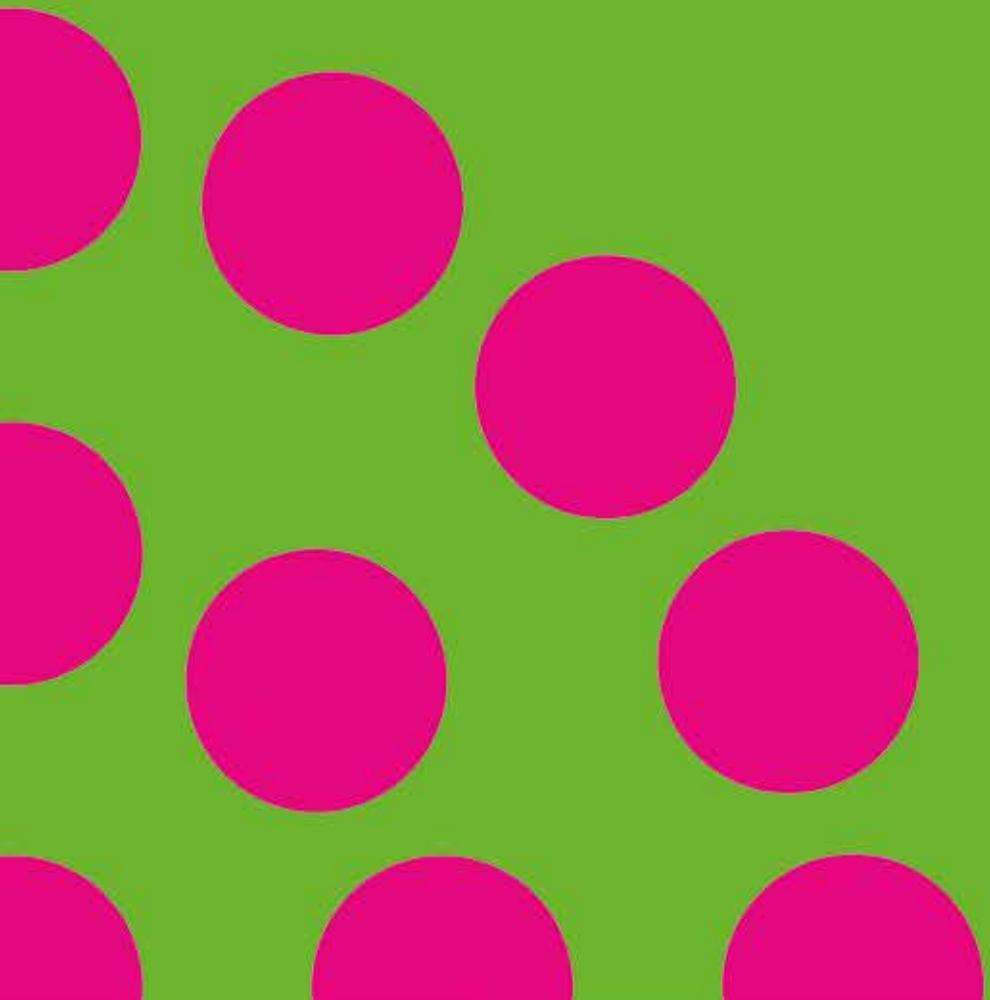


# THE PHILLOSOPHER

TheNewBasics.Society



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was for this reason that Hayek described the market as a “catallaxy” – a term he derived from the Greek verb *katallasso*, which meant both to exchange and to turn from an enemy into a friend. And yet the neoliberals were also clear that pacified market relations require the violent suppression of any challenges to *the market*. Despite affirmations of the pacifying role of commerce, coercive market integration has licensed great violence and the destruction of non-market forms of life.

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Although, so far, we have been concerned with “markets” or “the market”, most contemporary markets are *capitalist* markets. The market, under capitalism, is not simply a space in which goods and services are exchanged; it is, for many of the world’s people, an imperative, the very condition of survival. Capitalist societies do not merely *use* markets; they are regulated by markets, which means that decisions about what is produced, how resources are distributed, how many people are employed and under what conditions, are ultimately driven by the need to maximize profit. Production for the market is not unique to capitalism, but market participants under capitalism are dependent on the market for survival in a way that belies neoliberal celebrations of their freedom and independence.

This is particularly true of labour markets, where the very time of human life and the productive capacities of human beings are sold as commodities. This need to sell one’s labour to survive, as Karl Marx noted, makes the wage-labourer “doubly free” – free of the dependence and immobility that typified feudalism, on the one hand, but free also of any other option than to sell one’s labour on the market. The capitalist market, as the historian Ellen Meiksins Wood has argued, is not so much an opportunity as it is a form of compulsion. Marx himself referred to the “dull compulsion of economic relations” that secures the subjugation of workers. This compulsion bears down not only on individual workers but on all market participants, and, ultimately, on whole nations, which must engage in a competitive struggle to produce efficiently and attract investment – at the expense of labour and environmental conditions, and, ultimately, beyond the reach of the democratic process.

Again, there is nothing natural about such compulsion; it is the result of a historical process of enclosure and

expropriation regulated by law and enforced by punitive power. The result of decades of neoliberal restructuring has been to intensify such market dependence by enclosing and privatizing formerly common goods and depriving people of non-market sources of welfare and survival, from housing to hospitals. At the same time, existing market forces have been strengthened by the weakening of those institutions – from trade unions to political parties – that bolstered the bargaining power of workers or intervened into the market in the name of ends not reducible to profit. This has been what is necessary to instil that submission that Hayek saw as the necessary subjective comportment in a market competitive society.

## NEOLIBERAL ADVOCACY OF FREEDOM HAS ALWAYS BEEN ACCOMPANIED BY AN ANXIETY THAT FREEDOM MUST BE KEPT WITHIN STRICT MARGINS IF IT IS NOT TO THREATEN THE MARKET ORDER

Far from fostering democratic participation, freedom, and peace, the imposition of the competitive market as the regulator of social life has reduced the scope for collective self-determination, subjected us all to an abstract form of compulsion that limits individual and collective freedom, and generated new domestic and international conflicts. Submission to the market as a form of fate is the reality of a world that is, as Greenspan insisted, “governed by market forces”.

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# OBJECTIVITY

If I were to ask you some variation on the question, “what does it mean to be objective?”, you might say something along the following lines: that it involves being impartial or unbiased, that it demands setting aside our own perspective, that it requires not letting our values inform our judgments. If you’re a philosopher (as I imagine you perhaps are), you might even say that it involves a sort of epistemic detachment. That is to say, to be objective requires removing one’s self, as the subject, from the object of inquiry, a stance that, following Thomas Nagel, is sometimes referred to as a “view from nowhere”.

When it comes to inquiry, we – philosophers, in general, and epistemologists, in particular – seem to think that we ought to adopt an objective stance towards the object of inquiry. What motivates such a view?

Epistemologists ask themselves (among other questions): under what conditions can some person, S, be said to know some proposition, P? In answering this question, we might say something obvious and straightforward like: S can know P when P is true. But we might also wish to speak to, and exclude, factors that somehow obstruct the truth of P from S’s view. So, we might add that S needs to be impartial or disinterested with respect to the truth of P. Of course, we can flesh this out further, and interrogate what conditions might lead someone to fail to adopt such a perspective. We might say, then, that to be impartial or disinterested one must abstract away from, or set aside (in their consideration of P), their own values, biases, or other idiosyncrasies that might interfere with the assessment of P. The term “idiosyncrasies” here is meant to capture all manner of sins, but roughly the idea is that in order to know P one must distance oneself from the personal and the political, the private and the partial. Thus, we end up with the idea that objective inquiry requires taking a “view from nowhere”; objective knowledge is that which is acquired by objective inquiry (or by taking such a view from nowhere). In this respect, we might understand objectivity as an *epistemological methodology*, a process for evaluating beliefs in order to secure truth. And a belief’s objectivity is indexed to this methodology – that is, a belief is objective to the extent that it is independent of values, biases, and other distorting features of the inquirer.

**by Briana Toole**  
*Claremont McKenna College*

But achieving a “view from nowhere” – that is, occupying a stance that is somehow centreless and without perspective – may not be possible for creatures like us. For instance, one of the central means by which we acquire knowledge is through perception. Our perceptual engagement with the world is *necessarily* undetachable from our bodily experience – and, therefore, necessarily undetachable from our perspective. As Linda Martín Alcoff writes in her 1999 essay “On Judging Epistemic Credibility”, “it is only because being is always *being in the world*, and *not apart or over the world*, that we can know the world”. Thus, our knowledge of the world, informed by our perceptual engagement with it, is, as Alcoff goes on to say, incapable of being closed off from “our concrete, situated, and dynamic embodiment”.

## THE WORLD DOES NOT “GIVE” RAW, UNFILTERED DATA THAT WE CAN MECHANICALLY ASSESS DIVESTED OF OUR INDIVIDUAL BIASES AND VALUES

Arriving at knowledge that satisfies the standards of objective inquiry would require such a stance – that one comes to know P while being “apart from” or “over” the world, while being detached from our bodily experiences. But if bodily experience is central to knowing – as theories of embodied perception and naturalized epistemology suggest – then a commitment to objectivity, understood as a detachment from this experience, would actually *undermine* knowledge.

Embodiment aside, objectivity, understood as a “view from nowhere”, prescribes standards that would lead to less knowledge rather than more. One cannot arrive at knowledge from a “centreless” place, because the evaluation of evidence – even the recognition of evidence *as evidence* – requires a *context*, an epistemic backdrop against which to make sense of that information. Essentially, our context helps us figure out which information in our perceptual field to

attend to; it provides concepts that help us interpret that which we see; and it informs which explanations we entertain to make sense of what we see.

The world does not “give” raw, unfiltered data that we can mechanically assess divested of our individual biases and values. Rather, what information is “given” or made available to us, as inquirers, is given *from* a particular situation. As Thomas Kuhn, author of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, famously argued, facts and observations only become meaningful within a context of theory that can give sense to that information. And, as feminist philosophers writing on this subject suggest, this context is necessarily *situated*. Thus, according to Louise Antony and others (naturalized epistemologists and feminist epistemologists, among them), knowledge cannot be produced from the neutral, disinterested perspective that “objective inquiry”, understood as a “view from nowhere”, prescribes.

If objectivity, understood as “a view from nowhere”, does not serve our aim of acquiring knowledge, then what function does it serve? When we look at how objectivity is understood in practice, we can see that it is perhaps best understood not as an *epistemological methodology* that secures truth on the part of the knower, but, rather, as a *political ideology* that operates in service of the status quo.

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Part of the trouble with objectivity, conceived of as a “view from nowhere” which secures truths, is that this conception is regarded as a “politically neutral” option in epistemology. That we treat it as politically neutral means that this epistemic ideal – which we routinely deploy to evaluate and scrutinize beliefs – is rarely (outside of feminist circles) itself subjected to scrutiny. Louise Antony offers a similar observation, writing that “there is a *general and uncritical* belief that the [epistemic] ideal is actually satisfied by at least some individuals and institutions”.

Why might this matter? Well, in part, because those who are presumed to satisfy this ideal are those with whom power lies. As feminist philosopher of science Sandra Harding observes, objectivity can often be deployed to “[certify] as value-neutral, normal, natural,



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and therefore not political at all the existing scientific policies and practices through which powerful groups can gain the information and explanations that they need to advance their priorities”. As an illustration of the deployment of objectivity to such an end, consider Lorraine Code’s discussion of research conducted by psychologist J. Philippe Rushton in the mid-1980s.

Rushton claimed to have demonstrated two things: first, that “Orientals” are more intelligent than whites, who are in turn more intelligent than Blacks and, second, that the explanation for this is due to an inverse correlation between genitalia size and intellect (thus, smaller genitals means greater intelligence, and larger genitals means lesser intelligence). According to Lorraine Code, understanding this research as

being produced by an objective methodology, “erects a screen, a blind, behind which the researcher... can abdicate accountability to anything but ‘the facts’ and can present himself as a neutral”, all while disappearing the values, biases, and idiosyncrasies that might have produced this research”.

Notably, the scientific context, the backdrop against which Rushton’s research was produced, was informed by a commitment to biological determinism (including biological racism and sexism). Thus, in evaluating Rushton’s research, it is important to note the social and political landscape that motivated and informed his research enterprise. Importantly, as Code observes, given the upheaval of racial and sexual norms at the time, “there was a concerted effort...to produce

studies that would demonstrate the ‘natural’ sources of racial and sexual inequality”. As such, it is difficult to conceive of Rushton’s research program being chosen, or the “data” being gathered and interpreted, independent of these debates.

But objectivity operates in service of the status quo not just by certifying the claims of those who are dominantly positioned (by which I mean those who are positioned as powerful within a system). It is also deployed to dismiss and exclude the claims of those who are marginalized. To some extent, this is because those at the margins – women, people of colour, the working class – are *essentialized* as being irrational or emotional, features that are thought to distort our capacity for objective inquiry. Thus, if those at the margins are, *by nature*, such that they cannot engage in objective inquiry, then their claims can neither be regarded as objective, nor can they be taken to count as knowledge.

However, even if marginalized agents were not seen to be essentially incapable of engaging in objective inquiry, the standards of objectivity are such that those at the margins cannot share their experiences if those experiences are had *in virtue of* one’s social positioning. Consider, for a moment, the experience of legal scholar Patricia Williams, who attempted to publish an article in which she described being denied entry into a Benetton store in New York City.

The store required that patrons press a buzzer to gain entry. Though there were a number of other, white patrons in the store, Williams describes a white teenager approaching the door and smugly mouthing the words “we’re closed”. As Williams describes in her 1991 book *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, she attempted to share her story in a symposium on “Excluded Voices” sponsored by a law review, but the editorial board initially removed references both to the store (claiming that her account was unverifiable) and to her race (as it was against editorial policy to “permit descriptions of physiognomy”). The policy of the editorial board to exclude references to race might seem a good one – after all, we don’t want decisions about what is published to be affected by the social identity of the author. But in this case, in trying to be “objective”, the editorial board’s policy made incommunicable a valuable piece of information that Williams attempted

to share – namely, the sorts of experiences that she has in virtue of facts about her race. As Williams writes of the incident with the editorial board: “What was most interesting to me in this experience was how the blind application of principles of neutrality, through the device of omission, acted either to make me look crazy or to make the reader participate in old habits of cultural bias”.

## OBJECTIVITY LEAVES THE EPISTEMIC LANDSCAPE UNTOUCHED, VERIFYING AND VALIDATING THE CLAIMS OF THOSE IN POWER WHILE SIMULTANEOUSLY SUPPRESSING THE CLAIMS OF THOSE WITHOUT

So, in terms of understanding how the ideal of objectivity actually functions, it both leads us to positively evaluate (as knowledge) the claims and research of those who are dominantly positioned, while simultaneously leading us to negatively evaluate the claims of those who sit at the social margins. In short, objectivity leaves the epistemic landscape untouched, verifying and validating the claims of those in power while simultaneously suppressing the claims of those without.

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In a sense, then, objectivity functions to consolidate power by offering, to borrow a term from literary theorist and philosopher Roland Barthes, an “alibi” for oppression. By ascribing objectivity to some claim or set of research, it immunizes that claim from attack. We then treat these claims as reliable because we take them to be the products of objective inquiry. If “objective” research has proved that Blacks are inferior to whites, then these are just facts we have to accept. Moreover, this “objective research” would serve to

legitimize certain ill-treatment of Black people or the withdrawal or elimination of certain programs (like affirmative action).

The other side of this, of course, is that the rhetoric of objectivity makes it difficult for those outside of the operative power structures to challenge such claims. As Code wrote, such rhetoric “places the burden of proof on the challenger rather than the fact-finder and judges her guilty of intolerance, dogmatism, or ideological excess if she cannot make her challenge good”. This is especially so if challengers are read – as the marginalized often are – as having motives to question such research and/or the status quo. While there is no reason to think that those in power have a special or unique ability, unavailable to others, to access the truth about the world or to shrug off their embodied perspective, objectivity allows for the “general and uncritical belief” that they are not, like others, shrouded by their own perspective.

## IF OBJECTIVITY REALLY IS LITTLE MORE THAN A SHIELD TO PROTECT THE INTERESTS OF THE POWERFUL, THEN WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE PURSUIT OF TRUTH?

In short, objectivity enables the consolidation of *epistemic power* among the socially powerful, where that power is defined, as Kristie Dotson writes, as “a kind of authority for one’s claim(s) that is grounded in a, presumably, stronger relationship to some privileged value and/or variable, e.g., truth”. Thus, what is taken as an “objective” view tends to reflect the perspective of those in power. The conception of objectivity as neutrality, as a disinterested viewpoint, then, amounts to little more than an ideology that, as Charles Mills claims, “help[s] to sustain a particular interpretation of what is happening, and to denigrate other viewpoints”.

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If objectivity really is little more than a shield to protect the interests of the powerful, then what does this mean for the pursuit of truth? Perhaps the goal should not be to eliminate the values, desires, and biases that shape inquiry, but rather to determine, as feminist epistemologists propose, which of these features take us away from truth and which bring us closer to it.

We should learn to see objectivity not as an endpoint or a goalpost, but as an aspiration, one that is achieved *not* by abstracting away from the very features that are required for knowing – like our situated context – but by collaborating across diverse, and sometimes conflicting, perspectives. As Harding notes, objectivity can be understood as a social achievement arising from “the clashing and meshing of a variety of points of view” that serves to expose the assumptions, biases, and other social features that shape inquiry. In short, we have to learn to see the world not just as we are but as others are, too.

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