

The Logic of Objectivity: Reflections on the Priority of Inference

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INTRODUCTION

Contextualism raises doubts about objectivity. It can also politicize what we take to count as knowledge and slip into what I will call “the politics of making.” Countering contextualism, some philosophers have made radical moves to secure objectivity by turning to either a supersensible realm of “mind-independent objects” or some essential feature of *human nature* for epistemic ground. In this paper I reject both contextualism and any kind of ahistorical commitment to objectivity. By taking architecture as paradigmatic of *making*, I defend a view of epistemic warrant that is neither wholly contextualist nor committed to any transhistorical form of objectivity. I maintain that educational practice steers clear of this tension even when theorists in education may not. This is not accidental. Educational practices are discursive and, as such, *inferential* and normative. Their rationality, and their objectivity, is secured by the logic of inference. I defend this view.

ARCHITECTS ON ARCHITECTS

Susan Gray, in her edited work, *Architects on Architects*, brings together well-known designers of our artefactual spaces; she asks that they pay homage to their mentors, “designers of some of the most famous structures on Earth.” Michael Graves, recognized for his design of the Denver Central Library and Kasumi Research and Training Center in Tsukuba City, Japan, remarks on Le Corbusier by first discussing *drawing*.¹ He writes

[d]rawing for me is a fundamental act of an architectural thought process...Drawing is in part a mnemonic device, a kind of visual diary. However, because of the intrinsic reciprocity between mind and act, drawing goes beyond simple information. It fixes in our inner experience what we have seen.²

Graves is connecting together at least two thoughts; first, drawing is necessary for bringing conceptually unclear or cloudy intuitions into *thought*; and, second, there is only a notional separation between thought and *how it finds expression*. A fortiori, the stuff of “inner experience” is private in only one sense; it is unshared. However, inner experience is always, if the mnemonic of drawing is understood to expose intuitions that are potentially shareable, a result of the discursive and intentional forces of social life. Drawing is a public act and the inner life of the designer is made possible by the public concepts that furnish intuitions with their respective content. Put another way, the drawing is a kind of claim, an assertion that requires *reasons* for its intelligibility. Later Graves adds the following, now addressing Le Corbusier’s influence:

Le Corbusier, who repeatedly published his travel sketches and even the crudest of his project studies, was exemplary in considering drawing as a “conscience.” We customarily value sketches for their sensual, impressionistic qualities, but the appeal of Le Corbusier’s

drawings rests largely on the inquiry they record: *his search for what he considered a rational basis for architecture.*³

Graves's earlier thoughts on drawing dovetail nicely with his praise for Le Corbusier. In short, the rational basis he posits as motivating his hero also embodies the public character of privacy. The drawing, a *record of inquiry*, makes not only the rational grounds public, but the processes that bring it about, insofar as the intentional raw material of Le Corbusier's beliefs *bring about* a level of responsibility we have in understanding him, and a responsibility he has is communicating whatever it is by way of inquiry he wishes to record. Conscience is moral, and morality is expressed here as objective expression of the private intuition — an outer sign of the inner's inherent outer-directedness. Another way of understanding this idea is to take any designer as first and foremost a human agent bound by that dimension of human life that is subjected to the assessments of others — that arena of discursive back-and-forth that judges the appropriateness of our attitudes. This is the basis of conscience, if I understand Graves. It is also a commitment to norms, that aspect of discursive practice that gives shape to our concern as it is expressed for us — in our historical moment.

Arata Isozaki, known for the Team Disney building in Buena Vista, Florida, and the Museum of Modern Art in Los Angeles, California, also remarks on Le Corbusier. He writes

In *Purism*, a collaboration with Amédée Ozenfant, Le Corbusier persisted in pure form by rejecting all supplements: the cube, cone, sphere, cylinder, and pyramid were all primordial forms whose structures appeared in the light. The forms were clear and easy to grasp. They were unambiguous, so that they were beautiful, and the most beautiful ones at that. Then in a leap of faith he determined that the Pyramids, the Parthenon, the Colosseum, Hagia Sophia, and Brunelleschi's work were architecture because of their use of the primordial forms. Where did this logic come from? He acknowledged the influence of two architects in coming to his definition — Phidias and Michelangelo — they who intuitively concretized the theory of primary forms and mathematical harmony that Alberti attempted to elaborate in his *Ten Books of Architecture*. Isn't this early logic similar to the transparent space dominated by the absolute beauty of primary form as proposed by Plato in *Philebus*?⁴

Isozaki sees in Le Corbusier the clarity and objectivity of the Platonic *Forms*. He equates beauty with an ontology of objects existing outside of human interest. In Le Corbusier, Isozaki observes a seer; by way of "reasonable" intuition his mentor picks out the primordial elements of pure forms and finds way to have them instantiated in sensibility — having empirical reality. This is Le Corbusier's main contribution, Isozaki thinks. The "concretizing theory of primary forms" is the grasping of objects and, ultimately, having them actualized in experience. More importantly perhaps, it is not the actualization in experience that makes the forms "real." It is what gives the form empirical content. Their reality is supersensible, pure, and in a state of being in the Platonic realm. Contrasted with Graves's normative constraints on Le Corbusier's conscience-driven discursive attitude, Isozaki takes the same designer as somehow able to exit the norms, apprehending ultimate reality and making it part of our lived, shared experience. In other words, Graves takes the historical moment as explanatory. In contrast, Isozaki takes our rising above history as explanatory. Both are speaking of the same architect.

Finally, Antoine Predock, known for the Nelson Fine Arts Center on the campus of Arizona State University and the Spencer Theater for the Performing Arts in Alto, New Mexico, remarks on the Alhambra — architect, *unknown*. He writes

For me, the essence of any great building of any time — from Chartres to Ryoan-ji to Salk — is that ineffable power, that *duende*, that haunts whatever programmatic, cultural, or theoretical premises underpin its conception. In my work, although I aspire to these levels of spirit in architecture, I have found that *duende* is not a readily deployable “ingredient” that can be conjured up at will. It just shows up if am lucky (or blessed) and of course, is in the (inner) eye of the beholder.⁶

Predock takes note of the ineffable power that provides for the “essence of any great building.” He “grasps” it and can be moved to the *duende* that he can in his own life achieve only by luck (perhaps *moral luck*); he cannot “conjure up at will” the underlying spirit that makes a space *great* or of historical significance. But this is a limit that we share with Predock as viewers and occupiers of artefactual spaces. We can also share an ability to recognize that beauty. With Predock, we can speak about the ineffable power of Alhambra, offer uncontroversial praise, and identify it for its *duende*. If Predock can take notice of the ineffable power that underpins spaces like the Alhambra, then he shares the programmatic, cultural, or theoretic premises that makes the identification possible. Predock *must* be stepping out of the “premises” that makes his creation possible and stepping into the conceptual — and spatial — frame that make great buildings *great*. This is powerful when it is understood that the buildings may even be historically remote. How is this transhistorical sensibility — one that licenses an ability to rise out of one’s own situation and pass judgment about objectivity — possible? Predock does not invoke the purity of the Platonic objects. Rather, he speaks to a psychic attribute, an ineffable *experience* that qualitatively makes some spaces more substantial than others. The ineffable is important because it exits the norms, but it does not find “foundation” in the conceptual or discursive elements that make supersensible objects foundational — as Isozaki understands of Le Corbusier.

These remarks speak to a tension that threads discussion in the politics of making, but also to the basis of a divide in epistemology of educational foundations. On the one hand, each architect, situated in “this” time and place, takes note of aspects of the built reality they admire. Some of those elements are understood as answerable to the contextualized social practices of which the architect, social agent, is part. Graves’s understanding of Le Corbusier speaks to this normatively internal assessment. Other interpretations *transcend* situated concern by grasping at purified, ahistorical elements. Isozaki moves us toward this interpretation by invoking Plato’s forms. Predock takes us out of the normative, not asking us to seek foundation in purified objects, but grounding our appreciation in the ineffable. In each designer we can acknowledge an ability to catapult oneself conceptually into talk of foundational elements that reduce to nonideological grounds, be they the purity of shape or the ineffably sublime *duende*. What makes this transhistorical movement possible when the context or situatedness of the individual seems all one has access to?

THE TENSION

Contextualists understand as authoritative the circumstances any social actor, a potential *knower*, is said to be in; they take as authoritative the vantage not only of the subject's knowledge of his or her own mental states but, also, of the attributions made of him or her by others caught in the same push-and-pull of contextualized place and time. Put differently, the standards for knowledge are said, by the contextualist, to shift depending on social practices; what is *knowable* depends on one's location. For the "politics of making," in the spirit of contextualism, the artifact is also taken as "situated"; its actualization made possible by the normative forces from within which its creator or creators find footing. Admitting exclusively of situational standards, contextualists must reject transhistorical objects of knowledge that depend on noncontextual grounds for their justification. Any object by these lights can be known only after having been domesticated. If, however, the contextualist is to admit the possibility of knowing anything other than what is realized within his or her own social arrangement, he or she *must* be committed to some objective feature of justification that resists the contextual authority of the moment — or totalizing "presence" in place and time. In another language, the contextualist must admit that in the sphere of human activity there are forces that exert obligations that cannot be *reduced* or described in merely contextualist terms.

Robert Brandom's inferentialism is a cousin to contextualism. Brandom's aim is to provide for transhistorical, *non-normative* grounds to explain social practices.⁶ He does this without slipping into either a scientific, bald naturalistic stance — one that exits norms all together, finding footing in mechanistic nature or a full-blown contextualism. Still, Brandom's underlying commitment is formal. I return to this point later.

Some philosophers, friendly to a scientific image (or *worldview*), take bald naturalistic commitments as *objective*; they understand the normative as ultimately illusory, its elements in need of translation into the formalism science — especially physics. The Temple of Delphic Apollo, for instance, can be made sense of, but not by interpreting the activities of the Ancient Greeks. It is, rather, available to our appreciating how spaces are treated, and how they sometimes represent the sacred. The ideas that animated the Temple are unavailable and so we are not able to legitimately enter into a discursive relationship with the past; we are, rather, according to the bald naturalist, relating to the object by grounds made available in nature alone — if our concern is with remaining "objective," especially if by this we mean to discover, at some point, generalizable laws that aid our understanding of the past.

Other philosophers, skeptical about the possibility of knowledge in the empirical realm, take objects of some supersensible realm, uncontaminated by worldly muck, as fully actualized objects of knowledge. The Temple can be understood by attempting to reanimate the ideas of the Ancients who understood the centripetal force of this particular sacred space. The objectivity of moral judgment, its

foundational place in assessing the practices of its practitioners, was as real to the Ancients as can be the scientific image for us. This kind of objectivity seeks out moral ideals, theological concerns that we can take as “common,” and treat them as transhistorical. History in this case means merely the past; it is a series of *facts* strung together by us, but about persons much like ourselves, no matter their social practice or ontological commitment. In the end, “they” can be domesticated.

Both reductions grasp at immutable principles for *ultimate reality*. Both reductions attempt to rise above history in order to inoculate against ideology. The reason is, at least in part, obvious: if each social actor is limited by ideological constraint, only that constraint that stems from an actor’s context can be known. All other possibility is rendered illusory — mere construction from this vantage or that. This is the politics of making. Each architect quoted above, at least prephilosophically, rejects this view. Yet the compulsion to think that dense borders of our present situation are totalizing seems powerful and difficult to deny.

INFERENCE AS GROUNDS: RETURNING TO BRANDOM

There are reasons to take Brandom’s inferentialism seriously. First, inferentialism addresses certain epistemological anxieties in representationalist theories of content — the presumably conceptual stuff of belief and desire; it seeks to replace the psychologically thick tribunal of experience in adjudicating the “mind-world relation” with the “normative dimension of linguistic practice.” Secondly, contra empiricism, inferentialism is the view that content is to be explained in terms of inference and inferential articulation; it is to be explained in terms of discursive practice. In other words, inference is more basic than content — the latter need not be invoked to understand inference. This is Brandom’s central insight, but it is a formal claim. It lacks historical sense and is, at core, noncontextualist. Still, it leaves us in a better place than empiricist epistemologies.

Empiricist theories take experience as *foundational*, taking “world” as somehow causally implicated in providing many psychological states with their raw intentional content. The idea is that contents are basic and that the world is their provider. Think here of any beliefs one holds that are about features of the empirical world. By this view, content-full states need not depend on norms for their explanation — what they are and how they arise. Rather, experience carries the burden. To understand the nature of belief we are required, on this view, to examine the nature of experience. Scientific method gets its force from this intuition, that the muck of social forces be replaced with a steel calibration of some deductive-nomological or inductive-statistical model.⁷ Against experience, Brandom takes inference as a condition of conceptual content; experience not only loses its central place as content-provider; it is replaced all together. Brandom’s position is, then, against empiricism and while fresh, the idea being examined has its first formulation in Plato. As I aim to show, it is a powerful position, but it suffers from an important weakness. It is ultimately ahistorical and its contextualist core is merely formal.

In Plato’s dialogue *Meno*, an exchange takes place between Socrates, Meno (the General) and a slave boy. Socrates posits his famous “theory of recollection” in this

dialogue. Recollection (anamnesis) is introduced to defeat the so-called learner's paradox (also called the "eristic paradox" or "Meno's paradox") at 80d5–e5.⁸ Meno, after some Socratic interrogation, asks how inquiry is to ever begin; if one knows what one is looking for, then one need never begin to inquire, but if one does not know what one is to inquire into, then how is the inquiry to ever find footing? Socrates responds by attempting to expose the ground for inquiry without invoking social prescription, something like "one must inquire even in spite of this tension." Socrates does not compel Meno by making any kind of commitment to some inherent philosophical nature that cannot help but inquire into the world. His answer is unique and *inferential*.

Socrates is concerned with whether there can be knowledge of virtue in general. And if there can be, there must be teachers of virtue and thereby third-person assessments of whether what we believe about the nature of virtue is actually true. Unfortunately, Socrates tells us that he has never met such a teacher. Socrates' emphasis is on the "teachability" of virtue and whether knowledge, as such, is possible in the absence of teachers or third-person evaluators. Is "virtue" objective as in the way we think that mathematical functions may be? In spite of the absence of teachers of virtue, the inquiry must move forward. At 80d Socrates says the following:

I'm utterly perplexed myself and that's how I come to make other people perplexed as well. That's how it is with virtue now; I on my side don't know what it is, while you [Meno] on yours did know, perhaps, till you came into contact with me, while now you're just like someone who doesn't know. All the same I'm ready to consider it with you and join you in searching for what it might be.⁹

To Socrates' remarks, Meno responds with the articulation of the paradox of inquiry. Meno asks: "And how are you going to search for this when you don't know at all what it is, Socrates? Which of all the things you don't know will you set up as target for your search? And even if you actually come across it, how will you know that it is that thing which you didn't know?"

In response to Meno, Socrates calls over a slave boy. Socrates does not ask the slave boy to define or to enter into a discussion over the nature of virtue — the topic of the dialogue. Rather, the questions he does ask of the boy have to do with geometry and are obviously interpretable by the boy and meaningfully engaged by him. The boy suffers mental distress — at least Socrates suggests as much.¹⁰ The mental distress is a state of being perplexed. This is central. The boy moves past his perplexity and eventually answers correctly. The boy is said to have "recollected" knowledge of geometry.

There are important reasons why Socrates demonstrates the recollection or reasoning out of geometrical truths with the boy and not knowledge of virtue. Simply put, Socrates is required to be arbiter (along with Meno). That is, they both need to judge the boy's answers on matters with which they both have enough familiarity, and geometrical truths are, all terms equal, shared, certain, and necessary. So it is clearly understandable why interpreters would read the recollection-myth as being a defense of innate knowledge. However, the arbitration of correctness or incorrectness

comes not from the boy's own internal system of representations, nor does it arise from some Platonic ideal of soul. Rather it comes from the external forces of pedagogical technique imposed by Socrates with Meno looking on. The correctness conditions have normative elements of public assessment, and they also seem objective because of how the principles that make Euclidean geometry the kind it is are assessed by a corporate body of social agents and not only by a solitary geometer.

It is in making contact with Socrates that the slave boy begins to "recollect" and, as Dominic Scott points out, it is not clear that the boy would have begun to recollect had not the interaction with Socrates taken place.¹¹ Socrates asks Meno prior to the discussion whether the boy speaks Greek. This means, even on a cursory reading, that for Socrates' purposes, the boy must have some capacity to engage in the dialectic, in dialogical exchange, and the boy must command some facility with his native language so that he can seriously entertain Socrates' questions. Hence the boy ought to be able to understand his state of ignorance enough so that he would agree to follow through in the process of reasoning out an explanation. This is a higher order insight on the boy's part.

Two conclusions are important for our purposes: first, the slave boy's ability to navigate geometrical inquiry in the absence of prior learning may tell us something about geometry. But second, more importantly, the practical force that allows the slave boy to *do geometry* is tied directly to his ability to reason out and *feel* the bindedness of assessment. Independently of the slave boy's other beliefs, be they about politics or religion, he is able to reason out explanatory content that is neither from the world per se, nor entirely from his social context. Linguistic practice is prior and its force to consistency is more powerful than any doxastic voluntarism.

EMPATHY AND HISTORICAL SENSE

In understanding the interaction between the slave boy and Socrates we, too, are reasoning; we are made part of the discursive practice. The slave boy's inferences are our own; we understand the slave boy's "mental life" as he does because the force of inference is as powerful for us as it would be for him. In short, we take for granted a common logical heritage between the boy and ourselves — between Socrates and ourselves.

While contextualism takes "situatedness" seriously, it is, as are bald naturalism and Platonism, inherently ahistorical. Our understanding of the exchange between Socrates and the slave-boy demonstrates this. It also shows that inferentialism, so far, fails to fare better. It renders as objective something without content, merely logical and formal.

HISTORICAL SENSE

Logic is a normative discipline. By accepting as authoritative *a* logic we accept as binding the forces of proper evaluation its constraints dictate. Put another way, the forms of reasoning we understand as exercising constraints on us work to distinguish the appropriate from the inappropriate, the correct from the incorrect, the sound from the unsound, and the true from the false. Some philosophers have long considered the animating principles of logic as regulative, their strength informing

the evaluative practices of everyday reasoning, but remaining in and of themselves independent, somehow given.¹² Here the independence of logic is binding on all discursive practice; it can be said to adjudicate against fraudulent ontological commitment — but not necessarily so. Logic does not reveal truth, *per se*; it discloses the legitimate over the illegitimate conclusion, scrutinizing reasoning process over product. Even for those who speak to the *postmetaphysical* philosopher, indeed, especially for such a thinker, logic has some kind of special status as overseer over forms of reasoning.

Brandom's inferentialism takes as central the role of logic in semantics. Any conceptual content that can have a role in the mental life of a rational agent has a semantic role. One might defend R.G. Collingwood's view of history here. He believes that history is the history of thought; hence, *history is rational*.¹³ This is not the same as saying of history that it is logical; it does not commit one to the truth of claims they might make about the past; nor does it guarantee against erroneous judgment or epistemic or ontological misstep. However, it is taking history as an extension of that feature of discursive practice, the to-and-fro of reason, that distinguishes human life from the rest of arational nature. If history is the history of thought, then rational exchange and its unique *cultural and social* instantiations is retrievable *because* it is that distinctive feature *we* all share as persons — living and once-living. But what is it exactly that we share when it is said that we are *rational*? The answer is the logic of inference. In the absence of inference there can be no understanding — and no empathy. To understand the slave boy means going beyond the mere logical perplexion he expresses. It means *rationally empathizing* with the boy's sense of discomfort and understanding his desire for a correct response. More importantly, in understanding the slave boy's thoughts, we are making sense of a life that is remote from us. It is a life that we cannot live, and a life that can be made "known" to some degree because we share with the boy, his fictive status aside, a sense of a mental life animated by concepts that do not animate our own. This is the logical of objectivity and the priority of inference.

1. Charles-Edouard Jeanneret chose to be known as Le Corbusier.

2. Susan Gray, *Architects on Architects* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001), 39.

3. *Ibid.*, 40.

4. *Ibid.*, 72. Also, Plato, *Philebus*, trans. A.E. Taylor, ed. Raymond Klibansky (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1956), 1132.

5. Gray, *Architects on Architects*, 148–9.

6. Robert Brandom, *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism* (Harvard University Press, 2000); Robert Brandom, *Making it Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment* (Harvard University Press, 1994).

7. See Carl Hempel, "The Function of General Laws in History," in *Readings in the Philosophy of Social Science*, eds. M. Martin and L.C. McIntyre (Boston: MIT Press, 1994).

8. Plato, *Meno*, trans. Dominic Scott (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 80d5–e5.

9. *Ibid.*, 80d.

10. *Ibid.*, 84a–b.

11. Dominic Scott, *Recollection and Experience: Plato's Theory of Learning and Its Successors* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

12. See Fred Sommers, "Types of Ontology," *The Philosophical Review* 72 (1963), 327–63.

13. Collingwood makes this claim in a number of places. See for an extended treatment, *The Idea of History*, ed. W.J. Van Der Dussen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

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