

# OBJECTIVITY AND SELF-KNOWLEDGE

PY Core

Winter Term 2010

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*To be objective is to aspire to knowledge that bears no trace of the knower – knowledge unmarked by prejudice or skill, fantasy or judgment, wishing or striving. Objectivity is blind sight: seeing without inference, interpretation or intelligence. Only in the nineteenth century did scientists begin to yearn for this blind sight...*

L. Daston and P. Galison, *Objectivity*, p. 17

If “objective knowledge” is knowledge that bears no trace of the knower, does it make any sense to speak of “objective self-knowledge”? Is there a meaningful kind of self-knowledge that is *not* objective self-knowledge? What if the impulse to objective knowledge were itself subjected to scrutiny? What is its psychological origin? What role should objectivity play in practical judgments and ordinary human actions? Should we consider our serious commitments and dearest loves in the light of objective scrutiny? Is it possible that “objectivity,” especially when brought to bear on oneself, is a distortion or an incomplete way of knowing?

**Week 1, Jan 14:** Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*

What does it mean that the only human being to be able to answer the riddle of the Sphinx—to be able to see the image of humanity itself as if from beyond humanity—is also riddle to himself? What does his capacity to answer the riddle have to do with his two crimes: incest and patricide? Why is he a tyrant? For Freud, our surprisingly un-indignant response to the play was the best testimony of the psychological truth it contained, that “even though man has repressed his evil desires into his Unconscious and would then gladly say to himself that he is no longer answerable for them, he is yet compelled to feel his responsibility in the form of a sense of guilt for which he can discern no foundation.”

**Weeks 2-4, Jan 21-Feb 4:** Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality*

Objectivity is not only among the central concerns of Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morality* but, arguably, the very target of his ‘polemic.’ Tracing its origins to the Judeo-Christian ideal of selflessness, Nietzsche portrays scientific objectivity as the latest permutation – and self-overcoming – of Biblical morality. Against objectivity understood as self-less truth, he seeks to restore the centrality of the knower in the quest for knowledge. Does this force Nietzsche to abandon the aspiration to objective truth? Or is the *Genealogy* an attempt to redefine and

reorient that quest toward a new epistemic ideal: "a new objectivity"?

### Week 5 SWWE

*This immense and almost new domain of dangerous knowledge... Never yet did a profounder world of insight reveal itself to daring travelers and adventurers, and the psychologists who thus "make a sacrifice" – it is not the sacrificio dell' intelletto, on the contrary! – will at least be entitled to demand in return that psychology shall once more be recognized as the Queen of the sciences, for whose service and equipment the other sciences exist. For psychology is now again the path to the fundamental problems.*

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, I 23

### Week 6, Feb 18: Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*

In J.M. Coetzee's complex novella, his protagonist, Elizabeth Costello, is haunted by the contemporary treatment of animals, which she compares to the Holocaust. In describing this horror, Costello makes a challenge to the philosophical mode of argument, which she sees as distorting our self-understanding. She speaks instead in favor of something broadly identified as "poetry."

### Week 7, Feb 25: Freud, "Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through", "Observations on Transference-Love"

### Week 8, Mar 4: Loewald, "On the Therapeutic Action of Psychoanalysis"; Lear, "Subjectivity, Objectivity, and Irony" from *Therapeutic Action*

These two articles by Freud will help us understand what, for the psychoanalyst, the work of coming to self-knowledge involves. "Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through" has been called "the most significant article Freud ever wrote: if all of his works were somehow lost except for this one, we would be able to reconstruct what is valuable in psychoanalysis" (Jonathan Lear). In it, Freud describes the therapeutic work of psychoanalysis as having to do fundamentally with *transference*. The second article investigates the peculiar dilemma the analyst faces when the patient is transferring love to him.

The psychoanalyst Hans Loewald began his intellectual career as one of Heidegger's students. For Loewald, Heidegger's embrace of Nazism was not only a personal betrayal; it implicated philosophy itself. Loewald's response was to search "for a form of knowing that was more grounded in the details of human living, and more committed to alleviating suffering" (Lear). This search involved the development of a post-19<sup>th</sup> century conception of objectivity, a conception fit for understanding the kind of object which the human mind is, and for assisting the patient in creating the possibility of "the new discovery of objects." In conjunction with Loewald's essay,

we read "Subjectivity, Objectivity, and Irony," a chapter from Jonathan Lear's *Therapeutic Action*. As one of Loewald's students, Lear helps to explain his teacher's thought and then builds upon it in order to recommend "a subjective conception of objectivity."

*What I discovered in Auschwitz is the human condition, the end point of a great adventure, where the European traveler arrived after his two-thousand-year-old moral and cultural history.*

Imre Kertész, 2002 Nobel lecture

Week 9, Mar 11: Jünger, *On Pain*; Rorty, *Solidarity or Objectivity?*

Week 10, Mar 18: Imre Kertész, *Fatelessness*; 2002 Nobel Lecture

Jünger declaims and Rorty theorizes an opposition between objectivity and solidarity as two distinct ways of orienting ourselves in the world. Are these orientations irreconcilable? And what are the ethical and political consequences of having to choose between them? Describing with objective detachment the experience of the concentration camp, Imre Kertész' quasi-autobiographical novel may be read as a meditation on these questions.

Grading:

Seminar grade: 30%

Presentation: 20%

Paper: 50%

The aim of the presentation (approximately 15-20 minutes) is to lay the groundwork for a serious discussion, and to open that discussion by asking an important question.