serves as a criterion of choice between them, criticism, is a matter of looking on this picture and on that, not of comparing both pictures with the original"[15].

Rorty goes further in his attack against the traditional concept of objectivity. If we are to accept the correspondence theory of truth, we should talk about the world as we talk about people, using a specific, favorite vocabulary, which is imposed upon us. Only this way, Rorty thinks, the idea of a truth present out there becomes intelligible. But, as he famously asserted, the world doesn't talk, only we do. In rejecting any form of the correspondence theory of truth, Rorty and, along with it, any form of objectivity, including a difference in degree. Rorty claims that if objectivity requires discriminations between various discourses based on their so-called degree of correspondence with reality, then all objectivist aspirations should be dropped. But what happens if we really take this step?

Rorty considers that the elimination of the correspondence theory of truth and of the image of the mind or language as a mirror leads to a maximization of the role of man in his activities because "to see the aim of philosophy as truth – namely, the truth about the terms which provide ultimate commensuration for all human inquiries and activities – is to see human beings as objects rather than subjects (…)"[16] The emphasis on objectivity, scientific language and truth prevent philosophy from achieving its edifying role which, from Rorty's point of view,

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[14] Ibidem, p. 9.

[15] Idem, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, p. 80.

[16] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 378.

should be of utmost importance. This way, the attack against objectivity does not concern only the metaphysical and metaphilosophical presuppositions, but also its consequences from a social point of view. Rorty suggests that we see the human being not as seeking the truth already set out there in the world, but as its creator. As vocabularies are not discovered, but invented, we could say the same thing about truth, because, on Davidsonian account, truth is dependent upon language: "languages are made rather than found and truth is a property of linguistic entities, of sentences"[17].

As we can see, Rorty tries to undermine the often privileged status of scientific knowledge. From his point of view, scientists shouldn't replace the priests in their role of intermediating human communities and a supernatural existence (no matter if that is called God, Nature or any other way). Thus, Rorty criticizes some modern philosophers such as Francis Bacon for their exaggerated trust in scientific knowledge. Here, Rorty steps away from the doctrines of Quine or Davidson who consider that scientific sentences have a different status. If Quine considers that the sentences of logic and mathematics are less likely to be revised, being in the center of the web of belief (the maxim of minimal mutilation), Rorty denies the existence of such a center. Therefore, any sentence can be replaced. This change has as a consequence the enhancement of human freedom: "To see the history of language and thus of the arts, sciences and the moral sense as the history of metaphor is to drop the picture of the human mind or human languages becoming better and better suited to the purposes for which God or Nature designed them (…)"[18].

By suppressing the ideal of objectivity, the supreme authority is neither the world, nor a divinity or another, nor the truth, but the community inside which individuals live. The truth or falsity of a sentence is a matter of obtaining a justification from the community. Thus, the problem of objectivity becomes a problem of obtaining an intersubjective agreement. Through this, Rorty offers an alternative view of the difference between knowledge and mere belief: we can talk about knowledge when a total agreement is obtained and of belief when only a partial agreement is achieved. For an individual, it is essential to cope, not to produce an adequate copy of the world, as D.L. Hall puts it, "Rorty's narrative attempts to render plausible the shift away from a search for objective knowledge to the creation of vocabularies for the purposes of getting what we want"[19]. Thus, the purpose is no longer established from the outside, but created by the individual. This leads to the ideal of edification or private perfection.

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[17] Idem, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, p. 7.
[18] Ibidem, p. 16.
[19] David L. Hall, *Richard Rorty*, State University of New York Press, 1994, p. 52.

Finally, this changes lead to what Rorty calls "liberal ironist". Liberal in the sense of accepting that cruelty is the worst thing we do and ironist as having the characteristics described in *Contingency, irony and solidarity*:

(1) He has some serious doubts concerning his final vocabulary because he has compared it with other vocabularies.
(2) The arguments from inside his vocabulary cannot dissolve these doubts.
(3) He does not think that his vocabulary is more adequate to the reality than the others.

Thus, the ironist is aware of both the contingency of his favorite vocabulary and impossibility of creating a "super-vocabulary" in order to evaluate all the other vocabularies. This is the reason why the ironist can never take his own vocabulary seriously.

If our purpose is no longer the search for truth, but its creation, if we no longer have rigid criteria for verifying our sentences, if the only relationship between us and the world is causal, what remains? The replacement of epistemology by hermeneutics and the competition between different vocabularies? The "conversion" of scientists in liberal ironists whose only purpose is the advancement of technology? As we can see, Rorty offers an alternative to objectivity which does not possess inacceptable consequences, but weakens the importance of science and of a certain part of philosophy. We will see how many of Rorty's theses can be accepted.

4. Representation, truth and vocabularies

The problem of representation, seen as a metaphysical trace which must be eliminated, is not as simple as Rorty seems to think. Although, generally speaking, representationalism is prone to criticism we cannot finish with it once and for all. As Simon Blackburn puts it: "God only had to make a piece of terrain once with all its abundance of features. But he did not thereby bring it about that there could only be one proper *take* on the piece of terrain. You can map it how you like: map the geology, topography, population, rivers, crops, and you can map all these in different ways for different purposes. A unique world is one thing, but it does not demand just one description"[20]. This objection shows that we can talk about a unique world without thinking of a single description. Therefore, as we can draw various maps for the same geographical region, we can use multiple descriptions of the world, all equally adequate, according to our interests. The question that springs to mind is why those maps are adequate. Simon Blackburn's answer defeats Rorty's argument against representationalism: "the opposition between coping and copying totters and falls. The map enables us to cope, indeed, but we

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[20] Simon Blackburn, *Truth: A guide for the Perplexed*, Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 156-157.

also know why. It enables us to cope precisely because it represents the landscape correctly; it enables us to anticipate what we shall find"[21].

We can see not only that representation doesn't require a single, adequate image of the world, but also that it is often necessary. If we are to remind an argument from *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, telling that Newtonian physics is better than Aristotelian physics because in more useful not because it represents better reality, we come to the same difficulties. Why is Newtonian physics more useful? Rorty's answer is that it offers us more possibilities to formulate the problems we confront. Therefore, scientific theories prove to be linguistic instruments. Rorty's position in this matter is definitely instrumentalist and it is vulnerable to the main objections against instrumentalism. If we accept a theory only for its success and not for its correspondence to reality, it may be ask how we make the difference between the former and the latter. What if its success is based on its very truth? Making some considerations on Bas Van Fraasen instrumentalism, Simon Blackburn concludes that eliminating the belief in the truth of a theory and accepting only its empirical success leads to the reduction of the theory to its empirical content and, therefore, to a form of verificationism.

Furthermore, the usefulness of a certain theory must not be confused with its truth. As Karl Popper pointed out, an instrument can be better or worse, but the truth has no place in this. There may be useful, but false theories. If usefulness cannot determine the falsity of a theory, then we need another criterion for falsity and, therefore, for truth too. And this could be as well correspondence with reality.

Finally, if truth is, on Jamesian account, "what is good for us to believe", isn't it better for us to believe in the existence of an external world which can be represented? And also, that we can compare our representations and obtain more than mere intersubjective agreement? A positive answer comes from the scientific realism and evolutionist epistemology. As Karl Popper puts it, "starting from scientific realism it is fairly clear that if our actions and reactions were badly adjusted to our environment, we should not survive"[22].

Other objections concern the vocabularies. D.L. Hall observes that the distinction between vocabularies and propositions is problematic: "The distinction between vocabularies and sentences, like all Rortyan distinctions is not backed up by claims to essential characteristics about language and world. One can only distinguish between sentences and vocabularies within a vocabulary that permits that distinction"[23]. We see that, by denying the natural distinctions that "correspond" to the world, Rorty cannot claim that his distinction is natural and,

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[21] Ibidem, p. 158.

[22] „Two Faces of Common Sense: An Argument for Commonsense Realism and Against the Commonsense Theory of Knowledge", in Karl Popper, *Objective Knowledge*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1979, p. 69.

[23] David L. Hall, *Richard Rorty*, p. 88.

under these conditions, it is hard to find a criterion to legitimate it. If the distinction is, like any vocabulary, contingent, then we may as well talk legitimately about natural distinctions. Hall also brings into attention a more important problem concerning vocabularies: the changes determined by various scientific theories. We cannot consider axioms vocabularies and, consequently, we cannot consider the changes employed by axioms changes of vocabularies. The difference between a Euclidean and a Non-Euclidean system in mathematics involves more than a change of vocabulary, respectively a change in the way we understand space. Here, it becomes clear that the choice between two rival systems is not made by persuasion, but on the basis of objective criteria: how adequate are they in different situations. Continuing Hall's suggestion, one can ask whether mathematical language, for example, is a vocabulary. If positive, then so far no competing vocabulary has been created. And, most likely, it will never appear. If mathematical language is a vocabulary, then it could be taken as a common ground (and thus objective) for solving certain issues. Under these considerations, the "creating versus discovering" languages controversy must be revised.

Taking the mathematical language as an example once again, one couldn't say that Galileo created another language that could be applied in physics, but rather, that he discovered that physics can be studied better by using the mathematical language. The fact that, in the same time, he improved that language does not mean he created it. Here, another difficulty rises: to what extent can a vocabulary contain concepts that are adequate to facts?

Following Thomas Kuhn, Rorty denies the very idea of natural kind and of science as an activity that leads to an ultimate truth. This idea can be refuted by studying some examples from the history of science. By doing this, Philip Kitcher concludes that scientists use terms that are closer and closer to being natural kinds. If we take, for instance the terms "oxygen" and "deflogisticated air" we see that they have the same reference: a substance that exists in reality. "Oxygen" is closer from being a natural kind because it offers a better explanation of the substance, without referring to a component that we know as inexistent: flogiston. Thus, following the changes in the language of different stages of a science, one can conclude that science evolves to languages closer from being natural kinds. However, this is a far cry from Rorty's "privileged vocabulary". In Kitcher's words, "the fundamental realist thesis is that we arrive at true statements about the world. That thesis does not imply that we have unbiased access to nature, merely that the biases are not so powerful that they prevent us from working our way out of false belief"[24]. Thus, we see that the truth of some sentences does not entail any kind of extravagant metaphysics, but a more detailed research of the result of certain theories.

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[24] Philip Kitcher, *The Advancement of Science*, Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 161.

Other objections to Rorty's view come from philosophers that sustain the traditional epistemological concepts. Paul Moser, Dwayne Mulder and J.D. Trout consider that replacement pragmatism cannot dispose of facts in sustaining certain philosophical domains that are relevant from a social point of view. But, if the existence of facts is accepted, then we come once again to traditional epistemological issues, such as truth or justification. Furthermore, the pragmatist approach has some major internal difficulties. When pragmatists talk about acceptability, do they refer to the "true nature" of acceptability? If positive, then they are acting against their principles. If no, they cannot claim any legitimacy for their doctrine. The mentioned philosophers argue, against the pragmatist objections, that epistemological issues are, to some extent, natural and, for this reason, objectivity should remain an ideal: "The objectivity of knowledge and justification is secure, contrary to the relativist so long as knowledge and justification are natural kinds, and we see no reason to deny they are"[25].

5. Knowledge and social practice

Although Rorty's approach is justified from some points of view, it is refuted by scientific knowledge. His attempt to make science a component of the centerless web of belief, fails because, unless ethical or political issues, for instance, scientific theories can and must take reality as starting point. This does not lead to any metaphysical complications such as "the human mind as a great mirror", "the talking world", or "privileged vocabulary". Furthermore, his criticism of objectivity fails to affect even areas which are more exposed to subjectivity. As Ian Hacking pointed out, in ethics we can talk about things that are absolutely bad, such as child abuse or illiteracy. His conclusion is that "our society is not nearly as relativistic as is made out".

If the old ideal of objective knowledge hasn't got anything to do with the kind of metaphysics criticized by Rorty, we must point out an important aspect which the American philosopher brings into discussion: the social component of knowledge. Scientific knowledge cannot be separated from social practice. This, however, does not entail that scientific knowledge is a social construct. On this point, many contemporary philosophers of science, such as Ian Hacking, Philip Kitcher or Helen Longino seem to agree. The problem concerning constructivism, considers Hacking, comes from the bad understanding of a metaphor: while the process of inquiry is a social construct, we cannot say the same thing about its product. Once these conceptual clarifications are made, we can talk about the objectivity of knowledge or science, without having to adopt a radical position. Helen Longino points out the importance of the social factors in knowledge as a

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[25] Paul Moser, Dwayne Mulder, J.D. Trout, *The Theory of Knowledge*, Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 186.

reaction to the logical or historical approaches in the philosophy of science, which she considers insufficient: "Scientific knowledge is (…) social knowledge. It is produced by processes that are intrinsically social, and once a theory, hypothesis, or set of data has been accepted by a community, it becomes a public resource. It is available to use in support of other theories and hypotheses and as a basis of action. Scientific knowledge is social both in the ways it is created and in the uses it serves"[26].

As a conclusion, Rorty's approach to objectivity is justified as long as it emphasizes the role of the social component of knowledge, which has been ignored by ancient, modern philosophers and also by the adepts of the "logic of science". As we have already seen, straying too far in this direction leads to the replacement of objectivity and, further, to some conclusions hard to sustain. The acceptance of some less sophisticated metaphysical implications can lead to a concept of objectivity, distinct from mere intersubjective agreement, which can face the objections raised by Rorty.

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[26] Helen Longino, „Values and Objectivity", in J.A. Cover, (ed.), Martin Curd (ed.), *Philosophy of Science: The Central Issues*, New York, W.V. Norton and Company, 1998, p. 180.

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