

CONSTRUCTIVE-ENGAGEMENT DIALOGUE  
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**OBJECTIVITY**

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One of the hotly debated issues in science, particularly social science, is whether science can be objective. On the one side one has traditional scientists, like Ole-Jørgen Skog, who not only do science, but also reflect on methodology, and who hold that there are standards in science that distinguish good science from bad science and that any good scientist has to live up to.

On the other side one has relativists of different varieties, post modernists and others, who get a lot of attention by holding that we all are confined to a subjective perspective, that one perspective is as good as another and that talk about objectivity is just a rhetorical attempt by those who are in power to suppress those who have diverging views.

Oddly enough many who hold this view are inspired by Edmund Husserl, who often gets credited for having put an end to the relativist tendencies which were dominant towards the end of the nineteenth century. What has attracted many to Husserl is that he focused on the subjective perspective, the structuring of our surroundings that we perform in all our activities. This idea was taken over by Sartre in his philosophy of freedom and has been eagerly taken over by subjectivist constructivists of all varieties.

What these followers of Husserl have not noted, is that Husserl supplemented his analysis of the subjective perspective with rich and detailed studies of intersubjectivity and from this again turned to objectivity. His subjectivist followers do not seem to have read this part of his work. The whole first volume of Husserl's *Logical Investigations* is a detailed refutation of relativism, and in his later work he presents argument after argument against relativistic views. His subjectivist followers never discuss these arguments and seem not even to be aware of them.

Instead of presenting more arguments against relativism which will probably not be read by those they are directed against, I will here confine myself to a more constructive effort; I will put forth a view on objectivity, what it is and whether it is

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achievable.

It is often said that the most important feature of science, which distinguishes it from non-science, is that science is objective or at least attempts to be objective. The presumed objectivity of science is a principal reason why we have confidence in science, depend on its results and support it economically. Also the scientist's attitude to his own activity depends on a firm conviction that the results of science are universally valid and do not just express the scientist's private opinions.

But is science objective? There is no doubt that much of what is called science is far from objective. Many claim also that science *cannot* be objective and that the ideal of objectivity is harmful, by giving rise to an exaggerated trust in science and its results.

In order to be able to take a stand on this question we obviously first have to know what is meant by 'objectivity'. The word is used in many senses, and often it seems to be used without any clear sense. Some define the word as something that has to do with our data or observations, as does Johan Galtung in the following passage:

If repeated observations of a constant phenomenon and by the same observer give constant data, the observation is said to be intrasubjective, or dependable. If repeated observations of a constant phenomenon by different observers give constant data, the observation is said to be intersubjective.

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These two conditions, dependability and intersubjectivity, can be used together as definiens for the loosely used term 'objectivity'.<sup>1</sup>

There are two problems with this definition. First, objectivity is normally conceived as something we should strive for, but it is doubtful that we should always restrict ourselves to data that are intersubjective. In psychology and social science one often uses data that have been obtained by introspection. People report what they feel, see, believe or wish. In the childhood of behaviorism one tended to reject such data, but gradually one has come to accept them because they are *corrigible*.<sup>2</sup> The theories that are supported by them, must also fit in with data that are intersubjectively controllable (for example observable behavior), and if there is a conflict, one will now and then reject the data one obtained by introspection. Introspection is therefore not regarded as something infallible. Paradoxically, this is a reason why introspective data are admissible in science.

Secondly, and this is the most important: A main consideration in debates about objectivity is the *selection* of data and the *balancing* of the various hypotheses and theories against one another. These are questions that are not touched upon in the definitions above. One may be objective in the sense above but select one's data in a very special way, which makes it easy to support the conclusions one likes. Objectivity

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<sup>1</sup> Johan Galtung 1967, 28.

<sup>2</sup> William Alston 1972, 71-102.

in the most common and interesting sense of the word must therefore be defined in a different way.

Many maintain that objectivity must be defined by reference to scientific method in general. One must stipulate conditions both on the collection of data and on the formation and testing of hypotheses. When one goes sufficiently far in this direction, 'objectivity' becomes practically synonymous with 'scientific'. This does not seem reasonable. 'Objectivity' is used not only about scientific works, but also about news reports, articles and other oral, written and pictorial presentations of a topic. It is therefore natural to assume that objectivity is a feature of the end product and the way it is presented and not of the methods that have been used to obtain the results that are presented.

Another fairly common view, especially with regard to science, is that objectivity means *value free*. Scientific works shall be value free, they shall not contain value judgments or incite to action. This would exclude most of Ole-Jørgen's work, since his work has certainly incited to action. The requirement is rather dubious, even for a strictly scientific work. A scientific work will often function normatively and inspire action even if it does not contain any explicit value judgments. And even explicit value judgments are permitted if they are well supported by the work. However, as will be argued below, use of strong emotional words should be avoided if one aims for objectivity.

A third, related, view is that 'objectivity' means 'not taking sides' in the sense that all different sides of an issue shall be given the same amount of space or attention. This requirement may apply to the final results or to the research process leading up to them.

This condition is also somewhat problematic: how many sides does an issue have, and how many pages must a scientific work have in order to give them all the same amount of space? Nevertheless we are here getting on to what is probably the main concern behind much of the discussion of objectivity: one wants to obtain a picture which is not "one sided", "biased", "distorted" or what one might want to call it. But how can one spell out this conception of objectivity, and how can one achieve it?

We will propose the following definition, which fits what we are after better than the definitions we have looked at earlier, but which still needs improvements:

A presentation (for example a scientific treatise, a TV program, a news report, an article) is objective if and only if the beliefs and attitudes it creates in the receiver would not have been changed if one had had full knowledge of the issue, with all information and all alternative hypotheses.

It is here tacitly understood that the presentation concerns a particular time. A report of the condition of a ship at a given time that states that all is well does not lack objectivity if the ship shortly afterwards runs into a mine and sinks. The information about the accident will change our belief of how the condition of the ship is now, but not of how it was before the accident.

Of course, nobody has such complete information about a case. However, the definition gives us a practical and simple test of objectivity, which we will discuss in a

moment. The improvements that are needed in the definition are primarily steps to increase its precision. We must, for example, distinguish between changing a belief and deepening it. If a presentation is objective, further information shall not make us reject anything in the presentation, but we may obtain a more precise understanding of it, a more complete picture, and so on. We should also avoid the use of expressions that are strongly emotionally charged. Compare, for example, a news report that says: "The red hordes roll forward" with one that states "The freedom movement is advancing". If one permits the use of emotionally strongly charged words, alternative descriptions of the same state of affairs will easily change our attitudes and thereby make objectivity impossible.

Even if our definition needs many such improvements, we believe that it is a step in the right direction. It seems to capture the point in most discussions of objectivity. And even the way it stands in its vague form, it can be applied. The test of objectivity is very simple:

Is there information/data, or hypotheses which are well supported by these data, that are not included, but which, if they had been included would have changed the beliefs or attitudes of the receiver?

If the answer is no, the presentation is objective, if the answer is yes, the presentation is not objective, and by pointing to information that changes the picture one can show where the presentation is deficient.

Note that the definition and our discussion of it do not require that an objective presentation should be *complete*. Given the richness in all that surrounds us, this would be an unrealistic goal, and a presentation that tried to scrape together everything, would be very dull, pretty unreadable. It is no excuse for a lack of objectivity that the theme one is writing about is enormous and that one has to make a selection. What is decisive is *which* selection one makes. It is clear from the definition that if one wants to be objective, one must not leave out information which is likely to change the receiver's beliefs or attitudes.

Objectivity as it is defined here is an ideal which perhaps few presentations conform to. Even the best researcher can have the misfortune to leave out information that would change the picture. His work is thereby not objective. Which attitude we should take to the researcher himself depends on how excusable it was to overlook this information. Did the researcher know it and leave it out intentionally? Had he familiarized himself less with the subject matter than what can reasonably be expected from a researcher? Or was the new information surprising, even for those who knew the topic well? Stood the author to gain something when the information was overlooked? Economically, politically, or with respect to his prestige, because it would overthrow his earlier results or theories?

A lack of will to objectivity often springs from a desire to maintain one's old opinions and prejudices. Or one avoids bringing up sides of an issue that may be uncomfortable for oneself or what one stands for.

Lack of objectivity is most easily discovered in presentations by others that do not fit in with one's own view. This may be due to the fact that one then often has information that has not been included in the presentation and that, if it had been included, would change the reader's view. One has then reason for regarding the presentation as not objective. If, however, one cannot point to any such missing information, but nevertheless reacts against the presentation, then one should ask oneself: Am I the one who is lacking objectivity? Have I become so obstinate that I am not willing to change my view and my attitudes? When this presentation stands in conflict with my view, is it because it contains information that I have not known? Or have I had this information and not been willing to take it into account? Such questions should press themselves upon us when one is reading a presentation with which one disagrees, but which one cannot accuse of lacking objectivity. That objective presentations pose this challenge to us, is perhaps the most important reason why we should be objective, not only in science, but also in polemics.

However, also objectivity has its limits. A high degree of objectivity is necessary for good science (and as we just noted, desirable also outside science). But it is not sufficient for good science. One can easily be objective if one chooses a theme that is simple and easy to deal with, perhaps a detail that nobody has considered earlier. However, such problems are rarely important, interesting or intellectually challenging. Good science may emerge when one takes up problems which are important for our practical life or for the further development of science, and which are also difficult. That they are difficult does not mean that they will remain difficult for ever. Good science often makes difficult problems easy, by opening a good way of approaching them. It thereby also makes it easy to be objective where it earlier was difficult.\*

## REFERENCES

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\* Editor's note: this article is the author's contribution to a Festschrift to Ole-Jørgen Skog (a Norwegian Professor of Sociology), *Understanding Choice, Explaining Behaviour: Essays in Honour of Ole-Jørgen Skog*, edited by Jon Elster, Olav Gjelsvik, Aanund Hylland, and Karl Moene (Unipub Forlag/Oslo Academic Press, 2006), 75-80. With consideration that Festschrifts usually have a very small circulation (especially outside the country of the person to whom such a volume is devoted), the author is pretty much sure that this article has not been read by anybody outside Norway.