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Ought Cats Be Tuesday? Reflections on the Neutrality of Philosophers

Xavier O. Monasterio

Should walls be brown, or white? The question is ridiculous because, at it stands, it is unanswerable. Why should walls be brown rather than white, or white rather than brown? On what basis can we decide that one color is more fitted than another for walls? In order for the question to become truly intelligible and answerable its context needs to be specified. Tell me whether you are talking about the walls of a house or the walls of an industrial plant, whether the industry is a clean one or a dirty one, whether you have in mind the walls of an office or the walls of a shop . . . Then we will be in business.

Ought philosophers be neutral, or committed? I am afraid that this question may sound to some ears as unanswerable and, therefore, as ridiculous as the question about walls. As I happen to be the one who proposed it as the subject for our colloquium, I feel that the least I owe you and myself is to place the question in a context in which it becomes answerable, and to share with you for further discussion my answer to it.

The Issue of the Objectivity of Knowledge

When the question concerns the color of walls we do not have any problem finding its context. Finding, however, the context in which the question concerning the neutrality or commitment or philosophers becomes intelligible and answerable is not as easy. My hypothesis, to be judged by its results, is that our question is deeply related to the old issue of the objectivity of knowledge. If so, the way to render our question intelligible and, hopefully, answerable is to read it in that particular context.

Since philosophy is conceived as a cognitional undertaking, that is, as a form of activity that aims at knowledge, it is only normal to expect that philosophers will submit themselves to the intrinsic demands of the cognitional undertaking. Now, as a rather long tradition of our Western culture has had it, one of the basic demands of the cognitional undertaking is that the undertaker, that is, the knower, remain perfectly neutral. If it is a matter of observation, the observer is supposed to meet what is to be observed in a state of perfect neutrality, lest he starts interpreting instead of observing. Ideally, then, he ought to meet the object of observation without any preconceived view. If this is not possible, he ought to at least neutralize, so to say, his preconceived views so that they do not interfere with the observational process. For, if he fails to do this, the result of his observation will be marred. Instead of being objective, that is, correct, his observational knowledge will be subjective, that is, non-

knowledge, mere illusion of knowledge without any relationship with what was to be observed. If it is a matter, not of observing, but of explaining, the knower ought to remain perfectly neutral in regard to his explanatory hypothesis, lest his commitment to it prevent him from grasping the flaws of his hypothesis when confronted with a better hypothesis proposed by someone else. If it is a matter of testing a hypothesis by actual experiment, the knower must approach his experiment in a state of perfect neutrality in regard to his hypothesis. For, if he fails to do this, he will tend to misinterpret or disregard the results of the experiment whenever they do not confirm his hypothesis. Of course, it is possible that the experimenter, being human, feels a certain measure of attachment to his own hypothesis and desires to be right. But the actual test of his neutrality is his willingness to drop his hypothesis as soon as it appears that the experimental results belie it, whatever his subjective feelings.

It seems, then, that the neutrality of the knower—be he a scientist, a philosopher, or an ordinary man in everyday life—is demanded in the name of a certain view of the knowing process. The knowing process demands neutrality on the part of the knower because the latter's neutrality is a condition without which the knowledge obtained is not knowledge but mere wishful thinking. The extent to which such a view has come to prevail can be gathered from the fact that for a long time it has been accepted as a matter of course. Indeed, a good deal of the success of modern science has been customarily attributed to the strict objectivity observed by the scientists. And what else is that strict objectivity but the perfect neutrality described above? As a characteristic description of the code according to which scientists are deemed to proceed, I offer the views of Ernst Mach as summarized by the physicist A. M. Taylor:

... [According to Mach] . . . , scientists must be prepared immediately to drop a theory the moment an observation turns up to conflict with it. Scientists must have an absolute respect for observations; they must hold scientific theories in judicial detachment. Scientists must be passionless observers, unbiased by emotion, intellectually cold.¹

Of course, if for knowledge to be knowledge, the neutrality of the knower is indeed a necessary condition, I would have to grant that philosophers ought be neutral, for I believe philosophizing to be a cognitive undertaking. What seems to me highly questionable, however, and what I will actually question in this first part of my paper, is the view of objectivity of knowledge on which the ideal of neutrality rests.

A first glimpse that something may be wrong with the notion that scientists practice the kind of neutrality that is often predicated of them, or that they at least strive for such neutrality, comes from the fact that it does not square at all with the actual experience of those who are engaged in the scientific undertaking. For instance, a three-year detailed study of the attitudes of those scientists involved in the Apollo Project of exploration of the moon revealed that mature scientists find the neutrality that is generally attributed to them under the name of scientific objectivity to be utterly ridiculous. The following is taken from that study:

For the first round of interviews, it was the question of what the scientists thought of the notion of the 'objective, disinterested scientist or observer' that provoked this kind of response. Out of the 42 scientists interviewed on the first round there was not one scientist who in one way or another did not indicate that he thought the notion of the objective, disinterested scientist naive. . . . It was generally felt that the only people who took the idea of the objective, disinterested scientist literally and seriously were the general public or beginning science students. Certainly no working scientist, to quote from one of the respondents, 'believed in that simple-minded nonsense.'²

Simple-minded nonsense. This is a rather strong judgment. But what does it mean: that scientists fail to live up to the demands of the scientific undertaking, or rather that the scientific undertaking, far from demanding neutrality in order to be successful, demands commitment? That the latter is the case, at least in the view of those scientists who were interviewed in the course of the mentioned study, is clearly stated by the author of the study:

What was so surprising about the reactions of the scientists was not that they rejected the notion of the 'disinterested scientist' as an accurate *descriptive* account of the workings of science but that they even rejected it on stronger grounds as a desired *prescriptive* ideal or standard. Not only was it recognized that in point of actual conduct the good scientist was more often than not highly committed to a point of view—at the very least to his pet theories and hypotheses—but even more interesting and important, strong reasons were evinced why this *ought* to be the case, i.e. that *ideally* scientists ought not to be without strong prior commitments.³

What, then, are those strong reasons to think that scientists neither are nor ought to be neutral? As a first step toward the answer, we may take the issue at the level of perceptual knowledge.

We will not fall too far off the mark, I think, if we trace back to Locke the view of the neutral perceiver. On the one hand, following in this a long tradition, Locke studied perception divorced from action, as if perceiving were a kind of contemplative endeavor unsupported by action and unrelated to action. On the other hand, reacting in this against all forms of innatism and apriorism, he conceived the mind of the perceiver, to use his own expression, as "white paper, void of all character, without any ideas."⁴ On this white paper the objects of the outside world were supposed to draw their images, and the perceiver was supposed to contemplate them. Perceiving, therefore, was exposing oneself neutrally to objects.

Apparently the main attraction of Locke's views on perception is that they are simple. This perhaps explains why the idea of the neutral observer has proven to be so resilient. Perception, however, seems to be a far more complex operation than Locke imagined it to be. For one, we do not simply perceive objects, we perceive ob-

jects-in-the-world, that it, in a context of reality that is far larger than the objects actually perceived. Secondly perception is neither independent from nor unrelated to action. We perceive because we interact with the objects of perception, and we risk ourselves into interaction with the world on the basis of a commitment to what we perceive. Thirdly, far from being a neutral recipient, the perceiver is an active contributor.

As the main purpose of this paper is not to contrast the Lockean view of perception with the more sophisticated one that arises from the actual examination of the facts, the following quotation from Matson's essay *The Broken Image* will hopefully do as a suggestive summary:

The fundamental innovation of the new look was a radically altered perspective in which the act of perception came to be seen as a selective and dynamic function of the total personality, an on-going process or 'transaction' through which the individual creatively relates himself to his world. Since the first expressions of this new approach began to appear . . . an accumulation of experiments and observations have confirmed what common sense might seem to testify: namely, that perception is not an inert and indiscriminate response to irresistible forces, but a highly discriminative process in which, as it were, many stimuli may be called but few are chosen . . .

A variety of attempts have been made over the past score of years to erect conceptual schemes to account for this evident fact of perceptual organization. Sherif, for one, taking perception as the prototype of all experience, posits 'a central structuring or patterning' of perceptions by the individual—made up of such factors as 'motives (needs), attitudes, emotions, general state of the organism, effects of past experience, etc.' Postman and Bruner have identified the subjective organizing principle as a set of 'hypotheses'—that is, 'expectancies or predispositions' which serve to select, organize, and even transform the stimulus information crowding in from the environment. The ultimate purpose of these students has been to develop 'a unified theory of behavior' which will treat the individual as an organized whole and regard his perceiving as 'an instrument of adjustive activity.'⁵

If such indeed is the case with perception, it is hard to see how any observer, whether a layman or a scientist, can be expected to be neutral. To give a concrete example, the trained physicist sees traces of electrons where the layman sees an unintelligible arrangement of lines. Is the perception of the layman better than that of the physicist? Or is it rather that they are working within and committed to what has to be characterized as two different worlds? In any case, from this example one can easily see where the effort to achieve neutral observation would put science, and how nonsensical is the demand that scientists approach their objects of observation without preconceived views. Quite to the contrary, the very beginning of science seems to coincide with the moment at which the observational field is completely restructured by the scientist thanks to his preconceived views.

None perhaps more than Thomas Kuhn has been influential in exploding the myth of the neutrality of the scientist as well as the naive empiricism on which it is grounded. What Kuhn noticed more clearly and thoroughly than others was, first of all, that scientists do not behave at all the way they ought to if science were what empiricists assumed it to be. Let us examine some of his instances.

Do scientists meet their objects of observation without any preconceived ideas? If so, one would expect all of them to agree about what they observe. But it is not at all so. As Kuhn remarks in one characteristic instance among many others, "Lavoisier . . . saw oxygen where Priestley had seen dephlogisticated air and where others had seen nothing at all."⁶

Do scientists abandon or modify their explanatory hypotheses when they appear to be in conflict with the experimental facts? No. And, strangely enough, such stubbornness pays handsome dividends sometimes. For instance,

Throughout the eighteenth century those scientists who tried to derive the observed motion of the moon from Newton's laws of motion and gravitation consistently failed to do so . . . In the event, scientists preserved the rules until, in 1750, one of them discovered how they could successfully be applied.⁷

Do scientists automatically change their views when confronted with the more comprehensive and better experimentally supported views of other scientists? Not at all.

Copernicanism made few converts for almost a century after Copernicus' death. Newton's work was not generally accepted, particularly in the Continent, for more than half a century after the *Principia* appeared. Priestley never accepted the oxygen theory, nor Lord Kelvin the electro-magnetic theory, and so on . . .⁸

Of course, the convinced empiricist would argue that both Lavoisier and Priestley were interpreting instead of seeing. But the least that follows from such a distinction, if indeed the distinction between seeing and interpreting is to be accepted, is that scientist have to strive for non-neutrality in their observations, for without interpretation, that is, without preconceived ideas science would simply never start. Again, the convinced empiricist may argue that the fact that scientists sometimes do not abandon their hypotheses when confronted with conflicting experimental evidence only shows that, being human, they do not always live up to the ideal of scientific neutrality. But, as Kuhn shows, if scientists happened to live up to that ideal there simply would be no science, for there is practically no scientific hypothesis that does not have to confront experimental anomalies.⁹

The novelty of Kuhn's approach is that, instead of insisting on the traditional attempt to force science into the mould of empiricism, he completely reshapes the mould. The result is a completely different view of science in which the supposed

neutrality of the scientist either as an 'is' or as an 'ought,' that is, as an actual fact or as an ideal to be striven for, goes down the drain.

Being a scientist, says Kuhn, is living in, and being committed to, a particular world. Scientists do not have a world of objects and experimental facts before them, and a collection of explanatory hypotheses, theories and definitions in their minds. On the contrary, facts, experimental results, scientific instruments, hypotheses, theories and definitions are interdependent. Hypotheses, theories and definitions cannot be changed without changing facts, experimental results and scientific instruments, and conversely.

The child who transfers the word 'mama' from all humans to all females and then to his mother is not just learning what 'mama' means or who his mother is. Simultaneously he is learning some of the differences between males and females as well as something about the way in which all but one female will behave toward him. His reactions, expectations, and beliefs, indeed, much of his perceived world—change accordingly. By the same token, the Copernicians who denied its traditional title 'planet' to the sun were not only learning what 'planet' meant or what the sun was. Instead, they were changing the meaning of 'planet' so that it would continue to make useful distinctions in a world where all celestial bodies, not just the sun, were seen differently from the way they had been seen before. The same point could be made about any of our earlier examples. To see oxygen instead of dephlogisticated air, the condenser instead of the Leyden jar, or the pendulum instead of constrained fall, was only one part of an integrated shift in the scientist's vision of a great many related chemical, electrical, or dynamical phenomena.¹⁰

As Kuhn repeatedly has recourse to the switches in *visual* gestalt to suggest the radical transformation that occurs in the scientific world with every revolutionary advance, his reader may easily have the impression that Kuhn is talking of science merely as a way of seeing the world. But the case is not so. As the seeing, for him, cannot be separated from the seen world, nor can the seen world be separated from the world in which the scientist acts. In other words, as the perceiver acts in the world he perceives, and by risking himself into action in the world he perceives, he shows his basic commitment to the world he perceives, so the scientist, by risking himself into action in the world he sees shows his basic commitment to the world as he sees it. This means that, far from being neutral, the scientist is deeply and necessarily committed to his views, for without such a commitment he would be unable to act as a scientist.

Perhaps the best illustration of this point is to be found in the way in which, according to Kuhn, the beginning student is introduced to science. Since the people who teach science are scientists, and since being a scientist is being committed to a specific world rather than to another, the teaching of science cannot be but a process

of indoctrination in which the student gradually learns to see the world his teacher sees and to act in that world as his teacher acts in it.

. . . science students accept theories on the authority of teacher and text, not because of evidence. What alternatives have they, or what competence? The applications given in texts are not there as evidence but because learning them is learning the paradigm at the base of current practice. If applications were set forth as evidence, then the very failure of texts to suggest alternative interpretations or to discuss problems for which scientists have failed to produce paradigm solutions would convict their authors of extreme bias. There is not the slightest reason for such an indictment.¹¹

Surprisingly, that is, surprisingly for those who insist on forcing science into the empiricist mold, the commitment of the scientists to a world and their stubbornness in introducing the students authoritatively into that world rather than into another results in the fertile activity that Kuhn calls "normal science." And it is only within the framework of normal science that those students who came to share the paradigms of their teachers and possess a certain measure of genius can hope to effect a revolution that will lead the scientific community to start seeing, and working, in a different world. When that occurs, whether in the large scale of an Einsteinian revolution or in the smaller scale of a Lavoisier's revolution, the scientific community usually reacts to the innovation as if it were an heresy. And indeed it is. For what it demands from the scientific community is a complete shift of commitments. No wonder, then, that Copernicanism had made so few converts in a whole century, and that Newton's *Principia* had been practically rejected for half a century. No wonder, that is, if one has realized that, far from being the neutral endeavor postulated by the empiricist radical division between facts and interpretations, between experiment and theory, in short, between the world and the subject, science actually involves, and is made possible by a commitment of the scientist to the world in which he works. As Kuhn puts it, commenting on the reaction to Copernicanism and Newtonism,

These facts and others like them are too commonly known to need further analysis. But they do need re-evaluation. In the past they have most often been taken to indicate that scientists, being only human, cannot always admit their errors, even when confronted with strict proof. I would argue, rather, that in these matters neither proof nor error is at issue. The transfer of allegiance from paradigm to paradigm is a conversion experience that cannot be forced. Lifelong resistance, particularly from those whose productive careers have committed them to an older tradition of normal science, is not a violation of scientific standards but an index to the nature of scientific research itself. The source of resistance is the assurance that the older paradigm will ultimately solve all its problems, that nature can be shoved into the box the paradigm provides. Inevitably, at times of revolution, that assurance seems stubborn and pigheaded as indeed it sometimes becomes.

But it is also something more. That same assurance is what makes normal or puzzle-solving science possible. And it is only through normal science that the professional community of students succeeds, first, in exploiting the potential scope and precision of the older paradigm and, then, in isolating the difficulty through the study of which a new paradigm may emerge.¹²

We are now, it seems to me, in a better position to answer our questions concerning the neutrality of scientists and of the science that results from their activity. Ought scientists be neutral observers? Ought they be detached from their hypotheses and theories? Ought they submit themselves neutrally to the ultimate verdict of the experimental facts? We might as well ask: ought cats be Tuesday? Indeed, being Tuesday is as absurd a predicate for cats as being neutral is for scientists, for science cannot be if scientists are neutral.

The Philosopher: Neutral or Committed?

In a way, the previous part of this paper may be considered as a long preface to a short answer. But the preface was needed as the context within which the question of the neutrality or commitment of the philosopher becomes intelligible and answerable.

When we ask whether the philosopher ought to be neutral we do so in the implicit context of a certain view of what objective knowing and objective knowledge are. I have made explicit that context in the previous part of this paper. I have also endeavored to show that the view of objective knowing and objective knowledge in which the ideal of the neutral knower finds its place is to be sent to a museum for historical oddities. No knower is neutral in any of the senses in which neutrality is usually predicated of the knower, and if he were neutral in any of these senses he would not know anything.

Now, as far as philosophy is concerned, there seem to be almost as many different views of what philosophy is as there are philosophers. Thus from the philosophizing activity some philosophers expect wisdom, others the elimination of false problems, others more accurate linguistic usages, others final certitudes about God, others sweeping socio-economic changes, etc., etc. For all their divergent views, however, all philosophers seem to consider the philosophizing activity as the means of gaining the knowledge that is needed in order to obtain the results they want to see achieved. And as a matter of fact, all of them proceed as if philosophizing were a cognitional undertaking, since all of them raise questions, propose explanations, offer evidence in support of their views, and so on. Even the repeated attempts to render philosophy scientific point to the fact that philosophy is a cognitional undertaking. For one can hardly see how philosophy could be scientific if it did not share with the scientific undertaking its cognitional character. However if, as we have seen, the very nature of the cognitional undertaking demands the commitment of the knower, it is difficult not to suspect that asking whether philosophers ought to be neutral does not amount to asking whether cats ought to be Tuesday.

That in fact we philosophers are not neutral, that is, that we operate within world-views to which we are deeply committed should be even more clear than in the case of scientists. For, though scientists operate within a world view, they seldom have the opportunity to notice it, for they are seldom confronted with a radically divergent world-view within their scientific community. And though they are deeply committed to the world within which they operate, they seldom notice it, for they seldom are confronted within their scientific community by people who are no less deeply committed to a radically divergent world. This only happens noticeably in the case of very major revolutions, such as the shift from Newtonian to Einsteinian physics, which demanded a fundamental shift of perspective comparable, in Kuhn's words, to a religious conversion. It is only during those periods of major revolution that the scientific community finds itself as profoundly divided and as incapable of deep, creative communication as philosophers usually are. For the fact is that we, philosophers, can hardly communicate with each other as philosophers outside of the small groups of those with whom we find ourselves in basic philosophical agreement. Is it that we do not want communication? Or is it rather that communication is not possible without a commonly shared frame of reference, that is, without living and working in the same world? We use all the same words, such as "philosophy," "subject," "object," "knowledge," "facts," "values," "language," etc. But the words do not mean the same for all of us, exactly as the word "planet" did not mean the same for the pre-Copernicans and for the Copernicans who denied its traditional title 'planet' to the sun. That it is not just a matter of definitions is shown by the fact that, if we define the meaning of our words, it is only to find that either they do not make sense at all to those who use the same word with different meanings, or that, if at all understood by them, our definitions are met with absolute disagreement. Should we then proceed to agree conventionally on our definitions? The trick, as far as I know, has never been attempted, for we all know that it is impossible. Indeed, our definitions, no less than those of the physicists, are not independent of our facts, of our methods, of our problems, neither are all of these independent from the contextual world to which we are committed. In this regard, then, the difference between scientists and philosophers is not that scientists are not and can not be neutral while philosophers are or can, but that in philosophy, contrary to what happens in science, there is no world-view largely shared by the community of philosophers. What we have instead is a vast collection of small philosophical communities—suggested by such a variety of names as marxists, linguists, phenomenologists, existentialists, etc., etc.—each one of them committed to a different world-view.

This is not the place to ask why philosophers have failed to reach a common paradigm. But, if we are not to remain in purely abstract theories—a situation for which we philosophers seem to have a strange predilection—this certainly is the place to question whether our praxis corresponds to our theory. As I have already gone beyond the time allotted for this paper I will limit myself to suggest broadly one practical problem among many that would be interesting and important.

According to a rather popular slogan, one can become educated by being exposed to as many divergent views as possible. For those who think that teaching is presenting views as one would present hats, and that learning is choosing among different views as one would choose among different hats—that is, that knowing is confronting the object in a purely contemplative and neutral attitude—this is a consistent position. But is it a consistent position to take or to defend for those who realize that such a thing as neutral knowledge is impossible, that one does not learn to have a view by hearing about it but develops a view by working within one under the direction of those who are committed to it, and that one cannot know anything and cannot become productive in a field before committing oneself?

If neutral knowledge is for the birds, as I have maintained in this paper, then the educational practice of exposure to divergent views is simply aberrant. For it amounts to preventing the student from growing into a commitment without which knowledge, personal fulfillment, and creative, not to say revolutionary, work, which is the lot of the genius, are impossible.

Bertrand Russell wrote: "To teach how to live without certainty, and yet without being paralyzed by hesitation, is perhaps the chief thing that philosophy, in our age, can still do for those who study it."¹³ I agree. But for us philosophers to start teaching that in an effective way we will have to start talking and acting in a way that shows that we are truly and practically committed to the view that being a knower and being neutral are about as compatible as being a cat and being Tuesday.

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NOTES

¹ A. M. Taylor, *Imagination and the Growth of Science* (Schocken, New York 1967) pp. 4-5.

² I. I. Mitroff, "On the Norms of Science: A Report of a Philosophical Case Study into the Psychology of the Apollo Moon Scientists, Part I" (Privately Distributed Paper), p. 16. The results of Mitroff's investigation, of which this paper is only a partial presentation, are presently in the process of being published as a volume.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

⁴ Actually, Locke's views on perception were more sophisticated than that, for he attributed to the mind a combinatory ability of its own. The outside world objects were supposed to contribute impressions that the mind combined into perceived objects. But, in the first place, Locke was extremely vague concerning that combinatory ability of the mind as far as perception goes. Secondly, the combinatory activity of the mind is not experienced by the subject, at least not in the case of perception. Hence it was easily ignored by more radical empiricists than Locke. Finally, under the growing influence of the materialistic views, the tendency prevailed to simply ignore the mind and attribute to the outside objects and the physiological mechanisms the whole operation. For these reasons among others the view of perception that came to obtain citizenship practically reduced the perceiver, not only to being neutral, but totally passive.

⁵ F. W. Matson, *The Broken Image. Man, Science, and Society* (Doubleday and Co., New York 1966), pp. 168-169.

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⁶ T. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Second Edition (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1970), p. 118.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 39. On the same instance see also p. 81.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 150-151.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 68, p. 77, and *passim*.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 80-81.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 150-152.

¹³ B. Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (Simon and Schuster, New York 1945), p. XIV.

