

6 The Age of Fallibility

to which we have become accustomed. Our view of the world will never correspond to the world as it is because we are part of the world, and what we think automatically becomes part of what we have to think about. In trying to understand the relationship between thinking and reality, we are shooting at a moving target. The way we look at the world changes the world. This renders perfect knowledge unattainable. Nevertheless, it is possible to improve our understanding, even if we cannot attain perfection.*

THE CONCEPT OF REFLEXIVITY

Recognizing that our understanding of the world in which we live is inherently imperfect (fallible for short) constitutes a major step forward. Instead of thinking in terms of a one-way relationship in which our statements do or do not correspond to the facts, we need to take into account a connection that is going in the opposite direction. Our thinking makes an impact on the world in which we live. Not all aspects of reality are affected but those that are can be best understood in terms of a two-way relationship between thinking and reality.

On the one hand, we seek to understand our situation: I call this the cognitive function. On the other hand, we seek to make an impact on the world: I call this the participating

*Please note the difference in the way I use the words "knowledge" and "understanding." I do not want to define the difference—because it would get me into no end of trouble—so I will only indicate it. Knowledge is meant to be objective, understanding is admittedly subjective. Knowledge is connected with the correspondence theory of truth and scientific method; understanding is more personal and more biased. I say *more* biased because knowledge cannot avoid being biased either. Where knowledge is deficient, we have to fall back on understanding.

function. The two functions work in opposite directions, and they can interfere with each other. The cognitive function seeks to improve our understanding. The participating function seeks to make an impact on the world. If the two functions operated independently of each other, they could in theory serve their purposes perfectly well. If reality were independently given, our views could correspond to reality. And if our decisions were based on knowledge, the outcomes would correspond to our expectations. But that is not what happens because the two functions intersect: and where they intersect, they can interfere with each other. I have given the interference a name: reflexivity. The fact that I have given it a name does not mean that I have discovered something new; the phenomenon has been studied under different names since antiquity.

Reflexive situations are characterized by a *lack of correspondence* between the participants' views and the actual state of affairs. Take the stock market, for example. People buy and sell stocks in anticipation of future stock prices, but those prices are contingent on the investors' expectations. The expectations cannot qualify as knowledge. In the absence of knowledge, participants must introduce an element of judgment or bias into their decision-making. As a result, outcomes are liable to diverge from expectations. It is important to realize that reflexivity introduces an element of uncertainty and unpredictability not only into the participants' view of the world but also into the reality with which the participants contend. Reality can become far removed from what it would be if the participants based their decisions on knowledge alone.