

In the first paragraph of his autobiography, Charles Darwin wrote: “I have attempted to write the following account of myself, as if I were a dead man in another world looking back at my life.” It is a striking appeal to the idea and ideal of objectivity, which the great scientist wants to apply to his own life. For many, the principle of objectivity is what defines science, especially modern science, which strives to acquire knowledge that, as a recent book puts it, bears no trace of the knower. Can we know what things are in themselves, free of everything that belongs merely to us and our perception of them, of all our biases and distortions? It would seem to be the only knowledge worth striving for. In this core class, we try to understand what objectivity means, how the idea has been defended and attacked, and how it changed the world.

Objectivity has not only been a scientific idea, even if in science it is much less often combined with other ideas and goals. Great novelists and storytellers like Flaubert and Chekhov talked about their ambition to describe objectively and dispassionately, to create a narrative voice that remains detached from every character and every event. And painters and sculptors have struggled, above everything else, with the question of how much of their own personality should be expressed in their works.

The deliberate striving for objectivity in the arts however, itself indicates a tension between objective knowledge and aesthetic representation and experience. One might even say, as one famous scientist did, that the problem with objectivity is that it cannot capture what is most important for us: for instance, it cannot explain the beauty of a flower or why an old song will move us to tears. More generally, a scientific worldview is often presented as void of all aesthetic and moral value. Does not the sphere of value fall on the subjective side of the old distinction between values and facts? Or maybe there is a sphere of objective value, provided we know where to find it.

In the world of politics, many decisive questions are almost inevitably framed in terms of what is particular to one perspective and cannot provide a basis for state coercion and what is impartial, neutral, objective, and just. Here too critics of an ideal of objectivity will be less enthusiastic. Does objectivity disguise the exercise of personal power, presenting it as the rule of reality, anodyne and irresistible? Does it deliver us from democratic rule into the hands of “specialists without spirit and vision and voluptuaries without heart”? We all yearn for objectivity, but when we get it, or seem to get it, the feeling is that something terribly important has been lost. Darwin, after all, went on to add: “Nor have I found this difficult, for life is nearly over with me.”

The course offers an introduction to the term and its meaning in contemporary debates from the theory of science, as well as an exploration of key moments concerning the problem of objectivity in the history of thought. It then turns to contemporary debates regarding the term, focusing in particular on the problem of the relation between objective knowledge and judgment and the claims of social consensus, and on the relevance of the concept of objectivity to the making and reception of art.

Recommended Core Text: Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*

### Week One: Introduction: Definitions

Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, "Objectivity Shock", "Epistemologies of the Eye" from *Objectivity*

Henri Poincare, "Science and Reality" from *The Value of Science*

Thomas Nagel, Introduction, *The View from Nowhere*

### Week Two: Scientific Objectivity

Thomas Kuhn, "Objectivity, Value Judgment and Theory Choice"

Daston and Galison, "The Scientific Self," from *Objectivity*

Erwin Schroedinger, "The Principle of Objectivation"

Jacques Monod, "The Kingdom and the Darkness" from *Chance and Necessity*

### Week Three: The Life of Science

Max Weber, "The Vocation of Science"

Descartes, *Discourse on Method*

### Week Four: The Self and the World

Descartes, *Meditations*

Thomas Nagel, "The Objective Self", "Thought and Reality", "Birth, Death and the Meaning of Life."

### Week Five: Between Objectivism and Subjectivism

Pierre Bourdieu, "The Objective Limits of Objectivism"

Levi Strauss, from *The Raw and the Cooked*

### Week Six: Ideology

Rorty "Objectivity or Solidarity"

Eagleton, "What is Ideology?"; "Ideological Strategies"; "Discourse and Ideology"

Adorno and Horkheimer, "The Concept of Enlightenment"

### Objectivity and Representation

#### Week Seven

Michael Fried "Art and Objecthood"

#### Week Eight

Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Chekhov, Flaubert letters (selections)

### Objectivity and Interpretation

#### Week Nine

Sigmund Freud, from *Interpretation of Dreams*

#### Week Ten

Rivka Galchen, *Atmospheric Disturbances*