



Reality is veiled: The subject that knows and the limits of the objective

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Abstract

In this extremely brief essay I trace and contextualize the rupture between objective and subjective knowledge, beginning with the Kantian reconciliation of empiricism and rationalism and the slow but resolute march that this led from idealism to phenomenology to existentialism and postmodern philosophy ending in contemporary discourse and the dangers of subjectivity that appears objective. The problem is urgent and requires a return to the Kantian origin rather than a slippery slope of moral depravity that current philosophies have led to.

Keywords: objectivity, subjectivity, Kant, relativism, pseudo-objectivity.

1. Introduction:

I have been contemplating the notions of the objective and subjective. The modern assumption that objectivity is superior rests on a mistake: that objectivity is independent of the subject. But objectivity is never accessed except through a subject—through perception, language, categories, interests, power structures, and historical location. What we call “objective” is already processed subjectively, only with its origins concealed.

This creates a permanent epistemic rupture: To want objectivity is already to admit dependence and to be subjective is already to distort what one seeks.

It may seem then that one could retreat into the realm of the intersubjective to overcome this hiatus. Consensus, however, may signal truth—but just as often power, fashion, or fear. Thus, Intersubjectivity is not objectivity but rather it is a negotiated truce between subjectivities.

One therefore ought to maintain the impossibility of a view from nowhere, that is, objectivity, while at the same time dismissing subjectivity as a form of objectivity. It seems one is in an impossible bind. I shall trace this philosophical heritage that began in the West with Kant’s “Copernican Revolution” and morphed into idealism, phenomenology, existentialism, post modernism and finally contemporary subjectivism which will be described as dangerous. While no solution will be offered, I will conclude with the possibility of knowledge claims and institutional control in need of responsible humility rather than radical subjectivity. The rupture remains but a less damaging outcome is possible and urgent as the latter position is dangerous.

2. Transcendental Objectivity – origins of the rupture

In Critique of Pure Reason (1st ed. 1781; 2nd ed. 1787), Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) argues that objectivity is no longer access to things-in-themselves (noumena), but necessary and universal validity of appearances (phenomena) constituted through a priori structures of the subject. In this formulation, Objectivity is that which holds necessarily and universally for any possible subject of experience, given shared transcendental conditions (space, time, categories).

This radical shift means that objectivity becomes not independence from the subject, but dependence on universally shared subjective conditions. This is the precise sense in which objectivity is already subjective. The categories are not my categories.

They are the conditions for any possible experience. Thus, Kant gives us: objectivity without metaphysical realism and universality without God’s-eye access. This is why Kant remains the last great defender of objectivity without illusion.

3. The Rupture and Attempts at Reconciliation

The next “stage” sees these three key figures: Fichte (1762–1814), Schelling (1775–1854) and Hegel (1770–1831). With them, German Idealism attempts to heal Kant’s rupture by overcoming the subject–object divide. Strategies include Fichte’s objectivity grounded in the self-positing Ich, Schelling’s Identity of nature and spirit and Hegel’s objectivity as historical–dialectical self-unfolding of Geist. The latter is objectivity as the self-development of reason through history, not a static condition of cognition. In this sense, objectivity is no longer timeless, truth becomes historical and mediation deepens. However, this introduces a problem: Objectivity begins to slide into system, totality, and later suspicion of grand narratives.

4. Phenomenological Intersubjectivity

The rupture takes on new forms: Key figures here include Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) (Logical Investigations, 1900–01; Ideas I, 1913) and Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) (Being and Time, 1927). Objectivity is grounded not in a solitary subject, but in intersubjective constitution. Objectivity is that which is constituted through shared intentional structures and lifeworlds. In Husserl, objectivity arises through the mutual verification of perspectives and the “lifeworld” underlies scientific abstraction. With Heidegger: Truth as *aletheia* (unconcealment) and objectivity is derivative of being-in-the-world. The positive outcome is that objectivity means embodiment, being situated and has communal meaning. The loss is that there is no ultimate foundation and objectivity becomes fragile, contextual, revisable.

5. Existential Internalization of the Rupture

Then the rupture assumes a new form with Kierkegaard (1813–1855), Nietzsche (1844–1900) and Sartre (1905–1980). The rupture is no longer theoretical—it becomes lived. Objectivity is something one longs for but cannot inhabit without loss of self. Truth becomes costly, risky and bound to existence. In Kierkegaard: “Truth is subjectivity” (often misread) but not relativism, but existential commitment. In Nietzsche, Perspectivism dominates and we find a suspicion of objectivity as disguised will-to-power. Consequence: The ethical danger emerges that without discipline, subjectivity begins to masquerade as objectivity.

6. Late Modern / Postmodern Collapse into Radical Subjectivity

Between 1960–2000, the key figures are Foucault, Derrida and Lyotard. Suspicion (of the objective) becomes dominant; and objectivity is treated as: discourse, power and narrative. Objectivity is an ideological effect rather than a regulative ideal. What happens here is critique without reconstruction and deconstruction without responsibility. This radical subjectivity presents itself as moral, as epistemic certainty. This is subjectivism with authority, not humility.

7. Contemporary Pseudo-Objectivity

Finally, from 2000 to the present, the rupture begins to look like this. The forms it takes are the following:

- Algorithmic neutrality
- Moral absolutism grounded in experience
- Consensus-as-truth
- “The science says” without metaphysics

It is objectivity without transcendental grounding, but with performative certainty. This is objectivity as posture, not as aspiration. Its methods may be as simple and seemingly innocuous as: “The data shows...” The subject disappears *not because it is absent*, but because it is concealed; “Everyone agrees...” but agreement does not equate with objectivity. Rather it may indicate power, fashion and fear of exclusion. Thus, intersubjectivity hardens into dogma.

Another simple form is: “As someone who has lived X, I know...” Experience becomes unquestionable, uncriticizable and absolute. This is subjectivity immune to critique, which is the opposite of Kantian responsibility. Another one: “The science says...” but science rests on metaphysical assumptions it no longer examines and values are smuggled in as facts. This is not science. It is authority without reflection. True objectivity (in the Kantian sense) requires explicit conditions, acknowledgment of limits, openness to revision and a distinction between fact, value, and interpretation. Pseudo-objectivity does the opposite – it hides its conditions; denies its limits; treats disagreement as moral failure and collapses critique into harm. While Postmodernism said (often clumsily): “There is no neutral standpoint”, Contemporary pseudo-objectivity says: “There *is* a neutral standpoint — and we occupy it.”

In contemporary discourse, objectivity has not disappeared but has been simulated. Claims to neutrality now frequently rest on concealed assumptions—algorithmic authority, moralized experience, or appeals to consensus—rather than explicit epistemic conditions. What emerges is not objectivity in the Kantian sense, but a pseudo-objectivity that masks its subjective origins while demanding unquestioned assent. That is why it is more dangerous than even post-modern relativism.

8. Conclusion

When objectivity is declared impossible, two broad responses tend to follow.

The first is responsible epistemic humility: the recognition that all knowing proceeds from somewhere, that claims require justification, that perspectives must remain open to revision, and that disagreement is a condition of inquiry rather than a moral failure. This stance does not abandon objectivity, but treats it as a *regulative ideal*—something to be approached through discipline, dialogue, and methodological care rather than possessed as certainty.

The second response is more troubling: radical subjectivity disguised as objectivity. Here, perspective hardens into authority, experience becomes immune to critique, consensus replaces justification, and procedural or scientific language masks unexamined normative commitments. This position does not reject objectivity outright; rather, it simulates it while abolishing its conditions. Disagreement is moralized, critique is pathologized, and power speaks in the grammar of neutrality.

This second form is not relativism. It is dogmatism without accountability. As the classical guarantees of objectivity weaken, the human desire for certainty does not disappear; it reemerges in less examined, more coercive forms. What is required, therefore, is neither a return to naïve realism nor a celebration of radical subjectivity, but a renewed commitment to epistemic responsibility: the explicit acknowledgment of conditions, limits, values, and interests that underwrite knowledge claims.

The rupture between subjectivity and objectivity cannot be healed. But it can be inhabited with discipline rather than denial. Objectivity survives not as possession or posture, but as a fragile achievement—one that demands humility, restraint, and continual self-critique.

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