AGAINST COMMON SENSE:
AVOIDING CARTESIAN ANXIETY

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A recent issue of this journal contains Richard A. Cherwitz and James W. Hikins’ response to my essay on Cartesian Anxiety in the epistemic rhetoric literature. Cherwitz and Hikins argue that “it is both impossible and undesirable to circumvent or escape by fiat a minimal dualism, wherein the commonsense distinction between subjects as knowers and most objects as extra-human entities is maintained” (p. 230). Cherwitz and Hikins’ essay does clarify some aspects of their “rhetorical perspectivism.” In particular, while their original essay on perspectivism claims to avoid dualism, they now embrace a “coalescent” dualism and distinguish their position from the “pernicious” dualism to which they say I have directed my attack. In this essay I address two issues. First, I argue that circumvention of Cartesian Anxiety is desirable. And second, I argue that a repair to “common sense” does not resolve the problems I examined in my original essay.

Avoiding Cartesian Anxiety

As Cherwitz and Hikins affirm, dualism takes a variety of forms, most of which presume some kind of distinction between subjects and objects. I am interested in those forms of dualism which beget “Cartesian Anxiety.” Richard Bernstein uses this phrase to describe the assumption that some ultimate foundation must exist by which knowledge claims and actions can be judged, or we will be beset by relativistic skepticism which will render meaningful judgment impossible. My assessment of the epistemic rhetoric literature is part of a larger effort to develop a perspective whereby one can employ standards of judgment, without reliance upon the assumption that some absolute foundation undergirds those standards. To develop such a perspective requires a corresponding...
philosophical position which avoids the various subject/object polarities engendered by Cartesian dualism. The basis for such a view can be found in the writings of the Sophists, Heidegger, Gadamer, Rorty, Bernstein, and in the consensus theory of epistemic rhetoric. With this perspective in mind, I can address several of the points made by Cherwitz and Hikins.

Cherwitz and Hikins state that “the catalyst for Bineham’s concern is the issue of how we can attain human knowledge of an extra-human world” (p. 230). But they miss the point here by describing my concern in terms of the Cartesian Anxiety I wish to avoid. My concern is not to explain how people gain “human” knowledge of an “extra-human” world, but to avoid that distinction altogether. Cherwitz and Hikins also state that “Bineham believes our view is inherently unable to answer the question, ‘how is the subjective knower to accord the status of certainty to truths, beliefs and justifications about the external and objective world?’” (p. 229). Not so. Their view does answer that question, as I demonstrated in the earlier essay. I simply do not like the answer and, even more important, I prefer not to address the question, for it presumes the distinction associated with Cartesian Anxiety.

One final example will illustrate my point here. Cherwitz and Hikins write that Bineham “assumes the impossibility of bridging this ontological and epistemological gap” between subjects and objects (p. 231). This is true in one sense. For if absolutes exist (and I will grant the possibility that they might), then we as finite human beings cannot know them absolutely. But my basic assumption is that no “gap” exists, because “subjects” and “objects” (for lack of better terms) are interconnected.

In each of the cases noted above, Cherwitz and Hikins describe my analysis in terms associated with dualism and Cartesian Anxiety. Whether they describe themselves as objectivists or not, they assume that our options are between subjectivity and objectivity, and that the primary problem to be addressed concerns how subjects come to know objects in the world. Indeed, they state that “coalescent dualism accounts for knower and known, as well as for the bridge between the two, thus making human knowledge possible” (p. 234). That Cherwitz and Hikins describe my analysis in such terms ought not bother them, for they state explicitly that Cartesian Anxiety leads to some unfortunate consequences, the most pronounced of which arises in Cherwitz and Hikins’ essay.

One of these scholars’ chief concerns is that without an objective
reality to serve as the basis for knowledge claims, we are left with no basis for judgment of anything. In response to Crable’s notion that knowledge is a product of consensus within epistemic courts composed of competent judges, they ask: “what criteria could possibly be used to legitimize epistemic courts or competent judges?!” (p. 235). In response to the hermeneutic metaphor of an ongoing cultural conversation, they wonder “what this conversation is about and what criteria serve as the basis for rendering judgments within the ongoing discussion” (p. 237). And in response to “anti-objectivist positions” in general, they suggest that decision-makers must conclude “there is no way to tell who is right in these religious or political matters, so I might as well impose my own views by force, if I can” (p. 235).

But we regularly establish criteria for judgment without the assumption of an absolute foundation in which to ground those criteria. By what criteria do we judge epistemic courts or competent judges? We use a lot of criteria, many of which differ depending on our field of inquiry, but those criteria are hammered out in argumentation rather than handed down from an objective source. What criteria serve as the basis for judgment within an ongoing cultural conversation? Again one could name plenty of criteria without presuming them to be objective or absolute; the criteria themselves emerge from the conversation. And how do we tell who is right in religious and political matters? Often such matters are not resolved, but when someone is deemed “right” it is invariably that person who is most convincing, whether or not he or she has repaired to seemingly objectivist standards.

Cherwitz and Hikins fall prey to Cartesian Anxiety, of course, because for them it is indispensible. Their adherences to an objectivist position leads them to conclude that without some “minimally objectivist” philosophy we are doomed to chaos. My basic contention is that one can have standards that are not “objective,” that we embrace such standards regularly, and that we utilize them for all sorts of judgments.

On Common Sense

Cherwitz and Hikins admit that much of their argument is built on “the residue of commonsense.” They maintain a “commonsense distinction” between subjects and objects (p. 230); their term “relation” is a “commonsense usage” (p. 232); they refer to
“commonsense perceptions of the external world” (p. 236); they assert that the metaphor of a cultural conversation “defies commonsense” (p. 237); and they argue that to circumvent Cartesian Anxiety runs “counter to commonsense” (p. 240).

The issue these scholars do not address is how we get our common sense. Hoare and Smith define common sense as “the uncritical and largely unconscious way of perceiving and understanding the world that has become ‘common’ in any given epoch.” While Cherwitz and Hikins may not embrace this definition, Hoare and Smith do make clear (as do Gramsci and others) that common sense is itself a rhetorical creation.

Rorty notes that while we assume “everybody has always known how to divide the world into the mental and the physical,” that very notion “originated in the seventeenth century’s attempt to make ‘the mind’ a self-contained sphere of inquiry.” Many of the common sense assumptions we make about dualism, epistemology, and ontology are not simply given, they were created and propounded by people with specific interests, in specific historical and social contexts. Cherwitz and Hikins assume on common sense that subjects are autonomous (p. 233), but numerous scholars have argued that they are constituted in language. They assume with Aristotole that nature is self-evident (p. 236) and that facts are unproblematic (p. 239), but numerous scholars have argued that how we define “nature” and “facts” is exactly what is at issue.

The power of common sense is significant, nonetheless, and perhaps the main difficulty which confronts those of us who challenge traditional ontologies is that we do defy common sense. But the notions of a flat earth and a geocentric universe were also once common sense. As we move toward fuller realization of language and communication as constitutive of reality, rather than merely reflective of it, perhaps our common sense notions of epistemology and ontology will change as well.

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Notes


6. For a description of this “interconnectedness” see the discussion of consensus theory in Bineham, “Cartesian Anxiety,” 52–55.

7. For a more complete development of this contention see Bineham, “The Ontology of Consensus Theory.”
