

1 *Three kinds of objectivity*

Objectivity – the fact that a judgment is objective, or the fact that an individual or a group of individuals has the capacity or disposition to make objective judgments – is a cardinal virtue, perhaps the cardinal virtue, of intellectual life.

To any number of readers, this will seem a dubious claim, and understandably so. There can be little doubt that many of the most influential currents of modern thought – beginning with the sudden, startling appearance of Cartesian skepticism and the consequent emergence of epistemology as a central preoccupation of philosophical inquiry – seem to raise serious questions about the very possibility, much less the importance, of objectivity. The (re)discovery of cultural history, commonly associated with Herder and his successors in the German idealist tradition; the invention of an anthropological manner of thinking rooted in experiences of exploration, conquest and colonization; the rise of what might be called psychologistic individualism as embodied, for example, not only in the modern novel but in poetic and dramatic literatures as well – developments such as these have promoted habits of critical inquiry that turn our attention away from the objects of thought and toward the thinking subject itself, a subject that, according to the standard view, constructs the world even as it seeks to know it. To say that the very notion of objectivity is unfashionable is to belabor the obvious. Yet surely here is a case where fashion is deeply out of touch with fact – specifically the, dare I say, objective fact that human discourse, from the most ordinary and unremarkable interactions of everyday life to the most esoteric and elevated expressions of intellectual endeavor, is utterly and unavoidably underwritten by notions of true and false, right and wrong, correct and incorrect, justified and unjustified, plausible and implausible, warranted and unwarranted, and any number of other formulations that involve standards of judgment presumed to be valid not just for you or me but across the board. And if the precise reference of a phrase

such as “across the board” is far from clear – perhaps even essentially contested – it remains undeniable that virtually everything we do is bound up with questions to which some answers are understood to be objectively better than others.

Thus, for example, if I ask you whether or not it’s raining outside – and assuming a reasonable set of shared understandings about time and place – this presupposes either that it is or that it isn’t. If I ask the jury to determine whether or not the defendant actually committed the crime, the question is unintelligible unless we agree that there is a fact of the matter to which it refers. If I am told to find the derivative of a function, the very character of the problem assumes the existence of a correct answer. Of course, none of this is to deny that many of the questions we ask – rhetorical ones, for instance – are not like this at all. Nor is it to deny the existence of hard cases wherein the distinction between true and false, right and wrong, better and worse, is, for one reason or another, unclear. And it is certainly not to deny that some questions are difficult or impossible to answer for the simple reason that our observational and intellectual apparatus is, to say the least, fallible. But such issues are beside the point. For I am not proposing to defend here an account of what we can know and how we can know it. My interests are not, in that sense, epistemological. The goal, rather, is to lay bare – to discover and rationally reconstruct – the underlying logic of our own engagement with the world and of the various forms of discourse with which we talk about that engagement. It is in this precise context that notions of objectivity seem to me necessary and fundamental.

Now it does appear that an *absence* of objectivity might or might not be praiseworthy, depending on the circumstance. We may, at times, admire passionate, uncritical and utterly subjective expressions of enthusiasm; at other times we will find them inappropriate, even abhorrent. But objectivity, in and of itself, seems nonetheless to be an inherently good thing.¹ It would be odd, for example, to criticize someone for having taken “the objective point of view,” or to reject a claim because it states an “objective fact” about the world. Indeed, the expression “objective fact” is a redundancy. For while some facts

¹ There is certainly nothing contradictory about admiring subjective enthusiasm *in some sense* or *from a certain perspective* while nonetheless believing that an objective standpoint is, in the end, always to be preferred.

may be *about* subjectivity, the facts themselves *are*, by definition, objectively so, and any assertion of fact is and can only be an assertion that claims objectivity. A truly “subjective fact” – not a fact that characterizes some feature of subjectivity but a fact that is itself subjective – is literally unthinkable. There is no such idea. To the degree, then, that we want to operate in terms of the facts – and as an intellectual (though not necessarily social or psychological) matter, this is almost always what we want – objectivity is to be prized, perhaps above everything else.

It is also the case, however, that objectivity is conceived in different ways. We seek objectivity but we are unclear – indeed we disagree – about just what it is. The idea of objectivity is not only an extremely important but also a highly unstable part of our conceptual apparatus, unreflectively and inconsistently applied. This is certainly troubling in and of itself. Confused and imprecise habits of dealing with foundational notions can never be a good thing. In the instant case, however, the problem is of special concern. For while we commonly and routinely use different and incompatible notions of objectivity, those differences and incompatibilities are only rarely recognized as such. We often disagree about whether or not a claim is objective, but we also differ about what it *means* to say that a claim is objective; and yet, this latter kind of difference is something about which we are often, indeed typically, unaware. One result is that we may disagree without understanding the bases of our disagreement; or worse, we may disagree without actually knowing it.

The implications for intellectual life – involving all manner of miscommunication, self-contradiction and irresolvable, because poorly understood, discord – are various and innumerable. But among the most important are those having to do with politics. Indeed, I believe that many of the central controversies of policy and principle characteristic of the modern political state are rooted in or otherwise deeply connected with a failure to recognize, and a consequent failure to reconcile, fundamental differences regarding the idea of objectivity. To understand the problem of objectivity is, in some significant sense, to understand the nature of contemporary political conflict.

This will seem a peculiar and unpromising claim. For the question of objectivity is principally a question of theory and concept in the most abstract and esoteric sense. It is a question of meaning, a philosopher’s question. The stuff of political conflict, on the other hand – power and

privilege, interest and advantage, freedom and coercion – would seem to be the very opposite, deeply embedded, as these things are, in the everyday and utterly concrete precincts of social existence. The voice of practical activity – of desire and aversion² – is, we are told, sharply different from the voice of philosophical inquiry. Disagreements about objectivity, like all essentially conceptual disagreements, are detached and disembodied. They are, in the end, exercises in pedantry; and while we can certainly agree that ideas always play a role in political conflict, we are also apt to think of even the most politically charged ideas as a kind of window dressing. They are, as we say, “ideologies.” As such, they are the insubstantial outward expression of a deeper and darker reality, the authentic or inauthentic but in any case epiphenomenal reflection of palpable, material, flesh-and-blood structures and processes that require a decidedly non-philosophical kind of analysis.

I believe that this is not only false, but massively so. The problem of objectivity is, to be sure, a philosophical problem, through and through. But it is hardly disconnected from the rough and tumble of ordinary politics; nor is it merely a pale reflection of some more tangible, substantial reality. To the contrary: thinking seriously about the problem of objectivity – uncovering and explicating our own implicit understanding of what it means to be objective – is in fact directly to engage fundamental, substantial questions of a political nature. Indeed, it is to provide an indispensable foundation for addressing and perhaps even resolving some of the most important and challenging controversies that plague and preoccupy the modern political state.

In Chapters 2 and 3, I pursue in general terms the idea of political conflict – an idea that is not limited to any particular historical or socio-cultural environment but that provides the formal, conceptual framework within which all instances of political conflict are to be understood. In Chapter 4, I offer some thoughts concerning the structure of political conflict characteristic of the modern state – focusing on what I am calling the politics of objectivity – approached both in terms of its unique and distinctive elements and, at the same time, as an exemplar of political conflict per se. I propose, in effect, a hypothesis about how best to address certain important features of contemporary politics, understood, however, through the lens of our own

² Michael Oakeshott, “The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind,” in *Rationalism in Politics* (London: Methuen, 1962), p. 206.

shared, though typically only implicit, conception of the underlying logic of all political conflict.

Before turning to these matters, though, I begin by examining in the present chapter the problem of objectivity itself. What do we mean by objectivity, and what role do conceptions of objectivity play in our understanding of how things in the world really are? In effect, the strategy is to explore the content or substance of modern political conflict before exploring its structure or form, keeping in mind that, in the end, we can make sense of things only by considering form explicitly in the light of substance, substance in the light of form.

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1. Recent philosophical speculation on objectivity has been preoccupied with long-standing issues about whether or not such a thing is possible. What is there that could truly be called objective? Can we actually make objective claims? Do humans have the ability – whether in the short run or long – to achieve genuine objectivity? Much of this speculation seems to have presupposed, moreover, that objectivity is a single thing. Is *it* possible? In characterizing this single thing, however, commentators have in fact said many different things. Thus, objectivity is thought to involve, or to be associated with, or to presuppose, or to be characterized by, or to be roughly synonymous with “reasonableness,” “generalized impersonal cogency,” “common sense,” “universality,” “recognition access” and “a community of standard responses”;³ with “theoretical coherence,” “observational fidelity,” “observational credibility,” “responsible belief,” “logical fact,” “empirical fact” and a reliance on “public verifiability,” “independent controls,” “fair controls” and “detachment”;⁴ with “realism,” “natural reason,” “scientism” and the “correspondence theory”;⁵ with “institutions” and/or “institutional and methodical thinking”;⁶ with the availability of

³ Nicholas Rescher, *Objectivity: The Obligations of Impersonal Reason* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), pp. 4–18.

⁴ Israel Scheffler, *Science and Subjectivity* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1982), pp. 1–8 and p. 68.

⁵ Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 22, 27, 35–37.

⁶ Alven Neiman and Harvey Siegel, “Objectivity and Rationality in Epistemology and Education: Scheffler’s Middle Road,” *Synthese* 94 (1993), p. 60.

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Excerpt

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“determinate answers”;⁷ with “disinterestedness,” “personal restraint,” the capacity to bridge “distances,” “mechanical” thinking and “rules”;⁸ with “repeated observations” of items in the world;⁹ with “reason”;¹⁰ with “truth”;¹¹ with “rationality”;¹² with having “relevant reasons” and “evidence”;¹³ with “impersonality” and “independence”;¹⁴ with “impartiality”;¹⁵ with “self-distancing”;¹⁶ with being comparatively less reliant on “the specifics of [one’s] makeup and position in the world”;¹⁷ with “fairness”;¹⁸ and with “rigorous method.”¹⁹ While it’s easy enough to imagine how many or most of these notions might arise in a discussion of objectivity, it’s also obvious that they are far from interchangeable. We know, for example, that rationality is, for certain purposes, directly and pointedly contrasted with reasonableness, that common sense is often sharply distinguished from, or is directly opposed to, scientism, that any proposed relationship between fairness and theoretical coherence would be highly controversial, and so on. Of

⁷ Kent Greenwalt, *Law and Objectivity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 12.

⁸ Theodore M. Porter, *Trust in Numbers: The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. ix–xi, 3–7.

⁹ Harold I. Brown, *Observation and Objectivity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 203–204.

¹⁰ Rescher, *Objectivity*, p. 4; Scheffler, *Science and Subjectivity*, p. 3.

¹¹ Rescher, *Objectivity*, pp. 17–18; Scheffler, *Science and Subjectivity*, p. 8.

¹² Rescher, *Objectivity*, p. 9; Scheffler, *Science and Subjectivity*, p. 2; Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p. 27; Neiman and Siegel, “Objectivity and Rationality in Epistemology and Education,” p. 61.

¹³ Scheffler, *Science and Subjectivity*, p. 2; Neiman and Siegel, “Objectivity and Rationality in Epistemology and Education,” p. 61; Brown, *Observation and Objectivity*, pp. 190–193.

¹⁴ Neiman and Siegel, “Objectivity and Rationality in Epistemology and Education,” p. 60; Porter, *Trust in Numbers*, p. xi; Greenwalt, *Law and Objectivity*, p. 7; Brown, *Observation and Objectivity*, pp. 193–200; Felix Mühlhölzer, “On Objectivity,” *Erkenntnis* 28 (1988), p. 192.

¹⁵ Porter, *Trust in Numbers*, p. 4; Scheffler, *Science and Subjectivity*, p. 2; Neiman and Siegel, “Objectivity and Rationality in Epistemology and Education,” p. 61.

¹⁶ Julie Robin Solomon, *Objectivity in the Making: Francis Bacon and the Politics of Inquiry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), pp. xv, xix.

¹⁷ Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 5.

¹⁸ Porter, *Trust in Numbers*, p. 4; Neiman and Siegel, “Objectivity and Rationality in Epistemology and Education,” p. 61.

¹⁹ Porter, *Trust in Numbers*, p. 4; Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, pp. 35–37.

course, few if any of these terms are self-interpreting; indeed, most are highly contested. What do we mean by common sense? What is it about responsible beliefs that makes them responsible? Why are some reasons relevant and others not? As the references should suggest, moreover, this jumble characterizes not merely the literature on objectivity but, in a great many cases, the individual works of which that literature is composed. And the situation is no better when we consider all of those things that are thought to describe what objectivity is not. Thus, for example, objectivity is distinguished from “personal affinity,” “loyalty,” “affective involvement,” “parochial eccentricities,” “personal motives,” the “vagaries, contingencies and idiosyncrasies of individual persons,” “personal predilections,” “conformity,” “ideology,” “political allegiance” and “whim”;²⁰ from “self-interest,” “personal trust,” “intimate knowledge,” “judgment,” “discretion” and a reliance on “locality,” “community” and “particularity”;²¹ from “wishful thinking,” “political advocacy” and the use of “umpires” or “judges” or, more generally, the “authority of persons”;²² from “arbitrariness” or an invocation of “controversial moral and political claims”;²³ from uncritical reliance on “accepted beliefs”;²⁴ from “bias,” “prejudice” and personal “preference.”²⁵ Again, such an inventory of inherently problematic and, at very best, loosely interconnected terms is not especially helpful.

One result is a tendency – surprising in analytic philosophy – to look very closely at the foundations, implications or prospects of something without having established a fairly hard-edged, informative definition of the thing itself.²⁶ Consider a few examples. According to one influential account, “objectivity” is explicitly understood to be a matter of “rational belief,” which, in turn, is “possible only in situations where there are cogent grounds ... for what one does ... and the cogency of grounds is a matter of objective standards.”²⁷ According to another,

²⁰ Rescher, *Objectivity*, pp. 4–18.

²¹ Porter, *Trust in Numbers*, pp. ix–xi, 4–7, 103–107.

²² Scheffler, *Science and Subjectivity*, pp. 1–3.

²³ Greenwalt, *Law and Objectivity*, pp. 7, 12.

²⁴ Brown, *Observation and Objectivity*, p. 205.

²⁵ Rescher, *Objectivity*, p. 5; Porter, *Trust in Numbers*, p. 4; Brown, *Observation and Objectivity*, pp. 205, 223.

²⁶ For notable exceptions, see Mühlhölzer, “On Objectivity” and Heather Douglas, “The Irreducible Complexity of Objectivity,” *Synthese* 138 (2004), pp. 453–473.

²⁷ Rescher, *Objectivity*, p. 9.

“objectivity requires fair assessment on the basis of relevant reasons, evidence and test; rationality requires that such assessment be objective.”²⁸ Or again: the objectivity of the law is a matter of focusing on “objective circumstances” and treating people “in an impersonal and objective way.” In each such case, objectivity is defined, at least in part, in terms of that which is objective.²⁹ Objectivity is a matter of fair assessment – or of cogent argument or impersonal treatment – which is, in turn, a matter of objectivity. We need not deny the thesis that the meanings of words are embedded in closed, self-referential structures of mutual definition to reject this kind of vicious circularity.

2. A rather different tradition of inquiry – historicist in nature – presupposes not the unity of the idea of objectivity but rather the reverse: notions of objectivity have changed over time and any serious theory of objectivity will require close attention to a range of historically quite different conceptions. Perhaps the most influential version of this approach distinguishes ontological, mechanical and aperspectival “aspects” of objectivity.³⁰ The ontological aspect describes objectivity as denoting that which is real or natural or true. The external world – independent of our thinking about it – is what is objective. Rather different from this is the mechanical aspect, which conceives of objectivity in methodological terms. Here, objectivity is a feature of claims that are made on the basis of some kind of systematic, algorithmic or rote procedure that forbids anything that smacks of “judgment” or “interpretation.”³¹ Different yet again is the aperspectival aspect, in which objectivity is conceived as that which suppresses or eliminates all elements of individual idiosyncrasy.³² It is, on such an account, the capacity to transcend or ignore one’s personal predilections or one’s peculiar situation. In historical terms, the analysis goes on to suggest

²⁸ Neiman and Siegel, “Objectivity and Rationality in Epistemology and Education,” p. 61.

²⁹ Greenwalt, *Law and Objectivity*, p. 7.

³⁰ Lorraine Daston, “Objectivity and the Escape from Perspective,” *Social Studies of Science* 22 (1992), pp. 597–618. For related arguments, see R. W. Newell, *Objectivity, Empiricism and Truth* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986); and Allan Megill, ed., *Rethinking Objectivity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994).

³¹ In addition to Daston, see Douglas, “The Irreducible Complexity of Objectivity,” pp. 456–458, which emphasizes the reliability and replicability of procedure.

³² Douglas, “The Irreducible Complexity of Objectivity,” pp. 458–461.

that the aperspectival aspect is largely what we are referring to when we say, today, that the natural sciences are objective; but further, that this was not always the case, for the idea of aperspectivity has its roots not, as has commonly been thought, in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophy of science but, rather, in pre-Kantian theories of art and ethics.³³ Modern and contemporary notions of scientific objectivity, driven principally by the perceived need to communicate the results of research on a more or less universal basis, thus reflect the influence not primarily of Cartesian or Baconian epistemology but, instead, of aesthetic and moral philosophies associated with, *inter alia*, Smith and Hume.³⁴

The historicist approach – at least as formulated along these lines – seems to me unsatisfying in several ways. To begin with, the idea of distinguishing different “aspects” of objectivity is not at all clear. The locution itself suggests that different notions of objectivity – ontological, mechanical and aperspectival – are simply different features of a single thing, perhaps in the way that rooms and walls and hallways and such are different features or aspects of a house. But as far as I can tell, we are not told what that single thing is; and in the absence of such an account, it is hard to know what the status of ontological, mechanical and aperspectival objectivity actually might be. What do these aspects share that allows us to think of each as objective? The problem is made more difficult by the fact that historical analyses actually suggest something like the very reverse, namely, that objectivity is not really a single thing but many different things. We are told, for example, that the idea of objectivity as ontology is distinct and separate from, irreducible to and not bound up with, the idea of objectivity as aperspectival. According to such an account, the contemporary notion of scientific objectivity is conceptually very different from earlier notions, and these are, apparently, not different aspects of a single thing but, rather, different things altogether. At first blush, a formulation along these lines seems to be an improvement insofar as it is sensitive to real historical and ideational complexities. But even as it addresses such complexities, it also invites – to come full circle – doubts about the extent or even reality of conceptual change. For one might well wonder, upon reflection, if different notions of

³³ Daston, “Objectivity and the Escape from Perspective,” pp. 603–604.

³⁴ Daston, “Objectivity and the Escape from Perspective,” pp. 607–609.

objectivity – whether “aspects” or otherwise – are perhaps not so different after all. Why, for example, doesn’t mechanical objectivity simply reduce to aperspectival objectivity? Wouldn’t the adoption of a bloodless mechanical algorithm simply be the means by which we eliminate personal perspective? And why isn’t aperspectival objectivity objective precisely because it (uniquely?) allows us to make ontological claims that are true?

A second problem with the historical approach concerns the specifically ontological aspect. Indeed, the claim that objectivity has an ontological sense – that it is a property of reality, of how things in the world really are – is, I would suggest, impossible to sustain. In this respect (though not in others), it seems to me that “objective” is much like “true.” Certainly we must agree that the world out there is neither true nor false. It simply is. We cannot coherently say that this rock or that cow or this automobile is true. Truth is a property not of things but of (what we variously call) statements, claims or propositions. And so too, I believe, for objectivity, at least in the first instance. Just as a rock cannot be true or false, neither can it be objective or subjective. It is, rather, a topic about which one makes objective or subjective statements, claims or propositions.

Now as indicated above, it does seem to be the case that facts can – indeed, always are – objective. The redundancy of the expression “objective fact” does not contradict but, to the contrary, reaffirms such a claim. But doesn’t this at the same time contradict the claim that things in the world out there cannot be objective? I believe it does not, for the very good reason that such an objection would misunderstand what it is for a fact to be a fact. Simply put, a fact is not a thing, at least not in the way that rocks, cows and automobiles are things. To suggest otherwise is make a serious mistake. On this question, I would advert to Strawson’s important – and, to my knowledge, still unrefuted – criticism of Austin. In defending a (modified) correspondence theory of truth, Austin had argued for a certain kind of relationship between facts on the one hand and statements about facts on the other. Truth involves, roughly, both descriptive conventions for correlating words and sentences with kinds of facts and demonstrative conventions for correlating statements with some particular fact or set of facts.³⁵ Strawson rejects Austin’s account in part because it

³⁵ J. L. Austin, “Truth,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supp. vol. XXIV (1950), pp. 111–128.