



Political Philosophy

## The Ideal of Objectivity in Political Dialogue

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**ABSTRACT:** If political dialogue is to identify and redress existing forms of injustice, participants in the dialogue must be able to appeal to the concept of objectivity in order to exchange claims, attitudes, and background beliefs which distort or conceal various forms of injustice. The conceptions of objectivity traditionally employed in liberal democratic political philosophy are not well-suited to play this role because they are insufficiently sensitive to the social and ideological pluralism of modern societies. Some liberal political philosophers have recently offered more context-sensitive and pluralistic conceptions of objectivity, requiring participants in political dialogue to frame their demands for justice in terms of a conception of justice acceptable to all participants in the dialogue. I argue that this conception of objectivity constitutes an improvement over traditional liberal conceptions. However, it is ultimately unacceptable because it does not take adequate account of the limited and distorted knowledge that members of dominant social groups tend to possess about the oppression experienced by members of subordinate and marginalized groups. As a result, this conception of objectivity wrongly deems the demands for justice voiced by members of subordinate and marginalized groups to be subjective simply because they seem unreasonable from the limited and distorting standpoint of dominant social groups.

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Throughout the modern history of Western political philosophy, objectivity has often served as a bulwark reinforcing the privilege of dominant groups rather than as a fulcrum for subordinate groups to use in undermining that privilege. This is at least partly due to the prevalence in Western philosophy of conceptions of objectivity as either emotional detachment from the immediate circumstances of one's life, or being able to view social arrangements from the privileged perspective of a distanced observer, or viewing society as it is, independent of any particular observer's perspective or interpretation. Whatever the theoretical merits of these conceptions of objectivity may be in the abstract, in the concrete circumstances of practical deliberations they all tend to permit the privileged perspectives of dominant social groups to masquerade as objective and thus as valid, by comparison with the subjective and thus invalid perspective of subordinate social groups.

Despite this legacy of abuses of the concept of objectivity, social and political philosophy will be hard-pressed to develop an adequate conception of political dialogue without appealing to some normative conception of objectivity. The ideal of objectivity provides a normative ground from which to criticize a claim about justice for impeding rather than aiding a dialogue's progress. Without recourse to some such ideal, it will be difficult or impossible to provide a philosophical justification for criticizing claims about justice which aim to intimidate rather than to convince, or which are determined by self-interest or ideology, or which are so deeply rooted in the immediate experience of an individual or group that they are incomprehensible to others not merely in fact, but even in principle. Thus the ideal of objectivity plays an indispensable normative role in social and political dialogue. Traditional conceptions of objectivity, however, fill this role inadequately. We therefore need to re-conceive objectivity so that it can fill this normative role without reinforcing the existence of the injustices which social and political dialogue aims to uncover, undermine, and eliminate.

## I.

The main source of conceptions of objectivity in modern Western political philosophy has been the dominant family of theories in that tradition, namely, liberal democratic political philosophy. Various forms of liberal democratic political philosophy have employed different conceptions of objectivity in their attempts to specify when political dialogue leads to acceptable conclusions about the nature of justice or about what justice requires of a certain society. Most of these conceptions of objectivity have, unfortunately, done more to hinder than to help societies understand what justice demands of them. For instance, the democratic strain of liberal democratic political philosophy traditionally defines democracy as the expression of the will of the majority of a society's citizens. On this definition, an objective political dialogue is a procedurally fair dialogue in which no citizen actively hinders any other from expressing his or her views about what justice demands of society. This conception of objectivity as negative freedom of speech plus majoritarian decision-making provides no grounds for ruling out coercive threats or ideologically determined demands for justice as failing to meet the norm of objectivity, unless the threats in question infringe specifically on others' right to speak their minds.

By contrast, the liberal strain of liberal democratic political philosophy traditionally treats claims about the nature of justice or the existence of injustice as objective if they appeal to the one, true theory of justice: that is, the theory of justice which would be accepted by an emotionally detached and rationally distanced observer, or the theory of justice which is valid independent of any particular observer's perspective or interpretation. But as I said above, such conceptions serve in practice as masks for the ideologically determined interests of dominant social groups. No one engaged in social and political dialogue can effectively occupy the emotionally detached, non-perspectival, pre-interpretive point of view presumed by these conceptions, and only those who enjoy the privileges of dominant groups can even appear to do so.

Recently, some proponents of liberal democracy have proposed a new conception of deliberative objectivity which is sometimes called an ideal of public reason. According to this conception, a claim about the nature of justice or about what justice requires in a given social situation is objective if it can be justified by

appeal to a conception of justice which all members of society can reasonably be expected to accept for their own reasons. Thus, an objective claim about the nature of justice is one that all members of a society can be expected to accept as reasonable on the basis of their different and conflicting moral and religious views. Like the traditional liberal conception of objectivity and unlike the majoritarian democratic conception, the ideal of public reason is strong enough to rule out coercive and ideologically determined claims about justice as non-objective and therefore inadmissible in political dialogue. But the ideal of public reason also differs from the traditional liberal conception of objectivity insofar as it refrains from assuming (1) that one and the same conception of justice can be fairly applied to every society independent of social, cultural, and historical variations between societies and (2) that all members of a given society must accept the same moral justification of that society's conception of justice if that conception is to form the basis of a morally fair political dialogue. Thus the ideal of public reason is at once stronger than its majoritarian counterpart and more sensitive to moral and religious pluralism than its liberal counterpart.

## II.

Public reason's sensitivity to moral and religious pluralism has encouraged some liberal democratic political philosophers to hope that this ideal can help liberalism become more sensitive to political problems related to racial, gender, ethnic, and cultural pluralism as well. Some such hope seems to animate Will Kymlicka's argument for the protection of the cultures of Canada's First Nations, for instance.<sup>(1)</sup> Liberals have often opposed the demand for special rights or privileges for aboriginal persons on the grounds that such demands express a subjective partiality or preference for one social group over others which cannot be justified on objective grounds. Kymlicka argues, by contrast, that the creation of such powers, privileges, and rights should be seen as an effort to secure for aboriginal persons a precondition for the exercise of autonomy which members of dominant cultures take for granted, namely, belonging to a stable culture which can serve as a background framework in which to make life choices. The claim that belonging to a stable culture is a good which all members of society require in order to attain autonomy does not express a subjective partiality or preference and is therefore open to objective evaluation in political dialogue. Thus Kymlicka is able to maintain that providing special rights and privileges to Canada's First Nations is a matter of justice without relinquishing the ideal that all demands for justice must be voiced objectively in order to be admissible into political dialogue.

Kymlicka's strategy in this argument can be generally characterized thus: (1) identify a demand for justice voiced by some particular social group; (2) restate that specific demand as a general claim that all members of a given society depend on or need a certain good in order to lead autonomous lives, and that justice therefore entitles them to this good; (3) argue that all reasonable members of society can be expected to accept this demand for justice as supported by their society's conception of justice, no matter what moral or religious beliefs persuade them to accept that conception; and, finally, (4) justify state intervention to provide that good for those who lack it as a prerequisite for the attainment of autonomy, and thus as a requirement of justice.

Steps (2) and (3) are particularly distinctive of Kymlicka's approach. Step (2) is a process of generalization whereby Kymlicka reconceives the specific good demanded by a particular group as an instance of a more general kind of good

required by all members of society. In step (3), Kymlicka then deploys the ideal of public reason by constructing an argument for this generalized demand for justice in terms of society's shared conception of justice, which citizens of all different moral viewpoints can be expected to accept as justified for their own reasons. These two steps enable Kymlicka to articulate a generalized demand for justice in terms which all members of a morally and religiously pluralistic society can be expected to accept.

I have tried to show that Kymlicka's approach to dealing with the demands for justice voiced by Canada's First Nations can be understood as employing a conception of objectivity based on the ideal of public reason. If this approach were to succeed, then it could be adapted to address other forms of injustice which operate along lines of culture. Proponents of the liberatory potential of liberal political philosophy frequently express the hope that this approach can also be modified to address injustices related to gender, race, class, sexuality, and other aspects of social identity. But while Kymlicka's approach enjoys some clear advantages over its liberal democratic predecessors, it is inadequate to address this broader range of forms of injustice.

### III.

The basic problem with the ideal of public reason is that it does not go far enough in acknowledging the depth and significance of the epistemic gulfs between different social standpoints. Not every form of injustice is or can be made equally evident to every member of society. In some cases, members of privileged groups remain unaware of existing injustices simply on account of disinterest or laziness. The wide-ranging effects of material deprivation on the lives of the working poor and welfare recipients are a good example of forms of injustice which go unrecognized by members of the professional and capitalist classes largely because these persons are either passively disinterested in these realities or actively desirous of avoiding learning about them. Claims made by the poor or by anti-poverty activists about the ways poverty constrains people's efforts to lead an autonomous lives are unlikely to gain general acceptance among members of the middle and upper classes for several reasons.

First, most professionals and capitalists have no idea how much effort, frustration, and humiliation results from being jobless and dependent on various impersonal, paternalistic, and often racist social services to meet the immediate physical needs of oneself and one's family. This is largely because poverty does not constrain the lives of the middle and upper classes, and most members of these economic classes are largely if not completely inexperienced with the routine daily experience of material deprivation. This inexperience with poverty can make it hard for them to accept claims about the variety and seriousness of the obstacles faced by those who are trying to overcome poverty.

Second, the well off have little motivation to repair their ignorance of what it is like to live in poverty. If they were to discover how much the poor suffer as a result of their deprivation, they would have to come to terms with how much they benefit from their relative affluence and how much power that affluence permits them to exercise over those who are less well off. Confronting real inequities in the distribution of wealth could call into question the moral justifiability of their own economic standing and social power.

Third, some professionals and capitalists are not benignly ignorant of the social basis of their material comfort and personal freedom, but are well aware of how their enjoyment of these goods depends upon the perpetuation of economic inequality. Some of these members of the privileged classes will be ideologically motivated to conceal the operation of the social factors, which create and reinforce the advantages they enjoy so as to maintain those advantages.

In each of these cases, the members of a dominant social group are unlikely to accept the validity of a demand for justice, either because they live at too great a social distance from the injustice in question or because they have emotional, social, and economic investments in the perpetuation of the status quo. Their failure to heed subordinate group members' claims about justice on account of their epistemically disadvantageous social location or their own self-interest in the status quo is a clear case of failure to meet the demands of objectivity, a failure which participants in social dialogue should be able to criticize.

But if we conceive of objectivity in terms of the ideal of public reason, then we have no basis for criticizing the attitudes discussed above as failures to be objective. The ideal of public reason merely requires participants in social dialogue about matters of justice to listen to and reasonably evaluate others' claims about justice so long as these claims are voiced in terms they understand and are supported with reasons they can accept on the basis of their own moral and religious views. It does not go beyond this to require that members of dominant group seek out experiences, which can help them understand the standpoints of the subordinate and the marginalized. Nor does the ideal of public reason require dominant group members to examine their moral and religious views self-critically to uncover any signs of ideological determination. By failing to point out the limitations and distortions of the epistemic viewpoint of dominant group members, the ideal of public reason masks and reinforces the privileges of dominant groups rather than uncovering and undermining them.

Indeed, if anyone is to be criticized for failing to meet public reason's standard of objectivity, it will be the members of subordinate social groups who criticize the status quo. As suggested above, such persons must frequently articulate demands for justice whose weight other members of society will not accept, appreciate, or even comprehend because, for one reason or another, these others lack the experiences which would allow them to feel the weight of those demands. But the ideal of public reason admits demands for justice as objective only if those demands are ones that other members of society can reasonably be expected to accept. As a result, the ideal of public reason not only fails to provide a ground on which the marginalized and oppressed can stand in order to criticize their oppressors' attempts to maintain and reinforce their oppression. It also places the burden of proving one's freedom from subjective interest and bias squarely upon the marginalized critic of the status quo rather than upon the dominant defender of that state of affairs.

A deeper conceptual problem is lurking here, as well. My examples relating to poverty, discussed above, address a form of oppression which most professionals and capitalists have not and in all likelihood will never experience. But even the richest of the rich could conceivably lose everything and be out on the street in a matter of days, or even choose to divest herself of her wealth for moral or religious reasons in order to share the state of the least well off. This is not,

however, the case with some other forms of oppression, such as racism. Short of an overnight transformation of the current matrix of racial identities, neither choice nor fate can change one's race from white to black in the context of US society. Thus not only are most white Americans likely, for reasons discussed above, to remain ignorant of the experiences of oppression which ground many demands for justice voiced by black Americans. But these experiences also are in principle unavailable to white Americans, regardless of how much (or, more frequently, how little) they might desire to have those experiences in order to understand racism better.

This is not to say that the grounds for black Americans' demands for racial justice are in principle incommunicable to outsiders of that social group, but only that they cannot be experienced first-hand by those who are not black Americans. If the concept of objectivity is to play a useful role in political dialogue, it must somehow take account of this gulf of understanding created by social diversity. Part of objectivity's role as a norm governing political dialogue is to require all participants to try in good faith to understand others' claims and to make their own claims understood by others. If our concept of objectivity sets the threshold of a good-faith effort to meet this standard so high that no claim which is grounded in an experience which is not in fact or in principle equally available to all participants is not objective, then our concept of objectivity will silence the demands for justice voiced by many oppressed groups and perpetuate their marginalization. But our concept of objectivity can also err by setting this threshold so low that even claims which are in principle incomprehensible to those lacking a certain kind of experience which is peculiar to a particular social group cannot be criticized as being epistemically inaccessible to much of society and thus as not being objective. In this case, we effectively neutralize any persuasive force which well-grounded and soundly argued demands for justice might have in social dialogue by making it impossible to distinguish well-grounded, communicable claims from ungrounded, incommunicable claims. We need a renewed conception of objectivity, which steers between these twin perils.

Such a conception can and should maintain the fundamental importance of the corrigibility, communicability, and context-dependence of claims about the nature of justice without insisting that all evidence about the nature of justice be equally accessible to every member of society, regardless of the epistemic limitations and distortions of that person's social standpoint. One way this might be achieved is to define objectivity in terms of each person's responsibility to seek out, uncover, and undermine whatever impedes social dialogue about matters of justice, whether it is an incorrigible appeal to incommunicable evidence of the existence of a purported injustice or a lazy assumption that those who suffer injustice must bear the sole responsibility for bringing that injustice to light. More could surely be said about how to develop a conception of objectivity in this direction, but that will have to wait for the discussion period.

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## NOTES

(1) See Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community, and Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), pp. 140-205.

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