Part 2

World Affairs Approached
Introduction to Part II

Even the most subjective of experiences seems to yield new insights when analyzed in an objectifying way. When rationally appraised from a mental distance, all the world seems more amenable to explanation, prediction and control. Once we no longer rely on revelation, that is (however much intuition may continue to play an important part in what we know), and once we no longer rely on knowledge in its more conventional forms (however much shared paradigms may help structure our scientific understanding), we are free to be more detached. We are free to look at the world, to analyze it and experiment with it, relatively unencumbered by prior assertions and relatively uninhibited by assumed truths.

Why not stop there? Why not accept this as the best the mind can do? Why not think this way wherever we are and forever and a day? Quite simply, because this is not the best the mind can do. Indeed, we do not know what this best might be. What we do know, though, is that whatever the mind can do, objectifying rationalism does only part of it. The mind knows in more than one way, and while the light of the mind illuminates any subject it is shone upon, that should not be allowed to stop us using other ways to know, and combining the results of these other ways with the ones that rationalism provides.

Consider what we learn about world affairs by standing back to look at them from a mental distance. We learn about the patterns they make, despite all their contingency, and the chaos they involve.

Next we need to consider what we don’t learn this way, such as what world affairs mean to those taking part in them. Objectifying rationalism doesn’t allow us to know what people think and feel about the world. We can find out this way what they seem to think and feel, but
we can’t say in the rationalist way with any great degree of certainty at all whether any of this is true to those taking part.

And that’s the rub. To find out what world affairs means to other people, we have to stand close to listen to what they say in non-objectifying as well as objectifying ways. Our analysis must become a more proximal one.

In the land of the blind, to be sure, the sighted woman has a definite advantage. She can see what is going on much better than anyone else. In the land of the deaf, the woman with hearing has another kind of advantage. She can hear more than anyone else can hear. In the land of the hand-less, moreover, having a hand confers another kind of advantage. It allows a better grasp of what is going on.

While objectifying rationalism uses the mind’s eyes, the mind has other faculties it can use, like the mind’s ears and the mind’s hands. All have their strengths and weaknesses. And if we use the strengths of each to overcome the weaknesses of the others, then we can maximize what we know. We can use each capacity in turn to counteract the limits the others may set.

I spoke in the Introduction of the collapse of the Soviet Union, and of how US scientism prevented most of its Cold War analysts from entertaining even the concept that this collapse might occur. This is only one example of the myopia induced by modernist hubris. There are many more. During the Gulf War, for instance, though US satellite surveillance was comprehensive and intense, it was not able to see what the Iraqi military had put underground. Thus, though ‘the full panoply of Western technical wizardry was brought to bear and, partly because of its impressive cost, presumed to be virtually infallible … [i]t was not. With a combination of skill, ingenuity, guile and hard work, large parts of Iraq’s arsenal, and the means of its production, had already been hidden or so disguised that the machines could not see them’ (Forsyth, 1994: 623). Saddam Hussein’s chemical, bacteriological, and nuclear capacity had to be gauged by agents working from evidence on the ground, as well as by the agents working from the evidence gained from the sky. Strategically valuable though they were, the satellite pictures were not enough to reveal the location, the type or the extent of Hussein’s arms hoard. Indeed, they may have inhibited US analysts from looking in ways that would have served their purpose better.

Scientism remains widespread in the US, for historical and professional reasons that need not detain us here. The contemporary popularity in the US of ‘rational actor’ modelling and the ‘rational choice’
approach are two of the more extreme examples of this cultural preference, though a systematic review of what world affairs academics publish makes the same point.

In Europe (including in the UK) the interest in arguments of a more inductive kind is notably more strong, however. And as academic communities outside the US grow more confident, which as the Cold War recedes seems to be the case, they begin to offer more of a challenge to the ‘deep political ontology’ of the US mainstream (Waever, 1998: 721).

Both US and European approaches are rationalist, however. Both stand back to look objectively. US thinkers tend to do so more rigorously than their European counterparts, but both put world affairs at a mental distance the better to identify their recurrent features in rationalist terms. This is what I tried to do in the previous section (Part 1).

In this section, however, I shall attempt a non-rationalist turn. I shall stand close to listen in a subjectifying way.

Objectifyers might claim that they stand close to listen too. The ‘interview’, for example, or the ‘opinion poll’, are both listening experiences. They are objectifying experiences nonetheless. They are distal, not proximal ones. And it is the latter that I want to highlight here.

In Part 3 I shall move even closer again to document what it is like to take part too. This is even more of a subjectifying ploy. It is to forgo objectivist research techniques altogether.

This is not, I should say at once, a matter of repudiating rationalism. It is a way of realizing the potential of other ways to know, without repudiating rationalism. It is a way of complementing what rationalism can do, with what other ways of knowing can do. I want to stand close and listen, and take part, in such a way as to engage other mental faculties, that is, non-rationalist faculties. In doing so I want to suggest the use of the modes of knowing that non-rationalist faculties make possible, so that we not only learn objectively about world affairs, but that we learn subjectively within world affairs as well.

This is to assume that non-rationalist learning and knowing is possible, an assumption any thorough-going rationalist is likely to reject. They would say that the successful use of non-rationalist research techniques will ultimately depend on the use of reason again. They would see the objectifying mind-move as still the best mental step the members of our species have been able to take in terms of coming to know, since to them it is still the most reliable way of ascertaining ‘truth’ and conveying its content to others.

The objectifying mind-move cannot account fully for any lived experience other than the objectifying mind-move itself, however. This
said, it is the case that we can account for any and every lived experience in an objectifying way. We can and do create logically consistent and highly linear propositions about cause and effect. The objectifying mind-move can be and is used to assess the results of applying these linear chains to the notional ‘real world’, in the attempt to determine how well these chains and ‘reality’ correspond. None of these things should be allowed to hide the fact that the objectifying mind-move does all of this imperfectly, though, and that it is only one way to know. If we are to account fully for lived experience we have to do so other than analytically and intellectually. We have to do more, that is, than stand back to look with the eye of the mind.