

"All readings are also mis-readings, re-readings, partial readings, imposed readings, and imagined readings of a text that is originally and finally never simply there. Just as the world is originally fallen apart, the text is always already enmeshed in contending practices and hopes."

Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*.

New York (NY), Routledge, 1991, p. 123-124.

Merging the dichotomy of subjectivity and objectivity

By asserting that all readings are different interpretation of a text that "is originally and finally never simply there", Donna J. Haraway introduces us to the relativistic position that there are no facts or true reality, only interpretations. As further developed in the second sentence of Haraway's quote, this statement entails not only a text in the sense of written words one reads, but also of every interpretation of the world as such. Indeed, it seems natural to assume that when Haraway is writing about reading a "text", the word text is to be understood in the same philosophical manner as Jacques Derrida, Hans-Georg Gadamer and many other philosophers with them have used the term: as everything one perceives and tries to make sense of in the external world. This means that the world itself is also part of the text which Haraway asserts were never simply there. As also clear from the second sentence of her quote, this assertion rests on several premises, but challenging the two main premises is of vital importance to fully understand Haraway's argument before accepting a relativistic interpretation of the world:

1. The world in itself "is originally fallen apart"
2. That something being "enmeshed in contending practices and hopes" must mean it is not truth, but merely the result of "mis-readings, re-readings, partial readings, imposed readings, and imagined readings"

These premises are very tempting to accept, even more today when we are living in a world which is in many aspects postmodern and devoid of a central story explaining and reassuring us about the nature, and existence, of reality, something the Christian religion did for thousands of years in the West, and other religions and believes have done elsewhere. However, one can just as easily argue to premise 1. that as apparent from our senses and the fact that we are able to achieve a common, almost objective interpretation of the world through the rigour of the scientific method, saying that the world is fallen apart and does not exist as a tangible unity is contrary to both our body of knowledge and to the instincts of our body. But how does we know that we can trust our senses, when there is so many situations in which they fail us? As a starting point for investigating Haraway's assertion, I will start with the simple but powerful argument that saying everything is relativistic means that that very statement is also relativistic. So, if the Haraway's statement refuses to believe anything is true, how can the statement itself be true in any meaningful sense?

To get a meaningful philosophical discussion out of this contradiction, I will in this essay see how one can resolve the seductive argument of the world being relativistic by first examining how the argument of relativism has historically emerged and been defended. Subsequently, I will then see whether the opposite to relativism, belief in certain knowledge, has any connection to the emergence of a relative worldview and if it is at all possible to be intellectually honest and still reject the relativistic position. Finally, I will in this essay investigate if this opposition between wanting true knowledge and losing belief in all knowledge can be merged together in the opposite concepts

of the-one-who-sees-the-world and the-world-as-such, subjectivity and objectivity.

I: The historical context of the non-existent text

Believing the world is originally fallen apart is an ancient belief, dating at least back to the natural philosophers who lived around the Mediterranean Sea before 300 years B.C. The philosopher who most clearly supported this line of argument was Heraclitus, who argued that the nature of the world was that of change. In his mind, one river was never the same, and everything was constantly *becoming* rather than *being*. *Pantera rei*, everything changes. After Plato's belief in a permanent true world existing in the idea-world beyond the material world, this view was not extremely relevant until Friedrich Nietzsche reintroduced Heraclitus in the 19th century. However, an interesting nuance to note within Plato's argument for a permanent and true world of ideas is that he accepted Heraclitus' position that the material world is impermanent and always changing. In a sense, Plato's and by extension Christianity's belief in a true reality outside the material world has ironically enough also paved the way for the relativist position. Since both accepted that the material world is impermanent, when one loses faith in the spiritual world, the only thing left is the material world, which is already agreed upon to be in constant change. And this was precisely what happened when the philosophers of the enlightenment and the modern era rejected a belief in the spiritual world in favour of a materialistic worldview.

From this rough sketch of the relation between the ancient philosophy, the materialistic worldview and the relativistic worldview one can get a sense that Haraway's position is indeed grounded by the very arguments which sought to ground absolute knowledge. As the German philosopher Nietzsche was one of the most astute defenders of the concept that the world is always changing, it is relevant to examine his views on the matter to see how the position that the world is in constant change does not need to culminate in the statement that there is no reality at all. Nietzsche's quote that "There are no facts, only interpretations" is often misunderstood to mean that he believes nothing everything is relativistic. However, as is clear from the context in which he says this quote, he is not talking about facts in general. He is asserting that there are no moral facts. Morality for Nietzsche is indeed only something created out of "enmeshed practices and hopes", as Haraway asserts, but Nietzsche's opinion about the nature of reality is more subtle. He developed a position called perspectivism. Perspectivism is the belief that every belief and opinion is inherently tied to a perspective, just as Haraway thinks. However, instead of then immediately concluding that everything is relative, a perspectivist thinks that each perspective reveals some aspects of an object, and the more perspectives one sees an object from, the more of it is revealed. The crucial point here is of course that there is something to reveal. Nietzsche therefore contends premise 2 of Haraway's argument, and one can see that being dependent on interpreting reality is not necessarily the same as saying interpretation is the only thing that exists. To go further, how can one know that there is at all someone interpreting if interpretation is grounds for saying that the world does not really exist? To assume the interpreter is necessary for saying anything meaningful about anything, but this would of course make knowledge dependent on certain premises which we ultimately can not know. Reliance on a necessary but unfounded premise is a central concept within epistemology, but also something challenged by the postmodern philosophers after Nietzsche.

Arriving in the postmodern era, we meet a philosopher who would agree with Haraway and criticised Nietzsche for not going far enough in his position of relativism. The French philosopher Jacques Derrida thought that our language in itself was simultaneously meaningless and our only way of interpreting the world. In fact, many have interpreted Derrida's method of deconstruction to mean that any text has to be completely picked apart until there is nothing left. A nuance in Derrida's deconstruction is of course that the concept mentally picked apart should also be mentally reassembled to gain a more complete understanding of the text. Still, there is little doubt that Derrida dismissed reality itself and certainly how humans observe reality as mere interpretation.

Here, I have two main areas where I disagree with Derrida. Firstly, Derrida's assertion that language has to be the only way humans construct a meaningful interpretation of the world is dubious when compared to the argument that images, instincts and feelings precedes and creates our language. There is no doubt that one's language to a great extent changes who one thinks, and even one's personality. However, both by observing my own mind, were I more often than not think in images before I verbalise them, and from the fact that we have evidence of paintings in caves long before we have evidence of language, language seems more like a tool to express observation and concepts than the creator of these concepts. The other area where I disagree with Derrida is that language is essentially meaningless. If one believes that language is the only way to ground language, then one naturally would conclude that language is meaningless. Every word is then defined by a different word, which again is defined by more words, turning into an infinite regression. But, if one agrees with the argument that words are not grounded in other words, but rather in concepts, language is meaningful because it allows us to give further nuance and more precise expression to our mind's primitive concepts. Therefore, the fact that our interpretation of the world is deeply intertwined with our language does not mean that our interpretations are baseless, nor that there is nothing to interpret.

II: The paradox of misplaced optimism

As seen from investigating the relative position in a historical context, and after providing some arguments against the notion that knowledge being based on interpretation necessarily leads to a relativistic worldview, an interesting point is that the relativistic position seems to be almost created as an opposition to the belief in an absolute truth. This relation is almost even more apparent from the emergence of positivism and the postmodern answer that everything is relative. As the today prevalent belief that science will solve every problem there is and create an ultimate theory of everything is being more and more unlikely to happen, there seems to have been a complete turn of opinion: either, one supports the positivistic explanation, or one goes in the opposite direction. In a sense this complete turn reflects the idiom "twice the pride, double the fall", because the more humankind has believed in an absolute truth, the farther its belief in truth has fallen. This apparent duality had a strong relation with what I previously discussed regarding the belief in a relative, changing reality in large parts coming from the belief in an absolute truth. The instinct for truth is still apparent in scientific thinking and, and it is therefore just as alive in the positivism of the materialistic worldview. The opposition between a belief in absolute truth and belief in no truth at all thus leaves us with either blind optimism or unfounded relativism. However, as demonstrated, relativism has to be unfounded, because it seems to by definition be incapable of founding itself. But is really the positivism which we also see from a belief in science a satisfying answer?

I think the essence of whether science can provide us with a good answer to relativism lies in the very contemporary debate about consciousness. To simplify, consciousness is the subjective first-person perspective one can assume every human, and perhaps some other animals, have of the world. Consciousness is that tasting a banana tastes something, and that this taste further feels like something. This goes beyond the neurons which travel inside your brain, but there are strong arguments in favour of your brain and your neurons being the only things which are real. However, how does one then explain consciousness? How can fully material neurons create an experience that seeming is not material at all? When investigating this question from the scientific and material position, the conclusion is something which reveals that even the belief in certain knowledge asserted by materialism becomes almost identical to relativism. This is most apparent in the works of the American philosopher Daniel Dennett, who argues that since reality is materialistic, our conscious experience of ourselves and the world around us is an illusion. Rather our conscious experience being something materialism cannot fully explain, Dennett thinks this conscious experience is the result of multiple drafts of consciousness. These drafts are the sum of a conundrum

of signals from the brain we get from our observation of the outside world that together forms the illusion that we are conscious. It is to be noted that Dennett stresses that he cannot prove this scientifically, but he thinks it is the only, or at least best, explanation of consciousness if reality is fundamentally materialistic.

As a consequence of Dennett's argument, just as Haraway's assertion that the world is only created by interpretation undermines itself as an interpretation, which on the surface is at least somewhat close to idealism, I would also argue that the opposite position of materialism also undermines itself when it claims that our conscious experience is merely an illusion. This is because our subjective experience of reality is the foundation upon which every interpretation, thought and assertion we ever make is based upon. If the very subjective "thing" or "experience" we use to make conclusions is merely an illusion we have no reasons at all to trust the conclusions derived from this subjective viewpoint. Even further, we have no reason to assume that it even exists at all. Referring to the American philosopher Thomas Nagel's criticism of our current methods to explain consciousness, Dennett's argument may also fail intellectually in that it tries to explain consciousness from the outside, and assumes a materialistic explanation at the beginning. On the contrary, Nagel thinks that since our scientific and materialistic worldview by definition has to acquire knowledge from a third-person perspective, then consciousness, which is by definition an experience from a first-person perspective, cannot be explained materialistically. But no matter if Nagel is right in his argument or not, the central point is that even if Dennett is right in that consciousness is an illusion, this conclusion undermines itself just as surely as Haraway's relativistic conclusion. But then what? Are we bound to assert that we do not know if reality is real, but thereby falling in the same trap of asserting that assertions cannot be true?

III: Merging the subject and the object

However, is there any way at all to close this gap between wanting absolute knowledge and falling in the self-contradictory trap of dismissing all knowledge? One could of course follow Kant in that the world is divided into *Das Ding für Mich* and *Das Ding an Sich*, were we cannot have knowledge about true reality, but can make reasonable conclusions about the world as it seems to us. Indeed, even the scientific worldview does not need to be a slave to materialism, and can about this position as long as we have the courage to admit that truth with capital "T" is unattainable, but also unnecessary. And this might be the most proper response to Haraway's assertion, and the most practical one if we are to live normally as if the world does indeed exist. Nonetheless, I think the question about consciousness and subjectivity in general warrants a more complete answer. A central theme in the discussion of how one can argue against a relativistic position is that one either adopts the position that everything is subjective, or the opposite that everything is objective. As I argued from Dennett's take on consciousness, both these positions can lead to a paradox which undermines itself. Going further, a more interesting question is whether these positions can in a meaningful way be merged to create a more complete and less paradoxical worldview.

Starting from the 20th century Danish physicist Niels Bohr, he believed that the opposition between subjective and objective was both a false and arbitrary one. He argued that as his discovery of quantum mechanics proved, the atom is both as dependent on the observer as the observer is dependent on being created by atoms. At face value, this assertions seems not only to be reasonable, but also empirically proven. I must, however, be completely honest and confess that how one can merge the subjective and objective quality seems like an extremely abstract and difficult task. A starting point can be a combination of Bohr and Nagel, a combination of physics and consciousness. As this almost certainly warrants a dismissal of absolute materialism and absolute relativism, the merging of the fact that the world fundamentally consists of subjective experience and objective reality would perhaps even require a new ontology. This new ontology would then be able to both account for our conscious experience and the material world, which can be explained as having a

science that includes the observation of our subjective and internal world. Whether this is accomplished by hermeneutics, a new method of physics or something else, this is a Copernican turn which is needed. No matter, as the purpose of this essay is to analyse Haraway's statement that everything, every text, is only an interpretation, I will not attempt to create a new philosophy of merging the subjective and objective quality of the world. I merely think it is crucial that these two perspectives has to be merged if we are to escape from the paradoxes of either relativism or materialism, and that this mergence not only is a reasonable alternative, but also a possible one.

To try to conclude this essay, undermining the belief in absolute truth when exposed by a relativistic argument is difficult avoid. However, for the exact same reason I find the relativistic argument unconvincing since it in the process also undermines itself. By examining the historical context in which the relativistic position has emerged, it becomes apparent that it is a natural result of Western civilization abandoning the belief in a spiritual absolute truth. After also looking at the arguments for relativism it is clear that the fact that we have a subjective perspective does not equal everything being relative. However, the opposite to this relative position has today become a materialistic worldview. When examining Dennett's conclusion that materialism leads to our basis for experiencing being undermined, a new ontology seems to be needed, a merging of nature's subjective and objective quality.