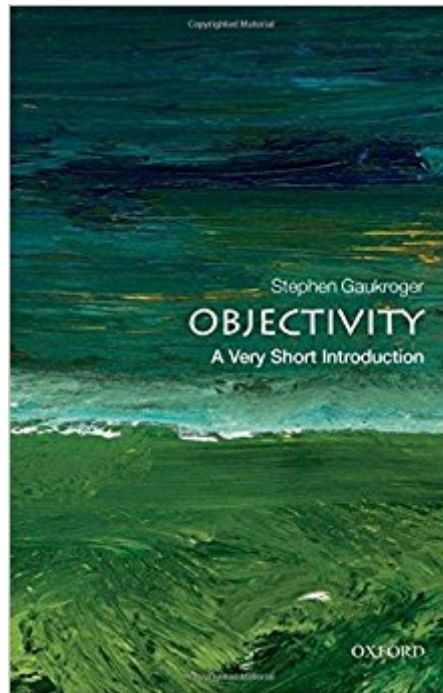




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Objectivity: A Very Short Introduction



Synopsis

Is objectivity possible? Can there be objectivity in matters of morals? What would a truly objective account of the world be like? Is everything subjective, or relative? Are moral judgments objective or culturally relative? This Very Short Introduction demonstrates that there are a number of common misunderstandings about what objectivity is, and explores the theoretical and practical problems of objectivity by assessing the basic questions raised by it. In addition to considering the core philosophical issues, Stephen Gaukroger also deals with the way in which particular understandings of objectivity impinge on social research, science, and art, and he concludes by considering the question, "Are we obliged to be objective?"

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Customer Reviews

The author of this volume (SG) succeeds wonderfully in packing a lot of valuable substance into a slightly shorter-than-average "very short introduction" (only 104 pages of text). Most of the book focuses on some common misconceptions about the nature of objectivity, while the final three chapters consider the relationship of objectivity to the social sciences, ethics and aesthetics. Starting from Plato's notion of knowledge as "justified true belief," SG makes the point that objectivity pertains to justification, not to truth. And while many people believe objectivity to consist in the absence of judgments, SG emphasizes that in fact it exists solely as a *property* of judgments. My own background is in physics, law and business, and in all three of those fields there are people prone to be confused on these points (including myself, from time to time). Many scientists and

engineers, as well as plenty of other people, tend to believe that objectivity relates to truth, and that the methods of science are the unique path to truth; for many, too, the phrase "objective reality" seems like a natural idea. On the other hand, many lawyers believe (or behave as if they believe) that all truth is relative. And too many in business believe that truth is to be found in numbers and measurements. All such folks could profit from reading this book. I learned a lot. My one quibble was with SG's praise of decision theory as an "inestimable help" for dealing with ethical issues, "offer[ing] a simple way for calculating the 'utility' of any particular action" (@76-78). Here SG implicitly assumes that a utilitarian ethical position is the most helpful one in a given situation.

I love Gaukroger's work, but this book disappointed me. In a way, it was what I expected, because I am familiar with his general outlook on the history of philosophy and philosophy of science; but, in another way, it was not what I expected: Gaukroger spoke more about variations of intersubjectivity than objectivity. Being away of his intellectual position and general understanding, I was still hoping for the book to be about what the title was about, objectivity. The book is well written and entertaining at times, and, if I knew a bit less about Daston and Galison's views on objectivity, wasn't familiar with logical positivists, and weren't well-versed in Kuhn, the book would have been a lot more interesting. The sections on general history of philosophy and philosophy of science are very, very competently done, but aren't really original in their take. I give the book three stars, instead of four, for a couple of reasons. I think someone who has read minimally on the topics of history of philosophy and philosophy of science will find little or no use in the book. Additionally, I didn't feel the sections on values were extremely well done. For knowing relatively as little as I do on the subject, nothing really struck me as being new, either in information content or presentation. On the latter of these, Oxford's "Very Short Introduction" (VSI) is supposed to have some quirky and valuable element that makes them, above other introductions, worth purchasing; and this text didn't have that quality, which was also a disappointment, given how generally creative Gaukroger is. I think he could have done a lot more. Overall, I recommend that, if you have time, peruse a few pages and base your decision on that.

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