BOOK REVIEW

James A. Diefenbeck, *A Celebration of Subjective Thought*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984. 280 pp. $24.95.

One of the most exciting and important developments in philosophy and social science today is the movement toward a theory of knowledge which gets beyond the empty nihilism and lifelessness of empirical thought. This movement is diverse in origins and emphases, but the overall trend is toward the construction and reconstruction of philosophies of human action and praxis. General features of these efforts often converge in the deposition of empirical theory for its irrelevance to normative issues, the location of the human subject at the center of action, and the reconceptualization of knowledge as self-initiating, self-clarifying, expressive activity of autonomous subjects. From these perspectives, subjective activity is of more fundamental importance than the categories of objective thought which can neither explain, nor comprehend the subject as the center, or first cause, of action. In my view, Professor Diefenbeck makes a significant contribution to this body of emergent theory.

In Part I of the book, the author introduces his aims with the claim that objective knowledge is inadequate for purposes of understanding subjective thought and activity, and consequently can never serve as the basis of any comprehensive theory of the natural sciences, nor of society. Objective knowledge, he explains, fails on three counts: (1) It cannot exist as a self-sufficient form of cognition, (2) it cannot achieve the aim of total prediction, and (3) it cannot answer the major questions which arise in human life. Diefenbeck's analysis is painstaking and his method is dialectical. In Part I, both the ontological assumptions and the epistemological claims of mathematics and empirical science are dissected and shown to be

either self-contradictory or misdirected. Diefenbeck's goal, however, is not to discard objective epistemologies, but rather to preserve them for later reconstruction and incorporation into a more adequate theory of knowledge.

Those readers who are schooled in the analytic tradition of British and American empiricism, and who find reading the "continental" traditions to be tough going, will appreciate the author's incisive style. This is not to suggest that the writing is in any way simplistic, but rather that Diefenbeck's deconstruction of objective thought proceeds from the categories of objective knowledge itself. Although this work is clearly addressed to a philosophically informed audience, the style and the argumentative approach are accessible to a more general readership.

In Part II of the work, Diefenbeck advances a reflective theory of knowledge which outlines a method for the acquisition of knowledge about subjects not as objects, i.e., "not as observed patterns of behavior, but as centers of action or first causes." Explored here are the concepts of reflective knowledge, reflective reason, and reflective relationships. Students of Q methodology should be particularly interested in the author's discussion of historical inquiry. History, for Diefenbeck, is not simply the recapitulation of names, dates, and places from the past; rather, the fundamental task of historians is the reconstruction of the subjective positions of those whom they study. History is, in its first moment, an attempt to understand the opinions, values, motives, and intentions of past minds. The movements of thought involved in the reconstruction of historical subjectivity are similar to those found in the activity of factor interpretation.

The requirements, problems, and solutions associated with the development of Diefenbeck's theory of knowledge are too numerous and complex to discuss in any detail here. But I should not like to end these comments without noting the crucial role dialectical thought plays in the theory. It is through understanding the dialectical movement of active minds that we find, for example, the solution to the normative

problem of incompatible subjective positions. Diefenbeck, however, abandons the inherent determinism in the Hegelian doctrine of rational necessity, and thereby maintains the radical autonomy of the human subject. Indeed, autonomy and self-direction are the primary values in Diefenbeck's theory, and the dialectical moments of preservation, negation, and transformation characterize the knowledge that is subjective activity. Reflective reason makes no appeals to objective standards or to static concepts. Because we are autonomous subjects, the most important question we face is not "What exists?", but rather "What kind of world shall we create?" In Professor Diefenbeck's view, the appeal to truth as our guide is not merely inadequate. It is also beneath us.

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The statistician who fails to see that important generalizations from research on a single case can ever be acceptable is on a par with the experimentalist who fails to appreciate the fact that some problems can never be solved without resort to numbers. The single-case method and the statistical method are, of course, somewhat opposed, but each has its merits and each its shortcomings. (Quinn McNemar)