

# Objectivity and History

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IN THE EARLY 1960s, A CRISIS OCCURRED in the academic field of the philosophy of science, spilling over into the philosophy of history and the philosophy of social sciences. The crisis emerged from research in the related fields of the philosophy of language, the philosophy of science, epistemology, and metaphysics and can be dated to 1962, the year that Thomas S. Kuhn's book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, first appeared.

Before attempting to describe this crisis, let me characterize some of its outcomes. One is the claim that there is no objectivity in history, science, or life. Another is that there is no rationality — that changing perspectives and conceptual schemes are irrational and unpredictable events without causes. As a result, some scholars have claimed that there is no longer any basis in science for saying that one way of doing things is more rational than another. Some of the questions that have been raised with this way of looking at objectivity and rationality are: What do we really know? What should we believe? What is evidence? What are good reasons? And is science as rational as people used to think? (Hacking 1983, 1).

Another way of describing this crisis has to do with “scientific realism.” Here we might ask, What is the world? What kinds of things are in it? What is truth? Is there, in fact, any such thing as truth? Are the “facts” of science simply constructs of human minds which could be supplanted by alternative organizing schemes? Could these organizing schemes be changed, since they are based on shifting paradigms, without being guided by objective causes, truth, or rationality? What then is left of truth? And what remains of rationality? (Hacking 1983, 1).

It should be obvious why this crisis is of such concern to philosophers of science and to historians. If there is no truth, no objectivity, no basis on which to argue the rationality of one account over another, one can claim that different accounts are simply based upon prevailing sociological prejudices and biases. There would be no basis for claiming that one piece of history is good,

another poor; no basis on which to say that one kind of history is objective, another biased. The sociology of knowledge becomes the central criterion for evaluating all work. All writing could be judged only against changing perspectives within the community of historians, the community of scientists, and the community of scholars, without there being any starting point which could reveal truth, objectivity, and rationality.

This is the crisis that science and history have confronted since the early 1960s. If we accept this perspective, we can assert, as did Louis Midgley at the Western History Association in 1981 that, since we have no ability to discriminate, we can have no perspective from which to be objective and Mormon historians should therefore be defenders of the faith (Midgley 1981, 13, 28, 31). Like Johann Gottlieb Fichte, who maintained that what I believe about the world is determined by my will, it is my obligation to show that I am free and to announce to the world my commitment to my subjective truth (1906, Bk 3). Midgley maintains that history is a matter of assertion without objectivity, rationality, or truth and that we should all therefore assert our faith. Since no one can do better than this, one person's biases are no better than another's, except possibly in regard to religious values. It is uncertain whether Midgley believes that religious values are also arbitrarily chosen and relativistic.

In another essay, "No Higher Ground," David Earl Bohn maintains that there is no superior approach to history from which historians can defend their views. Since there is no objectivity, there is no truth, no rationality. The reference to a "higher ground" assumes that there is some basis on which historians, scientists, and others can ground their claims to truth, objectivity, and rationality. Bohn writes "The illusion of a higher ground is indeed, seductive. If the ideal of neutrality and objectivity cannot be approximated, then the historians' distinction between 'good history', and 'bad history', evaporates and the secular historians claim that somehow his account is of a higher order can no longer hold" (1983, 27).

The logical outcome of this line of thinking is that we have no criteria for deciding between good and bad history, good and bad science, good and bad logic, good and bad philosophy, and good and bad values. Everything becomes relative to the people who assert this or that position; skepticism, relativism, and cynicism rule the day. From this perspective, if I take a position in history and you agree with me, you write good history. But if you disagree with me, you write bad history. There is no position independent of our own from which we can say that this is, in itself, good or bad history or good or bad science.

This same crisis has also spread into the field of ethics where the prevailing mood is relativism. Nothing is good or bad, right or wrong. Good and bad are relative to a particular culture, nation, religion, or ethnic group. There is no objective definition of good or bad against which to measure these judgments. To use the idiom of the day, "Do your own thing" — which means that since nothing is good, bad, right, or wrong, then it does not make any difference what people do.

This crisis is widespread and has profound implications in ethics, history, philosophy of science, epistemology, and elsewhere.

I would like to argue against this relativism, this subjectivity, this lack of objectivity, this claim that there is no truth — that knowledge can be determined only within the context of the sociology of knowledge. While I do not intend in this essay to argue against relativism in ethics, I do hope to argue against the lack of objectivity in history, the lack of truth in history, and the lack of rationality in history and science.

There is a body of literature in philosophy and history which argues that there is no truth, objectivity, or rationality in history or science. In fact, Bohn quotes some of that literature (1983, 32, n23). He could have gone on to draw attention to the controversies concerning a theory of truth in the philosophy of language and a theory of right in ethics. In history, Bohn might have used Carl L. Becker's relativism and lack of objectivity expressed in "What are Historical Facts?" Or he might have gone back further to English Bishop George Berkeley and Scottish philosopher David Hume, both of whom argued that we not only have no sure knowledge that there is an external world, we cannot know that we ourselves exist, let alone others.

Mormon historians have joined in the thrust of the ideas underlying this crisis. In 1969 Richard Bushman published "Faithful History," an essay in which he wrote, "We have abandoned the naive hope that we can write objective history" (1962, 16). James Clayton claimed in 1982 that historians do not have a point of view from which they can achieve "total objectivity" (1982, 34). In another article, "The Future of Mormon History," Bushman wrote, "We should not be deceived, however, by the illusion that at long last we have learned to write objective history. . . . The myth of scientific history . . . has been discarded" (1966, 24). Ronald K. Esplin asserted that an approach to historical truth which assumes that a historian can be objective is unrealistic and naive (1982, 41). And Thomas G. Alexander has said (1986) that no historian today believes that objectivity is possible, at least in a Cartesian or Kantian sense. Alexander focuses our attention on what we mean by objectivity and raises the question whether there is any kind of objectivity or truth that we can make use of in our history to overcome the challenge that there is no truth whatsoever.

The issues are broad ones. They concern not only history but all of science. We are just now beginning to see reactions against this attack on objectivity, truth, and rationality. More and more, philosophers are arguing that there *are* some starting points, that there *is* such a thing as rationality and objectivity, that everything is *not* equally valid. If we could arrive at acceptable definitions of objectivity and truth, so the claim goes, we may discover that history is no more subjective than science and that science no more objective than history. Part of this problem lies in the traditional misunderstandings of science by those in the humanities and social sciences, especially historians.

The traditional assumption has been that scientific events are repeatable and testable. The truth of the matter is that all events are confined to a specific

place and time which, when they are over, are never repeated. The best that one can do is to construct, possibly in the laboratory, a new event that is hopefully similar enough in relevant ways to the previous event; but the tie between the two events is conceptual and linguistic.

Before any testing can be done, these kinds of conceptual ties between events must be made in science as in history. Frequently, these ties are made by words. General terms cover not just one event but several. If historians talk about a revolution, for example, there must be ways to link past and present revolutions or they could not call both of them revolutions. In the same way, scientists hope to call a particular event in a linear accelerator an event of left- or right-handed electron spin, while another could hopefully be interpreted as a weak neutral event of left- or right-handed electron spin (Hacking 1983, 266–71). Only by connecting the two events are scientists able to make an interesting scientific generalization because the events are spatially and temporally discontinuous. It is because of this discontinuity — and the fact that connections between events need to be made by conceptual ideas having a basis in language — that the crisis over objectivity, truth, and rationality has, in part, arisen.

Before this crisis in science and history occurred, scholars used to assume that there was a clear distinction between observation and theory, that the growth of knowledge was cumulative, and that it could lead to an increasingly adequate theory of the universe. In the context of these views, Kuhn's book was a bombshell. Kuhn charged that there is no distinction between observation and theory, that science and history are not cumulative, that scientific concepts are not particularly precise, and that the methodological unity of science is false. There is no one basis upon which we can strive for truth and objectivity. Kuhn did not want to assert that science is, therefore, irrational. But he did not believe that one could talk glibly about what is true or objective. One interpretation of the Kuhnian paradigm as a set-of-shared-values is that these values are merely social constructs and that they change without there being necessarily good reasons for change. It is here where one writer senses a "whiff of irrationality" in Kuhn's views (Hacking 1983, 11). This whiff can extend to the dismissal of historical objectivity and even, in some cases, to the dismissal of a concept of truth.

One reaction to this crisis can be found in the work of Imre Lakatos, a well-known philosopher of science at the University of London, who charged that Kuhn's vision was dominated by "mob psychology" (Hacking 1983, 112). Larry Laudan, another prominent philosopher of science, thinks that scientific rationality lies in the power of science to solve problems and answer questions (1981, 144 ff). And Ian Hacking takes his response to Kuhn from the idea that the entities, states, and processes described by correct theories really exist and that scientific realism is true.

My own claim for objectivity, rationality, and truth in history is an amalgam of these views, in addition to other considerations that derive from the philosophy of language. In this, I assert that Bohn and Midgley are wrong when they say that there is no higher or middle ground that can be used for

testing good history. When one sets out to write history, he or she tries to describe and interpret objects, persons, and events. I assume, contrary to Berkeley and Hume, that these objects and events exist, that there are real people in the world, and that there is an external world. To assume otherwise would be perverse, because the assumption that there are real events and objects in the world has made possible such scientific progress as the current space program.

Furthermore, I believe that there is a defensible theory of truth which says that one can truly describe objects and events in the world. These events can be described and redescribed, but the descriptions are either true or false. There is a distinction to be made between truth and falsity. In the philosophy of language, while I reject a naive correspondence theory of truth, I do subscribe to the view that there is a holistic interpretation of truth that makes sense (Davidson 1984, 215–25). The naive correspondence theory holds that each word stands for an object, person, or event, and that the truth is a relation in which the word *does* stand for the object. A holistic theory argues that truth must be discovered only in the context of a whole language and its relation to the world. Already we have two firm starting positions for history. Either the events occurred or they did not occur. If they occurred, we can give true descriptions of them or we can give false descriptions of them. It *does* make a difference. And we can endlessly describe in true ways the events that occurred.

Why is it that historians can continue to write new books about the same events, using different categories and different interpretations? Does this, once again, suggest that history is not objective and that there is no truth? To my mind, it does not. It simply tells us that many alternative, true accounts of historical events can be given without lapsing into falsehood and irrationality because no complete description of any event, let alone any historical event, may be given by anyone.

Historians have sometimes claimed that we cannot give complete descriptions of past events. Although they are right, the truth is that we cannot give *complete* descriptions of any events, even contemporary ones. Complete descriptions are impossible, not only because of the many ways that we can use language to connect events with this object or that person, but because the recursive rules of language formation enable us to generate an infinite number of sentences after starting with finite vocabulary and a finite set of rules. To whatever description we use, we could add, "John believed that." There are rules for constructing true sentences that enable us to take an endless number of persons and ascribe attitudes to them. These rules enable us to describe events and objects endlessly because the rules are recursive (Davidson 1984).

It was this phenomenon Richard Bushman described in "Faithful History" when he observed, "Written history rarely survives the three score and ten allotted to the men who write it. New evidence, new outlooks, new concepts for describing the events can give rise to new accounts of the events" (1969, 11). At every time, however, one can ask, "Did the events occur and are the descriptions and interpretations of them true?"

When Richard Bushman wrote "Faithful History," he talked about facts. I prefer not to use the word *fact* because it conceals a crucial ambiguity (Rob-

son 1978). Facts can be taken both as events themselves and as true descriptions of events. By running these two ideas together, one can make the mistake of believing that changes in one's descriptions "change," "mold," or "sculpt" the events themselves (Robson 1970, 8). Once the event is over, it cannot be changed. But it can be endlessly redescribed. And among the endless redescrptions of the events are those that are true. If facts are taken as linguistic entities, then they relate to these descriptions and redescrptions of the events. But if facts are interpreted to be the events themselves, then they are unchanging and not in any way "plastic."

This brings me to my suggestions as to how we might make sense of objectivity in history or in science. Methodologically sophisticated historians like Alexander talk about objectivity in a Cartesian or Kantian sense, specifying the difference between subjects and objects. Here we know nothing about the objects unless we experience them as subjects. There is, therefore, a connection, as Kuhn suggested, between our experience and the way we conceptualize that experience. We do not know the events independent of epistemologically experiencing them.

In his 1967 book, *Science and Subjectivity*, Israel Scheffler argues for several definitions of objectivity in opposition to Kuhn's view that there is no objectivity in science. The first definition Scheffler provides is that objectivity means that independent tests can be made of any individual's assertions in any field. This is the assertion that any serious historian or scientist must make his or her work available to other historians and scientists for independent, impartial, and detached assessment. Scheffler says such a process is entirely compatible "with passionate advocacies, strong faith, intuitive conjecture and imaginative speculation (1967, 2). This ideal cannot be limited to science but applies to history, mathematics, and other disciplines. It presupposes that persons of differing points of view may yet talk intelligently and intelligibly to each other.

The next concept of objectivity suggested by Scheffler has to do with observation and objectivity (1967, 21–44). Here, he claims that assertions are objective if they are true, that is, if they truly describe events that have occurred. This concept presupposes that the events and the objects described and interpreted really exist, and that there are true and also false ways of talking about them. In this, Scheffler and Hacking have a common interest in defending "scientific realism," the view that there are real objects and events in the world. Scheffler asserts this concept despite his realization that observation is never independent of conceptualization, that what is observed may not be altered by conceptual change, that observation is not ineffable, and that observational descriptions are not, just because they are observational, certain. Even so, there is a foundation for a kind of objectivity in realism (Scheffler 1967, 36).

A third definition of objectivity has to do with meaning and objectivity (Scheffler 1967, 45–66). Donald Davidson has provided by far the most thoughtful discussion of this concept. Davidson construes the central problem in the philosophy of language to be that of developing a semantics that makes

sense of concepts such as meaning, naming, referring, and asserting (1984, 219). Davidson's answer to all of the questions lies in the development of a holistic theory of truth in language. Davidson writes, for example, that "language is an instrument of communication because of its semantic dimension, the potentiality for truth or falsehood of its sentences, or, better, of its utterances and inscriptions" (1984, 201). Davidson believes that this view helps us to understand that different languages are not relativistic, that is, not just derivative of cultures, times, and places as many writers have claimed. True sentences correspond to actual relations among things to which I refer by my sentences. As Hacking suggested, "This attitude brings a comforting antidote to relativism and anti-objectivity" (1984, 57).

A further interpretation of objectivity has to do with the growth of scientific knowledge (see Scheffler 1967, 67–89; Lakatos 1978; Hacking 1983, 112–28). This concept presupposes a scientific or historical community. Over a period of time, one can look back and ask: "Are there problems that have been solved in science? Are there problems that have been solved in history?" This, Lakatos asserts, is the key to understanding objectivity. Is it the case that knowledge does grow? Do we, for example, now know that polygyny was practiced in Nauvoo? There was a time, not too many years ago, when the answer was unclear. We have now reached a point where we can answer, with firmness, "Yes." In this regard, as Laudan suggests, a solution has been found to a problem that gives us a concept of rationality (1981, 144 ff). We may still argue about what polygyny in Nauvoo among Mormons meant, or what the intentions of the practicing individuals were. Still, we now know things about history, including Mormon history, that we did not know earlier. We can thus affirm that there is cumulative knowledge. No historian today can afford to overlook the sources, the documentation, the evidence, and the interpretations of others in arriving at new assertions. This gives us a demarcation between rational activity, even in history, and irrationalism. It could also be described as a demarcation between objectivity and subjectivism.

In light of these suggestions, one can argue against the assertions by some Mormon scholars that there is no objectivity in history. When Bohn contends that there is no ground for claiming that one history is better than another, I can suggest, because of the above definitions of objectivity, that Bohn's claim is false.

Bohn strenuously objects to "New Mormon Historians" and, after listing some of them, including the philosopher Sterling McMurrin, lumps all of them together as "positivists" or "those expressing the positivist's paradigm," which he then dismisses on the grounds that there is no objectivity, truth, or rationality (1983, 27–28). McMurrin's account of his own position suggests that he takes seriously the idea that some sentences about the world are true and can be distinguished from those that are false. To think otherwise would plunge us into a morass of irrationality, even in religious matters, and we should defend a concept of "reasonableness" and a commitment to "rationality" (McMurrin 1982, 18–19).

Some of what Bohn writes in his article cannot be accurate. For example, he alleges, "The historian who approaches the record realizes that his text

constitutes his only avenue of access to the past” (1983, 28). I have previously pointed out that every record of every event is incomplete, not only of past events but of contemporary events as well. However, every historian brings more to the event than simply the text. He or she brings a knowledge of a language that enables him or her to read the text and an understanding about events, objects, and current events which, by drawing analogies, he or she can bring to bear on the event. Furthermore, there are aspects of language, such as truth and reference, contrary to what Bohn says, that remain stable over time and place. Davidson suggests this in his theory of truth (1984, 199–214). Whatever historians arrive at may be tested, reexamined, and reevaluated by other historians. Over a period of time, this enables us to make fairly firm assertions about what is known and what is still problematic. The accounts can be interpreted in this sense as being more or less “adequate” (Lambert and Brittan 1970, 88–91).

There is another problematic suggestion in Bohn’s essay. After naming those whom he describes as the “New Mormon Historians,” he suggests that they mutually support the view that one should defend a “secular middle ground” in doing history. Such a middle ground, he asserts, would be one which is “objective and neutral” (1983, 27). In my reading in Mormon history, I have not seen the word *neutrality* widely used by those whom Bohn asserts are the New Mormon Historians. Although some of them argue against objectivity in history, in this, I believe, they are mistaken, depending on how one chooses to define objectivity. I do not find them describing their own work as “secular.” For example, Esplin suggests that scholarship should be evaluated based on acquaintance with “relevant sources, honesty in the use of documents, integrity in presentation, quality of insights and adequacy of interpretation” (1982, 4). I see no assertion here that this must somehow be “secular.” Lawrence Foster, a non-Mormon, in “New Perspectives on the Mormon Past,” argues that “labeling the recent historical writings as secular Mormonism is a red herring, since it suggests a false dichotomy between a position that is exclusively religious and a position that is exclusively secular” (1982, 44). James Clayton, in “Does History Undermine Faith?” answers with this quote, “I believe that the study of history seldom directly threatens fundamental religious beliefs, because history and religions seldom meet” (1983, 37). And Richard Bushman suggests that the New Mormon History may be both “faithful” and scholarly, informed, and intelligent (1969, 16).

Bushman goes on to suggest that Mormons should write history. I firmly agree. By virtue of their religious perspectives Mormons can bring an orientation to and an analysis of historical issues different from those of non-Mormons so long as they describe events that happened in ways that are true and submit their work to others for independent evaluation. I see no way to maintain that Mormons — just because they are Mormons — are incapable of offering insights on historical problems and even resolving them in ways that would be acceptable to non-Mormons as well as Mormons. In this, Mormons may use models adopted from the other social sciences, or they may attempt to make their work intelligible to non-Mormons by explaining the terms, conditions,



and perspectives from which they write. But they may still write of issues as insiders in ways that non-Mormon historians may not have previously understood. Just because Mormons write to communicate their insights to Mormons and non-Mormons, this cannot mean, as Bohn seems to imply, that their work lacks faith, that it undermines faith, or that somehow it is innately "positivistic."

Both Clayton and Bushman address the issue of how religious values impact the writing of history. On the one hand, I do not believe a Mormon historian needs to write history only according to a program of religious perspectives that have to be defended. Even though Bushman suggests that Mormon historians might consider some ways of organizing their historical research along lines called "Faithful History," his new book *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (1984) does not suggest that he is writing narrow programmatic history that cannot be taken to be true, rational, and intelligent also.

Bushman describes these possibilities when he writes concerning the discovery of the plates and their translation, "The story to emerge from these accounts may in one respect perplex readers who are not Mormons. . . . Some readers may wish to separate the easily believable mundane details from the extraordinary supernatural events and to find other explanations for the unusual experiences. The account that follows does not make that separation or attempt an explanation beyond that *given in the sources*. It tells the story as the Mormons remembered it, in the hope that an account reconstructed from the participants' memories will be useful in some degree to every reader" (Bushman 1984, 80–81; my emphasis).

Clayton's assertion that "historians and advocates of a particular religion do clash when the historian perceives that the advocate is not being loyal to historical as opposed to religious truth, when the religious advocate does not have a high sense of intellectual honesty or lacks a sense of balance, proportion, and common sense" suggests that Clayton may believe that a person who believes in religious truth cannot have the kind of honesty, sense of balance, proportion, and common sense needed to write history which would not clash with adequate historical perspectives. I believe that it is clearly possible to do that.

Clayton further argues that historians have no tools for dealing with the supernatural (1982, 38). This is not completely accurate. Historians have the same tools as any other human beings. They have their normal faculties, their ability to understand language, their ability to assess information and to draw conclusions. If they themselves have not experienced certain kinds of events, at least they know what it is like to experience events. They can, at the minimum, report on what others have said they have experienced.

If one wishes to go beyond reporting what the participants said occurred one could, for example, build a case based upon the usual evidentiary rules used in the law. Are the accounts eye-witness accounts? Are they contemporary? Were they experienced by several individuals? Were the accounts repudiated? Throughout all of this, one can continue to ask: Did the events occur as the participants described? Are the descriptions of the event accurate? Are there additional descriptions of the events that would be true of the events

and compatible with other true descriptions? Did the participants believe the descriptions to be true?

All of these questions might be used in assessing uniquely Mormon events such as the First Vision, the discovery of the plates, and the translation of the Book of Mormon. At the same time one can take account of the perspectives of the writers of the events. Do they exhibit accuracy and honesty in dealing with the evidence available to them? Is the evidence first hand or something else?

Larry Foster recently claimed, concerning the writing of Jerald and Sandra Tanner, "On the one hand, I agree with many of the Tanners' criticisms of the inadequacies of much Mormon writing until recently. On the other hand, I am equally critical of the narrow-minded Protestant Fundamentalism which the Tanners have substituted for the Mormonism that they decry" (1984, 36). There is still a great deal to be said for honesty that does not become special pleading, for integrity that exhibits a sense of proportion and balance, for careful research that has not decided that the purpose of writing is propaganda or indoctrination. If it is incumbent upon historians to do the best, most detailed, and most careful research they are capable of, one might also expect it to be incumbent upon those who possess sources of information to make them accessible and available.

In short, there are constraints on the writing of history. The first has to do with whether the event or events occurred. The second relates to whether the descriptions of those events are true. An additional constraint has to do with the "multiple jeopardy" that any historical writer is subject to concerning the adequacy of the historical research, the care and handling of sources and documentation, and the way in which peers from all areas in history may have access to the histories written and may assess them from many perspectives over an unlimited period of time (Hexter 1971, 83). If Lakatos's claims are correct about the growth of knowledge, the superior accounts will emerge over time, after multiple testing and examination, and new problems will have been solved. These constraints on history and science enable us to make sense of objectivity, truth, and rationality and undercut relativism.

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