

## The Power of Positive Thinking: A Review of Paolo Parrini's *Knowledge and Reality*.

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*Knowledge and Reality: An Essay in Positive Philosophy*. Parrini, Paolo. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers. 1998, pp. 218 + xix.

Parrini's *Knowledge and Reality*, is modest in length but not in scope. In just 216 pages, Parrini argues for a redefinition of truth, objectivity, and rationality in order to ground a new approach to philosophy itself, all while attempting to revive positivism as a philosophic doctrine. As with most positivists, science serves Parrini primarily as a role model for rational inquiry. This text, therefore, is best seen as a work in core philosophy (particularly epistemology) which mitigates the lack of attention paid to major innovations in contemporary philosophy of science by thinkers such as Van Fraassen, Cartwright, Kitcher, Longino and Shapere. This lack strikes me as perhaps the major fault of a work which is otherwise well worth investigation.

According to Parrini the task of philosophy is to describe and repair the flaws and lacunae in our current conceptual structure (pp. xiii; 91). Rather than defending this view, Parrini instantiates it by providing an extended analysis and reconstruction of key notions in epistemology. His argument begins with a description and evaluation of Logical Positivism. Parrini's account, in chapter 1, whilst sympathetic, is closer to the canonical view than to any recent revisionary views. The key point for Parrini is that the fatal flaws of Logical Positivism (see p. 16 ff) arise from its formulation in terms of linguistic philosophy. When stripped of this linguistic 'straightjacket', a core philosophic program which is prima facie viable and is true to the spirit of the 19<sup>th</sup> century positivists, remains intact. Parrini identifies three major features of this core, "...relativism, empiricism and anti-metaphysical objectivism" (p. 16). The remainder of Parrini's text is devoted to working out the details and consequences of this program.

Parrini begins his detailed account with a discussion of relativism (perhaps better thought of as 'conventionalism', but I will retain Parrini's term here). In chapter 2, Parrini sets out what he calls Epistemic Relativism which has three dimensions: linguistic, theoretic, and axiological-methodological (see p. 40 ff). His point is that each of these areas; language, world-view and methods and

values, are independently affected by more than just the nature of the 'world'. In chapter 3, Parrini addresses empiricism, following (p. 74 ff) Mary Hesse's 'Network' model of the relation of observation and meaning. On this account some predicates have their extension determined, in part, by empirical means. So that although the subsequent development of associated conceptual structures may be largely theoretical, it is always possible that theoretical disagreements may be resolved by appeal to this empirical basis.

It is worth pausing at this point to identify two arguments that first appear in chapters 2 and 3 and play a major role in subsequent developments. In chapter 2 Parrini argues for a contextual notion of concepts (such as the *a priori*—p. 51 ff), which he later deploys to rescue a notion of normativity (in chapters 6 and 7). The motivation for this view is the requirement to navigate between the Scylla of radical relativism and the Charybdis of metaphysical absolutism. The other argument of note is chapter 3's use of a possibility argument to establish the importance of empiricism (p. 74 ff). That Parrini is 'reduced' to arguing from the possibility of something to the importance of that something is a clear signal that he is fully committed to positivism's contingency; a commitment that is engendered by the navigational challenge mentioned above and that reappears in Parrini's positive account of anti-metaphysical objectivity later in the book.

In chapters 4 and 5, Parrini addresses what he takes to be the two major alternative accounts of an epistemology marked by Epistemic Relativism and Network theory. In chapter 4, he looks at Logical Idealism and in chapter 5, Metaphysical Realism. In both cases, Parrini argues that the views ought to be rejected because they contain an appeal to an absolute philosophic standard and such standards lead to insuperable puzzles. Basically both views are connected with scepticism (p. 113 ff), which Parrini regards as a *reductio* of any view that entails it.

Parrini's positive account begins in chapter 5 with a discussion of Fine's 'Natural Ontological Attitude' (p. 135 ff), which he takes to be the right descriptive account of our everyday realist intuitions. The remaining challenge, taken up in chapters 6 and 7, is to provide a reconstruction of objectivity (chapter 6) and associated notions; truth (chapter 6), and rationality (chapter 7), that is neither too relativist nor too absolutist. Parrini's solution is to combine Kantian constitutivity with the contextual argument mentioned above. The result is a set of ideas that have inter-theoretic reach; we must always evaluate our views objectively with an eye on their truth and rationality (these notions therefore constitute the

normative standards of our cognitive activity). On the other hand, without a context these ideas are no more than ideals; the concrete aspects of these notions that allow them to do real work within our cognitive economy arise only once we have established a context. Parrini's best guess as to how this works in practice (see, for example, p. 185) is that successive theoretical structures become more and more coherent; including a wider range of material and richer interconnections between notions.

The view outlined is a tantalizing one, and Parrini is careful to state that his account is not guaranteed, as is appropriate for a positivist, but I think it faces a dilemma. If key notions are merely constitutive, are they really doing any work; if they are more than that, have we avoided the metaphysical element that so worried Parrini? That is, if *all* the standards that objectivity and the like make normative come from a given context surely the idea itself is vacuous. On the other hand, real inter-theoretic standards are exactly the entities which Parrini is so keen to avoid. Such worries are par for the course, of course, and Parrini's essay remains an intriguing attempt to balance the competing requirements on any contemporary epistemology, particularly one that honours the rational structure of science. Given this, it is a shame that we do not get more on how Parrini sees his views as complementing and/or critiquing those of the philosophers of science I mentioned at the beginning of this review. That said, anyone with an interest in the large scale structure of epistemology should find this work worthy of investigation.

In concluding this review it should be noted that the text is a translation, carried out with the approval and under the supervision of the author, by Paolo Baracchi. Baracchi also provided the text's extensive index, a useful table of contents, and a great deal of the internal structuring of the work.

## References

Parrini, Paolo. *Knowledge and Reality: An Essay in Positive Philosophy*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998.