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Commentary on “Mapping Objectivity and Bias in Relation to Argument”

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Professor Blair’s detailed analysis of some of the different things that can be meant by “biased” and “objective” pulls apart strands in the meanings of these terms that are not usually separated, and provides a useful resource for anyone who cares about using these terms with precision. My commentary will focus on a few points at which I think he understates the relationships between being biased (in some sense) and being objective (in some sense).

	O1: Factual, agreed- upon	O2: Impersonal, detached	O3: Realistic	O4: Barebones, strictly factual	O5: A- perspectival	O6: Balanced
B1: Unfair, partial						
B2: Closed- minded, prejudiced						
B3: Having a preference						
B4: Disproportional						
B5: Cognitively misaligned						
B6: Unbalanced, one-sided						CONTRA- DICTIONARIES

Table 1: Blair’s view of the relationships between the types of bias and the types of objectivity

Professor Blair suggests that although the kind of bias labeled B6 (being unbalanced or one-sided) is the contradictory of the kind of objectivity labelled O6 (being balanced, considering all perspectives fairly), none of the other types of bias are either the contradictories or the contraries of any of the other types of objectivity.

Part of the issue may be that different types of things are the subjects of claims of bias and objectivity in the different senses. As Professor Blair talks about the different ways of being biased, it seems that a *person* is unfair or partial (B1), closed-minded or prejudiced (B2), or has a preference (B3), whereas a *sample* is biased in the sense of disproportional and a *report* is biased in the sense of being unbalanced or one-sided. On the objectivity axis, a *report* is factual (O1), barebones (O4), A-perspectival (O5) or balanced (O6); a *judgment* is impersonal or detached (O2), and a *person* is realistic (O3). (“B5: Cognitive misalignment” is presented as a

characteristic of a person, and the contraries as *cognitive sophistication* or *cognitive astuteness*. But I think a mechanism rather than a person is biased in this sense – it produces skewed results – and that the contrary is something like “accurate” or “reliable.”)

If most of the kinds of objectivity apply to reports and most of the kinds of bias apply to people, it is less surprising than one might initially have thought that only B6 and O6 (both of which apply to reports) are contradictories. This may also make the claim a bit less interesting. In some cases it may be that a quite superficial feature of how we use certain words is being made to carry the weight of determining that a particular form of objectivity is not opposed to a particular form of bias (e.g. the fact that “barebones” describes a passage of text rather than its author, and so its contraries will also be characteristics normally attributed to texts rather than people).

	O1: Factual, agreed- upon	O2: Impersonal, detached	O3: Realistic	O4: Barebones, strictly factual	O5: A- perspectival	O6: Balanced
B1: Unfair, Partial P			Contraries		Contraries?	Contraries?
B2: Closed- minded, prejudiced P						
B3: Having a preference P						
B4: Disproportional						
B5: Cognitively misaligned			Contraries ?			
B6: Unbalanced, one-sided R	Contraries				Contraries	CONTRA- DICTIONARIES

Table 2: An expanded view of the relationships between the types of bias and the types of objectivity

Some other possible relationships between the types of bias and the types of objectivity are given in Table 2. B1 and O3 seem to me to be contraries. A person who is unfair or partial is not realistic: he or she is not seeing the world as it is.

B6 and O5 I think are contraries as well. A report that is unbalanced or one-sided is not a-perspectival – it is a report from a particular point of view. B6 may also be a contrary of O1: if a report is unbalanced, it is not factual (if it was, what would make it unbalanced)?

These suggestions are independent of the issue of what type of thing the different sorts of claims take as their subjects: B1 and O3 both apply to people, and B6, O1 and O5 all apply to reports. Other possible connections appear when one does pay attention to this issue – these are marked with question marks in Table 2. The person who presents an A-perspectival report (modified O5) is clearly not being unfair or partial (B1); likewise the person who presents a balanced report (modified O6). The cognitive mechanisms of a person who is realistic about some feature of the world (O3) are not cognitively misaligned (B5) with respect to that feature –

if they were, the person would not have an accurate picture of that feature of the world. Whether or not one describes these as sets of contraries, the claim that there is *no* relation between them (or, no opposition between the kinds of objectivity and the kinds of bias picked out) seems too strong.