May 18th, 9:00 AM - May 21st, 5:00 PM

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Mapping Objectivity and Bias in Relation to Argument

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Abstract: The conference theme invites contrasts between objectivity and bias, since these two states of affairs are commonly considered contraries. But there are a variety of meanings of the two and a corresponding variety of contraries. Thus there is a problem for any attempt to discuss bias and objectivity in relation to argument as a contrasting pair. Still, several senses of both terms relate to argumentation. I offer an inventory of them.

Keywords: Argumentation, bias, biased, meta-theory, objectivity, objective

1. Introduction

I would like to make two preliminary points and stipulate some terminology before getting down to business.

First, this paper is an exercise in meta-theoretical analysis, not ground-level analysis. Although I discuss objectivity and bias, I do so with a view to supporting a claim about theorizing about objectivity and bias in relation to argument. The second point is a reminder of the old distinction between lumping analyses and splitting analyses. That is, some analyses call for an emphasis on what things share and how they can best be understood as aspects or variations of a single entity, whereas others call for an emphasis on what distinguishes things that might otherwise be conflated. In the case at hand, as will be clear shortly, it seems to me that conflation invites confusion, so the paper is an exercise in splitting, not lumping.

As for terminology, I here mean by an argument a claim and a reason for accepting it. Such arguments are typically used to attempt to persuade an interlocutor or audience, but can also be used to investigate the case that can be made for a claim, perhaps among other things. The “type/token” distinction applies to arguments: argument types are abstract entities; argument tokens are particulars: unique, relative to author, audience, occasion, venue and other features of context. (Thus the ontological argument for God’s existence is an argument type; Anselm’s and Descartes’s versions of the ontological argument are tokens of that type.) I use argumentation to denote both an extended body of related arguments and the activity of differing parties engaging in exchanges of arguments.

The theme of the OSSA11 conference—“Argumentation, Objectivity and Bias”—invites contrasts between objectivity and bias, since these two states of affairs are commonly considered to be contraries, or even contradictories: bias impedes objectivity; lack of objectivity stems from bias; objectivity requires eliminating bias. However, in calling up this trope, the theme also unwittingly invites discussions at cross-purposes or other confusions, for, as I will argue, there are varieties of meanings of both objectivity and bias. It might turn out that to be objective in any sense is not the same as being unbiased in any sense, and that to be biased in any sense is not the same as a failure of objectivity in any sense. In fact when either bias or objectivity is understood in any of its senses that relates to arguments or argumentation and that involves a contrast with its contraries, in most cases those contraries will not include, respectively, objectivity or bias. To
show that this is so, I catalogue the different meanings of bias and of objectivity and for each one note its contraries. It will become evident that in most cases the items in the two catalogues pair up with quite different contraries.

Based on these analyses, there is a problem for any attempt to discuss bias and objectivity in relation to arguments or argumentation along the lines that the two form a contrasting pair—that is, that they are contraries. To be sure, it remains possible that there are several senses of bias in which bias can affect arguments, and several senses of objectivity in which objectivity can be seen as a desirable or an undesirable property of argumentation. And it also remains possible that it requires a bias of some sort to value objectivity of some kind—that being objective in some sense is to exhibit a bias. I will propose an inventory or map of different possible issues that are spawned by each sense of the two concepts.

2. Senses of ‘biased’ and ‘objective’ (species of bias and objectivity)

I first turn to catalogue the various senses of ‘biased’ and ‘objective’. In a paper called “What Is Bias?” published long ago (reprinted in Blair 2012) I wrote:

The root idea of bias . . . is that it is a slant, an angle, a leaning or a limited perspective [“a kind of leaning, or an inclination or a predisposition” (2012, p. 31)]. This idea seems to appear in three types of cases: (1) bias that is bad and avoidable; (2) bias that is unavoidable, potentially dangerous but for which one can compensate; and (3) bias that is contingent and good—or at least neutral. (2012, p. 23)

This account still seems accurate to me, so I take the general concept of bias to be unproblematic, although complex.

“Our usage of the word ‘objectivity’”, writes Lorraine Daston (1992, p. 597), “... is hopelessly but revealingly confused.” She continues:

Current usage allows us to apply the word as an approximate synonym for the empirical (or, more narrowly, the factual); for the scientific, in the sense of public, empirically verifiable knowledge; for impartiality-unto-self-effacement and the cold-blooded restraint of the emotions; for the sense of compelling assent from all rational minds, be they lodged in human, Martian or angelic bodies; and for the ‘really real’, that is to say, objects in themselves independent of all minds except, perhaps, that of God. (1992, pp. 597-598)

Daston goes on to show how these and various other meanings developed historically, with successive senses building in layers upon their predecessors rather than displacing them. In the present paper I am interested in distinguishing different senses of ‘bias’ and ‘objectivity’, that is, different varieties of bias and of objectivity, so Daston’s thesis is grist for my mill and her analysis informs my distinctions.¹

I identify fine-grained senses of the terms ‘biased’ and ‘objective’ and note the contrast terms that attach to each of them. Using that approach, a survey of definitions and examples reveals at least six senses of ‘biased’ (or kinds of bias) and at least six senses of ‘objective’ (or kinds of objectivity). Which of these relate to argument or argumentation, and if so, how, will be considered later.

¹ Thanks to Cate Hundleby for putting me on to Daston’s work.
2.1. Senses of ‘biased’ (the adjective)

Here are six senses of ‘biased’.

B1: Unfair, partial. A judge of an athletic contest (such as those involving boxing, diving, figure skating, gymnastics, mogul skiing, ski jumping or synchronized swimming) or for a literary prize, or a flower show, a beauty contest, or for best apple pie at the county fair, is biased in this sense when she or he is unfair in the sense of being partial by favouring or disfavouring some competitor or group of competitors. Certain flaws in a person’s or group’s performance are overlooked or weighted too lightly and/or certain virtues are weighted too heavily—or the reverse. A judge in a court of law is biased in this sense when partial to one litigant over another in a civil suit or to the prosecution or the defence in a criminal trial. Some arguments or items of evidence are given more or less weight than they deserve, or allowed or disallowed when they shouldn’t be, and so on. Having a bias in this sense is bad, and it is avoidable.

The contradictory of ‘biased’ in this sense—fair or impartial—is not the same as objective. Contraries are uncommitted, open-minded or balanced, not objective.

B2: Closed-minded, prejudiced. A person is said to be biased or to have a bias in this sense when she or he values or disvalues arbitrarily or without sufficient evidence all of some class of entities. One can be biased in this sense by being prejudiced against members of ethnic groups or social classes or occupational groups or genders. Sexism, racism, nationalistic chauvinism are all biases in this sense. Such attitudes are both avoidable, and to be condemned.

The contradictories, open-minded or unprejudiced, do not mean the same as objective. The contraries are tolerant, unblinkered or inclusive, not objective.

B3: Having a preference/dis-preference. In one’s reading habits, one can have a bias against romantic poetry or science fiction or histories, and be biased in favour of police procedurals or westerns or biographies. Serious music listeners can tend to have a bias for some genres and against others—say for classical jazz or against early rock and roll. Having such biases is a contingent property—some have them, others do not—and it is generally regarded as value-neutral: neither a virtue nor a vice.

To have no preference or dis-preference is not to be objective; it’s to be neutral. Contraries of this sense of ‘biased’ are eclectic (in one’s range of tastes), uncommitted or catholic, not objective.

B4. Disproportional. The sex of sea turtles is determined by the temperature of their eggs during their incubation in the sand of the beaches where they are laid. Warmer temperatures cause the turtles to form as females. For instance, sea turtle eggs laid in black sand beaches, which absorb more heat from the sun than white sand beaches, produce a higher percentage of female turtles than eggs laid in white sand beaches. There is a concern among sea turtle biologists that global warming due to climate change is causing what they term highly biased sex ratios among
sea turtles, that is, producing disproportionate numbers of females (too many) and males (too few) (Wyneken and Lolavar 2015). This kind of bias is unavoidable, given climate change, potentially dangerous, and in the case of humans, or with human assistance, can be compensated for. Or, to take another example, a sample in survey research is biased in this sense when there is a greater or lesser representation in the sample of a salient group of the target population than exists in the population at large. To reason or argue from biased samples is to mislead, and results in falsehoods; thus it is bad, and to be avoided.

Unbiased sex ratios among sea turtles are not objective sex ratios; and an unbiased sample is not an objective sample. Contraries of ‘biased’ in this sense are representative, typical, balanced, or, in some cases, equal; but certainly not objective.

B5. Cognitively misaligned. It is to this sense that the much-discussed concept of cognitive bias belongs. Cognitive bias is hypothesized as the explanation of a variety of approaches that can lead to mistaken calculations and other kinds of erroneous decision making judgments, such as medical misdiagnoses. Cognitive bias is characterized as a predisposition, in some cases unavoidable, to use a heuristic that might generally serve well for quick judgments but that can or will cause errors when dealing with more subtle or complicated problems. For instance in judgments of representativeness, there is tendency to be insensitive to the prior probability of outcomes or to the relevance of sample size, or to fall prey to misconceptions of chance (Tversky and Kahneman 1974, in Kahneman 2011, pp. 420-422). Or in assessing the frequency of a class or the probability of an event, there is a tendency to rely on evidence that is readily brought to mind and as a consequence to overlook more relevant but less available data (Tversky and Kahneman 1974, in Kahneman 2011, pp. 425-427). There is evidence that people tend to be improperly influenced in their judgments by being anchored in the initial presentation or description of the problem, and people fail to adjust for relevant differences such as the different probabilities of conjunctive and of disjunctive events (Tversky and Kahneman 1974, in Kahneman 2011, pp. 427-428). Relying on research like that of Tverskysy and Kahneman, in a well-known paper Croskerry (2003) has produced a long list of what he terms “cognitive dispositions to respond” that can lead to medical misdiagnoses. ² A couple of examples from his list are confirmation bias: “the tendency to look for confirming evidence to support a diagnosis rather than look for disconfirming evidence to refute it” and diagnostic momentum: “once diagnostic labels are attached to a patient they tend to become stickier and stickier” (Croskerry 2003, p. 777). ³ Some of these biases, such as the well-known “gamblers’ fallacy” are avoidable; others seem to be hard-wired. All are potential-

² Croskerry prefers not to use the term ‘bias’ for fear that its pejorative connotation will result in resistance to cognitive de-biasing strategies: “Removing the stigma of bias clears the way towards accepting the capricious nature of decision-making, and perhaps goes some way toward exculpating clinicians when their diagnoses fail” (Croskerry 2003, p. 776).

³ I am aware that there is a large literature on cognitive bias. While some of it is controversial, there tends to be agreement about the phenomena, so I see no need to cite more than a couple of illustrative examples. The controversy concerns the best explanation of the phenomena, which is not my interest here.
ly dangerous, because they can influence judgments that can result in harm, and even, in some situations, such as medical diagnoses, judgments that are matters of life and death. Some cognitive biases, but perhaps not all—and this is controversial—can be compensated for: that is, anticipated and their effects guarded against.

There can be institutional bias in this sense. There is some evidence, for example, that elements of the American prosecutorial system have confirmation bias in favour of convictions. Once a suspect is identified, often only evidence supporting his or her guilt is sought, and supporting accusations of self-interested parties such as jailhouse snitches, are accepted at face value and not checked (The Economist, 2014).

To not be cognitively biased in these sorts of ways is to be cognitively sophisticated or cogitively astute. It is not to be objective.

B6. Unbalanced, one-sided, slanted. A news media outlet such as a newspaper or a TV or radio station or network is biased in this sense when its news reporting is unbalanced. More news stories about a favoured group than a disfavoured group are reported; or more positive news stories about the former and/or more negative news stores about the latter are reported when this is not the actual distribution of positive and negative events. Or the reporting of a particular event is biased by virtue of selecting or emphasizing facts or descriptions that unjustifiably favour (or disfavour) a particular party, or a particular interpretation of events. When controversies are being reported, a news report can be biased in the sense of being slanted when it favours one side over the others in many ways, for instance, by virtue of its language or its emphasis, or due to its selection of what to include and what to omit, or due to the ordering of the events described. Such a bias is a bad thing, and is avoidable, and as such deserving of condemnation.

A contrary of ‘biased’ in this sense is balanced. Here at last is a sense of biased whose contradictory, unbiased, means objective.

2.2. Senses of ‘objective’ (the adjective)

And here are six senses of ‘objective’.

O1. Factual, agreed-upon. An account or report of events, a description, a characterization is said to be objective in this sense when it is true to the facts, when any observer would agree with it or would report, describe or characterize the event in similar terms. It is not objective in this sense when it is influenced by whimsy, or peculiarity of focus—idiosyncrasies of the person reporting, describing or characterizing—or when it is value-laden, instead of neutral. A person is objective in this sense when he or she strives for fidelity, completeness and value neutrality. This is Daston’s sense of “empirical” objectivity.

4 Thanks to Doug Walton for this example.
5 There is some point to the objection that value-free descriptions are a myth, but still, there is a difference between “six grizzlies were feeding on the migrating salmon” and “six savage behemoths were gorging themselves on the defenceless migrants”.

5
 Contraries of ‘objective’ in this sense are fanciful, misrepresentative, value-laden. An objective account in this sense is not the same as an unbiased account; it’s an accurate account.

O2. Impersonal, detached. A judgment is said to be objective in this sense if the assessor’s personal preferences do not influence it and instead it is made according to the appropriate criteria and standards. Thus an account of a new car’s features, merits and faults, or a description of a wine’s characteristics, weaknesses and strengths, is objective when the account does not simply express the reporter’s likes and dislikes, and when it applies the criteria appropriate in the circumstances for judging cars or wines.

Contraries of ‘objective’ in this sense are subjective or personal, not biased.

O3. Realistic. When the proponents of a cause are planning a campaign to seek support, whether moral, financial or both, some of them might think that others are overly optimistic in their expectations. “We need to be realistic,” someone will say, “We need to look at the situation objectively.” The point in general is to not allow enthusiasm, or its opposite, pessimism—that is, subjective factors—to distort perceptions of the true nature of a situation.

Contraries of ‘objective’ in this sense are overly optimistic or overly pessimistic; being unrealistic is not being biased.

O4. Bare-bones, strictly factual, purely observational. A report is objective in this sense when there is no embellishment, no editorializing comments, no attributions of motives or of assumptions. The observer’s reactions to or attitudes towards what is reported are not recorded. Here is the self-effacing, emotion-restraining sense of ‘objective’ that Daston catalogues.

Contraries of ‘objective’ in this sense are subjective, impressionistic, or opinionated. An impressionistic or opinionated account is not thereby a biased account.

O5. A-perspectival. Daston discusses another sense of ‘objective’, not mentioned in the list I quoted above, which is perhaps found particularly in philosophical and some scientific writing, namely being objective in the sense of taking no point of view, of transcending particularity of focus and escaping any special interests. Theories are from this vantage point supposed to be from no vantage point. See Thomas Nagel’s (1986) famous “view from Nowhere”.

Contraries here include grounded, contextual, embedded; its contradictory, “perspectival”, is not the same as “unbiased”.

O6. Balanced, all perspectives considered fairly. A commission set up to write a report on the treatment of its aboriginal peoples by the post-colonial Canadian federal and provincial governments is expected to be objective in the sense that it considers testimony from all those involved in such treatment, including not only those in all the aboriginal groups affected, but also the public and private agencies delivering such treatment, and the private corporations involved as well. Also, not
just the mistakes and mistreatment that occurred should be reported; the benefits and the successes should be covered as well. Journalists who strive for objectivity operationalize that goal by seeking to report in a balanced way, reporting the views of all parties in disputed matters without giving undue emphasis to any one and writing or speaking in such a way as to make it impossible to detect which view they personally favour.

The failure to be *objective* in this sense is to be *one-sided, selective* or *biased*.

A particular version of this sense of ‘objective’ was found in a meta-ethical theory of moral philosophy in the third quarter of the 20th century, the *ideal observer* theory (see Firth 1952). Unlike its cousin, the a-perspectival perspective, the ideal observer was objective by virtue of taking into account all relevant perspectives while being the agent or captive of none of them in particular, and especially being wed to no particular set of interests. To be objective in one’s ethical judgments, both practical and theoretical, it was thought, was to take the vantage point of the ideal observer and the correct judgment was regarded as the one that an ideal observer would make.

Someone whose judgments were influenced by some perspective in particular was not being objective, but was *interested* or and in some cases could be considered to be *partial* or *biased*.

Not all the items on these two lists have anything to do with arguments or argumentation. That connection is a matter to be taken up in Section 4, below. The first order of business has been just to get a sense for the variety of senses of ‘biased’ and ‘objective’, and so of bias and objectivity. Also, just as having a bias is to be condemned in some senses but innocent or neutral others, similarly I do not suggest that being objective is always desirable or admirable; it may well as denoted in some senses be a mistake and to be condemned. And in some senses it seems to me that objectivity is in fact impossible, so seeking it, or trying to approximate it, is thus misconceived and foolish.

Some critics of these two lists might complain that I am splitting hairs, and that, at least in some cases, if not all, one alleged sense of *biased* or *objective* is indistinguishable from another. Others might complain that my lists are incomplete. I am sympathetic to both objections. At least a couple of distinctions are admittedly quite fine-grained. However, whether or not I have pinned down accurately each of these distinctions, I do think that reflection on how we used these terms reveals several senses of each one, if not exactly these six. And if there are more, my thesis might be even more strongly supported. Moreover, as will emerge below, it turns out that each of these senses that can figure in arguments or argumentation one way or another (if at all) does so in its own way, and that fact is indirect support for these distinctions. So I appeal to these critics to reserve judgment for a bit.

3. Corresponding contraries

If objectivity and bias are indeed a contrasting pair in at least one sense of each of the two terms, there must be at least one match—that is, at least one sense of the one that is a contrary (or contradictory) of at least one sense of the other. If the above survey of senses of ‘biased’ and ‘objec-
tive’ is accurate, then although there are several senses of each of the two terms, there is only one such match. B6, being biased in the sense of being unbalanced, one-sided and selective is the contrary of being objective in the sense, O6, of being balanced and considering all the relevant perspectives. The above list identifies five other ways of being biased, but their contraries are not ways of being objective, and it identifies five other ways of being objective, but their contraries are not ways of being biased. Table 1 portrays this state of affairs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Senses of ‘biased’ &amp; their contraries</th>
<th>Senses of ‘objective’ &amp; their contraries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B1: Unfair, partial</td>
<td>Uncommitted, open-minded, balanced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B2: Closed-minded, prejudiced</td>
<td>Tolerant, unblinking, inclusive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B3: Having a preference</td>
<td>Eclectic, uncommitted, catholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B4: Disproportional</td>
<td>Representative, typical, equal</td>
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<tr>
<td>B5: Cognitively misaligned</td>
<td>cognitively astute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B6. Unbalanced, one-sided, slanted</td>
<td>balanced, fair or objective</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>O1 Factual, agreed-upon</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>O2. Impersonal, detached</td>
<td>Subjective, personal</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>O5. A-perspectival</td>
<td>grounded, contextual, embedded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>O6. Balanced, all perspectives considered; ideal observer point of view</td>
<td>one-sided, selective, incomplete, unbalanced, interested, biased</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Senses of ‘biased’ and ‘objective’ and their contraries

4. Implications

If the above survey and analyses are correct, it follows that any discussion of bias and objectivity in arguments or in argumentation should tend to be, for the most part, an independent discussion of one sense or another of either of the two concepts and a discussion of the relation of that particular sense of that concept to arguments and argumentation. Thus, for example, in Douglas Walton’s book, One-Sided Arguments, A Dialectical Analysis of Bias (1999), several kinds of bias are discussed, but none of these is contrasted with objectivity. In fact Walton explicitly addresses the relation between bias and objectivity (pp. 62-65), and contends that “bias [in argumentation] is not the same thing as absence of ... objectivity” (p. 63). Walton’s position is consistent with our findings. A treatment of objectivity and bias will be a discussion of a pair of phenomena related by being opposites only if, either it is about bias in the sense of lack of balance, slant or unfairness vs. objectivity in the sense of balance or fairness, or else it is about some other contrasting pair of senses of these two terms that I have overlooked.
I say this is so for the most part, because I can think of one exception, which I discuss below.

It follows from these distinctions that (for the most part) discussions of the relation between bias and argumentation might take different forms, some focusing on one sense of bias and others focusing on some other sense of bias. Likewise discussions of the relation between objectivity and argumentation might take different forms. Here is a speculative list of some kinds of possible connections between bias and argument and between objectivity and argument that might be worth investigating.

B1. Bias in the sense of a disposition to unfairness would feature in examinations of the ethics of argumentation. We see this bias affecting in contemporary political argumentation when exaggerations and outright lies are used as premises in arguments aimed at demonizing the opponent or at inciting fear and anxiety. Deliberate straw man attacks, which are frequent occurrences in political adversarial debates, exhibit bias in this sense. Mr. Trump has excelled at ad hominem rejoinders during the contest for the Republican nominee for President in the next U.S. election, both tu quoque and ethotic (abusive) versions (see Walton 1998).

B2. A bias in the sense of a prejudice or close-mindedness can affect argumentation in various ways. It can lead to a failure to appreciate the merits of an opponent’s position or arguments. It can result in a failure to be aware of, or to take seriously, positions or arguments of others that have a bearing on the issue at hand. It can result in the unjustified dismissal or neglect of views that are worthy of consideration. In political or public policy argumentation, such biases produce undemocratic positions often at odds with constitutional values.

B3. A bias in the sense of a preference for or against some object of interest strikes me as one use of the term that does not have much general connection with argument. However, in a particular argument the accusation that someone is biased in this sense can work to discount an appeal for or against the object in question, as in “Given your bias you would think the library should stock more science fiction”; and a confession of a bias in this sense can work to defuse a criticism, as in “I hope you won’t mind the background music: the restaurant owner has a bias for the swing era.”

B4. In statistical reasoning and arguments issuing from it, biased samples result in mistaken inferences when generalizing from properties of a sample to those of a population.

B5. Cognitive biases have been demonstrated to result in mistaken inferences, which can result in bad arguments being offered or accepted. The connection between cognitive biases and fallacies merits examination (see Bokmelder 2014). Do they dispose people to commit fallacies? Is the commission of a fallacy causally related to cognitive biases? Are they two unrelated phenomena? Which issues are empirical and which ones are conceptual in the question of the connection between cognitive biases and fallacies?
B6. On bias in the sense of lack of balance, see O6., below.

There appear also to be questions surrounding the connection between the different kinds of objectivity and argument.

O1. Being objective in the sense of being factual in situations in which facts exist and are needed seems a virtue in thinking in general, and so, in argument. A call for objectivity in this sense when the relevant grounds are not undisputed facts is a false appeal, akin to the plea to “Be reasonable!” when the interlocutor happens simply to be disagreeing.

O2. The virtue of objectivity in argumentation in the sense of detachment seems less straightforward. Rhetorically, the appearance of detachment seems likely to be an advantage in some kinds of argumentative situation, and a defect in others. Earnest advocacy seems more authentic, and strong commitment to a cause can motivate rigorous examination of the interests and arguments of various parties to it. At the same time it can result in my-side reasoning and the failure to give alternative positions and objections their due. Also the importance of emotion in argument calls into question the value of objectivity in the sense of detachment (see Tindale 2015, Ch. 8). These are matters deserving of closer examination.

O3. Being objective in the sense of being realistic strikes me as generally an advantage both in advocacy arguments and in using arguments to investigate hypotheses. One is usually better off having an accurate understanding of the merits and defects or weaknesses of one’s case or views and those of alternatives to it or them. On the other hand there are plenty of examples of people who persevere in the defence of unpopular or unlikely positions and, against all odds, are successful or proven right in the end. Had they been objective about it in the sense of being realistic about its prospects, they would never have succeeded. How one is best to draw the line here might be a question worth examining.

O4. Similarly, there seems to be a time for objectivity in the sense of being drily descriptive and a time for eschewing such objectivity in favour of personal opinions and impressionistic accounts. The advice of rhetoricians is needed to inform advocates of when argumentation requires the one and when the other.

O5. Being objective in the sense of being a-perspectival strikes me as problematic. It seems an impossible stance for anyone to take in practice, and dicey to attempt to approximate. Claims to such objectivity in argumentation can easily mask biases of which their owners are unaware, as many studies of male chauvinism and racism have shown. Claiming objectivity in this sense when evaluating arguments looks like taking the “God’s-eye-view” to which Hamblin famously objected in *Fallacies*: “... if I as a former onlooker decide to intervene to give Smith the good tidings that his argument is valid or Jones the news that his premisses are false, I am likely to find that I have become simply another participant in an enlarged dialectical situation ...” (Hamblin 1970, pp. 242-243). On the other hand, the alternative does not seem to be subjectivity in the sense of relativism. During the
drafting of arguments to be presented in some advocacy situation, one can and one does critique one’s own drafts.

O6. Objectivity and bias constitute legitimate contraries, I suggest, when bias is understood in the sense of lack of balance, or one-sidedness, and objectivity understood in the sense of fair consideration of all views and due treatment of all the interests and perspectives bearing on an issue. They both in these senses have implications for argumentation, or so it would seem—and this is an issue worth investigating. My-sided reasoning in “makes-sense” epistemology (see Perkins 1991) might be regarded as entailing a failure to meet dialectical obligations, for it appears to consist of the exclusive consideration of ground-level arguments and overlooks the need for such meta-arguments (Finocchiaro 2013) as replies to objections to premises, to inference links or to one’s conclusion (see also Johnson 2000 on the dialectical tier). The use of arguments to inquire might be hamstrung by such a bias or failure of objectivity, for it appears to prevent a thorough vetting of the hypotheses being examined. This failure also appears to impede the crucial rhetorical imperative of understanding one’s audience from its own point of view. These and other possible effects of this sort of objectivity being impeded by this sort of bias deserve investigation.

In short, there is plenty of room for the study of the relations between different senses of bias and argument, and for the study of the relations between different senses of objectivity and argument, but not so much room for the study of a contrast between bias and objectivity in relation to argument.

The exception occurs when bias and objectivity are not considered as contraries, but when one is a condition of the other, and when it is not individuals but the norms of practices that are biased. Think of the practice of removing any first-person pronouns in scientific writing such as laboratory reports. It at least used to be the case that lab reports were supposed to be completely objective. They were written in the passive voice. “I observed that ...” was to be struck and replaced by, “It was observed that ... .” This banishing of so-called subjectivity is an example of an institutional bias in the social sciences. In their eagerness to be counted as a science, social scientists aped the conventions of reporting followed by natural scientists, thereby conveying an impression of detachment or impersonality, that is, of objectivity, that is often illusory. When conclusions are being drawn from psychological or sociological data thus reported, this false sense of objectivity gets introduced into the argument. This is one example, and there might well be others.

5. Summary

I close with a brief summary. I have appealed to our ordinary usage of the terms ‘bias’ and ‘biased,’ and ‘objectivity’ and ‘objective’ to support the contention that there is a variety of species or senses of each concept. An examination of the contraries of each species, I have contended, reveals that for all but one, there is no contrary that makes reference to the other concept. In other words, bias and objectivity, in most of their senses, do not form a contrasting pair. If this finding is correct, it follows that the theme of the conference, “Argumentation, Objectivity and Bias,” runs the danger of falsely implying that the contrast between objectivity and bias has broad implication for argumentation. However, this finding does not imply that there is nothing to think
and say about the separate relations of different senses of objectivity and argument, and of different senses of bias and argument, nor does it imply that the norm of objectivity in some contexts cannot itself be an instance of a bias.

Acknowledgements: Thanks to CRRAR Fellows Catherine Hundleby, Curtis Hyra, Ralph Johnson, Christopher Tindale and Douglas Walton for constructive and useful suggestions that have led to improvements to an earlier version of this paper.

References


