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# Colloquium in Legal, Political, and Social Philosophy

Conducted by

Jeremy Waldron and Liam Murphy

Speaker: **Alice Crary, The New School**

Paper: **Objectivity's Politics**



## Objectivity's Politics

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For discussion at the NYU Law Colloquium, September 21, 2023, 4pm

*DRAFT—Please don't cite without reaching out to me.*

Prefatory comment for the NYU Law Colloquium. *During my career, I have written a fair amount about how analytic philosophers use the term “objectivity.” I have undertaken most of my explorations of this topic out of a concern with the nature of moral and social thought. I have argued that prevalent interpretations of the interrelated epistemic and ontological concepts that “objectivity” is used to pick out constrain our understanding of possibilities for moral and political thought in prejudicial ways. Although I have been critical of influential philosophical conceptions of objectivity, I have also described how to reclaim the notion for ethics and social philosophy. I have myself been happy to talk about objectivity.*

*During the last decade, my work has become more overtly political, and some of my collaborators have protested that in ethics and politics talk of objectivity is damaging. These interventions on the part of friends are the occasion for the current exercise. I set aside the question of whether it is acceptable to use the word “objectivity,” since I take this question to be at bottom a pragmatic one that should be answered contextually. Instead, I explore the kinds of concerns that lead some of those fighting grievous injustices to distrust appeals to objectivity, and I advance a claim about why, regardless of whether we continue with objectivity-talk, it is politically urgent to rethink the epistemic and ontological notions that philosophers and others use such talk to determine. Finally, standing on the shoulders of historians and social theorists, I float a genealogical hypothesis that deepens this point, revealing yet greater political urgency. The following essay, in which I address these topics, is a work-in-progress. I am grateful for the opportunity to circulate it and get feedback.*

### Prologue

In June of 2020, a month after George Floyd was murdered by a police officer in Minneapolis, journalist Wesley Lowery wrote an opinion piece for the *New York Times*, in which he declared “a reckoning over objectivity, led by black journalists.” Lowery recounts how Black journalists are using new resources to express a decades-old complaint about “the failure of the mainstream press to accurately cover black communities,” a complaint he connects with a journalistic model he calls “neutral objectivity.” Such objectivity is, Lowery explains, a matter of pretending that “there is a debate about the facts when the weight of the truth is clear,” and, within the context of structural racism, adopting this stance means endeavoring not to offend “the sensibilities of white readers.” Journalists will, for instance, resort to “clunky euphemisms” like an “officer-involved shooting,” so as not to say that “the police shot someone.” This is not only insidious but also confused, Lowery argues, since all journalistic outlooks are “constructed atop a pyramid of subjective decision-making” and “no journalistic process is objective.” But Lowery doesn't think it follows that journalists should abandon fairness and embrace sheer partisanship. Rather, they should go as far as they can toward truth-telling, “diligently seek[ing] out the perspectives of those with whom [they] personally may be inclined to disagree” (Lowery 2020).

The main argument of Lowery's article very likely seems familiar. It follows the stages of a political dialectic, well established in our public culture, that starts from the idea that some claims to objectivity are tools of oppression and proceeds to the idea that the epistemic ideal picked out by the word “objectivity” can be re-envisioned to serve social justice. Questions about what objectivity is like, and what falls under it, are the purview of philosophy, yet, as we will see, mainstream discussions of objectivity among analytic philosophers offer little support for this familiar liberating pattern of thought, instead favoring the kinds of views about what objectivity amounts to that underlie complaints about its oppressive potential.

It wouldn't be unreasonable to think that there must be compelling philosophical considerations for such views about objectivity. In fact, it is not obvious that these views owe their acceptance primarily to their philosophical merits. A glance at the views' history suggests that their appeal is in real part a function of their alignment with political, economic, and technological developments of capitalist modernity—developments that many critical social theorists take to be structurally connected to forms of oppression that some appeals to objectivity serve. This raises the prospect that the apparently unremarkable philosophical task of rethinking objectivity might be an exercise of resistance, a step toward a language of politics better suited not only for illuminating grave injustices but for finding a route to more just forms of life.

### **Ongoing objectivity wars**

It is well known that the words "*Objekt*" and "*Objektivität*," together with their near cousins in other European languages, underwent a fundamental change of meaning in the late eighteenth century, coming for the first time to be used—by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten and soon afterward by Kant—for things in the world and our engagement with them (see, e.g., Beck 1969: 284; see also Hacking 2015: 21-22). Since then, talk of objectivity has remained world-oriented while being strikingly multivalent, referring, in the words of one historian, "at once to metaphysics, to methods and to morals" (Daston 1992: 597). One central modern meaning of "objectivity" is the epistemic stance required to get the world clearly in focus. A study of references to the term in the academy and broader culture today reveals a wealth of competing suggestions about virtues that must be displayed by someone who adopts this stance and so is entitled to represent herself as objective. These include suggestions about lack of prejudice, procedural propriety, and perspectival flexibility, and they also include, prominently, suggestions about value-neutrality and aperspectival abstractness (for a survey, see Gaukroger 2012: Ch. 1).

Philosophers sometimes treat questions about how to understand objectivity, conceived as an epistemic ideal, as strictly academic. But these questions are mired in politics. The idea that objectivity-talk may be an instrument of oppression is a fixture of twentieth and twenty-first century social justice movements, where such claims are often impugned for strengthening and perpetuating unjust relations of domination. This criticism tends to be directed against invocations of objectivity on which it is treated as a matter of dispassionateness and value-neutrality, and the criticism typically at least implicitly depends on the following basic account of the nature of social phenomena and of the demands of grasping them. The idea is that values are woven into the fabric of social life and that social understanding requires a willingness to explore value-laden historical and cultural perspectives, and thus to demonstrate a sensitivity to local values. This idea is taken to have special significance in relation to the sorts of structural injustices targeted by participants in anti-racist, feminist, and Indigenous rights movements. The point is that it is not possible to adequately grasp the nature of these wrongs without an appreciation of the history and function of the social mechanisms that reproduce them. The wrongness of accounts of social relations that are alleged to be objective, in the sense of being value-neutral, hence appears to have to do with how these accounts can block recognition of concrete injustices—all the while disavowing evaluative presuppositions that they cannot help but have, thereby disguising their own partisanship. That is what is supposed to be insidious.

Insistence on value-neutrality in social understanding is not always couched in the language of objectivity, and some political discussions about how such insistence can be pernicious are formulated as critiques of claims not to objectivity but to value-neutrality, or to what are seen as

neutrality-related forms of universality. Foucault is concerned with how alleged universals can be means of great cruelty, and a core project of decolonial studies is bringing out the hypocrisy and viciousness of supposedly universalizing programs that are represented as ‘civilizing’ forces.

Many suggestions of value-neutrality regarding social events are not only explicitly made but also criticized as claims to objectivity. In the early decades of the twentieth century, anti-racist social critics in the U.S. charge that purportedly “‘objective’ reporting on lynchings had carefully followed the who/what/when/where line and simply narrated the killing of African-American men, women and children as they were murdered” (Galison 2015: 305). Some twentieth and twenty-first century anti-racists generalize this observation, noting that what gets treated as an “objective” view of social relations is often a matter of, in philosopher Paul Taylor’s parlance, “the whitely gaze” (Taylor 2016: e.g., 40), a point that anticipates claims of Wesley Lowery’s. Feminists such as legal scholar Catharine MacKinnon similarly point out that in structurally sexist societies such as the U.S. “objectivity” in the legal system, and other institutions of the state, can “mean men’s point of view” (Harding 2015: 29, discussing MacKinnon 1983), and left-leaning historians argue, with regard to reporting on the Vietnam War, that “the effect of ‘objectivity’ was not to free the news of political influence but to open wide the channel through which official influence flowed” (Hallin 1986: 25, in Galison 2015: 307-308). All the while, numerous critical theorists stress that appeals to “scientific objectivity” routinely serve as masks for pernicious ideologies (see, e.g., Proctor 1991).

Although numerous social critics and theorists thus converge on a general view of how claims to objectivity are politically injurious, they wind up proposing an array of different remedies. Some exhort us to simply jettison objectivity, to rid ourselves not only of the word but of the epistemic ideal that it is used to pick out. Starting from the thought that worldly understanding is always situated, informed by the attitudes of a person or persons at a specific social and historical location, such thinkers take the idea of an ineliminable role for attitudes to place the project of an undistorted view of the world forever out of reach, and so to oblige us to give up our ideal of objectivity. But this skeptical posture, sometimes developed in the name of poststructuralism, contains a fatal internal tension. In treating the necessary involvement of attitudes as incompatible with objectivity, it presupposes the very dispassionate construal of objectivity it claims to forfeit (for helpful discussion, see, e.g., Alcoff 2015). Nor is it possible to keep the skeptical stance without the logical disaster, as Richard Rorty starts trying to do as far back as the early 1970s, by appealing exclusively to pragmatic considerations in urging us to relinquish not only talk of “objectivity” but the very idea of getting the world in view (Rorty 1972; see also Rorty 1988 and 1990). Rorty’s project depends for its success on establishing that we cope better and are politically more empowered absent the idea of striving for more accurate images of the world and our lives in it. This proposal deserves, and has received, blunt criticism from those of ‘us’ injured by racist, colonialist, and sexist social mechanisms that are ideologically dressed up in ways that render their harms invisible (see, e.g., Fraser 1996).

Not all theorists who call out specific claims to objectivity for their oppressive force take a skeptical tack. Non-skeptical strategies are worked out with clarity and insight in strands of Anglophone feminist epistemology that overlap with Black and Marxist epistemologies. These strains of feminist theory are distinguished by the thought, shared with poststructuralists, that all knowledge is socially situated and engaged. But this thought is not taken to threaten the prospect of getting the world clearly in view. A survey of Anglophone feminist theory from the 1960s to the present—through its successive emphases on consciousness-raising, standpoint,

intersections and affect—reveals a substantial consensus about how investigating experiences of those subject to sexist and intersecting racist and ableist forms of bias can contribute internally to arriving at more accurate images of women’s lives and relationships. In insisting on its right to such images, this body of theory retains the epistemic ideal that figures in talk of objectivity.

This is not a point about retention of the *word* “objectivity.” Despite keeping the epistemic ideal that “objectivity” determines, some feminists in the tradition just sketched opt not to use the word in their own voices, effectively allowing it to keep what they regard as its problematic association with abstraction and value-neutrality. But there are conspicuous discussions within feminist theory about rethinking the epistemic virtues appropriate for different areas of knowledge so that, instead of being limited to abstraction and neutrality, these virtues include things like disciplined perception and perspectival flexibility. And some of these discussions—which include treatments of the natural sciences (see, e.g., Anderson 1995, Harding 1991 and 2015 and Longino 1990) as well as the social sciences—are conceived as attempts to bring the word “objectivity” into circulation in more appropriate ways.

One common feature of the work of feminists and other critical social theorists who condemn some claims to value-neutral objectivity as oppressive, and who also retain the epistemic ideal that the word “objectivity” picks out, is a willingness to adjust going assumptions about the epistemic virtues that achieving this ideal requires. A straightforward proposal for such adjustment gets made in feminist philosopher Marilyn Frye’s classic 1974 essay “Oppression” (reprinted in Frye 1983: Ch.1), which addresses what oppression is and why it is hard to see. Oppression does not, Frye explains, include “any and all human experience of limitation or suffering” (Frye 1983: 1). To be oppressed is to have “the living of one’s life...confined and shaped by forces and barriers which are not accidental or occasional and hence avoidable” (Frye 1983: 4). Frye glosses this observation by saying that a characteristic experience of oppression is “the double-bind,” which she brings out like this:

It is often a requirement upon oppressed people that we smile and be cheerful. If we comply, we signal our docility and our acquiescence in our situation. We need not, then, be taken note of...On the other hand, anything but the sunniest countenance exposes us to being perceived as mean, bitter, angry or dangerous...[and this] has been known to result in rape, arrest, beating and murder. One can only choose to risk one’s preferred form and rate of annihilation (Frye 1983: 2-3).

Frye wants us to see that the lived experience of oppression is that of being “caged in” (Frye 1983: 4). She tells us that, just as we overlook the barrier represented by a cage if we focus our attention “microscopically” on its individual wires, we overlook the barrier represented by oppressive circumstances if we focus only on individual actions and practices. To clearly see the lives of oppressed people, we need a “macroscopic” view (Frye 1983: 7). We need to look at the social relations in question from the perspective of the experience of a normatively organized, mutually reinforcing system of restrictive forces. One upshot of Frye’s reflections is a proposal for conceiving the epistemic virtues required for getting aspects of the social world in view so that they include a kind of perspectival flexibility.

There are significant lines of filiation between Frye’s work and the work of other critical theorists who represent claims to objectivity-qua-value neutrality as tools of oppression while also calling on us to rework the idea of getting a clear view of social phenomena so that it is not primarily a matter of value-neutrality. The cost of not revising this idea is as high as the risk of obscuring and compounding severe injustice. It might seem reasonable to seek guidance for this

politically pressing project of revision by turning to central debates in analytic philosophy about the nature of objectivity. But instead of guidance, what we find is something approaching the enshrinement of the suspect conception of objectivity.

### **Aperspectival objectivity**

The epistemically-oriented construal of objectivity that looms large in analytic philosophy—and exerts substantial influence in other contemporary philosophical traditions—is, to use historian of science Lorraine Daston’s moniker, an “aperspectival” one (see, e.g., Daston 1992). The idea is that we bring the world into view by stepping back as far as possible from all our subjective endowments, perceptual as well as affective. The idea of the aperspectival here is a metaphor, and philosophers who set out to defend the subjectivity-countering account of objectivity at issue typically ask the metaphor to bear philosophical weight.

These philosophers invite us to regard our subjective endowments as resembling spatial perspectives we occupy in observing objects. They remind us of the possibility of transcending such literal perspectives by putting them in “a matrix of alternative perspectives...correct[ing] for distortions and achiev[ing] a true estimation of the spatial properties and relationships of an object (or set of objects)” (Conant 2005: 15, stress in the original; see also McDowell 1983: 5–6). And they suggest that we must likewise transcend all aspects of our subjective makeups if we are to achieve a less distorted image of how things are. We must abstract as far as we can from, in Thomas Nagel’s words, “the forms of perception and action characteristic of humans” (Nagel 1979: 206) and, as Bernard Williams writes, “step back from [those] peculiarities of our constitution” related to color perception, tastes and interests (Williams 1978: 242-243). That is the thinking that underlies the use of aperspectival metaphors—the most famous of which is Nagel’s “view from nowhere” (Nagel 1986)—for an entrenched conception of objectivity.

To say that aperspectival objectivity occupies a preeminent position within analytic philosophy is not to deny that it has formidable critics within the tradition. Aperspectival objectivity’s status is a function of the organizing role that, despite coming in for sometimes fundamental criticism, it plays across research programs. Commitment to an aperspectival epistemic ideal seems to oblige us to exclude the possibility of modes of thought that are, simultaneously, sensibility-informed and matters of attention to how things are, and this exclusion provides a structural principle for most philosophical subdisciplines. It is, for instance, there in the philosophy of language in “invariantist” or “indexicalist” resistance to the idea that pragmatic sensitivities contribute internally to a grasp of cognitive meaning; it is there in ethics in the thought that combining the apparently world-directed and practical aspects of moral assessments represents a central, intractable problem, even “the moral problem” (Smith 1994); it is there in philosophy of mind in the thought that explaining subjective experience poses such a daunting challenge that it is rightly regarded as “the hard problem” (Chalmers 1995); and it is there in the acceptance of an enterprise of political philosophy, boldly inaugurated by John Rawls’s 1971 *A Theory of Judgment* (Rawls 1971), dedicated to identifying principles of justice in a manner insulated from the direct influence of sensibility-informed judgments about the good. Aperspectival objectivity is a pillar of analytic philosophy and an implicit referent of familiar talk of the tradition’s “mainstream.”

It would make sense to assume that there must be a well-developed body of philosophical argument in its favor. What an examination turns up are not so much carefully reasoned cases for an aperspectival epistemic stance but looser efforts to motivate the stance by appeal to images, traceable to early modern European thought, of the relationship between mind and

world. There are also regular rearguard actions against any attempt to contest the images. Subjectivity-expulsion as a strategy for bringing the world into focus at base derives its support from an image of mind and world on which their relationship is depicted as if, in John McDowell's phrase, "from sideways on" (McDowell 1998: 214), so that our subjective makeups appear to veer essentially toward occluding our view of how things are. The oft-invoked analogy between subjective propensities and literal spatial perspectives, though rhetorically powerful, does not add to the content of this image, since it's unclear what the subjectivity-oriented analogue is of getting the world in view by using laws of optics to locate one line of sight in a larger network. The image of mind and world as separate and side-by-side in any case by itself seems to enjoin us to strive to set aside everything subjective.

Taking this injunction seriously does not mean we must think we can discourse about the world in a wholly aperspectival manner. Philosophers who champion aperspectival objectivity generally sympathize with the nominalist strain of the empiricist tradition and hold that all our concepts and categories are 'ours' (not found in the world) and so at least residually perspectival (see Nagel 1979: 208 and Williams 1978: 244). The standard proposal is to invest hopes for wholly abstract mental contact with the world in methods of inquiry in the natural sciences. This seems like a meaningful step if the relevant methods are taken to be independent of any particular beliefs about what the world is like and so to afford transparent access to how things are.

What may seem to lend plausibility to this understanding of methods of scientific inquiry is the idea, central to classic empiricism and prominent in philosophy of perception today, that perceptual experience represents a means of non-conceptual, and so ideally abstract, contact with how things are. Views of perception that incorporate this idea may seem to provide support for an aperspectival conception of objectivity. These views have critics who charge that they are unable to explain how perceptual experience could have the normative character that allows it to bear rationally on belief, and who urge us to adopt understandings of perceptual thought as in a sense conceptual, and hence perspectival, all the way down. Advocates of non-conceptual views push back against these challenges in various ways. One striking tact is to deny that perceptual experience bears rationally on belief and to insist that it plays a merely causal role (see, e.g., Brandom 1994: Ch4). Whatever the interest of this move, it provides no assistance to the idea of an aperspectival epistemic ideal but decisively undercuts it. A further cluster of approaches to defending non-conceptual views of perception go on the offensive and argue that alternative, perspectival views leave us unable to account for the fact that non-rational creatures, such as very young children and some non-human animals, have perceptual capacities much like those of most adult humans. These aren't so much positive cases for aperspectival objectivity as attempts to keep it alive. A clear-eyed observer may get the impression that this conception of objectivity has a resilience far exceeding the strength of cases in its favor.

Aperspectival objectivity undoubtedly owes its stature in significant part to the belief that it guides scientific practice. The truth of this belief, if established, wouldn't show that an aperspectival stance was the mark of all knowledge, rather only that it was the mark of whatever regions of science were in question. Showing that there is reason to doubt its truth is one of the achievements of Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison's monumental 2007 *Objectivity* (Daston and Galison 2007). Through a far-reaching study of scientific atlases, the book documents how an aperspectival ideal has played a role in attempts to accurately represent objects and processes in the life and physical sciences, while also demonstrating that this ideal consistently competes with other non-abstract or perspectival ideals with equally serious claims to figure in accurate

depiction. Daston and Galison describe how the aperspectival ideal they call “structural objectivity” comes into consideration as an ideal for scientific representation around the middle of the nineteenth century. The proposal that we progress toward understanding by eliminating every subjective contribution is a challenge to earlier practices of treating researchers’ sensibilities—their “genius”—as internally informing the description of nature, while also partly a response to limitations of mechanical ideals that emerged with researchers’ use of photographic images. But demands for the abstractions of structural objectivity don’t go unquestioned, and early in the twentieth century some researchers start to argue that the connections and classifications that interest them are only available to judgment “trained” by experience and familiarity (e.g., Daston and Galison 2007: 318 and 336). The single-minded attempt “to hold oneself back and let nature write itself to the page” is wrongheaded, sometimes conflicting with, as Galison later puts it, “pedagogical utility, precision, reproducibility, accuracy, even truth” (Galison 2015). What Daston and Galison wish to show is that structural or aperspectival objectivity inhabits a “pluralistic” evaluative landscape alongside various non-abstract ideals (see Daston and Galison 2007: 18). They conclude that we should forfeit “an identification of [such] objectivity with science *tout court*” (Daston and Galison 2007: 28).

Daston and Galison are among the most insightful of the many thinkers in our post-Kuhnian age counseling against using appeals to the natural sciences to shore up the credentials of aperspectival objectivity. Given weaknesses in the philosophical arguments for this influential conception of objectivity, it seems well-advised to seek an understanding of its emergence as a philosophical and social force by examining it historically.

### **Outtakes from objectivity’s history**

Aperspectival objectivity is conceptually tied to an engrained modern metaphysic. The individual who attempts an aperspectival stance tries to step back from all her attitudes and perceptual responses, those that are idiosyncratic and humanly typical, as well as those related to membership in smaller groups, and in doing so she culls from her image of the world anything only properly understandable in terms of such attitudes and perceptual responses. With every attitude out of play, getting the world empirically in view becomes seeing it as shorn of values. The resulting outlook splits the moral realm from the natural or physical one, presenting what philosopher William Frankena describes as a “bifurcationist” ontology that is the site of, in Daston’s words, “the moral evacuation of nature as a whole” (Daston 2014: 581). Today this outlook is woven into the social imaginary of advanced industrial capitalist societies, revealing itself conspicuously in, among other things, the pervasiveness of the idea of a sharp fact/value divide. It is not merely that this idea is ubiquitous in philosophy in the guise of the metaphysical counterpart of aperspectival objectivity, and not merely that it is there in other humanities such as history where, as historian Peter Novick and others demonstrate, the conceit of dealing in value-free facts has been central to the efforts of historians in the US to establish themselves as a profession, running back as far as the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Novick 1988; see also Lepore 2008). Nor is it merely that the idea of a stark fact-value opposition haunts the social sciences, putting engaged, ethnographic methods perennially on the defensive, so that they are in the position of needing to prove their cognitive chops. This idea permeates our public culture, reaching both into and beyond the academy, showing up, among other places, in practices of treating all aspects of more-than-human nature as morally indifferent resources, and in the sorts of claims to objectivity, touched on above, that social justice-minded theorists find politically corrosive.



A value-drained image of the nature isn't a 20<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup> century-novelty. Daston recounts how, "since at least the 19<sup>th</sup> century, powerful voices—John Stuart Mill, Thomas Henry Huxley, Émile Zola—have insisted that there are no values in nature" (Daston 2014: 579). This image, together with the aperspectival conception of objectivity that is its epistemic cousin, has a history. One of Daston's scholarly achievements is showing that there are histories to be narrated here and that they are helpfully narrated together. A few outtakes from the combined history make room for a genealogical hypothesis that introduces a further wrinkle to the story of objectivity's politics.

There are antecedents of aperspectival objectivity in eighteenth century European philosophy, before what Daston and Galison identify as its definitive mid nineteenth century integration into scientific practice and reflection (Daston and Galison 2007). Daston maintains that the evidence of eighteenth-century interest in transcending individual perspectives is stronger regarding reflection on how to grasp objects of ethics and aesthetics than it is regarding accounts of how to understand the natural world. She mentions Adam Smith's use of perspectival metaphors in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) to develop his ideal of the "impartial spectator" as a figure bound to shed all particular standpoints (Daston 1992: 605), and she notes that Smith's concern with overcoming perspective extends to the study of the natural world with his admiration for "the indifference of the mathematician and natural philosopher to adverse public opinion" (Daston 1992: 605). Daston also discusses a key passage of Hume's essay "Of the Standard of Taste" (1757) that defends an approach to aesthetic criticism in terms of shedding one's own perspectives. The capable critic must, Hume declares, "depart from [a situation of friendship or enmity with the artist], and, considering [himself] as a man in general, forget, if possible [his] individual being, and [his] peculiar circumstances" (Hume 1993: 145; see Daston 1992: 604).

The earliest forerunner of aperspectival objectivity Daston mentions is Francis Bacon, who produced his main works in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Bacon provides the first theoretical articulation of empiricism with his methodological reflections on correcting for false appearances produced by theoretical and other kinds of bias. He calls the different sources of false appearance he identifies "idols of the mind," offering a four-fold classification into idols of tribe, cave, marketplace and theater, having to do with distortions introduced by human nature, individual beliefs and habits, traffic with words, and larger theoretical worldviews (Bacon 1991: 41-42). Although Daston and Galison don't situate Bacon within their history of objectivity, on the ground that only one of his "four categories (the idols of the cave) applied to the individual psyche and could therefore be a candidate for subjectivity in the modern sense" (Daston and Galison 2007: 32), Daston gives Bacon a role in what she calls objectivity's prehistory. His attack on theoretical bias, an "idol of the theater," is, she argues, decisive for his contribution to modern science. The gesture was integral to the promotion of the knowledge of particular facts "to an epistemological status worth of natural philosophy" and likewise decisive for the unseating of Aristotelian natural philosophy, with its exultation of the knowledge of universals, from its preeminent position (Daston 1991: 46).

### **A genealogical hypothesis**

Daston's account of the emergence of aperspectival objectivity and its associated metaphysics of nature is a contribution to the story of the scientific revolution. Narratives about the rise of modern science are often presented together with narratives about the rise of capitalism. However the story of these institutions' relation is told, both have as hallmarks a commitment to something approaching aperspectival objectivity and to a closely connected value-bereft conception of nature. This is as true of capitalism, through its many changes, from the early

modern period to the present, as it is of the new science. Capitalism is, at base, a socio-economic system organized around privately owned and controlled production for the sake of profit. The inputs to the system are human labor and nature, and, although societies may impose constraints on the use of these things, as inputs they are simply resources—indifferent materials at home in the morally evacuated metaphysical terrain that is aperspectival objectivity’s close cousin, to be surveyed and assessed in terms of the amount of profit they generate. The capitalist enterprise is in this way spelled out in terms of aperspectival objectivity. That largely accounts for its staying power in philosophy and elsewhere in society. It is part of the air we breathe.

That might seem to vindicate aperspectival objectivity. Some people believe that capitalism, especially in its most liberal versions, has done more for human flourishing and advancement than any other socio-economic form. Set aside that view for a moment. Many people also believe that numerous scientific innovations that many of us would be loath to live without, and that were enabled by institutional support in capitalist societies, were pursued by researchers who were as guided by aperspectival epistemic ideals. That is true, but it doesn’t establish an aperspectival epistemic ideal as regulative for all thought about the world. It is only evidence of the importance of such an ideal for whatever research contexts are at issue, and it is consistent with the observations of Daston, Galison, and others about how, far from being exclusively aperspectival, the epistemic values at play in many research contexts are plural.

The imbrication of aperspectival objectivity with capitalism may also be taken to debunk the former’s authority as an epistemic ideal. Unswerving accounts of capitalism’s history must recite a catalogue of horrors—the dispossession of European peasants, the transatlantic slave trade, the genocide of Indigenous people in the Americas and elsewhere, colonialism, imperialism, the onset of the sixth mass extinction, and severe, widespread, and long-term ecological degradation rising to the level of ecocide. These cataclysms are sometimes lamented yet dismissed as mere historical concomitants of capitalist expansion, detachable from its core commitments. But notable contemporary traditions of social theory invite us to regard the outrages as direct expressions of capitalism’s internal, aperspectival, morally neutralizing or instrumentalizing logic.

Consider a key thesis of Cedric Robinson’s *Black Marxism*, the book that introduced the notion of racial capitalism in its contemporary meaning. Robinson argues that capitalism’s relation to labor is irretrievably racializing. Before capitalism became a world system dependent on slavery, genocide, and imperialism, it racialized the original European proletarians, constructing them as inferiors whose condition ‘allowed for’ dispossession and enslavement (Robinson 1983, Ch1). Robinson’s suggestion is that a tendency toward racializing dehumanization is an ineradicable tendency of a system that exploits labor by instrumentalizing it for profit—a tendency that can be muted but never overcome by liberal reforms. Or, again, consider the work of members of an overlapping group of social theorists working in the traditions of ecofeminism, ecological Marxism, and the environmentalism of the poor who reach a complementary, similarly negative verdict about the possibility of reforming injurious tendencies of capitalism’s basic workings. The drive to production for profit creates a pressure toward expropriating not only the natural environment but also the reproductive, care, and subsistence work of women, Indigenous, and racialized people the world over (see Foster 2000; Martinez Alier 2002; and Mies and Shiva 2014). There is, to be sure, a countermovement of neoliberal capitalism that may seem to promise to eliminate this destructive freeriding. The idea is to arrange for the different values in question to get counted by reconceiving aspects of the environment as commodities and bringing them inside markets, and by similarly internalizing reproductive, care, and subsistence

work. Beyond the economic wishful thinking involved in efforts to make the environment behave like a self-regulating market system (Foster 2000:27-30), as well as in efforts to translate care work into commodities capturable in market transactions (Folbre and Nelson 2000 and Oksala 2013: 226), there is the stubborn fact that these strategies cannot register intrinsic values (see Sandel 2012). They have the effect of simply relocating, not eliminating, both the devastation of the natural world and gender-based and other modes of human oppression.

These different social theories make it unsurprising, in the age of global capitalism, that terrible racist discrimination and violence are widespread; that many (especially poor and non-white) women have neither reproductive freedom nor economic security; that Indigenous people confront deadly racist violence and threats to their sovereignty; and that, as the world burns around us, major fossil fuel companies are scaling back climate pledges and ramping up oil and gas production. That is an answer of sorts to those who place capitalism among humankind's most glorious achievement. There is no reason to deny that there are streaks of glory within it. But the entire enterprise is, to borrow a phrase of Theodor Adorno's and Max Horkheimer's, "radiant with triumphant calamity" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002 [1944]).

Aperspectival objectivity's tie to fundamental structures of capitalism is, not vindication, but confirmation of its ruinous vacuity. There should be no question of treating an aperspectival stance as somehow granting transparent access to how things are and so counting as a regulative ideal for all world-directed thought. This conclusion is anticipated by the numerous radical social critics who—like Lowery, Frye, and others discussed at this essay's opening—bring out with great clarity that, to get in view circumstances of oppression and the injustices such circumstances enable, we require epistemic ideals like disciplined perception and perspectival flexibility. But it is not happenstance that such social critics have had to fight, again and again, for appropriate epistemic tools just to make the sufferings of the oppressed visible and intelligible. Aperspectival objectivity is integral to the mechanisms of a global socio-economic system that reliably rehearses race- and gender-based wrongs (and that has, moreover, compounded its wrongs over generations by leaving many of those humans it has hurt open to injury from the terrible environmental damages that it predictably causes (see Achiume 2022 and Taiwo 2021: Ch5)). This system further aggravates its harms by propagating an aperspectival image of our cognitive predicament that ideologically obscures and so intensifies those harms.

The project of rethinking objectivity along non-aperspectival lines is, under these circumstances, anything but merely academic and politically trivial. It may be undertaken as a step toward exposing injustice and imagining more just and ecologically sounder forms of life (see Ghosh 2021: Ch18). Given that capitalism's ecocidal bent has already devastated many of the earth's susceptible humans, animals, and ecosystems, and given that it now threatens all life on the planet, it is difficult to think of a more pressing project.

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