

## max deutscher: original and enduring themes

paul crittenden

Among Max Deutscher's many publications I propose to focus on themes and characteristics that emerged prominently in his book *Subjecting and Objecting: An Essay in Objectivity*. In its primary terms this is a book mainly about aspects of the ethics of inquiry and belief, where ethics is taken to embrace both intellectual and moral virtue. More broadly, the inquiry touches on a range of key themes in modern philosophy that give substance to the introductory suggestion that a search for the conditions of objectivity could encompass the whole history of the philosophy of knowledge. This leads, especially in the closing chapter, to critical reflection on the prevailing forms of Anglophone philosophy in the twentieth century and on where philosophy as a whole might be headed. What struck me at the time the book appeared was the author's capacity for incisive and imaginative analysis together with a concern for "big picture" issues, all presented in a voice that was entirely distinctive. A philosophical style that was already present in Max's early publications emerged fully in this study. And it has continued to reappear, in a variety of ways, in a string of articles and books, notably in his work on Sartre and Beauvoir in *Genre and Void* and his significant contribution to questions of judgment in *Judgement after Arendt* and more recently *In Sensible Judgement*.

The aim of the study is to consider the conditions for objectivity, its critical importance for inquiry and our ways of acting generally, and the many ways

in which it can become debased or distorted. The discussion proceeds with a particular focus on the bond between subjectivity and objectivity, or more concretely, between the inquiring subject and the object of interest. The argument develops around the paradox that “it is only in the so-called subjectivity of our point of view that objectivity can arise.”<sup>1</sup> The point is that there is no field of human inquiry in which it is possible to escape the frame of a point of view, hence it is subjects who are, or who fail to be, objective. So he argues that objectivity is “a style of our subjectivity”, or “an intelligent learned use of our subjectivity, not an escape from it” (Deutscher, *Subjecting*, 19, 129). To become objective, one must subject oneself to a process of learning, a discipline for acquiring the virtues, qualities, and emotions that underpin the practices of inquiry while eschewing attitudes or habits that would drive a wedge between subject and object.

Separated from objectivity, subjectivity becomes subjectivism, a romantic and unrestrained relativism on the lines that ‘I can know only how I experience the world.’<sup>2</sup> Separated from subjectivity, objectivity takes the distorted and destructive form of objectivism. This is “the view that would have us forget that it is a view”, the fantasy of pure realism in which “there is only what is viewed; the viewing of it is passed over” (Deutscher, *Subjecting*, 29). Within the point of view that would deny its own presence an objectivist standpoint typically exhibits an absolutist or totalitarian mentality in which no room is left for rival standpoints.

Deutscher dismisses subjectivism promptly (but not without argument) as self-refuting. Objectivism calls for more extended discussion. This runs as a thread through the study with reference to three major examples of the objectivist mindset: physicalism in contemporary philosophy, religion (mainly Christianity), and varieties of Marxism (largely unspecified but including Althusserian Marxism which was prominent in Paris in the 1970s with an outpost for a short time in Sydney). Here the concern is not with the attempt to provide a full-scale rebuttal of these encompassing world-views, but with showing how each of them, in exhibiting a totalitarian and reductionist standpoint, fits the syndrome of a distorted or degraded form of objectivity. I will come back to this large but subsidiary topic later. For now I want to comment briefly on Max’s style in writing philosophy, and in speaking philosophy for that matter—for he is an outstanding practitioner of Plato’s ideal of philosophy as living speech.

In his article “Sartre’s Story of Consciousness”, Deutscher writes of Sartre’s hope “to give a logical and metaphysical resolution of the enigmas about oneself, one’s experiences and its ‘objects’, but in these logical bones there must exist an

emotional marrow suitable to sustain our understanding of why people have been so attracted to the classical trilogy of materialism, idealism and dualism, and, even more importantly, to nourish the detailed flesh of what we experience and what it is like to experience.”<sup>3</sup> If one looks back to Max’s early writings on mental and physical properties, or on remembering and perception, through to his current work on mental concepts, one could say that his own philosophical concerns, in an entirely different context of course, manifest a very similar focus and hope.

Style is commonly set over against substance, but in philosophy, as in many fields, it is a central, inseparable constituent of the art in question, “the physiognomy of the mind” in Schopenhauer’s phrase. Think what a poor thing Plato’s philosophy would be if one dispensed with the dialogues with all their richness for a bare series of syllogisms. This incidentally is another theme on which Max has written explicitly, notably in his 1986 article in the journal *Philosophy*, “Stories, Pictures and Arguments”. In keeping with this enlarged conception of philosophical inquiry his writing carries the stamp of a distinctive voice and a characteristic method of inquiry. Gilbert Ryle, Jean-Paul Sartre, and the essayist Susan Sontag figure high on his own list of influences on method, style, and appropriate level of language. Shakespeare and other poets, pop songs, films, and sharply observed scenes of ordinary life also have a place with comment on philosophers and their many different ways of philosophising from the Greeks to Descartes to Derrida. For all the many sources and influences, the voice that emerges is his own.

Max has an eye for paradox, as in the observation that detachment, so closely associated with objectivity, is itself a form of engagement. He has a talent for arresting metaphors and similes. Let me fill out an earlier quotation: “Objectivity is intelligent learned use of our subjectivity, not an escape from it, as the culinary and social arts are a deployment of our need for food, and obviously no escape from it” (Deutscher, *Subjecting*, 19). He is relentless in argument, not least in showing how a view espoused by this or that philosopher digs its own grave. Along with light touches and lively asides, his writing is above all intense and energetic, marked by moral seriousness. At times there are odd juxtapositions, inversions, abrupt switches—which sometimes delight and sometimes cause puzzlement—and there are daring claims that give one pause and demand close scrutiny. Nietzsche famously declared himself “a teacher of slow reading” and looked for ruminative readers. That is the right way, I think, to read Deutscher. His writing calls for close attention and rewards it.

While he commonly gives a place to other voices in working out his views, he assumes responsibility as the primary speaker, storyteller and weaver of arguments. On the other hand, in pressing his own argument, with or against others, he is not “an absolute subject”. The voice is that of a liberal pluralist, a thinker who is confident in his views and committed to arguing for them while remaining open to different possibilities. (As an aside, this openness is less obvious in this particular work in regard to the possibility of an open-minded Marxist or religious point of view.) In *Subjecting and Objecting*, various philosophers make an appearance —Kant, Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Ryle, Popper, J.J.C. Smart, for instance —but only Descartes and Berkeley receive close attention.

Thus, on the importance of confidence as a condition for objectivity, he subjects Descartes’ method of scepticism to a series of internal criticisms in which he turns the argument for general doubt in regard to his opinions against itself (Deutscher, *Subjecting*, 96ff). But over-confidence in one’s convictions also constitutes a threat to objectivity. Descartes obligingly provides an instance of this as well in his rapid transition from profound-seeming doubt to the indubitable certainty of his existence and of his conception of the self as “a purely privately self-contained self-intimate being”. This discussion can be paired with the critique of Berkeley’s arguments for idealism, the view that “It’s all in the mind you know” as summed up in a line Max takes from the Goon Show. Here the conclusion is that “idealism does not allow a proper objectivity to subjectivity —the sheer brute actuality of personal existence in a preformed social and physical order” (Deutscher, *Subjecting*, 228). This might appear as a Dr Johnson stone-kicking-type response to idealism, but the summary criticism comes only after an investigation that has shown how Berkeley’s arguments, temptingly designed to lead us into idealism, collapse on close inspection.

Deutscher’s argument with Descartes and Berkeley could serve to exemplify his suggestion that a search for the conditions of objectivity might embrace the whole history of the philosophy of knowledge. The reader might also see it as a reminder that objectivity is commonly seen, in the analytic tradition at least, as a central topic in metaphysics in its broad concern with what counts as real. This is not a primary focus in *Subjecting and Objecting*. Nonetheless the discussion draws attention to the questionable path that leads to the Cartesian conception of the self (and the dualism that goes with it); and Berkeley’s idealism is subjected to direct counter-argument in the name of the objectivity of subjectivity. Thus, two of the major metaphysical systems that emerged in early modern philosophy fall under scrutiny.

The other philosophers who are called on from time to time in the inquiry are generally accorded no more than a brief moment on the stage, appearing either for illustrative purposes or reproof. This is reasonable and illuminating for the most part, but not, I would argue, in the case of either Kant or Husserl. Kant is acknowledged in just two passing references, a brief note on his doctrine of the noumenal self and a remark about the incredibility of his “grand transcendental metaphysics”. This relative neglect is surprising, for, in response to his rationalist and empiricist predecessors, Kant’s treatment of the ideas of “subject” and “object” and his account of the subjective origins of the principles of science and morality continue to shape debate in both European and Anglophone philosophy. For instance, his search for the “conditions of possibility” underlying subjective experience retains a basic guiding role, as commentators point out, in the critique of the subject in recent French philosophy.

Husserl makes regular short appearances at different points in the discussion, almost always as a modern penumbra of Descartes: Husserl putting our observations and ideas in question with his “bracketing” proposal (Deutscher, *Subjecting*, 51); Husserl abstaining from judgment in the manner of Descartes in quest of a higher absolute objectivity, only to end in the most profound subjectivism (99); Husserl assuming the idea of transcendental subjectivity only to veer towards objectivism (79); Husserl having us juggle three egos, unwilling to be content with the customary one, and portraying the chief of the trio, the transcendental ego, as a “ghost” separable from “body” (56; 130); finally there is Husserl with his blithe insistence on the primacy of the life-world, a notion that is characterised as comparable in form with Descartes’ insistence on the primacy of self-consciousness, albeit different in its grounds (Deutscher, *Subjecting*, 222-23).

Any of these summary readings of Husserl might be plausible, on first appearances at least, but they lack argument here. Moreover they sit awkwardly with the insistence towards the end of the book on the importance of Husserl for rescuing Anglophone philosophy from some of its blind spots. They also sit uncomfortably with Deutscher’s own more positive reading of Husserl elsewhere.

Pinning down Husserl’s views across his voluminous inquiries from the *Investigations* to the *Crisis of European Sciences* is no easy matter. But I would argue in particular that Husserl is a direct realist regarding perception and that his insistence on the primacy of the life-world is not at all a case of epistemological foundationalism, much less an appeal to a private world of privileged access (as in the Cartesian case). For the life-world relates most generally to the idea

of a common world that, for the most part and for good reason, we all take for granted. Husserl is commonly characterised as an idealist in the manner of Kant, or more strongly on occasions in the manner of Berkeley. Again, he is portrayed as a dualist with epistemological motivations like those of Descartes. But, as David Woodruff Smith has argued, if one examines closely what Husserl says about the mind-body problem, his metaphysics looks very different.<sup>4</sup> His argument in short is that, from *Ideas I* onwards, Husserl espoused a *monism* of substrata (individuals or events) and a pluralism of essences or species and hence senses of mind and body —what Smith calls “many-aspect monism”.

For Husserl, in Smith’s words, “each concrete experience falls under two high-level essences or species, called Consciousness and Nature respectively, so that the mental and physical sides of the experience are two aspects of a single event.”<sup>5</sup> Consciousness and Nature in conjunction then constitute the basis of an elaborate system of ontological and phenomenological distinctions. It is true that Husserl speaks of three egos, but these are simply three different ways of speaking about the one ego, the one individual —the first ego, I considered as animate organism, the second, I considered as personal, social human being, and the third, transcendental (pure) ego, I considered as subject of intentional experiences or acts of consciousness in no way separable from the individual, the living body which I am. Admittedly, this leaves aside the large question of Husserl’s “transcendental idealism”, which sits as superstructure on the underlying monism. But here too I would follow Smith’s proposal that this should be understood as no more (and no less) than the doctrine that “every object is known or intended only through a system of intentional acts or intentional contents.”<sup>6</sup> This intentional perspectivism would fit well, I think, with Deutscher’s view that it is primarily subjects who are (or who fail to be) objective. It might also have provided support for his critique of physicalism and of objectivism and subjectivism more generally.

*Subjecting and Objecting*, as already suggested, explores the relevant epistemological concerns of its topic within a strong moral framework. Indeed, the work could properly be described as a contribution to moral philosophy. Specifically, in reviewing the book in 1984, Graham Nerlich suggested that it is “a moral work on what it is for subjects to be objective ... about how to live the life of reason, with all its attendant attitudes, emotions and styles, in good faith.”<sup>7</sup> Nerlich goes further in drawing an analogy between what is unmistakably a philosophy book full of analysis and argument with John Bunyan’s Christian allegory *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. This is perhaps a strained comparison, although the idea of a difficult journey in pursuit of a goal is a recurrent theme from an early stage in the history

of literature and philosophy as well as religion. So in these terms the book deals with the progress of the rational pilgrim in overcoming the pitfalls and perils that block the way towards objectivity. The envisaged journey is a process of learning how to avoid the bad habits that conflict with the desired goal in conjunction with acquiring the good habits, qualities of mind and character and the related emotions, that underpin the practices of inquiry and intelligent behaviour generally. This constitutes the substance of the study. A summary of its contents and some brief comments must suffice in this context.

Ethics provides a primary site for the discussion of objectivity, certainly in analytic philosophy, for the truth-status of ethical claims has long been a subject for dispute between cognitivists and anti-cognitivists, realists and anti-realists, objectivists and subjectivists. Deutscher wisely avoids this whole debate in order to get on with the substantive question of what we need to acquire and what we need to avoid if we are to make an “intelligent learned use of our subjectivity”.

In considering the many vices that mar our capacity for objectivity, he puts particular emphasis on vanity followed especially by envy, narcissism, jealousy, and arrogance. Taking vice as a malign form of virtue —the distortion of something of which we have need —he explores the ins and outs of each of these destructive qualities with illuminating and occasionally provocative detail. This constitutes one part of a significant exploration in moral psychology, undertaken broadly in the Humean tradition (with echoes of Plato and Aristotle). The other component of the inquiry, equally important, is a close scrutiny of the positive conditions for objectivity. But while there are many ways of going wrong, the path to getting things right is marked by narrow boundaries. The key guide here is the recognition that the conditions that sustain objectivity might also undermine it: “although there are many important conditions intimately connected with it, the unqualified and unchecked use of any of them is destructive of objectivity” (Deutscher, *Subjecting*, 23-4). Confidence, as suggested earlier, can readily spill into over-confidence in one’s opinions or fall away into paralysing uncertainty. The necessary commitment for a task may become obsessive or die away for lack of spirit or laziness. Virtue may go wrong, as Aristotle proposed, either by excess or defect.

Objectivity, Deutscher proposes, lies in a complex balance of competing conditions. The conventional view puts particular stress on detachment and impartiality. He does not dispute this, but shows that detachment, taken on its own or as principal device, can only be destructive. For where does detachment

end? On what ground does one stand in seeking to detach oneself from one's beliefs, desires and experiences? Involvement, encompassing interest and care on the part of the subject, is no less important for objectivity. But involvement is also prone to excess. The inquirer needs both qualities in a tension in which each holds the other in check. The task as a whole then is to acquire the practical good sense that shows up in the capacity to determine the appropriate balance between these two qualities of mind, a balance that must itself be balanced in keeping with particular circumstances, with the subject knowing when to stand back in the course of considering a topic and when to become more involved (see Deutscher, *Subjecting*, 87). This is something to be learnt in practice, obviously in conjunction with others experienced in the field. One can find a model of this kind, I suggest, in Aristotle's account of the way in which, in acquiring moral virtue and practical wisdom, a person becomes the measure of what it is to act well.

Deutscher's detailed and nuanced discussion of these issues covers a wide range of conditions related to finding the right balance for objectivity: being interested, being disinterested —objectivity as “disinterested interest” in John Anderson's aphorism (Deutscher, *Subjecting*, 54); being passionate, calm; partial, impartial; prejudiced, open-minded; tolerant, intolerant; liberal or conservative in style and outlook; having self-esteem, a sense of pride, a sense of one's limitations; being compulsive or obsessed; being reasonable, committed, confident, in control ... all these frames of mind bear on the difficult art of getting the balance right in the subject's exercise of objectivity.

Does the inquiry overlook any important conditions for objectivity? Deutscher is critical of terms such as “objective facts” or “objective truths” as occurring typically in attempts to suppress the place of the subject in accounts of objectivity. This may be so; in any case, these terms involve redundancy. However a concern with truth, or with facts where appropriate, is a different matter. What is missing from the discussion of qualities of mind and character in the context of objectivity is specific attention to truthfulness. This is a quality of the subject, consisting in the balanced concern to get things right about the matter in hand as well as being right about oneself (such as being aware of one's interests and motivations). Nietzsche makes brief appearances in *Subjecting and Objecting*, but might have been invoked to effect on the importance of intellectual conscience and truthfulness.

Another concern is that very little is said about the inter-subjective character of our meaningful grasp of the world and the bearing this might have for agreement and objectivity within a given community or between different communities.

Consideration of Husserl's conception of the life-world would be particularly relevant here or Wittgenstein's proposal that "[I]f language to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also ... in judgments."<sup>8</sup> It is true nonetheless that a good deal is said about inter-personal influences bearing on objectivity, obviously within an assumed social context that could be our own. On the other hand, this takes place without particular reference to the social structures or institutions in which opinion is formed. Thus little is said even in broad terms about the kind of socio-political order in which objectivity as a style of subjectivity is likely to flourish. In this domain attention turns rather to the baneful influence of others in the form of authorities, traditions or schools of thought with closed agreement in judgments such as can be found in religious bodies and various political systems, and, one might add, in some educational institutions and many privately-funded think-tanks.

Thus the topic of inter-subjective agreement in *Subjecting and Objecting* comes to the fore, indirectly for the most part, in the critique of various instances of an objectivist-type outlook. Attention falls, as noted earlier, especially on Marxism, religion, and contemporary physicalism. Of these three, the assessment of Marxism and religion is open to question, not least because Marxism takes many theoretical forms other than its dogmatic varieties; and religion, with its long history and diversity of belief and practice even within Christianity, is even more diffused and difficult to tie down. The critique of religion, in brief, turns on the reductionist claim that "[t]he religious point of view just is a person's inability to face the reality of his or her bodily, mental, material and social desires, and to recognise the real difficulties which stand in the way of satisfying them" (Deutscher, *Subjecting*, 207-8). This diagnosis brings everything down to the (flawed) psychology of the individual and exhibits in its own way precisely the 'nothing but' reductionist drive that characterises objectivist views in the first place. Dogmatic systems of religious belief and practice are especially open to serious criticism. But what is missing here is recognition of the many forms religious points of view might take and how they might fit within a way of life or tradition or constitute a subculture or define a culture as a whole (as for example indigenous beliefs and attitudes in regard to country).

The critique of physicalism is much more persuasive, being more concentrated and more sharply drawn. The focus is on the mind-set that accompanies the theory: the hard unyielding gaze that pretends to see beyond appearances to the fundamental nature of reality; the sleight of hand in spiriting away the subject; the false consciousness that attends the treatment of consciousness in the theory;

and the relentless reductionism that fails to recognise the significance of form and the nature of complexity. There is also the one-sided reading of identity claims. The thought that thoughts are processes in the brain does not yield the nonsensical consequence that “thoughts are nothing but processes in the brain”. For it conveys the equally significant information that certain processes in the brain are thoughts (Deutscher, *Subjecting*, 224-5).

These are telling general criticisms of contemporary physicalism addressed at large to a diffused community of scholars, among whom agreement on a range of matters runs along with widespread disagreement on just about all the big questions in philosophy. How an objectivist point of view gains traction in this setting, or how one might argue against it, is clearly a world apart from the constraints that operate in the closed domain of an authoritarian ideology in institutions or states. There are gatekeepers and fashions in philosophy, but open discussion runs freely back and forth on the whole. At the same time, distances have opened up in contemporary philosophy since the late nineteenth century and voices may be rejected in advance, or not be heard (or not understood) across divisions.

Deutscher’s concern here, as noted, is not with a direct rebuttal of physicalism. His aim overall is to show that objectivity arises only in “the subjectivity of our point of view”. So the primary criticism of physicalism in this context is that it is an absolute and reductionist standpoint that pretends to escape the status of being a point of view. The desire to assume an absolute perspective is a common aspiration, of course, in philosophical inquiry. From an early stage, philosophy was drawn to assume a god’s-eye perspective, expressed notably in Plato’s vision of the philosopher as seeing the absolute and immutable and contemplating all time and all eternity.

This consideration of philosophical ambition is also prompted broadly by Deutscher’s concluding reflections in *Subjecting and Objecting* on where philosophy stands in our forms of life, here in Australia for example, and in the closing stage of the twentieth century. This involves discussion of the formative influences and competing visions that have shaped contemporary Anglophone philosophy especially from the seventeenth century onwards. Accompanying criticism of the present age is focussed particularly on current forms of scientific reductionism, idealism, and relativism, and prevailing styles in the practice of philosophy. Deutscher’s emphasis is on the need to pause and take stock at this time in order to find ways of overcoming philosophical distances as a prelude to opening up new

paths of inquiry. He looks especially to themes and emphases in recent European philosophy as the most promising way to modify our current situation, thereby to foster new ways of thinking about old problems and to open up new possibilities. He had already made a start on a program of this kind in his early writings in the 1960s and 1970s, but *Subjecting and Objecting* gave the proposal full expression, and his subsequent publications have borne out that promise.

Ideas about the subject and subjectivity have remained significant themes in Deutscher's writings, notably in his later work on Husserl, Sartre, Beauvoir, and Le Doeuff. Again, objectivity is obviously an important consideration in his insightful studies on the nature of judgment. More generally he has continued to work on aspects of consciousness and the trilogy of dualism, idealism, and physicalism. Specifically, his current project in this vein is a study of mental concepts related mainly to Ryle, Descartes, Husserl, and Sartre. That is something to look forward to with anticipation in the next little while. In the meantime, it is worth remembering that many of these themes in Deutscher's original and enduring contribution to philosophy in Australia (and beyond) had their first big day out in the essay in objectivity.

University of Sydney

## NOTES

1. Max Deutscher, *Subjecting and Objecting: An Essay in Objectivity*. St Lucia: USQ, 1983, 24. Hereafter cited as *Subjecting*.
2. Max Deutscher, *In Sensible Judgement* (Ashgate: Farnham, 2013), 183.
3. Max Deutscher, "Sartre's Story of Consciousness," in *A Hundred Years of Phenomenology*, ed. Robin Small (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), 111.
4. David Woodruff Smith, "Mind and Body," in *The Cambridge Companion to Husserl*, ed. Barry Smith and David Woodruff Smith (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), 323ff.
5. Smith, "Mind and Body", 323.
6. Smith, "Mind and Body", 373.
7. Graham Nerlich, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 62:2 (June 1984), 186.
8. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E.M. Anscombe. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968) I, §242.