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Commentary on “Pursuing Objectivity: How Virtuous Can You Get?”

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1. Introduction

In “Pursuing objectivity: How virtuous can you get?”, José Gascón raises a legitimate concern about a deficiency in the philosophical literature on argumentation—specifically, the paucity of accounts of objectivity, regarded as an “argumentative or, more broadly, intellectual virtue.” Social psychologists, behavioral economists and others have made inroads into the subject in an empirical way by means of exploring bias, but philosophers have apparently not dedicated much effort to articulating a normative account of objectivity. Gascón invites us down this road less travelled, so let’s see where it might take us.

2. In what context is objectivity a virtue?

In his paper, Gascón refers to Janack’s (2002) list of thirteen different uses of the term “objectivity.” Of these thirteen, Gascón selects two to pursue further, being the most viable candidates for explicating objectivity *qua* individual virtue: (i) objectivity as lack of bias, and (ii) objectivity as an attitude of psychological distance. One of the author’s worries is whether objectivity, construed in either of these senses, is a distinct virtue from other presumptive intellectual virtues such as intellectual humility, intellectual empathy, or open-mindedness. Whether objectivity is to be regarded specifically an *argumentative* virtue is not explicated.

In section 2 of his paper, Gascón suggests that “the virtue of objectivity would seem to imply *perceiving* and *judging* things in a special way. The manifestation of objectivity in our perception and judgement should be such that our idiosyncratic position and motivations do not interfere with our views.” In the concluding section, he asserts that there is a sense in which people “praise objectivity and censure lack of objectivity in other people in argumentative contexts” and that it is “this use of the term that I have tried to elucidate here.” It is somewhat ambiguous, then, whether the virtue of objectivity (whatever it turns out to be) is to be regarded as a broadly intellectual virtue, more narrowly as an epistemic or argumentative virtue, or perhaps more narrowly still. My sense is that this ambiguity is, by and large, intentional.

For the purposes of conceptual analysis, however, I think a case can be made that “objectivity” and “bias” do not fall under the rubric of argumentation, *per se*. Rather, the contexts of perception and judgment constitute the central locus of meaning for the notion of objectivity.

Argumentation is concerned with modeling the structure and interaction of sets of judgments, whereas the presumption in Gascón’s paper, more often than not, is that the central notion of objectivity concerns the conditions and criteria of justification for perceptual judgments and propositions, not on higher-order constructs like arguments.

The notions of bias and objectivity can be extended to the context of argumentation, of course, because arguments are comprised of propositions. Biases enter into arguments as

unacknowledged assumptions, as factors subconsciously influencing what evidence is considered relevant, as questions we beg, and in other ways too many to recount. Yet the proper subjects of adjectives like “biased” and “objective” remain *judgements*, not arguments. So when we say that a given arguer is biased, we are not saying that she has an idiosyncratic affinity for abductive inference, or an unacknowledged predilection for the argumentation scheme of *argumentum ad verecundiam*, although these might well be true. Rather, we are saying that, in various contexts, she operates from a standpoint¹ that includes at least one component that is unjustified, or inappropriately applied.

3. The bias blind spot

Gascón broaches the subject of objectivity by initially contrasting it with biases in perception and reasoning. The analysis of the subjective factors involved in producing bias fall under two kinds of approach: the motivational approach and the cognitivist approach.

The first approach seeks to identify self-serving factors that skew our reasoning. He cites Correia (2011, p. 110): “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.”

By “interests,” we could include personal “needs” like the need for self-esteem or social approval, or even more transcendental needs, such as the need to believe in cosmic justice, perhaps meted out by an ultimate divine judge, or a need for an explanation of the existence and nomologicality of the universe.

Debiasing as a path towards objectivity seems promising because we can, for the most part, become aware of our emotions, and the interests and values that underlie them. For those who may be less aware of them, there is good news: emotional intelligence is a skill that can be acquired. We can learn to become better at identifying our emotions, understand our emotional triggers, and learn to modify our responses to provocation. We can learn to move from the need to be defensive about our identities and values (or the need to attack others’) and adopt a more dialectical stance: one of respect, civility and inquiry.

However accessible our affective states are to introspection, they are nevertheless only tools to help identify those unconsciously held beliefs and assumptions that constitute our biases. Biases themselves are not the sort of thing that can be discovered through introspection. On the other hand, we may become aware of our biases in another way: by subjecting our standpoints and the reasoning behind them to social scrutiny and critique.

Gascón might agree that an effective engagement with other people holding different viewpoint requires virtues such as intellectual humility, intellectual empathy and open-mindedness.² In his examination of the possibility of countering bias, he approvingly cites Bailin and Battersby’s (2013, p. 8) recommendation to seriously consider arguments on different sides of issues, and deliberately consider alternative positions prior to making a judgment. This is good counsel, and it’s a message we’re all quite familiar with.

¹ By standpoint, I mean a matrix “of beliefs, attitudes, emotions, insights, and values connected to a claim.” (Gilbert 1997, p. 105)

² I agree with Gascón that, while these are surely virtues worth having, they do not constitute objectivity. Even if they did, objectivity would have no unique connotation irreducible to these other virtues.

It remains the case, however, that “... our motivations influence which of our background beliefs and which rules we select in reasoning” (Kunda 1990, p. 483). So it is very possible that a perspective shift, even if it should occur as a result of conscious soul-searching and committed open-mindedness and empathy, may culminate in the replacement of one biased standpoint with another biased standpoint.

Moreover, if our biases can lead us to falsely accept our own insights as objective, they can just as easily lead us to “false positives” when we suppose we have detected an instance of bias in someone else.

The cognitive biases of the sort described by Daniel Kahneman and others not only elude introspection—they are just as likely to be invisible to others. In this connection, Gascón cites several authors who are skeptical of the possibility of debiasing, because cognitive biases are unconscious, and debiasing presupposes conscious access to particular biases. It is not just that biases are unnoticed; they are by nature not accessible by introspection. The metaphor of a bias “blind spot” is instructive.

If biases reach beyond personal desires, interests, attachments into the very architecture of cognition, then regarding objectivity as a commitment to debiasing seems even more problematic. If “even well-intended arguers ... put forward tendentious arguments, given that cognitive biases are unconscious” (Correia 2011, p. 123) this calls attention to an inherent limitation of reason whereby we are unable to “see” the biases that operate at an unconscious level to influence our conscious thought processes.

Since the notion of virtue implies choice, intellectual virtue implies cognitive self-regulation. If objectivity is a virtue, its domain of application must extend only to those elements of subjectivity that *are* eliminable. Whatever elements of subjectivity are inherent to human cognitive architecture are therefore beyond the reach of our virtues. Likewise, they cannot be legitimately regarded as vices, either. Even if we could reach a state of intellectual purity, in which every factor under our volitional control affecting the objectivity of our perceptions and judgments were fully known and mitigated, we would still be subject to the idiosyncrasies of our unique perspective on the world, the perspective of a life lived entirely from behind just one set of eyes.

4. Objectivity and detachment

Could we transcend the inherent subjectivity of our unique individual perspectives, that is, to adopt a view “from nowhere?” Taking his cue from Thomas Nagel, Gascón wonders in what ways we can step back from our viewpoint and regard *it*, and its relation to the world, as *objects* in the world. His proposal is insightful: we should see ourselves as objects of study by social and cognitive scientists. Picture looking at a single data point on a graph published in the pages of an academic journal and thinking “that could be me.”

Gascón suggests that a conception of objectivity as “detachment” captures an important part of its meaning. But detachment from what? If factors like our motivations and interests function to bias our outlooks, wouldn’t an antonym like “disinterested” express the sense of objectivity achieved by appropriately eschewing those interests? Taken this way, it is easy to see how an emotional attachment to such interests could undermine epistemic hygiene, and that “detachment” could be at least part of the solution.

Gascón has two warnings for us on this point, however. One warning is that objectivity *qua* detachment does not preclude commitment to causes, or emotional involvement. A reasonable conception of objectivity should not require us to abandon our hopes and desires, repress our

emotions, and so on. Objectivity is not an exercise in self-abnegation. I agree with Gascón that a key component of objectivity *qua* virtue is the search for self-knowledge.

The second warning is that the level of detachment is *partial*—there is a contextual optimum that an individual ought to seek. We need to balance the need for detachment, based on our understanding that persons are “imperfect cognitive subjects,” with a need to retain a particular attachment to the epistemic goal of identifying what features of a situation are relevant to validating our judgments.

I would caution that, if we take *too few* steps back, our higher-order judgments concerning what considerations are relevant are at risk of being biased. On the other hand, if we take *too many* steps back, we might lose sight of important details. If we take detachment too far, it would lead to an estrangement from our values and an invalidation of our feelings, including whatever passion we have for objectivity. So we need to practice not only the right degree of detachment, but the “right kind” of detachment—one that disregards one’s particular circumstances and motivations as differentially less irrelevant.

Despite a couple of key points of contact with Nagel’s position, Gascón’s preference is not for the visual metaphor of distance, but for the tactile metaphor of “detachment.” Objectivity is more like a letting go, or at least a loosening of one’s grip (on one’s convictions and deep-rooted judgments). On the other hand, in section 4, the author does employ the metaphor of distance—psychological distance—to describe how far we need to step back for self-knowledge to be possible. Nagel, too, uses the distance metaphor when he describes the blind spot that “is part of our objective picture of the world” from which we need to recede if we want to bring the blind spot itself into our field of view.

Objectivity demands of us that not only that we really look—whether we like what we see—but, as a virtue, it calls us to seek out the vantage point that provides the best view.

5. Psychological distance

One of the uses of “objectivity” from Janack’s (2002) list of thirteen was “psychological distance.” While Gascón pursues the metaphor of “detachment” as a way of understanding objectivity, my view is that the metaphor of psychological “distance” is slightly more illuminating. The notion can be understood from either the spatial or temporal dimension.

On the spatial interpretation, attaining psychological distance suggests getting a remote view of the phenomenon, pulling the camera lens back to see the larger context in which the subject is situated. It also suggests a wider field of view, in which we can not only see our views, but a broader array of possibilities.

On the temporal interpretation, psychological distance suggests the interval of time needed following the experience of strong emotions before one settles back down to emotional equilibrium. As Thomas Jefferson counselled, “when angry, count ten before you speak; when very angry, count one hundred.”

There is a more nuanced way of looking at psychological distance in the temporal sense, one in which an emotionally unsettling trigger event can function as a gateway to critical thinking, if not to objectivity. As Stephen Brookfield (1987, p. 24) notes, “people are often prompted to become critical thinkers by an external circumstance or stimulus of some kind; only rarely does a change in thinking patterns happen because of a person’s self-willed decision to become more critically reflective.” This external stimulus puts us into a state of cognitive dissonance of a sort—we become aware of a gap or contradiction between how things seem and how they really are, or

should be. This trigger-induced awareness can be accompanied by surprise, anger, shame, remorse, or what have you.

According to Brookfield, we transition through four additional phases as we process the experience. We first enter an appraisal phase of self-scrutiny and self-examination, where we clarify the personal meaning of the events. Next comes an exploratory phase, where we open our eyes to new possibilities, new information, new concepts. Following that is the stage where we develop an alternative “best fit” perspective and validate it. Last comes the integration stage wherein we align our lives with the new outlook, settling into changed behavior and thought processes.

I wish to suggest that the objective stance reaches the highest likelihood of being adopted during the exploratory phase—that phase following a trigger event when we have achieved a measure of psychological distance (in the temporal sense). The distance is such that, while the immediate affective responses to the trigger event have subsided (the anger, *etc.*), we remain at a heightened level of motivation—a state of epistemic diligence sufficient to open our eyes to that which we had previously been blinded.

6. Conclusion

If this picture is right, what emerges is that the virtue of objectivity starts with the recognition that there is a vantage point from which our capacity to acquire knowledge of the world, including us as parts of that world, is optimized. Gascón’s position, as I see it, invites an Aristotelian-style gloss: objectivity is state of character, concerned with choice, lying in a mean relative to us, a mean between extremes of bias blindness on the one hand, and total detachment on the other.

Finding that golden mean will involve taking a journey of learning and growth. Gascón has performed a valuable service in giving us a compass to take on that journey, and for that, please join me in thanking him.

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