

The ‘Dialectics of Objectivity’?
Guy Axtell, Radford University

“Objectivity” is a theoretical concept with diverse applications in our collective practices of inquiry. It is also a concept attended in recent decades by vigorous debate, including but not restricted to the contributions of scientists and philosophers. In part because the authority of science is supposed to result from its objective methods and procedures, objectivity has been described as an “essentially contested,” and even an “embattled” concept. That objectivity should have become the troubling and controversial concept that it is today was probably inevitable given the ferociousness of certain debates among academics since the breakdown of the positivist paradigm. Attitudes towards the value of the concept of objectivity in its primary, epistemic sense, have differed.

Recent movements in the theory of knowledge, most especially social and feminist epistemology, have been a source of both criticism of standard accounts of scientific reasoning associated with positivism, and of “reconstructions” accounts of objectivity. But many early critics of the value of the concept have in recent decades agreed with Helen Longino’s stance that the concept should be “reconstructed” to fit contemporary views, rather than rejected. The standard account made the roles that values play in scientific practice especially controversial; if the special status of science justified by the objectivity of its methods, and this is premised on ‘value-free’ or ‘value-neutral’ conceptions of method, that status will be tarnished or undermined if values (or at least values of a kind usually sharply distinguished from and contrasted with epistemic values), are shown to enter into actual scientific practice. Contemporary views still maintain a distinction between epistemic and social values, but, following Longino’s insistence that we must deconstruct the rational/social dichotomy, do not necessarily view the role of social values as threatening epistemological relativism—an assumption that positivists and their radical historicist critics apparently shared. Longino’s feminism “understands the cognitive processes of scientific inquiry not as opposed to the social but as themselves social” (1993, 260), which means taking social values positively, as aiding rather than necessarily or always detracting from objectivity.

In their book *Objectivity* (2007) historians of science Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison’s provide historical studies to support their contention that the scientific understanding of objectivity does not remain constant over time. But while developing this moderate historicist account of the concept of objectivity, they also make the philosophical argument the epistemic norms that have informed scientific practice can be historicized without leading to relativism. We are used to saying that theories change, and we allow that scientific methodology also changes for a number of reasons. But that the goals and aims of science should not remain steady, but also change in relationship to theories and methods is more troubling to many philosophers of science. Perhaps this is because we tend to think of truth as an inherently epistemic goal, and epistemic norms as *logical* connections between evidence and inference. Moderate historicism about epistemic norms such as those embedded in scientific aims and methods, is a thesis I accept, and that is difficult to deny on any view that recognizes the importance of the history of science to philosophy of science.

Daston and Galison's approach is one that I find interesting, and one that I associated with a "dialectical" account. A "dialectics of objectivity" suggests a negotiative conception of the means and ends of inquiry, one with clear reference to the active, adjectival sense of the objective *inquirer*. In *Rethinking Objectivity* (1994) Megill outlines four competing senses of objectivity: the absolute, the disciplinary, the dialectical, and the procedural:

A striking feature of both absolute and disciplinary conceptions of objectivity is their negative relation to subjectivity. Absolute objectivity seeks to exclude subjectivity; disciplinary objectivity seeks to contain it.... Phrases like 'aperspectival objectivity' and 'view from nowhere' really draw attention to ... negativity. In contrast, dialectical objectivity involves a positive attitude toward subjectivity. The defining feature of dialectical objectivity is the claim that subjectivity is indispensable to constitute the objects. Associated with this feature is a preference for 'doing' over 'viewing'... in other words, *subjectivity* is needed for *objectivity*; or, as Nietzsche put it, 'objectivity is required, but is a positive quality' (8).

The special emphasis of a dialectical approach as how something is constituted as an object for inquiry through interplay between researchers and that which they study. Objectivity, proponents of a dialectical model hold, is not a property of a right method or a steady state, but rather describes a *process* carried out actively through communicative interaction and comparison. In my paper and draft monograph on objectivity, I pay special attention to how the content and value of the ideal of objectivity differs across scientific disciplines. One thesis I develop is that the question of how to parse the relevance of the distinction between theory virtues and personal traits of researchers — what Pierre Duhem would call *bon sens* — depends crucially upon differences between disciplines or fields of inquiry, and the relative normality of inquiry operating in contexts of underdetermination. How characteristic it is for a discipline to operate under conditions of deep underdetermination determines much about the balance of theory-virtues and personal virtues as criteria of adequacy in that field. But notice that this does not mirror, but rather cuts across the usual distinction between natural and social, or again 'hard' and 'soft' sciences, since both historiography and theoretical physics, for example, for all their other differences, are chronically subject to underdetermination-of-theory worries.

Another thesis is the potential synergies between moderate historicism about epistemic norms and virtue-theoretic approaches in epistemology. Authors who develop relations of mutual support between their historicist assumptions and virtue theory all assert that disciplinary objectivity entails a condition of character of some weaker or stronger sort. Historicism and virtue theory are mutually supportive in ways that should make attempts to combine them especially appealing or advantageous. Considerations stemming from underdetermination problems motivate the claim that historicism requires agent-focused rather than merely belief-focused epistemology; embracing this point helps historicists avoid the charge of relativism. Considerations stemming from the genealogy of epistemic virtue concepts motivate the claim that character epistemologies are strengthened by moderate historicism about the epistemic virtues and values at work in communities of

inquiry; embracing this point helps character epistemologists avoid the charge of objectivism.

Contact details: gsaxtell@radford.edu

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