

**Philosophy 513/Topics in Recent and Contemporary Philosophy:
Rationality and Objectivity**

Princeton University
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Wednesdays 7-9:45(ish), Marx 201

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Rationality and objectivity as epistemic categories, and the roles that they play in structuring select debates within contemporary philosophy.

I want to begin by taking a fresh look at the most influential book of twentieth century philosophy of science, Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Kuhn put on the table, in a particularly compelling way, a number of the topics that I want to pursue: To what extent are one's observations of the world influenced by the theories that one accepts? To what extent is rational adjudication possible between those who differ with respect to their most fundamental theoretical commitments (the interpersonal case), and to what extent might revising one's most fundamental theoretical commitments be a rational process (the intrapersonal case)? What might explain why natural scientists regularly seem to achieve a kind of consensus that is so conspicuously elusive in other fields (e.g., the social sciences, and--saliently for us--philosophy)?

Van Fraassen on radical belief change. The debate about whether observation is 'theory laden', in both its classical guise (Kuhn and Hanson versus the logical empiricists) and its contemporary one (Fodor versus Churchland). The concept of evidence, and various versions of the claim that evidence will inevitably 'underdetermine' the choice between rival theories. Williamson on evidence. Issues about rationality and interpretation as they arise in both the philosophy of social science and the philosophy of psychology: debates about Principles of Charity and Humanity, etc. (Davidson, Dennett, Stich). Bernard Williams on convergence in ethics and in science. Recent 'transcendental' defenses of Reason due to Thomas Nagel and Ronald Dworkin.

1. 2/8 Overview

2. 2/15 Kuhn

Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* [selections].

Thomas Kuhn, “Objectivity, Value Judgement, and Theory Choice”. Reprinted as chapter 13 of his *The Essential Tension* (University of Chicago Press, 1977).

3. 2/22 Van Fraassen on Radical Belief Change

Bas van Fraassen, “Scientific Revolution/Conversion as a Philosophical Problem” and “Experience: Epistemic Life Without Foundations”. Lectures 3 and 4 of his *The Empirical Stance* (Yale University Press, 2002).

4. 3/1. The ‘Theory-Ladenness’ of Observation

Excerpt from Norwood Russell Hanson, *Patterns of Discovery*.

Jerry Fodor, “Observation Reconsidered”, *Philosophy of Science* 51, pp.23-43 (1984). Reprinted in his *A Theory of Content and Other Essays* (MIT Press, 1990).

Paul Churchland. “Perceptual Plasticity and Theoretical Neutrality”, *Philosophy of Science* 55, 2, 67-90 (1988).

[ALSO: James Woodward and Jim Bogen, “Observations, Theories, and the Evolution of the Human Spirit” *Philosophy of Science* 59, 4, 590-611.]

5. 3/8. Evidence and Underdetermination.

Timothy Williamson, “Evidence”. Chapter 9 of his *Knowledge and Its Limits* (OUP, 2000).

Richard Feldman, “Respecting the Evidence” in John Hawthorne (ed.) *Philosophical Perspectives 19: Epistemology* (Blackwell, 2005), pp. 95-119.

Larry Laudan, “Demystifying Underdetermination”. Chapter 2 of his *Beyond Positivism and Relativism: Theory, Method, and Evidence* (Westview, 1996).

[ALSO: Richard Posner, “The Principles of Evidence and the Critique of Adversarial Procedure”. Chapter 11 of his *Frontiers of Legal Theory* (Harvard, 2001).]

6. 3/15. Cognitive Bias

G.A. Cohen, “Paradoxes of Conviction”. Chapter 1 of his *If You’re an Egalitarian, How Come You’re So Rich?* (Harvard, 2000).

Thomas Gilovich, “Seeing What We Expect to See: The Biased Evaluation of Ambiguous and Inconsistent Data”. Chapter 4 of his *How We Know What Isn’t So* (The Free Press, 1991).

C.G. Lord, Lee Ross, and M.R. Lepper, “Biased Assimilation and Attitude Polarization: The Effects of Prior Theories on Subsequently Considered Evidence”. In the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 37 (1979), 2098-2109.

Thomas Kelly, “Disagreement, Dogmatism, and Belief Polarization” (draft).

Wednesday, 3/22: No Class (Spring Break).

7. 3/29. Convergence in Ethics and in Science.

Bernard Williams, “Knowledge, Science, Convergence”. Chapter 8 of his *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Harvard University Press, 1985).

Larry Laudan, “Two Puzzles About Science: Reflections on Some Crises in Philosophy and Sociology of Science”. Chapter 1 of his *Science and Values* (Berkeley, 1984).

8. 4/5. Rationality, Interpretation, and Principles of Charity.

Kirk Ludwig, “Rationality, Language, and the Principle of Charity” in the *Oxford Handbook of Rationality* (OUP, 2004).

Daniel Dennett, “Making Sense of Ourselves”. Reprinted as Chapter 4 of his *The Intentional Stance* (MIT, 1987).

Stephen Stich, “Could Man Be an Irrational Animal? Some Notes on the Epistemology of Rationality”. Reprinted in Kornblith (ed.), *Naturalizing Epistemology* (MIT, 1994).

9. 4/12. Is All Irrationality Ultimately a Matter of Inconsistency?

Donald Davidson, "Incoherence and Irrationality". Reprinted as Chapter 12 of his collection *Problems of Rationality* (OUP, 2004).

Derek Parfit, "Can Desires Be Intrinsically Irrational?". Pages 120-126 of his *Reasons and Persons* (OUP, 1984).

Robert Nozick, "Instrumental Rationality and Its Limits", chapter V of his *The Nature of Rationality* (Princeton University Press, 1993).

10. 4/19 NO CLASS.

11. 4/26. Objectivity and the Social Sciences.

Ernest Nagel, "Methodological Problems of the Social Sciences", Chapter 13 of his *The Structure of Science* (Hackett, 1979). See especially pp.485-502, "The Value Oriented Bias of Social Inquiry".

Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession* (selections) (Cambridge University Press, 1988).

Larry Laudan, "The Pseudo-Science of Science?" Chapter 10 of his *Beyond Positivism and Relativism: Theory, Method, and Evidence* (Westview, 1996).

12. 5/3. Must Reason Get 'the Last Word'?

Thomas Nagel, "Why We Can't Understand Thought From the Outside". Chapter 2 of his *The Last Word* (OUP, 1997).

Ronald Dworkin "Objectivity and Truth: You Better Believe It", in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 25, no.2 (Spring 1996).