

# Syracuse Scholar (1979-1991)

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Volume 8  
Issue 1 *Syracuse Scholar Spring 1987*

Article 8

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5-15-1987

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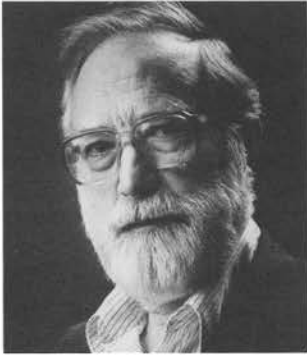
### Recommended Citation

Mathews, Cleve (1987) "Objectivity," *Syracuse Scholar (1979-1991)*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 1 , Article 8.  
Available at: <https://surface.syr.edu/sus scholar/vol8/iss1/8>

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# Objectivity

## CLEVE MATHEWS



Cleve Mathews is a professor of journalism in the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University. He obtained his B.A. and M.A. from the University of Michigan. Prior to entering teaching, he was an editor on the *New York Times* and director of news and public affairs for National Public Radio. In the latter capacity, he served as the first executive producer of the news program "All Things Considered." He is coauthor with William L. Rivers of Stanford University of *Ethics in the Media*, to be published next spring by Prentice-Hall.

This article is an adaptation of a chapter written for *Contesting the Boundaries of Liberal Education: The Syracuse Experiment*, ed. Peter Marsh (Syracuse University Press, forthcoming).

OVER THE LAST TWO YEARS, scholars in several different fields at Syracuse University engaged in give-and-take discussions, not about university business as happens so often in faculty committees, but about one another's scholarly fields. These unusual encounters occurred under the auspices of a program financed by the Mellon Foundation to examine the relationships between the professional schools and liberal arts and sciences. Seldom do faculty members get a chance to exchange information and views about their disciplines. While these discussions started off rather tentatively, they soon took on a vitality and openness that enabled those of us participating to peer across the traditional boundaries into the hearts of our respective worlds.

We could not, of course, engage in the deeper discourses of specialists, but we were pleased to find that we could achieve an understanding and even a degree of rigor at a shallower level. In retrospect, our success in communicating with one another might be attributed to two factors: (1) a confidence, perhaps naive, that our perceptions of each other's language were valid, and (2) a realization that the content of each field possessed an integrity and uniqueness that could engage and even excite those of us in other fields. But communication did not come easily. Crossing the boundaries was not enough. It took us a while to realize that in order to talk back and forth with real success, we had to operate more deliberately in an objective manner than we normally do when engaging in scholarly discourse with others in our own fields. This realization emerged slowly as we noticed that the need to validate our information came up time and again as we talked and as we discussed readings we all had submitted to further the project's purposes.

As a journalist questioning my own field's validation of the information it conveys to the public, I was intrigued to see that the other

fields represented in the Mellon seminar confronted some of the same issues and that they affected our discussions. We seemed to insist on justifying statements as a means of clarifying scholarly interpretations of one body of knowledge to those in other fields. We could accept subjective interpretations from one another, but we wanted more objectivity when we discussed the content of our respective disciplines. In fact, objectivity became a theme of the project.

To no one's great surprise, there was lack of agreement about what objectivity is. It was more important as an issue for some disciplines than for others. And the issue presented itself in more than one way. My journalistic orientation posed it as a kind of stance to protect information from contamination. To the literary critic, objectivity arose from the otherness of an object being considered from the subjective view of the subject doing the considering (I think). But all our fields seemed to have some kind of objectivity-subjectivity element, however defined, as part of their adherents' visions of themselves. A sense emerged that this element provided something common to all fields and might therefore be one vehicle for better understanding between fields.

The question of objectivity was raised most insistently for the seminar by artist Robert Irwin and historian Thomas Kuhn, whose views were set forth in seminar readings.<sup>1</sup> The two men did so by contesting objectivity. It is not surprising that Irwin, presumably more concerned with conveying subjective feelings than facts, should reject objectivity. But Irwin persistently insisted on reasoning his way—slowly, deliberately—to his artistic expressions. At times he seemed determined to eliminate any arbitrary or superfluous elements that might bias one's perceptions of his art as he stripped away all imagery from the unmediated “phenomenal presence” that he said a work of art was all about. If this leads to presenting an empty room as an exhibit, it nevertheless succeeds in forcing people to ask what it is all about. Yet Irwin ended up rejecting the “logic” of the scientist that cuts the world into slices and doesn't deal with its overall complexities. He accepted, instead, the approach of “reason,” which intuitively grapples with the situation as a whole. He found hope in those who work “beyond the techniques of their disciplines,” which seemed to be his warning against the constraints of objectivity.<sup>2</sup>

Kuhn was concerned with explaining the development of science, and he was more complex than Irwin in his view of the logic of science. He saw science progressing through the replacement of one set of theory that is unable to account for a serious anomaly by another body of theory that can account for it. Kuhn called such a set of theory a paradigm. The new set of theory attracts a community of scientists committed to articulating and applying that theory. Within that community of scientists, an objective kind of logic prevails in the development of the paradigm's potential. But science progresses through the rise of new paradigms in a series of discontinuous steps brought about by breakthroughs that displace or resolve anomalies troubling earlier

1. Lawrence Weschler, *Seeing Is Forgetting: The Name of the Thing One Sees: A Life of Contemporary Artist Robert Irwin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); T. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed., enlarged (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

2. Weschler, *Seeing Is Forgetting*, 137.

paradigms. The logic of normal science does not permit effective communication between paradigms. A scientist “converted” to one paradigm cannot accept all the explanations acceptable in another. This incommensurable quality vitiates the traditional function of objectivity, which is to enable any scientist to make an independent check of some other scientist’s assertion of truth.<sup>3</sup>

3. Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 198–207.

The views of Irwin and Kuhn are forms of idealism, in tune with a good deal of modern thinking from Immanuel Kant to today’s phenomenologists. Objectivity to such thinkers is an unobtainable ideal, and trying to live up to it may not be the proper thing to do. Since it is an ideal, it can be applied only through imperfect means, which may cause more harm than good.

Objectivity encounters less criticism from those who operate as realists or empiricists. To them objectivity serves more as an instrument than as a concept. It has been defined by one of Kuhn’s critics, Israel Scheffler, as “fair control over assertion,” and he saw commitment to such control as the basis of the scientific attitude of impartiality and detachment. Scientists, Scheffler said, are no more naturally impartial than anyone else, but the scientific habits of mind reflected in such objectivity are compatible with passionate advocacy, strong faith, intuitive conjecture, and imaginative speculation.<sup>4</sup> So objectivity provides a way of preventing error that might arise from more subjective factors.

4. I. Scheffler, *Science and Subjectivity*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1982), 1–2.

The debate between idealism and realism has a long and sophisticated history, which the Mellon Foundation seminar did not try to pursue. Yet the issues of that debate cropped up in various forms as the disciplines encountered one another. A warning against falling into the trap of dualistic analogies was raised in an article by Richard A. Shweder circulated to members of the seminar. It warned of simply accepting the dichotomy that one can either “tell it as it is” or find the answer through “divine” revelation.<sup>5</sup>

5. R. A. Shweder, “Storytelling among the Anthropologists,” *New York Times Book Review*, 28 September 1986, 1, 38–39.

Shweder said good writers of ethnography are casuists who take the perspective of others and thus get outside themselves. Perhaps journalists, seeking to reach their audience more effectively by putting themselves in their readers’ and viewers’ places, tend to become casuistic. Yet in conveying their pictures of the world, implicitly framed by rights and wrongs, they find objectivity a comfortable, credible way of validating their information.

I said before that a look at the debate over objectivity could provide us with a sense of the quality of knowledge of a field. Let me offer such a view of the debate in the field of journalism.

**T**HE TURBULENCE OF THE 1960S, first over civil rights and later over Vietnam, brought to a head reactions that had been long developing among journalists to what was seen as a formulaic kind of automatic objectivity. A decade earlier, Senator Joseph McCarthy had exploited journalistic routines that validated controversial information by attributing it to a credible source. After all, a United States senator was a newsworthy source, and attributing unfounded charges to him was all that was required by traditional objectivity. The

press sought to avoid the trap revealed by McCarthy by modifying the objectivity routines to encourage reporters to quote participants on both sides of an issue in the same report, if possible.

The 1960s put even this modified view of journalistic objectivity under great strain. Reporters, contending with deceptive information issued by official sources and with special interests dramatically thrusting forth their own visions, sought to tell the truth as they saw it. Sometimes that truth was quite subjective. The mainline press resisted subjective reporting.

The classic view of journalistic objectivity was restated in a modern form on 7 October 1969 by A. M. Rosenthal, then managing editor and later executive editor of the *New York Times*. In a memorandum to guide his reporters and editors in dealing with the pressures of the Vietnam period, he called for preserving “the basic character of the paper.” He told the staff that the newspaper’s character rested on:<sup>6</sup>

*The belief that although total objectivity may be impossible because every story is written by a human being, the duty of every reporter and editor is to strive for as much objectivity as possible.*

*The belief that no matter how engaged the reporter is emotionally he tries as best he can to disengage himself when he sits down at the typewriter.*

*The belief that expression of personal opinion should be excluded from the news columns.*

*The belief that our own perjorative phrases should be excluded, and so should anonymous charges against people or institutions.*

*The belief that every accused man or institution should have the immediate right of reply.*

*The belief that we should not use a typewriter to stick our fingers in people’s eyes just because we have the power to do so.*

*The belief that presenting both sides of an issue is not hedging but the essence of responsible journalism.*

While saying that “our business is facts,” Rosenthal asserted that “a social movement, a change in life styles, a trend in music or art, an emotion spreading among people, can be as real a fact as a speech or a parade.” He said he was not talking about cold, dry reporting, just fair reporting. “The nature of The Times,” he concluded, “rests on what can be demonstrated, what can be reported, dissected, analyzed, rather than on what can simply be labeled or characterized or caricatured.”

If Rosenthal represented the establishment view, perhaps Hunter Thompson dramatized the alternative view. Writing in *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail*, about his objectivity, he said:

*Well, my doctor says it swole up and busted about ten years ago. The only thing I ever saw that came close to Objective Journalism was a closed-circuit TV set-up that watched shoplifters in the General Store at Woody Creek, Colorado. I always admired that machine, but I noticed that nobody paid much attention to it until one of those known, heavy, out-front shoplifters came into the place. . . but when that happened everybody got so excited that the thief had to do something quick, like buy a green popsicle or a can of Coors and get out of the place immediately.*

6. The author of this article was a member of the *Times* staff at the time.

7. Dr. H. S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72* (New York: Popular Library, 1973), 47–48.

8. A. Smith, *Goodbye Gutenberg: The Newspaper Revolution of the 1980s* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 168.

9. M. Herr, *Dispatches* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977).

10. Smith, *Goodbye Gutenberg*, 183.

11. Jonathan Alter, "The Two Faces of Breslin," *Newsweek*, 12 May 1983, 74.

12. M. Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 162–63.

*So much for Objective Journalism. Don't bother to look for it here—not under any byline of mine; or anyone else's I can think of. With the possible exception of things like box scores, race results and stock market tabulations, there is no such thing as Objective Journalism. The phrase itself is a pompous contradiction in terms.*<sup>7</sup>

Not all the critics of traditional objectivity were so extreme, but many sympathized with Thompson's views.

Anthony Smith, in *Goodbye Gutenberg*, saw objectivity as partly a response to the chaos in the international political sphere. He said, "It fostered the collection of information on the basis of a special diction, which restricted the definition of a statement to that which could be assented to by all."<sup>8</sup>

Smith's example of an objectivity suitable to the times was that of Michael Herr. In Herr's book *Dispatches*,<sup>9</sup> a collection of his reports from Vietnam, Smith found that "one can see something of what has endured of the new strains of reporting: a deep commitment to straight facts and background, suffused with the passions of an individual who feels free to use his emotions as a guide to the event while holding back from pressing opinions of a political kind—the reporter offering his experience as part of his material without prejudicing accuracy or objectivity."<sup>10</sup>

A current example of reporting of the Thompson-Herr kind is that of Jimmy Breslin. *Newsweek* wrote of him in the spring of 1986, "Breslin tries to get the details right, but generally believes that a contest between a particular fact and the absolute truth (as he defines it) is not really any contest at all." The magazine said Breslin admitted the details in a report he filed about the Three Mile Island nuclear accident were wrong, but he insisted "the absolute truth of the column was overwhelming."<sup>11</sup>

A major complaint by the young reporters of the Vietnam era was that traditional objectivity supported the status quo and thus was not really objective. Press historian Michael Schudson noted in his *Discovering the News* that the critics charged the establishment journalists were political whether they intended to be or not. "Their political impact lay not in what they openly advocated but in the unexamined assumptions on which they based their professional practice and, most of all, in their conformity to the conventions of objective reporting." Schudson said traditional objectivity had become not an ideal, but a mystification. "The slant of journalism lay not in explicit bias but in the social structure of news gathering which reinforced official viewpoints of social reality."<sup>12</sup>

THE "SOCIAL STRUCTURE of news gathering" has proved a fruitful field for media sociologists trying to find out what causes journalists to do what they do. The dogma of objectivity quickly aroused their interest. Herbert Gans found wide-scale doubts about objectivity in the 1960s and 1970s but attributed the persistence of claims of objectivity to the need to protect journalistic credibility and to the fact that journalism is a low-cost kind of information




gathering. Both reasons are basically commercial. In the first case, credibility is seen as essential to hold the audience that is the ultimate source of revenue. In the second case, the media have to rely on knowledgeable sources and other information collectors because it would raise the cost of news too much to develop the expertise and the capacity needed to gather the information on a timely basis themselves.<sup>13</sup>

Additional reasons for the traditional form of objectivity were detected by other media researchers. Gaye Tuchman asserted that objectivity was a strategic ritual designed to protect journalists who must make numerous quick decisions about the quality of their news. The speed with which the news becomes stale prevents the journalists from determining the accuracy of their information, so they attribute it to their sources as a way of validating it.<sup>14</sup>

E. Barbara Phillips developed this line of thought and contended that daily journalism encourages a lack of expertise and promotes a non-systematic, copying-machine kind of concrete information.<sup>15</sup> This supports the distinction made much earlier by Robert Park that journalistic information merely provides "acquaintance with" facts rather than the "understanding of" them.<sup>16</sup>

The reliance on sources implicit in journalistic objectivity has become a key part of current theories that the sources and the media collaborate to construct the picture of reality that is presented to the audience. This is the conclusion to which a model by an early champion of objectivity, Walter Lippmann, has led. He asserted that the media contribute to the picture of the world that resides in the heads of members of the public.<sup>17</sup> But this phenomenon is frequently offered as a reason to reject the idea of objectivity because the reality that is constructed results from the special interests of those constructing it. The term "reality," of course, is not really reality but instead a fabricated kind of ideal in the sense that it exists in the minds of members of the public. So the long debate between idealism and realism emerges anew in a special formulation at the center of today's world of media theory and research.

NE WILL FIND similar debates going on in other fields. In literary criticism, for example, Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory: An Introduction*<sup>18</sup> and such works as Raman Selden's *Criticism and Objectivity*<sup>19</sup> could sensitize one to the depth and diversity of the elements that contribute to meaning. Selden, in fact, found the objectivity of historical criticism growing out of a "structural plurality" of forces that interact to determine the meaning of a message. While these forces are not randomly independent, their numerous conjunctures give rise to an overdetermination of meanings that makes the "true" meaning of a text indeterminate, one among many possible interpretations. This results in a complexly structured discourse that Selden found more suitable for giving an objective reading than a subjective one.

The conjuncture of forces at the receiving end of the message also acts to determine the meaning. We operate in a world of perceptions, which might cause some to accept the view of philosopher Ludwig

13. H. J. Gans, *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek and Time* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979), 82, 186.

14. G. Tuchman, "Objectivity as Strategic Ritual," *American Journal of Sociology* 77 (January 1972): 660-70.

15. E. B. Phillips, "Approaches to Objectivity: Journalistic versus Social Science Perspectives," in *Strategies for Communications Research*, Chapter 3 (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1977), 68.

16. R. Park, "News as a Form of Knowledge," *American Journal of Sociology* 45 (March 1940): 667-86.

17. W. Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Macmillan, 1922; New York: Penguin Books, 1946), 20.

18. T. Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1963).

19. R. Selden, *Criticism and Objectivity* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984), 156-57.

Wittgenstein that objectivity is the acceptance of appearances. If, as to Wittgenstein, the world is an expressive phenomenon rather than a logical, causal one, then the stance of objectivity loses its anchor to objects, the link responsible for the term itself.<sup>20</sup>

Phenomenologist Edmund Husserl placed the fact-world of time and space “out there” in brackets beyond judgment. Asserting that objects and events cannot be apprehended in neutral fashion in any case, he followed pure subjective processes, rejecting the testimony of others in confronting the givenness of experience, in “an unremitting assault on the peak of certitude.” He insisted on shifting the focus of attention from specific fact to essential and universal qualities.<sup>21</sup> Husserl argued that while reason could demonstrate the truth, it could not persuade people that truth was desirable. Only by an intentional act of will can a person choose to bring value and truth together.<sup>22</sup>

Scholars engrossed in the debate over the ethical behavior of the media draw on the phenomenologists’ position to make their arguments. Theodore L. Glasser argued that objectivity makes it difficult for journalism to consider ethical questions. Leading off a series on objectivity in the *Quill*, the publication of the Society of Professional Journalists, he wrote:

*Since news exists “out there”—apparently independent of the reporter—journalists can’t be held responsible for it. And since they are not responsible for the news being there, how can we expect journalists to be responsible for the consequences of merely reporting it?*

*What objectivity has brought about, in short, is a disregard for the consequences of newsmaking.*<sup>23</sup>

What stronger argument for exposing journalism and other students to debates in various fields about objectivity? Perhaps they might then be in a better position to answer a question raised by an engineer in the Mellon seminar’s discussions: “Is objectivity always better?” If they can’t answer the question, maybe they would at least recognize that Husserl’s intentional act of will for bringing value and truth together is too often absent.

FROM A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE, the realists’ side of the debate over objectivity appeals to the empirical tradition of journalists, but journalists have not probed this argument deeply. In fact, Glasser blamed the journalist’s “naively empirical view of the world” for the “burden of objectivity,” but he seemed to be putting more emphasis on the “empirical” than on the “naively.”<sup>24</sup>

Social realists find no crucial distinction to be made between facts and values. Tronn Overend even argued that there was no fundamental distinction between ethics and the social sciences. Overend said ethics could be seen as a branch of social inquiry concerned with mapping out the empirical character of good and evil.<sup>25</sup> The approach in such an analysis is descriptive rather than the prescriptive one common in studying ethics. Such issues as freedom and responsibility, not to mention obligation, are eliminated as characteristics of ethical facts.

20. Henry LeRoy Finch, *Wittgenstein—The Later Philosophy: An Exposition of the Philosophical Investigations* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1977), 190.

21. Maurice Natanson, *Edmund Husserl, Philosopher of Infinite Tasks* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 60.

22. *Ibid.*, 180.

23. T. L. Glasser, “Objectivity Precludes Responsibility,” *The Quill* 72 (February 1984): 13–16.

24. *Ibid.*

25. T. Overend, *Social Idealism and the Problem of Objectivity* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1983), 190.



Realists like J. Anderson, author of *Studies in Empirical Philosophy*, conceive their practice of objectivity in terms of disinterest. This is brought out by their rejection of advocacy and insistence “on the facts, to expound and expose, let the results be what they may.”<sup>26</sup> A current journalistic formulation that approaches this view of disinterest was given by James Boylan, professor of journalism at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, in reviewing Dan Schiller’s *Objectivity and the News* for the *Columbia Journalism Review*. “Objectivity,” he wrote, “has gradually come to be understood not only as an impersonal, ‘balanced’ style of newswriting (which is the commonplace, or newsroom, sense of the word), but also as representing the broader claim of journalism for its position in society, the one that speaks for the general interest.”<sup>27</sup>

This position comes close to saying that the body of knowledge to which the profession of journalism applies its skills is not journalism, but the bodies of knowledge in the other disciplines. The profession of journalism may not then be a profession unto itself, but a form of professional practice configured to tap into the other disciplines and professions while asserting a claim to serve the general interest of the public by disseminating timely, though superficial, information arising from those fields. Superficial here does not mean unimportant, but rather is closer to meaning adequate for satisfying public expectations.

Boylan’s formulation places establishment journalism somewhere between the disinterest advocated by the philosophic realists and the interest implicit in consciously collaborating to construct a mediated reality. His position may fall short of drawing a clear guideline, but it acts to move journalism somewhat beyond any automatic balancing of opinionated statements to a perspective based on the journalists’ understanding of society’s interests.

**T**HE UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY’S interests is furthered by the cross-disciplinary education that served as a goal of the Mellon Foundation seminar. The fact that such an educational process took place among the participating faculty members is encouraging. It bodes well for the belief that students would benefit from courses designed to illuminate the elements that link liberal and professional education.

Objectivity can be one such element. By examining the ways various disciplines validate the truth of the bodies of knowledge they build, students may avoid an objectivity trap that threatens the professions. Alvin W. Gouldner warned of this trap in an article addressed to sociologists, but his warning might well apply to other fields. “Professions,” he wrote, “do not tend to see value commitments as questions of personal commitment but tend, instead, simply to treat the values they transmit as non-problematic givens.” The result is that “the growth of professionalism means the substitution of a routine and banal code of ethics for a concern with the serious kind of morality on which alone objectivity might rest.”<sup>28</sup>

Gouldner’s concern about professions’ tendency to bury the truth-revealing queries that encumber efficient practice was reflected in our

26. J. Anderson, *Studies in Empirical Philosophy* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1963), 287; cited by Overend, *Social Idealism*, 195.

27. J. Boylan, “Infancy of Objectivity,” *Columbia Journalism Review* 20 (September–October 1981): 61–63.

28. A. W. Gouldner, “The Sociologist as Partisan: Sociology and the Welfare State,” *The American Sociologist* 3 (May 1968): 113–16. (Also in *Values, Objectivity, and the Social Sciences*, ed. Gresham Riley (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1974), 56–57.

seminar discussions. Peter Marsh, as discussion leader, summed up the difference between disciplines and professions as to objectivity: “The question of objective criteria is much closer to the surface in the disciplines.”

Students in the professional schools may thus encounter those basic criteria of objectivity more readily in their liberal arts courses than in the professional courses that emphasize practice. The courses designed by the seminar participants, including those to be taught in the professional schools, may encourage students to apply such criteria across the boundaries between fields. The topic is one that arouses interest. In a course developed in the Mellon seminar for the School of Public Communications, the students demonstrated that interest. Sharon Hollenback, my colleague in the school’s television and film department, and I jointly taught the course in the fall of 1986. She mentioned that I had done a chapter for a book based on the Mellon seminar designed to probe a bit into objectivity and that I had expressed doubts about the concept as practiced by journalists generally. We then tried to pass on to the topic scheduled for the day, but the students would not let us.

“So what did you conclude objectivity is?” one asked. Sharon smiled as I danced around the question. Although I squirmed under the questioning, I was pleased by the rather passionate kind of inquiry it revealed. The fact that I could not come up with a satisfactory answer did not dismay the students. They seemed, in fact, to look at the inquiry itself as one for them to conduct on their own. We had agreed earlier in the course that freedom is redefined each generation by the way people use it. Objectivity seemed to fall into a similar category. And the students were ready to work out their own meanings of objectivity by putting it to the same kind of practical test.

This experience made me feel that objectivity is a subject that can be examined critically and feelingly by students in all fields. It reflected our experience in the seminar’s discussions, which came to see objectivity not as the path to truth, but as a means, varying among fields, for improving the mutual understanding and respect among disciplines and professions.