

WHY SUBJECTIVISM IS ALWAYS MORE WRONG THAN  
OBJECTIVISM EVER CAN BE, EVEN IN AESTHETICS

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To give thoughts and things a local habitation and a name is the ultimate task of philosophy. Being all-embracing, foundational and self-reflective, such an endeavour is, if not impossible per se, at least — as the history of philosophy evinces — highly and notoriously paradoxical. One might even be tempted to surmise — if time could make for wisdom — that humanity would be far better off if philosophical reflection could be abandoned altogether. But, as time makes only for endurance — if it makes for anything at all — human nature — theological grace apart — is not that fair and simple : it can't be done. For us, human beings, to be is to make sense of existence, to figure out, by whatever means, our place in the universe and — horresco referens — to build a view of the world that — in order to keep sheer violence in check — must be convincing, rationally convincing, for ourselves and for others. And that's indeed what philosophy, if it is about anything at all, essentially and exclusively was and is about. Nevertheless, the problem is that worldviews — all-inclusive as they are — must be, as everything else, limited, finite and well-defined. For philosophy without restraint and self-control is doomed to be empty : worldviews, names apart, indeed must have a local habitation or, while seeming everything, they will be nothing at all. The human mind however, that is its own place and can make a heaven of hell and a hell of heaven, has proved in its time to have great difficulties to establish worldviews that provide more orientation than they produce confusion. Philosophy, presumably, is replete with what might be called, the paradox of perfection : the seemingly innocent and quite understandable quest for a final and perfect orientation in the world has proved to be

almost irresistible and has let almost unavoidably to dogmatical and — on the rebound — sceptical temptations that have, all things considered, nothing to recommend them but their very emptiness. It is our contention that there is no such thing as perfection and finality : both are inconceivable in principle. For finality is death and death, whatever it may be in addition, is at least a dispensation from philosophical orientation as such. Consequently, all orientation in the world, in order to be effectively orientation at all, must of necessity be inadequate and incomplete. Indeed, this incompleteness and inadequacy is the very condition for the existence of the problem of philosophical orientation as such. For it is quite beyond doubt — if anything is — that one cannot solve a problem, whatever it might be, by proposing a solution that, if indeed it is a solution at all, presupposes that the problem in question never could have arisen in the first place. Such a solution or dissolution is indeed comical : as if one would say that, in order to eliminate once and for all the ever present danger of falling of the branch one is sitting on, the best thing to do would be to saw it off. It is remarkable and intriguing to notice that, more often than not, philosophy has been doing precisely this. Nowhere can this state of — presumably — human affairs more clearly be observed than in the endless disputes concerning problems of aesthetic evaluation, especially in the controversy between subjectivism and objectivism. As if aesthetics were the most serious of jokes, which indeed it is.

## 2.

For the sake of clarity, let's start with a discussion of subjectivism and objectivism in their classical disguise and see why they collapse into scepticism and dogmatism respectively.

Suppose the problem is to assess a painting presented in the usual way, so that there seem to be no difficulties — at least no external ones — as far as accessibility is concerned. Looking at the painting, the subjectivist will say that now, at this moment, he doesn't like it and that that's all there is to be said. The objectivist on the contrary will conclude that the painting is fine, whether anybody likes it or not, and that therefore it ought to be liked. Evidently, the objectivist implies that his colleague is quite wrong, whatever the reason, whereupon the subjectivist might retort that his judgement is not wrong at all, simply because it is honest : he indeed doesn't like the painting now. One might be inclined to think there

is, in fact, no genuine problem here, because the subjectivist is exclusively talking about his state of mind, whereas the objectivist is exclusively talking, or at least is thinking he is talking exclusively about the painting as it is. And these are two quite different things. But this way out won't do : for how can the subjectivist voice his assessment of the painting, if there *is* no painting as it is — all paintings, if they exist, certainly and exclusively being what they are —, and how can the objectivist have access to the painting, if he doesn't ground his assessment in *his* state of mind — the assessment of the painting being, if it is to be an assessment, necessarily and exclusively his —? It seems plausible to suppose that such a — typically philosophical — discussion cannot even start and if started per impossibile, cannot by any means be brought to an end, let alone a reasonable conclusion. Let it be so. But this is not to be attributed, as is generally thought, to the fact that they are not talking about the same thing — for that they *must* — but because, as we shall presently see, neither the subjectivist nor the objectivist really have — and can have — a genuine problem of assessment. And they haven't because both of them are flouting the conditions of the problematic character of assessment itself. Both indeed are pretending to have solved the problem at hand in an absolute way, i.e. in a way that in principle excludes all possible doubt about the solution proposed : their judgement pretends to be a final, i.e. a perfectly definite solution. Now, at first sight, this is precisely what we are all up to. For, if we are set on orientation, what consummation is more devoutly to be wished, than precisely a final, definite and perfect solution of the problem in question ? The point of problems is to get rid of them. Or isn't it ? And yet, to have such a wish, and to act upon it, is to make a quite fatal move : it proves heterotelic in the extreme. For if this wish could be fulfilled, the problem never could have arisen or was already solved. Final solutions don't bear discussion. It seems that all absolutes are necessarily ridiculous.

### 3.

To see this, let's consider more closely the position of both antagonists.

The objectivist contends that the beauty — in a general sense — is in the painting, i.e. that the necessary and sufficient conditions for the truth of the judgement "This is beautiful" are *in* the painting

as it is. And the painting being identical with itself — as must be supposed — there is and there can be one and only one judgement that is sufficiently grounded, namely the judgement “This is beautiful”, if and only if — indeed — the painting *is* beautiful. Consequently, on objectivist premisses, the beauty of the painting must be, at least for an ideal observer, evident : if the painting *is* beautiful, its beauty, if apprehended, cannot be doubted. Any possible doubt concerning the beauty of the painting must necessarily be attributed either to obstinacy or to blindness, i.e. one isn’t serious about the matter at all or one hasn’t after all access to the painting. For an objectivist therefore, who is serious and has access, there can be no doubt, i.e. no problem in assessing the painting : he simply must look. But this contention unluckily boils down to the conclusion that problems of assessment cannot really and genuinely arise : for what is evident cannot, if it is evident indeed, be doubted. Surely, — and in addition — this implies that the objectivist must contend that he has an adequate and complete definition of beauty, for otherwise he couldn’t — beyond doubt — see the evidence of the beauty, i.e. its instantiation in the painting. But that’s precisely what objectivism is about : for if the beauty is necessarily and sufficiently grounded in the painting as it is, it — the painting — must be and cannot be but an instantiation — and exclusively an instantiation — of *the* definition, the uncontestable definition of beauty. If this were not the case, no observer could ever fully know that the painting *is* beautiful. Yet there seems to be no such definition and one prominent indication thereof is the fact that there are, effectively, problems of assessment. But how can they arise, if the objectivist is right ? If the objectivist isn’t prepared to change his position — because he wants after all a final solution — he is obliged to explain how and why it happens that paintings that *are* beautiful are in fact not evidently so. Just as a theologian of a good God must explain the horrors of the world, so an aesthete of Beauty must face the problem of aesthetic theodicy. And just as such a theologian cannot solve this problem without acknowledging that his good God is, in His goodness, really beyond his ken, so the objectivist must acknowledge that he is not, in principle, in a position to know for certain that the painting *is* beautiful, even if in fact it is. The definition he necessarily needs is one he cannot possibly have. Moreover, in order to judge the painting, even an objectivist must see it, and consequently the painting he appreciates never is nor can be the painting as it is in itself. It always is, and

exclusively is, the painting as it is seen by the objectivist, i.e. he necessarily must confide in *his* state of mind, and that is by definition the *only* thing he effectively can confide in. In other words, in order to be a *real* objectivist, he must be a subject that is completely transparent, so to speak, a subject that isn't *really* a subject after all. For if he is a subject, really and substantially, he cannot possibly know whether or not he is seeing the painting really as it is in itself. Leaving the impossibility of *the* definition of beauty aside, an appreciation of the painting as it is in itself, must be an appreciation without a subject appreciating. And this is simply a contradiction in terms, and hence once more an impossibility. The attempt of the objectivist therefore is abortive on at least two accounts : he must be a subject without being one and he must have a definition he can't have at all. And this impossible stance is a necessary consequence of the temptation to give a final and perfect solution to the problem of assessment : for to provide such a solution one must eliminate in principle all possibility of there being any subjective element in the assessment and one must presuppose the existence and availability of an adequate and complete definition of beauty. But for such a subject there indeed cannot be any problem of assessment : the painting seen is the painting evaluated, absolutely and definitely. For an objectivist, who takes his claims seriously, there can be no problem in aesthetics but the unsolvable problem of aesthetic theodicy. For if subjects are in principle transparent and if beauty is evident, all factual problems of assessment must be, by definition, fakes of Philistinism, that must be attributed exclusively to stupidity out of obstinacy, for short, to motiveless malignity. Philistines are the heretics of the orthodoxy of objectivism, and to save their souls they must — as tradition goes — be burnt to death. Beauty after all is too important to be simply the privilege of the happy few that really and in principle *know*. And, as the problem of theodicy cannot be solved in theory, it must be eliminated in fact. And one has the right, even the obligation to do so, because — on objectivist's premisses — the problem of theodicy itself is a fake : it does not really exist because it cannot exist, it is, it must be the result of sheer malignity. And malignity evidently must be rooted out. In short, objectivism taken seriously — as it is certainly meant to be — is a most dangerous position to take, because it is mere pretence. If heretics must be burnt, orthodoxy is necessarily wrong. Like inquisitors objectivists must, if they want to live up to their claims, be godlike. But, like inquisitors, they can't,

because, just as the *real* problem of inquisition is in its own orthodoxy, so the *real* problem of objectivism is in its own absurdity. The solution of the objectivist is, so to speak, post-problematic : if it were a — i.e. *the* — solution, problems of assessment could no more occur, because all of them would already have been solved. Disputes about evaluation would be — in principle — beside the point : they would be superfluous. They are not — in principle — and therefore objectivism is no solution at all : it has no problem in the first place. And the weird and inescapable quagmire of aesthetic theodicy attests to this.

One might conclude that the subjectivist's position is, all things considered, more reasonable. But this is wrong, for he too has an almost irresistible tendency to succumb to the temptations of the absolute. The reason is that his starting-point leads him irretrievably to acknowledge that there is no such thing as *the* painting and that — in principle — he can't have any idea whatever of what beauty might be. And such a conclusion isn't quite comfortable, as presently we shall see.

As there is no object — at least no knowable object — without a subject knowing it, the painting — whatever it may be in itself — is always and necessarily the painting as it is known by the subject: whatever it is, it is in any case — if it is knowable at all — at least a modification of the state of mind of the subject. This being so, there is in consequence and in principle no possibility anyhow to know whether or not this impression, so to speak, in the mind of the subject corresponds to anything that might be called *the* painting. For to know this, one ought to be able to look at the painting as it is, in order to compare it with the impression of the painting in the mind. And this is to ask the impossible. Therefore, the painting is, whatever it may be else, always and everywhere solely and exclusively the painting as it is in the mind of the subjectivist. And consequently the only thing that he can do concerning the painting is to voice his approval or disapproval of this impression in his mind. Moreover, this approval or disapproval itself is evidently as much an impression as the painting is. And as all impressions are, qua impressions, simply what they are and nothing else, this momentary appreciation — this moment of like and dislike — is, just like the impression of the painting, the only thing he really can be certain about. But there is even more to it than meets the eye : for as impressions and impressions of impressions are simply what they are, the subjectivist cannot be wrong, he needs must be right. For as far

as impressions are concerned, right and wrong are, even from the beginning, out of the question. For if anyone — presumably an objectivist — would say that I — a subjectivist — was wrong, what could he possibly be saying? Certainly not something I would be able to know. For he cannot mean that his judgement is right and mine is wrong. For if he is honest — but objectivists, as we have seen, aren't — his judgement is as right or wrong as mine is, just as his impression of the painting and his impression of this impression is as much his as mine is mine. So what does he mean? My impressions certainly are not his, and they never can be: for to know that, I ought to become him or he ought to become me, and, in order to compare impressions, each of us ought to become our own self again. But even that impossibility, if possible, would not get us out of trouble. For I, being him, and once again being me, can only compare my impressions with my impressions having become him: and so they are, whatever he may be, after all my impressions and nothing more. The problem of the objectivist therefore, is unsolvable. But, on subjectivist premisses — mine — there is no problem anyhow: my impressions are mine, and his are his. And that's all there is, and all there is to say. Moreover, an objectivist cannot mean that I am wrong in my judgement and therefore ought to look at the painting once again. For, if he meant that, he, once again, wouldn't have understood the point of my argument. For if I didn't like the painting yesterday and if I do like it today, there's no sense in his saying that I have corrected my judgement about the painting. For there is no way to compare both judgements, because I can't possibly know that the painting, i.e. my impressions of the painting are indeed the same. On the contrary it is misleading, even quite wrong to compare them to see if they are the same or not. For they certainly are not: for yesterday it evidently was yesterday's painting I was seeing, and today it evidently is the painting of today. And both impressions are, as anybody with a notion of time knows quite well, notoriously different. The objectivist's objection therefore is, once again, beside the mark: consequently, there is no conceivable problem at hand. Neither can the objectivist mean that, say, yesterday I was not looking properly, whereas today I am. I cannot even say that myself. For there can't be such a thing as looking properly: looking properly must be based, once way or another, on looking, i.e. ultimately and exclusively on an impression. And impressions, as we have seen, are not proper or improper: they simply are. Therefore, I can't have the impression

of having looked improperly. Impropriety doesn't make sense at all. Last but not least, there even is no reason to suppose that there is an "I" that can look more than once at any so-called painting at all. For I cannot know, by whatever means, that I am the same today as I was yesterday. For whatever I am, my "I" must be based on an impression and consequently, indeed, my "I" of yesterday certainly is not my "I" of today. In fact and in the last instance all impressions are the impressions that are, and there cannot be any comparison whatever between them for there is no way of comparing them, because there is no impression of comparison : for if comparison is to be, it must be an impression, and an impression is ... as such ... no comparison. For to compare anything at all, one must *have* two impressions, at the least. And nobody has anything but the impression he, momentarily, has.

The subjectivist's position therefore seems to be as secure and absolute as the objectivist's. But surely, it is a very queer position, for, whereas the objectivist's stance presupposed that everything sayable already had been said, the subjectivist's presupposes that nothing, initially, can be said at all. For him the problem of assessment is solved simply by denying there ever could arise such a problem. No aesthetic judgement can possibly contradict any other judgement of this sort, because no judgements, nor, for that matter, anything else, can ever be compared. All judgements, as all impressions, are unique and momentarily, and there is even no sense to talk of them as a plurality. Impressions are no bundle, for all impressions are unique, unassailable and absolutely solitary atoms. There is even, finally, *ex absurdo*, no sense in talking at all. For the appreciation of a painting, the impression of an appreciation, is an impression, a unique, unassailable, absolutely solitary impression, that cannot be compared with any other impression at all. It cannot therefore be compared — in no sense of the word — with the impression it presumably *is* about : it cannot even be established whether it is about anything at all. On the contrary, it is not about anything and it can't be. For no impression is about anything : it simply is. For short, subjectivism implies that there is no painting at all, no subject to judge it, no evaluation of the painting, and finally no voicing of any evaluation whatever, but only sound, momentarily. The solipsistic nature of impressions doesn't allow for talk about them. Consequently, Humean scepticism is wrong : it boils down to Gorgias' contention that there is nothing, that, if something was at all, it couldn't be known, and that, if something was known,



it certainly couldn't be voiced or expressed. The subjectivist's position therefore, is no position at all. And that's why it is so intriguing. For if, per impossibile, it is stated at all — as we have tried to do — this is possible only, if the subjectivist does something, he — in principle — cannot do : he must privilege some of his impressions and disregard others. And this, one may say, is precisely what every objectivist, if he is a real and genuine subject, effectively does. And that's the reason why there are paintings and subjects, and a proper way of looking, and a definition of beauty. But no subjectivist can ever do that, for on his account of the matter there cannot be any reason for privileging any impression whatsoever. Therefore, the subjectivist concludes, nothing can be done at all. But, again, such an absolutist line of approach cannot provide a solution to the problem of evaluation, because, it would, even if it could be stated positively, presuppose that the problem in question couldn't occur at all. The subjectivist's solution therefore is pre-problematic, so to speak, and consequently, it is simply — from his so-called point of view — a scandal that people go on thinking there is a problem of assessment, in aesthetics and elsewhere : such a way of doing things merely is a form of metaphysical delirium. But delirium or not, people have the impression or the subjectivist sometimes gets the impression that some people or all people have such illusions and hallucinations, i.e. such impressions. And because impressions simply are what they are and cannot be wrong, they must be accounted for. Therefore the subjectivist has, whether he likes it or not, a theodicy of his own making, just as the objectivist has : if there are — really — no problems at all, the problem is : "Why do people make them ?". Happily, he is not in a position, as the objectivist is or thinks he is, to imply that people are stupid out of malignity. As there is no orthodoxy of impressions, there can't be any inquisition. But unhappily and fatally so, there can't be no orientation either. And, for sure, that's what the solution of a problem, if it is one, evidently is for. The only thing a subjectivist can do, and inevitably must do, is to attack any objectivist whatever, in order to prove that he cannot, by any means, make his claims objectively true. And as long as the objectivist isn't godlike — and he certainly isn't — this is easy enough. But what's the point in doing so, if the only thing that can result from it is sheer disorientation ? For one cannot say, as David Hume presumably thought and indeed said, that, after all, imperceptibly and therefore gently, nature itself provides us with an orientation human reason demonstrably is

incapable of providing us with. For if this was indeed the case, the problem of theodicy would become quite monstrous. For, if we have, by the grace of nature, our orientation, how can it be — as is in fact the case — that there ever could have arisen a problem, any problem of orientation at all? Philosophy itself would become completely and definitely incomprehensible, and even inexcusable. Indeed, if there are no problems, what's the use of philosophy? And if there are any problems left, how can philosophy ever be put to the flames? So, if it is clear that both positions, the objectivist's and the subjectivist's are quite wrong, and moreover either fatally dangerous or fatally uninformative, what must be done? We cannot be forever on the move between two positions both of which are unacceptable from the outset. For objectivism is wrong in principle because it presupposes that the problem envisaged would already have been solved, and subjectivism is wrong in principle because, if it were the solution, the problems never could have occurred in the first place. They are either post- or preproblematic. And both have, consequently, to face a problem that is as unsolvable on their own terms as it is artificial on any terms whatever: either the theodicy of the actuality if not the sheer possibility of false aesthetic evaluation, or the theodicy of the actuality, if not the sheer possibility of aesthetic dispute as such. Moreover, the impossible dispute between both positions is a dialogue between quite mythical persons that are continuously shouting to silence one another, because they are unable to understand that they are, in fact, continuously saying nothing at all. There is indeed no possible end to discussions about final solutions. We must conclude therefore, as we said in the beginning, that one cannot solve any problem, not even a problem in aesthetics, by denying the conditions of the occurrence of the problem as such.

## 4.

One might have the impression that till now nothing new has been said, because after all everybody knows that the endless dispute between objectivism and subjectivism, between dogmatism and scepticism cannot be solved and that it would be wise accordingly to leave these doctrines to their own devices. And one might conclude that some relational position with a certain amount of objectivism and subjectivism combined, will and must do. It seems political wisdom indeed to solve unsolvable problems by

compromise. Moreover, one might feel that, at least in aesthetics, there are no ontological wonders — such as things in themselves — because we have to do exclusively with so-called “semblances”, i.e. with phenomena, and that in consequence the bedeviling problem of ontological accessibility is quite beside the point. Yet, this way out seems to be too good to be true. And it is to be feared that the madness of reason is not that easily kept at bay.

First, it is not difficult to see that the phenomenal level is as tricky as the ontological one: the accessibility of phenomena or semblances is as difficult to ascertain as the accessibility of things as they are. For a phenomenon, or a semblance, is not and cannot be an impression, because, if it were, our conclusions would be quite as sceptical as they were previously. But if it is not an impression, the semblance must be something that transcends our immediate and momentary impressions of it. Consequently the problem of the adequacy of our impressions of the semblance in relation to the semblance itself, i.e. the semblance as it is, is posed once again. Talk about the painting as it is, is talk about the painting as a semblance, that is, about the semblance as it is. Otherwise we will have no thing, no semblance, no painting, indeed nothing to talk about. Accordingly, beyond and above all impressions of things or semblances, we must have access to *the* painting as it is, whether *the* painting is a thing in itself or a semblance as it is, which is indeed the case. Our initial problem therefore has not been solved: the problem of the adequacy of *our* impressions of the semblance in relation to the semblance as it *is* is quite analogous to our previous problem. It remains fully in force: we simply have changed terminology. And terminology, magic aside, doesn't solve problems, it simply labels them. The assessment of the painting is therefore as difficult as it ever was.

Secondly, it must be feared that a compromise between objectivism and subjectivism is as unstable and momentary as compromise, in politics and elsewhere, generally proves to be. Suppose, indeed, that the assessment of the painting is a relational affair. Judgements of beauty and ugliness then must be considered to be the expression of a synthesis of objective and subjective factors, whatever the relative weight of both. The subject, with its properties, is confronted with the painting, with its properties, and the judgement expressed evinces the way *this* subject evaluates *this* painting. This might seem to be a comfortable position, for the relational view can presumably account for a lot of facts, neither

subjectivism nor objectivism alone can account for. Indeed : the subject being subjective up to a certain point, and an historical subject at that, it is quite possible to explain a whole gamut of diversity. First, that some judge the painting to be ugly whereas others think it is beautiful, and secondly, that judgements are individually and collectively changing over time, so that aesthetic evaluations can have a history, which indeed they have. Moreover, because the painting is what it is — at least ideally — one can maintain at the same time that it *is* beautiful or ugly, as the case may be. Diverse and even contradictory assessments can be explained by the fact that it manifestly depends on the subjective and historical factors whether or not the subject in question can make or will make an appropriate, and therefore “objective” judgement of the painting. And one might even be able to explain the apparent or real convergence over time of the evaluations of works conveniently called masterpieces. In this way one might even conclude that in such a relational view, some things are more relative than others. Thus relativism relativised is indeed objectivism regained, at least as far as semblances are concerned. This position however may be fine in theory, as most theories go, but it might easily prove to be as much of a muddle in practice as most theories are. For the problem is that one has, once again, to sort out the objective and subjective factors one is so heavily relying on. And that might prove to be very difficult, if not impossible. For how can one sort them out and give each of them their rightful place ? How can anyone — each of us being historical subjects — make out — in the course of history — which factors really are subjective or objective ? The answer is simple but not very comforting : it cannot be done. For in order to do so, one must do two things, and both of them are fatal: one must find out the qualities the painting has — the qualities *in* the painting, i.e. the semblance, that make for its *being* beautiful or ugly, and one must find out the qualities *in* the subject that make for adequate or inadequate evaluation of the painting as it is. To do so however, to really select the objective factors that are indeed objective, one must pretend to have access to the painting as it is, i.e. to the semblance as it is or can be seen by someone that is able to judge it objectively, i.e. a subject that is not hampered by subjective factors that make for inadequacy of appreciation. Moreover, one must have access — objectively — to subjective factors as well that make for inadequacy, for only then one is able to explain really how and why some people don't or even can't judge the

painting as it ought — ideally — to be judged. Otherwise said, if and only if one can do this, one has a right — a real right — to say that some people have good or bad taste. For short, in order to be able justifiably to say that some eyes are not innocent, one must have an innocent eye, i.e. an eye that is not merely and exclusively subjective and historical. The only way to have such an eye, is to prove that one has access to the painting as it is and to the qualities as they are that make for adequacy. To be able to prove one is objective, one must be so, or objectivity is mere pretence. And if one doesn't pretend to have such an access, one must acknowledge that one is grounding one's judgements on some, subjectively and historically, privileged impressions of the painting, and merely proclaim that these judgements are objective. But being an historical and subjective subject after all, there is and there can be no reason whatever to do so. Consequently, if one pretends to be able to sort out subjective and objective factors, one must be — in the last analysis — once again dogmatically informed, and even doubly so. Otherwise one's relativism is once again completely relative. By taking a relational stance therefore, one gains nothing as long as it is impossible to transcend the relativising influence of history and subjectivity. One must transcend history to make sense out of it, or it will be nothing but the tale told by any idiot that happens to find himself in the limelight. And innocence is not that easily acquired. What, at first sight, seemed to be an elegant solution, after all but doubled the problem at hand. One must make assurance double sure. So, once again, what's to be done ?

## 5.

To make the best of a bad business, is the best one can do, always and anywhere. One might be inclined therefore to acquiesce in relativism because, all things considered, relativism seems to be inescapable. The only thing one can do about it, is to try to make it innoxious, i.e. — presumably — hypothetical : it must be possible, however difficult it might prove to be, to change one's views of the matter at hand in a way that makes for progress. Some relative things indeed must be more relative than others, if one isn't prepared to leave things simply as they are. And this one can't do, for that would be no solution at all : it would make a virtue out of triviality. One must therefore accept that the information one has simply is not the information one — ideally — ought to have, and one must hope and

expect that in the future more and better information may come up, so that one can change one's judgements accordingly, i.e. so that one can rightfully say one has improved the adequacy of one's view of things. This hypothetical way of looking at relativism might seem commonsensical and practical in an exemplary way : it must be satisfying if anything is. Nevertheless one must realise also that it is necessary, even in this case, to provide criteria to distinguish mere change from correction and improvement. One cannot — really — correct a judgement but correctly so, for otherwise one might be in not only for mere change, but one might even have worsened, without knowing so, one's position. Moreover, in order to select the right and the best information one has at one's disposal, one must have, again, criteria to select it correctly. Consequently, there is no difficulty in seeing that the dilemma of scepticism and dogmatism is fully applicable in this case too. In order to select the best or to really improve one's position, one must have principles of improvement and selection, and they must be justified. And they cannot if they are merely principles at hoc : they must be, one way or another, more than merely subjective and more than simply historical. And, last but not least, one cannot escape the fatal resurgence of the initial issues — however reassuring that might be — by pretending that one could change *all* criteria one has, not even over an indefinite period of time. For this "*all*" will be too much, in any case: it would mean that one's position might totally change, i.e. that it may be or become any position whatever. But flexibility without any constancy is flexibility about nothing : it simply means one hasn't any position at all. It does not make for orientation, even if it seems to do so at any particular moment. If one can change one's position totally — and one must in order to avoid the problem of the transcendence of history and subjectivity — one's orientation might, in principle, at any moment, and consequently, always, be totally wrong. And to acknowledge this is to give in, once again, to scepticism and its dire consequences. It is leaving everything just as it is by changing it continuously. It is a very clever thing to do, but certainly it is no solution. It is simply to have business as usual without really bothering about the issue at all. The theory of all-round flexibility is as empty as any theory can be : if everything is subjective, there is nothing left to be subjective about, and if everything is historical, there is nothing to be historical about, i.e. there is no history at all. In other words, we are in for momentary impressions all over again. If this position, i.e. that *all* criteria can be changed, is taken serious-

ly — and happily nobody really and fully does — then it is trivial. But if it is taken seriously — and any position one is acting upon, intellectually or otherwise, *is* serious in fact — it is an extremely dangerous position to take. It is, indeed, dogmatical in the extreme : for it means that whatever position one has at the moment and whatever change one deems correct at the moment, is, precisely and exclusively because it is taken, the right position and the right change. Any position and any move *is* correct, simply because it *is* the position or the move one *is* taking. Moreover all positions one is moving away from are, simply because one is moving away, incorrect: today is always right, yesterday is always wrong — at least today —, and tomorrow will be right tomorrow, if today happens to be changed by then. This implies that all positions, whatever they are, are once and for all, without any change in the position itself, both right and wrong : time is indeed supreme, and time is supremely flexible. Positions are right when they happen to be, because they are momentarily endorsed, and they are wrong at the moment they are no longer endorsed, simply because they aren't. In this way, one is always right in thinking what one thinks, even if one is, after all, always wrong. This way of thinking things out is very close to Hegelian dialectics, if it is not identical with it, but this holiday from thinking, i.e. from argumentation and justification, will not do if the teleology of thinking on the move is not presupposed and if the eschatology of absolute knowledge is not endorsed. And that's precisely the issue we were talking about all the time. We were even thinking about it : for any finite being — even if one follows Hegel — the difference between right and wrong is fatal or might be so, and consequently it will be safe not to put one's trust in absolute totalities that, as far as finite beings are concerned, can't have any real problems at all. But if this is the move to take — at any moment whatever — absolute flexibility is untenable. For either everybody has his moment in time and is right at that time and nothing can be concluded about it, but that everybody is right in thinking what he thinks because he happens to do so. This is quite a mystical position — Hegelian one might say — but it is precisely the position extreme subjectivism boils down to. And this view is wrong in principle, because it is preproblematic. Or one must say that at any moment in history, one and only one position is right, because it *is* the position of the moment — and that's Hegelian as well —. It is evident this position will be — if thinking is on the move — wrong tomorrow, but this is quite an irrelevant remark —,

at least today. Today, the position of the moment is the right one and consequently it must be acted upon, because that is the only right thing to do. Now, this position is very weird. For suppose that it *is* indeed the right position, because it is the position of the moment. Then, once again, no problem, no dispute about positions could conceivably occur, even if, at any ulterior moment, the position would become quite wrong. The position would be, so to speak, dynamically postproblematic : dogmatism at any moment would be guaranteed, even if the position, as any position whatsoever, will reveal itself to be, afterwards, but any of the innumerable disguises of an all-time scepticism. This all-time proteus dogmatism of the right moment might be quite innocent — and indefinitely comfortable — were it not for the baffling fact that — whatever its ontology may prescribe (and ontology it is) — there *are* positions in time that are irreconcilable with the right one. And there *must* be, for it there aren't, what's the problem and what's the use of the theory ? Why proclaim a theory to be right, when it is impossible — according to the theory — to have, at any time, any other position than the one prescribed ? But if such baffling facts do occur — and they do — we are once again in for theodicy, for such facts are — in principle — completely incomprehensible. On the premisses of the theory they cannot occur. Yet they do. So, one is obliged to change one's theory, i.e. one must renounce the relativistic position, in order to search for criteria that are not merely historical. And once again the spectre of objectivism appears around the corner. Or one must attribute the occurrence of alternative and irreconcilable positions, as one is inclined to do in such cases, once again to obstinacy and motiveless malignity, this being the only way to solve the unsolvable problem of theodicy. This however means that the theory requires us to condemn alternative positions ... simply because they exist. For the reason, the only reason we have and can have to condemn these positions is simply that they are not ours : for ours simply *is* right because we happen to have it. In other words, this kind of dogmatism — the unavoidable dogmatism of relativism — is, in principle, arbitrary. It cannot argue about alternative positions, it simply cannot tolerate them, without any reason at all. For the sake of harmony, they shall not be, for what is not harmony, our harmony, is evidently sabotage. But this is, without doubt, dogmatism squared and triviality made holy. It needs must lead to intellectual panic and concomitantly to arbitrary violence : it must condemn people to death, because they happen to be brought into



the court-room. This, if anything is, surely is assurance made double sure. One may however, if humanity is not simply the desperation of nature, assume that only absolute totalities or madmen will take such a position seriously. And so, we're once again at our starting-point.

## 6.

It may be fairly assumed by now that the four positions outlined above are quite unacceptable. Dogmatism and scepticism, objectivism and subjectivism and their modulated forms are two sides of the same coin that can be turned around and around without acquiring any market value whatever : some may confuse the issue in order to conceal it, but all of them pretend to be at ease on the rack. Either, they don't provide any orientation at all or they pretend to provide an orientation everybody has in any case. They provide theories that aren't, either because on their premisses no problems could conceivably arise or because all problems would already have been solved, and consequently they must face the fatal problem of theodicy that, in order to be solved, requires the quite trivial and nonsensical brutality of empty inquisition. It isn't comfortable after all to be justified to the point of complete immunisation. The reason however for this most miserable state of disruption is, as by now may be clear, quite simple : knowingly or not, all four positions presuppose that it is advisable or even devoutly to be wished to have an adequate and complete orientation, in aesthetics and elsewhere, in order to do away, once and for all, with the problematic nature of all human endeavours. This core of all wishful thinking is quite understandable : what's done, cannot be undone, and consequently everything that has been done is absolute. And as there is no way — trivial fiction apart — to undo what has been done, it is — evidently — of the highest importance not to be wrong at any moment whatever. Therefore one is inclined — in order to make wishful thinking come true, however magically — to pretend one has an irrefutable — an absolute — orientation for all time. And on the rebound, as this proves impossible, because such an orientation is self-refuting, scepticism becomes quite unavoidable. As long therefore as it is thought advisable to be so disoriented in orientation, scepticism is always right and dogmatism is always wrong. Provided dogmatism is its opponent, scepticism is irrefutable. What is wrong however, and absolutely so, is the weird

idea of an adequate and complete orientation. For such a thing would be possible only if there were no problems at all, i.e. if human orientation was not in se problematic. The wish for finality therefore is, however comprehensible at first sight, in fine quite self-destructive : it is empty and trivial. And triviality does not make for orientation : it only makes for theodicy and inquisition. Such an exalted endeavour could make sense only if one supposes one could be or become God : and evidently God never can be troubled by any problem of orientation. For where and in what sense could God, a self-sufficient being, be oriented in ? Orientation therefore is a question of the utmost importance only, but then necessarily so, for beings that are in theory and in fact real finite parts of a universe that is largely unknown. But if this is the case, it is quite clear that orientation never is and cannot be, in no sense of the word, adequate and complete. Indeed, precisely because we *are* finite and real parts of a largely unknown universe, we need orientation in it and therefore any orientation — a fortiori any theory about ourselves and our environment — must have, because it *is* an orientation, a local habitation and a name. And this *is* true, *absolutely* true, in aesthetics and elsewhere. In other words, there must be what one might call, necessary and sufficient conditions of detrialisation that guarantee the necessary problematic nature of all entities, i.e. of all finite parts of the universe. And these conditions must be ontological *for us*. Indeed. All views of the world, whatever they may be, must conform to the principle that, if they give a view of the world as it is — as ontology perforce must do — this view must be such that it is possible in this world this view is thought and expressed by a finite and real part of this universe. In other words, the view of the world must be such that it can be thought in the world it describes. If this is not the case, the worldview in question necessarily must be wrong : it must be non-sensical and trivial, as dogmatism and scepticism, subjectivism and objectivism are. This means that there must be a core of ontology that is epistemically accessible and consequently that there are principles that are at the same time ontological and epistemical. And they are thus, because they are in theory and in fact the same principles : the core of ontology is, so to speak, epistemically right before our eyes. For the point of union between epistemology and ontology cannot be found but precisely in the conditions that guarantee that the worldview will not be trivial, and these principles are precisely the conditions of detrialisation. These principles therefore are onto-epistemical

conditions that must be accepted as conditions of thinking and being for all finite entities in the world. For all such beings any possible world must necessarily be described in the light of these conditions: *for them* these principles are axioms of the world *as such*. And these criteria are not historical: they cannot be changed, for any change would necessarily make for triviality. Moreover, these conditions are not trivial themselves, i.e. they effectively provide orientation, even if such orientation is necessarily inadequate and incomplete in concreto. And this is so because human beings can be trivial in thinking and acting: we *can* make a heaven of hell and a hell of heaven. Yet there are compelling reasons for not doing so, for, indeed, to do so would make us trivial, i.e. we would lose, knowingly or not, our local habitation and our name. Therefore we have criteria that are ontologically grounded, epistemically accessible, and binding and valid for all history. In this way all trivial positions or positions that boil down to triviality, can and must be excluded, inter alia the four positions outlined above, and in this way a reinterpretation of a relational position is possible, that — because it is based on valid and stable principles — is not forced once again to give in either to dogmatism or scepticism. In this way subjects and objects can acquire the consistency and stability that make inter alia and specifically for the evaluation of paintings as they are, for historical change as they are seen, and for definite limits to the variability of valid and invalid assessments. Under conditions of detrialisation indeed, the painting *as it is* can be *seen* as such, but whether this is the case or not, depends upon the local habitation of the subject seeing it. For short, conditions of non-triviality guarantee that after all subjectivism is always more wrong than objectivism ever can be, even in aesthetics: to judge paintings is to judge them as they are, even if not all subjects can in all circumstances do so.

## 7.

It is evidently impossible in this context to work out this line of approach — articles are far too finite for that — but we have shown, we hope, that the problem of aesthetic evaluation cannot be solved satisfactorily, however partially, if there is no way of establishing onto-epistemic principles that, if not evident as such, can at least be shown to be a priori principles for us, i.e. for finite parts of the universe. And we have suggested that these principles

are only to be found — as far as we, finite parts of the universe can see — in the conditions that make for the problematic character of all orientation a such, i.e. in conditions of detrialisation of thinking and acting. At least it may be clear by now that one cannot solve problems by eliminating them, but only — if they can be solved at all — by respecting the conditions of their occurrence, i.e. by accepting conditions of non-triviality. Objectivism and subjectivism, dogmatism and scepticism don't do that — they *are* trivial — and therefore they are wrong, *for us* absolutely so.

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