



Positional Objectivity

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I. INTRODUCTION

What we can observe depends on our position vis-à-vis the objects of observation. What we decide to believe is influenced by what we observe. How we decide to act relates to our beliefs. Positionally dependent observations, beliefs, and actions are central to our knowledge and practical reason. The nature of objectivity in epistemology, decision theory, and ethics has to take adequate note of the parametric dependence of observation and inference on the position of the observer. This article attempts to investigate some of the far-reaching consequences of that parametric dependence.¹

One of the immediate implications of emphasizing the positional perspective is to question the tradition of seeing objectivity in the form of invariance with respect to individual observers and their positions—a “view from nowhere,” as Thomas Nagel puts it in his illuminating study. “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

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1. This article does not address the foundational issues in metaphysics that relate to positional dependence, in particular the presumed “duality” between the external world and our conceptual powers. The language of the arguments presented in this article invokes this duality, and it is certainly simpler to see the practical and immediate implications of the claims made here in that classical Cartesian form. However, the full implications of this line of reasoning can be worked out only, I believe, by reexamining the issue of that duality itself.

on the character of the particular type of creature he is."² This way of seeing objectivity has some clear merit, and Nagel's characterization focuses on an important aspect of the classical conception of objectivity. This conception of objectivity is, however, in some tension with the inescapable positionality of observations.

That tension is most direct and immediate in dealing with the objectivity of elementary observational claims. The subject matter of an objective assessment can well be the way an object appears from a *specified* position of observation. What is observed can vary from position to position, but different people can conduct their respective observations from similar positions and make much the same observations. The positional parameters need not, of course, be only locational (or related to any spatial placing), and can include any condition that (1) may influence observation, and (2) can apply parametrically to different persons. Different types of examples of positional parameters (in this broad sense) include: being myopic or color-blind or having normal eyesight; knowing or not knowing a specific language; having or not having knowledge of particular concepts; being able or not able to count. The objectivity of observations must be a position-dependent characteristic: not a "view from nowhere," but one "from a delineated somewhere."³

But if position-dependence applied only to directly observational claims, then the classical conception of objectivity could be seen as largely adequate except specifically for statements of that particular kind. I argue here that the tension is, in fact, much more extensive than that. Positional variability is generally relevant for the objectivity of decisions about beliefs and actions as well.

Position-dependent objectivity ("positional objectivity," for short) is important in different contexts in different ways. First, it is the central concept in dealing with directly observational claims (Section II). Second, the objectivity of positional observations plays a crucial part in the process of acquiring scientific knowledge, and thus serves as a building block of science (Section III).

Third, more generally, positional objectivity is important in understanding the objectivity of beliefs, whether or not these beliefs happen to

2. Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 5.

3. The nature of positional objectivity of observations was the main focus of attention in my Lindley Lecture, *Objectivity and Position* (Lawrence, Kans.: University of Kansas, 1992).

be correct. Truth is quite a different issue from the objectivity of the reasoning leading to a particular belief, given the access to information that the person has. (Julius Caesar was not particularly lacking in objectivity in disbelieving that Brutus too was planning to kill him, but he was of course badly mistaken.) Positional objectivity is important in understanding the idea of "objective illusion" (Section IV). The concept of objective illusion can be illustrated with practical examples; here it is done with the problem of assessment of morbidity and the understanding of gender bias within the family (Section V).

Fourth, the notion of positional objectivity can be used to reassess critically the concept of subjectivism (Section VI) and that of cultural relativism (Section VII).

Fifth, positional objectivity is central to decision theory, since a person has to decide what to do on the basis of what he or she has reasons to believe. This is particularly critical in interpreting the concept of "subjective probability," which can be seen as positionally objective expectations (Section VIII).

Finally, self-assessment of the ethical acceptability of a person's actions must take note of the special position of the person vis-à-vis her own actions and of the states of affairs that include those actions. This is a central issue in judging the range and reach of consequentialist ethics in dealing with deontological concerns and agent-relative moral values (Section IX).

II. POSITIONALLY OBJECTIVE OBSERVATIONAL CLAIMS

Consider the claim:

(A) The sun and the moon look similar in size.

This observation is, obviously, not position independent, and the two bodies would look very dissimilar in size from, say, the moon. But that is no reason for describing the cited claim as nonobjective. Another person observing the sun and the moon from roughly the same place (to wit, the Earth), and having the same concept of size, should be able to confirm that claim. There is no immediate reason to see claim (A) as "having its source in the mind," or as "pertaining or peculiar to an individual subject

or his mental operations" (to quote two standard criteria of subjectivity).⁴ Even though the positional reference is not explicitly stated here, we can nevertheless take (A) to be a positional claim, which can be spelled out as:

(B) From *here*, the sun and the moon look similar in size.

Someone can, of course, also make a claim about how things would appear from a position *different* from the one she currently occupies.

(C) From *there*, the sun and the moon look similar in size.

Objectivity may require interpersonal invariance when the observational position is fixed, but that requirement is quite compatible with position-relativity of observations. Different persons can occupy the same position and confirm the same observation; and the same person can occupy different positions and make dissimilar observations. Objectivity, in this sense, is not so much a "view from nowhere," but a "view of no one in particular." Observational claims can be both position-dependent and person-invariant.

III. KNOWLEDGE, SCIENCE, AND POSITIONALLY OBJECTIVE BELIEFS

Questions could, however, be raised about the epistemological status of observational claims. It might be argued that observational statements like (A), (B), or (C) are claims "merely" about appearance, as opposed to "reality." It might be tempting to take the view that the subject matter of such statements is not knowledge of the world as it *is*, only as it *appears*, so that the objectivity in question is not about the world as it is. But observational occurrences are also part of the world in which we live. The immediate issue here is not whether observational features (including so-called "secondary qualities") are characteristics of the objects *themselves*, but that the observer and the observed both belong to the world in which we live, and so do the observations themselves. The demand of invariance as a requirement of objectivity of observational claims relates to the fact that it is possible to check whether such an observation could be reproduced by others if placed in a similar position.

4. These come from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, but similar characterizations can be found in many other places.

There is also the more foundational question as to whether it at all makes sense to think of the world as it "is," independent of reflective observers.⁵ I shall not go into that deeper metaphysical issue in this article. Positional objectivity has to be an important part of science even in terms of conventional understandings of the real world. But its relevance would be more constitutive if the conception of what an object is could not be detached from observational and reflective acts.

Observations are unavoidably position-based, but scientific reasoning need not, of course, be based on observational information from one specific position only. There is need for what may be called "trans-positional" assessment—drawing on but going beyond different positional observations. The constructed "view from nowhere" would then be based on synthesizing different views from distinct positions. The positional objectivity of the respective observations would still remain important but not in itself adequate. A trans-positional scrutiny would also demand some kind of coherence between different positional views.⁶

The "trans-positional" assessment that we might undertake can lead to a broader understanding that makes sense of the respective (and possibly divergent) positional observations. For example, in the simple example of the relative appearances of the sun and the moon, we may have no great difficulty in distinguishing between (1) how large the sun and the moon appear to us, and (2) how large we think they "really are" (defined in some way that we can comprehend, e.g., in terms of our understanding of how long it would take us to go around it if we were to move at a specified speed). We can make some coherent sense of the different observations because we know something about optics and projections, about our distances to the sun and the moon, and about possible correspondences between different ways of estimating the sizes of the sun and the moon.

We also know that the relative sizes of the sun and the moon, as seen by us, would correspond to their respective projections in our observational fields. Indeed, the fact that the sun and the moon look to be of much the same size to us is not unrelated to the phenomenon that in a

5. On this and related matters, see Hilary Putnam's illuminating analysis, including his argument that (metaphorically put) "the mind and the world jointly make up the mind and the world" (*The Many Faces of Realism* [LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1987], p. 1).

6. See Susan Hurley, *Natural Reasons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989) for a helpful discussion of the general importance of coherence for the objectivity of beliefs.

full eclipse of the sun (as seen from Earth), the moon covers the sun almost exactly.⁷ Those positional relativities can be discussed in terms of rules of optics and projections, if we are familiar with them.

But the scientist's ability to reason trans-positionally depends on what else she knows and on the type of reasoning she is able to use, and these, in a broad sense, are also positional features. Even the "conceptual schemes" that mediate our understanding of the world can be fruitfully seen as general positional characteristics related to acts of observation and reflection. But the proposed (or implicitly used) conceptual schemes and lines of reasoning can, of course, be challenged, invoking rival concepts and competing lines of construction. The demands of trans-positional coherence and critical scrutiny can have extensive cutting power. The history of science gives ample examples of the emergence of agreed scientific beliefs overturning previously agreed conclusions, or overcoming a plurality of rival conclusions.⁸

IV. POSITIONALITY AND OBJECTIVE ILLUSIONS

While positionality of observation and construction plays an important part in the process of deriving scientific knowledge, it is important in belief formation in general, even when the beliefs are far removed from the discipline and scrutiny used in science. Indeed, the role of positionality may be particularly crucial in interpreting systematic illusions and persistent misunderstandings, which can be central to social analysis and public affairs.

Returning to the simple example involving the relative size of the sun vis-à-vis the moon, consider a person who belongs to a community that is not familiar with distance-dependent projections, nor with any other source of information about the sun and the moon. Lacking the relevant

7. Indeed, in the late Satyajit Ray's last film (*Agantuk*—in the English version, "The Visitor"), the anthropologist visitor lectures his grandnephew on the remarkable fact that the sun and the moon are of similar size as seen from Earth (as the full solar eclipse shows) and on the further fact that the shadow of the Earth on the moon is also of much the same size (as indicated by the full lunar eclipse). The visitor even wonders whether these remarkable positional equalities indicate anything significant about our place in the wider world.

8. It is not, of course, guaranteed that such a convergence must always take place. On the issue of convergence and also context dependence, see Isaac Levi, *The Enterprise of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

conceptual frameworks and ancillary knowledge, this person may decide that the sun and the moon are indeed of the same size, even in the sense that it would take much the same time to go around them respectively (moving at the same speed in the two cases).⁹ This would be a most unreasonable judgment if he did know about distances, projections, and such, but not if he knew none of those things. His belief that the sun and the moon are really the same size (in the sense that it would take the same time to go around each if one traveled at the same speed) is, of course, a mistake (an illusion), but this belief cannot, given the totality of his position, be seen as purely subjective. Indeed, anyone in exactly his position—sharing the same ignorance of related information and concepts—can understandably take much the same view for much the same reasons.¹⁰ The *truth* of his beliefs has to be distinguished from the *objectivity* of what he decides to believe (given what he observes, what else he knows, etc.).

The notion of “objective illusion,” used in Marxian philosophy, can be helpfully interpreted in terms of positional objectivity.¹¹ An objective illusion, thus interpreted, is a positionally objective belief that is, in fact, mistaken. The concept of an objective illusion invokes both (1) the idea of positionally objective belief, and (2) the diagnosis that this belief is, in fact, mistaken. In the example involving the relative sizes of the sun and the moon, the similarity of their appearances (positionally objective as it is from here) can lead—in the absence of other information and the opportunity for critical scrutiny—to a positionally objective belief about the similarity of their “actual sizes” (in terms of the time taken to go around

9. In this case the person shares this view with others in the community. But this sharing is, in itself, neither necessary nor sufficient for positional objectivity. The dependence is on the person's own positional features, and it is the congruence of these positional features that may make the respective positionally objective judgments coincide.

10. Members of the *Nyāya* philosophical school in India, which achieved prominence in the first few centuries A.D., had argued that not only knowledge but also illusions turn on preexisting concepts. When, in a much-discussed example, a person mistakes a rope for a snake, this illusion occurs precisely because of the prior understanding—*genuine* understanding—of the “snake-concept”; a person who confuses the “snake-concept” with, say, the “pig-concept” would not be inclined to mistake a rope for a snake. On the implications of this and related connections between illusion and reality, as explored in the *Nyāya* and rival schools in that period, see Bimal Matilal, *Perceptions: An Essay on Classical Indian Theories of Knowledge* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), chap. 6.

11. The concept of objective illusion figures in Marx's economic writings (not just in the more philosophical ones), including *Capital*, vol. 1, and *Theories of Surplus Value*.

them). The falsity of that belief would, then, be an illustration of an objective illusion.

G. A. Cohen presents the following analysis of objective illusion, developing Marx's idea of "the outer form of things, which enjoys an objective status":

For Marx the senses mislead us with respect to the constitution of the air and the movements of heavenly bodies. Yet a person who managed through breathing to detect different components in the air would have a nose that did not function as healthy human noses do. And a person who sincerely claimed to perceive a stationary sun and a rotating earth would be suffering from some disorder of vision, or motor control. Perceiving the air as elementary and the sun as in motion are experiences more akin to seeing mirages than to having hallucinations. For if a man does not see a mirage under the appropriate conditions, there is something wrong with his vision. His eyes have failed to register the play of light in the distance.¹²

Here the observations, which are taken to be objective, relate to the positional features of breathing the air with a normal nose, seeing the sun with normal eyes, observing the play of light in the distance with normal vision, and so on.

These positional observations are not simply subjective; indeed they have some claim to being objective within their own terms. Here illusion relates to beliefs that are formed on the basis of a limited class of positional observations. And these beliefs—false as they may be—could nevertheless have been derived objectively in the absence of access to other positional scrutiny (such as being able to analyze the air chemically in a laboratory, observe the apparent movements of other planets and stars vis-à-vis the sun and the earth, and so on), and in the absence of familiarity with related concepts and ideas (such as the aromatic indistinguishability of odorless gases, the nature of relative movements of bodies, and so on).

Thus, the notion of positionally objective beliefs helps to place the idea of "objective illusion" within a more inclusive framework. That framework is indeed much broader, since a positionally objective belief may or may not be illusory.

12. G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), pp. 328–29.

V. ILLUSTRATIONS OF OBJECTIVE ILLUSION: MORBIDITY AND GENDER BIAS

The concept of objective illusion can be used in many different types of cases. Marx's own use of the idea was primarily in the contexts of class analysis and "commodity fetishism," and it led him to his investigation of what he called "false consciousness." A very different type of problem concerns the self-perception of morbidity, and this can be particularly important in analyzing the health situation in developing economies.

For example, among the Indian states, Kerala has by a large margin the longest life expectancy at birth (67.5 years for men and 73 years for women, compared with around 56 years for both men and women in India as a whole), and professional medical assessment gives much evidence of Kerala's successful health transition. And yet Kerala also reports by far the highest rates of self-perceived morbidity (both on the average and in terms of age-specific rates). At the other end are states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh with very low life expectancy, no evidence of any health transition, and yet astonishingly low rates of self-assessed morbidity. If the medical evidence and the testimony of mortality rates are accepted (and there are no particularly good reasons to rule them out), then the picture of relative morbidity rates as given by self-assessment must be taken to be erroneous.

But it would be odd to dismiss these self-assessed morbidity rates as simply accidental errors, or as results of individual subjectivism. The concept of objective illusion is helpful here. The population of Kerala has a remarkably higher rate of literacy (including female literacy) than the rest of India, and also has much more extensive public health services. Thus in Kerala there is a much greater awareness of possible illnesses and of the need to seek medical remedies and to undertake preventive measures. These very ideas and actions that help to reduce actual morbidity and mortality in Kerala also heighten the awareness of ailments. At the other end, the relatively illiterate population of Uttar Pradesh—severely undersupplied with public health facilities—has less understanding of possible illnesses and less activity in trying to prevent or cure them. This makes the health conditions and life expectancy much worse in Uttar Pradesh, but it also makes the awareness of morbidity generally much more restricted than in Kerala. The illusion of low morbidity in

Uttar Pradesh does indeed have a *positionally* objective basis, and the same applies to Kerala in the opposite direction.¹³

The positional objectivity of these views—with parameterized positional specifications—command attention, and social scientists can hardly dismiss them as simply subjective and capricious. But neither can these self-perceptions be taken to be accurate reflections of relative morbidities in any trans-positional understanding. Indeed, they are not even *positionally* objective from the general position of “living in” a particular region, say, Uttar Pradesh, since that geographical characterization can go with various different parameterized positional specifications. (There are obviously many excellent doctors and medically sophisticated patients in Uttar Pradesh as well.) The positional objectivity of the illusion of good health turns on the nature of the positional parameters that influence the observations of the individual subjects (location is not in itself central), and the frequency of this phenomenon in regions like Uttar Pradesh relates to the congruence of these positional parameters among a large proportion of the population of that region. The possibility and frequency of objective illusion have some far-reaching implications on the way comparative medical and health statistics are currently presented by national and international organizations. The comparative data on self-reporting of illness and the seeking of medical attention call for critical scrutiny taking note of positional perspectives.

Another practical illustration, also from India, relates to the dissonance between the ranking of perceived morbidity and that of observed mortality of men and women. Women have, on the whole, tended to have survival disadvantages vis-à-vis men in India (as in many other countries in Asia and North Africa, such as China, Pakistan, Iran, or Egypt).¹⁴ Mortality rates have been typically higher for women for all age groups (after a short neonatal period of some months) up to the ages of thirty-five to forty. And yet the self-perceived morbidity rates of women are often no higher—sometimes much lower—than that of men. This seems to relate

13. This explanation is reinforced by comparisons of self-assessed morbidity rates in the U.S. with those in India (including Kerala). In disease-by-disease comparison, while Kerala has much higher self-assessed rates for most illnesses than the rest of India, the United States has even higher rates for the same illnesses. On this see Christopher Murray and Lincoln Chen, “Understanding Morbidity Change,” *Population and Development Review* 18 (1992): 481–503.

14. Kerala is an exception in this respect too, with female mortality rates systematically lower than male.

to women's deprivation in education and also to the social tendency to emphasize the "normality" of gender inequality as a part of the prevailing mode of living. On an earlier occasion, I have discussed the remarkable fact that in a study of postfamine Bengal in 1944, widows had reported hardly any incidence of being in "indifferent health" whereas widowers complained massively about just that.¹⁵

The idea of positional objectivity is particularly crucial in understanding gender inequality. The working of families involves conflict as well as congruence of interests in the division of benefits and chores, but the demands of harmonious family living require that the conflicting aspects be resolved implicitly, rather than through explicit bargaining. Dwelling on such conflicts would generally be seen as abnormal behavior. As a result, customary patterns of conduct are simply taken as legitimate (usually by implication), and there is a shared tendency not to notice the systematic deprivation of females vis-à-vis males.

Given these conditions, it is very hard to challenge received gender inequalities, and indeed even to identify them clearly as inequalities that demand attention.¹⁶ While this applies to the inequalities in health care in many Third World countries, the phenomenon itself is, of course, more general, and can be seen in other forms (for example, in terms of the distribution of family chores and the sharing of ambitious opportunities) even in Europe and North America. Since gender inequalities within the family tend to survive by making allies out of the deprived, the opaqueness of the positional perspectives plays a major part in the prevalence and persistence of these inequalities.

VI. SUBJECTIVISM AND POSITIONAL OBJECTIVITY

If a determinist view is taken of causation in general, it can be argued that anyone's actual observations and actual beliefs can be explained entirely by an adequate specification of the positional parameters that influence his or her observation and understanding. If those parameters were

15. *Commodities and Capabilities* (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1985), appendix B. It is interesting to note in this context that as the subject of women's deprivation has become politicized, the biases in the perception of the unequal deprivation of women have become less common.

16. I have discussed these issues in my "Gender and Cooperative Conflict," in *Persistent Inequalities*, ed. Irene Tinker (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

all to be specified as part of the positional identification, then those observations and beliefs would be positionally objective in that constrained situation. It might, thus, appear that every view or opinion could be made positionally objective by some appropriately thorough specification of positional parameters.

This does not, of course, contradict the role that may be played by subjective features in influencing observation and belief. Rather, in the special case considered, the subjective characteristics influencing views and opinions would simply be included in the specified positional parameters. The formal possibility of this overlap is a direct result of the parametric form of positional objectivity, which makes the assessment relative to the chosen positional parameters.

However, the existence of this formal possibility of overlap does not, in itself, make it any less relevant to address the issue of subjectivism as an important social idea. In the context of scrutinizing the subjective arbitrariness of some views, it remains necessary to examine whether those views could be made to fit positional objectivity only through parametric specifications that invoke special mental tendencies, particular types of inexperience, or constrained features of reasoning. If so, the diagnosis of subjective arbitrariness would remain relevant, no matter whether we also describe those views as positionally objective from that very special position.

Indeed, there could be a good practical case for excluding special mental tendencies, particular types of inexperience, and so forth, from the permissible parameterization in determining positional objectivity. If we chose this type of exclusion, then subjectivity would overlap much less with positional objectivity, and this might, in fact, appear to some to be "neater," at least in terminology (since subjectivity and objectivity are usually taken to be contradictory). On the other hand, this move would go against the general approach of seeing objectivity in positional terms. In fact, in the context of analyzing systematic social prejudices (shared by many people who are similarly placed in a community), it might well be useful to see a phenomenon that has clearly subjective features as being also positionally objective from an elaborately specified position, since this would then help us to focus on causal links that have important explanatory roles. Whether or not this exclusionary route is taken, subjectivity and positional objectivity do, in general, remain different; the possibility of overlap does not undermine this basic distinction.

VII. CULTURAL RELATIVISM AND INTERNAL CRITICISM

Given the parameterized form of positional objectivity, the question can also be raised as to whether it does not automatically make culturally relativistic views perfectly "objective." I shall be particularly concerned with culturally influenced readings of *social* phenomena. For example, belief in women's inferiority in particular skills may be statistically associated with living in a society that partly or wholly reserves those skilled occupations for men, giving little opportunity for women to establish their ability to perform these jobs. Let us call such a society an S* society. Is this belief in the lower ability of women positionally objective from the position of members of that S* society, however senseless it might seem from elsewhere?

By specifying in great detail a person's background and other positional features in that S* society, that unfounded belief can indeed be made "positionally objective" from that thoroughly specified position. This is clear enough, but in terms of the justificatory force of cultural relativism, this is not in itself a big deal, since the positional parameters needed to get that result would have to be quite special, typically involving some general ignorance (e.g., of experiences and observations in other societies). The normative claims by cultural relativists tend to operate with broader units, to wit, an entire society seen as a whole. Social criticism of the prevailing beliefs and practices in society S* can then only come from other, alien cultures (an example, as it were, of the arrogance of cultural imperialists). The normative demands of cultural relativism include deference to each society and its internal culture—an immunity, as it were, to criticism coming from "outside."

But the positional objectivity under discussion does not cover all the parametric positions that are consistent with living in and belonging to a particular society.¹⁷ The belief in question may well be positionally objective for particular specifications of the positional parameters, but this does not make that belief objective from the general position of being a member of society S*. The central difficulty in that supposition lies in assuming that a special set of positional parameters are the only ones

17. As discussed in the context of analyzing perceptions of morbidity, residents of a low-education, low-medical care region (such as Uttar Pradesh) may frequently tend to assume that their morbidity rates are low (given their positional parameters), but there is no necessity to have that belief merely because of living in such a region, or as a result of being a member of a society where most people take that view (see Section V).

open to members of society S^* . But surely the positional specification in the general form of living in a particular country (or even of being a native of that country) does not translate into that special set of positional parameters in any obvious way. There is no *necessity* to choose the special vantage point of the majority (even of an overwhelming majority) in that society merely because a person happens to live in such a society. The need to consider different positional parameters consistent with being in society S^* is not eliminated by the existence of an establishment view or a majority opinion.

In denying the objectivity of the belief in women's inferiority, one can of course invoke the need for a trans-positional assessment involving international perspectives, drawing on observations and beliefs from vantage points prevailing in other societies where women have more opportunity to show their ability. But the more immediate issue is the nonnecessity of taking an establishment view of feminine inferiority even for those living in society S^* . Contrary views can be taken consistently with living in such a society, and the critique of that view can be "internal" (rather than arising from outside that society).¹⁸

This general point is not critically dependent on any actual experience of dissent or of nonuniformity of viewpoints, and it is adequate to note that the underspecified position of living in society S^* leaves open various alternative positional features. However, as a matter of fact, virtually every society tends to have dissenters, and even the most repressive fundamentalist regimes can—and typically do—have skeptics. Indeed, the presence and use of the apparatus of prosecution in societies with allegedly homogeneous beliefs would seem to indicate that the possibility of a different view is not just a theoretical one. The viewpoint of, say, the dominant clergy in Iran has no more privileged status in assessing "the Iranian position" than that of one of the many dissenters. The need for such a trans-positional exercise is part of an *internal* scrutiny in the country in question and must not be confused with an alien critique. Even if the perspective of the dissenters is influenced by their reading of

18. On related matters, see Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, "Internal Criticism and Indian Rationalist Traditions," in *Relativism: Interpretation and Confrontation*, ed. M. Krausz (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988). See also Michael Walzer, *The Company of Critics* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), and Clifford Geertz, "Outsider Knowledge and Insider Criticism," mimeographed, Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, 1989.

foreign authors (such as Kant, Hume, Marx, or Mill), the viewpoints and critical perspectives of these members are still "internal" to society S*.

Arguments invoking cultural relativism typically operate on units that are much too gross. Positional parameters need finer specifications for examining the positional objectivity of particular beliefs. This leaves open the possibility of internal criticisms. Given the possibility of taking different positional views in any given society, the necessity of transpositional assessment arises within each society itself. The need for comparing and assessing different points of view, diverse observations, and distinct conclusions in any given society cannot be eliminated by the dubious assumption of dissentless uniformity, or by the political pressure of going by the establishment view or the majority opinion in the country in question. The terms of the debate on cultural relativism have to be thoroughly reexamined in the light of the issues raised by the positional conception of objectivity.

VIII. SUBJECTIVE PROBABILITY AS POSITIONALLY OBJECTIVE EXPECTATIONS

There is a tension in the use of the concept of the so-called "subjective probability" that can be fruitfully addressed using the notion of positional objectivity. The term subjective probability suggests a denial of any claim to objectivity, and it is certainly true that the concept is frequently defined entirely in terms of personal beliefs and credence that guide the bets an individual is, in fact, willing to take. On the other hand, a vast decision-theoretic literature is concerned specifically with the discipline of how to form these beliefs and modify them systematically as new information becomes available—the so-called Bayes' Law is a classic example of this.¹⁹ This makes extensive use of demands of reason, rejecting reliance on merely idiosyncratic persuasions and subjective beliefs.²⁰ In some respects, therefore, subjective probabilities are thus required to be objective after all. The question is: in *what* respects?

19. Thomas Bayes, "An Essay towards Solving a Problem in the Doctrine of Chances," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* 53 (1763), reprinted in *Biometrika* 45 (1958).

20. See, for example, R. Duncan Luce and Howard Raiffa, *Games and Decisions* (New York: Wiley, 1957), and John C. Harsanyi, *Rational Behaviour and Bargaining Equilibrium in Games and Social Situations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

Consider a game in which you have picked up one card from a pack of the usual fifty-two cards (you can see what it is, but I cannot), and I am asked to guess what card that might be and then to place bets on my guess being right. Suppose I venture that it is the jack of spades, and then offer an even bet on this. Unless I happen to know something else about the game and about your actions, I might be thought to be rather idiosyncratic. Let us assume that I do not know anything more about the situation, but feel inclined to take an even bet anyway. If someone were to explain to me that this is unwise (since there are as many as fifty-two different cards), I am being asked to be "more objective."

But this demand for objectivity relates to the position in which I actually am. From your position you do, in fact, know what the card is; all I know is that you have picked one card from fifty-two. In any trans-positional assessment to determine what card it really is, your positional observation would get justifiable priority (for you can see it and I cannot). But that priority is of no use to me since I do not know what you are observing and I have to assess the situation from my actual position. Positional objectivity from my actual position is exactly the relevant notion of objectivity here. My expectations can be systematically revised as new information unfolds, but each time I try to be objective in the light of what I have reason to believe at that time.

Of course, I may not regard every card as equally likely even without knowing exactly which one you have picked. I may have some evidence that you tend to like spades and go for pictures rather than numbers.²¹ I certainly need not be guided simply by the frequency statistics. But no matter what else I am influenced by, reasoned subjective probabilities have to be sensitive to the relevant information and evidence I happen to have in the position I am actually in.

Bayes's communication to the Royal Society saw the probability of an event as: "the ratio between the value at which an expectation depending upon the happening of the event ought to be computed, and the value of the thing expected upon its happening." The idea of this "ought" is to make the best use of the information available to the person. In

21. I may even have some belief without very solid evidence. Subjective probabilities can certainly be influenced by ideas that go beyond whatever totality of evidence might be available. Given the limitations of available evidence, the room for personal variations can be quite considerable. Nothing stated here goes against that feature of subjective probabilities.

discussing the Bayesian approach, Ian Hacking notes a certain "superficial difficulty" in Bayes's characterization of probability:

Sometimes he writes as if the fair betting rate is entirely a function of the available information, and may alter as any new information is made available. At other places he is at odds with this idea; he writes of unknown probability of an event as if there were an objective property of it quite independent of whatever information is available.²²

Hacking analyzes the resolution of this difficulty in terms of the Bayesian distinction between (1) an "evidence-dependent" sense of probability, "a fair betting rate," and (2) "chance, or long run frequency." Even though Hacking calls the latter, but not the former, "objective," it is clear from his analysis that the former ("a fair betting rate") too is meant to be based on eschewing idiosyncratic or subjective propensities in favor of making sensible use of the available information. There is also the need to revise these betting rates as new information becomes available. Thus, the notion of subjective probability, though typically described as non-objective, is required, in Bayesian analysis, to reflect what objectivity demands from the *position* of the person taking the bets, with exactly the information that she has. The idea of positional objectivity is precisely what is needed to understand that Bayesian concept.

The decision theory of subjective probabilities is concerned with rational use of positional information. It is not concerned with objectivity as a "view from nowhere"—neither in the form of frequencies, nor in that of trans-positional scrutiny. The distinction between rational use of objective and subjective probabilities does not lie in one being based on objective considerations and the other being divorced from them. They relate, rather, to the different types of objective considerations that can be invoked in different contexts.

IX. DEONTOLOGY AND POSITIONAL CONSEQUENTIALISM

Positional objectivity can be important for ethics as well.²³ The nature of personal moral decisions makes some positional characteristics inescap-

22. Ian Hacking, *Logic of Statistical Inference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), p. 193.

23. On this, see the last substantive section of my "Rights and Agency," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 11, no. 1 (Winter 1982): 3–39, reprinted in *Consequentialism and Its Crit-*

ably relevant for evaluation and choice. For example, a person's own role in bringing about some disastrous consequences may be peculiarly significant in that person's evaluation of the state of affairs of which those consequences are constitutive parts. The positional perspectives may, in this sense, have even more intrinsic relevance in ethics than they do in epistemology. My focus here is not specifically on the question of whether ethics can really be substantially objective, but on the positional nature of ethical reasoning and rationality, which would also apply to the objective elements in ethical judgments.

Several modern philosophers (including Bernard Williams, Thomas Nagel, Derek Parfit, and others) have argued for assessing actions in an "agent relative" way.²⁴ The need for agent relativity has been seen as an argument against consequentialist ethics for its alleged failure to deal with important agent-relative values. For example, in a much-discussed example, a substantial distinction is made between (1) murdering someone oneself, and (2) failing to prevent a murder committed by a third person. The former has been seen, not implausibly, in even more negative terms than the latter. The relevance of this distinction has been interpreted as evidence of the inadequacy of consequentialism as an ethical approach. Even though the consequences are "the same" in the two cases (including a person being murdered), the ethical case against committing a murder oneself can be said to be much stronger than that against failing to prevent a murder committed by another person.²⁵

But are the consequences really the same in the two cases, when seen from the position of the person in question? Why must it be permissible—indeed obligatory—for a person who commits a murder himself to

ics, ed. S. Scheffler (Oxford University Press, 1988). See also Donald Regan's disputation of these claims, "Against Evaluator Relativity: A Response to Sen," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 12, no. 2 (Spring 1983): 93–112, and my reply in *ibid.*, 113–32; see also my "Well-being, Agency and Freedom: The Dewey Lectures 1984," *Journal of Philosophy* 82 (1985): 169–221.

24. Bernard Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism," in J.J.C. Smart and B. Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), and *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Thomas Nagel, "The Limits of Objectivity," in *Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, vol. 1, ed. S. McMurrin (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1980), and *The View from Nowhere*; Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

25. The comparison can be extended by examining the ethical dilemma involved in the choice between committing one murder oneself and failing to prevent several committed by others; see Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism," pp. 98–107.

see the consequent state of affairs in exactly the same way as another case in which he does not commit this murder? The murderer surely bears a special responsibility in bringing about the states of affairs resulting from (and including) the murder he commits, and it cannot be sensible to insist that he must not see this state of affairs in any more negative terms than another where he is not thus involved. Correspondingly, it seems odd to insist that the murderer himself must view the state of affairs of which this murder is a central aspect in exactly the same way as any other person. It is only because of this arbitrary insistence (that judgments of consequences be position-neutral) that consequentialism appears to fail to guide agent-relative choice of actions and accommodate agent-relative values.²⁶

By insisting on agent-relativity of action morality, Bernard Williams and others argue—I believe rightly—in favor of a relevant difference, in terms of the *actions* respectively performed, between the murderer and others. But a similar reasoning strongly suggests that the *consequences* themselves (including the actions performed) may not be viewed in exactly the same way by the murderer as others might be free to do.²⁷ The *positional* view of consequences leads to a consequentialist distinction between the murderer's moral problems and those of the nonpreventers.

The unargued requirement of trans-positional invariance of consequences amounts to begging the central question; to wit, how should the consequences be viewed by each person respectively? For example, when Macbeth observes that "Duncan in his grave" and "Treason has done his worst," there are indeed good reasons for him and Lady Macbeth to view that state of affairs differently from the way others can. And they have reason enough to wonder about the actions performed, as Lady Macbeth did: "What, will these hands ne'er be clean?" Similarly, Othello does not have the freedom to see the state of affairs in which Desdemona lies strangled in her bed—strangled by Othello himself—in the way others can.

It is quite arbitrary to exclude the possibility of having a special inter-

26. The distinction and relationship between different kinds of "neutrality" ("doer neutrality," "viewer neutrality," and "self-evaluation neutrality") were analyzed in my "Rights and Agency," pp. 19–28 (reprinted in Scheffler, *Consequentialism and Its Critics*, pp. 204–12).

27. The extension would, of course, be strained if it were required that the consequent states of affairs must *exclude* the actions involved. But there is no particular reason for that exclusion. Indeed, in clarifying the distinctions between the different approaches, Williams even considers—very effectively—the case of a "state of affairs which consists in his doing A" ("A Critique of Utilitarianism," p. 88).

est in—and taking responsibility for—one's own actions, in evaluating states of affairs of which those actions and their effects are among the *constitutive* elements.²⁸ And if this possibility is kept open—not arbitrarily closed—then consequential reasoning can certainly accommodate the deontological concerns mentioned earlier. There is no basic conflict between consequential ethics and agent-relativity in judging states and actions.

X. A CONCLUDING REMARK

The positional view of objectivity takes note of the parametric dependence of observations, beliefs, and decisions on positional features of the person in question. It leads to a view of objectivity that contrasts with the more traditional formulation of the invariance needed for objectivity. The proposed approach involves personal invariance without making a blanket demand for positional invariance at the same time.

Using this approach, it is possible to reinterpret the demands of objectivity of beliefs, including the idea of objective illusions, which proves to be useful in investigating several social phenomena (illustrated here with the specific problems of assessment of morbidity and the understanding of gender bias). It also leads to a somewhat different critique of cultural relativism, one not congruent with critiques that have been re-proached as culturally imperialistic.

This view of objectivity also demands sensitivity to positional features in rational decisions, features central to decision theory. In particular, it provides a reinterpretation of the distinction between subjective and objective probabilities.

The approach also indicates a much wider reach of consequentialist reasoning in ethics. Indeed, the alleged limitations of consequentialism to take note of deontological considerations and of agent-relative values are the result of demanding a positional invariance that is thoroughly arbitrary.

28. A similar argument applies to agent-relative values involving the importance of autonomy and the integrity of a person (other grounds that have been cited to show the limitations of consequentialist ethics). On this and on the distinctions between different types of agent-relative values, see my "Rights and Agency."