Reason is not objectivity

A response to Julian Baggini's narrowly rational criteria for objectivity

Introduction

In terms of our total response to the world, reason provides only the tip of the iceberg of the ways in which we can improve our adequacy and objectivity. A variety of recent advances make the limitations of reason increasingly clear, for example:

- Cognitive bias theory shows that a claim or argument can often appear 'rational' to its advocate yet be the product of 'fast thinking' intuitive short-cuts. (Kahneman 2011)
- Brain lateralisation studies show the process of reasoning to be the product of the linguistic and tool-using centres of the over-dominant left pre-frontal cortex, emphasised to the exclusion of the right hemisphere that can provide new information from the senses or bodily experience. The reasoning process of the left hemisphere can thus easily be accompanied by an illusory self-sufficiency that excludes all challenges through confirmation bias. (McGilchrist 2009)
- The embodied meaning theory of Lakoff and Johnson presents a viable alternative to correspondence theories of meaning still dominant in naturalistic philosophy, and one that is based on an array of linguistic, psychological and neuroscientific evidence. This theory challenges the traditional distinction between cognitive and emotive meaning, and explains meaning as a whole as developed through synaptic links that associate basic categories and schemas with active experiences from early infancy. More complex and abstract language then becomes meaningful to us through metaphorical extension and cognitive modelling which always depends on the more basic formative experiences of schematic meaning. In this way it is made clear that reasoning is a process of establishing consistency within an assumed cognitive model, with all the terms in a logical argument dependent for their meaning on our bodies rather than on a system of propositional truth-correspondence. (Johnson 2007, Lakoff 1987, Lakoff & Johnson 1980, Ellis 2013b)
- The increasing use of mindfulness techniques in Western society means that a wider number of people have experienced meditation of some kind. An increasing number of people have thus directly experienced the ways in which objectivity can be improved primarily through working with habitual mental states rather than primarily through reasoning.

My purpose here, though, is not to further explore these advances, but rather to show how they undermine the model of 'reason' as the saviour of humankind and the basis of objectivity that is still being assumed and even defended, despite everything, by many analytic philosophers and naturalistic scientists. Such thinkers tend to assume a clear distinction between 'reason' and 'emotion' or 'facts' and values'. They also tend to assume a correspondence view of meaning and the stability and singleness of individuals (whose disagreements are mediated by 'reason' in a social context rather than addressed through psychology). Such naturalistic thinking at worst may simply ignore psychology, or at best may appropriate it without recognising its full implications.

Reason, I shall argue, may at times play a small part in objectivity, but for the most part objectivity has little to do with reason, and 'thin' conceptions of reason that stretch its definition to implicitly include various features of psychological objectivity tend to distract us from focusing on the ways that objectivity can most helpfully and realistically be developed. I will not be able to develop a full account of my alternative model of objectivity here (see Ellis 2012 for more), but it needs to be

noted that I do not accept the common assumption that the only alternative to 'rational' objectivity is relativism or nihilism.

This paper is also in large part as response to Julian Baggini's recent book 'The Edge of Reason' (Baggini 2016). Baggini's book offers a new summation of the case for reason as a central part of objectivity, with nods to psychology and an apparent willingness to challenge the assumptions of the analytic philosophical tradition – but these elements of promise are not followed through with any thorough or genuine reconsideration of the common assumptions of analytic philosophy. In the end, what we get is something like an apology for analytic naturalism, in which alternatives are raised but inadequately considered, and the same old assumptions reasserted. The commitment to objectivity in the book is admirable, but the extent to which the conditions for objectivity are understood is extremely disappointing. Baggini's book is a good one to focus on in order to reveal the limitations of the over-reliance on reason precisely because it sees itself as doing the opposite, as recognising the limits to reason, but fails to do so. Those who are even more entrenched in this perspective than Baggini will obviously come in for the same criticisms by implication. I will be focusing on Baggini's 'Five Characteristics of Objectivity' (Baggini 2016, 114-129) as the key to his claims about the role of reason which are in many ways representative of the assumptions of the analytic philosophical tradition.

Before discussing Baggini's approach, however, it's important to focus on what is meant by the term 'reason'. Very often it is a word that merely presents the appearance of precision and justification but in practice rides on a set of vague associations with an objective attitude to human judgement that reason itself does not fully offer.

What is reason?

Most basically, 'reason' is logical processing, the linking of certain assumptions with which we begin with conclusions with which we end a reasoning process. Those assumptions may be better or worse justified, and may be explicit or implicit, but in some way a new judgement is made that is, or could be, justified with reference to starting assumptions that are taken to require it. The reasoning process is traditionally classified into deductive and inductive forms, with deduction assuming an absolute link between premises and conclusion and induction only a degree of justification supported by limited evidence. However, in both cases we have conclusions drawn from assumptions. Thus a key assertion can be made that is too often lost sight of in discussion of reason: *any piece of reasoning is only ever as good as the assumptions it begins with*. If you begin with the assumption that your critics must always be lying, for example, the conclusions you draw from this, however rigorously reasoned, will exclude the possibility of learning from your critics.

Reasoning can also help us to examine the *consistency* of our assumptions, and to that extent, when used thoroughly, can lead us to call some of our beliefs into question when they fail to cohere with the rest. The process of doing a Sudoku, for example, is one of deductive reasoning, in which a grid of numbers in a consistent pattern is discovered by a laborious process of examining what possible number could fit consistently in each square. The whole exercise, however, is carefully devised to enable this process, by convention excluding the possibility that no consistent grid of numbers exists or that an inconsistent grid would be adequate. Such puzzles may help to contribute to a habitual belief that consistent rationality can also unlock the correct solutions to wider problems in human life – but the world is not a Sudoku, because it is not carefully framed to be solvable in those terms by a puzzle-setter.

How embodied meaning affects our understanding of reason

Given that we rely on assumptions, it's also important to consider where these assumptions come from, before we jump to over-strong conclusions about what we can do with them. According to the embodied meaning theory of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, our propositional beliefs are understood in the context of cognitive models. A cognitive model involves a coherent set of terms that can only be understood in relation to each other and to a wider structure: for example, the meaning of the days of the week can only be understood in relation to the structure of a week as made up of seven days, as well as the structure of time as being made up of days that advance steadily forwards. Cognitive models, in turn, depend on metaphorical constructions: for example, the idea of time as flowing forwards is a metaphorical extension of our experience of walking forwards and moving through space along a path. Metaphorical constructions all depend for their meaning on more basic bodily experiences that we have associated with certain schematic or categorical words of symbols since early infancy. To give another example, a child learning actively about the meaning of something being 'in' or 'out' of a box can activate what Lakoff calls the 'container' schema. The meaning of the term 'field' draws on the container schema to be understood, both in its more basic sense of an enclosed area of land and in its metaphorical sense of an area of study (Lakoff 1987, Johnson 2007).

Though appeals to reason can take both a rationalist and a naturalist form, what these have in common is the assumption of earlier accounts of meaning that do not take into account this embodied dependency. The Rationalists, going back to Plato and Descartes, assumed one single cognitive model within which certainty could be reached through deductive reasoning alone. Naturalism does not generally assume that reasoning alone can deliver such certainty, because the basis of knowledge is believed to be empirical, but it does tend to assume the possibility that our language gains its meaning by representing at least a potential reality. In the truth-correspondent theory of meaning that predominates in analytic philosophy, the meaning of a proposition consists in a recognition of the circumstances in which it would be true. If this is not the theory assumed, then the implications of abandoning it need to be recognised: namely that reasoning cannot be assumed to take place within a single cognitive model. One proposition cannot clearly and necessarily imply another unless the terms used within both premise and conclusion are stable: otherwise the result is equivocation.

If we take embodied meaning seriously, we are thrown into a world in which 'reason' can no longer be relied upon to relate to even hypothetical representations. It is not a world of meaninglessness, but rather a world where meaning needs to be understood in wider terms, and where some degree of equivocation will be unavoidable both in any reasoning process and in any communication. An understanding of the differing roles of the two brain hemispheres can help us to understand the nature of this new world. Neuroscience offers clear evidence, not of two entirely separate systems in the brain, but of two specialisations within one wider system. Within that system, the left pre-frontal cortex specialises in the maintenance of conscious linguistic representations that are closely related to our goals. This part of the brain, which generally tends to dominate, assumes a single cognitive model in which reasoning can operate unequivocally. However, this narrower awareness of meaning relies, through a process of metaphorical construction, on the embodied meaning, connected to the senses and the entire nervous system, of the right hemisphere. The common experience of not 'understanding' a piece of abstract language thus consists in the absence of adequate grounding in the right hemisphere and bodily experience. Reasoning is always dependent for its meaning on this deeper bodily experience.

The consistency that reasoning can introduce within one set of assumptions is of limited help, because the sphere within which it remains unequivocal is extremely limited, and indeed may not occur at all in any pure form. It might be argued that even in an equivocal realm, approximately or functionally equivalent terms are enough to make reason of some use, and indeed they are. If the reasoning in this paper in any way convinces you, it will be because of such functional resemblance in the cognitive structures we are each using. However, in many cases I fear it will not, because you and I will have insufficiently compatible understandings of the terms I am employing – understandings that will probably determine what we take to be acceptable implications as well as the meaning of the terms we begin with.

Provisionality as an alternative to reason for objectivity

We thus come to very different conclusions about objectivity if we take these points seriously. Rather than being primarily a matter of reason, objectivity depends on our capacity to understand and engage with alternative views that lie beyond our customary assumptions. Without that capacity, the arguments for those other views will make no impression on us, because we will not sufficiently relate them to our base embodied experience and our accustomed language. With that capacity, on the other hand, arguments become a mere prompt to a process that we could easily go through for ourselves.

The term I have adopted for that capacity is not new, but insufficiently employed: it is provisionality (Ellis 2012, 1c). We develop a degree of provisionality according to our level of awareness, including both critical awareness of the limitations of our current beliefs and positive awareness dependent on imagination of alternatives. Such provisionality is undermined by the assumption that our current beliefs are unquestionable – which may be assumed as a result of a variety of *absolute* beliefs which frame our current beliefs in ways that prevent them being compared with others.

Now, some of the features of provisionality as I have defined it here have been attributed to 'reason', in a bigger, baggier or 'thinner' sense than that of mere reason*ing*. However, it is obvious that this type of usage tends to lead us to appropriate the idea of provisionality to the process of reasoning when it has little to do with it. The framing of philosophical and critical thinking training, indeed, has tended to encourage such an association, because philosophers and critical thinkers are obliged to get into the habit of recognising their assumptions. As I have argued elsewhere, though, fallacies can all be analysed in terms of unhelpful assumptions, because a 'fault in reasoning', even of a 'formal' type, involves the assumption of an additional unrecognised premise (Ellis 2015a, 2015b). To a large extent, the study of formal logic is a distraction from the conditions for objectivity, as it is only when that study is applied to examples that we are obliged to recognise and question our assumptions – something we are unlikely to do unless our study of logic is augmented by a practice of provisionality.

In Baggini's account, 'reason' in this 'thinner' sense involves social prompts to objectivity. He is at pains to point out that reason cannot have an all-encompassing or ultimately consistent solution to human cognitive limitations, but nevertheless he identifies 'reason' with the conditions for objectivity to such an extent that he lists his five characteristics of *objectivity* as the rationally-led comprehensibility, assessability, defeasibility, value-neutrality and compulsion. These are all 'rational' criteria that one can apply to a belief without deductive certainty, but, as I shall show, these are all narrow rationalised versions of much wider and more generally relevant psychological criteria for objectivity. They also depend on assumptions of a kind that have become entrenched in the analytic school of philosophy only by ignoring psychology and its implications.

Comprehensibility

Baggini (2016 p.114) understands objectivity as moving towards a sharable viewpoint that goes beyond the limitations of any one given individual, so this sharable viewpoint thus requires comprehensibility 'in principle by any rational agent'. The 'in principle' allows Baggini to deal with the effects of expertise and differences in intellectual capacity, but it still evades the deeper problem that there is no absolute mutual comprehensibility. Whilst a degree of mutual comprehensibility is indeed required to be able to learn from others, as a condition this needs to be mutually developed as an aspect of the exercise of objectivity rather than adopted as a prior requirement for it. If there is not just one cognitive model, one cannot simply demand that a person whose arguments are not 'comprehensible' under one's own model should make themselves so. Rather a dialectical process is required by which both sides engage in stretching their understanding to new possible models and sort through the justification of the assumptions they have made under that model. It is *mutual* awareness and provisionality that are required for this process.

The mutual understanding is also not necessarily social in the way Baggini appears to assume, but may consist in an engagement between one's own contrary voices, emerging at different times. If we do not assume a unified self, the implication is that mutual understanding is needed for the conflicting beliefs that we find in ourselves at different times, just as much as it is needed for others and their perspectives, and thus that objectivity is an overwhelmingly psychological criterion because it is not only exercised in public debate between individuals with fixed perspectives. Indeed, the other voices in ourselves may take the form of others as we represent them in our thoughts, and our own alternative voices may be expressed by others. We cannot simply reduce objectivity to a process of socially shared examination, because it may not involve that at all. Introspection in which I reflect on my own varied beliefs requires objectivity just as much, but depends on 'reason' even less than public discussion does.

'Comprehensibility' is thus at best a very limited stand-in for a dialectical process in which those voices that lack adequate mutual comprehension (whether between or within individuals) work to establish it to a greater extent. It is the kind of stand-in that can only be offered by someone who holds an established viewpoint that they take to be the entire basis of discussion: but since no such established viewpoint is beyond critical discussion in this way, it seems to offer, at worst, a charter for the kinds of dismissiveness towards 'unintelligible' questioning of their base assumptions that in my experience analytic philosophers very often engage in.

Assessability

Baggini (2016, p.116) also claims that objective beliefs should be 'assessable by any rational agent', without, he says, presuming to limit what form that assessment should take (whether verification or falsification, for example). I have to agree with him that assessment, in the sense of justification, is something our beliefs always need, but what Baggini seems to forget in using 'assessability' as a criterion is that it is a matter of degree rather than an absolute. Our beliefs can be justified sufficiently for us to be confident in their application for a particular purpose, but, as with comprehensibility, it is our task to engage in that justification rather than applying a discontinuous criterion of 'assessability'. One would have thought that this this point could be learnt from the failures of both verificationism and falsificationism, that Baggini reviews, both of which failed precisely because they insisted on using absolute criteria for justification.

If assessability is admitted to be a matter of degree, it follows that there are no such things as totally non-assessable claims. A criterion has to be assumed to assess them, and the claim will then be

justified according to that criterion to some degree (subject also to the initial uncertainty of the criterion). Unfortunately, though, many claims are held in a context of assumption in which assessment is not admitted to be a matter of degree, but rather assumed to be absolutely justified or not justified, with this assumption constantly reinforced by the entire framing of the claim in its context. This is what makes a claim *absolute* and thus absolutely non-justifiable in its own terms. I have argued extensively elsewhere that metaphysical beliefs (both positive and negative) are of this type, not necessarily only because of the words that compose the claim, but because of the assumptions with which they are liable to be interpreted. To be able to justify a claim, then, we have to not only apply an assumed criterion consistently to it, but also recognise its lack of absolute justification.

'Assessability' is thus, again, far too narrow a criterion for objectivity, given that it appears to assume the possibility of absolute assessability, but that practical justification in context actually involves recognising that there can be no such absolute criteria. Instead of such a crude criterion, which is not really applicable in any practical cases, we need incremental criteria for assessment that stick to the requirements of an incremental perspective with a great deal more rigour.

Defeasibility

Baggini's third criterion (2016, p.120), defeasibility, again mistakes the tip of the iceberg for the whole thing, taking the context of natural science as the paradigm case, even though he argues elsewhere that it cannot be assumed to be the only model. In the natural sciences, the public statement of defeasibility conditions provides an approximation to provisionality that has, so far, has served science well, in compensation as it is for the lack of skills and attitudes of provisionality systematically cultivated in the education systems on which science relies. Admitting to others the possibility that your theory may be wrong, and stating the conditions for proving it, is indeed a strong criterion for a kind of enforced provisionality, rather as watchful neighbours may substitute for ethics, but its limitation to topics that can be adequately observed and specified to the standards socially required by natural science is also very restrictive, given that provisionality can also be exercised in all sorts of less formal ways beyond it.

The vast majority of instances where one needs to be open to the possibility of one's beliefs being wrong occur, not scientifically, but internally. Again, it's a question of listening to our alternative voices. Criteria of defeasibility are formal, discontinuous, and dependent on the representative accuracy of linguistic descriptors that are intended to match the defeasibility conditions. However, most of the cases of provisionality that mould our character involve moral decisions of a much more personal kind. By the time we come to making scientific judgements with formal defeasibility (if we do) a large proportion of our degree of personal objectivity is probably already set.

Even where formal defeasibility is used, its effectiveness depends entirely on the more general criterion of provisionality. The defeasibility may not in fact be tested by an opportunity for any change of mind, as defeasibility merely offers a stimulus for that change. Awareness of better alternative beliefs, even without formal defeasibility criteria, may also provide a basis of changed judgement. At best, then, defeasibility is a blunt instrument which may bear a very approximate relationship to the conditions for provisionality, and hence for objectivity, in certain circumstances. At worst, it may form a barrier to provisionality, because it may be formalistically demanded when provisional claims are made about matters that either cannot be investigated by natural science or are not of sufficient generality and importance to be thus investigated. When we make exploratory claims about someone else's emotional state, or about the moral advisability of a particular course of action, for instance, the lack of formal defeasibility of such claims is just a question that cannot be

practically pursued, but provisionality is nevertheless still a crucially important quality that is required for the objectivity of such claims.

Interest neutrality

Baggini (2016, p.122) argues that for objectivity, values should be 'set aside' in favour of 'disinterested' facts. This forms the basis of cultivating what he calls 'epistemic rationality' as opposed to 'practical rationality' in which values are included. This seems to me the most obviously and basically mistaken of all Baggini's five criteria, and one where he follows the cultural assumptions of analytic philosophy and scientific naturalism, for which the fact-value distinction is a basic requirement. The fact-value distinction is a logical distinction between different kinds of claims. In Hume's influential argument, we cannot logically justify the derivation of a value (an 'ought' claim) from a fact (an 'is' claim) or vice-versa, as neither implies the other. This is an argument that takes a truth-correspondent theory of meaning for granted and entirely neglects the embodied context in which interdependent 'is' and 'ought' claims are used. If all our claims are dependent for their meaning on cognitive models grounded in metaphor and embodied experience, however, there is no such basic distinction in the meaning of terms. Factual claims are grounded on our embodied experience, and have a pragmatic role in relation to that experience, just as value claims are. The difference between them is only a slight distinction of usage, not one of meaning.

For a human being with a body, there can indeed be no such thing as 'interest neutrality', and 'disinterested facts', whether or not they exist independently in some disembodied fashion, cannot be held by embodied humans. The identification of objectivity with 'facts' seems to be the basic assumption going back to Hume and the enlightenment here. But if we are to take the impurity of meaning seriously, and discuss it as though we were humans rather than disembodied beings, we have no business entering into the self-deceit of assuming either that we *can* set aside values or even that in some sense we should. The recognition that the fact-value distinction is a logical abstraction of no relevance to our further judgements does not imply relativism, as is often assumed, because the possibility of incremental objectivity based on psychological states means that this objectivity will apply just as much to our judgements about values as it does to our judgements about facts. This relates closely to the recognition, also, that our emotional states are closely involved in any kind of objectivity. We are more objective *because* of our emotions and values, not despite them.

Our justification for believing generally accepted scientific claims has nothing whatsoever to do with "setting our values aside" (as though that was possible), but rather on making a relatively objective valuation. For example, if we compare the reasons for accepting the scientific consensus about climate change, with all the evidence that accompanies, as opposed to the reasons for rejecting that consensus, the reasons for will convince us better *only if* we value objectivity and the recognition of conditions beyond our previous assumptions, even when this is socially, psychologically and politically difficult for us. When scientists think they are "setting their values aside" (if they are actually ever deluded enough to think they are doing such a thing), what they seem to mean is that they set aside specific interests of a kind that they might recognise as distorting their judgement. Such disruptive values (which always come with accompanying factual assumptions) might, for example, take the form of a temptation to ignore inconvenient facts that don't fit a theory, especially when the importance of that theory is reinforced by political pressure. The problem with such pressures is that they are a result of biases that disrupt our judgement, not that they are 'values'.

Baggini claims that “whenever thinkers have tried to go [as] far” as denying the existence of disinterested facts, “they have always ended up in absurdity”. But then he gives as an example arguments of Luce Irigaray about the ‘sexed’ equation of the speed of light that are indeed absurd, followed by “the fact is that scientists… all have good reasons to accept the equation [of the speed of light]. This is interest-neutral science, pure and simple” (126). But these very scientists have an interest in developing as objective a view of the speed of light as possible that is very far from neutral, but depends on scientific values reaching back into a developed scientific culture. “Of course values and interests infuse how we live and how we think” Baggini argues, “But that does not mean values and interests permeate the content of every knowledge claim.” (126) How so? Does he really think that knowledge claims are independent of how we live and how we think? If so it can apparently only be because he assumes that we consist only of representational left pre-frontal cortices rather than humans with bodies. Baggini’s apparently disarming gestures towards recognising other perspectives turn out to conceal a very traditional and absolutist set of assumptions.

Compulsion

Baggini’s final criterion (2016 p.127) for objectivity is that of ‘compulsion’. “For the argument to have objective force it must in some way be *compelling*.” he claims, “Turned over and examined on all sides, any rational agent who understands the argument should find herself feeling forced – or at least strongly pushed – to accept the conclusion, whether she likes it or not.” I wonder very much who this ‘rational agent’ is, as she seems to bear no particular resemblance to any human known to me. I also wonder what this ‘feeling forced’ is supposed to mean. Is he talking about a sense of mental compulsion that one actually feels, like the pull of a cigarette for a smoker? If so, it sounds as though the ‘rational agent’ must be someone sufficiently addicted to ‘reason’ to feel such a compulsion. But the ‘*should* feel herself feeling forced’ suggests that this is actually meant to be a normative claim that may have no relationship at all to how we actually feel. Even if you’re not ‘rational’, it seems, you *should* be.

All this seems to me quite bizarre, though presumably it isn’t for those who’ve got sufficiently used to talking in this way. It apparently leaves us in a Catch-22 in relation to any actual ‘rational’ argument. If the argument is rational and you don’t actually feel compelled by it, then you’re apparently either not rational or you’re immoral, as you’re not feeling what you should feel. All of this totally ignores the psychology of why people actually find an argument ‘compelling’, which will depend on us understanding and accepting the assumptions of an argument and following through the reasoning from those assumptions to the conclusion. If you don’t accept the assumptions, you’re not actually going to be compelled, no matter how well connected the conclusion is to the assumptions.

As to whether we *ought* to accept an argument that we don’t actually accept: the idea that this is a matter of rationality seems to me a crude stand-in for a more adequate account of ethics. The idea that normative language can be used about rationality, and that this can somehow offer a kind of substitute for ethics that only requires us to be rationally consistent in relation to our own goals is one that has been developed as ‘practical rationality’ by, for example, Simon Blackburn (1998). But why ever should the way in which we link claims together through reasoning have anything much to do with moral normativity, whether of the normal kind or in this kind of ersatz version? We can link together claims in Nazi Ideology, or even in the rationalisations of a lone mass murderer, just as rigorously as ones in any other context of a kind that we might be more likely to accept as moral. It is the assumptions that make the difference, not the reasoning.

I do think we *ought* to accept claims for which there is a strong justification, but not just in terms of consistency with our other beliefs – also in terms of awareness of the limitations of the assumptions on which those beliefs are built. We will only be in a practical position to engage with such claims if they are sufficiently close to what we already accept for us to be able to find them sufficiently meaningful and adapt our assumptions to those on which they rely. But the mechanism by which we do that involves cultivating open enough states of mind to engage with alternative assumptions. We *ought* to accept claims that can be justified in such a way, because we *ought* to be slightly more integrated than we are: but this is a wider psychological criterion for normativity, not a merely rational one. It is also a moral criterion that cannot be distinguished from one of 'practical rationality'.

If one does not ignore the implications of psychology, it can be readily seen that criteria of psychological integration (where conflicts between different desires and beliefs over time are mediated) and associated adequacy (where we are better able to accept new and challenging assumptions because of the wider awareness that accompanies integration) can provide a far more adequate account of normative ethics than rationality alone can do. At best, reasoning can provide us with slightly more adequacy by making our beliefs slightly more consistent within a particular set of assumptions. But where we are simply not aware of alternative assumptions, or dismiss them due to our strength of identification with the assumptions of a limited culture or specialisation, no amount of reasoning will help us with that. There is no substitute for wider awareness.

Likely responses

Having discussed at least some of this case with Baggini, I have a good idea of the likely responses, which echo ones I have heard in the past from other analytic philosophers. He would take it as a misrepresentation of his argument to present it as *identifying* objectivity solely with reason. He might say that nothing that he has written explicitly excludes engagement with psychology, and that it would be better to focus on what he does say rather than what he doesn't say. He would protest that his version of the role of reason is 'thin' and not dependent solely on an appeal to the process of reasoning itself. Rather he might say that it offers a variety of challenges in a wider context that recognises uncertainty.

Whether or not he technically identifies objectivity with reason, there is no doubt from Baggini's book that in practice he wants to present objectivity overwhelmingly in terms of reason. For one thing, no alternative ways of understanding objectivity are even mentioned, let alone discussed. For another, the five criteria I have just discussed are described as 'criteria of objectivity' even though they are entirely focused on rationality. This is hardly just a specialised part of a wider vision of objectivity that is explored more fully elsewhere, either by himself or others – rather it is a manifestation of a philosophical sub-culture in denial. Even if he does not explicitly exclude further psychological criteria for objectivity, there is a clear expectation that 'reason' will do the job, when in most cases it will not. So it is a practical inadequacy that is the problem rather than merely an omission.

That my definition of 'reason' is narrower than his is also practically driven, given that it achieves nothing of benefit to anyone to keep vaguely adding positive associations to 'reason'. Making 'reason' all-embracing merely obscures the kind of psychologically-orientated practical work that is required to actually develop greater objectivity from whatever point one begins, because such work becomes associated with processes of reasoning rather than with awareness of assumptions. To use the term 'reason' to cover skills such as critical awareness of assumptions or the ability to imagine alternatives is just an appropriative act of aggrandisement for this big, baggy eighteenth century

empire. It is high time that a philosophical equivalent of the Versailles treaties came along and broke up this empire of reason into its component parts, for the practical benefit of those who live in them. 'Reason' might then have a more proportionate and realistic role, in the same way that Austria or Turkey remain as self-determining and much better-defined rumps of their previously over-inflated selves.

A rationalised approach to objectivity may also be seen as correct in its own terms – but those terms are far more narrow than seems to be recognised by their proponents, with their empty gestures towards greater breadth. In the highly unlikely event that one was engaged in an entirely rational discussion, between two individuals of the abstract species *homo philosophicus,* in an entirely unquestionable context of assumptions and cognitive models, the criteria Baggini offers might be sufficient. That we are not in such a discussion should be obvious. *Homo philosophicus,* if he ever existed*,* would not even be a particularly good philosopher, since one of the most basic duties of a philosopher is to question his or her assumptions.

Alternative criteria

To close on a more positive note, I would like to suggest five alternative criteria for objectivity that in my view can collectively fulfil the role of Baggini's five criteria, but far more adequately. These criteria do not closely mirror Baggini's individually but only when seen in relation to each other. These criteria are ones I have already put forward elsewhere as 'Five Principles of the Middle Way' (http://www.middlewaysociety.org/five-principles-of-middle-way-philosophy/) and which draw on material developed in detail in Ellis 2012, 2013a, 2013b and 2015b:

1. Scepticism. This is a basic recognition of the implications of human embodiment as preventing certainty of belief as well as wholly representational meaning. Scepticism implies that no claim, whether positive or negative, can be absolutely justified – though it may be incrementally justified.
2. Provisionality. This involves the critical awareness that our current beliefs may be wrong, together with the cultivation of alternative possibilities. Alternative possibilities are seen as potential adaptive advantages rather than threats. Baggini's assessability and defeasibility may be seen as attempting to evoke provisionality in some respects, but since provisionality as a requirement for objectivity goes far beyond such formal rational criteria, a much more comprehensive psychological criterion is needed.
3. Incrementality. This involves a consistent examination of all absolute boundaries in our claims, and the attempt to understand them in terms of increments (as a matter of degree), so as to avoid the unquestioned assumptions that are associated with rigid categories. Baggini pays lip-service to incrementality in relation to the objective/ subjective opposition (quoting Thomas Nagel's incremental view of objectivity - 1986), but does not follow through the implications, because he then continues to use this opposition as an absolute basic assumption in his further argument.
4. Agnosticism. This involves a clear effort not to take sides in dualistic oppositions that are formed from absolute dual oppositions (for example realism v idealism, theism v atheism). This is an essential strategy if one is to be able to question the assumptions of a particular group in which one is embedded, without simply flipping into the opposite view advocated by a counter-group. It is only by putting oneself in the unclear middle ground that one is then in a position to consider the justifications more adequately in practice.
5. Integration. This is the psychological quality of having incrementally overcome conflicts of desire and associated belief, and can be associated with states of virtue such as wisdom. One can improve integration by engaging in a variety of integrative practices, which would include

meditation and the arts as well as more intellectual skills such as critical thinking. Integration is required to engage with the underlying psychological conditions that limit objectivity.

Conclusion

The positive alternatives cannot be explored further within the scope of this paper, but it was important to at least summarise them to put the criticism of Baggini's approach in a wider perspective. Yes, Baggini's approach to objectivity may be more open-minded in various minor respects than some of his peers, but it is not in any way a description of objectivity for humans as we know them. It claims to offer a recognition of the limits of reason, but actually over-extends them simply because it is so much formed by a philosophical tradition that over-extends them. Whether or not you agree with my alternatives, much more fundamental re-consideration of that tradition is required.

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