

# Can Our Values Be Objective? On Ethics, Aesthetics, and Progressive Politics\*

Satya P. Mohanty

**A**RE EVALUATIONS ALWAYS POLITICAL? Are our efforts to make objective value judgments always thwarted by our own political interests or our cultural and social perspectives? I am interested in this question because I am interested in progressive politics and would like to believe that my values and commitments are not rigidly determined by my social background or my narrow personal interests. In this paper I would like to defend the view that objectivity is attainable in the realm of values, in such areas as ethics and even aesthetics. For the purposes of the present discussion, I shall pose the question about value in epistemological terms: Can we human beings be objective in our views and judgments about such properties as goodness, justice, or beauty?

In order to outline my position and present my argument, however, I need to first explain what I mean by objectivity, for it is clear that we live in a postempiricist intellectual world where the term has undergone substantial redefinition. Whether we work in literary studies or in philosophy, in anthropology or any of the social sciences, we have to acknowledge the deep critique of empiricist and positivist epistemologies which has emerged from related developments in the philosophies of science and language, in ethics and cultural studies. Specifically, what has been shown to be inadequate is a particular conception of observation and objective knowledge. Thus, philosophers like Quine and Putnam, Nietzsche or Heidegger, all argue that everything that science relies on—its methodology, its understanding of what “facts” are, its practices of confirmation and even observation—is always necessarily theory-dependent rather than innocent, filtered through our values, presuppositions, and ideologies, rather than unmediated and self-evident.

\*This paper was presented to audiences at the Universities of Wisconsin-Madison, California-Riverside, and Rome, as well as at Cornell, Rice, NYU, and Harvard. Early drafts were read by Linda Alcoff, Michael Hames-García, Andrew Galloway, Terry Irwin, Dominick La Capra, Paula Moya, Ramón Saldivar, Paul Sawyer, and Harry Shaw, and I thank them for their helpful responses.

Where contemporary philosophers and most literary theorists disagree, however, is in their account of the implications of this antipositivist insight about the unavoidability of theory. A natural question to ask the antipositivist is this: Does the necessary ubiquity of theories and presuppositions, of biases and ideologies, lead to the conclusion that "objectivity" as such is never possible, not in values and not even in science? That conclusion, that objectivity is never possible, is endorsed by postmodernist thinkers who are influential especially in the fields of literary and cultural studies. A very different conclusion, endorsed by postpositivist thinkers in a variety of fields from philosophy of science to some new forms of literary theory, is that what is outmoded is specifically the positivist conception of objectivity, a conception based on a denial of the role of theory. This positivist view defines objective knowledge as something we achieve when we have freed ourselves from all bias and all interest; in this conception objectivity is seen as absolute *neutrality*, a complete divestiture of the thinker's subjectivity and her socially situated values, ideologies, and theoretical presuppositions. Defenders of a postpositivist conception of objectivity claim that this image of complete divestiture is profoundly flawed because such divestiture is never possible for humans. Objectivity is not neutrality. What we need to develop, such thinkers insist, is a more nuanced conception of objectivity which goes beyond the specifically positivist view of it; it is argued that this new conception can be built on an analysis of the differences between different kinds of subjective or theoretical bias or interest, an analysis that distinguishes those biases that are limiting or counterproductive from those that are in fact necessary for knowledge, that are epistemically productive and useful.

Arguing against postmodernist literary and cultural critics, I said in *Literary Theory and the Claims of History* that such an analysis of different kinds of bias and prejudice needs to focus on the role error plays in human inquiry.<sup>1</sup> Our elaboration of a new, nuanced conception of objectivity in literary and cultural inquiry, I suggested, depends on the richness of our understanding of error—its sources and causes, as well as the variety of forms it takes in various contexts. Our conceptions of objectivity and error are dialectically related. Both conceptions are the product of good inquiry, inquiry that is necessarily both theoretical and empirical. The analysis of error—of the distorting role played by pernicious social ideologies for instance, or the limitations of certain methodological approaches—is unavoidably empirical, even while it involves theoretical considerations. Similarly, the analysis of what works, what is epistemically productive and useful, is also simultaneously empirical and theoretical.<sup>2</sup> The view I am defending is opposed to the postmodernist position that objectivity as such is impossible, for I believe

that objectivity is often a realizable goal. Indeed, as I suggest later, objectivity is an epistemic ideal in the realm of values precisely because *values often refer to facts and properties that exist independently of our beliefs*. Such moral and aesthetic properties as goodness, justice, and beauty are, on this view, complex properties of objects and persons in the world, and we can be right or wrong in our attempts to detect and understand such properties. For realists (about value), the identification and analysis of error is essential for the attainment of objective knowledge.

One of my claims in this paper is that when postmodernists assume a skeptical attitude toward objectivity in an *a priori* way, their analysis of error often ends up being very limited in some ways and very inflated in others. An *a priori* skepticism makes it less urgent for us to look carefully at the variety of forms of, say, ideological error, and at the reasons for the differences among these different forms. The incomplete or inadequate empirical analysis is both supported by and seen as the support for an inflated thesis about the unavoidability of error. Error and distortion thus become a primeval epistemic condition, an original sinfulness, as it were. Instead of an explanation of error, we end up with a theology that sets unnecessarily rigid limits on the scope of social inquiry.