

OBJECTIVITY AND POSITION

by

AMARTYA SEN



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The E. H. Lindley Memorial Lectureship Fund was established in 1941 in memory of Ernest H. Lindley, Chancellor of the University of Kansas from 1920 to 1939. In February 1941 Mr. Roy Roberts, the chairman of the committee in charge, suggested in the *Graduate Magazine* that

the Chancellor should invite to the University for a lecture or a series of lectures, some outstanding national or world figure to speak on "Values of Living"—just as the late Chancellor proposed to do in his courses "The Human Situation" and "Plan for Living."

In the following June Mr. Roberts circulated a letter on behalf of the Committee, proposing in somewhat broader terms that

The income from this fund should be spent in a quest of social betterment by bringing to the University each year outstanding world leaders for a lecture or series of lectures, yet with a design so broad in its outline that in the years to come, if it is deemed wise, this living memorial could take some more desirable form.

The fund was allowed to accumulate until 1954, when Professor Richard McKeon lectured on "Human Rights and International Relations." The next lecture was given in 1959 by Professor Everett C. Hughes, and has been published by the University of Kansas School of Law as part of his book *Students' Culture and Perspectives: Lectures on Medical and General Education*. The selection of lecturers for the Lindley series has since been delegated to the Department of Philosophy.

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AMARTYA SEN
Lamont University Professor
and Professor of Economics
and of Philosophy,
Harvard University

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University of Kansas

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Amartya Sen

1. Introduction

The subject of this paper is the relationship between the inescapable positionality of observations and the demands of objectivity in science and practical reason. What we observe depends on our position vis-à-vis the object of observation, and that positionality relates to a number of parameters—locational and others—that influence acts of observation. But even though observations are parametrically variable with positions, they are central to our understanding of the world, and thus to science, decisions, and ethics. Objectivity would seem to demand some kind of *invariance* with respect to particular characteristics of the observer and her circumstances. But the question is: *which* characteristics should figure in the invariance conditions—and no less importantly, which must not so figure?²

It is not surprising that objectivity has been seen as a demand for “a view from nowhere” (to quote the title of Thomas Nagel’s important book on that subject).³ I shall argue that even though this way of seeing objectivity is advantageous and helpful in many respects (Nagel’s illuminating analysis is an excellent example of the fruitfulness of this approach), it is nevertheless misleading in some crucial respects. It is with those respects that I am primarily concerned in this paper.

I shall distinguish between two concepts of objectivity: (1) positional objectivity, and (2) *trans*-positional objectivity. Briefly put (though with some oversimplification, as will be discussed later), the distinction is this. How an object appears from a certain position of observation is an objective inquiry in which the observational position is specified (rather than being treated as an unspecified intrusion—a scientific nuisance). Any attempt at non-positional objectivity has to start with knowledge based on positional observations and *then* go beyond that, and in that sense this is really an idea of *trans*-positional objectivity (rather than one that does without positional objectivity altogether).

Positional objectivity is of interest both in itself and as the crucial building block of *trans*-positional objectivity. I shall discuss the relevance of positional perspectives on objectivity in, respectively, science, decision theory, ethics, and public affairs. But, first, some conceptual distinctions.

2. Subjectivity Distinguished from Positional Variability

Is positional variability related to the lack of objectivity in any way? There are some connections here, but we have to be careful in deciding on what they are. In *The View from Nowhere*, Thomas Nagel has commented on an aspect of these connections.

A view or form of thought is more objective than another if it relies less on the specifics of the individual's makeup and position in the world, or on the character of the particular type of creature he is.¹

This is a good way of beginning to see a distinction that may be significant, but we must also inquire what exactly the exercise is in which positional variability is to be interpreted. Its relevance must depend on the nature of the inquiry. If, for example, we are trying to find out how a phenomenon would appear to a person occupying a particular position, then clearly that positional view of the phenomenon is exactly what we are looking for. It is, then, part and parcel of that objective inquiry, rather than an illegitimate incursion of subjective features.

Positional variability does not necessarily provide counterevidence to the objectivity of observational statements. If I say that the moon looks small from where I am, I need not be accused of deep subjectivity—another person seeing the moon from where I am could confirm that observational *fact*. Nor is that observational claim contradicted by what we know—from other evidence—about the mass of the moon, or by the fact that the moon looked big enough to Neil Armstrong while taking his “one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind.”

Indeed, in an obvious sense, there can be no view from nowhere. What can be taken as a view from nowhere must, in some ways, be a constructed and scrutinized derivation based ultimately on the views from particular positions. Positional parameters need not, of course, be seen in spatial terms only—as in the simple examples chosen to illustrate positionality, and can involve different types of influences on observation. Since all observations are position-dependent, positional observations are central to science and provide the primary information on the basis of which *position-independent* generalizations may be eventually constructed.

Furthermore, sometimes we may be interested precisely in the positional observations *themselves*—those may be the objects of our inquiry. The fact that this is perhaps more likely to be the case in social sub-

jects and in ethics (on which more presently) than in the natural sciences is an important methodological issue. But this does not make the *occurrence* of positional variability a peculiar feature of the social sciences or ethics.

Indeed, modern physics is directly—and deeply—concerned with the influence of the positional parameters of observations on what is observed, and there is no general contrast here with the need for a corresponding recognition in the social sciences.⁵ What is, however, of particular importance in the social sciences is the extent to which specific positional views may themselves be the exact objects of inquiry, rather than being of interest only as ways of getting at some kind of a *transpositional* understanding. Thus, even though significant positional variability of observations is not at all a distinctive feature of *social* subjects only, nevertheless the particular interest in the positional variability of observations can be especially central to the enterprise of social knowledge. However, that direct and intrinsic interest in positional observations does not make those observations, in any sense, subjective.

But what is this idea of *subjectivity* from which I am trying to distinguish the notion of positional relativity? Am I using some odd notion of subjectivity—different from common use—to make these distinctions? I would argue that, on the contrary, the commonly shared idea of subjectivity is much in line with the usage here. In the *Oxford English Dictionary* subjectivity is characterized as: (1) “having its source in the mind,” and (2) “pertaining or peculiar to an individual subject or his mental operations.” The first feature, which I shall call “mental manufacture,” relates to the inward-looking nature of subjective judgements or theories. The honest racist who is persuaded without any attempt at actual observation that members of a certain race suffer from some terrible character defects is subjective in relying on his personal imagination on matters in which observations—direct or indirect—must be importantly relevant. Objectivity here will demand the use of careful observations (rather than mental manufacture), even though it must come to terms with the inescapable fact that what is actually observed may be significantly dependent on the position from which the observation is undertaken.

The second aspect (that is, “pertaining or peculiar to an individual subject or his mental operations”) has a different, though not unrelated, focus. I shall call this the aspect of “person sensitivity.” No matter how exactly it is characterized, objectivity must satisfy some requirements of *inter-personal invariance*. An observation may be inevitably position-dependent, but it would lack something in credibility if others

viewing the object from the same parametric position could not see what this subject sees. The demands of objectivity—positional as well as trans-positional objectivity—have to go beyond relying entirely on personally peculiar observations that others cannot reproduce even when they share the same position.

We have to distinguish clearly between *personal invariance* and *positional invariance*. On the other hand, what is included in the list of positional parameters is itself open to variation. In this sense, positional objectivity is a *parametric* characteristic, the exact implications of which would vary with the alteration of the specified positional parameters. This parametric variability is no embarrassment for the approach outlined here. Quite the contrary—it is an essential part of it. But the parametric specifications can change the nature of the exercise altogether. Indeed, if mental tendencies as well as personal peculiarities are all *included* in the specified positional parameters, then subjective observations involving clear cases of “mental manufacture” and “person sensitivity” would also be positionally objective in that *thoroughly specified* position.

The importance of the distinction between subjectivity and positional objectivity lies in the fact that parametric specification *need not* take that extreme form. Indeed, in most cases the parametric specifications will be less exhaustive, and the problem of *position-relativity* would not be trivially reduced to that of *person-relativity*. Some problems related to the issue of parametric specification are taken up in section 4, after discussing the concept of trans-positional objectivity.

3. Positional and Trans-positional Objectivity

While the main subject matter of this paper is positional objectivity, I am not trying to argue here that there is nothing deeper in objectivity than the idea of “positional objectivity.” Rather, the claims include: (1) that “the view from nowhere” is not our *only* concern in assessing objectivity—there are important problems of positional objectivity (related to parametric specification of positions), and (2) that “the view from nowhere” is really a matter of “trans-positional objectivity”—relying on but going beyond positional objectivity itself. Positional objectivity is important both because the positional view may be itself interesting, *and* because the positional observations have to be the building blocks of more demanding kinds of objectivity that may be sought.

Trans-positional assessment involves discriminating aggregation. There is, of course, no guarantee that an appropriate trans-positional

view must always exist, nor that it would be unambiguous when it would exist. The analytical problems involved in such aggregation, including the criteria that may be employed, are not altogether different from those that have become familiar in the context of other exercises in social aggregation, e.g., in social choice theory, involving different methods of scrutinized combination.⁶ The positional parameters can be taken to be specifying different “individual” views which would have to be “aggregated” together with appropriate discrimination to arrive at a combined view (a constructive “view from nowhere”).

There are many different types of criteria. For example, a particular positional view may get priority because it might help to “tie up” other positional observations in a coherent way.⁷ The diagnosis of subjectivity in trans-positional claims may be connected with rejecting generally perspicuous criteria and preferring to go by positional observations from personal standpoints despite those observations being less accessible and less integrable with other knowledge.⁸ Even though trans-positional objectivity cannot be dissociated from positional views in general, it cannot be arbitrarily anchored to any chosen positional view either.

4. Implicit Trans-positionality and Constrained Objectivity

The contrast between “positional” and “trans-positional” objectivity is not as sharp as it may first appear. Positional specifications tend to be typically incomplete, and some implicit trans-positional assessment is standardly involved in examining objectivity from some specified—but not exhaustively specified—position.

The issue of positional specifications has far-reaching significance. If we take a deterministic view of causation, it can be argued that anyone’s *actual* observation of any object can be entirely accounted for by an adequate specification of his or her positional parameters vis-à-vis the object. If those parameters were *all* to be specified as part of the positional identification, then the observation based on those parameters would be positionally objective in that constrained situation—and fully explainable to others. In this sense, any actual observation (to be distinguished from a *report* on—or an *account* of—an observation) can be seen as positionally objective for some appropriately thorough specification of positional parameters. Clearly subjective features influencing an observation would, then, be *included* in the specified positional parameters.

If a person who is terribly scared mistakenly sees a rolled umbrella in the hands of another person as a gun, the (trans-positional) unob-

jectivity of the observation that the other person had a gun does not contradict the *positional objectivity* of his seeing what seemed to him to be a gun. By bringing in all the positional parameters (including his being deeply scared), his observation can be made accessible to and understandable by others, *given* the extensive specification of circumstances and mental states. On the other hand, if we do not specify the position with *all* those parameters, and simply ask whether a person encountering another with a rolled umbrella in good light would be objective in taking that umbrella to be a gun, the answer could certainly be “no.” The distinction here has some relevance to understanding the concept of “the reasonable man” frequently invoked in legal disputations.

Similarly, the 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 (let us call such societies S-societies). Furthermore, by specifying in great detail a person’s education, social conditioning, conformist predilections, and so on, that subjective observation can be made positionally objective from that immensely specified position. But these features still do not make that belief objective—not just trans-positionally, or even from the position of *living* in an S-society. The positional specification in the form of living in such an S-society is, of course, less than exhaustive. In denying the positional objectivity of the *observation* of women’s inferiority from that—underspecified—position, the immediate point is not the *trans-positional unobjectivity* of the alleged feminine inferiority, nor the fact that in *other societies* women are not viewed as being inferior in these ways. The immediate issue is the non-necessity of taking such a view of feminine inferiority *even* for those living in an S-society. Other—contrary—views can be taken consistently with living in an S-society, and the critique of that view can be “internal” (rather than arising from outside that society).⁹

5. Positional Judgements and Consequential Ethics

The issue of positionality in objectivity arises not only in science and epistemology, but also in ethics and in the theory of decisions. Indeed, it is precisely in the context of positional *ethical* judgements that I had earlier made a somewhat *ad hoc* attempt (*ad hoc* because of being confined to ethics) to discuss the merits of the positional interpretation of objectivity.¹⁰ In this section and in the next, I consider two particular issues of ethics to illustrate the relevance of the positional view of objectivity in practical reason.

The need for assessing actions in an agent-specific way has been discussed by several modern philosophers, including Bernard Williams, Thomas Nagel, Derek Parfit, among others.¹¹ The need for agent relativity has been seen as an argument against consequentialist ethics, for its alleged failure to deal with an important deontological distinction. To take a much discussed example, there have been interesting analyses of the ethical difference between (1) killing 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.¹²

Are the consequences, in fact, the same? It is certainly possible to construct examples such that the alternative scenarios lead respectively to two states of affairs that are much the same except for the switching of name tags. While name tags and personal identities do make a difference in the detailed description of states of affairs, it can be argued that this difference cannot be significant, in assessing these states of affairs in a person-neutral way. In each case someone is murdered and also someone commits the bad deed of killing, and a *person-neutral* view of the two states cannot really find them to be critically different from an ethical point of view.¹³ And yet, killing someone oneself is seen—with reason—as a bigger personal failure than non-prevention of a murder being committed by another. Hence the conclusion that consequentialism must be rejected.

But the entire argument turns on the requirement that consequences be evaluated in a *person-neutral* way, despite the connections between the agent doing the evaluation and her own roles in the respective states of affairs. The dilemma for consequentialism, on this interpretation, arises from the agent making agent-relative moral judgements in assessing actions on deontological grounds, but at the same time being unable to make the corresponding distinctions in the respectively resulting states of affairs, because of the imposed requirement of person-neutrality in judging *states*, rather than actions. But why must an agent, in making a consequentialist judgement, be person-neutral in this way, as if she is viewing the states “from nowhere”?

The issue of positional assessment of states of affairs can be con-

sidered in another way: not in terms of the same person facing two alternative states of affairs (involving two different actions), as above, but with two persons undertaking two different actions facing exactly the *same* state of affairs.¹⁴ When a murder is committed by person A, should A and another person B, sharing the same substantive ethical values, view that state as being equally bad—bad in just the same way (even though A committed the murder and B did not)? The deontological critique of consequentialism, under discussion, would suggest that consequentialists must do just that. But why must consequentialists, by virtue of being consequentialists, view the consequences in exactly the same way independently of the persons' respective roles in the states of affairs (including in the actions respectively undertaken)? Why must a consequentialist see the consequence "from nowhere"?

By insisting (I believe rightly) on agent-relativity of action morality, Bernard Williams and others argue in favour of a relevant difference, in terms of the actions respectively performed, between the murderer and others—including the non-preventers of the murder. 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 the others might be free to do.¹⁵ The *positional* view of consequences leads to a consequentialist distinction between the murderer's moral problems and those of the non-preventers.

The prior 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 is in his grave" and "Treason has done his worst," he and Lady Macbeth do indeed have good reasons to have to view that state of affairs differently from the way the 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 her husband—in the way others can.

It is quite arbitrary to exclude the possibility of having a special interest in—and value ethical responsibility for—one's own actions, in evaluating states of affairs of which those actions and their effects are among the constitutive elements. And if this possibility is kept open (and not arbitrarily closed), then consequential reasoning can easily accommodate the deontological concerns mentioned earlier. There is no basic conflict between consequential ethics and this type of agent relativity in judging states and actions.

6. Contracts, Fairness and the Impartial Spectator

The issue of positionality is important in several other contexts in the discipline of ethical judgements and objectivity. One such context is the form that fairness and impartiality may take in unbiased ethical and political analysis. The “contractarian” view of justice has come to much prominence in recent years mainly due to the influence of John Rawls’s far-reaching contributions.¹⁶ His theory of “justice as fairness” relies, in essence, on a “fair” compromise between different positional views that anyone could have objectively occupied. In the “original position”—a hypothetical state of primordial equality—the parties are seen as negotiating a social contract, privileged with some information but denied other (that relating to particular personal advantages and disadvantages that each may actually have). In an alternative contractarian approach, Thomas Scanlon has analysed a requirement of fairness without the device of the “original position,” but in terms of selecting general rules “which no one can reasonably reject as a basis for informed, unforced general agreement.”¹⁷

While the positional specifications and the argumentative discipline vary between these different versions of the contractarian procedure, they share the general format of looking for a consensus or a negotiated settlement between the different “insiders.”¹⁸ In contrast, Adam Smith’s programme of finding what “the impartial spectator” would have decided is based on invoking an “outsider” who takes note of each positional view.¹⁹ Adam Smith is really seeking a *correct trans-positional* view that would be identified by a sympathetic spectator from outside, whereas the contractarians are focusing on a *negotiated fair resolution* of the different *positional* points of view treating each person as a participant—none an impartial spectator from outside it all.²⁰

Smith’s “impartial spectator” belongs to the class of pioneering ideas of the eighteenth century of which Kant’s more systematic and much more influential analysis of “practical reason” is the pre-eminent example.²¹ The Rawlsian analysis and the entire contractarian approach have clear Kantian connections,²² and in a generic sense there is considerable similarity between the contractarian procedures and the Smithian procedure involving “the impartial spectator.” The Smithian method has some advantages in terms of *reach* over the contractarian procedures, since the achievement of a consensus and a negotiated settlement, between a *fixed* group of “insiders,” breaks down when dealing with problems in which the population itself is a variable. An outsider in the form of an “impartial spectator” can make coherent judge-

ments even under those circumstances. On the other hand, the ethical force of a social arrangement that is backed by a consensus or negotiated settlement of all the people involved is clearly absent in the Smithian model involving an impartial spectator. It is not my purpose here to try to discuss the far-reaching differences between the alternative views of impartiality and fairness in these distinct approaches,²³ but only to point to the role of different positional observations in these alternative formulations of ethical rationality and objectivity.

7. Decisions, Positions and Subjective Probability

Positional objectivity has an important relevance also in the theory of rational decisions. The special relevance of one's objective position in viewing the prospects and their merits can hardly be ignored. I shall take up here the problem of choice under uncertainty in general and the use of so-called "subjective probabilities" in particular.

The term "subjective probability" would seem to indicate a firm denial of any claim to objectivity, and it is certainly true that the concept is *defined* entirely in terms of personal degrees of belief and credence that guide the bets a person is willing to take. And yet a vast decision-theoretic literature is concerned specifically with the discipline of how to *form, modify, or adjust* these beliefs, making extensive use of demands of reason and that of objectivity.²⁴ The question is what kind of objectivity?

I shall argue that the classic problem of distinguishing between rational conceptions of so-called "subjective" and "objective" probabilities can be helpfully analysed in terms of the distinction between *positional* and *trans-positional* objectivity. To illustrate, consider a case in which you have tossed what we both accept as an even coin. You can see whether it is head or tail that has come up, but my view is obscured by your palm. You ask me what bets would I take, and thus enquire about my so-called "subjective probabilities" (as they are defined in the literature). It is easily seen that I cannot sensibly take either a purely subjective view *or* a trans-positionally objective view in deciding on what bets to take. It would be silly of me to take, say, a 1-to-10 bet that it is a head, since I should know that for an even coin the "chances" don't favour that bet. There are good reasons for me to restrain my purely subjective inclinations and to concentrate on being as objective as possible.

On the other hand, what I have to seek is not objectivity that ignores the relevant peculiarities of *my own position*. Either head or tail

has definitely come up and you actually know what it is. In any trans-positional assessment of truth of the kind used in science, your view—based on seeing the coin—will get understandable priority. But in the position I am in, I don't know what your view is any more than I can observe which way the coin has come up. In deciding on bets, if the sensible view to take by me—or by anyone else in my position—is to act on the basis of a reading of a 50-50 chance, then the claim must be that this view is indeed unprejudiced and objective from my position. *Positional objectivity* is, in this context, exactly what is being sought, and it has to be clearly distinguished both from *subjectivity* and from general *trans-positional objectivity*.

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. Subjective probabilities may indeed be *defined* entirely in terms of mental attitudes such as beliefs and inclinations, but decision theory is concerned with the rational use of the information available to the person in question. The various principles—Bayesian and others—aimed at guiding the choice of subjective probabilities make effective use of positional objectivity, and that is indeed, I would argue, the appropriate framework to interpret those exercises.

8. Perceptions, Health and Well-being

Social sciences have to invoke positional points of view for other reasons as well. This includes the understanding of beliefs and actions. To illustrate, consider the problem of ill health, and in particular, the contrast between (1) self-perception of health and (2) medical examination by doctors. In some contexts, self-perception itself is part of the ailment. Having a headache, or experiencing nausea or dizziness, is part of the ill-health itself and not just a symptom of it. A doctor can scarcely diagnose that you have pain if you feel none. In these cases the priority of self-perception would seem to be hard to escape in arriving at a position-independent assessment.

But in other cases, self-perception can be a difficult basis for the appraisal of health status and medical conditions. Empirical analysis based on self-assessment can be plagued by perceptual variations and volatility, and also by systematic social influences that may make interpersonal comparisons particularly problematic.

Self-perceptions can be enormously affected by one's general men-

tal outlook. Understanding of morbidity is often associated with education, and the privileged frequently report higher incidence of illness. There is another connection here that deserves more attention than it tends to get. Methodical use of medical services both (1) reduces one's morbidity, and (2) increases the self-perception of morbidity. A population that goes to see doctors regularly may enjoy better health, but at the same time that population will have a clearer awareness of health deficiencies and ailments. This connection makes international or interregional comparisons of health conditions based on questionnaires not only misleading, but sometimes perversely so.

Let me illustrate the point by comparing different states in India. The state—Kerala—that has the highest level of longevity (a life expectancy at birth of more than 70 years now, in comparison with the Indian average of 57 years) also has incomparably the highest rate of reported morbidity. At the other extreme, questionnaires fielded in the backwards states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh reveal a very low perception of morbidity but extremely high rates of actual mortality. This has sometimes been seen as a bit of a mystery.

To disentangle the picture, what is needed is not really to ignore self-perception—the point of view of the persons themselves. Quite the contrary. It is to see that having enormously greater literacy than elsewhere in India and having the most extensive public health facilities in the country make the Kerala population more willing and able to diagnose illnesses and to do something about them in a way that cannot generally happen in much of the rest of India. It is also important to see that seeking more medical attention is not only a sign of the *awareness* of health condition, it is also a way of *seeking remedy*. There is no real mystery here once the positional conditions are seen as part of the causal influences that generate and sustain the situation reflected in the medical statistics.

This line of interpretation can be further extended by comparing the reported morbidity rates in India (including Kerala), on the one hand, and in the USA, on the other, based on comparative surveys of health perceptions. Such an extension has recently been made by Christopher Murray and Lincoln Chen of the Harvard School of Public Health. In disease by disease comparison, it turns out that while Kerala has much higher reported morbidity rates for most illnesses than the rest of India, the United States has *even higher* rates for the same illnesses. If we were to go by self-reported morbidity, we would have to conclude that the USA is the least healthy in this comparison, followed by Kerala, with the rest of India enjoying a much higher level

of health—led by the states that are most backward in education and health facilities, such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh!

The alternative is to understand the positional features in the systematic perceptions of morbidity, relating understanding and knowledge to the particular circumstances of the self-observers. This does not deny the possibility of trans-positional objectivity in assessing health conditions, typing up medical observations with perceptual information, but that is a distinct problem that has to be addressed on its own and must not be confused with positionally determined health perceptions.

9. Gender Inequality and Positional Perceptions

To take another example, nowhere is the importance of positional interpretation as crucial as it is in understanding gender inequality. The working of families involves a mixture of congruence and conflict of interests in the division of benefits and chores, but the demands of family living require that the conflicting aspects be resolved *implicitly*, rather than through explicit bargaining. Dwelling on such conflicts would generally be seen as aberrant behaviour. Instead, in day-to-day practice, conventional codes of conduct are simply taken as legitimate (usually by implication rather than by any explicit enunciation), and a derived perception of fairness and equity in the distributive arrangements plays an important causal role in the success of family living.²⁵

Given these conditions, it is very hard to challenge received gender inequalities, and indeed even to identify them clearly as inequalities that demand attention. To discuss another illustration from India, the questionnaire method of getting the views of rural women themselves on their experience of gender inequality has typically failed to find any strong perception of disparity or inequity. This has sometimes been interpreted as a proof of the absence of a “real” gender inequality in rural India. It has even led to the suggestion that raising the question of gender inequality in this context amounts to the planting of an alien notion in an illegitimate way into the harmony of Indian rural living.

And yet in terms of various criteria of mortality rates, literacy rates, nutrition-related diseases, etc., women emerge as being systematically underprivileged vis-à-vis men in rural India. The interest in the systematic absence of perceptions of gender inequality does not lie in its *trans*-positional objectivity, but in its reflection of the positionally constrained views that are shared and accepted. Indeed, the perception of harmony (even on the part of the rural Indian woman themselves)

contributes to the causal influences sustaining gender inequality, rather than *contradicting* the existence of that inequality.

There is also a dissonance between the ranking of perceived morbidity and that of observed mortality between men and women—similar to that between the Indian states on which I commented earlier. Indian women tend to have a higher mortality rate than Indian men for all age groups (after a short neo-natal period of some months) up to the ages of 35 to 40 years. And yet the reported morbidity rates, which are parasitic on self-perception (for reasons discussed in section 8 above), of women are typically no higher—sometimes much lower—than those of men. This is not only a reflection of women's deprivation in education, but also of the acceptance of greater discomfort and illness as a part of the prevailing mode of living. On an earlier occasion, I have discussed the remarkable fact that in a study of post-famine Bengal in 1944, widows had hardly reported any incidence of being in "indifferent health" whereas widowers complained massively about just that.²⁶

The perception of seriousness of diseases and of the need to seek professional medical attention also affects actions. There is evidence of systematically less use of hospital facilities by women *vis-à-vis* men (and by girls *vis-à-vis* boys) in India, even in major cities.²⁷ As argued earlier in the context of discussing positional perceptions of ill health, less frequent use of the medical services simultaneously (1) *decreases* reported morbidity, and (2) *increases* vulnerability to disease.

By constraining the positional parameters very thoroughly, it would be possible to attribute *positional objectivity* to the Indian rural women's lack of *sense* of relative deprivation in health or well-being. That positional objectivity has importance in understanding self-perceptions of Indian women, and also in explaining various actions and non-actions. On the other hand, this positional objectivity, achieved through extensive constraining, would not readily translate into *trans-positional objectivity* of women's relative deprivation, nor into *positional objectivity* from the general position of being an Indian rural woman (as discussed in section 4 earlier).

I have confined my comments on gender inequality here to India only, but similar statements can be made about most of the developing countries in South Asia and West Asia, and also about China.²⁸ At a different level, a similar analysis has relevance to gender inequalities in the richer countries of Europe and America as well. The relevant disparities there may not relate to such elementary matters as morbidity and mortality, but to other fields, such as unequal divisions of domestic chores, inequalities in the responsibility for child care and the op-

portunity to accept full-time outside employment, disparities in professional ambition and encouragement, and so on.

The importance of positionality can be enormous in understanding health, well-being, and relative deprivation. The distorted observations are not proof of their trans-positional truth or objectivity, but nor are they dismissable as purely subjective features of the persons involved. They are systematic and patterned, and can hardly be attributed to whims and quirks of mental manufacture or to purely personal peculiarities. The positionality of perspectives—and the idea of objectivity within those perspectives—provides a framework in terms of which these systematic findings can be analysed and understood.

10. A Concluding Remark

The importance of positionality in observations has been the main theme of this paper, and in that context, objectivity has been seen in both *positional* and *trans-positional* terms. Parametric positional variability is a general feature of all observations and is central to the process of acquiring of knowledge. Objectivity cannot do without positional observations. While this is just as true in the natural sciences as it is in the social sciences or in ethics or in decision theory, the significance of positional variations can be very different—in some ways more central—in the latter contexts. The subject matter of social sciences, ethics, decision theory requires us to take, for various reasons, a direct interest in the positional observations.

To try to see the claims of different perspectives merely in terms of the conflicting demands of “objectivity” and “relativity” (as some standard formulations of the dispute tend to suggest) is to miss something central in the nature of knowledge and practical reason. The relationship is not like that at all.

NOTES

1. For helpful comments and suggestions, I am most grateful to Guido Calabresi, Lincoln Chen, Susan Hurley, Arthur Kleinman, Tony Laden, Christopher Murray, Hilary Putnam, Thomas Nagel, Emma Rothschild, and Thomas Scanlon. This lecture draws on parts of my Storrs Lectures, on “Objectivity,” at the Yale Law School, given in September 1990.

2. The use of “invariance conditions” is a formal way of sorting out the contrast between relevant and non-relevant variations; on this see my “Information and Invariance in Normative Choice,” in W. P. Heller, R. M. Starr, and D. A. Starrett, eds., *Social Choice and Public Decision Making: Essays in Honor of Kenneth Arrow* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

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

4. Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 5.
5. There is a similarity between this claim and Hilary Putnam's argument that dependence of truth on "conceptual schemes" applies also to the natural sciences (and is not a special feature of the social sciences or ethics). Putnam's thesis draws on his more general argument that truth—"real truth"—itself "depends on conceptual schemes" (see Hilary Putnam, *The Many Faces of Realism*, LaSalle: Open Court, 1987). I shall not go directly into that far-reaching issue of "contextual relativity" of truth in this paper.
6. On this see my "Social Choice Theory," in K. J. Arrow and M. D. Intriligator, eds., *Handbook of Mathematical Economics* (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1986). See also Susan Hurley, *Natural Reasons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).
7. See particularly Susan Hurley, *Natural Reasons* (1989).
8. On this see Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (1986).
9. On related matters, see Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, "Internal Criticism and Indian Rationalist Traditions," in M. Krausz, ed., *Relativism: Interpretation and Confrontation* (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.
10. This occurs in the last substantive section of my "Rights and Agency," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 11 (1982), reprinted in S. Scheffler, ed., *Consequentialism and Its Critics* (Oxford University Press, 1988). See also Professor Donald Regan's disputation of these claims and my reply in *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 12 (1983), and also my "Well-being, Agency and Freedom: The Dewey Lectures 1984," *Journal of Philosophy*, 82 (April 1985), Lecture 1.
11. 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 S. McMurrin, ed., *Tanner Lectures on Human Values* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1980), and *The View from Nowhere* (1986); Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).
12. The force of that distinction can be highlighted through ethical dilemmas involving the choice between committing one murder oneself and failing to prevent several committed by others; see Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism" (1973), pp. 98–107.
13. In social choice theory, the formal version of this condition is called "anonymity." A critique of anonymity can be found in my *Collective Choice and Social Welfare* (San Francisco: Holden-Day, 1970; republished, Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1979), Chapters 5 and 6.
14. The distinction and relationship between different kinds of "neutrality" (viz., "doer neutrality," "viewer neutrality," and "self-evaluation neutrality") were analysed in my "Rights and Agency," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 1982, pp. 19–28 (in the reprint in Scheffler, *Consequentialism and Its Critics*, 1988, pp. 204–212).
15. The extension would, of course, be strained if it is 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).
16. Particularly, John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).
17. Thomas Scanlon, "Contractualism and Utilitarianism," in Amartya Sen and Bernard Williams, eds., *Utilitarianism and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).
18. To a considerable extent the same applies to the programmes of using contractual impartiality to obtain utilitarian ethics; see particularly John C. Harsanyi, *Essays in Ethics, Social Behaviour and Scientific Explanation* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1976).

19. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 1759; republished from the revised 1790 edition in D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie, eds., *Adam Smith: The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976).

20. The contrast between spectators and participants (familiar to contemporary practitioners of spectator sports, such as boxing) is brought out by Joseph Addison's slightly stuffy declaration, "I live in the world rather as a spectator of mankind than as one of the species" (*The Spectator*, London, 1712, p. 1).

21. Indeed, Smith's analysis of "the impartial spectator" has some claims to being the trail-blazing contribution in this area. Kant did not refer to it in his *Groundwork* (1785) or the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), but did cite the idea of "the impartial spectator" ("*der Unpartheyische Zuschauer*") in *Reflections on Anthropology*. He knew *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (originally published in 1759), and commented on it in a letter to Markus Herz in 1771—though he referred to him as "the Englishman Smith" (on this see Raphael and Macfie, 1976, p. 31).

22. On this see Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (1971), section 40 (pp. 251–257). In a later contribution ("Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory: The Dewey Lectures 1980," *Journal of Philosophy*, 77, 1980), Rawls related his "justice as fairness" in a different way to Kantian analysis—to Kantian "constructivism" in particular.

23. I have tried to discuss one aspect of the contrast in the context of population policy in my "Welfare Economics and Population Ethics," paper presented in the Nobel Jubilee Symposium on "Population, Development and Welfare" at Lund University, December 5–7, 1991. Some related issues are illuminatingly discussed by Remco Oostendorp, "The Principle of Sympathy in Adam Smith's Theory of Moral Sentiments," mimeographed, Harvard University, January 1992.

24. See, for example, John C. Harsanyi, *Rational Behaviour and Bargaining Equilibrium in Games and Social Situations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

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

26. *Commodities and Capabilities* (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1985), Appendix B.

27. Jocelyn Kynch and Amartya Sen, "Indian Women: Well-being and Survival," *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 7 (1983); also my *Commodities and Capabilities* (1985), Appendix B.

28. The ratio of females to males in the population, incorporating the cumulative impact of differential mortality rates, is remarkably below unity in China, much of South Asia (including India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh), and many countries (such as Iran and Egypt) in West Asia and North Africa, whereas the ratio is significantly higher than unity in countries where there is little anti-female bias in medical attention (for example, in the countries in Europe and North America, in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, and in the state of Kerala in India). On this and related issues, see my "Missing Women," *British Medical Journal*, March 1992.

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