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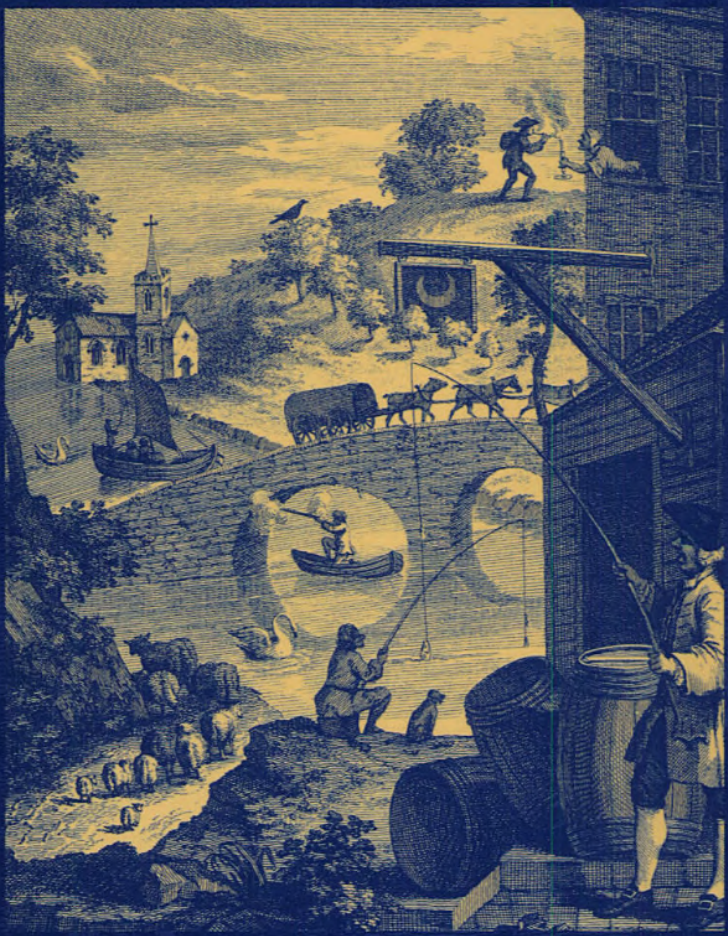
POINTS OF VIEW



A.W. MOORE

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ROBERT BRANDOM, *Times Literary Supplement*

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CONTENTS

The nature of the monad is representative, and consequently nothing can limit it to representing a part of things only, although it is true that its representation is confused as regards the detail of the whole universe and can only be distinct as regards a small part of things; that is to say as regards those which are either the nearest or the largest in relation to each of the monads; otherwise each monad would be a divinity. It is not in the object, but in the modification of the knowledge of the object, that monads are limited. In a confused way they all go towards the infinite, towards the whole; but they are limited and distinguished from one another by the degrees of their distinct perceptions.

(G. W. Leibniz)

Man reckons with immortality, and forgets to reckon with death.

(Milan Kundera)

And the Lord God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever: Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken.

(Genesis 3: 22–3)

ANALYTICAL TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: *"Are absolute representations possible?" This question, which is a question about the possibility of detached thought about the world, grounds the whole enquiry. A "representation" is anything that is either true or false. An "absolute" representation is a representation that is not from any point of view. A "perspectival" representation—the complementary notion—is a representation that is from some point of view. These ideas are defined in terms of the ways in which representations can be integrated with one another.*

CHAPTER TWO: *What makes the question significant is its bearing on a range of traditional philosophical concerns: the limits of objectivity; the ambitions of science; relativism; the way in which our thoughts relate to reality; and our aspiration to transcend our own finitude.*

CHAPTER THREE: *There is an illusion associated with the question, which must be dispelled before the question can be properly addressed. The illusion is that there are perspectival features of reality which figure in perspectival facts; and that what makes (some) true perspectival representations true is the obtaining of such facts. This is incoherent. The absolute/perspectival distinction applies* exclusively *to representations, not to what is represented.*

CHAPTER FOUR: *The answer to the question is yes. This is established by "the Basic Argument", an embellishment of an argument due to Williams. The Basic Argument has as one of its premisses "the Basic Assumption". This is an assumption which involves a cluster of interrelated ideas about the unity, substantiality, and autonomy of reality, and which is expressed as follows: 'Representations are representations of what is there* anyway.*'*

CHAPTER FIVE: *Many arguments have been advanced for answering the question negatively. Most of these can be countered—but not those in which the Basic Assumption is rejected. In their case, we seem to reach an*

impasse. However, there is a view which affords the prospect of a reconciliation. This view is a species of "transcendental idealism", according to which all our representations are from a "transcendent" point of view. It affords the prospect of reconciliation by distinguishing between levels. At a transcendent level, the Basic Assumption is rejected and the question is answered negatively. At a non-*transcendent level, the Basic Assumption is retained and the question is answered affirmatively (in accord with the Basic Argument). If the Basic Argument is not simply to be repudiated, then considerations in favour of answering the question negatively eventually become considerations in favour of this radical view; radical, because at the level at which the question is answered negatively, our representations are soaked in perspective of a deep and extraordinary kind.*

CHAPTER SIX: *Both Kant and, in his later work, Wittgenstein (the latter in spite of himself) indicate the possibility of such a response to the Basic Argument. However, transcendental idealism is incoherent. Specifically, it is self-stultifying. It does not provide an alternative to unregenerate endorsement of the Basic Argument after all.*

CHAPTER SEVEN: *But it does retain its appeal, even when it has been exposed. This creates a need for diagnosis. Transcendental idealists themselves may say that there is nothing wrong with the doctrine itself, but only with the attempt to state it; that transcendental idealism is* inexpressibly *true. This too, however, is incoherent. A related but importantly different proposal, deriving from Wittgenstein's earlier work, is this. While we cannot coherently* state *that transcendental idealism is true, we are* shown *that it is, where 'A is shown that x' is defined as '(i) A has ineffable knowledge, and (ii) when an attempt is made to put that knowledge into words, the result is: x'. Provided that we can make sense of (i) and (ii), this proposal has the threefold merit of: avoiding self-stultification; being compatible with the incoherence of transcendental idealism; and providing an account of transcendental idealism's appeal.*

CHAPTER EIGHT: *We can make sense of (i). Ineffable knowledge is a kind of practical knowledge, distinguished by the fact that it has nothing to answer to. Prime examples of ineffable knowledge are certain states of understanding.*

CHAPTER NINE: *We can make sense of (ii). This requires a critique of nonsense, since what replaces 'x' in the schema must be nonsense. Because*

our ineffable knowledge is a mark of our finitude, and because we have a shared aspiration to transcend our finitude, we have a shared temptation to put our ineffable knowledge into words. This in turn gives us a shared sense of when a piece of nonsense is "apt" to replace 'x' in the schema, where "aptness" is a quasi-aesthetic attribute, such as might occur in poetics. This, finally, is enough for instances of the schema to be true or false. In particular, both the following instances are true: 'We are shown that all our representations are from a transcendent point of view', 'We are shown that transcendental idealism is true.'

INTERLUDE

CHAPTER TEN: *Once these ideas are in place, further examples of things we are shown are forthcoming. These concern: the nature and identity of persons; the narrative unity of an individual life; scepticism; the subject matter of mathematics (or more specifically, of set theory); and the doctrine that Dummett calls anti-realism.*

CHAPTER ELEVEN: *Three principles underlie these ideas: first, that we are finite; secondly, that we are conscious of ourselves as finite; and thirdly, that we aspire to be infinite. The third of these also explains the value of certain things. That is, it explains their value* for us. *These things are not of value* tout court. *Nothing is. However, another thing we are shown is that they are of value* tout court. *Our aspiration to be infinite, precisely in determining that these things are of value for us, leads to our being shown this. (It also leads to our being shown that value* tout court *has an absoluteness that locates it at the transcendent level.) The question arises, finally, what value our aspiration to be infinite itself has. Exploration of this question indicates ways in which our ineffable knowledge stands in relation to God.*

BIBLIOGRAPHIES: Each chapter concludes with a short annotated bibliography of further relevant reading. These bibliographies do not include material already covered by the footnotes for their respective chapters. All items referred to in the bibliographies and footnotes are assembled in the main bibliography at the end of the book, together with publication details.

GLOSSARY: I have found it necessary to introduce my own terminology at various points in the book. Definitions of the terms I use most frequently are given in a glossary at the end.

CHAPTER ONE

> Some of our descriptions of the world are more local, or perspectival, or anthropocentric, than others . . . I can say of the moon that it is a body of a certain shape with irregularities on its surface some of which, when illuminated by the sun, reflect more light than others. I can say that when so illuminated, it looks like a man's face. I can say that it looks like your Uncle Henry, indeed . . . that it looks amusingly, or strangely, or evocatively like him. These are all human descriptions of the same thing, but the understandings they call upon are increasingly parochial. On a larger scale, when Pascal said of the spaces of the universe that they were immense, that they were silent, and that they were terrifying, he spoke from an increasingly local perspective.
>
> (Bernard Williams)

Introduction.

§ 1: The general idea of a point of view is introduced, through a range of examples.

§ 2: The idea of a representation is introduced. It is with respect to representations that the distinction is drawn between being from a point of view (being perspectival) and being from no point of view (being absolute).

§ 3: Three definitions of what this distinction comes to are considered. The first is rejected. The second is endorsed, but then set aside on the grounds that it relies on a notion of self-consciousness that is not yet clear enough for the definition to be suitable for our purposes. The third definition is adopted, though with the caveat that it will, in Chapter Five, be seen to involve a circularity. (By then, we shall be in a position to accept the circularity with equanimity.)

§ 4: Some related concepts are introduced, and an argument for the impossibility of absolute representations is sketched.

IS IT ever possible to think about the world with complete detachment?

I shall argue in Chapter Four that it is. Before that, I want to use this chapter to clarify the question, Chapter Two to consider its importance, and Chapter Three to dispel a certain illusion associated with it.

It is one of the great philosophical questions. Even so, I am not posing it merely for its own sake. Answering the question, or attempting to answer it, is as much a means for me as an end. In Chapter Five onwards, as I work through various objections to my position and clarify what I say in the first four chapters, I shall turn increasingly to other issues.

1

We often try to think as objectively as possible about the world around us, and to express ourselves accordingly. Whether we are musing in general terms about what kind of world it is, or assessing a particular situation, we try to ensure that what we think and what we say are not coloured by our own feelings, concerns, or special involvement with our subject matter. Such detachment is even sometimes required of us, for example if we are compiling an official report or giving evidence in a court of law. Someone might deliberately refrain from describing an event as amusing, say, because such a description would be an expression of his or her own particular sense of humour.

Science acts as a paradigm here. What a scientific theory is supposed to be is, precisely, a completely objective account of what the world is like and how it works. This is why many people regard science with a kind of reverence. They think that it contains pure, unadulterated truth.

Not that we always aim at objectivity. Sometimes it would be quite inappropriate to do so. If you are writing a poem or a love letter, or rallying support for a political cause, you may express yourself in a way that betrays your deepest commitments, aspirations, and values. You need not hold back from describing a state of affairs as amusing, or intolerable, just because such a description is conditioned by your attitude to it. On the contrary, you may describe it

in that way precisely in order to convey that attitude. Your description may reveal, and may be intended to reveal, as much about you as about what you are describing.

Does this mean that you are not (really) trying to express the truth? It is tempting to think that it must mean that. It is tempting to think that truth and objectivity are the same thing, or at least inseparable, so that if you are not trying to say objectively how things are, then you are not really trying to say how they are at all. An extreme version of this view is that the only authentic way of saying how things are is in scientific terms, and that science is the sole repository of truth.

But this view is quite unwarranted. A perfectly legitimate and very important way of saying how things are is from a particular point of deep involvement or engagement with them, in a way that it is not objective. Much of our understanding of the world, and of our own position in it, is informed by how it appears from such points of involvement—as beautiful, dreadful, bewildering, or frightening, say. Our understanding of death, for example, is not purely biological. It is conditioned by our own mortality, our own point of involvement with death. Each of us will die, each of us is affected by the deaths of others, and each of us understands death from that perspective. When it comes to giving voice to such understanding, the relevant paradigm will not be the scientific formula but the song, the prayer, the requiem.

There are ways of expressing the truth that are not objective, then. My opening question about detachment is not a question about whether it is possible to attain the truth. It is a question that arises granted that possibility. It is a question about whether it is possible to attain a certain kind of truth.

To see more clearly what is at stake here we need to broaden the discussion. Objectivity is merely one example of the kind of detachment that concerns me. There are many ways in which our thinking about the world can depend on how and where we are situated.

Suppose somebody says, 'It is snowing,' and somebody else says, 'It has stopped snowing.' There need be no conflict. They may be speaking in different places. It is possible that what each of them says is true. This unremarkable fact illustrates the way in which the content of a true judgement can depend quite literally on its location. To grasp that content it is not enough to know what *type* of

judgement it is, by which I mean, in this case, it is not enough to understand the English sentence that has been used. One must also know *where* the judgement has been made. I say 'where', and I talk about a literal sense of location, but in fact even this banal example illustrates how location can also be relevant in a metaphorical (non-spatial) sense. For it matters also *when* the judgement is made, in other words what its temporal location is. Someone can comment truly, 'It is snowing,' and, without moving but simply by waiting long enough, comment, again truly, 'It has stopped snowing.' There are other obvious ways of extending the metaphorical reach of the term 'location'. You may say, 'This box is light enough to lift,' while I say, referring to the same box, 'It is too heavy to lift.' Again there is no conflict. Each of us may have spoken truly, you for your part and I for mine.

It is when the idea of a location is allowed to extend yet further that we confront the concept of objectivity. An *objective* judgement is a judgement whose content does not depend on what I have been calling a 'point of involvement'. Points of involvement are locations, in this extended sense. (But not all locations are points of involvement. Merely spatial or temporal locations are not. Objectivity, as I said, is only one example of the kind of detachment that concerns me.) What it comes to is this. An objective judgement is a judgement whose content does not depend, peculiarly, on any of the concerns, interests, or values of whoever makes it, including any that are shared presuppositions of the context.

Once we have the more banal examples of location-dependence in mind, we can see more easily, perhaps, why 'objective truth' is not a pleonasm. Imagine a judgement of beauty made in a particular historical and cultural context. For instance, imagine a judgement about a child's physical beauty made in a sixteenth-century European setting, or a judgement about the beauty of a piece of classical Chinese music made by some suitable initiate. There is no reason why such a judgement should not be true. Whoever makes it may be revealing insight which others lack. This insight may have been achieved as a result of careful training, or special sensitivity, or both. The person may even be able to amplify on the judgement in such a way as to awaken similar sensitivity in others, directing their attention to pertinent features of the child or piece of music in question so that they too can see that the judgement is true. Even so, the judgement is not objective. Its content is conditioned by the

relevant backcloth of shared cultural interests and sensibilities. There may be no possibility, at a later time or in a different culture, of making a judgement to the same effect about the same child or the same piece of music; certainly not in the same way and with the same claim to truth. The original judgement is from a position of (cultural) involvement with what is being judged.

For another example, imagine someone's lament that her marriage has become a burden. We can suppose that she is justified in saying this even though the marriage has not become a burden for her husband. For him it has opened up possibilities without which he could now scarcely function. There is truth in his wife's lament, in part, because of the point of involvement from which it is made.

The idea of a location can be extended in other directions too. Simple colour ascriptions provide one important example, according to a well-known argument. The argument runs as follows. Consider colour-blindness. Some observers can make colour discriminations that others cannot. The latter are said to be deficient in this respect. But we can imagine something analogous where there is no question of deficiency. Suppose, for instance, that there are aliens who are so physiologically constituted that a particular substance looks red to them though it looks green to all normal-sighted human beings: the substance affects their visual apparatus differently from ours, though they otherwise make the same discriminations as we do. Imagine now that one of these aliens classifies the substance as red while one of us classifies it as green. There need no more be a conflict than in the case where one person remarks, 'It is snowing,' and another remarks, 'It has stopped snowing,' or indeed in the case where an alien says that our sun is thousands of light-years away and one of us says that it is approximately 93 million miles away. Both classifications may be correct, the one because of its alien location, the other because of its human location. And although this talk of aliens is science fiction, the very fact that it is intelligible means that our ordinary ascriptions of colour must already be conditioned by their location. For how could whether or not they are depend on whether or not such aliens do in fact exist? Thus when I say, 'Grass is green,' I am producing a correct account of how things are from that same human perspective.

—*"But surely colour concepts are more responsive to independent checks than this argument allows. Suppose we measure the relevant wave-*

lengths. And suppose that these are in line with the alien classification. Do *we not then count as deficient? Are we not forced to say that the substance, though it looks green to us because of some physiological quirk, is really red?"*—

Perhaps we are forced to say this. Even so, the argument serves to remind us of how our colour concepts are responsive, at some fundamental level, to the look of things. Ordinary uses of 'green' may not involve a suppressed relativization ('green for humans'). But beings whose visual apparatus differed radically from ours, or who had no visual apparatus at all, would be unable to grasp our colour concepts. Even if they could measure wavelengths, and even if they could tell, indirectly, that something was green, they would still not understand this in the way that we do. They might well not be able to see the point of our classifications. To that extent our use of colour concepts is dependent on its location. There is still a sense in which, when I say, 'Grass is green,' I am producing a correct account of how things are from a human perspective.

Once the idea of a location has been extended like this, we may wonder whether *all* the concepts we use in characterizing the world are location-dependent, perhaps in similar ways, perhaps in ways that would unsettle us, perhaps even in ways that we are incapable of recognizing. This possibility is brought closer by the fact that, even when the idea of a location is comparatively restricted, location-*dependence* can take unexpected forms. For instance, frames of reference, as understood in relativity theory, are locations of a spatio-temporal kind, but it took the genius of Einstein to recognize that judgements of simultaneity depend on them: events that are simultaneous relative to one frame of reference may not be simultaneous relative to another. It ought at least to be clearer now how much force there is in my opening question about detachment. Detachment, we now see, does not come cheaply.

I shall draw this part of the discussion to a close by invoking the idea of a *point of view*. By a point of view I shall mean a location in the broadest possible sense. Hence points of view include points in space, points in time, frames of reference, historical and cultural contexts, different roles in personal relationships, points of involvement of other kinds, and the sensory apparatuses of different species. My question, in these terms, is whether there can be thought about the world that is not from any point of view.

2

At this stage in the discussion there are two principal problems. First, now that the idea of a location is being stretched to its limit in the idea of a point of view, something needs to be said to keep it in check. Otherwise the question will vacuously receive the answer no. (Sidgwick once talked about "the point of view of the Universe".[1] Clearly there cannot be any coherent thought which is not at least from *that*.) The sheer range of examples given is part of this first problem. The second problem is that the idea of location-dependence, that is, the idea of what it is for something to be *from* a point of view, is still not sufficiently clear.

Let us call that which is from a point of view 'perspectival', and that which is from no point of view 'absolute'. If we can give a satisfactory account of what it is for something to be perspectival (or absolute—it does not matter which), then we shall have solved both problems at once.

The 'something' in that last sentence indicates our first task: to specify the domain over which the two terms 'perspectival' and 'absolute' are defined. So far I have been vague about this. I have treated thought, understanding, theories, judgements, expressions of the truth, and other things as if they were candidates for being perspectival or absolute. These do, however, have something in common. This common element can be encapsulated in the idea of a *representation*. By a representation I shall mean anything which has content—that things are thus and so—and which, because of its content, is true or false. Whenever we think about how things are, or say how they are, or reveal that we take them to be a certain way, whether we do so verbally, pictorially, inwardly to ourselves, or simply through the way in which we behave, then we can be said to have produced a representation. It is representations that are perspectival or absolute.

This idea of a representation raises huge philosophical problems. Much ink has been spilled in an effort to say when something qualifies as true or false. A lot of the attention has settled on statements which satisfy the relevant grammatical criteria—they involve the use of declarative sentences—but which are suspect on other grounds. Examples are: mathematical statements ('No square

[1] Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, pp. 382 and 420.

number is twice another'); self-ascriptions of pain ('That hurts!'); and, most notably, evaluations, including expressions of moral conviction ('She has a right to do whatever she likes with her own money'). The first of these have been likened to rule-specifications for a game; the second, to interjections; the third, to cheers or jeers, or, quite differently, imperatives. In each case talk of truth or falsity may be inappropriate. At any rate there is a major philosophical difficulty, or family of difficulties, about what counts as a representation.

I shall simply bypass these difficulties. I want to take the idea of a representation as given. The issues that concern me arise once that idea is in play. Some of what I go on to say may be of use to anyone who wants to come back to these difficulties. But for now, I shall say no more about what counts as a representation other than to mention two things that I am taking for granted. First, the content of any representation can also be the content of some belief. That is, given any representation that things are thus and so, it is possible to *think* that things are thus and so. (This I take to be both platitudinous and important. It is a useful tool for anyone wanting to show why some apparent representation is not really such.) Secondly—the assumption that guided the early part of this chapter—a representation need not be objective. In other words, a representation can be from a point of involvement. From now on I shall call any representation that is from a point of involvement 'subjective'.

This is a point of terminology worth dwelling on. The term 'subjective' is often used to characterize that which is disqualified from being a representation on the grounds that it is evaluative. My usage is quite different. On my usage, the term applies *only* to representations. Being subjective is one particular way of being perspectival.[2]

There is one other point of terminology before I proceed. This concerns the phrase 'point of view' itself. This phrase is often used to signify a kind of screening mechanism. To adopt a point of view, in this sense, is to attend only to certain limited aspects of whatever one is dealing with, those which are relevant to the concerns and

[2] For future reference I have included a diagram at the end of the glossary to illustrate the relationship between the objective/subjective distinction and the absolute/perspectival distinction.

interests that define one's point of view, and to disregard all the rest. This is certainly related to my conception, but it is important for my purposes not to take anything about the relationship for granted. In particular, I presuppose no connection between the perspectival and the incomplete, or again between the absolute and the complete. If a complete perspectival representation of reality is impossible, as it would trivially be on this alternative conception, and as indeed the various resonances of the word 'partial' encourage us to think, then even so, in my terms, this is something to be argued for.

3

What, then, is it for a representation to be perspectival?

Some of the examples above may have engendered an oversimplified model. On that model a state of affairs in which someone stands in a certain relation to some part of reality can be represented from the point of view of that person as a state of affairs in which that part of reality has some corresponding feature. Thus, for example, a state of affairs in which an astronaut is within fifty miles of the moon can be represented, from the point of view of that astronaut, as a state of affairs in which the moon is less than fifty miles away.

This model only fits cases which involve a suppressed relativization. Arguably, it does not fit the colour case. Certainly it would not fit the case of any representation which was so soaked in perspective that the very things to which it made reference existed only from that point of view. (I will give examples of such representations in Chapter Ten. On some extreme theories, they include representations that make reference to physical objects. Physical objects are said to exist only from the point of view of human, or animal, experience. The underlying reality is said to be neither spatial nor temporal. We shall encounter such theories in Chapter Six.) Still, the model indicates a promising way forward.

There are two notions associated with the idea of a representation which have great intuitive appeal and of which I have already made free use: the notion of the *content* of a representation, and the notion of its *type*. The model above helps to illustrate both these

notions. Suppose that the astronaut, in the case described, says, 'The moon is less than fifty miles away,' while somebody else, referring to him, says, 'He is now within fifty miles of the moon.' Then they have produced two representations with the same content, but of different types. Conversely, suppose that the astronaut says, 'The moon is less than fifty miles away,' while somebody else, on the surface of the earth, utters the same sentence. Then they have produced two representations of the same type, but with different contents (one true, the other false). It is precisely because of perspectival representations that the notions of content and type cut across each other in this way. The content of a perspectival representation depends not only on its type, but also on the point of view from which it is produced. It is tempting, now, to work this into a definition: a perspectival representation is a representation whose type can be shared by other representations which do not share its content. Equivalently: an absolute representation is a representation such that any other representation of the same type must have the same content.

However, there are two major obstacles to resting with this definition. The first obstacle is that the notions of content and type are themselves in need of clarification. The little that I have just said should have sufficed to tap their intuitive appeal, but it does not provide a secure basis for discussion. For one thing, it is unnerving to have made such significant play with the workings of language. Not all representations are linguistic.

One very natural account of the two notions runs as follows. The *content* of a representation is how things must be if it is true. The *type* of a representation is the role it must play in the psychology of whoever produces it, if he or she (or it) *thinks* the representation is true, that is if the representation expresses a belief of whoever produces it. Thus when the astronaut says, 'The moon is less than fifty miles away,' the content of his representation is that he is, at that time, within fifty miles of the moon. The type of his representation determines how he is disposed to act if the representation is an expression of what he thinks; for instance, and very roughly, if he is trying to land on the moon, then he is disposed to carry out the procedures that are necessary, or that he takes to be necessary, for landing on the moon from a distance of less than fifty miles. (Compare: the person who says, referring to him, 'He is now within fifty miles of the moon,' has said something with the same con-

ditions of truth, but is disposed to act in a different way; a crackpot on earth who says, believing it, 'The moon is less than fifty miles away,' is disposed to act in the same way, but has said something with different conditions of truth.) Corresponding to the content and the type of any representation are two levels at which it can be understood. To understand the representation at one level one must know its content. This will help in ascertaining whether or not it is true. To understand the representation at the other level one must know its type. This will help in explaining the behaviour of whoever produced it, if he or she thinks it is true.

This seems to me to be perfectly acceptable as far as it goes. But it does not go far. "Ways things must be" and "ways of being disposed to act" must themselves be individuated; and individuating them is every bit as difficult, and raises essentially the same problems, as saying what the content and the type of a representation are. A full account of these matters would have to expound the grounds on which representations are produced, the conclusions which are drawn from them, the conceptual abilities which are involved in their production, and the principles which determine what they are about. It would have to constitute a significant chapter in both the philosophy of psychology and the philosophy of language.

At this point I shall do precisely what I did when it came to saying what a representation is. I shall simply proceed as if such an account were to hand. As before, this means gliding over an area of great philosophical difficulty, in which much important work has been done and in which there is still much to do. My excuse is once again that I am interested in issues that arise at a later stage.

There remains the second obstacle to the proposed definition. On that definition, to repeat, a perspectival representation is a representation whose type does not determine its content. But we have to reckon with the possibility of a kind of representation which I shall call "radically perspectival". A radically perspectival representation would be a representation which was from a point of view such that there could not be another representation of the same type that was not also from that point of view. This would be because even to operate with those concepts would already be to see things from that point of view. Examples would include representations of the kind for which I insisted the model above would be inadequate, that is representations that made reference to things

whose very existence could only be acknowledged from that point of view (physical objects, on the extreme theories). Other possible examples would be subjective representations involving concepts such as *chivalry* or *dignity*, concepts whose application is arguably unintelligible except against a specific background of shared sensibilities and values. Suppose now that ρ is some radically perspectival representation. And suppose that ρ is not from any point of view other than that which makes it radically perspectival. By definition, any other representation of the same type would have to be from the same point of view. Hence it would have to have the same content. On the proposed definition, then, ρ would count as absolute.

The definition could be amended. We could say: a perspectival representation is a representation whose type does not determine its content *unless* that type is such that it cannot be shared by a representation from any other point of view. From any other point of view, though? The problem with this, at least as a definition, is that it invokes the very ideas that we are trying to explicate.

We do best to look for a different kind of definition, though we can continue to work with the notions of content and type. One thing that is liable to be significant is the endorsement of representations. To *endorse* a representation is to produce another representation with the same content. To endorse a representation *by simple repetition* is to endorse it by producing another representation of the same type. An absolute representation can always be endorsed by simple repetition. A perspectival representation, on the other hand, sometimes cannot be. Suppose, for example, that I wish to endorse an assertion I made yesterday of the sentence, 'It is humid today.' I have no alternative but to produce a representation of some other type ('It was humid yesterday').

This seems immediately to furnish us with a new definition. But it does not. Consider the 'always' and the 'sometimes' in the last paragraph. These are effectively quantifiers ranging over points of view. An absolute representation is a representation such that, for any point of view, it is possible to endorse the representation by producing another representation of the same type at that point of view (where incidentally the idea of producing a representation *at* a point of view presents an additional complexity). As before, then, essential use has been made of the very ideas that we are trying to explicate. Can we avoid this? We can, in two ways. (The two ways are related.)

The first way is to focus on a particular kind of endorsement, that which is fully self-conscious. By full self-consciousness here I have in mind something both distinctive and demanding. Self-consciousness is what enables me to see my own representations *as* my own representations. It is what I need if I am not only to know something but to know that I know it. (This is a very sketchy account of an idea that will be of crucial importance, and will receive further clarification, in later chapters.) In the case of an absolute representation, fully self-conscious endorsement can be achieved by simple repetition. In the case of a perspectival representation, on the other hand, full self-consciousness demands more. It demands reference to the relevant point of view. For it must allow for an understanding of how the original representation, if true, coheres with true representations from other points of view. The astronaut, if he is to provide a fully self-conscious endorsement of his own true report, 'The moon is less than fifty miles away,' must do so in such a way that he can see how it coheres with true assertions, made on the surface of the earth, of the sentence, 'The moon is nearly a quarter of a million miles away.' He may continue to think in perspectival terms: 'The moon is less than fifty miles away from *me*.' But since somebody on the surface of the earth can equally think, 'The moon is nearly a quarter of a million miles away from *me*,' the astronaut must supplement this with a conception of himself as one item among others, occupying a particular position in space. Eventually he must produce a representation in which the original element of perspective is superseded. Here, then, is a way of drawing the distinction between the perspectival and the absolute. A perspectival representation is a representation which cannot (and an absolute representation, a representation which can) be fully self-consciously endorsed by simple repetition.

Although I think this definition is correct, I readily concede that this idea of full self-consciousness is not yet clear enough for such a definition to be suitable for our purposes. We do better to turn to the second way of avoiding the specified circularity. We shall see in Chapter Five that this involves its own rather different circularity, but by then we shall be in a position to accept the circularity with equanimity. What we need to focus on is the joint endorsement of two representations, or, as I shall say, their integration. To *integrate* two representations is to produce a third representation whose con-

tent is the product of theirs, in other words a representation which is true if and only if they are both true. To integrate two representations *by simple addition* is to integrate them by producing a representation which is the conjunction of two representations of the same types as theirs. (Simple addition is the "two representation" counterpart of simple repetition.) In order to integrate two perspectival representations by simple addition it would be necessary to produce a third representation from all the same points of view as each. This would not always be possible. Some points of view are "incompatible", by which I mean that no representation could be produced from both of them. Points widely separated in time are an example. Thus suppose I say one day, 'It is humid today.' And suppose, some sixth months later, I say, 'It is snowing.' I could not then integrate these two representations by saying, 'It is humid today and it is snowing.' I should have to do something more circuitous, such as make explicit reference to the two dates concerned. Representations from incompatible points of view cannot be integrated by simple addition, then. Moreover, given any point of view, there are bound to be others incompatible with it: we have to insist on this if we are to stop the idea of a point of view from expanding into triviality. (Recall Sidgwick's "point of view of the Universe".) It follows that, given any perspectival representation, it is bound to be possible to produce a representation with which it cannot be integrated by simple addition. Not so in the case of an absolute representation. Here is the definition we seek then. A perspectival representation is a representation such that there is some possible representation with which it cannot be integrated by simple addition. An absolute representation is a representation which can be integrated by simple addition with any possible representation.

My opening question, in these terms, is this. Are absolute representations possible?

4

Now that the question has been clarified in this way, we may have lost sense of its significance. To activate that sense is the main task of Chapter Two. Before I bring this chapter to a close, however, I want to focus on a few concepts which the last part of the discus-

sion has brought to light; and then I want to say a little more about why the question does not obviously receive the answer yes.

It may be that some perspectival representations can be endorsed *only* by simple repetition—or at least, only by producing a representation from the same point of view. (Producing a representation from the same point of view does not preclude, for example, introducing a new element of perspective.) For instance, it *may* be that only from the point of view of beings with the relevant visual apparatus is it possible to have a thought with precisely the same content as the thoughts which you or I have whenever we think that grass is green. Call any such representation "inherently perspectival". It is instructive to compare this idea of inherent perspective with the earlier idea of radical perspective. A radically perspectival representation is a representation which is from a point of view that must be shared by any other representation of the same type. An inherently perspectival representation is a representation which is from a point of view that must be shared by any other representation with the same *content*. But the connections between the two kinds of representations do not stop there. If there *are* any inherently perspectival representations, then they are also likely to be radically perspectival, and vice versa. This is because any distinctive conceptual tools that serve to define a point of view are likely to be reflected in the content of a representation if and only if they are also reflected in its type. (I shall say a little more about this, and give some examples, in Chapter Three.)

However that may be, I claim that even if it is possible to endorse a certain representation only by adopting the same point of view, still it must be possible, even without adopting that point of view, to tell a story sufficiently long and complex to have the content of the representation as part of its own. In other words, it must be possible to tell a story that has the representation as a consequence. I leave open the question of how strong a notion of consequence this is. I certainly do not want to insist on the conceptual impossibility of the story's being true without the representation's also being true. All I require is that there should be *some* non-trivial notion of consequence for which my claim holds, for instance something that depends on a notion of supervenience.[3] Thus, for example, aliens without the relevant visual apparatus might nevertheless be able to

[3] See e.g. David Charles, 'Supervenience, Composition, and Physicalism'.

tell a sufficiently long and complex story about pigment, wavelengths, retinas, and the rest to capture what we mean in calling grass green. Let us say that one representation *weakly entails* another when the former has the latter as a consequence in this sense. And let us say that a representation has been *indirectly* endorsed when another representation has been produced which weakly entails it. (So endorsement is a special case of indirect endorsement.) Then my claim is this: even if there are inherently perspectival representations, that is to say, representations which can be endorsed only by adopting the same point of view, there is none which can be *indirectly* endorsed only by adopting the same point of view.

In an entirely parallel way, I claim that, even if there are some pairs of representations which cannot be integrated, there is none which cannot be *indirectly* integrated. (By indirect integration I mean the "two representation" counterpart of indirect endorsement: for two representations to be indirectly integrated is for a third representation to be produced that weakly entails each of them.) I claim, furthermore, that given any pair of true representations, their indirect integration can be achieved by producing a representation which is in turn true.[4] This is our first glimpse of something that I shall later parade as a fundamental principle about the unity of reality.

All the unsubstantiated claims that I have made in the last two paragraphs are controversial, require elaboration, and will be dealt with at greater length in later chapters. But it is useful to have got the relevant concepts into focus at an early stage. Moreover, they give us another angle on absolute representations. Consider any finite set of representations. If what I have been claiming is correct, a single representation can be produced which weakly entails every one of them. This single representation can be obtained by a series of indirect integrations, of the first representation with the second, of the result of this indirect integration with the third, of the result of *this* indirect integration with the fourth, and so on. It is entirely possible that no part of what results will bear any resemblance to any of the original representations. Indeed it is possible that no part of what results *can* bear any resemblance to any of the original rep-

[4] Cf. Wiggins on what he calls the fifth mark of truth, in David Wiggins, 'Truth, and Truth as Predicated of Moral Judgements', pp. 148 and 152.

resentations—unless they include representations that are absolute. Absolute representations can always be kept in reserve until the end of the process and then tagged on by simple addition. An absolute representation is always of a type fit to appear at the end-stage of any multiple integration of this kind.

—*"Very well, why are there not clear examples in mathematics? If I say, '2 + 2 = 4,' have I not produced an absolute representation whose content can be straightforwardly added to the content of any story by simply appending another representation of the same type?"*—

Well, remember that mathematical statements were among the problematical cases cited earlier when we considered what counts as a representation. In saying, '2 + 2 = 4,' you may not have produced a representation at all. But suppose we waive that worry. Perhaps your representation is from the point of view of people who count and do arithmetic in a certain way. Perhaps, if there were people, or aliens, who counted differently, one of them could say, '2 + 2 = 4,' and be in error.

—*"That is beside the point. Of course there could be people for whom the actual string of symbols '2 + 2 = 4' meant something false. They might use '4' as we use '3': one of them might assert, '2 + 2 = 4,' and mean that 2 + 2 = 3. But a merely linguistic difference of this kind would prove nothing. Such a representation would not be* of the same type *as mine."*—

What is that type, though? What is a "merely linguistic" difference? Is mathematical reality as separate from the use of mathematical symbols as you are suggesting? Is there a clear distinction between saying that, for certain people, '2 + 2 = 4' means something false, and saying that, from their point of view, $2 + 2 \neq 4$?

I ask these questions rhetorically. They are among the most fundamental in the philosophy of mathematics. Indeed they are among the most fundamental in philosophy. The point, for now, is that we are still far from being able to look at any representation and see straight away that it is absolute. Identifying elements of perspective can be both heady and disconcerting. It can also be extraordinarily difficult. The sheer variety of points of view already put us in mind of this. Nothing in the subsequent discussion has alleviated the difficulty.

The answer to my opening question is not obviously yes. Some may think it is obviously no. They may think that there is a simple argument to show, not just that any representation must be perspectival, but that any representation must be radically perspectival.

The argument runs as follows. Any representation must involve its own distinctive battery of conceptual apparatus, with its own distinctive systems of classification and organization. To operate these is already to see things in one way rather than another. It is already to see things from a particular point of view.

We shall come back to this argument in Chapter Five. Our first priority, however, is to get a better understanding of what hangs on such arguments. I shall now try to say some more about what does.

FURTHER READING

A precursor to this book is my 'Points of View': I should like to thank the editor and publisher of *Philosophical Quarterly* for permission to re-use material from this article. (I do however depart from some of the claims made there, and in other previously published work.)

The question raised in this chapter is particularly associated with Bernard Williams: see especially *Descartes*, pp. 64–8, 211–12, 239, 245–9, and 300–3; and *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, pp. 138–40. See also, for discussion of Williams's views, the material cited in the further reading for Chapter Four. The question raised is also associated with Thomas Nagel: see 'Subjective and Objective'; and, in much greater depth, *The View From Nowhere*. Also relevant to the question, and to the tools used in this chapter for clarifying it, are: Fred D'Agostino, 'Transcendence and Conversation: Two Concepts of Objectivity'; Miranda Fricker, 'Perspectival Realism: Towards a Pluralist Theory of Knowledge'; Geoffrey V. Klempner, *Naïve Metaphysics*; Colin McGinn, *The Subjective View*; D. H. Mellor, 'I and Now'; John Perry, *The Problem of the Essential Indexical and Other Essays*; John Perry and Simon Blackburn, 'Thoughts Without Representation'; Amartya Sen, 'Positional Objectivity'; and Galen Strawson, *The Secret Connexion*, Appendix B.

For somewhat different approaches to the idea of a point of view (more in keeping with what I described in the main text as the idea of a point of view as a screening mechanism) see Robert Brandom, 'Points of View and Practical Reasoning'; Antti Hautamäki, 'Points of View and Their Logical Analysis'; and Jon Moline, 'On Points of View'.

On the question of what counts as a representation, which I passed over, see Brad Hooker (ed.), *Truth in Ethics*; Paul Horwich, *Truth*; and Crispin Wright, *Truth and Objectivity*.

On the issues associated with the notions of content and type, which I

also passed over, see Jon Barwise and John Perry, *Situations and Attitudes*; Michael Dummett, 'The Relative Priority of Thought and Language'; Gareth Evans, *The Varieties of Reference*; David Lewis, 'Attitudes *De Dicto* and *De Se*'; and John Perry, *The Problem of the Essential Indexical and Other Essays*.

CHAPTER TWO

> First she placed her fingertips to a spot between her breasts, as if she wanted to point to the very centre of what is known as the self. Then she flung her arms forward, as if she wanted to transport that self somewhere far away, to the horizon, to infinity. The gesture of longing for immortality knows only two points in space: the self here, the horizon far in the distance; only two concepts: the absolute that is the self, and the absolute that is the world.
>
> (Milan Kundera)

§ 1: What is the significance of the question whether absolute representations are possible? Various reasons are given, in this chapter, for thinking that a negative answer to the question would be disquieting. First, some general remarks are made about why absoluteness is, or might be, a desideratum of certain enquiries.

§ 2: The bearing of a negative answer on the limits of objectivity is considered.

§ 3: Absoluteness is argued to be a desideratum of the natural sciences, or at any rate of physics.

§ 4: Problems about disagreement and relativism are considered. Certain difficulties are identified that would be the more severe if absoluteness were unattainable.

§ 5: Absoluteness is shown to lie at the limit of an ideal of rational reflective self-understanding.

§ 6: Some final comments are made about the threat that a negative answer would pose for our idea of reality. These comments presage the argument that will eventually be given for an affirmative answer.

1

ANY enquiry, in so far as it has pretensions to comprehensiveness, demands a certain transcendence of perspective. This is one con-

clusion that we can already draw. Comprehensiveness is a feature of representations. It comes in degrees. And it is of two kinds. The first kind is comprehensiveness of *coverage*. This is roughly a matter of how large the content of the representation is: "how much it says". (A representation to the effect that Jupiter and Saturn both have moons has larger content than a representation to the effect merely that Jupiter does.) Comprehensiveness of coverage is, so to speak, the *telos* of integration. And integration is bound sometimes to involve loss of perspective, as we saw in the last chapter. The more extensive the integration, the more extensive the likely loss. The second kind of comprehensiveness is comprehensiveness of *appeal*. This is roughly a matter of how large the range of enquirers is who can assimilate the representation. Assimilation here is basically what I have been calling endorsement by simple repetition. So increased comprehensiveness of appeal will likewise require loss of perspective.

But when is an enquiry likely to have pretensions to either kind of comprehensiveness?

Comprehensiveness of coverage is likely to be sought whenever the aim of the enquiry is to synthesize various things that are known into a single representation—a theory—in order to produce a systematic overview of a given area. Such is the aim of scientific enquiries. The comprehensiveness in such cases is sought as an end in itself, not merely as a means. (But it is not a supreme end. There are competing goods. For instance, one scientific theory might have greater content than another yet have less explanatory power or be less manageable.)

Comprehensiveness of coverage is also sometimes sought as a means to the end of rational and reflective understanding of oneself, or more particularly of oneself in relation to others. This connects with the brief comments about self-conscious endorsement in the previous chapter. It also connects with what I signalled as a fundamental principle about the unity of reality. The principle, which I shall henceforth refer to as the Fundamental Principle, is this. Given any pair of true representations, it is possible to produce a true representation that weakly entails each of them (in the sense of weak entailment introduced in the previous chapter). This can scarcely be proved. It is after all fundamental. But here are some comments that may serve to motivate it. The truth of any true representation is determined by how the world is—by how reality is.

There is only one world. This is what I mean when I talk about the unity of reality. So given any pair of true representations, that one world—reality—must be how both of them represent it as being. But if that is how reality is, then it must be possible to produce a true representation to that effect. Embellishing somewhat: given any pair of true representations, there must be a way of understanding not only how each of them can be true, but how *both* of them can be true. To see now how this connects with the goal of rational reflective self-understanding, suppose that I wish to endorse my own representations, perhaps along with the representations of others. And suppose that I wish to do so in a way that is fully and rationally reflective. Then I shall not be satisfied except in so far as I am satisfied that these representations conform to the Fundamental Principle. Piecemeal endorsement will not be good enough. Integration is called for, or at least indirect integration, the more extensive the better. In other words, I shall be aiming for a certain comprehensiveness of coverage.

When is an enquiry likely to have pretensions to comprehensiveness of appeal?

Comprehensiveness of appeal, like comprehensiveness of coverage, is a goal of science. Partly this is because of a presupposition of scientific enquiry that I shall amplify later in this chapter, namely that there is, as far as scientific enquiry is concerned, no privileged point of view: no point of view is particularly apt for the statement of scientific laws. Partly it is because scientific enquiry shares with other kinds of enquiry the further goal of common understanding. Common understanding occurs when independent enquirers not only reach agreement with one another but also attain a shared conception of things which, granted success in mutual translation, facilitates their seeing that they have reached agreement and aids further concerted enquiry. For this they need to produce accounts that are not only alike in content, but also alike in type.

These highly schematic remarks, which develop some of the equally schematic remarks made at the end of the last chapter, already suggest that absoluteness is a desideratum of certain enquiries. This gives significant fillip to the question whether absolute representations are possible. But two caveats should be entered to prevent the question from assuming too great an importance too soon. First, absoluteness is certainly not a desideratum of

all enquiries. This is something that I tried to emphasize at the beginning of the previous chapter. There are plenty of circumstances in which we actively seek a high degree of perspective, indeed a high degree of subjectivity, in our representations. If I am trying to understand some petty fear that is currently debilitating me, then I shall be relatively immune to the demands of comprehensiveness. My aim is to understand something very specific, from a very specific point of involvement with it. Secondly, even given an enquiry for which absoluteness is a desideratum, the question whether absolute representations are possible in no way puts the enquiry on trial. If they are possible, then one aim of the enquiry will be to produce them; and independent participants in the enquiry might be expected to converge on one type of account. But even if they are not possible, the desideratum might still be a reasonable one. The aim will then be, through successive excisions of elements of perspective, to get closer and closer to absoluteness, even though it is impossible to get so close that there is no room for improvement. Absoluteness will then be what Kant might have called a regulative ideal.[1]

What I have said so far in this chapter presents, in outline, one of its main threads. As I follow this thread I shall try to do three things. First, I shall try to say more about how, how far, and in what sense, absoluteness is a desideratum of any enquiry—if indeed it ever is. So far all I have done is make a suggestion: that absoluteness is a desideratum wherever there is an aspiration to comprehensiveness. The second thing I shall try to do is to substantiate this suggestion. Finally, I shall try to make the discussion less schematic. I shall begin by returning to an idea that dominated the early part of Chapter One, the idea of objectivity.

2

The objective/subjective distinction is a distinction of degree. There is no harm in calling a representation simply objective, or simply subjective; nor in construing 'objective' and 'subjective' as contradictories over the domain of representations, as we have

[1] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A567–71/B595–9.

been doing. But what determines whether a representation is objective or subjective, namely whether or not it is from a point of involvement, admits of various sorts of gradation. Thus one representation may be from many different points of involvement, another from not so many. One representation may be from a point of involvement that is harder to surmount than another. One representation may be from a point of deeper involvement than another. Now all of these have analogues in the case of the absolute/perspectival distinction, which is likewise, in *that* sense, a distinction of degree. None of them, in itself, threatens the presumption that there is a clear cut-off point between being from *no* point of involvement and being from at least one, any more than their analogues threaten the presumption that there is a clear cut-off point between being from no point of view (absolute) and being from at least one (perspectival). However, the objective/subjective distinction is further afflicted by an inherent vagueness that has no analogue in the case of the absolute/perspectival distinction: the vagueness that attaches to the very idea of a point of involvement. My talk of concerns, interests, and values in Chapter One did not constitute, and was not intended to constitute, a precise tool for prising apart subjectivity from other kinds of perspective. So here is another sort of gradation. One representation may be from a point of view that more definitely *counts* as a point of involvement.

Granted these different sorts of gradation, there is a question about the degree of objectivity to which we can aspire in any given context. Writing a treatise on microphysical structure and falling in love might be two extremes. For reasons that I shall try to make clear, this question can be vital. Whether absolute representations are possible bears on it.

It does not bear on it directly. Even if absoluteness is never attainable, complete objectivity may be. For by definition, absoluteness is harder to attain than objectivity. But the latter question bears on the former indirectly. For if absolute representations are not possible, then there must be some reason why; and this reason may well turn out to set limits on how objective we can be. Thus one embellishment of the argument sketched right at the end of the last chapter would have it that any set of concepts is inevitably an expression of certain needs, interests, concerns, and values. The argument would then show not only that any representation must be perspectival, but that any representation must be to some degree

subjective. A similar but more modest argument would show that any representation specifically with a certain kind of content must be subjective; or that there are special impediments to producing a representation with a certain kind of content beyond a certain level of objectivity. Thus, for example, there might be special impediments to thinking about certain emotional investments that we have made from anything other than our own points of involvement with them.

Would this matter?

Yes. Consider what accrues when we attain greater objectivity and stop viewing situations just from our own points of involvement. We begin to see why the situations look the way they do from those points of involvement. It becomes easier for us to imagine viewing the situations from the points of involvement of others. It is consequently easier for us to accept that the situations look different from there, without this indicating error or misunderstanding on anybody's part. So too it is easier for us to acknowledge that we can express these differences without disagreeing with one another. And quite generally, it is easier for us to understand and empathize with other people. Attaining such objectivity gives us a less narrow, less tainted, and less distorted conception of things. It gives us (paradoxically) a greater sense of perspective.

Not that such objectivity, in itself, makes us any the more altruistic. Empathy is not the same as sympathy. Indeed there are many ways in which such objectivity can animate a selfish unconcern for the welfare of others. Some vices actually require it—calculated cruelty and envy, for example. (This is one way in which these differ from callousness and greed.) Nevertheless, the value and importance of cultivating such objectivity are clear. So yes; certainly it would matter if there were special impediments in the way of our doing so, or even worse, if it were sometimes impossible to do so.

But this is not a plea for complete objectivity. In order to identify with other people,[2] we must learn to rise above our own points of involvement; but not above every point of involvement; not above a *human* point of involvement. Consider: I, along with many others, owe my very existence to the Second World War. Now it would be a psychopathic failure of objectivity if, just on that

[2] Strictly I should say 'other human beings' here: I shall come back to this distinction in Chapter Ten.

account, I were unable to grieve over the War. But equally, it would be a psychopathic failure of *sub*jectivity if, at the other extreme, I were unable to grieve over the War because I had so little sense of the human perspective that I came to see the War as a meaningless blip on the screen of eternity.[3]

Once again we are reminded that 'more objective' does not mean 'better'. The degree of objectivity that is desirable in our representations is heavily dependent on context. Nor does each context demand just one degree of objectivity. After all, I could scarcely view anything from a human point of involvement unless I also viewed it, or something suitably similar to it, from a human's point of involvement: my own. In most contexts, that is to say in most situations and for most purposes, what counts as an appropriate understanding of the situation will be something that combines representations of varying degrees of objectivity, each sustaining and informing the others.

It is not just that subjective representations have their place. All the most important representations that directly engage us are subjective. This is a modification of a principle which will assume importance at the end of the book, and which I shall refer to as the Engagement Principle. The Engagement Principle is this: *all* the representations that directly engage us are perspectival. Already I can give a simple illustration. Consider Mr Meanour. Suffering from amnesia after a car crash, he reads in the newspaper that Mr Meanour is wanted by the police. The news has no effect on him. Later he discovers that *he* is Mr Meanour. At once he takes steps to avoid arrest. He has come to view the situation in an appropriately perspectival way, from his own position within it. This illustrates how, given the perspectival character of our basic aims, projects, and wishes—Mr Meanour's concern is that *he* should not be arrested—only representations that are correspondingly perspectival, albeit usually in a way that is much more subtle than this, can have any immediate influence on our actions. (I shall amplify on this in Chapter Eleven.)

[3] Cf. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, pp. 581–2; and David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, pp. 272–3. Consider also in this connection Mao Zedong's remarkable claim, quoted by Jung Chang, *Wild Swans*, p. 293: 'Even if the United States . . . blew [the earth] to pieces . . . [this] would still be an insignificant matter as far as the universe as a whole is concerned.'

How does the question of the possibility of absolute representations fare now? Initially the question looked important because of its bearing on the question of how objective we can be. Now we seem to have reached the conclusion that objectivity beyond a certain level is of dubious interest to us anyway. If it transpired that we humans could not but view things from a human point of involvement, and *a fortiori* that we could not view things absolutely, nothing that has been said so far would make this disturbing.

But we must think again about the interplay of representations. What is true of the representations that directly engage us need not be true of the representations that (to echo the phrase I used above) sustain and inform them. Mr Meanour comes to the realization that he is wanted by the police by first discovering that Mr Meanour is wanted by the police. The representation that directly engages him is from his own point of view. The one that supports it is not. There is still plenty of scope for concluding that we sometimes do well to look at things completely objectively. In fact there is scope for concluding that we sometimes do well to look at things absolutely.

This conclusion has been drawn time and again throughout the history of human enquiry. Often it has been linked to a belief in God. The idea has been that we do well, sometimes, to look at things from God's point of view—which means (oxymoronically) from no point of view at all, since God *has* no point of view: God is not *in* the world. In more narrowly philosophical contexts the conclusion has been drawn alongside certain very general considerations about rationality. Certain Kantians have held that the most basic questions about how we ought to live have answers dictated purely by reason, and that it is inappropriate to address them from any particular vantage-point. (This arguably excludes Kant himself, whose own view might be better expressed by saying that we should address such questions from the vantage-point of rational beings. I shall discuss some of the complications that arise here in Chapter Eleven.) Others have held views that are structurally similar to the Kantian view, but with reason replaced by abstract principles of impartiality or by some maximizing principle of utility. Others again have argued that, just as there is a distinctively human conception of things which can act as a corrective to a narrowly self-centred conception not by annulling it but by making *sense* of it, so too there is an absolute conception which makes sense of the distinctively human conception by revealing our place in the wider

A. W. Moore argues in this bold and ambitious book that it is possible to think about the world 'from no point of view'. He examines this idea, explains its significance, and considers reasons for thinking that such a thing is not possible. In particular, drawing on the work of Kant and Wittgenstein, he considers transcendental idealism. This leads to the heart of his project: a study of ineffability and nonsense. His fundamental idea is that transcendental idealism is nonsense resulting from the attempt to express certain inexpressible insights. This idea is applied to a wide range of fundamental philosophical issues, including the nature of persons, the subject-matter of mathematics, anti-realism, value, and God; Moore's original approach forges unexpected connections between the various questions he addresses. *Points of View* is a lucid and lively study of the relation between reality and our representations of it, the upshot of which is a powerful critique of our own finitude.

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Nicholas Bunnin, *Philosophy*

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