

**UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON  
SPRING 2016**

**PHIL 560 A: Seminar in Philosophy of Science  
Objectivity, in the ideal and in practice**

**Instructor:** Professor Alison Wylie  
**Class meetings:** Thursdays 3:30-5:20, Savery 408

**Office hours:** Wednesdays, 3:00-5:00, Savery M396  
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### **Seminar Description**

Of all the epistemic ideals that have come in for critical reassessment in recent decades, 'objectivity' is perhaps most sharply contested. What counts as objectivity has been shown to have a history, to be contingent and changeable depending on context, interest, and the specific types of epistemic failings it is meant to counteract, and sometimes to mask the operation of the very interests researchers are meant to transcend in the name of objectivity. Some have urged that we give up talk of objectivity altogether while others take a deflationary approach, disaggregating 'objectivity' into a family of loosely related epistemic virtues. Still others urge a pragmatic turn, focusing attention on procedural norms by which objectivity is appraised. One thing everyone agrees on is that ideals of objectivity carry immense normative weight – in scientific contexts as well as in public debate.

With a wealth of philosophical and historical research now in hand that calls into question the viability of conventional conceptions of objectivity that equate it with transcendence of context and require that scientific inquiry be 'value-free', the aim of this seminar is to take stock of this ideal and assess what is at issue in debates that turn on claims of objectivity. The anchoring texts for the seminar present three different responses to critiques of 'aperspectival' ideals of objectivity. In *Objectivity* (2007) Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison present a rich social history of the conceptual palimpsest that has taken shape in the shifting contexts that have defined what counts as 'scientific' inquiry since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. And in *Science, Truth and Democracy* (Kitcher 2001) and *The Fate of Knowledge* (Longino 2002), Philip Kitcher and Helen Longino develop closely argued philosophical reassessments of the terms of debate given social/historical and contextualist critiques that have reframed philosophical thinking about science since the 1970s.

Kitcher will be giving the 2016 Stice Lecture in the second week of the quarter, so we begin with his appraisal of the philosophical landscape. We then turn to Daston and Galison's history of objectivity, and we close the quarter with discussion of Longino's proceduralist account and a complementary set of readings that articulate arguments for thoroughly contextualist, pragmatic accounts of objectivity: the claims for 'strong objectivity' advanced by standpoint theorists, and for conceptualizing objectivity in terms of trust.

### **Texts**

- Lorraine Daston & Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (Zone Books, 2007).
- Philip Kitcher, *Science Truth and Democracy* (Oxford University Press 2001).
- Helen E. Longino, *The Fate of Knowledge* (Princeton University Press 2002).
- All other readings available on Canvas.

### **Requirements**

This is a reading-intensive seminar. The requirements include reading responses and in-class presentations that emphasize close critical analysis of the texts assigned for the weekly seminar meetings. In addition, each member of the seminar will be required to write a more substantial thesis-driven paper that develops an analysis of ideals of objectivity as these figure in their area of primary research interest.

### **Learning objectives**

My central goals for this seminar are that you should come away with the following:

- Content knowledge of a range of positions on objectivity that have been influential in philosophical and public debate about the epistemic status of science;
- Skills of conceptual analysis relevant for disembedding assumptions about ideals of objectivity that underpin claims about the goals of scientific inquiry, the role of social values in science, and the credibility and authority of scientific knowledge; in contexts of practice and public debate as well as philosophical and social/historical scholarship.
- Insights about how these assumptions configure research practice and philosophical accounts of scientific inquiry in your areas of research interest or expertise.