

The Limits of Objectivity

17-19 June 2026 - Geneva, Uni Philosophes (PHIL211)

There is a special range of difficulties that metaphysical thinking seems to run into when it tries to be strictly objective, detaching itself from any particular ‘point of view’ or ‘perspective’ on the reality it aims to describe. Reflection on these difficulties – surveyed perhaps most famously by Thomas Nagel, in *The View From Nowhere* – tends to engender philosophical reactions of different kinds. Some philosophers remain convinced that an objective conception of reality can, if suitably elaborated, accommodate all phenomena, including the seemingly recalcitrant ones. Others are instead tempted to depart from the objective conception, enriching their account of reality with ‘perspectival facts’ of various sorts. Yet others take the difficulties faced by the objective conception to motivate scepticism about the realist presuppositions implicit in metaphysical thinking. 40 years since the publication of Nagel’s book, this conference aims to bring together philosophers interested in understanding the limits of objectivity, their sources, and their implications for metaphysical inquiry.

Speakers:

Lisa Doerksen (CEU)
David Hunter (Toronto)
Max Kölbel (Vienna)
Martin Lipman (Leiden)
Michela Massimi (Edinburgh)
Gurpreet Rattan (Toronto)
Elisabetta Sassarini (Geneva)
Stephan Torre (Aberdeen)
Crispin Wright (Stirling)

Chairs: Sophia Arbeiter, Giovanni Gonella, Paulina Kraft, Donnchadh O’Conaill

Organization: Malte Koot, Will Sharp, Giovanni Merlo

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Schedule

Wednesday June 17th

16.30-16.45: Welcome

16.45-18: Michela Massimi, 'Ways of world knowing'

19.30: Dinner (Location TBC)

Thursday June 18th

9.45-11: Martin Lipman, 'On Making Sense of a Perspectival Reality'

11-11.30: Coffee break

11.30-12.45: Lisa Doerksen, 'Objectivity and Subjective Facts'

13: Lunch @ Uni Dufour

14.30-15.45: Max Kölbel, 'Content and Objectivity'

15.45-16.15 Coffee break

16.15-17.30: David Hunter, 'Credal Objectivity and Credal Illusions'

Friday June 19th

9.45-11: Stephan Torre, 'Anticipation, Personal Identity, and the First-Person'

11-11.30: Coffee break

11.30-12.45: Gurpreet Rattan, 'An Objective Deduction of the Subjective Self'

13: Lunch @ Uni Dufour

14.30-15.45: Crispin Wright, 'Taking the measure of the Forced March Sorites'

15.45-16.15: Coffee break

16.15-17.30: Elisabetta Sassarini, TBA

20: Conference dinner (Location TBC)

Abstracts

(in alphabetical order, by author name)

Objectivity and Subjective Facts

Lisa Doerksen (CEU)

A purely objective conception can seem incomplete insofar as it leaves open basic questions about one's identity and experiences. Versions of this thought (which I call the incompleteness intuition) have recently played a role in motivating views on which there are subjective facts in addition to objective facts. An objective conception cannot represent subjective facts because these facts only obtain relative to certain points of view; they are not there to be known from other points of view. This diagnosis of the incompleteness intuition challenges the idea that there is one coherent (i.e., non-fragmented) world that includes all of us and our individual perspectives. It also abandons a familiar way of thinking about objectivity that links it with a form of transcendence. I argue that we can do justice to the incompleteness intuition without positing subjective facts. The key is to revisit the "transcendent" notion of objectivity to see how it poses a problem for inquiry directed at oneself and one's experiences. By focusing on this problem, my diagnosis aims to preserve the motivations for positing subjective facts while remaining compatible with the possibility of a complete objective conception.

Credal Objectivity and Credal Illusions

David Hunter (Toronto)

There are three grades of objectivity in the case of belief. The first two are familiar. It must be an objective matter whether a given person believes some proposition and whether they are right in believing it. This objectivity requires that we can be mistaken about what someone believes and about whether things are as they believe them to be. But there is a third grade to credal objectivity. It must also be an objective matter what there is to believe. Just as it is an objective matter what objects there are to be seen, so it is an objective matter what propositions there are to be believed. And just as perceptual objectivity makes perceptual illusions possible, credal objectivity makes credal illusions possible. That possibility is independent of debates about what there is to believe--about how to individuate propositions. Any account of how to individuate propositions must, if it is compatible with the objectivity of belief, allow for credal illusions. But the possibility of credal illusions can help us see the appeal of a relatively coarse-grained account of what there is to believe. My paper develops these ideas.

Content and Objectivity

Max Kölbel (Vienna)

Theories of semantic and mental content can have inbuilt metaphysical assumptions. For example, standard theories of propositions construe propositions as sets of possible worlds (or as determining sets of possible worlds). Only one of these possible worlds is usually assumed to be actual and to be the objective measure by which to evaluate representations for truth. This and other features of theories of content can have controversial metaphysical consequences, such as, for example, the fixity (rather than openness) of the future, or the objectivity of all contents of representation. In this paper, I will examine and evaluate various ways in which theories of content could avoid such assumptions.

On Making Sense of a Perspectival Reality

Martin Lipman (Leiden)

One might think that reality is perspectival in the following sense: the incompatible facts that obtain from different perspectives (of certain types) are all somehow equally part of the actual world. This is merely to gesture at a rough view that quite some metaphysicians have grappled with. This talk offers critical discussions of these views. There will be a wider methodological theme. I will, repeatedly, ask questions about how the application of one's chosen theoretical concepts relates to the application of concepts that our outside of these theories. I will often find the answers wanting. I will end by explaining why standpoint pluralism is my preferred take on the challenge of making sense of a perspectival world.

Ways of world knowing

Michela Massimi (Edinburgh)

In this talk I address the topic of the limits of objectivity by building on my previous work on perspectival realism (Massimi 2022) and associated metaphysical discussions about the nature of phenomena and natural kinds. I will present research originating from my recent RSE project "Ocean and Us" (Massimi, Brown, and Jaspars, OUP 2026) to illustrate the epistemic role and value of varieties of local knowledges for science and how they impinge on debates about realism.

An Objective Deduction of the Subjective Self

Gurpreet Rattan (Toronto)

What can one conclude about oneself based on the conscious experience of thinking? Descartes thought that he could conclude that he himself exists as a

thinking thing. However, others, like Georg Lichtenberg, objected that Descartes overshot the mark and was entitled to conclude only that there is thinking going on, and not that any self exists. Still others like Kant and Wittgenstein envisioned a middle position, according to which the self exists not as an object, but only as a subject engaged in spontaneous, objective judgment. These ideas suggest what I call the Three Grades of Self Involvement framework for understanding cogito-type reasoning and what can be concluded on the basis of the conscious experience of thinking:

Zeroth Grade: there is thinking going on

First Grade: I, considered as a subject, am thinking

Second Grade: I, considered as a subject that is also an object, am thinking

I explain this framework, and then argue for the middle, First Grade, view. My argument assumes that the kind of thinking at issue is a rich kind of objective thinking, informed by reflection. The paper distinguishes two models of reflection: the detachment model that understands reflection as detachment from the subjective perspective; and the critical reflective model according to which reflection makes ineliminable use of the subjective perspective. The argument then proceeds in two steps. In the first step, based on the critical reflective model and the nature of critical reflection, I argue that we must move from Zeroth Grade to the First Grade. In the second step, based on the detachment model and some ideas about the limits of evidential significance for higher-order evidence, I argue that we cannot move from the First Grade to the Second Grade. The conclusion of the argument is that based on the conscious experience of objective thinking one can conclude that one is a subject that thinks, but not also that one is an object.

[TBA]

Elisabetta Sassarini (Geneva)

Anticipation, Personal Identity, and the First-Person

Stephan Torre (Aberdeen)

Many philosophers have noted that first-person anticipation, like anticipating my painful dentist visit tomorrow, has certain features (binarity, determinacy, non-conventionality) that fail to be accommodated by reductionist accounts of personal identity like the psychological continuity theory or the bodily continuity theory. Some of these philosophers take these features of first-person anticipation to motivate the existence of first-personal facts. This strikes me as yet another case of illicitly drawing grandiose metaphysical conclusions from less grandiose features of our psychology. I argue that a) first-person anticipation essentially involves imagining from the inside and these features are explained by the nature of

imagining from the inside and b) explaining the features of first-person anticipation by appeal to the existence of first-personal facts leads to a highly implausible theory.

Taking the measure of the Forced March Sorites

Crispin Wright (Stirling)

The so-called Force march Sorites is not a paradox — that is, it is not a derivation of a contradiction or other singularity from seemingly acceptable premises — but a puzzle: how should a conceptually and cognitively competent subject reply, step by step, when charged to return verdicts about the successive elements in a sorites series for a phenomenal (or more loosely, an observational) predicate? Such a series can present as absolutely seamless transition, such that there is no discernible relevant difference between any pair of adjacent elements. Yet a competent subject must, it appears, offer discriminatory verdicts about some such indiscriminable pairs if they are correctly to register the contrasted characteristics of elements close to the end points. A related puzzle— the Transition Problem— is the challenge to account for the changes that must be taking place step-by-step if, for example, the series starts with a patch of colour that looks red and finishes with one that looks purple, e.g. I'll argue that reflection on these puzzles puts us in position to diagnose the fundamental mistake in Timothy Williamson's influential 'anti-luminosity' argument, and teaches us something about both so-called higher-order vagueness, and about the qualified objectivity of phenomenal judgement.