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Abstract: While, in common usage, objectivity is usually regarded as a virtue, and failures to be objective as vices, this concept tends to be absent in argumentation theory. This paper will explore the possibility of taking objectivity as an argumentative virtue. Several problems immediately arise: could objectivity be understood in positive terms—not only as mere absence of bias? Is it an attainable ideal? Or perhaps objectivity could be explained as a combination of other virtues?

Keywords: bias, detachment, objectivity, self-knowledge, virtue

1. Introduction

Among the theorists who have written about argumentative or, more broadly, intellectual virtues, the alleged virtue of *objectivity* is conspicuously absent. It does not appear, for example, in Richard Paul's list of virtues that characterise critical thinking in the "strong sense," (1993, pp. 261–262) nor in Zagzebski's examples of intellectual virtues (1996, p. 114). Andrew Aberdein (2010, p. 175) proposes a detailed typology of argumentative virtues, which does not include objectivity either. Is its absence in the relevant literature evidence that such a virtue does not exist?

I take it that 'objectivity' is used by ordinary speakers to refer to some good quality that is in some way related to critical thinking—sometimes more specifically to intellectual honesty, as when we talk about objective journalists. The title of the present congress itself—"Argumentation, objectivity and bias"—reveals the usage of the concept in connection with argumentation and bias. And, in critical thinking texts, we sometimes find it even if undefined; for example:

> The best we can do in moving toward increased *objectivity* is to bring to the surface the set of beliefs, assumptions, and inferences from the perspective of which our analysis is proceeding... [my emphasis] (Paul, 1981, p. 4)

I will take all of this as evidence, albeit admittedly rather weak, that there might be a virtue of objectivity. In the philosophical domain, however, the term 'objectivity' refers to so many different things that it is sometimes unclear what we are talking about. The historian Allan Megill (1994) identifies four senses in which 'objectivity' has been used: *absolute*, regarding the representation of things as they really are; *disciplinary*, referring to the claim by practitioners of a particular discipline to be authoritative; *dialectical*, related to the constitution of objects by the action of subjectivity; and *procedural*, focused on impersonality of procedure. Lloyd (1995) provides yet another list of four different meanings. And Marianne Janack (2002) distinguishes up to thirteen different uses of the term 'objectivity':

(1) objectivity as value neutrality;
(2) objectivity as lack of bias, with bias understood as including:
(a) personal attachment;
(b) political aims;
(c) ideological commitments;
(d) preferences;
(e) desires;
(f) interests;
(g) emotion.
(3) objectivity as scientific method;
(4) objectivity as rationality;
(5) objectivity as an attitude of 'psychological distance';
(6) objectivity as 'world-directedness';
(7) objectivity as impersonality;
(8) objectivity as impartiality;
(9) objectivity as having to do with facts;
(10) objectivity as having to do with things as they are in themselves; objectivity as universality;
(11) objectivity as disinterestedness;
(12) objectivity as commensurability;
(13) objectivity as intersubjective agreement. (p. 275)

With such a variety of different, although somehow related uses, it is little wonder that the author concludes that the word "refers to so many different things that it cannot be captured in a purely descriptive and literal form" (Janack, 2002, p. 275), and its common-sense applications, as well as the philosophical attempts to define it, mask "the instability of the concept" (Janack, 2002, p. 279).

Perhaps Janack (2002) is right, and objectivity is, as both she (p. 272) and Arthur Fine (2004, p. 121) put it, a "hodgepodge." In that case, objectivity could not be considered a virtue in argumentation. When people use this concept in an everyday sense—when they censure someone's lack of objectivity or praise someone as objective—they would actually be using a vague concept comprised of heterogeneous and variable values. My aim in this article, however, is to explore the possibility that there is something to that common-sense notion—at least taken narrowly as an argumentative virtue. This introduction is partly an acknowledgement of the difficulty of such an enterprise, which of course will not be accomplished here, but merely hinted at.

In order to focus on objectivity as a virtue, some of its senses must be ruled out from the beginning. Procedural objectivity, for example, does not concern an individual's character but the quality of a method involving several people. Some of the uses in Janack's (2002) list that refer to procedural objectivity are scientific method (3), commensurability (12), and intersubjective agreement (13). On the other hand, objectivity as lack of bias (2) and as an attitude of psychological distance (5), among other uses, are clearly personal traits. Due to limits of time and space, I will focus on these uses (2) and (5), as they seem to me to be the most promising candidates to capture the common-sense use of 'objectivity'. By considering how objectivity could be characterised in terms of these two uses, my main concerns will be whether it is a virtue

that is genuinely *different* from other virtues—such as intellectual humility or open-mindedness—and whether it is truly *attainable* by human beings.

Notice that my interest in objectivity as a distinct virtue and my focus on uses (2) and (5) will force me to leave aside important (parts of) contributions to the issue of objectivity. For instance, Rescher's (1997) work is undoubtedly an important one. But he conceives of objectivity broadly as rationality, and discusses it as, for example, universality (chs. 4, 10), quantification (ch. 5), communication (ch. 6), or ontological objectivity (ch. 7). Some of his insights, then, are not appropriate for a virtue approach, and others do not help us elucidate a virtue of objectivity as distinct from other virtues.

2. Objectivity as lack of bias

During the last decades there has been a great amount of empirical research on biases in human perception and reasoning. Biases are systematic distortions of facts or errors in judgement produced involuntarily by all of us, human beings (Pohl, 2004, pp. 2-3). A well-known example is the Linda problem, where the probability of a conjunction of events ("Linda is a bank teller and is active in the feminist movement") is thought by most people (up to 90%) to be greater than the probability of a single one of those events ("Linda is a bank teller"), which violates the conjunction rule of probability theory (Fisk, 2004).

What is the source of our biases? There has been a debate on that question. There are those who take a *motivational* approach, holding that what affects reasoning is motivations, broadly understood as "any wish, desire, or preference that concerns the outcome of a given reasoning task" (Kunda, 1990, p. 480). We sometimes have an interest in the truth of a particular conclusion among the possible ones, and such an interest pushes our reasoning towards that conclusion. It is not, as Ziva Kunda (1990) points out, that we can believe whatever we want (p. 482). Rather, our motivations influence which of our background beliefs and which rules we select in reasoning (Kunda, 1990, p. 483), but our inferences must nonetheless follow some logically consistent pattern (Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1987, p. 302). We are, after all, more or less constrained by reason, while at the same time "goals enhance the accessibility of those knowledge structures—memories, beliefs, and rules—that are consistent with desired conclusions" (Kunda, 1990, p. 494).

Several kinds of motivations have been proposed in the literature. Tetlock and Levi (1982) discuss four theoretical positions that belong to this motivational—or, as they call it, "functionalist"—approach, each of which focuses on a different motivational source:

- *Need for self-esteem*. It is taken as a broad need for a good self-concept, related for example to moral worth or skills. This motivation might explain the considerable amount of evidence that shows that we tend to take more responsibility for our successes than for our failures; successes tend to be attributed to personal skills while situational circumstances tend to be alluded in order to account for failures (Kunda, 1990, p. 486; Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1987, p. 298). Research indicates the existence of further self-serving biases of this kind; thus, one study showed that we tend to associate ourselves with fair behaviours and the others with unfair behaviours (Messick, Bloom, Boldizer, & Samuelson, 1985). We tend to see ourselves

as being better than average on many desirable aspects.[1] We even tend to consider ourselves less biased than the others (Friedrich, 1996; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Pronin, 2007, 2008; Pronin, Gilovich, & Ross, 2004; Scopelliti et al., 2015).

- *Need for social approval*. Analyses that focus on this need emphasise the public and social impacts of our beliefs about ourselves and the others. It has been shown, for instance, that "subjects explain their performance more defensively to high status than to peer audiences" (Tetlock & Levi, 1982, p. 78). The key term here is that of *self-presentation*: "the manner in which individuals plan, adopt, and carry out strategies for managing the impressions they make on others" (Arkin, Appelman, & Burger, 1980, p. 23). Arkin *et al*. (1980) showed that self-presentation may influence the attributions of success and failure—reversing those related to self-esteem, as discussed in the previous paragraph. Thus, these researchers performed two experiments that suggested that individuals with high scores in social anxiety tend to be more modest and to assume more responsibility for failure and less responsibility for success, avoiding flattering attributions that would not persuade their audience.

- *Need to believe in a "just world"*. Our general tendency to make sense of the events in the world and to believe that things happen for a reason is taken by some researchers as a cause of bias. This need is "rooted in strong motivational forces acquired early in socialization" and make people "very reluctant to acknowledge that the world (especially the world closest to them) is not really just" (Tetlock & Levi, 1982, p. 79). Thus, some studies have shown that when people are exposed to the suffering of a subject, if they are unable to stop or compensate it, they tend to evaluate that subject more negatively—convincing themselves that the victim deserves it (Tetlock & Levi, 1982, p. 80).

- *Need for effective control*. Finally, some biases have been considered to be caused by our "desire to feel that events are predictable and controllable" (Tetlock & Levi, 1982, p. 81). Several illusions of control are rather common.[2] Consider, for example, when someone takes a herbal supplement in order to avoid colds and the flu and, even though it has little or no effect, he attributes a period of good health to the supplement; or take the example of the gamblers that believe that their choice of slot machine or their way of pulling the handle affect their chances of winning (Thompson, 2004, p. 115).

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[1] A bias known as the *Lake Wobegon effect*, after a fictitious town where all the children are above average (Friedrich, 1996, p. 107).

[2] Apparently, moderately depressed people tend to be more realistic about their degree of control on events (Thompson, 2004, p. 123). I hope that is not what it takes to be virtuous.

Vasco Correia (2011) has also emphasised the role of motivations in rational argumentative behaviour:

> In the context of argumentation, the phenomenon of motivated irrationality tends to occur when the arguer 'feels very strongly' about a given standpoint, that is, when her commitment to the standpoint is anchored in strong emotions or interests. (p. 110)

However, some kinds of bias do not lend themselves so easily to motivational accounts, and approaches that search for the origin of bias in our cognitive capacities and reasoning processes seem more appropriate. Thus, some researchers have argued for a *cognitive* perspective, one that regards people as "intuitive scientists" and that looks for the sources of bias in our mental processes and our prior beliefs (Tetlock & Levi, 1982, pp. 71-72). Tetlock and Levi (1982) showed how the aforementioned biases could also be accounted for in information-processing terms. But other biases seem more obviously attributable to cognitive mechanisms, such as the one reported in the previously mentioned Linda experiment.

The *availability effect* is a bias showed by Tversky and Kahneman (1973) to be a result of a heuristic that we use in order to reduce our reasoning effort: "A person is said to employ the availability heuristic whenever he estimates frequency or probability by the ease with which instances or associations could be brought to mind" (p. 208). In one of their experiments, these researchers (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973) asked the subjects to recall a list of names, some of which were famous and some not. 80 of the 99 subjects who were asked to compare the frequency of names judged the famous names to be more frequent, even though there were fewer famous names in the list (pp. 220-221). The availability heuristic has some important implications for our everyday judgements:

> Perhaps the most obvious demonstration of availability in real life is the impact of the fortuitous availability of incidents or scenarios. Many readers must have experienced the temporary rise in the subjective probability of an accident after seeing a car overturned by the side of the road. Similarly, many must have noticed an increase in the subjective probability that an accident or malfunction will start a thermonuclear war after seeing a movie in which such an occurrence was vividly portrayed. Continued preoccupation with an outcome may increase its availability, and hence its perceived likelihood. (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973, p. 230)

The widespread *confirmation bias* has also been associated with cognitive mechanisms. This kind of bias takes place when "information is searched for, interpreted, and remembered in such a way that it systematically impedes the possibility that the hypothesis could be rejected— that is, it fosters the immunity of the hypothesis" (Oswald & Grosjean, 2004, p. 79). In a famous experiment, Peter Wason (1960) asked the subjects to try to find the rule that captured a series of numbers; they were presented with the set "2, 4, 6" and their task was to make up successive sets of three numbers in order to check whether the numbers conformed to the rule, until they figured out the rule (pp. 231-32). Most subjects came up with rules such as "numbers increasing in intervals of 2" or "consecutive even numbers" and then they provided sets of numbers—"8, 10, 12" or "20, 22, 24"—intended to *confirm* the rule rather than *refute* it. When they finally were

confident enough to state the rule, they discovered that they were wrong. The rule was actually "three numbers in increasing order of magnitude" (Wason, 1960, pp. 129-140).

Wason's (1960) conclusion that we seek to confirm our hypothesis was later challenged (cf. Oswald & Grosjean, 2004), but other studies have found that in certain domains we usually pursue the confirmation of our beliefs: we tend to dismiss evidence that contradicts our beliefs and uncritically accept evidence that supports them. A well-known example is the experiment carried out by Lord, Ross and Lepper (1979), in which proponents and opponents of death penalty were given two studies, one that confirmed the deterrent effectiveness of death penalty and another that disconfirmed it, and were asked to evaluate them. As expected, subjects evaluated as less convincing the study that contradicted their initial beliefs, and after the study their views were even more polarised rather than more moderate. However, it seems less obvious in this study than in Wason's that motivations do not enter the picture.

Overall, it might be reasonable to assume that both motivations and cognitive processes are involved in the origin of biases (Kunda, 1990, p. 493; Pronin et al., 2004, p. 788). Taking this into account, is there anything that can be done in order to purge, or at least attenuate, those biases? If not, does it make sense to talk about a virtue of objectivity understood as lack of bias? If our interests and desires motivate us towards specific conclusions and slanted reasonings, perhaps a virtue theory that takes into account character and emotions can help mitigate the effects of strong motivations. But what about our cognitive processes?

The greatest problem is that, as research has repeatedly shown, we are rarely conscious of our own biases. We are capable of spotting biases in others, but biases are not accessible by introspection and hence we tend to believe that our own opinions are not biased; this is what has been called the *bias blind spot* (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Pronin et al., 2004). The bias blind spot influences our assessment of our own opinions, making us view them as the truth of the matter: "People's lack of awareness of the processes that shape and distort their perceptions leads them to view those perceptions as objective" (Pronin, 2008, p. 1178).

Since we are not aware of our biases, this implies that it might not be possible for us to *consciously* correct them, as Correia (2011) explains:

> This means that the sincerity requirement and the care for truth are not sufficient to ensure the rationality of our arguments. Even well-intended arguers might fall prey to motivated illusions and put forward tendentious arguments, given that cognitive biases are unconscious. (p. 123)

Perhaps the first thing that one can conclude when learning about the pervasive and unnoticed character of biases is that we as arguers should not be too confident of our standpoints. At the same time, we should listen carefully to the others' views, trying to understand them and to take them seriously, and avoiding jumping to the hasty conclusion that they—unlike us—are biased and that's why they disagree with us. This is one of the pieces of advice that Bailin and Battersby (2013) provide:

> The strategy of actively seeking out counter evidence to one's views, looking for and seriously considering the arguments on various sides of an issue, and deliberately considering alternative positions when making a judgment can go a long way toward countering this tendency of rushing to judgment. (p. 8)

I believe this is essentially right. Even though we can probably never completely purge our biases with this method—or, for that matter, with any other method—the path towards an enhanced objectivity undoubtedly includes it. However, a problem emerges at this point, namely, how is this different from other virtues, such us *intellectual humility*, *intellectual empathy*, or *open-mindedness*? We seem to have arrived at a conception of objectivity as a result of other virtues, while what we were looking for instead was a conception of objectivity as a genuine virtue—truly different from other virtues.

If both motivations and cognitive processes are involved in the production of biases, then the virtue of objectivity would seem to imply *perceiving* and *judging* things in a special way. The manifestation of objectivity in our perception and judgment should be such that our idiosyncratic position and motivations do not interfere with our views. Admittedly, that might be an unattainable goal, but it is worth exploring—after all, complete consistency in our beliefs might also be an unattainable goal, but this fact does not make consistency less worth pursuing. Elimination of particular idiosyncrasies is at the core of the view of objectivity as "detachment" from oneself, to which we now turn.

3. Objectivity as detachment

Another sense of objectivity is that of a *nonperspectival* view, of a point of view that does not depend on any individual idiosyncrasy. It is what, in an extreme and somewhat paradoxical way, has been called the "view from nowhere" (Nagel, 1986). Objectivity in this sense can also be said to comprise the notion of objectivity as lack of bias just discussed, as Fine (2004) explains:

> The style of thought that leads to a viewpoint of no one in particular combines the impersonal with the unbiased. Impersonal goes with nonperspectival, perhaps detached and disinterested. Unbiased goes with impartial and neutral. The style could also be abstract or disengaged. (p. 117)

In a famous book, Thomas Nagel (1986) explores the relationship between the inherently human subjective point of view and the human capacity of adopting an objective stance. He discusses the meaning of objectivity and the possibility of attaining it across various areas, from epistemology to ethics. According to him, both perspectives—the internal or subjective and the external or objective—are real. This is how Nagel (1986) sees the human process of adopting an objective stance:

> To acquire a more objective understanding of some aspect of life or the world, we step back from our initial view of it and form a new conception which has that view and its relation to the world as its object. In other words, we place ourselves in the world that is to be understood. (p. 4)

Thus objectivity involves a kind of *detachment* from our point of view, a conception of the world and of ourselves—of our previous subjective views—that is not relative to us. Nor is it a conception relative to other points of view, such as would be the case if it were an intersubjective conception. "The idea of objectivity", Nagel (1986) says, "always points beyond mere intersubjective agreement, even though such agreement, criticism, and justification are essential methods of reaching an objective view" (p. 108). It is a "view from nowhere," as he

puts it. But it is not an all-or-nothing matter, we do not have completely subjective and completely objective views; it is rather a matter of degree. Accordingly:

> A view or form of thought is more objective than another if it relies less on the specifics of the individual's makeup and position in the world, or on the character of the particular type of creature he is. (p. 5)

By transcending our own subjectivity, we leave our previous, more subjective view behind. But that subjective view does not disappear and cannot be ignored. Therefore, one of Nagel's concerns is how the new and more objective view relates to the previous, more subjective one. The bulk of his book focuses on several philosophical problems—the mind, the theory of knowledge, free will and ethics—that are not so relevant for the purposes of this article, but some of his remarks on objectivity can be useful.

Nagel (1986) is particularly interested in the limits of objectivity. One of these limits is, precisely, our subjectivities. He warns against an excessively objective stance, for there are important elements of the world that cannot be captured by objectivity. In particular:

> Some aspects of practical reason may prove to be irreducibly subjective, so that while their existence must be acknowledged from an objective standpoint their content cannot be understood except from a more particular perspective. (Nagel, 1986, p. 149)

Indeed, Nagel (1986) acknowledges that such things as human beings' appearances and perspectives (p. 4), as well as our "hopes, projects, ambitions, and very survival" (p. 131), are important components of the world, and that they are not adequately represented in an objective point of view. Hence, a wholly objective view is not always adequate. This is especially relevant in the context of argumentation. If our subjectivities—our desires, interests, motivations, hopes, fears, and the like—were disregarded as manifestations of a vicious character, most real discussions would become irrelevant or even incomprehensible. Even if it were conceded that those subjective aspects are and should be irrelevant to epistemic or scientific argumentation—something about which I have serious doubts—we still want to take into account ethical, political, and practical discussions in general. Consider, for instance, the following situation imagined by Gilbert (2014):

> Sophie and Emma own a shop that sells specialty teas as well as having a few tables to serve tea and pastries. […] They always closed on Sunday as their business traditionally served mostly people working in the area. But now more small shops are opening up around them and the street is attracting more residents shopping or just out for a stroll. Sophie is single and six years younger than Emma, who is married with young children. Because of the changes in the area, Sophie is wondering if they should begin opening on Sundays. (p. 37)

Let's assume that opening on Sundays would indeed be a good move for Sophie and Emma's shop. They disagree, however, on whether they should work on Sundays. Emma would rather have Sundays off, as this is the only day of the week that she can spend with her family. Sophie, on the other hand, has no family ties and is willing to work on Sundays. From a purely

objective point of view, one that does not take subjective components into account, the discussion is pointless. Both Sophie and Emma agree that opening on Sundays would be good for business, so if Emma does not want to work on Sundays she would just be unreasonable. But that does not seem quite right. Emma's desire to spend time with her family can—in fact, should—be regarded as legitimate. Our everyday lives involve countless situations such as this one. Therefore, if we adopt a conception of the argumentative virtue of objectivity as detachment, it cannot be an extreme "view from nowhere," but a sensible one that does not lead us to reject legitimate motivations such as Emma's.

At the same time, it seems clear that one can adopt an objective stance towards *one's own subjectivity*. As Nagel (1986) says:

> There must be a notion of objectivity which applies to the self, to phenomenological qualities, and to other mental categories, for it is clear that the idea of a mistake with regard to my own personal identity, or with regard to the phenomenological quality of an experience, makes sense. (p. 36)

After the discussion on biases in the previous section, I believe this point is easy to see. Since introspection does not seem to be a good method of discovery of our own cognitive processes, and since many times we are not aware of our own biases, it has to be possible and many times appropriate to take a look at ourselves from a more objective point of view. The research studies conducted by the psychologists mentioned in the previous section are no doubt more objective—as more detached—than the subjects' self-reports. When we are informed of the presence of those unconscious biases, this is information we can take into account in our future deliberations, therefore making our judgements more objective. As Correia (2012) argues, "it seems likely that the very awareness of such biases can lead arguers to be more vigilant regarding their own cognitive weaknesses" (p. 232). This is what Nisbett and Wilson (1977) suggest:

> In addition, we might point out that at least some psychological phenomena probably would not occur in the first place if people were aware of the influence of certain critical stimuli. For example, if people were aware of the effects of the presence of other people on their tendency to offer help to a person in distress, they would surely strive to counteract that influence, and would therefore not show the typical effect. (p. 247)

On the other hand, there is an important difference between our present purposes—objectivity as a virtue in argumentation—and Nagel's book. His discussion on objectivity concerns an absolute view, a view, not dependent on any subjectivity whatsoever, of *reality*. That is, in a sense, he is talking about *truth*. Even though objectivity is usually discussed in the context of epistemology, this notion also carries, as Janack (2002) observes, "metaphysical overtones" (p. 267). In epistemic argumentation, however, what we are interested in is not truth but *knowledge*. Argumentation involves in part the transmission of knowledge between individuals, the putting forward and challenging of justifications—a sensible arguer should be suspicious of anyone presenting anything as "the truth." And this has important implications. For knowledge cannot be detached from the subject. Not only are justificatory reasons inherently related to a subject, but it has been argued that personal interests, desires, motives and the like

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also influence knowledge (Clarke, 1989; Freeman, 2005, ch. 4; Stanley, 2005). Therefore, objectivity cannot consist in a *complete* detachment from our particular circumstances and our subjective aspects, for some of those aspects will still be relevant from a more objective point of view.

Nevertheless, keeping all these qualifications in mind, I believe that a tenable conception exists, not of objectivity as a "view from nowhere," but of objectivity as some limited sort of detachment, that can be properly considered as an argumentative virtue. To the extent that objectivity is understood, not as an all-or-nothing matter, but as a matter of degree, it is not only a potential virtue but also an intrinsic capacity of human beings. To the extent that this capacity is exercised virtuously—that is, among other things, *reasonably*—objectivity as detachment is a tenable conception. Consider the following—allegedly true—story found in a Spanish blog:[3]

> Twenty years ago, in a family meeting, my father was speaking with me and my older cousins. At that moment one of the children, who was five or six years old, came in and, eager to participate in the conversation, he announced that it had been his first day of school.
> 'Really? And how did it go?' my father asked him.
> My cousin stopped and thought for a moment, and then seriously answered:
> 'Very well, very well. Only two children cried.'
> And, after a pause, he added: 'A girl and me.'

Obviously it had not been a good first day of school *for him*, but the child came to realise that the day had been good *on the whole*. This might still fall short of a totally impersonal standpoint, a "view from nowhere," but I believe it is nonetheless a remarkable exercise of detachment from oneself and one's particular circumstances. My contention is that there is something to be praised here, and my aim is to figure out what it is.

Virtuous as the child's view may seem, however, it is not without problems. Independently of how the day turned out to be on the whole, certainly it was not a good day *for him*, and the child misses this. It has already been argued that objectivity in argumentation should not involve disregarding our own interests. If we adopt a conception of objectivity as a virtue that denies the legitimacy of particular individual feelings, desires, and the like, then we will miss the point of most disagreements and arguments in the real world. So, in this example, I believe it would have been completely legitimate for the child to add that it had not been a good day for him, however good it was on the whole.

I emphasise this point not only in order to preserve the legitimacy of particular interests in argumentative contexts, but also to avoid a dangerous pitfall of objectivity. If objectivity required a complete detachment from our particular circumstances and those of others, would this be compatible with a commitment to a cause? Jeffreys (1955) held:

> If by objectivity we mean detachment, including the absence of any emotional involvement, objectivity is clearly incompatible with commitment and with its opposite. It is incompatible with commitment because the committed person is deeply involved emotionally. (p. 77)

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[3] Retrieved on February 27, 2016 from https://medium.com/@kikollan/la-objetividad-2086ff3050f7#.t7225026e [my translation].

Instead of objectivity as detachment, Jeffreys (1955) advocates a conception of objectivity as lack of bias, or, as he puts it, "seeing things as they are and not as we would like or fear them to be" (p. 77). This, he argues, can be reconciled with commitment. But I see two problems here with regard to the virtue of objectivity that I have been trying to elucidate. First, although it is true that I keep using the word 'detachment', I do not mean so strong a detachment as to exclude "any emotional involvement." As Jeffreys himself (1955) says, "our view of knowledge must be one in which existential experience is a necessary and important ingredient, and we cannot believe that anything can be fully understood, as it were from the outside" (p. 81). The degree of detachment for a particular individual in a particular situation must be such that it enables her to understand that she is an imperfect cognitive subject, but not so great as to make her lose sight of the relevant features of that situation. Precisely this contextual, middle-term character of objectivity is what, in my view, makes it suitable for a virtue account. And, secondly, it should be clear after our discussion in the previous section that it is impossible for us to see "things as they are." As Pronin (2008) concludes: "Perceptions only indirectly reflect reality; they are coloured and shaped by influences ranging from the imperfections of vision to the distorting pressures of hopes and desires" (p. 1178). Nevertheless, even if we take this as a goal that is unattainable but worth pursuing—as I suggest we should do—I do not see how we can pursue it without detaching from ourselves in some way. It is by way of my consideration of myself as an object that I can understand that I—just as everybody else—tend to take credit for my successes and to attribute my failures to the circumstances, or that I have a tendency to pay more attention to evidence that confirms my hypotheses. So, in sum, I believe that detachment in some sense and reduction of the effects of biases go hand in hand, and that, since some detachment does not involve disinterestedness, commitment can fit in the picture.

There are, of course, some attitudes that a committed person should adopt in order to be considered objective. For instance, Jeffreys (1955) recommends that "we practise the art of placing ourselves in other people's shoes, and seeing situations as they appear to them" (p. 78). This is no doubt a good piece of advice. Similarly, one should apply the same criteria when judging those situations and evidence that challenge one's point of view and when judging those that support it. Notice, however, that I am interested here in figuring out a *distinct* virtue of objectivity, and these behaviours can be more properly attributed to *intellectual empathy* and to *fairmindedness* respectively (cf. for both virtues Aberdein, 2010, p. 175; Paul, 1993, pp. 261-262).

4. Positionality and self-knowledge

The discussion in the previous sections has ruled out conceptions of objectivity that involve a total purge of our biases and a complete detachment from ourselves. Both things seem impossible to achieve—and, even if they were not, complete detachment would probably do more harm than good. I have hinted instead at a more reasonable conception of objectivity, one more appropriate for ordinary argumentative contexts. At the same time, I have tried to show how the "detachment" conception relates to the "lack of bias" conception: by taking a step back and seeing ourselves as objects—probably with the help of others' feedback, especially the one provided by psychological research—we could counteract our biases and strive for more rational opinions.

The point at which the degree of psychological distance from oneself and one's particular circumstances becomes virtuous will, of course, depend on the particular context. But the

consideration of objectivity as a virtue might be interesting not only because it could take into account its contextual character; it could also reveal its complexity, which cannot be easily reduced to rules or principles. For example, it is usually assumed that the objective pertains to what is public and shared by all, whereas the subjective relates to the particular and private. However, it is rarely so simple. Racist stereotypes, for example, are not private. They are in fact all too public (Janack, 2002, p. 270), but an objective judgement should not be based on them. On the other hand, experiences of injustice suffered by specific social groups are not shared by all members of society—we, middle-class white men, tend not to be aware of many offences— and reports of them may be received as idiosyncrasies or illusions, but an objective judgement should take them into account.

A sensible conception of the virtue of objectivity should be based on the fact that we are and, no matter what we do, will continue to be subjects that perceive the world from a particular perspective, subjects with motivations that are cognitively imperfect. Then, we can aspire to an ideal, but it has to be an ideal rooted in our reality—and that is *truly* desirable, not one that deprives our most precious values of their significance.

Feminist critiques of objectivity in philosophy of science led some philosophers to talk about the stance of *positionality*.[4] As Katharine Bartlett (2014) characterises it:

> Positionality builds on the social constructivist view that truth claims are always from a certain perspective and always specific to the particular set of methods and conditions that produced them. At the same time, positionality endorses the liberal commitment to the possibility of improving what we know through more rigorous truth-seeking, as if there is such a thing as truth to be improved upon. Positionality recognizes that it is not enough to be suspicious of objectivity; we must also be committed to trying to achieve it. (p. 383)

The view that Bartlett (2014) proposes is much in line with what has been argued in the present article. Objectivity involves "a responsibility both for understanding our own partiality and distorted ways of thinking *and* for striving to overcome these multiple distortions" [emphasis in original] (p. 389). While acknowledging our limitations, we should nonetheless make a continuous effort to improve our judgements. I have argued that this predominantly involves taking a step back in order to analyse ourselves, to enhance our *self-knowledge* and thus better understand—and hopefully counteract—our biases. This psychological distance also helps us acquire a broader and more neutral perspective of the circumstances, so that we are capable of seeing, not only what supports our views, but "the whole picture" (Gouldner, 1975, p. 5). That means taking all the relevant details into account and disregarding all the irrelevant details on any given issue.

In a sense, when discussing practical reasoning, Nagel (1986) proposes a method towards a more realistic and practical conception of objectivity, what he calls the *essentially incomplete objective view*:

> We might try, first, to develop as complete an objective view of ourselves as we can, and include it in the basis of our actions, wherever it is relevant. This would mean consistently looking over our own shoulders at what we are doing and why (though often it will be a mere formality). But this objective self-surveillance will

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[4] Amartya Sen (1993; 2009) elaborated a similar notion of 'positional objectivity'.

inevitably be incomplete, since some knower must remain behind the lens if anything is to be known. Moreover, each of us knows this—knows that some of the sources of his actions are not objects of his attention and choice. The objective view of ourselves includes both what we know and can use, and what we know that we do not know, and therefore know that we cannot use. (p. 127)

And

The incomplete view of ourselves includes a large blind spot, behind our eyes, so to speak, that hides something we cannot take into account in acting, because it is what acts. Yet this blind spot is part of our objective picture of the world, and to act from as far out as possible we must to some extent include a recognition of it in the basis of our actions. (Nagel, 1986, p. 127)

The path towards objectivity thus involves a progressively greater detachment—which will never be complete—in order to acquire a better view of ourselves. As I have already pointed out, self-knowledge is what helps us be more objective: "This involves the idea of an unlimited hypothetical development on the path of self-knowledge and self-criticism, only a small part of which we will actually traverse" (Nagel, 1986, p. 128). Then, the regulative component is negative:

Since such absolute objective grounds are even harder to come by in practical than in theoretical reason, a less ambitious strategy seems called for. One such strategy—a strategy of objective tolerance as opposed to objective affirmation—is to find grounds for acting within my personal perspective that will not be *rejected* from a larger point of view: grounds which the objective self can tolerate because of their limited pretensions to objectivity. [emphasis in original] (Nagel, 1986, p. 130).

Given the fact that—as we have seen—even in theoretical reasoning we all have a bias blind spot, I believe this applies to both theoretical and practical reasoning. This method seems appropriate for a conception of objectivity as a virtue for which we should strive, rather than as a state that we could believe to have reached—nobody should be encouraged to feel that she is objective. A proper account of virtues should not regard any of them as "a state you achieve and then sit back, with nothing further to do" (Annas, 2011, p. 25). Any virtue involves a "strive to improve" (Annas, 2011, p. 18). Objectivity is paradigmatic in this sense. Claims of objectivity should be regarded as highly suspicious.

Of course, given the existence of our bias blind spot, we cannot be expected to be able to detect our biases simply by observing ourselves. Our analysis and self-criticism must be in part our response to an argumentative process carried out together with other people, in which we should take seriously the others' criticisms to our points of view and try to sincerely understand their views.

But, again, the question is to what extent the kind of virtue that I have been trying to elucidate here is something different from other existing virtues. For example, self-criticism and consideration of the inevitable presence of biases in us can naturally be considered as part of the virtue of *intellectual humility*. And the effort to truly understand different points of view is no doubt what *intellectual empathy* requires. My intuition is that there is something truly unique in

objectivity, even if the discussion so far may not have completely succeeded in characterising it adequately. Perhaps an instance of patent lack of objectivity could help us see this. Consider the following dialogue:

> A: Violence against women is a huge problem. The United Nations says that one in three women worldwide have experienced physical or sexual violence from men.[5]
> B: Yeah, well, women can be quite mean too.

If we take B to be arguing, then, from an act-based approach, it is easy to explain what is wrong with his reply: it is a problem of *irrelevance*. It can be accounted for as a case of *red herring*, an attempt to change what is at issue, since the point in A's claim has nothing to do with whether men and women are "mean" or not. However, such an explanation is not very enlightening when it comes to understanding what motivated or brought about B's inappropriate response. My intuition is that, from a virtue approach, this example can be best considered as a manifestation of lack of objectivity. B is so immersed in his own situation and perspective, and probably even so consumed by emotions or need for self-esteem, that he is blind to the actually relevant issue. Instead of calmly focusing on what A has actually said, he feels attacked and makes a quite irrelevant remark. This explanation is, in my view, much more enlightening than simply pointing out that it is an instance of red herring. And the opposite of this manifestation of argumentative vice could, it seems to me, be captured by a distinct argumentative virtue— *objectivity*.

5. Conclusion

In this article, I began by acknowledging that the notorious absence of the virtue of objectivity among the lists of intellectual, epistemic or argumentative virtues could be taken as strong evidence that objectivity cannot properly be regarded as a personal trait. Admittedly, other conceptions of objectivity, such as procedural objectivity, are more solid. Since personal biases are inescapable, objectivity in a strong sense can only be the result of a critical procedure among different individuals. Nevertheless, there is a sense—undoubtedly weaker—in which ordinary people praise objectivity and censure lack of objectivity in other people in argumentative contexts. It is this use of the term that I have tried to elucidate here. I am not sure that I have achieved the purpose of identifying a genuine virtue, distinct from, for example, intellectual humility or open-mindedness, but at least a case may be made for it.

I have emphasised self-knowledge—awareness of our motivations and of the presence of biases in us—as a path towards the virtue of objectivity by uniting the idea of detachment from ourselves and the goal of counteracting our biases. This detachment in which we see ourselves as objects should not be taken as anything mysterious. The mere fact of learning from psychological research about biases that affect us all, and of taking oneself as an individual that is affected by these biases just like the others, already implies a distance from one's subjectivity. It will perhaps be argued that this is asking too much. Should everybody know about research studies in psychology? This might sound too demanding. But virtue *is* demanding. And we could

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[5] Retrieved on February 27, 2016 from
http://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/multimedia/2015/11/infographic-violence-against-women

begin by including psychological research about biases in argumentation and critical thinking courses if we want to encourage argumentative virtue.

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